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**VISUALISING BIRMINGHAM:
REFRAMING THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS**

Visualising Birmingham: Reframing the Photographic Collections

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Visualising Birmingham: Reframing the Photographic Collections

Warwickshire Photographic Survey

(1890-)

people, landscapes, environment

Sir Benjamin Stone

(1838-1914)

*photographs of customs and
people in Britain and overseas*

Bill Brandt

(1904-1983)

*socio-economic reportage,
showing working class life*

The Dyche Collection

(c.1920-1980)

*professional studio portraits in
Bordesley Green & Small Heath*

Nick Hedges

(1943-)

*reportage exhibitions include
religion and homelessness*

Vanley Burke

(1951-)

*photography of Afro-Caribbean
& other communities*

Ten.8 Collective

(1979- c.1993)

*photography magazine,
exhibitions & community projects*

Some Key Photographic Collections

Birmingham Central Library's photographic collections contain over two million images dating from 1842 to the present. Birmingham-based photographers have travelled widely, shooting images in both Britain and her colonies. This learning guide aims to present an introduction to some of the collections held in the archives.



Victoria Square, Birmingham, 1898. [WK2/Victoria Square 92]

Warwickshire Photographic Survey

The Warwickshire Photographic Survey provides a key 19th century source of images. It was established by William Jerome Harrison and Sir John Benjamin Stone in the early 1890s and aimed to record the county's architectural and historical heritage for the benefit of posterity.

Photographers rarely function like mirrors, and simply 'reflect' the real world. Images are often constructed, and in this way, much of the work of local photographers helped to feed discourses, or ways of representing, people and places both in Birmingham and abroad. Construction, as we shall see, was certainly a feature of much of the work of Benjamin Stone.



Soho Road, Handsworth, c.1900. [WK/H5/129]

Sir John Benjamin Stone

The Stone Collection

The Stone Collection comprises images of both Britain and her Empire. In England, Stone seemed to have a particular interest in taking photographs of what he termed 'people of note,' which usually comprised of members of local elites. He also displayed an ethnographic interest in photographing the customs and festivals of peasants and working classes. There were certainly similarities in Stone's representation of the poor at home, and those overseas. His images of the poor, taken in the UK and abroad, were exhibited in England, yet rendered invisible in the colonies. The uncomplicated portrayal of England as a place of wealth, would help to preserve the idea of the superiority of the British in her overseas territories.



The Sherborne Pageant.
An English Chieftain, Tribesmen & Families. 1905.

Sherborne Pageant, 1905. [Stone/Box 213/21]

'Types of Races of Mankind'

In his photographic album, Types of Races of Mankind, Stone attempted to construct a 'racial' typography of the human race. He tended to dignify his white subjects with names, yet describe his non-white subjects as racial 'types.' The notes Stone made about his colonial subjects, similarly to the construction (selection, setting, dress, perspective etc.) of his photographs, usually worked to reinforce racial stereotypes as well. Many of his images of non-white women were particularly problematic, and raised issues of exoticism, racism and sexism.



U.S.A. Effie Geram

Photographs from 'Types of Races of Mankind'. [Stone/Album 50]



Algerian



Trinidad. Coolie from Calcutta
Note: distance apart of toes. (cf Carib Indians of S. America)

Key Debate:
did Stone's work simply reflect or help to construct 'racial' types?

Bill Brandt and Bournville

Introduction

Bill Brandt (1904-1983) was a German-born photographer and photojournalist, well-known for his high-contrast images of urban Britain and his distorted nudes and landscapes.

Brandt worked for the Bournville Village Trust (BVT) in Birmingham, between 1939 and 1943. There, he photographed the living conditions of local people in a range of different housing types, from portraits of life in back-to-back slums built in the 19th century, to images of life in municipal housing built in the 1930s. The majority of the images in his book 'Homes Fit for Heroes' (2004), were taken in Birmingham.

Brandt and Social Class

Brandt used light to emphasise the contrast between slum and municipal housing. His approach seems to illustrate his support for working class struggles. Brandt's work was crucial in charting local history, and in the movement for improved local housing.

The Brandt photographs unwittingly highlighted some of Birmingham's ties with empire too. Members of two families have come forward after identifying themselves in his images. They told stories of the lives of photographed family members in the armed forces overseas, and as emigrants in Australia. In view of some of their living conditions in Birmingham, the argument that the wealth accrued by imperialism would 'trickle down' to working classes in Britain, as well as to those abroad, was clearly problematic.



[MS 1536/3F55]



[MS 1536/3FW04]



[MS 1536/BS04]

Key Debate:
in response to interpretations of his work as 'polemics against social injustice,' (James, 2004:7)
Brandt has denied that his images are political. How do you interpret his BVT work?

Lisel Haas

Introduction

Lisel Haas was born in Monchengladbach, Germany. She was a Jewish refugee who fled Nazi Germany. After having her application to enter the United States turned down, she applied for asylum in Britain. Haas came to Birmingham in 1938, and stayed until 1962.



[MS 2202/2/Box 7]

The Lisel Haas Collection

Haas provided a female perspective in a male-dominated activity. Her photographs offer a departure from the often objectifying images of women, common in the work of many of her male contemporaries.

In Germany, Haas, seemed to specialise in photo-documentary images. Her collection comprises a range of images on themes such as, religious practice, particularly in the Catholic Church, travelling communities, urban child-hoods, and many others.



[MS 2202/2/Box 48]



[MS 2202/Large Prints/Box 5]

Owing perhaps to her need to make a living in her place of refuge, Haas established a studio in Moseley, where she began to focus on studio portraiture much more. There is some overlap between the studio portraiture and photo documentary images, and her studio portraits began to capture, for instance, the post-war increase in the black and Asian population.

Haas also worked as a photographer at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre where she photographed many plays, and promising actors. She covered productions at other play-houses as well, including at the Alexandra Theatre, the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, and the Kidderminster Playhouse.

Key Debate:
what barriers might Haas have faced
as a female photographer in the mid-twentieth century?

Post-War Photographers

'Handsworth Self Portrait'

Ten.8 Collective
*self-portraiture by local residents
in Handsworth in 1979*

'Handsworth Through Southern Eyes'

George Hallett
documentary photos from 1971

'Home and Away'

Tim Smith
*Britain's South Asian
Communities*

'Home Front'

John Reardon & Derek Bishton
*lives and experiences of
Handsworth people*

'I'm A Believer'

Nick Hedges
*multi-cultural religion
in the West Midlands*

'Muzik Kinda Sweet'

Pogus Caesar
*photographs of
black musicians*

'Redemption Songs'

Vanley Burke
black voices, gospel songs

Some Key Photographic Exhibitions

A number of photographers, in the post-war years, began to challenge the increasingly common and pejorative images of black people in inner city Britain.

Vanley Burke, who migrated from Jamaica in 1965, is one such artist. His photo-documentary images of Handsworth from the 1970s, present an alternative view of the area, to the images of street violence and inner city decay, prevalent in the reductive discourse of the mainstream media.

Handsworth Self Portrait

Derek Bishton and John Reardon's Handsworth Self Portrait project of 1979, has provided a further break from the early constructed work of Benjamin Stone. In the project, local residents were invited to take photographs of themselves against a plain studio backdrop. For the photographers, the technique of self-portraiture, 'offered the greatest measure of control to the person being photographed, and involved them in a conscious decision about how they presented themselves.'



Photo by Vanley Burke. [MS 2192]

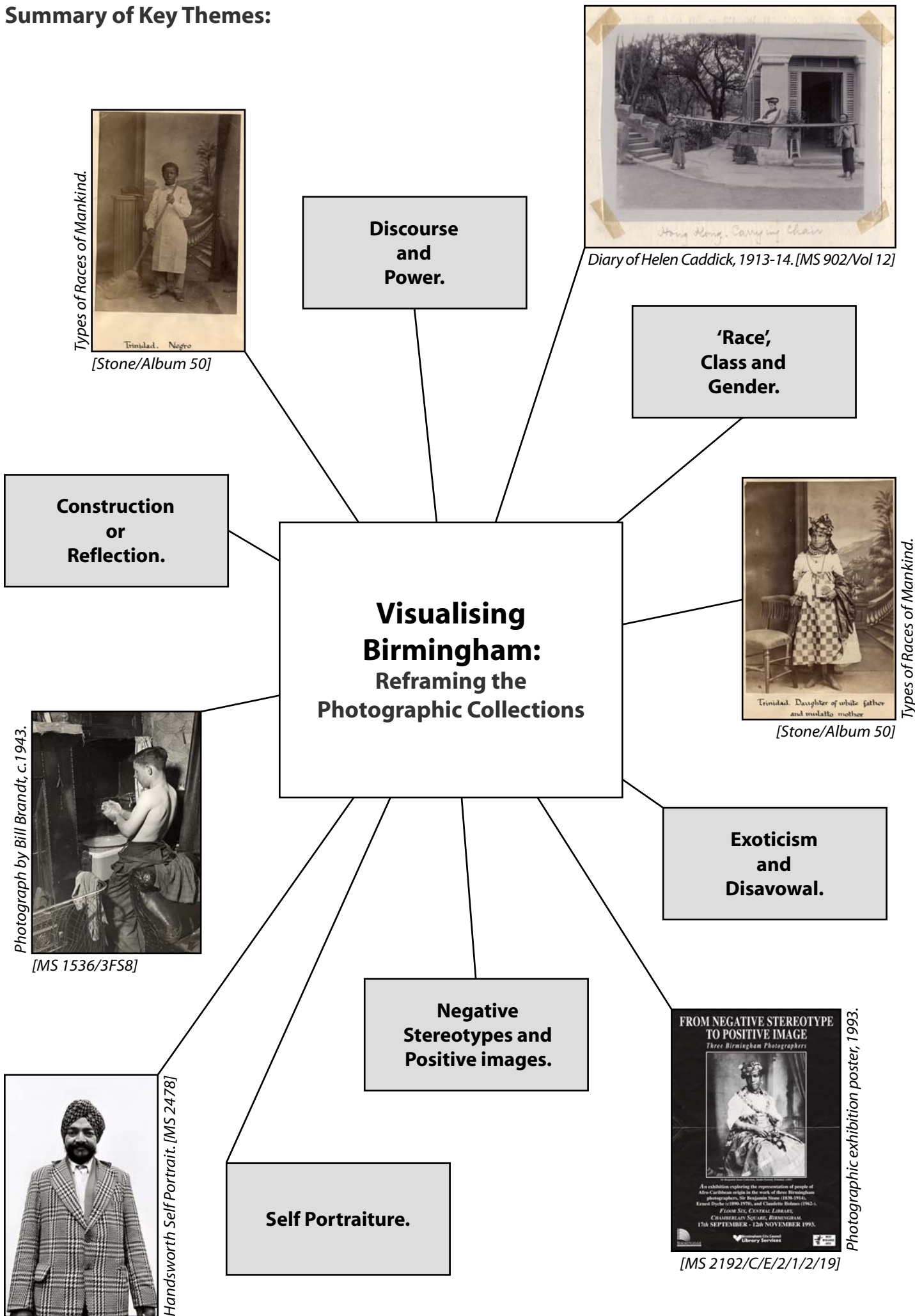


Images from the Handsworth Self Portrait project. [MS 2478]



Key Debate:
what, if anything, was new
about the approach of the post-war photographers?

Summary of Key Themes:



Types of Races of Mankind.

[Stone/Album 50]



Diary of Helen Caddick, 1913-14. [MS 902/Vol 12]

**'Race',
Class and
Gender.**



Types of Races of Mankind.

[Stone/Album 50]

**Construction
or
Reflection.**



Photograph by Bill Brandt, c.1943.

[MS 1536/3FS8]

**Exoticism
and
Disavowal.**

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**Negative
Stereotypes and
Positive images.**



Photographic exhibition poster, 1993.

[MS 2192/C/E/2/1/2/19]



Handsworth Self Portrait. [MS 2478]

Self Portraiture.

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Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

Archives:

Lisel Haas Collection [MS 2202]
Nick Hedges Collection [MS 2478]
Paul Hill Collection [MS 2294]
Pictures of Everyday Life: The People, Places and Cultures of the Commonwealth [MS 2294/7/4/17/2]
Pogus Caesar [MS 2364]
Sir Benjamin Stone Collection [MS 2507]
The Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the Eighties [MS 2192/C/E/2/1/2/13]
Vanley Burke Collection [MS 2192]
Warwickshire Photographic Survey [WK]

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Visualising Birmingham: Reframing the Photographic Collections

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- Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1991)

Websites - Museums - Libraries - Institutions:

- www.billbrandt.com (Bill Brandt)
- www.bmag.org.uk (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery)
- www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/bishton.asp (Derek Bishton and Ten.8)
- www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/george_hallett.asp (George Hallett)
- www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/vanley_burke.asp (Vanley Burke)
- www.connectinghistories.org.uk/exhibitions (Photographic exhibitions include: 'Religion in the West Midlands' by Nick Hedges; 'From Cathay to Pershore Street' by Terry Lo; and, 'Handsworth Self Portrait')
- www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk (The Digital Handsworth Project)
- www.macarts.co.uk (Mac Art Gallery)
- www.oomgallery.net (Pogus Caesar)

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