



The Struggle Continues: Kwame Brathwaite's Iconic Images Reflect His Political Vision and 'Black is Beautiful' Directive

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Oct 1, 2020 • 5:58 pm

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A LOVE OF BLACK PEOPLE and Black culture rings throughout the practice of Kwame Braithwaite, a self-described artist-activist who has said “Black is Beautiful was my directive.”

His photography is on view at Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles. “Kwame Brathwaite: The Struggle Continues, Victory is Certain” showcases his iconic portraits, street shots, and behind-the-scenes images of the Black arts community, primarily from 1964 to the 1970s.

Braithwaite’s photography reflects his life and political vision. Originally from Barbados, Braithwaite’s parents first moved to Brooklyn, then to the Bronx where the artist grew up. His father owned tailor shops and dry cleaners in Harlem. With his brother Elombe Brath, Braithwaite co-founded the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS). He has said AJASS was an ode to their love of jazz and the Black nationalist teachings of Marcus Garvey. They also established the Grandassa Models, a group of female models that promoted an Afrocentric aesthetic.

The images Braithwaite made during that time are very much of the moment, defined by African-inspired fashion, natural hairstyles, and the latest political concerns. At the same time, the images are classic and timeless, with a contemporary vision that connects with today’s viewers.

“Black is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite” introduced him to a new generation. Organized by Aperture and Kwame S. Braithwaite, the artist’s son, his first-ever major exhibition opened last year at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles and continues to travel.

The presentation at Philip Martin features large- and small-scale works, and a new selection of images printed for the first time last fall and this spring. The subject of “Untitled (Deedee Little),” one of the newly released photographs is a statuesque model.

The artist’s son serves as director of The Kwame Brathwaite Archive. In the exhibition description he explained how his father approached the circa 1970 image: “What he is looking at here is this wide-angled view of the entire person. You see the beautiful head piece and the jewelry, this incredible piece of fashion. We are seeing this connection back to Africa, this connection to culture, but also this self-sufficiency, and the concept of Buy Black.”

Shot through with pride and beauty, Braithwaite’s work spans several categories, from fashion photography to documentary photography embedded with cultural history. Profound stories lie within his images, whether captured inside the art gallery of Merton Simpson; across the street from Michaux Books, a Black-owned bookstore in Harlem; featuring the ladder Malcolm X stood on to recite his profound orator; or honing in on “Buy Black” signs in the window of an African market, affixed to the

Philip Martin Gallery

wall during a Grandassa Models fashion show, or emblazoned on a sign perched high next to Charles Peaker Street Speaker.

Braithwaite continues to live and work in New York City. The title of the Philip Martin show is drawn from the preface he wrote for the “Black is Beautiful” exhibition catalog. The artist reflects on having had the opportunity to photograph Muhammad Ali while he was training, Bob Marley at his home on Hope Road in Kingston, Jamaica, and a transcendent, international political leader.

“One of my favorite experiences was attending Nelson Mandela’s inauguration; it represented years of work finally coming to fruition,” Braithwaite wrote. “It almost felt like our job was done...but it wasn’t. Oppression still exists today, and we must keep fighting, keep pushing until we are all free. *A luta continua a vitória é certa*—the struggle continues, victory is certain.”