



‘Black is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite,’ closing March 1

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by Wanda Sabir

Sunday afternoon, Feb. 23, at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco was an opportunity to see what Black Joy looks like. While Africans in Oakland were celebrating what makes us a people, in San Francisco, artists, curators and scholars were discussing Kwame Brathwaite’s work in the “Black is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite” exhibit up through March 1. More than a tangible aesthetic enumerated, Brathwaite’s “Beautiful” is an opportunity to reflect on the many ways through the ages Blackness – while commodified –

2712 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90034
philipmartingallery.com (310) 559-0100

transgressed and transcended, even morphed into something completely incomprehensible (in that moment) like Charlie Parker's "Koko" or Dizzy Gillespie's "Shaw 'Nuff" or John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme."

What made the panel Sunday afternoon so remarkably fine was the personal relationships all the guests, especially co-curator Kwame S. Brathwaite, son, moderator Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who grew up with Kwame Brathwaite's son and knew the artist as his friend's dad, a serious man who didn't speak much. Dr. Deborah Willis spoke of meeting the senior Brathwaite when she was a young grad student doing research at the Schomburg, which she returned to later to develop its photography archive. Then Dr. Tanisha C. Ford spoke of how she discovered the artist's work as a scholar while in Europe where she met Kwame Brathwaite, son.

It was an afternoon of storytelling and reflection on these specific periods in African Diaspora history on this soil. Kwame Sr., an immigrant from Barbados, Joseph's family, immigrants from Haiti, Bamuthi, first generation American born.

Willis spoke of how in her search for the African Diaspora image, missing in her studies, she came to what became her life's work. As slides rotated behind the panel, who eventually shared stories about the eclectic selection from the exhibit and Brathwaite archive, the notion of art and personal aesthetic and choices were discussed as Bamuthi's provocative questions about intention and community and desire and necessity for the work as essential to one's value and life were shared. Bob Marley, James Brown, Abby Lincoln and Max Roach and a collective Grandassa Models, a part of Brathwaite's African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS).

We're talking 1956 when Kwame, with his brother, the late Elombe Brath (1936-2014), not only documented a period where racial segregation served as an incubator for Black culture to flourish. Brathwaite's work didn't just "challenge mainstream beauty standards that excluded Black women and other non-white women," AJASS and Grandassa Models were a public counter-narrative that offered a positive alternative to this exclusive discourse. Brathwaite was inspired by the writings of the Hon. Marcus Mosiah Garvey who was a Black nationalist whose work was to repair and mend a fractured nation. He actualized the Pan African concept in the meetings throughout the world, Madison Square Garden in NYC, New Orleans and elsewhere.

Garvey used print media and performance to stage counternarratives and manipulate Black images similar to his hero, Booker T. Washington, whose Tuskegee Institute was a place where African Americans, many the children of formerly enslaved parents, had an opportunity to reinvent themselves as whole people.

“Black Is Beautiful” illustrates the Black community’s compelling diversity and challenges to public personas that are negative or contrary to Black well-being. What a person thinks of him or herself affects his or her success in the world and our notion of self is socially constructed.

In MoAD’s third level gallery, large prints of gorgeous men and women embrace visitors. Also displayed are several gowns and original designs the models created. Since Africans arrived on this soil and even before, the fight has been for proper representation. Brathwaite and others confirm chronicled in Dr. Willis’s Smithsonian project on the centennial of Black photography, an exhibit that traveled throughout the country – one of the stops in the Bay Area, where the Oakland Museum, Mills College and the African American Museum and Library at Oakland hosted sections of the massive work.

In a culture bound inextricably to text, Brathwaite knew that one’s currency is attached to imagery. Now more than ever African people need to control how they perceive themselves as the world community maligns and prints images that are not framed well, underdeveloped or not developed at all, and more often poorly handled. The analogy Gordon Parks makes to guns and cameras which both shoot is intentional. He says his weapon is the camera. Brathwaite might say the same.

Other wonderful exhibitions also up through Sunday, March 1, on the first level include Laylah Amatullah Barrayn’s smaller photography show, “Baye Fall: Roots In Spirituality, Fashion and Resistance.” These photographs by New York-based documentary photographer Barrayn visually engages the Baye Fall, an enterprising sub-group of Senegal’s notable Sufi Muslim Community, the Mourides.

An integral part of the cultural fabric of Senegalese society, the Baye Fall possess a unique aesthetic that includes “locked” hair, patchwork garments, symphonic chanting, and artisanal leather talismans. Through witnessing the lives of the Baye Fall, and the Senegalese cities in

which they dwell, this series shows how pre and post-colonial politics have influenced their spiritual practice. On the second floor is MoAD's emerging artist, "Chanell Stone's Natural Negra." The artist has a talk Sunday, March 1, 2 p.m. On the same level in the larger gallery is "Don't Shoot: An Opus of the Opulence of Blackness," curated by Melonie and Melorra Green.

For more information about MoAD, visit the museum's website at moadsf.org. The exhibition is accompanied by the first-ever monograph dedicated to Brathwaite published by Aperture, May 2019.