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Black is Beautiful: celebrating the significance of Kwame Brathwaite

The Brooklyn-born photographer spent his career working to elevate natural black beauty during a time when the fashion industry was resistant

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Naturally '68 photo shoot, featuring Grandassa Models and founding members of Ajass. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery

In 1962, a group of African American women gathered in Harlem. Wearing African-inspired designs along with their natural unstraightened hair, they stepped on stage at the Purple Manor for a fashion show called Naturally '62. The slogan was “Black is Beautiful”.

The house was so packed that the organizers staged a second sold-out show. Then it became a regular event. The models were pioneering local activists called Grandassa models, and this night would be less known today if it weren't for the group's co-founder - and runway photographer - Kwame Brathwaite, now 81.

Photos from that night and more are going to be on view in Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite, which opens on 11 April at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, with 40 photographs from Brathwaite's archive from the 1950s and 1960s detailing natural black beauty. A deeper look at Brathwaite's work in Harlem and beyond will be released by Aperture Books on 1 May.

“Ultimately, the ‘black is beautiful’ movement is a catchphrase at this point in time,” says Kwame S Brathwaite, the photographer's son and the director of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive in Pasadena.

“But back when they started using this as their mantra, people were still calling themselves ‘colored’ and ‘negro’, this was revolutionary, even in the use of the term ‘black’,” he says. “It wasn't just the beauty and fashion, they were supporting black businesses, but also, just embracing who you are.”

All was not easy, however. The day after the 1962 pageant, the winning model of the beauty contest showed up to claim her prize with straightened hair - far different from the night before.

“She said: ‘I can't go to work like this,’” says Brathwaite. “It was perplexing. My dad said: ‘We must do something to make these women realize they can be their natural selves.’ He wanted people to embrace that and it helped people embrace the term black, as well.”



Kwame Brathwaite, a self-portrait, 1964. As part of the young black nationalism movement in Harlem, the fashion shows returned over a dozen times and were recognized as celebrating beauty with political overtones. Just as Brathwaite's photos became the visual counterpart to black power, he, along with his older brother Elombe Brath, coined the term "black is beautiful" in the 1950s.

But Brathwaite's son finds it hard to pin down the exact moment it was coined. "I heard my father and uncle use the phrase in many ways," he says. "My dad would say we and give credit to my uncle."

The phrase became widely popular in the 1960s, building upon the legacies of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who were well-known in Harlem. Though Brathwaite is known for spending a career behind the camera lens, he is often overlooked as a community builder.

Along with his brother, he co-founded the African Jazz Arts Society and Studios in 1956, which organized black cultural events, like jazz concerts at Club 845 in The Bronx and Small's Paradise in Harlem, where Brathwaite took photos of the jazz musicians and African dance performances.

The brothers also co-founded the Grandassa models group in 1962, whose name was inspired by the African nationalist pioneer Carlos A Cooks, who referred to Africa as "Grandassaland". Both groups sparked the beginning of the Black Arts Movement that followed in the 1960s and 1970s.

"I've always felt this work is incredibly relevant, not just from an art history standpoint, but educationally," says Brathwaite. "The group was bettering the lives of people of African

descent and my dad's goal was always about the movement.”

Brathwaite made a living as a photojournalist and writer for black-run publications from the 1950s through the 1970s, photographing Bob Marley, James Brown, Stevie Wonder and Muhammad Ali. “He knew a lot of stars but didn’t do it for the fame,” he says. “His goal was to uplift and empower African Americans.”

Brathwaite shot various subjects over a half-century career as a photographer, but nothing resonates quite like his photos of black artist activists. From writers to painters, musicians and fashion designers, he even broke the pattern of album covers, which typically only featured the artist on its cover, by putting the Grandassa girls on the covers of Blue Note Records albums.

The models wore designs by other black designers and worked with black stylists, hairdressers and makeup artists, which led to black-run businesses and boutiques. It also created demand for magazines like *Essence*, which was founded in 1970, as a space to celebrate black beauty.



Sikolo Brathwaite in 1968 wears a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery

“These models were artist activists, they embraced natural hairstyles and African-inspired clothing,” says Brathwaite. “You’d be hard-pressed to find women with darker skin in a lot of magazines. The formation of the models contributed to that.”

In one photo, a black woman sits on a car in Harlem during the Marcus Garvey parade, in another, Brathwaite’s mother poses in a headpiece by Carolee Prince, a black designer who created jewelry for Nina Simone.

“They embraced being their natural selves and putting their hair out, building a community, creating their own designs and designing for other models,” says Brathwaite. “It came to be this community where people were more self-sufficient.”

His father’s approach to photography has always been quite simple. “He was always after the truth of each moment,” he says. “It

was the time of film, not digital, so you had to be keen on when was ‘the moment’.”

Though this exhibition serves partly as a retrospective of the artist’s work, it comes at a poignant time – it was only last month that New York’s human rights commission has banned hair discrimination in the workplace.

“We’re fighting the same battle that they were fighting then,” says Brathwaite. “The difference between now and then is you do see some success, for some, but we’ve struggled against racism, police brutality, homophobia, all of that.

“What has happened throughout the course of black is beautiful,” he adds, “is people have adopted their own version to express who they are.”

Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite opens 11 April at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles

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