

VOGUE

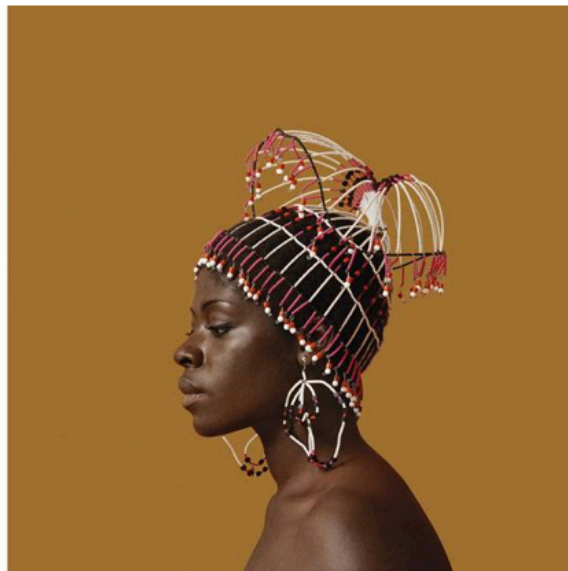
ARTS & LIFESTYLE

Rediscovering Photographer Kwame Brathwaite, Rihanna's Inspiration For Fenty

With an exhibition dedicated to his work currently showing in LA, a new monograph celebrating his images, and Rihanna naming him the inspiration behind her Fenty fashion collection, *Vogue* rediscovers the iconic photographer who pioneered the "Black Is Beautiful" movement.

by LIAM FREEMAN

Thursday 30 May 2019



Kwame Brathwaite, Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1968; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019)

CREDIT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

According to Kwame Brathwaite, people refer to him as “keeper of the images.” Someone less modest than him might call themselves a cultural lynchpin. From the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the American photographer used his striking images - in one, his wife, Sikolo, wears a beaded headpiece designed by Carolee Prince; in another she’s in a floral dress with her hair styled in a loose Afro - to upend mainstream beauty standards that excluded women of colour, popularising the slogan “Black Is Beautiful” along the way.

Brathwaite was the cofounder of the African Jazz-Art Society and Studios - a collective of artists, playwrights, designers and dancers - and a huge supporter of the Grandassa Models - a group of young female fashion activists who formed in the 1960s in New York to reclaim the African aesthetic in the most elevated way. The group designed, made and modelled their own clothes with sell-out success - and appeared in countless of Brathwaite’s shoots.

To this day, Brathwaite’s influence can be felt in music (photos of legends like Bob Marley and Miles Davis are some of the most iconic), politics (see his seminal documentation of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration) and fashion - this week his photographs were published alongside the official photos of Rihanna’s first capsule for her LVMH-owned Fenty line.

Ahead of the drop, in April, *Black Is Beautiful*, a major exhibition of Brathwaite’s photography opened at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles (until 1 September, 2019), accompanied by the first monograph dedicated to his work (published by Aperture in May). “My task has been to document creative powers throughout the diaspora,” Brathwaite, now aged 81, writes in the foreword. “Not only in our black artists, musicians, athletes, dancers, models and designers, but in all of us. It was my job to capture each moment of this creativity in its truest form.”

Here, *Vogue* delves into Brathwaite’s archive to rediscover his stories of struggle, work and ultimately liberation.



Kwame Brathwaite, Self-portrait, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1964; from Kwame Brathwaite: *Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Priscilla Bardonille, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1962; from Kwame Brathwaite: *Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Man smoking in a ballroom, Harlem, ca. 1962; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Marcus Garvey Day Parade, Harlem, ca. 1967; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Grandassa Models at the Merton Simpson Gallery, New York, ca. 1967;
from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Photo shoot at a public school for one of the AJASS - associated modeling
groups that emulated the Grandassa Models and began to embrace natural hairstyles. Harlem,
ca. 1966; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Grandassa Model onstage, Apollo Theater, Harlem, ca. 1968; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Sikolo Brathwaite, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1968; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Kwame Brathwaite, Carolee Prince wearing her own jewelry designs. Prince created much of the jewelry and headpieces featured in Brathwaite's work. *African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS)*, Harlem, ca. 1964; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES