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Lost worlds and personal quirks

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At Autograph in London's Rivington Place, the Ghanaian photographer James Barnor is presented in a charming exhibition which shows what well-directed public funding can do. Barnor is an octogenarian whose double career took in the Gold Coast and Ghana at about the time of independence in the late 1950s and the London of the early 1960s. His studio work is like west African work we already know by photographers such as the Malians Seydou Keïta or Malick Sidibe. People went to be photographed in simple studios all over the region for the most ordinary of reasons: aspiration, showing off, sending pictures to relatives . . .

This kind of vernacular photography becomes more interesting over time, a record of the shifting social background. Under Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana became the testing ground for a particular kind of decolonisation, and to have a good surviving archive of the period is important.

But Barnor was not only a modest studio photographer. He was associated at one time with Drum, the great South African magazine, edited at different times by Tom Hopkinson and Anthony Sampson, and its photographers were a pretty stellar group, including Jurgen Schadeburg and Peter Magubane. Barnor later took on the Agfa concession in Accra.

In between, after a period at a UK arts school, Barnor worked in London. His was the London of the novelists Sam Selvon and Colin MacInnes, and of the street photographer Roger Mayne, a London in which the new black population from the West Indies and west Africa was making its way. But Barnor was not a campaigning documentary photographer, and his account in colour of miniskirted cover girls in the jazzy patterns of the day is an antidote to the grey vision most of us have of London only 20 years after the war.

Covering a similarly wide range of a single artist's trajectory is an exhibition at the Diemar/Noble gallery of the Mexican Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The show takes its title from a picture called "Quetzalcoatl", a landscape study in which a tree takes on the writhing twist of that snake deity.

M+B

Bravo was many kinds of photographer at once. He told the truth, and was concerned with social justice and with recording its failure. But he also told stories, little surrealist, or perhaps magic-realist, juxtapositions of the unexpected. And he liked girls very much.

This collision of high-mindedness and earthiness is characteristic of Bravo (who died in 2002), and the balance of prints here shows that to perfection. A fine late study of a girl in a leotard has a wistful sexiness which stays just the right side of dirty-old-mannery, while the great surrealist puns are here in force.

At the more contemporary end of the scale is *Native* by photographer Mona Kuhn, which has transferred from Flowers in New York to its London gallery. Kuhn returned to Brazil after many years elsewhere to make a series purporting to examine the kind of life she might have had had she stayed. That sounds *recherché*, but some of these large, square-format colour works do succeed in blending an attractive kind of nostalgia.

The mix of views of the landscape with nude studies (which is where Kuhn has made her name) makes a beguiling combination: the effect is of a gentle movie of steamy jungle life. It's not very profound and has some overtones that are not so attractive – the air of kids permanently at play reminds me of such youth-obsessed photographers as Ryan McGinley, Sally Mann or even Larry Clark. But there are some well-made images by a photographer who will only get better as she finds more to say.

I have never yet drawn attention to the Little Black Gallery, in London's Chelsea, for the reason it trades largely on the archive of Bob Carlos Clarke, a self-regarding photographer whose repertoire was almost entirely restricted to latex. But a fine show from the archives of Terry O'Neill compels attention.

O'Neill is a celebrity photographer and it is easy to think less of his work for that. So many photographers do no more than reproduce an "image" which has already been carefully crafted by marketing people and stylists, but in O'Neill's prime he seems to have had a kind of snapper's intimacy that defeated marketing control.

A strong portrait of Michael Caine has a Raffles-like mix of gentleman and cracksman, and a very young Audrey Hepburn shows her before the trademark face was fully formed. The gallery is dominated by a large jokey picture of Raquel Welch crucified wearing the skin bikini she made famous. These are well-made things, frothy and fun.

Coming full circle, another show at Autograph is devoted to the studies of black Americans made for the civil rights pioneer W.E.B. Du Bois to show at the Paris Exhibition of 1900. The prints are execrable copies of Library of Congress prints, but the 200 or so portraits are interesting. They provide evidence, as Du Bois intended, of a thriving black middle class in contrast to the downtrodden stereotypes typical of the time.

That's quite a spread of photographs, varying greatly in quality, interest, elegance and value.

James Barnor and W.E.B Du Bois: Autograph, Rivington Place, EC2, until November 27; Manuel Bravo: Diemar/Noble Gallery, W1, until November 6; Mona Kuhn: Flowers, E2, until October 9; Terry O'Neill: Little Black Gallery, SW10, until October 30