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austin monthly

EXHIBITS

‘Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite’ Opens at the Blanton

He changed beauty standards in America. He was the inspiration behind Rihanna’s Fenty line. And now, for the first time, photographer Kwame Brathwaite is getting an exhibit that honors his career.

BY Jessica Lenamond

Published: June 23, 2021



Kwame Brathwaite, Self-portrait, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1964; from Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful (Aperture, 2019). Photo courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

On Jan. 28, 1962, at a packed Purple Manor club in Harlem, activist and photographer Kwame Brathwaite sought to prove to the world that Black was beautiful—and sparked a political movement by doing so.

Fashion, music, and politics converged that night at Naturally ‘62, a showcase of the first Grandassa Models—Black women who embraced their ancestry through natural hairstyles and African-inspired clothing and jewelry—and jazz by headliners Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach. The event was so popular

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that a second sold-out show was held the same night to accommodate the crowd enthralled by a clear cultural statement: it was time to embrace their heritage and Black freedom.

Brathwaite co-founded the African Jazz Art Society and Studios (AJASS), a collective of artists, playwrights, designers, and dancers that organized jazz concerts across Harlem and the Bronx, in 1956 with his brother, Elombe Brath. Inspired by the early-20th century Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, the group organized the Grandassa Models' debut and presented shows in other cities to spread the phrase "Black is Beautiful."



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).

Now, in the first exhibition to formally recognize his work, *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite* will be opening at the Blanton Museum of Art on June 27. Organized by Aperture Foundation with Kwame S. Brathwaite, the artist's son and director of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive, the Blanton's exhibition will feature more than 40 photographs from 1958-1970, as well as jewelry, clothing, album covers, and vintage posters.

"I hope it generates a sense of the importance of community," says Claire Howard, assistant curator of the museum's modern and contemporary art. "There are a lot of ways that his ideas are still relevant, and I think he was really ahead of his time. Conversations about beauty standards are still going on. Growing and protecting your community and documenting it and who's a part of it is also really important,

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especially in a city like Austin that's changing like it is, and that's losing its Black population at the same time."

Prior to inspiring Rihanna's first Fenty fashion launch and the exhibition's Los Angeles debut in 2019, Brathwaite's work was underrecognized, and Howard says for several reasons.

The discrimination against Black photographers makes it more difficult for them to access spaces to show their work, and photography, especially of fashion, was not widely recognized as fine art until the last several decades. When Brathwaite started photographing, Howard says he was much more interested in mass media distribution of his images, like record covers, because he understood that the more people saw natural Black beauty and African culture, the more his images would have the ability to shift thinking.

"I talked to his son about this, and he was just very committed to the movement and being involved with activism," Howard says. "Brathwaite wasn't necessarily trying to build a huge name for himself as an artist. He was doing the work that paid the bills."



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



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)

Inspired by Garvey's teachings to promote economic independence and social consciousness, Brathwaite emerged as a concert photographer at the AJASS shows and documented the vibrant jazz scene and local businesses and events. These celebrations of African American community and identity are embodied in one of Brathwaite's images featuring a giant "Buy Black" banner behind three Grandassa Models.

The Grandassa Models' afros and boldly patterned clothing that Brathwaite photographed challenged not only white beauty standards, but also the models with light skin and straightened hair in Black-owned publications at the time. A portrait of Sikolo Brathwaite, the artist's wife, wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince is the main image for the exhibition. Howard says the image evokes the idea of Pan-Africanism and combining the contemporary with the traditional past.

"When we think about the context of the '60s internationally, this is when a lot of formerly colonized African countries were gaining their independence," Howard says. "That provides this really interesting

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backdrop for thinking about Pan-Africanism and how Kwame's work helped to foster pride and a sense of a connection between people across continents."

To educate on the continued relevance of Brathwaite's ideas, the Blanton has two upcoming virtual panel events planned. On July 13, Black Is Beautiful in the Instagram Age invites photographers Cindy Elizabeth, Moyo Oyelola, and Riley Reed to discuss photographic activism and the role of social media in their work. Additionally, Kwame S. Brathwaite and University of Texas faculty members from the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs will contextualize Black Is Beautiful on Sept. 7.

Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite
Blanton Museum of Art
June 27-Sept. 19