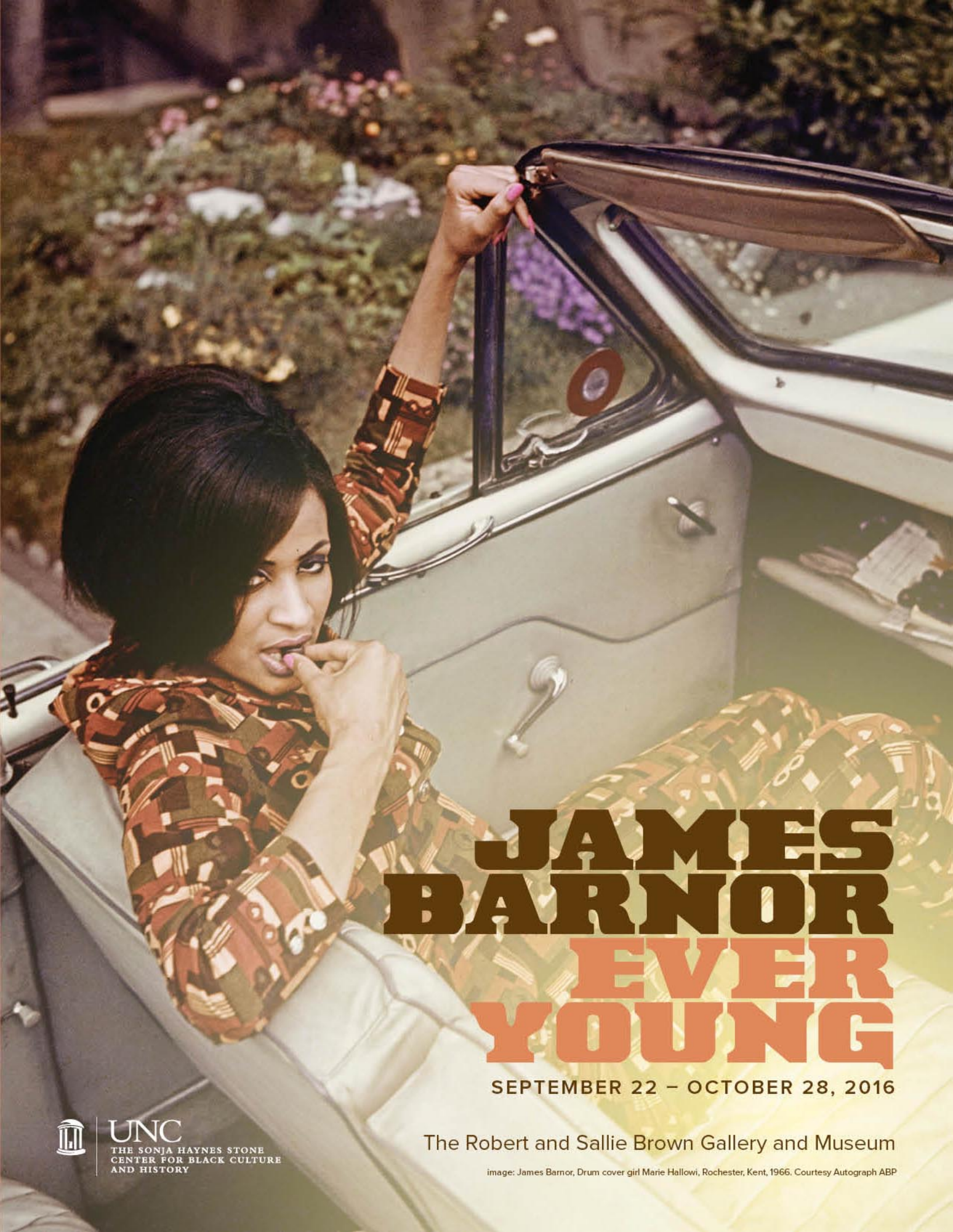

# JAMES BARNOR
# EVER YOUNG

SEPTEMBER 22 – OCTOBER 28, 2016

UNC
THE SONJA HAYNES STONE CENTER FOR BLACK CULTURE AND HISTORY

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum

image: James Barnor, Drum cover girl Marie Hallowi, Rochester, Kent, 1966. Courtesy Autograph ABP


(above) Mike Eghan at Piccadilly Circus, London, 1967. Courtesy Autograph ABP

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center in partnership with Autograph ABP presents a retrospective of James Barnor's street and studio photographs, spanning Ghana and London from the late 1940s to early 1970s.

James Barnor's career covers a remarkable period in history, bridging continents and photographic genres to create a transatlantic narrative marked by his passionate interest in people and cultures. Through the medium of portraiture, Barnor's photographs represent societies in transition: Ghana moving towards its independence and London becoming a cosmopolitan, multicultural metropolis. The exhibition showcases a range of street and studio photographs – modern and vintage - with elaborate backdrops, fashion portraits in glorious color, as well as social documentary features, many commissioned for pioneering South African magazine Drum during the 'swinging 60s' in London.

In the early 1950s, Barnor's photographic studio Ever Young in Jamestown, Accra was visited by civil servants and dignitaries, performance artists and newly-weds. During this period, Barnor captured intimate moments of luminaries and key political figures such as Ghana's first Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah as he pushed for pan-African unity, and commonwealth boxing champion Roy Ankrah. In 1960s London, Barnor photographed Muhammad Ali training for a fight at Earl's Court, BBC Africa Service reporter Mike Eghan posing at Piccadilly Circus and a multinational cohort of fashionable Drum cover girls.

A touring exhibition from Autograph ABP curated by Renée Mussai.

# JAMES BARNOR

(left) James Barnor and friend, photographing for the Daily Graphic', Accra, c. 1952© James Barnor, courtesy Autograph ABP.

James Barnor was born in Accra, Ghana in 1929 and started his photographic career with a makeshift studio in Jamestown. From the early 1950s he operated 'Ever Young' studio in Accra and worked as a photographer for the Daily Graphic newspaper, as well as Drum, Africa's foremost lifestyle and politics magazine. He left Ghana for the UK in 1959 and studied photography at Medway College of Art in Kent. He returned to Ghana in 1969 as a representative for Agfa Gevaert to introduce colour processing facilities in Accra.

He is currently retired and lives in Brentford, London. Since Autograph ABP's archival intervention in 2010, Barnor's work has been shown internationally at venues including Harvard University, Boston; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Rivington Place, London; Tate Britain, London; and Paris Photo 2012. His photographs are represented in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate and Government Art Collection in Britain, as well as in numerous international private collections.

(below) Drum cover girl Erlin Ibreck, London, 1966. Courtesy Autograph ABP

# EVER YOUNG, NEVER SLEEPS

**Excerpted from *An Introduction in Fragments* by Renée Mussai, from the James Barnor, Ever Young exhibition publication, Clementine de la Feronniere, Paris 2015 and Autograph, ABP, London 2015.**

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## The Alchemy of the Image

After completing his apprenticeship and running an open-air mobile studio for several years, Barnor opened Ever Young in 1953, transforming an ordinary room, barely ten-metres square into one of Accra's leading photographic studios. Here he was artistic director and magician, photographer and technician, offering a day and night service that attracted a diverse clientele from all walks of life, not in small part due to his ability to move effortlessly through divergent socio-cultural spaces a skill that would prove immensely useful as he continued his path over the decades to come.

Always with James there is a sense of a figure both contained as well transcending the prescribed place, forever hovering at the borders of genre and approach. For instance, his early portraits both reflect and reject the rigid formality characteristic of studio portraiture of the era, with an ever-present dual sense of disquiet and fidelity.

A dark, open sky dominated by a cumulus of dream-like clouds was painted on his studio wall, bearing the stamp of his artistry and his originality. In a favorite portrait of mine, a young woman is pictured with arms resting on a table, James's trademark figurine next to her like a faithful miniature companion. Perfectly composed, and beautifully lit, nestled deep within its alchemy is a kind of melancholia, a closeness and intimacy different to his portraits from those years. The young woman's name is Beatrice — "bringer of joy", and namesake of Dante Alighieri's guide through Paradise in his *Divine Comedy*: tradition and modernity woven seamlessly into a new whole.

(above) Eva, London, 1960s. Courtesy Autograph ABP

## A Sense of Place

The 1950s in Africa was a decade marked by the emergence of a black political consciousness and anti-colonial movements in the spirit of Kwame Nkrumah's "philosophical consciencism", the intellectual map to enable social revolution towards freedom from colonial rule, which Ghana gained in 1957. People were connected through this sense of living in a new time — and photography served as a perfect medium to satisfy the desire to become a modern subject, to partake in the game of modernity, to see and be seen, in a state of becoming as well as being, to paraphrase the late Stuart Hall. One of the "elective affinities" that brought people together in this period was music. The 1950s was the heyday of Highlife, a fusion of traditional African rhythms, Latin calypso and jazz influences that soon spread across Ghana's borders to West Africa and beyond.

Synonymous with a rising cosmopolitanism in Accra on the eve of independence, its lyrics intimated the coming of change, vividly reflecting a particular Ghanaian zeitgeist pre- and post-independence. Indeed, the Pan-African and diasporic dimension of High Life is intimately linked to the very heart of James's practice: when the rhapsody of "London is the Place For Me" called, it was South Africa's Drum magazine — influential journal for lifestyle, culture and politics born out of the anti-apartheid struggle, with a quarter of a million copies distributed each month across the African continent — that embraced the young photographer and offered a "sense of place" in the metropolis.

(above) Selina Opong, Policewoman #10, Ever Young studio, Accra, c. 1954.
Courtesy Autograph ABP

## Diasporic Desires

As Miles Davis releases *Kind of Blue*, James embarks on his "journey to a new identity" (Stuart Hall), to witness first-hand the hedonistic charm and cultural revolution in the capital of cool, Swinging London of the 1960s. His forte is now both the studio and the street; at the time of his arrival in 1959, little trace remains of the previous decade's formality: the stiffness associated with mid-twentieth century African studio portraiture was all but gone. In Barnor's new dramaturgy, the metropolis itself serves as backdrop as we find ourselves seduced by Drum models in psychedelic frocks and fancy cars. Surrounded by a sea of menacing pigeons worthy of a Hitchcock set, Erlin Ibreck is strategically posed at Trafalgar Square, while Mike Eghan seemingly floats on the steps of Eros at Piccadilly Circus, arms outstretched.

With a dedicated campaign of wide-ranging advocacy, these images have now become iconic and synonymous for "another London", firmly written into that continuously morphing compendium of different photographic histories in the making. They remind us that the visual register of the Swinging Sixties was not only occupied by Twiggy, David Bailey and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up*, but also by the multinational Drum models and other luminaries solicited by Barnor's lens. As such, these photographs provide us with that crucial visual evidence imperative in our simultaneously intertwined project of rewriting both a cultural history in general while reconfiguring specific histories of the medium of photography.

## The Burden of Representation

Barnor's remarkable portraits represent significant moments in Afro-diasporic subject formation, and the cosmopolitan self-fashioning that emerged in tandem with trans-cultural journeys through modernity and post-colonial worlds... new identities coming into being, epitomized by his subjects with a burning sense of pride and optimism. Even more astounding if we remind ourselves that these were the days of "No dogs. No blacks. No Irish" in a country irrevocably tainted by Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" anti-immigration speech, delivered only three years after the introduction of the 1965 Race Relations Act, the first legislation passed in the UK to outlaw racial discrimination on the grounds of color, race, or ethnic or national origins.

It could be argued that Barnor had the luxury to photograph without the "burden of representation" or the need to remediate existing or previous pictorial modes, and thus was able to avoid the familiar depictions of racist graffiti and raised fists locked in moments of revolt as were seen later in the work of a younger generation of black photographers, such as Neil Kenlock and Armet Francis. Barnor's photographs trouble the dominant narrative associated with 1960s Britain as a hotbed for racial tension: they depict no signs of displacement, marginality or sense of "diasporic desperation". But they are marked by the sense of a curious presence in a new place.

## "Tried Color Yet?"

The next chapter of Barnor's story is intimately tied to the "journey" of the medium itself, as it evolves and expands across the globe: in 1969, after a decade in London and now fully versed in the art and technique of color photography, Barnor returned to Ghana. One of the first pictures taken upon his return shows his two young daughters in glorious color, connected to each other by a giant Agfa beach ball; testament to yet another ritual of cross-cultural exchange that would see him manage the first dedicated laboratory offering color processing in Accra in the 1970s.

"'Race' disables us", philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah wrote provocatively in his seminal book *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Considering his life and work, it is evident that James chose what it meant to be African in 1960s England, how to construct his African identity as empowering rather than disabling, outside the confines of "race" and its attendant prescriptions of propriety, provenance and place. He has followed this path with great determination, insistently refusing to be "disabled" by neither race, nor class, refusing that shadow of race and its concomitant glare of obligations and reverberations.

*Renée Mussai*
*London, August 2015*

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THE SONJA HAYNES STONE CENTER FOR BLACK CULTURE AND HISTORY

## About the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery mission statement commits to: "... the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture."

## The Stone Center

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is an integral part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a Center within the Academic Affairs Division under the Provost's Office, we play a central role in supporting the academic mission of the University. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African Americans and to encourage a better understanding of the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

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