

**KWAME BRATHWAITE**

American, born Brooklyn, NY, 1938

Untitled (Grandassa Models, Merton Simpson Gallery), ca. 1967, printed 2018

Inkjet print, 30 × 30 inches

Gift of the Allen-Niesen Family: Kim, Keith, Kelsey, and Kyle, 2019.13.2

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who's gonna take  
the words  
    blk / is / beautiful  
and make more of it  
than blk / capitalism.  
                    u dig?  
—Sonia Sanchez, “blk / rhetoric”<sup>1</sup>

In 1966, Donyale Luna became the first Black woman to grace the cover of a mainstream fashion publication—*British Vogue*. In 1968 and 1969 Naomi Sims would become the first Black woman to appear on the cover of the popular US publications *Ladies Home Journal* and *Life* (the latter’s corresponding editorial feature of the month was titled “Black Models Take Center Stage”). However, as these Black women began to gain recognition by the international fashion public, artist Kwame Brathwaite was already centering the beauty of Black women in his work as a photographer.

Undergirded by mantras such as “Black is Beautiful” and “Thinking Black,” popularized during the Black Power era of the 1960s and 1970s, Brathwaite and his brother Elombe founded a modeling troupe they called Grandassa Models—named after “Grandassaland,” a term that Black nationalist Carlos Cooks created to refer to Africa—and launched a series of fashion-focused events that politically and aesthetically centered racial pride. Combining The Block’s “Thinking about History” concept with the mantras that guided Brathwaite’s work, I offer a meditation on “Thinking about Black History.” As I look at this image of Grandassa models, I ask what it means to note these women as “firsts” and to think about Black history, Black thought, Black beauty as the starting point.

According to historian and critic Tanisha Ford, Brathwaite’s photographs “never became a part of the [black freedom] movement’s visual canon” and have only recently emerged to take their place in popular culture, museum collections, and history.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I wonder if Brathwaite’s rich repository of images serves as a rejoinder to the inquiry posed by poet Sonia Sanchez in the epigraph above. Brathwaite’s visual tome of Black pride does not beg to be considered as an adjunct to the canon of Western art or rhetoric. Rather, it rightfully proclaims that it is a canon unto itself.

—Rikki Byrd ’23 PhD, African American Studies  
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1 From Sonia Sanchez, *We A BaddDDD People* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970).

2 Tanisha Ford, *Kwame Brathwaite: Black is Beautiful* (New York: Aperture, 2019), 75.