

BROADCAST

Bamiro, Yemi; Boateng, Joanna; Burnham, Otto. "Why we focused on Black joy to tell the story of an iconic Harlem photographer," *Broadcast*, October 27, 2026.



Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Hands in the Shape of a Unity Symbol), 1971 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

Following Kwame's lead

by Yemi Bamiro, director

Any deep dive into the black experience in America from around 1955 to 1968 will conjure up plenty of pain, anguish and suffering. This was a period defined by the murder of Emmett Till, widespread police brutality against African Americans, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and so much more. Stories and films that look at figures from this time tend to lean into the upheaval and distress that was synonymous with this era.

Our approach to this film was a bit different. It was never a discussion for us to place our attention on Kwame Brathwaite's very intentional creative choice to focus on the magic and wonder of black life without the shackles of torment and suffering. It was never a discussion because we were led by his work – the hundreds of thousands of (mostly never-before-seen) pictures. His work was and still is a living, breathing testament to the everyday splendour of Black life.

When we took on the job of making the film we indirectly became temporary custodians for his work and legacy. It was a role that we took very seriously – and we wanted to honour his life with a film that best represented him. Kwame's life purpose was to celebrate, platform and glorify black people through his photography. It was a completely radical and totally courageous approach for which he was unwavering about. Our film had to hit the same notes.

Kwame Brathwaite's vision infused our creative decisions both editorially and production, informing who we approached as we expanded the team, which contributors we included and what we asked people to share.

We looked for crew members who shared our enthusiasm for Kwame Brathwaite's work and Kwame Brathwaite's collaborative approach to working. The family were still grieving his passing in April 2023, and inviting a crew into the life of their father and partner was a significant undertaking.

Our whole team approached that responsibility with care and curiosity. Junior producer Izzy MacCleod helped build a thoughtful schedule and budget that gave us time to explain the filmmaking process and involve the family at every stage. Assistant producer Chandler Pierre uncovered details that added to both our understanding and the family's knowledge of Kwame's life. Together, this helped build trust, allowing the family to share more of their memories and gradually welcome us further into the archive and their lives.

Casting with care

by Joanna Boateng, producer

We turned this level of attention to casting beyond the immediate

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Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Miles Davis and Paul Chambers at RLJF), n.d.
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family. We spent months talking to people whose lives were part of the world Kwame documented and those who became part of his world during the resurgence of interest in his work towards the end of his life. This all helped to build an ecosystem of people in front of the camera who were just as invested in bringing Kwame's story to light as the filmmaking team.

Some, like Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz, were able to use their celebrity power to help us get more funding later down the line. And others, like the Grandassa models, eventually agreed to recreate one of Kwame's fashion shows, pulling his imagery from the early 60s into the present day. It meant investing our resources into a complex 10- hour shoot that brought together elderly women – many with disabilities – who lived across New York. Some were initially wary of taking part in a documentary and, as with the Brathwaite family, we spent months speaking with them, often late into the evening, helping them understand what we were asking and talking through what taking part would involve.

Those conversations were as much a part of making the film as anything that happened on the shoot itself. Making an ambitious sequence depended on understanding the people taking part and helping them feel comfortable enough to participate.

Across the years that we were making the film, in the US specifically, there was a very concerted effort to erase and minimize anything that pedestaled and celebrated the black experience in America. Books were banned, and waves of anti-diversity, equity and inclusion legislature were pushed through. We felt this. It made our film feel even more urgent and necessary. Like Kwame's work, our film doesn't apologise for what it is and what it stands for. It dares to put his head above the parapet and proudly announce itself.

Piecing together a life through half a million photographs

by Otto Burnham, editor

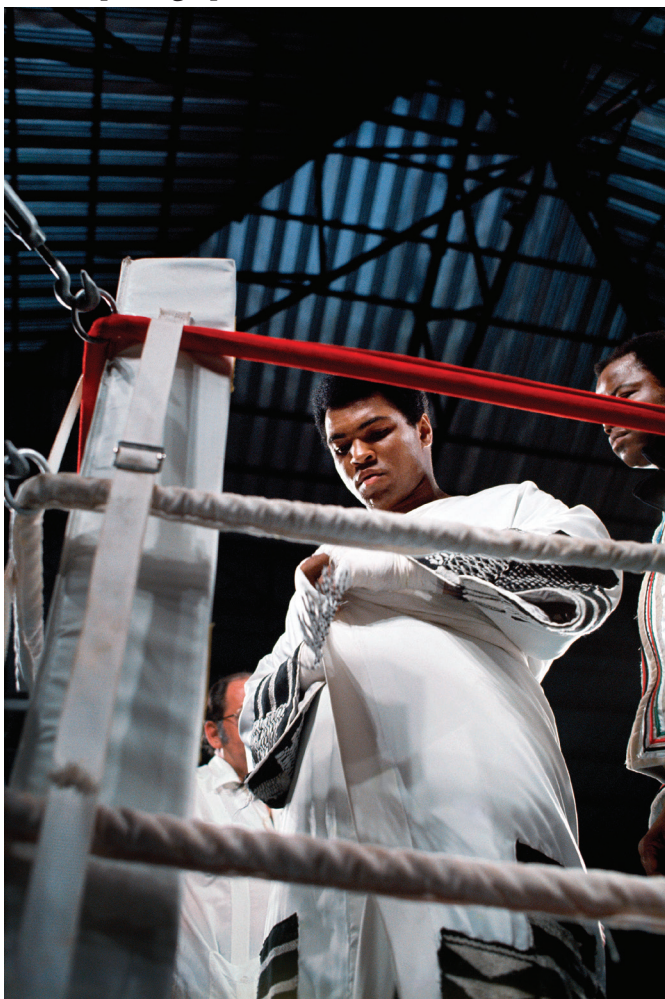
Every photo in this film is either taken by Kwame Brathwaite or of him. Kwame took an incredible number of photographs during his career, so the discussion about which images to use was pretty much never ending! Myself and associate editor Lwimbo Kunda were constantly assessing which images moved us most, trying to categorise them based on their narrative potential.

Some images I wanted to sit in and allow the audience to take in every detail. The portrait of Sikolo, Kwame's wife, is a good example. What starts as a portrait, when repeated multiple times and paired with musings about colour, stillness and true love, becomes something else entirely.

When we discovered Kwame had documented Muhammad Ali's famous Rumble in the Jungle fight and trip, I had the opportunity to create a picture-driven sequence shedding light on how much

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Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Ali in Ring), 1974 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

anxiety Ali experienced before the fight, something previously unknown to me. I love how little dialogue is required to follow his emotional trajectory through the photographs alone.

The pictures of the Grandassa models performing in their groundbreaking 'Naturally' shows were incredible. Despite being from 1962, they felt so fresh and powerful. Combining these images with contemporary music offered a unique opportunity to connect past and present. The first time I heard FKA twiggs' Two Weeks, it blew my mind. Its heavy, electronic, futuristic energy paired beautifully with black-and-white images from Harlem in 1962.

The Brathwaite archive is his family's labour of love. New photographs were being developed throughout the edit. One insane discovery was finding images that dovetailed with extraordinary footage of Nelson Mandela speaking in Harlem in 1990. In our last offline week, photographs were developed showing Kwame's family at the event. Beautiful closeups – we were jumping for joy in the edit!

Having spent much of my career being offered projects focusing on the murder of Black people, discriminatory legislation and stereotypical representations of young Black men, the opportunity to celebrate the joy of the Black experience was one I couldn't turn down. This film is something I want my mixed-heritage children to see.