

Philip Martin Gallery

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# The Photographer Who Captured the Beauty in Blackness

Kwame Brathwaite, who shot some of the great icons of the 1960s and '70s, has spent his career largely underrecognized. That is, until now.



A self-portrait of the photographer Kwame Brathwaite, circa 1964, taken in Harlem. Courtesy of the artist, Aperture and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles

By Adam Bradley

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In 2004, while sifting through a box of files with his son, the pioneering photographer Kwame Brathwaite, who chronicled Black life across seven decades, beginning in the 1950s, pulled out a long-forgotten black-and-white image from a manila envelope. It captured a resplendent Roberta Flack in a flowing chiffon gown, John Lennon's left arm draped atop her shoulder, his right clutching Yoko Ono, with a "plastic soul"-era David Bowie looking on bemused and the Righteous Brothers thrown in for good measure.

"Baba, where did you shoot this?" Kwame Samori Brathwaite, now 47, known by friends and family as Kwame Jr., asked.

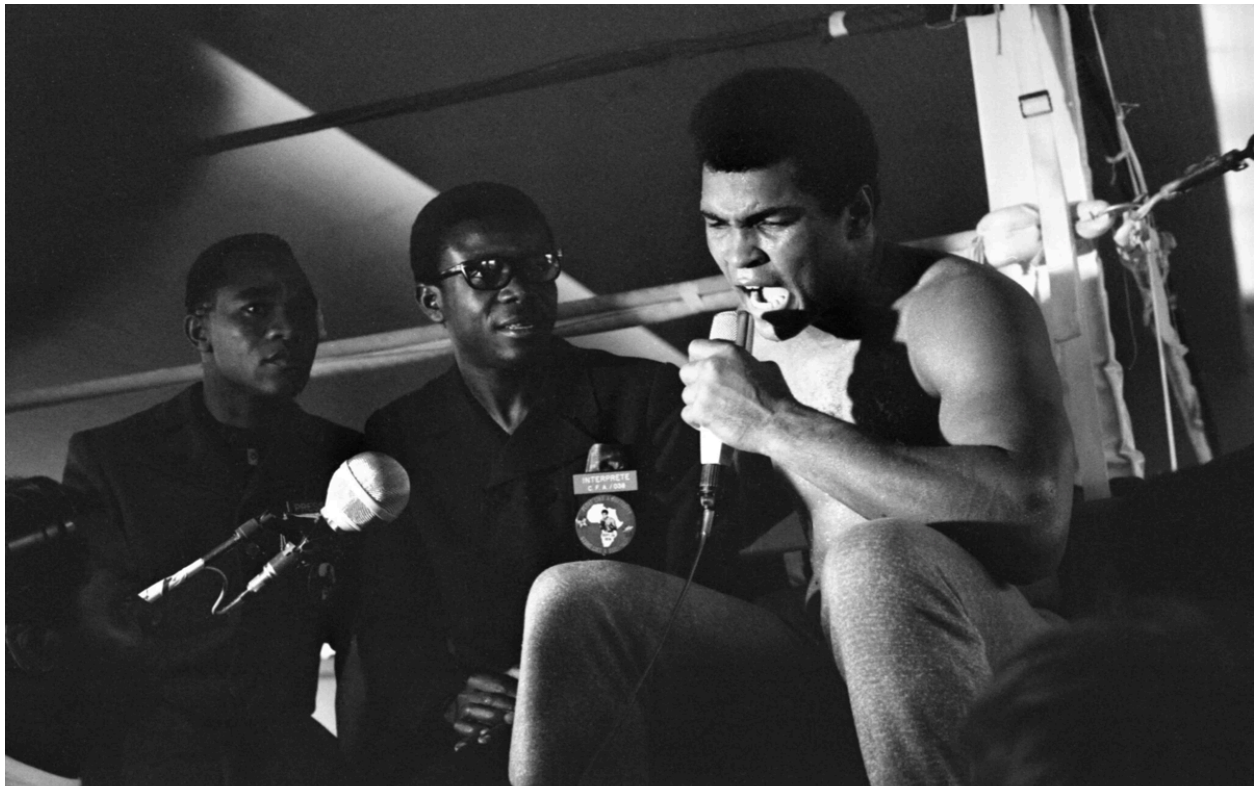
His father responded matter-of-factly: "Backstage at the Grammys. Gershwin Theater. 1975."

The senior Brathwaite pulled out a second image, in muted hues of grays and blues, this one of a 32-year-old Muhammad Ali in a moment of quiet repose, sitting alone on a bench overlooking the Congo River. "This one's called 'Gray Day on the Congo.'"

His son shook his head in amazement. "How have I never seen these before?"

"I got thousands of pictures you've never seen before."

"That's when I realized the breadth of his work," Kwame Jr. says.



Muhammad Ali at a press conference in 1974 in Zaire for the Rumble in the Jungle fight against George Foreman. Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive

The breadth of Brathwaite's work is indeed astonishing. Over the course of his career he's captured jazz performances by Miles Davis and John Coltrane; he took his camera out of the club and into the street, documenting Black life in Harlem, the Bronx and beyond; he photographed Nelson Mandela's

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inauguration in 1994. Like his predecessor James Van Der Zee, whose images of Harlem in the 1920s and '30s are among the most enduring portraits of the era, Brathwaite approached his work with a conscious awareness of what it means to capture a Black community in images. His politically minded photographs and Pan-African vision also reaches across the Atlantic to contemporaries on the African continent like Malick Sidibé, of Studio Malick in Bamako, Mali, and James Barnor, working in post-independence Ghana — artists capturing the new faces of Black freedom. At the center of Brathwaite's legacy is his *Black Is Beautiful* work — studio portraiture and fashion photography that celebrates the natural beauty of Black women and men in defiance of Eurocentric beauty standards — which is now the subject of a touring retrospective, organized by the Aperture Foundation, that debuted at Los Angeles's Skirball Cultural Center in 2019 and is making its way east, opening later this month at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, before arriving at the New-York Historical Society during the second half of 2022.

This is the first major retrospective for the artist, but it comes at the end of a long and prolific career. Brathwaite no longer takes photographs. Now 83, and in limited health (which left him unable to be interviewed for this piece), he spends much of his time at home with his wife of 55 years, Sikolo, in an apartment on the border of Harlem and Spanish Harlem, near 106th Street, overlooking Central Park. His last commission was in early 2018, when he photographed the artist Joanne Petit-Frère for *The New Yorker*. Brathwaite's work, though, is far from exhausted, and Kwame Jr. has only begun to explore the mysteries of his father's archive, which contains thousands of photographic prints and undeveloped negatives. (Many of them, like the ones reproduced here, have never before been seen by the public.) "It's voluminous," Kwame Jr. says. Beyond its importance as visual history, the archive is of immeasurable personal value as well. "Through his work," Kwame Jr. says, "I've gotten to know my father as a man."



Two Grandassa Models, who embodied Brathwaite's *Black Is Beautiful* philosophy, at the Marcus Garvey Day Parade in New York City in 1965. The woman on the left is Nomsa Brath, Kwame Brathwaite's sister-in-law. Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive



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KWAME BRATHWAITE WAS BORN on New Year's Day 1938 in what he has fondly called "the People's Republic of Brooklyn." His parents, Cecil and Margaret Etelka Brathwaite, both immigrants from Barbados, moved Brathwaite and his older brother, Elombe, to Harlem, then to the South Bronx, to a house on Kelly Street, when Brathwaite was 5. As a boy, he excelled in his studies, gaining enrollment to the prestigious School of Industrial Art (now the High School of Art and Design) in the early 1950s. Though for a time he considered a career in graphic design, two encounters with photography soon changed his mind. The first came in August 1955. Brathwaite had just graduated from high school when, 1,200 miles away in Mississippi, a white man and his half brother mutilated and murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till for supposedly flirting with the man's wife. Brathwaite saw David Jackson's jarring photographs of Till's tortured body, which Till's mother courageously consented to publish in *Jet* magazine. As people's outrage turned to action, Brathwaite, then 17, understood how a photograph could rechart the course of the nation's political life.

Brathwaite's second encounter with photography came a year later, after he and his brother co-founded what would later be known as the African Jazz Art Society and Studios (AJASS). Nine years before the poet LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) made his way uptown to Harlem and galvanized the Black Arts Movement, Brathwaite and AJASS started a movement of their own, centered on jazz, photography, design, dance, fashion and Pan-African politics. In an effort to shift the center of gravity of the jazz scene back uptown after its exodus to the largely white clubs of Lower Manhattan, AJASS started promoting shows in Harlem and the Bronx. At one such show, Brathwaite witnessed a young man taking photos in the dark, smoky club, without the benefit of a flash — a sort of practical magic. Brathwaite soon tried it himself. Using a Hasselblad medium-format camera, he learned to manipulate the available light, to command the shadow. "I just fell in love with the textures," Brathwaite once said, "the slight graininess of it."



George Foreman playing with his dog during a down moment in Zaire in 1974. The older Ali would knock out the undefeated Foreman in the eighth round of the Rumble in the Jungle fight.  
Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive

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During these early years of Brathwaite's career, his camera followed the music. In August 1959, Brathwaite, then 21 years old, took the ferry from Manhattan over to the Randalls Island Jazz Festival. The three-night bill reads like a jazz hall of fame: Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Sarah Vaughan, Horace Silver and Dave Brubeck on the first night; Duke Ellington, Dinah Washington, Art Blakey and Thelonious Monk on the second; and Miles Davis, Ahmad Jamal, Stan Kenton and the Modern Jazz Quartet on the third. As an avid jazz fan and amateur musician, Brathwaite knew implicitly when his camera might capture the most expressive moments. He studied the arranging systems of Joseph Schillinger and played the tenor saxophone but, as he told Harold Channer during a 2010 appearance on Channer's Manhattan public access program, he was no Charlie Parker: "I never could blow like Bird!" Being a good enough musician, however, made Brathwaite a great jazz photographer: He knew when a performer was about to take a solo, could anticipate a motion, interpret a glance.

For one of the never-before-seen photographs taken that weekend, Brathwaite shot the pianist Thelonious Monk from bench height, an uncommon angle that exalts Monk to grand proportions. Where a more conventional jazz photograph might have fixed on Monk's fingers on the keys, Brathwaite denies us that, instead directing the eye to more subtle gestures that might otherwise have escaped attention: the crook of Monk's elbow as he addresses his instrument, his lips parted to hum as he plays, his downcast gaze — attentive, enraptured.

For a second image from Randalls Island, Brathwaite photographed the saxophone player Cannonball Adderley, there as part of the Miles Davis Sextet, in a casual moment offstage, giving an interview to the Armed Forces Radio Service. The top button of Adderley's shirt is undone, the strap for his instrument hanging from his neck like a tie. A wry smile plays across his face. This is a jazz giant at human scale. "He understood as a photographer that you always have control of what you're portraying, but that you are also always driving for the truth of that person," Kwame Jr. says of his father. "He's always seeking out that glow, that inner spirit. That was his mastery."



Nina Simone with her mother, Mary Kate Waymon, at the 1974 Human Kindness Day event in Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive

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SIKOLO BRATHWAITE MET HER HUSBAND in 1965, when he and his brother stopped her one day as she was shopping on 125th Street. He told her he was a photographer, gave her a business card and said he would like nothing better than to photograph her. Sikolo was intrigued, but she was also wary of two men luring a young woman to some abandoned studio, so she brought a friend along with her. “It was pretty sketchy,” she recalls with a laugh. When she arrived at their Harlem studio, she saw walls adorned with gorgeous images of Black women of every skin tone. These were the Grandassa Models, a fixture of the Black Is Beautiful movement, and Sikolo would soon become one of them herself. (A year later, Kwame and Sikolo were married.)

Brathwaite did not invent the phrase “Black Is Beautiful”; he, Elombe and their AJASS associates found inspiration in the teachings of Marcus Garvey, who made this idea a cornerstone of the mass Pan-African movement he built, which reached its zenith in the 1920s. Brathwaite did, however, take this slogan of self-affirmation and give it a visual vocabulary. Beginning in the early 1960s, he and AJASS conceived the idea of gathering together a group of Black women who could model natural beauty standards in the face of whitewashing and hair straightening, through fashion shows and studio portraiture. The Grandassa Models — a riff on the ancestral term for the African continent, “Grandassaland” — would embody unaffected beauty and pride.

And so on January 28, 1962, at a small club in Harlem called the Purple Manor, near the corner of East 125th Street and Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard), AJASS staged Naturally '62: The Original African Coiffure and Fashion Extravaganza Designed to Restore Our Racial Pride and Standards, the first in a series of fashion shows held twice a year through 1973, then more sporadically until 1992. At their height, the Naturally shows attracted thousands of attendees. These were multifaceted affairs — fashion show and African dance concert, political meeting and cultural expo. The models walked the runway in clothing that they designed, inspired by the latest patterns and fashions from Africa’s urban centers: Accra, Nairobi, Dakar. Brathwaite began photographing the shows in color, capturing the vibrant shades of the garments and the varieties of the models’ skin tones.

In keeping with this animating spirit of activism, Brathwaite often photographed the models out in the world as well, at street fairs and political rallies. One newly discovered image shows two Grandassa Models — including Nomsa Brath (Elombe’s wife) — reclining on the hood of a car, wearing bold, earth-toned patterns of green, brown and gold, holding a protest poster that proclaims “Want Work Build Africa” scrawled in the red, black and green of the Pan-African flag. As Brathwaite took on more commercial work to supplement his portraiture and documentary photography, his lens remained trained on the beauty of Blackness wherever he found it.

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The pianist Thelonious Monk performing at the Randall's Island Jazz Festival in 1959. Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive

BY THE EARLY 1970S, BRATHWAITE was shooting fewer jazz concerts (“The jazz wasn’t paying,” Brathwaite confessed to Channer) and shifted to covering R&B concerts, awards shows and large sporting and political events. Around this time, he also transitioned from his medium-format camera to a 35 mm Canon. Brathwaite followed the Jackson Five to Ghana, then, four years later, photographed Michael Jackson partying at Studio 54. He became the unofficial house photographer for the Apollo Theater, where he shot Chaka Khan and Whitney Houston and countless others. He took commissions for magazines, especially the U.K.-based *Blues & Soul*, for whom he photographed Bob Marley, Sly Stone and many more.

Celebrity was a part of Brathwaite’s life, and he forged friendships with many of his subjects. Such familiarity allowed for comfort and trust, which in turn enabled Brathwaite to capture celebrated figures



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far from their fame. In a newly uncovered photograph of Nina Simone from 1974, the 41-year-old singer, backstage at the Human Kindness Day celebration on the national mall in Washington, D.C., shares a private moment with her 72-year-old mother, Mary Kate Waymon. Simone addresses the camera, while her mother, clutching her hat and her handbag, a shawl draped across her arm, looks off to the side unaware of anything other than her daughter's embrace. It's a straightforward image, communicating intimacy, love and pride.

Brathwaite was a master of finding these private moments even amid the flurry of public life. In late September of 1974, for instance, he traveled to Kinshasa, Zaire, to photograph the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman fight. The Rumble in the Jungle, as it would be dubbed, is best known for Ali's rope-a-dope strategy, in which he used Foreman's aggression against him, negating his opponent's advantage of strength by dint of his own unrelenting endurance. It is easy to cast the fight — and the fighters — in broad terms: the young favorite Foreman and the aging underdog Ali; Foreman's stoic villain and Ali's loquacious hero. What Brathwaite's lens captured is something more: two Black men, both still young, in full possession of their human complexity.

Brathwaite's image of Ali shows him resting ringside against the ropes during a sparring session, stripped to the waist, gripping a condenser microphone and holding it close to his mouth like he's ready to take a bite out of it. Two men, one of them with the unenviable task of interpreter, look on — one amused, the other awe-struck. Brathwaite's composition exercises the command of light and shadow honed years before in those dim uptown jazz clubs. Light streams in from the left, drawing the eye to Ali, whose face is partly in darkness. The delicate chiaroscuro heightens the drama of the moment while celebrating the contrasting tones of Brathwaite's Black subjects.



The saxophonist Cannonball Adderley being interviewed backstage at the Randall's Island Jazz Festival in 1959. Courtesy of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive



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Foreman was a far more enigmatic figure than Ali, having unwittingly lost favor with the citizens of Zaire by virtue of owning the same breed of dog, a German Shepard, employed in the past by Belgian colonizers to terrorize them. Brathwaite captured Foreman and his dog, Daggo, in a moment of raucous play. The orientation of the image is remarkable, cutting a vertical across the frame. Foreman is strong and stylish and endearing, shirtless in crocheted overalls, a floppy newsboy hat crowning his head. His corded muscles pull taught as he grips a branch, the other end fixed in the jaws of his maligned pet. What is so striking about both of these images is how inconspicuous Brathwaite has made himself. In doing so, he captures moments that might have otherwise proved inaccessible.

IN A 1974 ESSAY IN The New York Times Magazine, Toni Morrison rejects the phrase “Black Is Beautiful” as “an accurate but wholly irrelevant observation.” Of course, Morrison did not have Brathwaite in mind when she wrote this. By the 1970s, Black Is Beautiful was an advertising slogan, another way to sell cars and beauty products. To Morrison’s ear, the phrase sounded like a “psychic crutch for the needy” that ironically distracted Black people from attaining true self-worth. She continues, “When we are urged to confuse dignity with prettiness, and presence with image, we are being distracted from what is worthy about us: for example, our intelligence, our resilience, our skill, our tenacity, irony or spiritual health.”

Brathwaite’s work, however, is supremely attentive to the dignity and presence of his subjects. Throughout the ’80s and ’90s and until the late 2010s, he continued to photograph the diversity of human experience through the particulars of his Black subjects. In Brathwaite’s expansive vision, Black Is Beautiful never meant Black is only beautiful, nor was it just a corrective slogan to dispel the disparaged image of Blackness in the white supremacist’s imagination. Rather, Brathwaite’s lens marvels at the beauty of Blackness on its own terms, naturally. It makes no special pleading. The eyes of Brathwaite’s subjects look upon us with a regality that does not speak of a compensatory fantasy of mythic Black kings and queens but rather of a hard-earned wisdom born of a lived experience that crosses continents, spans slavery and emancipation and the ongoing fight for freedom.

For all of this, Brathwaite remains far less celebrated than one would expect, given the depth of his contributions, given how assiduously and artfully he chronicled a revolutionary era in Black American life, newly relevant in our own time of artistic and political foment. How might Brathwaite’s career and art have grown had his work been greeted 30, 40, 50 years ago with the same fanfare it is receiving today? Had his portraits graced the covers of mainstream fashion magazines? Had he been offered commissions by major publications, like The New York Times?

Regret and bitterness, however, have never been Kwame Brathwaite’s style. Three years ago, in one of his last public appearances, at a sold-out event at the Museum of the City of New York, the historian Tanisha Ford asked Brathwaite to define his legacy. He did not hesitate in responding: “I love Black people.” His wife, Sikolo, knows that love better than anyone. “People can go their entire lives without finding their purpose,” she says, reflecting on her husband’s long career. “He knew his purpose.”