

BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Blanton Museum of Art to Present Summer Exhibitions *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite and Suzanne Bocanegra: Valley*



AUSTIN, TX — April 20, 2021— The Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin is pleased to present two summer exhibitions, *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite* and *Suzanne Bocanegra: Valley*, both opening June 27, 2021 and remaining on view through September 19, 2021. *Black Is Beautiful* features the previously under-recognized photographic work of activist and photographer Kwame Brathwaite. The second exhibition is dedicated to University of Texas alumna and 2020 Guggenheim Fellow Suzanne Bocanegra's large-scale video work *Valley*.

“The Blanton is excited to kick off the summer with simultaneous exhibitions that showcase compelling works by two contemporary artists,” said Blanton director Simone Wicha. “Fusing art and activism, Brathwaite’s photography shines a light on the Black Is Beautiful movement, while Bocanegra’s immersive video experience reimagines a famous wardrobe test with Judy Garland, employing influential women to honor her legacy. Although Brathwaite’s and Bocanegra’s works are quite different in format and content, both point to important questions about empowerment in contemporary visual culture. We hope these exhibitions and related public programs resonate with our community, expanding perspectives and inspiring thoughtful dialogue.”

About *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite*

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Kwame Brathwaite (b. Brooklyn, 1938) used his work to popularize the political slogan “Black Is Beautiful.” This exhibition, the first ever dedicated to Brathwaite’s remarkable career, explores Brathwaite as a key figure of the second Harlem Renaissance.

“Brathwaite’s photography offers a window into a particular time and place that makes this exhibition historically rich, but his message and activism resonate today,” said exhibition organizer Claire Howard, Blanton assistant curator of modern and contemporary art. “I’m excited to connect the exhibition to University of Texas faculty expertise and our local creative community to underscore the continued relevance of Brathwaite’s ideas.”

Organized by Aperture Foundation in partnership with Kwame S. Brathwaite, Brathwaite’s son and Director of the Kwame Brathwaite Archive, the Blanton’s presentation features more than 40 photographs, most shot in Harlem and the Bronx, accompanied by contemporary jewelry and clothing, album covers, and reproductions of vintage posters.



Inspired by the writings of early-20th-century Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, Brathwaite and his brother, Elombe Brath, founded the African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS)—a collective of artists, playwrights, designers, and dancers that organized jazz concerts across Harlem and the Bronx—and the Grandassa Models, a collective of Black women of varying backgrounds from the community, who embraced natural hairstyles and their African ancestry.

Brathwaite emerged as a concert photographer at the AJASS shows, capturing performances by top acts, including Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Miles Davis. As an extension of their music promotion, the group also drew on Garvey’s teachings to advance messages of economic independence and social consciousness. Brathwaite’s skill as a photographer, but also as an activist who sought to create and celebrate African American community and identity, is reflected in the exhibition’s images of the vibrant jazz scene and local businesses and events.

Grandassa had an instantaneous impact, countering not only the white beauty norms of the Twiggy era, but also the lighter-skinned, straight-haired models popular in Black-owned publications at the time. The Grandassa Models figure prominently in *Black Is Beautiful*, shot in studios and galleries as well as less conventional locales: posed on the hood of a car at Marcus Garvey Day Parade, or wielding a protest sign promoting natural hairstyles outside a wig shop on 125th Street.

Brathwaite's photographs document the stories of the Black men and women who changed the political and cultural landscape by challenging notions of beauty and disenfranchisement. In the preface to the publication accompanying the exhibition, Brathwaite, who diligently preserved his photo negatives, remarks, "There's so much history that must be made, so much to share. As the Keeper of the Images, my goal has always been to pass that legacy on and make sure that for generations to come, everyone who sees my work knows the greatness of our people."¹

The exhibition is accompanied by the first-ever monograph dedicated to Kwame Brathwaite. Featuring in-depth essays by Tanisha C. Ford and Deborah Willis and more than 80 images, *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019) offers a long-overdue exploration of Brathwaite's life and work.



About Suzanne Bocanegra: Valley

Suzanne Bocanegra's *Valley* is a multi-channel video installation of eight women simultaneously reenacting Judy Garland's wardrobe test for the movie *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), based on Jacqueline Susann's best-selling novel of the same name about women undone by pills and show business. Since Susann had drawn on details from Garland's real-life struggles with drugs and men, she was cast in the film adaptation to give it authenticity. Fired after only a few days of filming, Garland took the costumes with her and wore them in concerts until her death from a barbiturate overdose in 1969.

Bocanegra worked with the studio staff of Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum to recreate these costumes for each of the eight women whose own work touches on performance: poet Anne Carson, dancer and choreographer Deborah Hay, artist Joan Jonas, actor and singer Alicia Hall Moran, activist Tanya Selvaratnam, actor Kate Valk, artist Carrie Mae Weems, and ballet dancer Wendy Whelan.

"Taken together, these eight restagings of Garland's wardrobe test are mesmerizing," said exhibition curator Claire Howard. "Each performer's distinct take on 'Judy Garland' reclaims her tragic narrative by asserting an individualism that transcends any one role."

The wardrobe test is the only footage of Garland from the film that survives; in it, she poses and turns at the bidding of an off-screen director, uttering the occasional nervous quip. Despite having grown up a star, she appears self-conscious and unsure of herself in front of the camera. “Garland wasn’t really acting in the wardrobe test for *Valley of the Dolls*, but in a sense, she was,” said Bocanegra. “She was trying hard to convince the director and crew that she was still dependable, trying to hide her exhaustion and fragility, performing the role of ‘Judy Garland.’ The exhaustion and fragility are what we end up seeing. I wanted to reframe it by casting these eight powerful women, using their strength to spotlight the exploitation of women in film and popular culture.”

Valley debuted in 2018 as part of a solo exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum. In conversation with Bocanegra, critic Hal Foster noted that “all these pieces are not only personal stories; they’re also cultural essays.”²

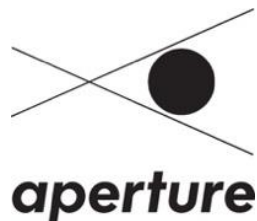
Born in Houston in 1957, Bocanegra received her BFA from The University of Texas at Austin. Bocanegra has alluded to her Texas ties in past works such as her 2017 performative artist lecture *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*, in which she mined memories of her grandparents’ farmhouse in La Grange, Texas, and their next-door neighbors at the Chicken Ranch brothel — better known as the “Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.” Her homecoming show at the Blanton marks her first major solo exhibition in Texas.

“I’ve lived in New York for almost 30 years now, but in many ways, personally and artistically, I never really left Texas,” said Bocanegra. “It means a lot to me to come back to UT and show my work.”

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

The Blanton’s presentation is organized by Claire Howard, Assistant Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art.

Generous support for this exhibition at the Blanton is provided by Michael Chesser, with additional support from Ellen and David Berman.



Suzanne Bocanegra: Valley is organized by the Blanton Museum of Art.

Major funding for this exhibition is provided by Suzanne Deal Booth.

Public Programs

“Black Is Beautiful” in the Instagram Age

Tuesday, July 13 | 5:00 p.m.

Claire Howard will be joined by local photographers Cindy Elizabeth, Moyo Oyelola, and Riley Reed in a virtual conversation about photographic activism and the role of social media in their own work, and the ongoing relevance of Brathwaite’s ideas about representation and social change.

Virtual Screening: *When a Priest Marries a Witch, an Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Paul Lazar*
Tuesday, August 10 | 5:00 p.m.

Virtual screening of Suzanne Bocanegra's 2010 performative "artist lecture" *When a Priest Marries a Witch, an Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Paul Lazar*. The lecture debuted at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and was presented at Austin's Fusebox Festival in 2012.

Contextualizing "Black Is Beautiful": A UT Faculty Panel

Tuesday, September 7 | 5:00 p.m.

In conjunction with *Black Is Beautiful*, the Blanton will co-host a virtual panel featuring UT faculty members Peniel E. Joseph, Lyndon K. Gill, and Lisa B. Thompson, with special guest Kwame S. Brathwaite, in partnership with the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at The University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs.

More details and information on these public programs will be made available at blantonmuseum.org/events.

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About the Blanton Museum of Art

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with around 19,000 objects. Recognized as the home of Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, its major collecting areas are modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and prints and drawings. The Blanton offers thought-provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

About Kwame Brathwaite

Kwame Brathwaite (b. Brooklyn, New York, 1938) lives and works in New York. His photographs have been included in solo and group exhibitions at Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles; David Nolan Gallery, New York; and the Museum of the City of New York, and published in *Aperture*, the *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, and *New York* magazine. Brathwaite's photography is held in public and private collections, including those of the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Museum of the City of New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Organized by the Aperture Foundation, *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite* was first presented at the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, in 2019.

About Suzanne Bocanegra

Suzanne Bocanegra (b. Houston, Texas, 1957) earned her BFA from The University of Texas at Austin and her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, California. She currently lives and works in New York. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Robert Rauschenberg Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Art, and the Rome Prize, she has received grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Tiffany Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her recent work involves large-scale performance and installation, frequently translating two-dimensional information, images, and ideas from the past into three-dimensional staging, movement, and music.

Images:

Kwame Brathwaite, Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1968; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019)

Suzanne Bocanegra, *Valley* (stills), 2018, eight-channel HD video (color, sound), 4:44 minutes, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, photo Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of the artist

Kwame Brathwaite, Marcus Garvey Day Parade, Harlem, circa 1967; from *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019), photo courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles

Installation view of Suzanne Bocanegra, *Valley*, at Art Cake, New York, 2018, photo Alan Tansey, courtesy of the artist

References:

1. *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (New York: Aperture, 2019), 8.
2. *Suzanne Bocanegra: Poorly Watched Girls* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, and MW Editions: 2019), 18.