

# MoMA

Onobanjo, Oluremi C., et al. "Remembering Kwame Brathwaite (1938-2023)," MoMA, December 26, 2023.



Kwame Brathwaite  
*Untitled (Sikolo Brathwaite with Headpiece designed by Carolee Prince)*, 1968  
c., printed 2016  
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed  
60 x 60 in  
152.4 x 152.4 cm

## Remembering Kwame Brathwaite (1938–2023)

**We pay tribute to a visionary photographer whose lens illuminated the beauty of a generation.**

**Oluremi C. Onobanjo, The Peter Schub Associate Curator, Department of Photography:**

Black Is Beautiful.

From Marcus Garvey to the Black Panther Party, these three words powered the political dreams and material possibilities of generations of Black people living in the United States. Over the course of seven decades, the recently departed photographer Kwame Brathwaite constructed a glorious visual lexicon to articulate a Pan-Africanist argument. Whether through his rhythmic documentation of the jazz scene in Harlem and the Bronx, or his cofounding of the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Brathwaite positioned photography at the nexus of Black artistic, political, and musical expression. Moving between concert halls and boxing rings, portrait studios and protest movement scenes—his Hasselblad in hand—Brathwaite chronicled self-determination and creativity that celebrated Blackness in all of its forms. Each of his photographs brims with bombastic flare and undeniable elegance. Their narrative potential is still transfixing.

"Black Is Beautiful was my directive," Brathwaite said. "It was a time when people were protesting injustices related to race, class, and human rights around the globe. I focused on perfecting my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas, and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation.... Oppression still exists today, and we must keep fighting, keep on pushing until we are free. A luta continua, a vitória é certa—the struggle continues, victory is certain."

With this ethos undergirding his image making, Brathwaite participated in a trans-Atlantic call and response that resounds forcefully through revolutionary times—a photographic echo of Ghanaian musician Guy Warren's 1957 record *Africa Speaks, America Answers*.

As 2023 comes to a close and Brathwaite's birthday approaches, a group of curatorial colleagues, editors, and artists reflect on the photographer's indelible impact.

**Marilyn Nance, photographer:**

I started wearing my hair in an Afro in 1968, at age 14. Though I didn't know Kwame Brathwaite then, I am sure I was affected by

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Kwame Brathwaite  
*Untitled (Nomsa with Africa corkboard at AJASS studios), 1964 c.*  
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed  
30 x 30 in  
76.2 x 76.2 cm

the Black Is Beautiful movement he heralded.

I started making photographs with a 35mm camera in 1972. It was a pleasure to encounter Kwame as a fellow photographer at all the events, rallies, and concerts. We shared a head nod, a couple of words, a presence. He had a serious commitment to the uplift of Black people and culture. A brother of such calm, grace, and caring demeanor—Kwame wasn't like all the other photographers.

My most memorable encounter with Kwame was a chance meeting in 1998 in East Harlem, in front of a supermarket. We talked for a long time. I remember feeling a kinship with him, whereas before I'd thought of him as almost mythical.

While all of us in the community of Black image-makers knew and respected him, the book and exhibition KWAME BRATHWAITE: BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL served notice to the larger art world.

Most assuredly, there are many Kwame Brathwaite images that have not been seen. I support the important work to protect, organize, and make his archive accessible.

## **David Hartt, artist:**

The only way to stop structural racism in our cultural institutions is to stop reproducing it. While I was studying photography in Canada in the early 1990s, my frame of reference was steeped in Canadian and European Conceptual art. I recognized that there were so many histories and modes of practice that I was unaware of. Years later, in 2016, when I curated an exhibition called *This Synthetic Moment* at the David Nolan Gallery in New York, I was struggling to describe a more polyphonic concept of identity that occupied multiple cultural positions simultaneously. I'm grateful to my friend Hamza Walker for introducing me to the work of Kwame Brathwaite. *Untitled (Photo shoot at a school for one of the many modeling groups who had begun to embrace natural hairstyles in the 1960s) (1964–68)* was one of several of Brathwaite's photographs that I included in the exhibition, along with work by James Barnor, Liz Johnson Artur, Christopher Williams, and Zoe Leonard.

I wish I had encountered Kwame's work earlier, but I'm grateful to know of it now.

## **Roxana Marcoci, The David Dechman Senior Curator and Acting Chief Curator of Photography:**

The photographer-activist Kwame Brathwaite was a key voice in the pan-Africanist movement of the 1950s and '60s, and a chronicler of the most inspiring cultural, political, and social happenings in

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Kwame Brathwaite  
*Untitled (Photo shoot at a school for one of the many modeling groups who had begun to embrace natural hairstyles in the 1960s)*, 1966 c. printed 2017  
Archival pigment print, framed  
15 x 15 in  
38.1 x 38.1 cm

Harlem. He also founded the art collective African Jazz Art-Society & Studios (AJASS) and Grandassa Models, a modeling agency for Black women. In January 1962, in the basement of a small Harlem nightclub called Purple Manor, he and his brother, Elombe Brath, organized an event featuring performances by jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, along with an all-Black cast of models, who were dressed in Afrocentric designs and sported natural hairstyles. Known as "Naturally '62," the event ignited a global movement.

Brathwaite's portrait of his wife Sikolo, wearing a regal beaded headpiece and earrings by Carolee Prince, one of the era's most innovative designers, with her dark shoulders showing, challenged the ubiquitous presence of lighter-complexioned, straight-haired Black models. It was a celebration of a new African American identity that gave rise to the rallying cry "Black Is Beautiful." This portrait from MoMA's collection offers much-needed texture to our understanding of the Black freedom movement of the 1960s, and of the lasting power of fashion and photography in the development of racial pride and the unique beauty and style of Black women.

## **Esther Adler, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints:**

I love a statement earring, so there is a lot for me to admire in Kwame Brathwaite's portraits of women. His pictures of sharply dressed, perfectly poised figures always read as monumental regardless of the scale at which they are printed, because of the focused attention he lavished on his subjects. The viewer can't help but follow his lead. Nomsa Brath (Brathwaite's frequent model and collaborator, and a cultural force in her own right, who sadly passed this year as well) was the "Girl with a Pearl Earring" to Brathwaite, the photographer's Vermeer, and this work glows in the same mysterious way, suggesting a rich inner life and active mind that we can only guess at.

Of course this image of a woman lost in thought is one of great beauty—it's hard to imagine anyone thinking otherwise. The simplicity of this reaction is due in part to Brathwaite and Brath's work together, and to their dedication to producing images of Black women being their well-dressed, naturally gorgeous selves. There is a larger sociopolitical message underlying the work, as there is in many images of Black women with natural hairstyles from the 1960s and 1970s, but to me it feels secondary here. I'm too busy obsessing about the figure's jewelry and clothing and wondering if I could ever pull off either. I think this speaks to the incredible accomplishment of Brathwaite's career: his photographs have so changed the narrative around images of Black women that sometimes we can forget for a minute how revolutionary they are.

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Kwame Brathwaite  
*Untitled (Nomsa Brath at Photoshoot at AJASS Studio)*, 1965 c.  
Archival pigment print, framed  
15 x 15 in  
38.1 x 38.1 cm

## **Michael Famighetti, Editor-in-Chief, Aperture magazine:**

As a photographer and activist, Kwame Brathwaite was a model of inventiveness and entrepreneurial zeal. Known as the “Keeper of the Images,” he was at the center of the “Black Is Beautiful” movement in Harlem in the 1960s. He and his indefatigable colleagues, including his brother Elombe Brath, organized jazz concerts, fashion shows, protests, and nights of what they called “edutainment” at the Apollo Theater. Brathwaite understood the power of photography, music, and sartorial flair in the movement for equality and social justice. His images document a captivating story of grassroots activism fueled by creativity. In the photo, the juxtaposition of Nomsa Brath and the animal skin suspended from the ceiling creates a compelling visual contrast, suggesting a fusion of traditional and contemporary elements. The colorful check dress worn by Nomsa Brath adds vibrancy to the scene, symbolizing a celebration of culture and identity. But it is his close-cropped portraits of the Grandassa models that propel the ideas of the movement with uncommon visual power. The women pictured, who were also organizers and leading figures, are often photographed in profile, sometimes slightly from below. Their gaze is often directed outside the frame. They seem to glow in the majestic prints, now carefully produced by the photographer’s son.