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## An Uptown Photographer Who Captured Harlem Life

By Nana Agyemang | Photographs By Kwame Brathwaite



Photo: Kwame Brathwaite

Photographer and activist Kwame Brathwaite got his start documenting jazz music uptown in the 1950s. “Jazz set the rhythm of his work;” his photos captured the syncopated rhythms, the elasticity of sound, and the spirit of improvisation. “[Jazz] is a feeling, a drive, an emotion that can be totally captivating. I have tried to capture that same feeling in my work,” writes Brathwaite in his upcoming book, *Black Is Beautiful*, which is pegged to the first major retrospective of his work.

Brathwaite was from a Caribbean background but grew up in the Bronx. Coming of age in the era of “separate but equal,” he was determined to use his art to elevate depictions of black life in the Bronx and Harlem, and soon fell in with a group of unapologetically black young artists known as the Garveyites. (The name came from the early-1900s political leader Marcus Garvey, who sought to unify people across the African diaspora.)

The Garveyites formed a club called African Jazz-Art Society (AJAS) to promote a “Think Black” message they expressed through political action and self-presentation, adopting Yoruba, Akan, and Ashanti names and dressing in African-inspired garments.

As part of this new Black Nationalist Movement, AJAS recruited women, mostly from Harlem, to showcase their natural hair. At the time, it was rare for black women to be seen with Afros, but the “Grandassas” — a name derived from the word “Grandassaland,” which the black nationalist Carol Cooks coined to describe the African continent — wanted to be role models as well as fashion models.

As Africana studies professor Tanisha C. Ford explains in the book: “The models ranged in complexion from light brown to medium brown to dark chocolate; most had full lips and noses; all had curvy figures that proclaimed onstage the difference in black and white America perceptions of the ideal body type.”

Brathwaite, she writes, had a specific vision: “He wanted viewers to see the range of shades of black skin; the vibrant colors of the garments; the red, green and black of the Pan-African liberation flag.” He used his images as a protest against publications that only featured lighter-complexioned, straight-haired black models.

Brathwaite helped to transform AJAS from a collective of creative teenagers into a group of businessmen and women “who could ‘sell’ their vision of blackness to an international audience.” Looking at his work now, it’s easy to be reminded of the current renaissance among black creatives — you can imagine contemporary young photographers like Yagazie Emezi, Andre D. Wagner, or Tyler Mitchell as part of his group, working with modern models like Adwoa Aboah and stylists like Mecca James-Williams.

The first-ever major exhibition of Brathwaite’s work will be at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles from April 11 through September 1, 2019, and the book comes out May 1. Until then, scroll down for a look at some of Brathwaite’s work channeling the power of art, music, and fashion.



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