

The Arts

My father the photographer



Mother and Child, 1971

Focused: Harry Jacobs (left) was a constant of Brixton life for 40 years, where locals flocked to his studio to sit for formal portraits in front of a Tahitian backdrop

WERE you ever photographed by Harry Jacobs?" Thus ran the legend across the huge placard bearing a picture of Brixton's best-known photographer, arms folded in the manner of a man whose reputation goes before him. It was midsummer and my family and I were in Brockwell Park, in south London, trailing through the Lambeth Country Show, an annual extravaganza of craft and commerce, politics and pop, swings and slides.

The stall we were heading for had been set up by the Photographers' Gallery, an outfit one associates more with the cocktail interiors of the art world than the blast and sprawl of the streets of Brixton.

Nevertheless, there it was, surrounded by a small,

Harry Jacobs's striking portraits document the changing face of Brixton's black community over four decades

by Gerald Jacobs

absorbed group, several of whom were leafing through a giant photo-album.

"I've been photographed by Harry Jacobs," I told the young woman standing behind the stall, "hundreds of times." She looked at me doubtfully. "I'm his son," I told her. "Really?" she asked, not completely convinced.

Oh yes, I have been photographed by Harry Jacobs. His excruciating insistence on arranging each individual in a group shot into a particular pose — to be held until he was absolutely ready — is Jacobs family folk lore. But

that is not how his paying customers felt. For them, going to his studio to stand or sit in front of his trademark Tahitian backdrop with its equally inevitable bowl of artificial flowers was more ceremony than ordeal. An individual or family portrait in that same pose against that same background, with the "Harry Jacobs" stamp showing the Landor Road address, was from around 1959 to 1999 a badge of belonging to Brixton's black community.

The man from the Photographers' Gallery unravelled himself from the knot of people around the Brockwell Park stall to explain its purpose. Next month, the gallery is to hold what its director

describes as a "major" exhibition of Harry Jacobs's work, constituting as it does a striking piece of social history. And, apart from good local publicity, permission is required from the subjects of photographs taken before the 1988 Copyright Act to enable them to be exhibited. Hence the question on the placard.

HARRY became a central character in the unfolding story of the settlement and integration of black citizens into Brixton and surrounding areas. And it was not only within the mainstream that he was accepted — when Brixton was

riven by rioting and looting in the early 1980s, his premises were deliberately left alone.

In the early days my father went knocking on doors. It wasn't that difficult to persuade young mums to allow their offspring to pose for the camera in the comfort of familiar surroundings.

What was difficult was going back with the results and asking those same mums to part with their money. "OK," he would say, "so you don't want the picture," and he'd prepare to tear in half the smiling, darling face before their very eyes. "No, please don't," most parents would cry. "I'll buy one print, or maybe two."

Once he found himself a studio and began taking passport photographs, he used it as a base from which to go out and do weddings and christenings. This gradually gave him a footing in the local black community.

Many of its members ret-

ained strong connections with their families in the West Indies and were keen to send pictures home. Many, too, were anxious to establish a British identity, and Harry's was the place to go to get a photo for a job application, record a graduation or simply advertise your presence in local society.

Over the years my father photographed thousands of people — including the infant Naomi Campbell and the giant Frank Bruno. When he finally retired, he sold all of his negatives to an archive, which led to the Photographers' Gallery interest.

The building which once housed his studio in Landor Road has been converted into flats, the Tahitian landscape rolled up and dumped, along with the bowl of flowers. But, as my father learned early on, photographs don't get torn up; they live on.

● *Brixton Studio, an exhibition of the photographs of Harry Jacobs with work by contemporary artists will be at the Photographers' Gallery, Great Newport Street, WC2 (020 7831 1772), from 4 October to 16 November.*

Sweet and sour allusions to Tate's past

A GROVE of seven oak tree trunks, thick and tall, now stand in the Duveen Galleries in Tate Britain. Along with some beautifully translucent, rectangular slabs of sugar, the base of an oak tree that has been turned into the gentlest of water sculptures and a photograph, they make up *Beat*, a new installation by Anya Gallaccio.

For over a decade now Gallaccio has been creating large, highly emotive, site-specific installations committed to mirroring the transience of the natural world. She has coated the walls of a gallery with chocolate that decomposed, left a ton of oranges to rot on a warehouse floor and carpeted the ICA with 10,000 decaying red roses.

Here transience is still the topic of the work, but now on a grander and

EXHIBITION

Anya Gallaccio: Beat

Tate Britain

Nick Hackworth

yet more human scale and its presence is alluded to rather than being represented by dying organic matter.

History is inherently melancholy and Gallaccio's work is cloaked in it, the different elements of her installation picking out strands of the past related to the Tate and the fortune of Sir Henry Tate, the sugar magnate who was its founder. Despite the fact that his business was made possible only by the conditions created by imperialism, the work is

not a crude critique, but an ambiguous reminder instead.

The oak trunks allude to the oak-built ships that upheld the empire and ferried raw materials, including sugar cane from the West Indies, to Britain. The tree base, upon which sits a delicate film of water that is constantly replenished as it seeps into the wood, and the photograph are, however, more subtle in their possible meanings.

The image captures Gallaccio, Ophelia-like, floating in a green, wood-shaded pool and it, along with the tree base, draws an appropriately hazy link between the romantic dreams of art and the hard facts of history upon which they are ultimately built.

● *Until 26 January. Information: 020 7887 8008*

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