

# NEWS RELEASE

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Skirball Cultural Center to present US premiere of new exhibition

## BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite April 11–September 1, 2019

First major exhibition of groundbreaking African American photographer  
fuses art, music, fashion, and social history

LOS ANGELES, CA—The Skirball Cultural Center announces *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite*, the first exhibition to focus on this key—and until now under-recognized—figure of the second Harlem Renaissance. Through more than forty iconic images, *Black Is Beautiful* will illuminate how in the late 1950s and 1960s, Kwame Brathwaite (b. 1938) used his art to popularize “Black Is Beautiful,” now considered one of the most influential cultural movements of that era. Organized by Aperture Foundation, the exhibition will make its national debut at the Skirball from April 11 through September 1, 2019.

Inspired by the writings of famed activist and black nationalist Marcus Garvey, Brathwaite harnessed the power of art, music, and fashion to effect social change. Along with his brother Elombe Brath (1936–2014), he founded two organizations that were instrumental in realizing his vision: the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), a collective of artists, playwrights, designers, and dancers, in 1956; and Grandassa Models, a modeling group for black women, in 1962. Brathwaite organized fashion shows showcasing clothes designed by the models themselves, created stunning portraits of jazz luminaries, and captured behind-the-scenes photographs of the black arts community, including Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Miles Davis.

During an era when segregation prevailed across the United States, Brathwaite’s body of work is remarkable for challenging mainstream beauty standards that excluded people of color. His photographs of African American women and men with natural hair and clothes that reclaimed and honored their African roots instilled a sense of pride throughout the community. In addition to Brathwaite’s photographs, the exhibition will display several garments worn during the fashion shows, as well as a selection of ephemeral materials.

Brathwaite’s son, Kwame S. Brathwaite—who co-curated the exhibition with Aperture Foundation’s Michael Famighetti and Skirball managing curator Bethany Montagano—remarked, “My father preserved the legacy of the ‘Black Is Beautiful’ movement, which is not merely a slogan, but a template for the way that art and activism can propel us toward equity and inclusion.”

“*Black Is Beautiful* demonstrates how Kwame Brathwaite’s photographs disrupted cultural norms and helped to broaden our definition of what is beautiful and who gets to decide,” added Montagano. “In keeping with the Skirball’s mission to affirm the dignity of every cultural identity, we are honored to highlight an artist whose body of work and guiding principles call upon us to work toward a more just and inclusive society.”

Following the Skirball presentation of *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite*, the exhibition will go on national tour, traveling to the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina in 2020, among other venues to be announced.

## Related Publication

The exhibition at the Skirball will coincide with the publication of the first-ever monograph dedicated to Kwame Brathwaite. Featuring in-depth essays by Tanisha C. Ford and Deborah Willis and more than eighty images, *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, May 2019) will offer a long overdue exploration of Brathwaite’s life and work.

## Related Programs

In celebration of opening week of the exhibition, the Skirball will present two related programs:

**BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL: THEN AND NOW** | Thursday, April 11, 8:00 pm—Hear from the artist’s son and director of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive, **Kwame S. Brathwaite**, along with fashion designer **Mimi Plange** and additional guests TBA, as they examine the social impact of Brathwaite’s photography. This panel will also consider contemporary issues of representation and activism through media.

**EXTRA ANCESTRAL** | Sunday, April 14, 7:00 pm—**Extra Ancestral**, a collective of artists at the forefront of contemporary Afro-Latin music and dance, takes the Skirball stage to celebrate the African diaspora in LA. In the 1960s and 1970s, black people in the diaspora looked to the African continent for inspiration and connection to their ancestral heritage, finding a shared sense of Pan-Africanism. Today, Afro-diasporic cultures continue to influence both American and global cultures. The performance will feature members of **Jungle Fire**, **Ethio Cali**, and **Capofresh Ensemble**, and a special performance by **Viver Brasil Dance Company**.

## About the Artist

Born in Brooklyn in 1938 and raised in the Bronx, New York, Brathwaite spent most of his adult life in and around New York City. In the late 1950s, Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath became active in the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement led by Carlos Cooks. At the same time, the brothers regularly produced and promoted concerts and art shows at venues such as Club 845 in the Bronx and Small’s Paradise in Harlem, while Brathwaite photographed the events.

Throughout the 1960s, Brathwaite contributed photography to leading black publications such as the *Amsterdam News*, *City Sun*, and *Daily Challenge*. By the 1970s, Brathwaite was a leading concert photographer, helping to shape the images of major celebrities, including Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, James Brown, and Muhammad Ali. Brathwaite wrote about and photographed such landmark events as the Motown Revue at the Apollo in 1963, WattStax 1972, the Jackson 5’s first trip to Africa in 1974, and the Festival in Zaire in 1974.

Today Brathwaite resides in New York City and is represented by Philip Martin Gallery in Culver City, California. He is married to Sikolo Brathwaite, a former Grandassa model whom he met through their work together. She continues to advocate for the empowerment of black women today. Their son, Kwame S. Brathwaite, is currently the director of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive in Pasadena, California.

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*Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite* is organized by Aperture Foundation, New York. The exhibition and the accompanying Aperture publication are made possible in part with generous support to the Aperture Foundation from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Photographic Arts Council Los Angeles.

The exhibition and its related educational programs at the Skirball Cultural Center are made possible through generous support from the following donors:

**The Angell Foundation**  
**Billie B. and Steven G. Fischer Foundation**  
**GRoW@Annenberg**  
**U.S. Bank**

### **About the Skirball**

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

### **Visiting the Skirball**

The Skirball Cultural Center is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Museum admission: \$12 General; \$9 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$7 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. Exhibitions are FREE to all visitors on Thursdays. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit [skirball.org](http://skirball.org).