



Celebrity and the Everyday

Co-curated by Jesse Williams and Kwame S. Brathwaite

November 3, 2018- January 12, 2019

Kwame Brathwaite

Press Release

Philip Martin Gallery is proud to present, “Celebrity and the Everyday,” an exhibition of photographs by Kwame Brathwaite (b. 1938). The exhibition is co-curated by Jesse Williams and Kwame S. Brathwaite. There will be a reception Saturday November 3 from 6-8pm.

For almost six decades, Kwame Brathwaite has created positive images of African-Americans and promoted the beauty of everyday people. Brathwaite, his brother Elombe, and the two groups of artist-activists the brothers helped co-found — African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS) and Grandassa Models — were the first to promote “Black is Beautiful.”

“Black is Beautiful” is one of the most influential ideas of the twentieth century. It finds resonance today in contemporary political movements like “Black Lives Matter.” Although Brathwaite is well-known for his photographs of public figures like Muhammad Ali, Bob Marley, and Stevie Wonder, what is not as well-known is the history of these images in American culture, and the role that Brathwaite played along with figures like Ali, Marley, and Wonder in crafting black celebrity as a political tool.

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Working as an artist and theorist, Brathwaite made photographs of African-Americans that defied negative stereotypes and depicted a new vision of black people. “Untitled (Ethel Parks at AJASS Studios photoshoot)” (1969) presents a young woman against a glowing red background, wearing a headwrap, in the pose of a fashion model. “Untitled (Nomsa Brath at Photoshoot at AJASS Studio)” (1965) features Nomsa Brath in an intimate portrait that both confronts and engages the viewer. The color and black and white tones in Brathwaite’s photographs are stunning; the nuanced black and white tones of which are a result of Brathwaite’s relentless experimentation in the photographic darkroom to better depict the richness of black skin.

Brathwaite’s powerful portraits of the 60s are informed by the post-war new consumer landscape. Brathwaite and Grandassa models were often hired by black business owners to attract their consumers through images of everyday people engaged in normal tasks, like buying a bedroom set. Brathwaite also created remarkable staged images like, “Untitled (Naturally '68 photoshoot in the Apollo Theater featuring Grandassa Models and Founding members of AJASS (Frank Adu, Elombe Brath and Ernest Baxter)” (1968), which was used for posters. The shot presents engaged artist-activists at the Apollo Theater in New York, next to which Brathwaite established AJASS’s offices in 1962. The designers of AJASS and Grandassa were among first to incorporate African cloths into American avant-garde fashion.

Brathwaite was proactive in using the photographic presentation of the individuals that achieve celebrity. As Harry Belafonte commented in his introduction to the 2016 BET Humanitarian Award ceremony honoring the activism of exhibition co-curator Jesse Williams, “I think that for anybody that achieves celebrity, it means that you have captured the imagination of the vast public. For those of us that have had that experience, the great challenge then becomes what do you do with that platform.” As AJASS friends and peers ascended the heights of their own celebrity, they messaged “Black is Beautiful” to a broad American public, one that was widely consuming the artist-production of a new generation of African-American musicians, actors and sports figures. Brathwaite’s “Gray Day on the Congo” (1974) depicts Muhammad Ali sitting on a bench near the Congo River in Zaire, contemplating his upcoming fight with George Foreman.

In today’s media climate — one in which celebrities are specifically activating the power of their image and actions to affect change — Brathwaite’s work seems prescient. His photographs are a rich source of ideas. Brathwaite’s photographs are an inspiration for the battles of our current time and engage with the beauty, power and integrity of everyday people.

Kwame Brathwaite’s work will be the subject of a major touring exhibition, “Kwame Brathwaite: Black is Beautiful,” that will open at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles in May 2019: <https://aperture.org/exhibition/kwame-brathwaiteblack-beautiful/>. A monograph of the same title, produced by the Aperture Foundation, will be released in spring 2019 with essays by Deborah Willis, Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at Tisch School of the Arts of New York University, and Tanisha C. Ford, Associate Professor of Black American Studies and History at the University of Delaware. Brathwaite’s work has recently been acquired by such institutions as Museum of Modern Art (New York; NY); Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY); MIT List Visual Arts Center (Boston, MA); The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College (Saratoga Springs, NY); Museum of the City of New York (New York, NY); Santa Barbara Museum of Art (Santa Barbara, CA); JPMorgan Chase Art Collection (New York, NY); and Sidley Austin LLP (New York, NY). Brathwaite's work has recently appeared in the New Yorker, New York Times, New York Post, New York Magazine, Vogue, Aperture and other publications.

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Jesse Williams is an internationally known actor and activist, as well a burgeoning producer and director. Star of Grey's Anatomy and former high school teacher, Williams is the son of an artist and long time art patron. His producer credits include "Question Bridge: Black Males," a transmedia art project redefining African American male identity, acquired as part of the permanent collection at both the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Brooklyn Museum. Williams produced both the original documentary "Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement" and Norman Lear's "America Divided" docuseries. Mr. Williams was famously awarded the 2016 BET Humanitarian Award, where his acceptance speech made international news.

Philip Martin Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 11am-6pm and by appointment. For further information and images please contact the gallery at 310-559-0100 or info@philipmartingallery.com.