



mac birmingham press release :: 30 Aug



**Vanley Burke: By the Rivers of Birmingham**  
**Sat 22 Sep – Sun 18 Nov**

mac birmingham presents *By the Rivers of Birmingham* - the first retrospective exhibition of one of the country's most prolific black photographers, Vanley Burke.

Since the mid-1960s, Vanley Burke has photographed the Jamaican community in the Handsworth area of Birmingham. *By the Rivers of Birmingham* will bring together 100 new and existing images for the first time which explore the history of the Caribbean community in the city from 1967 to present day. Curated by Lynda Morris, the exhibition charts Vanley Burke's practice over the last 45 years, during which time he has produced what is considered to be the greatest photographic document of Caribbean people in post-war Britain, detailing the experience of Black people in the UK and their community identity.

Shot entirely in black and white, many of the images show events covered by national press – Burke's images have captured the visits of significant figures such as Malcolm X and Mohammed Ali, Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech delivered to the Conservative Party in Birmingham (although these are not featured in *By the Rivers of Birmingham*) and the more recent Handsworth Riots of last summer and the 1980s. As a member of the community in which he photographs, Burke has had, and continues to have, an intimacy with his subject that national press photographers historically have been unable to achieve. This can be seen in the portraits of the generations from childhood and youth to old age; the musicians, the intellectuals, the soldiers, the church choirs and the members of the Nation of Islam. This careful and considered collection of photographs will concentrate on the intelligence of the Caribbean communities, showing the beauty, the closeness, the sense of community, the churches and family values, as well as the political, emotional and spiritual life which is identifiable across all social groups in Handsworth.

The photographs will be accompanied by contemporaneous press cuttings edited by Lynda Morris covering the history of Jamaican immigration to Birmingham since 1954 which have been gathered from Birmingham Central Library's archives on 'Ethnic Communities'. The local and national press cuttings tell an extraordinary story of the role of local government officials in the fortunes of the immigrant community; in their schools, housing and employment. *By the Rivers of Birmingham* will tell the story of Handsworth and reflect on its recent history as a home to migrant families seeking a better life and to contribute to Great Britain's prosperity.

Lynda Morris, curator and Senior Lecturer at Norwich University College of the Arts commented, "*By the Rivers of Birmingham* is a recognition of the outstanding achievements made by Vanley





Burke during his longstanding practice. His connection with the subject has allowed him to depict the immigration of the Caribbean community to Great Britain in a way which has been, and continues to be, unparalleled by any other photographer working in this country. Nowhere can tell this story better than Birmingham and Vanley Burke is the photographer who was there and who knew he was living through a great moment in history."

Burke's reason for accumulating his collection is best summed up in his own words: "The photographs are very much a part of a documentation process which we as black people need to go through... it is not an attempt to show the black community to the wider community, this is where we are, it is more importantly a record."

*By the Rivers of Birminam* is part of 'mac at fifty' – a series of exhibitions, activities and events to mark mac birmingham's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of providing arts for all. The exhibition has received funding from Arts Council England and the Roughley Trust, and is supported by Norwich University College of the Arts.

-Ends-

#### Notes to editor

Vanley Burke is available for interview. For more information, further images, to arrange an interview or confirm your place at the press viewing on Fri 21 Sep please contact:

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Vanley Burke: *By the Rivers of Birminam*

Sat 22 Sep – Sun 18 Nov

Free entry, Gallery

Open Tue – Sat, 12 noon – 8pm; Sun 11am – 4pm; Closed Mon.

Press viewing: Fri 21 Sep – 2-4pm

#### Venue

mac birmingham, Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham, B12 9QH

[www.macarts.co.uk](http://www.macarts.co.uk)

#### About mac birmingham

Opened in 1962, mac birmingham is a hub of creativity and learning in the Midlands. With four performance auditoria, rehearsal and media studios, a cinema, and a visual art gallery, mac birmingham presents a broad range of contemporary work from both emerging and established artists across genres. mac birmingham is the most visited arts centre in the Midlands and is renowned for its family friendly and inclusive approach. Originally intended for



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children, the centre now caters for audiences young and old, from the local community and beyond.

Re-opened in May 2010 after extensive refurbishment, the arts centre boasts stunning architecture and a high level of accessibility. Set in the magnificent surroundings of Cannon Hill Park and home to the Bridges Bar Café for meals and snacks, and the stylish Arena Bar for evening drinks, the centre is well worth a visit.

### **About Arts Council England**

Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2011 and 2015, we will invest £1.4 billion of public money from government and an estimated £1 billion from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country.

[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

