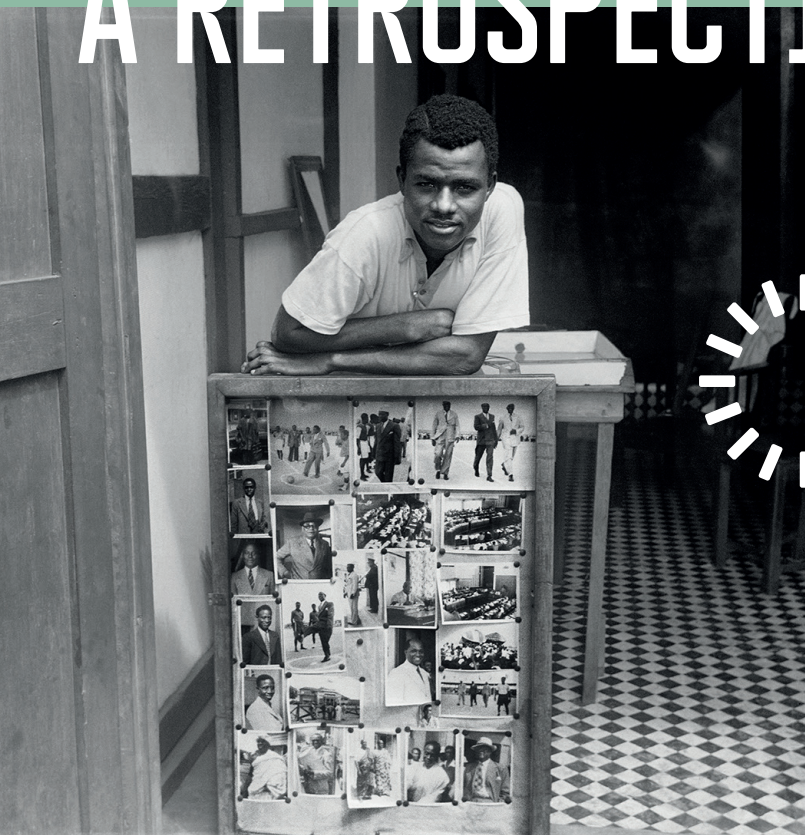


JAMES BARNOR: ACCRA/LONDON – A RETROSPECTIVE



19 MAY - 24 OCTOBER 2021

SERPENTINE



Evelyn Abbew, Ever Young Studio, Accra 1954 © James Barnor/Autograph ABP, London

Front cover: *Portrait of James Barnor in his youthful days in front of his showcase, Accra c.1952*
© James Barnor Courtesy Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière, Paris

INTRODUCTION

‘I came across a magazine with an inscription that said: “A civilisation flourishes when men plant trees under which they themselves will never sit.” But to me it’s not only plants – putting something in somebody’s life, a young person’s life, is the same as planting a tree that you will not cut and sell during your lifetime. That has helped me a lot in my work. Sometimes the more you give, the more you get.’ – James Barnor

Throughout his career, British-Ghanaian photographer James Barnor has captured images of societies in transition and transformation. Moving between Accra and London to cultivate a practice that encompasses the genres of studio portraiture, photojournalism and social documentary photography, Barnor witnessed and recorded major social and political changes during a career that spans over six decades and two continents. This exhibition, the largest survey of his work to date, is drawn from his extensive archive and focuses on the decades 1950–80.

Born in 1929 in Accra, Ghana, Barnor came from a family of photographers. He initially trained under a photographic apprenticeship with his cousin J. P. D. Dodoo, before establishing Ever Young, his first studio, in the early 1950s. Barnor likened Ever Young to a community centre, and it was there that he captured a nation on the cusp of independence in an environment of lively conversation and music. During this time, he also undertook assignments for the *Daily Graphic* newspaper, owned by the Mirror Group, documenting key events and figures in the lead-up to Ghana's independence in 1957, which established him as the first photojournalist in the country. Enticed by a friend's promise that 'London was the place for him', Barnor arrived in London in December 1959 and spent the next decade furthering his studies, continuing assignments for the influential South African magazine *Drum*, and photographing his ever-growing circle of family and friends. He returned to Accra a decade later to establish the first

colour-processing laboratory in Ghana. Barnor settled permanently in the UK in 1994 and now lives in West London.

Central to Barnor's work is the intimate documentation of African and Afro-diasporic lives across time and space. Whether taking family snapshots, commissioned portraits or commercial assignments, Barnor approaches the photographic process as a collaborative venture, a conversation with the sitter, and these images are a testament to a lifetime of encounters. Barnor's desire to bring communities with him along his journey extends to his lifelong passion for education, not just as a means of furthering his own skills but also as a way of transmitting his knowledge to others. The recent digitisation of his archive of 32,000 images has enabled him to adopt the daily practice of revisiting his pictures with fresh eyes and memories to share his extraordinary life and work with a new generation.

EVER YOUNG STUDIO

Barnor first developed his photographic skills while serving an apprenticeship under his cousin J. P. D. Dodoo before going out on his own to establish Ever Young Studio in the early 1950s. Initially a modest, outdoor set-up with a darkroom in his aunt's vacant room, the studio later moved to the Jamestown district of Accra in 1953. Ever Young was a hive of activity, a drop-in space for people of all ages and all walks of life: 'My studio was at a spot where everything happened in Accra, where young and old people met from various backgrounds, free to talk about everything and anything.'

Barnor took the name Ever Young from the story of Iduna's Grove that he learned in school as a child. In the myth 'Iduna, the beautiful young goddess of the Norsemen, lived in a pretty grove called Ever Young. She had a golden casket full of the most beautiful apples. A hero might come, tired and weary to Iduna's Grove, feeling that he was growing old. Then Iduna would give him an apple and as soon as he had eaten it he would feel fresh and young again. It is not surprising that Iduna's Grove was never lonely. As soon as the last rosy fruit had been given away, the casket was filled again by an invisible hand.'

The ethos of the name Ever Young can be felt in Barnor's youthful energy and commitment to inspiring younger generations. The name also refers to his photographic training and process: 'The essence of my studio profession is retouching, that's the training I had, even though I wasn't perfect. I thought that if someone came in, I'd make them look younger. So, if I open a studio, what should I call it? Ever Young.'

ACCRA LIFE

Barnor's early work depicting life in and around Accra in the 1950s resisted the formal quality and rigid structure associated with large-format studio portraiture, becoming progressively more candid as he documented the communities around him using a small camera.

'For me it was like living in two worlds: there was the careful handling of a sitter in my "studio" with a big camera on a heavy tripod, and then running around town chasing news and sports! ... If I needed a picture, or a new story, I would rush to the Makola market,

where people behave most like themselves. I enjoyed this more than studio photography. I would use a small camera. It was good for finding stories.'

Barnor became great friends with *Drum* magazine's energetic proprietor, Jim Bailey. *Drum* was an influential South African politics and lifestyle magazine that also served as an anti-apartheid platform. When visiting Ghana, Bailey would host impromptu, often legendary, parties for the *Drum* community. One gathering was organised by Barnor at his studio, with another taking place on the beach, where he recounts that 'people were swimming under the moon'.

INDEPENDENCE

In 1957, Ghana became the first West African country to gain independence from British colonial rule when Dr Kwame Nkrumah was elected its Prime Minister. Nkrumah's political trajectory compounded by 'philosophical consciencism', an ideology for decolonisation to enable social revolution, saw him organising extensively with scholars and activists such as George Padmore and W.E.B Du Bois, who all resided in the country. Barnor was there to capture it all.

After gaining attention after one of his photographs was published in the *Telegraph*, Barnor was commissioned by UK-based Black Star Picture Agency and *Drum* magazine to photograph this time of significant historic transformation for a new nation, and the subsequent celebrations that drew people from all over the world.

'I was the first newspaper photographer in Ghana, and I'm proud of that. Newspaper photography changed people's lives and it changed journalism in Ghana. I was part of this moment.'

LONDON

‘My friend and mentor, A. Q. A. Archampong, who had been my class teacher, had decided to go to England to study. We always kept in touch. Before he left, I said to him: “If the place is alright, write to me.” So, in his first letter to me, he wrote: “London is the place for you”’

In 1959, two years after Ghana’s independence, Barnor arrived in London. After initially lodging in Peckham, he was introduced to Dennis Kemp by the Ghanaian Embassy, a lecturer in visual education working for the Kodak Lecture Service, who was researching Africa in preparation for a trip to document the forthcoming Nigerian independence celebrations. Kemp shared Barnor’s passion for photography and the two toured schools around the country where Kemp gave lectures using his archive of images on subjects that interested him, such as his travels, climbing and pot-holing, in order to demonstrate Kodak products as visual teaching aids. Barnor also joined Kemp on his trip to Nigeria in October 1960, and lodged at his flat in Holborn, eventually receiving a grant from the Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board to support his training. Barnor



Mike Eghan at Piccadilly Circus, London, 1967 © James Barnor/Autograph ABP, London

and Kemp would often host coffee evenings with friends discussing approaches to photography and shared interests in African cultures and philosophies.



Drum cover girl Erlin Ibreck, Kilburn, London 1966 © James Barnor/Autograph ABP, London

DRUM

‘When I saw *Drum* with my photos on the cover, alongside other magazines at the newsstands, I felt like I was in heaven.’

In London, Barnor continued assignments for *Drum*. He captured the experiences of a vibrant and growing Afro diasporic community for the magazine, playing a key role in placing models of African descent, such as Erlin Ibreck and Marie Hallowi, on the cover. Through his work for *Drum*, Barnor combined studio portraiture and street photography, capturing a singular vision of a diasporic ‘Swinging Sixties’ in London. Whether picturing Hallowi gazing seductively from a convertible car, or Mike Eghan joyously floating down the steps at Piccadilly Circus, these pictorial narratives articulate the Afro-diasporic reclaiming of space and agency in self-expression.

‘You couldn’t get work in the 1960s as a Black photographer. It wouldn’t happen that a Black photographer would instruct white sitters [...] If you worked for a studio in London, you worked behind the

scenes in the darkroom doing odd jobs. *Drum* though, where I did freelance work, was different. They let me photograph the cover girls, Muhammad Ali, Mike Eghan (the BBC presenter). *Drum* was my home in London, my office, I got everything done there.'

UK 1960S

In 1960, Barnor moved to Kent, where he learned about colour photography at the Colour Processing Laboratories (CPL) in Edenbridge, the UK's leading lab at the time. With Kemp's encouragement he enrolled in a three-year course at Medway College of Art in Rochester. At Medway, he learned the technical aspects of colour photography, while continuing to work during the holidays at CPL. After graduating he was employed as a technician at the college before he was hired as a photographer in the design section of Centre for Educational Television Overseas (CETO).

During this period Barnor became close to Kemp's family, who lived in Southwick, West Sussex, spending his free time rock climbing with Kemp and going on weekly outings with the Tunbridge Wells Overseas

Club, a community group that fostered friendships between people who had recently settled in West Kent. Barnor was offered fulltime employment as a colour printer by CPL in 1968.

COLOUR IN GHANA

Driven by a desire to share the experience and skills he acquired while working with colour photography in the UK, Barnor returned to Ghana in 1970 as a trained manager for Sick-Hagemayer, a subdivision of the photographic equipment and materials manufacturer Agfa-Gevaert, to establish the first colour-processing laboratory in the country, where he worked until 1973 before establishing his own studio. Prior to the introduction of colour film-processing labs in West Africa in the 1970s, photographers had to improvise or send films for processing abroad. With a local colour processing lab in Accra, under Barnor's leadership, came a greater demand and wider access to colour photography. People wanted their photographs to depict the range of vibrant life and Ghanaian fashion around them. Barnor excelled in this regard, using his knowledge of colour and



Salah Day, Kokomlemle, Accra 1973 © James Barnor/Autograph ABP, London

singular aesthetic to capture popular dress and create a new style of portraiture.

‘Colour really changed people’s ideas about photography. Kente is Ghanaian woven fabric with many different colours, and people wanted their photographs taken after church or in town wearing this cloth, so the news spread quickly.’

ACCRA LIFE AND STUDIO X23

In the late 1970s, Barnor was employed as photographer by the United States Information Service in Ghana (1977–82) and then as a government photographer under President Jerry John Rawlings at Osu Castle (1983–87). Prior to these assignments he had established his second studio, Studio X23 in 1973. Barnor initially converted a small storeroom given to him by his cousin Albert M. Quarcoopome into a darkroom before expanding into other parts of the building. Although he returned to Ghana with little intention of continuing a studio practice, it nevertheless found him again and for the next twenty years Barnor continued his practice as a portrait photographer.

COMMISSIONS

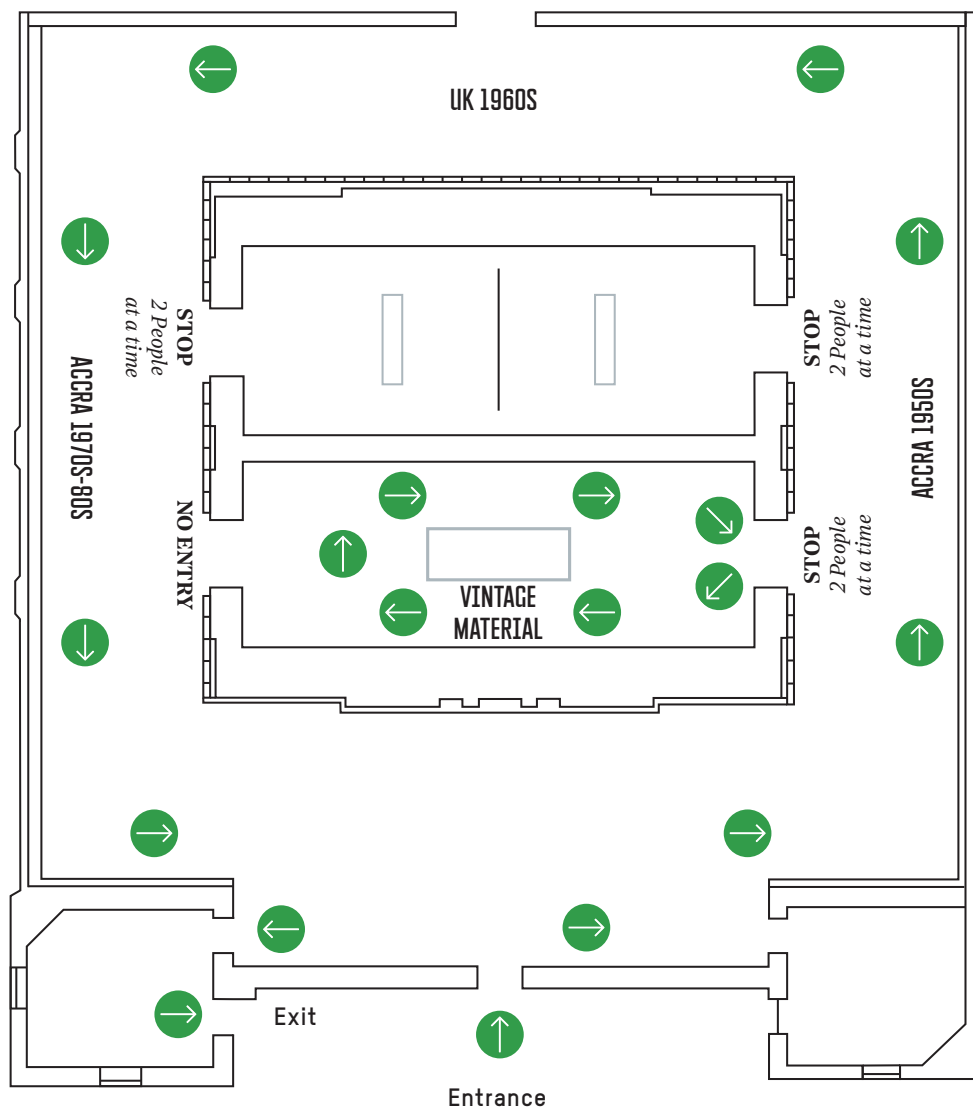
Alongside his studio practice Barnor regularly took on commercial commissions, many of which were passed on to him by his friend the graphic designer Emmanuel Odartey Lamptey. Barnor shot images for clients including a promotional calendar for the Italian oil company AGIP, and publicity shots and record sleeve images for musicians like E. K. Nyame. 'I was close to the music fraternity too. I knew E.T. Mensah, who played the trumpet and the sax and spearheaded high-life music before all the others. I knew all the musicians. I was taking their pictures.'

MUSIC

While continuing to run Studio X23 and working at the United States Information Service throughout the 1970s and 80s Barnor's attention became increasingly focussed on pursuing his passion for music through the management of children's troupe Ebaahi Gbiko (All Will Be Well One Day), later renamed Fee Hi (All is Well). The group rehearsed in the yard of the studio every day with the understanding that they had to attend school. He felt that practising together after

school kept the group out of trouble and focused on their education: 'I don't play drums, write music or sing, but I took them in like my own children.' The troupe became an important part of Barnor's life, and he accompanied them on a tour of Italy in 1983 as part of an anti-apartheid campaign focusing on the living conditions of South African children for which they had been officially nominated.

As a result of the early 1980s global economic recession, by the middle of the decade Ghana's economy collapsed, leading to a debt crisis that spread across the African continent. This made conditions difficult for Barnor to continue his photographic practice, the troupe disbanded and in 1994 he returned to the UK. Barnor enrolled in business-management classes in the evening and secured a rehearsal space with the hope of reforming the troupe and bringing them to London but was unable to arrange work permits and relinquished the idea. Today, former members of Fee Hi are, as Barnor notes: 'All over the diaspora. They have since joined other groups, and I feel very pleased. The memory of them will never leave me.'



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