Untitled #2 Accra, c.1972

Drum Cover Girl Marie Hallowi Kent, 1966

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Autograph ABP is a charity that works internationally to educate the public in photography, with a particular emphasis on issues of cultural identity and human rights.

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Autograph ABP
Rivington Place
London EC2A 3BA

T +44 (0)20 7729 9200

E info@autograph-abp.co.uk

www.autograph-abp.co.uk

Registered charity no 1127712

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STAFF

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Tom O Mara Deputy Director

Renée Mussai
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Communications and Events

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AUTOGRAPH ABP

EVER YOUNG
JAMES BARNOR

Eva London 1960s

EVER YOUNG

JAMES BARNOR

The first major solo exhibition of James Barnor's photographs was presented by Autograph ABP at Rivington Place, London

September 17 – November 27, 2010

The exhibition *Ever Young: James Barnor* emerged as a direct result of archival research supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and is closely linked to the establishment of Autograph ABP's *Archive and Research Centre for Culturally Diverse Photography*, due to open in 2011.

Untitled #1 London, 1967

Selina Opong, Policewoman #10 Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1954

Ghanaian Indian
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1955

Newlyweds
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1957

Fancy dress party
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1955

Olas Comedians Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1953-54

Baby on All Fours (Nii Armah)
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1952

Everything In My Hand I Bring
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1953

Mr A.Q.A. Archampong a.k.a. 'Joy'
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1957

Yoga undergraduate Peter Dodoo, a student of Mr. Strong
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1957

Four Nurses
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1957

Beatrice with trademark figurine
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1955

PEOPLE GET READY

JAMES BARNOR'S ROUTE MAP OF AFRO-MODERNITY

KOBENA MERCER

Photography is a distinctively modern medium. In the hands of African photographers a camera reveals the various uneven ways modernity took root around the globe. Images by the Ghanaian photographer James Barnor, which are now being displayed for the first time as a collection, not only reveal a new nation making the transition to independence but, after he moved to the UK in the early 1960s, also throw light on the making of modern London as a multicultural world city. The multi-faceted nature of Barnor's output – from black and white studio portraits and press agency photos for the *Daily Graphic* newspaper to colour fashion plates for the weekly magazine *Drum* – confirms that while photography may claim to deliver merely the cold documentary facts it also has an intimate quality that can illuminate the most private aspects of individual lives.

Barnor served his apprenticeship when Ghana was still the Gold Coast colony and in 1949 he opened the *Ever Young* portrait studio in the Jamestown district of Accra. At a time when visiting the photographer's studio was a ritual occasion, made with the aim of capturing life-changing moments such as weddings or graduations, his clients would have come from traditional middle class families and from the ambitious working class, including rural migrants arriving in the city for the first time. But he was also catering for customers newly entering the urban professions like nursing, teaching or the police. His portraits from the early 1950s capture a nation gearing up for modernity and independence.

Barnor's portrait of the saluting policewoman, *Selina Opong* (c.1954), standing forthright in her crisp new uniform, goes beyond the outward appearance of someone on a journey of upward mobility. The self-confidence and pride radiating from her transmit her optimism, her desire to play a part in the making of a new society. In presenting to the camera the status she has achieved as a result of her own choice and hard work, her pose expresses a civic commitment driven by the wish to contribute to the common good. Barnor captures the mood of a nation on the cusp of self-determination.

Barnor's subjects are thus always somehow 'more' than their individual selves, yet they are never mere types. Like the 1950s portraits of his contemporaries – Seydou Keita in Mali or Salla Casset in Senegal – Barnor skilfully encapsulates the hopes and dreams of his sitters and the inner aspirations of a nation. The formal yet relaxed posture of his sitters conveys a dignified self-possession, reflecting the fact that both photographer and photographed share control over the apparatus of representation. This cooperation offers a stark contrast to the fixed gaze of colonial photographs depicting Africans in exoticised exterior settings, drawing attention to their 'native' environment and pre-modern tribalism. The very artificiality of the studio's inner chamber enabled photographer and sitter together to fashion new versions of Ghanaian, and African, identity. In *The Blavo Siblings* (c.1953) the details in clothing and hairstyle articulate the inner life of the subjects with the same acuteness as their tentatively confident expressions. In the case of the *Olas Comedians* (c.1954), we see a theatrical troupe, complete with female impersonator, who performed in the indigenous genre of the 'concert party', a kind of satirical review mocking pompous local authority figures but which also, under colonial rule, took aim at the attitudes imported by Empire.

Whether outfitted in a three-piece suit or kente cloth, it is the theatricality of Barnor's studio setting that highlights the fact that his subjects were choosing what they wanted Afro-Modernity to be. Set up with parted

Drum Cover Girl Erlin Ibreck at Trafalgar Square
London, 1966

Mike Eghan at Piccadilly Circus
London, 1967

Drum cover girl Erlin Ibreck
London, 1966

The Blavo siblings
Ever Young Studio, Accra, c.1953

Breakfast with Roy Ankrah a.k.a. 'The Black Flash'
Accra, c. 1952-53

curtains, painted balcony backdrops and a lino-covered dais, the *Ever Young* studio was literally a stage upon which social actors tried out different roles. The seemingly incongruous props – china figurines, plastic toys, even 'Red Indian' costumes – hint at Ghana's place in global circuits of commodities characteristic of modernity, and the desire of Barnor's subjects to participate in this modern world.

Whereas the studio portraits were meant for the private realm of the parlour or the family album, Barnor's photojournalism disclosed the public affairs of state that surrounded Ghana's independence in 1957. More revealing than his 'official' pictures, of President Kwame Nkrumah greeting HRH Duchess of Kent, are the early examples of celebrity reportage like that showing boxer Roy Ankrah, aka the 'Black Flash', at breakfast with his family. This photo is stage-managed in a way the portraits are not – offering an idealised domestic scene, with the branded cornflakes packet indicating the aspirational status bestowed by the imported luxury. After independence, sport became an important metaphor for self-determination among African nations. On account of the massive popular audiences commanded by boxing and football, politicians were keen to be seen showing their support, as captured in a snapshot showing Barnor sitting on a sofa next to Ankrah and Nkrumah.

As a *Daily Graphic* staff photographer, Barnor would have taken commissions set by a picture editor. He may have had less autonomy and fewer choices than in his work as a portraitist, but his assignments for *Drum* magazine – Barnor's mainstay after he left Ghana in 1959, living in Britain until he returned to Africa in 1969 – give us a glimpse into the trans-continental and global remit that defines African photography as a distinctive visual genre.

When *Drum*'s co-founder Jim Bailey appointed Anthony Sampson as its editor in the 1950s, the magazine's combination of campaigning journalism and light-hearted photo stories made it a thorn in the side of apartheid. And having been an integral part of the resistance movement known as the Sophiatown Renaissance, *Drum* was also a launching pad for the documentary photography of black South Africans such as Peter Magubane and Bob Gosani. In the 1960s, the *Drum* franchise spread throughout the African continent, including editions in Kenya and Nigeria. But as we can see from the red pillarbox in James Barnor's cover image for the June 1967 Nigerian edition, the magazine and its readership were also part and parcel of the rise of Black London.

Muhammad Ali, training for his 1966 fight with Henry Cooper, featured in Barnor's London-based reportage. A portrait of Ghanaian broadcaster Mike Eghan, who hosted a talk show for the BBC World Service, underlines the celebrity presence in Barnor's UK portfolio. But to the extent that fashion begins to predominate, as with the model standing with arms at an angle in space-age jump suit and silver boots in *Untitled #1* (1967), we find that it becomes less and less plausible to identify Barnor's subjects by their nationality.

Whether individually named, such as *Eva* (1960), or more anonymously depicted in settings such as Trafalgar Square, his fashion models could be Caribbean, African American or West African. Within the trans-national orbit of the magazine's circulation, these throwaway fashion photographs thus testify to the 1960s emergence of a global blackness that could not be fixed or contained within one national identity.

Cutting across the divide between periphery and metropolis, Barnor's images suggest that 'Africa' has never been a static entity, confined to the boundaries of geography, but has always had a diasporic dimension. The scattering of culture and identity away from one single origin into multiple sites of residence was once seen as a tragic loss of 'roots', although Barnor's oeuvre seems to tally more with contemporary post-colonial thinking that regards diaspora as the alter-national product of world-making journeys, which pass through numerous cross-cultural 'routes'. As such it is not a minus but a plus.

The rediscovery of Barnor's images today reveals how photographs have a diasporic life of their own. By virtue of mechanical reproduction, which undercuts the distinction between the original and the copy, photographs are vulnerable to a process of decontextualisation – making them orphans, thrown into the world without a fixed 'home'. But in the research process of retrieval and reassembly that Autograph ABP has undertaken to unify Barnor's disparate images into a holistic body of work, we have a kind of homecoming in which previously orphaned images are given a second life.

Photos initially intended for private exchange among family members, or made to meet newspaper deadlines only to be then discarded, are, by virtue of being repositioned as art on gallery walls, given new value as objects of aesthetic attention and as markers of the emergence of a new world.

Note This essay was originally commissioned by the *New Humanist* magazine for a review of the Autograph ABP exhibition *James Barnor: Ever Young*

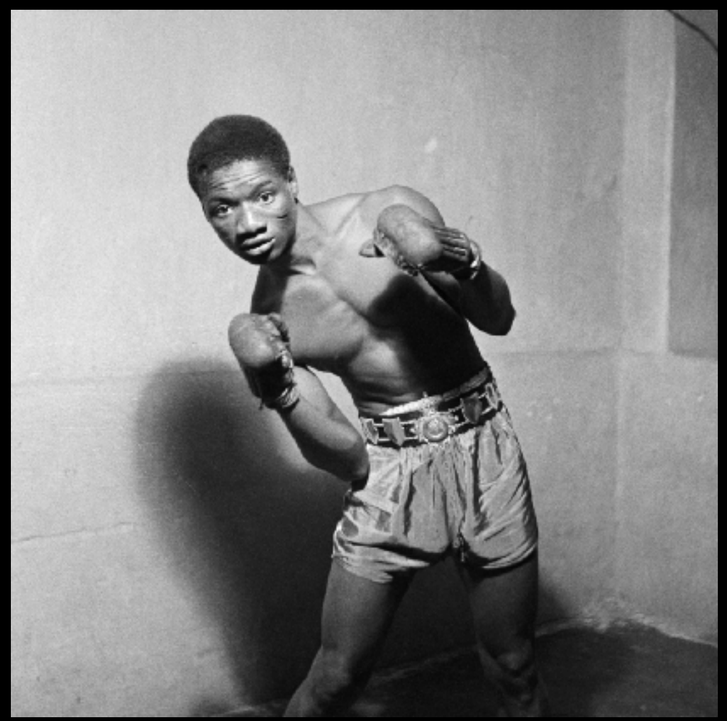
Text © Kobena Mercer 2010

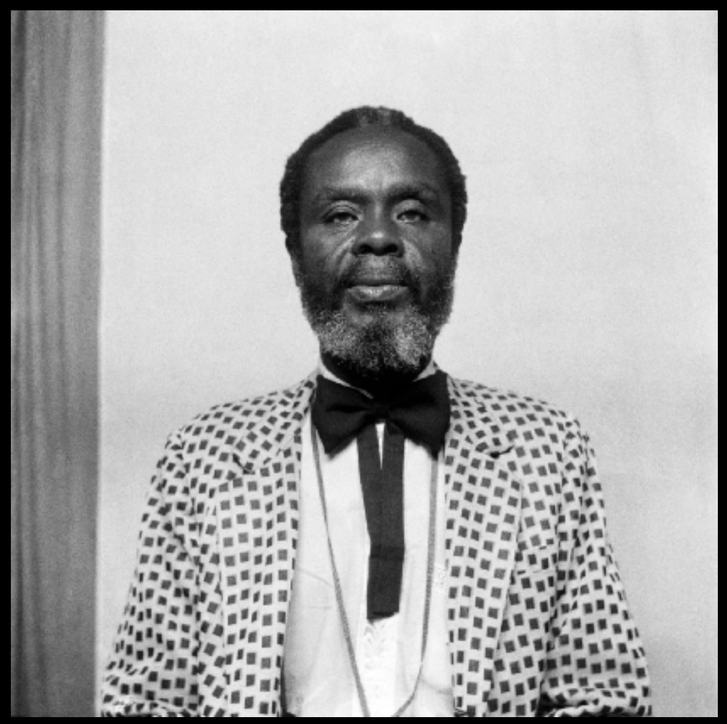
Drum cover girl Rosemarie Thompson London, 1967

Independence Celebrations #2 (Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah greets HRH The Duchess of Kent)
Accra Stadium, 1957

Independence Celebrations #3 (Representatives from East Africa entering Parliament House) Accra, 1957

Self Portrait with Kwame Nkrumah, Roy Ankrah and wife Rebecca
Accra, c.1952





Ginger Nyarku Accra, c.1952

The Pastor Mamprobi, Accra, c. 1955

Untitled #4 Accra, c.1972

Untitled #7 Accra, 1970

Muhammad Ali training at Earls Court London, 1966

Mike Eghan at BBC Studios London, 1967

Wedding guests London, 1960s

Coffee night in Theobald's Road London, 1960s

Flamingo cover girl Sarah with friend London, 1960s