

Jesse Williams Co-Curates Photo Show on Black Icons and Ordinary People

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Kwame Brathwaite/Celebrity and the Everyday

At the opening of photographer Kwame Brathwaite's new show "Celebrity and the Everyday," the 'Grey's Anatomy' star talks about black representation in media as well as his provocative acceptance speech at the 2016 BET Awards

Fans of *Grey's Anatomy* grew concerned last month when the dashing Dr. Jackson Avery, played by Jesse Williams, vanished from the popular TV show for a few weeks, fueling speculation until his recent return.

"I was off shooting a movie called *Random Acts of Violence*, and I'm back. Crisis of conscience, lost his child, lost his ex-wife, lost a patient, so ventured out into the woods and find himself, which I think men need to do more often. Let's call it a mental health angle," Williams said of

his disappearance when *The Hollywood Reporter* caught up with him at Philip Martin Gallery in Culver City where he introduced a new show, "Celebrity and the Everyday" (through Dec. 22), a collection of photos by 80-year-old photographer Kwame S. Brathwaite, co-curated by Williams and the artist's son, Kwame Jr.

For more than 50 years Brathwaite has trained his lens on African-American subjects: Muhammad Ali in the Congo, seated alone in profile on a bench on a gray day by the water; a furrow-browed Bob Marley, guitar in hand, lost in thought during a sound check; or model Ethel Parks, a member of Grandassa Agency, featuring only African-American women and founded by Brathwaite and his brother, Elombe Brath, to challenge white beauty standards.

Other Grandassa models are featured in a 1971 black-and-white poster spelling out the words, "Black Is Beautiful," a phrase originated by Harlem orator Carlos A. Cook and popularized by "Naturally '62," an event sponsored by the Brathwaite brothers featuring Grandassa models at the Harlem Purple Manor where it was billed as the "original African coiffure and fashion extravaganza."

Strong proponents of Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism, the Brathwaite brothers also co-founded the African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS), a collective of artists, playwrights, designers and dancers, which is no doubt how they got Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach to perform at "Naturally '62." "Black is Beautiful, that concept, it's no different than when people say Black Lives Matter," says Brathwaite Jr., who joined Williams and art critic Hamza Walker at a well-attended opening, including names like Debbie Allen. "That's what this was, it was representation. This was the ability to look at yourself and see the beauty that was inherent in you."

Around the time Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message," elevating mass media in the form of television and cinema over the content it contains, Brathwaite Sr. hit upon the notion of using his camera to reshape how the world sees the black community and, more important, how it sees itself.

"You use the lens of media as marketing," says Williams. "*Grey's Anatomy* is marketing. Anything on TV, I mean look at the news, it's telling you how to feel about things. Unfortunately, it has been and continues to be incredibly important to have representation in the black community. Despite everything you're being told, despite the concepts and onslaught of conditioning around you, black is beautiful. Your life still matters."

Brathwaite Jr. met Williams at Art Basel Miami where the two fell into a discussion about the portrayal of African Americans in media. "When I was coming up with the show and thinking about the people that represented the same ideas my father had about celebrity being about the community, being about representing, being about having a call to arms and the acceptance speech at the 2016 BET Awards, I reached out to him and Jesse said yes."

Brathwaite Jr. is referring to the actor's 2016 BET Humanitarian Award acceptance speech in which he candidly spoke of racial injustice and police brutality, spotlighting Tamir Rice, a boy from Cleveland, who was gunned down by police in 2014. "I don't want to hear any more about

how far we've come when paid public servants can pull a drive-by on a 12-year-old playing alone in the park in broad daylight, killing him on television and then going home to make a sandwich," Williams told the audience at the time. "This invention called whiteness uses and abuses us, burying black people out of sight and out of mind while extracting our culture, our dollars, our entertainment like oil — black gold, ghettoizing and demeaning our creations then stealing them, gentrifying our genius and then trying us on like costumes before discarding our bodies like rinds of strange fruit."

The speech made headlines and sparked a series of dueling petitions for and against firing Williams from *Grey's Anatomy*. "The thing about pushback, it doesn't matter to me. I don't need this that badly. I can go do a different job. It's not going to compromise my job. But even if it did, this isn't my lifelong dream," Williams says of potential damage to his career following the speech. "But you've got to be careful to know what you're talking about. When you look at the appropriate backlash Kanye got, because he's doing it wrong, not just that I disagree politically, but maybe because you don't know what you're talking about."

Outside of his acting career, Williams serves as the youngest member of the board of directors at The Advancement Project, a Civil Rights think tank and advocacy group. He produced both Norman Lear's *America Divided* docuseries as well as the original documentary, *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*. He is also the executive producer of *Question Bridge: Black Males*, a multifaceted media project, art exhibition, student and teacher curriculum focused on black male identity. It has been acquired as part of the permanent collection at both the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture as well as the Brooklyn Museum.

"We had all these men walking into a museum and looking up and seeing themselves on the wall of a fucking museum," Williams recalls about opening the show in Brooklyn. "That was incomprehensible to them that they would ever be adjacent to value in such a way that well-heeled people would come to watch and gaze upon you in your natural state, not built up and air brushed. That was celebrity and the everyday."

By mixing images of celebrities with everyday people, like Harlemites celebrating at the Garvey Day parade, Brathwaite elevates the ordinary to the extraordinary. The Brooklyn-born photographer was gratified to see his work included in last spring's *Mod New York*, on view at the Museum of the City of New York, and was honored at Aperture Foundation's fall 2017 gala ahead of their monograph on him due out in May 2019, coinciding with a major touring exhibition, "Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful," opening at the Skirball Cultural Center around the same time.

"It's the classical thing of looking at these people who were everyday people who then come into their own cause now they represent to you an entire community," Brathwaite says of his father's method of choosing women off the street for the Grandassa Agency. "And to reach a certain level of celebrity so they go about their lives and they're on album covers, they're on magazine covers, these are the things that resonated. When you look at what people were fighting for then, it's the same thing we're fighting for now."

