

BLAVITY

How Photographer Kwame Brathwaite Made 'Black Is Beautiful' A Powerful Visual Movement

Brathwaite's photography turns the lens on natural Black beauty.



Ida Harris
under a min • 4 days ago

Point 'Em Out is an editorial series where we'll be exploring the latest and the greatest in Black art. Thanks to modern-day technology, we get to be virtual consumers of yesterday's icons and today's most innovative Black artwork — and if we're lucky, the Black geniuses who produce them.

The shared Black experience begets such words as captivity, despair, disenfranchise, oppression, struggle and violence, especially when Black people are not in control of the narrative or fail to realize just how incredible Blackness is. Many gloss over the fact Blackness embodies a special brand of brilliance, creativity, determination, love, resilience, spirituality, strength and — beauty.

Kwame Brathwaite understood this decades ago when he borrowed the phrase “Black is beautiful” from Marcus Garvey's rhetoric. In the early 1960s, Brathwaite, along with his brother Elombe Brath and Carlos Cooks, produced jazz concerts up in Harlem that integrated Black models donning Afros, braids and African attire into the program to emphasize the beauty of natural Blackness. Running with Garvey's philosophy of uplifting the community via Black pride, Brathwaite turned his camera lens on the Black diaspora, documenting Black people and movements.

From the civil rights era through the overlapping Black power and Black arts movement and beyond, Brathwaite amassed a multitude of breathtaking and powerful images, which are now on display as part of the traveling ["Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite"](#) exhibition. The art show is set to run through 2020, with openings in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Columbia, South Carolina. The retrospective is accompanied by a monograph [published by Aperture on May 1](#).

Blavity spoke to his son Kwame S. Brathwaite, the archivist of his father's body of work, about the legendary photographer's cultural impact.

Blavity: As your father's representative, could you tell us about the "Black Is Beautiful" project and your role?

Kwame S. Brathwaite: I'm the one running the archive for him. Essentially, what happened was, he was visiting with me and my wife, and he had an image with him. It was an image I had

never seen before, and I was like, "Why have I never seen this before?"

And he was like, "I have a lot of images you haven't seen before."

So I was looking at my wife, and we were like, "We have to get into this catalog, and make sure that's not the case for other people."

After my mom convinced him – because he really doesn't let people work with his negatives – he started allowing me to work with his negatives. So we started archiving the negatives; we organized and digitized them. In that process, we discovered these amazing photos of people. One of the goals I had was just to show these to people, and see what the response would be. In doing that, we've had this overwhelming response to the work, both from the art world and pop culture.

Blavity: Because this is your father, I'm assuming you have a depth of knowledge about his work over these 60 years?

Brathwaite: I've become an expert, definitely.

Blavity: So can you tell me what prompted your father to even pick up a camera?

Brathwaite: My father said there was a guy that would come and take pictures [at his jazz venues], and he fell in love with what they looked like. He was like, "This guy isn't shooting with a flash." They were grainy and had a wonderful tone to it, so he said he fell in love with it.

He went and got a camera that his uncle had given him for his graduation. His uncle had taught him the basics of loading and doing different things. He then said, "This is my thing, I want to do this." Then he started photographing their shows. He was just a self-taught photographer in the beginning, who started to develop his craft, learning how he would navigate and record these jazz shows at first.

Blavity: How did Marcus Garvey influence your father's work?

Brathwaite: My grandfather owned a dry cleaners in Harlem. They would spend a lot of time on 125th Street. They would hear the street speakers while they were there, and a lot of them were Africanist; they were people who followed Garvey. Then they met Carlos Cooks, who would be talking about Marcus Garvey and a lot of his principles — you know — back to Africa; investing in the communities, embracing African ancestry. They loved that concept and really started embracing Marcus Garvey and his principles through Carlos Cooks. They started to embrace and adapt that in the way in which they carried themselves into the way they spoke about the things that were happening this was around the civil rights movement. They focused on building together, doing for themselves, embracing our community and really focusing in on our connection to Africa.

Blavity: “Black Is Beautiful” has so much power and gravity. Do you know what sparked that title?

Brathwaite: Marcus Garvey had said that in some of his earlier speeches. The movement essentially started when they came together after Garvey passed [away]. There was a Marcus Garvey parade in Harlem; it's on August 17 every year, and there would be a celebration. They would hold a "Miss Standard of African Beauty" contest, so women would come and have their hair natural to represent the African standard of beauty. They noticed a woman who picked up her prize money — the contest was on Thursday, and the woman picked up her money on Saturday. Her hair was straightened again.

They asked, “Well, what happened?”

She said, “I can't go to work like this.”

They talked about doing something to make Black women be comfortable being their true selves, being in their own skin — Black men, as well. That's when the idea was born.

They started this jazz concert in January 1962, they named it "Naturally." They had models that represented African standards of beauty. They wore their hair natural, wore African-inspired clothing, designed their jewelry. They wanted to be in this self-sufficient mode where they talked about “Black is beautiful” as a concept, and living that concept. That's what they were kind of presenting to the world.

Blavity: How does that concept and the body of work that speak to today?

Brathwaite: Well, that's what he was always looking to do — create a body of work that represented the African diaspora here and abroad. It was not only present in the aesthetic of the pictures, but the activism that was coupled with it.

They were influential and partnered with African countries that were looking for their independence. So when these countries would report to the UN, they would go as well and invite them to Harlem to speak to the people, so that people in Harlem would understand what was happening in Africa, and people in Africa would understand what was happening in Harlem.

The way I feel it affects today is we're still fighting a lot of the same battles. New York just passed a law to allow people to wear their hair braided, which is an incredible thing that happened. But the fact that in 2019 we are still looking at how people wear their hair as an acceptable means [of judgment] — you should be able to be your natural self. You should be able to do what you please with essentially what God has given you. So I think the movement is relevant today. What I'm doing is looking at a way to reactivate the activist side of things. I'm looking to focus on building community, and educating people around what the movement was about and how they can further the idea.

Blavity: The show is a bit of new-found work. Is it integrated with some of the images that many are familiar with? Would this be considered a retrospective of sorts?

Brathwaite: This show accompanies the release of his first book. His book is being released on May 1, in conjunction with working with Aperture, one of the most respected photo publishers in the world. They wanted to do a traveling exhibition, so it's here in LA. It will go to San Francisco at the end of December. It'll be there for a few months, then it will go to South Carolina, then the New York Historical Society in fall 2020.

It's an introduction to his work — the first five to 10 years. It talks about his beginnings as an artist, and so it's a really nice way to be introduced to his work. We don't go into his work with music and the connections with Bob Marley and Muhammad Ali, Nina Simone. We focus on the early work that was the foundation of why he was a photographer and what drove him to his career.

Blavity: Last year, Beyoncé was on the cover of *Vogue*, while also serving as a guest editor: The first time in history a Black photographer shot the cover. Has your father spoken on that?

Brathwaite: He talks about how it was a different time; how [Black photographers] didn't get to be on the high-end art covers, fashion and things that were happening. He shot covers for *Essence* and *Ebony*, so there was this certain lane that you had to be in at this time. I think he laid the foundation for the young photographers that are out now, but I think because Beyoncé has that platform — she's in the position to be the decision-maker. Most people would not be able to do so. The power that she has amassed allowed her to be able to control who shot her, in order to be represented in a way she wanted to be represented.

Tyler [Mitchell] is also a fan of my father's work. We had him on a panel to open the exhibition, along with Ruth Carter and Mimi Phlange. He spoke about how photography is an act of justice. Being able to photograph Black bodies in today's world is an act of justice, and for him it's a therapeutic act. We've become fast friends not only because of his admiration of the work, but my admiration for his work. So being able to have that power and control is due to some of the early artists like my father, Gordon Parks, some of the painters of that time, Charles White and people like that were able to influence what's happening now.

Blavity: Do you know how your father feels about social media, and how it plays a role in our consumption of art these days?

Brathwaite: At first, he was wary of it as a platform. But a couple of years ago, we had a discussion of the fact that you can get your images out there, and you now have the ability for people to see it in ways that they couldn't see it. You had to physically be in a place with them, or they had to be at an exhibition or you would have to get [your work] in a magazine; some form of publication for people to see it and experience it. Now you have this platform where one picture, if shared enough times, can hit people that you couldn't reach back then. He recognizes the power of that tool. He also thinks about the copyright aspects, because one of the things he's always been wary of is the ability of people to take your image and make it their own. He's both keen and aware of the challenges associated with that.

Blavity: There was a point where a major transition occurred in photography; when shooting analog shifted into shooting in digital. How was that for your father?

Brathwaite: He was used to film, so reluctant. I think what's interesting for him is the ability to tell if you got the image. Back then, you had to be selective, because you had 12 shots on a roll before you had to change it. So you had to be very aware of what was happening in each moment, and be very keen of capturing the essence of what was happening to convey this message. When the switch came to digital and he started to work with it, he realized you had a lot more flexibility.

Blavity: In this body of work for "Black Is Beautiful," what is his favorite image?

Brathwaite: I've asked him that! There's an image of my mother in this rustic orange background. She's wearing this beaded headpiece that was created by Carolee Prince; she was a designer for Nina Simone and other people in the industry. It's this beautiful image that's actually the cover of the book. It kind of resonated. It's my mother. It represents these rich colors: Her skin, the background, the headpiece. He speaks to that and to that image.

Blavity: Who was his favorite celebrity to shoot?

Brathwaite: Bob Marley was his guy. He had a great relationships with Stevie Wonder and Muhammad Ali, but Bob was one of the people who was dear to him.

Blavity: What photographer — a veteran or maybe his contemporary — does he admire?

Brathwaite: Well, it was Gordon Parks. Then I would say he talks about Hank Willis Thomas quite a bit and his work.

Blavity: Did your father collaborate with any of his peers at the time? Did he know Hugh Bell, who also shot in Harlem?

Brathwaite: My father was in "A Great Day in Harlem" — the famous photo — and knew a lot of those people. But he didn't collaborate a lot. He was so focused on the Black is beautiful movement, looking to get to those big events to record and document those images. His nickname is "The Keeper of the Images," so he is known for being everywhere at all times. He used to [capture] every major event. People come to me and say, "Everyone says if anyone has this picture, it's your dad." He was known as being the guy that was always in the right place at the right time.