

April/May 2013 Al Jazeera series on new African photography



By Lara Bourdin *

From 22 April 2013, Al Jazeera presents a new six-part series that showcases the work of contemporary African photographers. Titled “The New African Photography,” the series aims to interrupt long-entrenched Western modes of (mis-) representing Africa – the ethnographic still, the safari shot, the pathos-filled imagery of the starving child – by giving focus to artists who are re-claiming the agency to represent themselves and their continent with nuance, insight, and incisiveness.

The series is a new addition to AlJazeera’s ongoing *Artscape* programming, which aims to bring to light the forms of popular creative expression that are flourishing in conditions

of social, political, economic hardship or adversity. Past reportages have included a series on a men's choir in an Argentinian prison, on practitioners of the martial art "parkour" in a Palestinian refugee camp, and on an Iraqi poet who addresses questions of love and memory in exile.

As its title intimates, "The New African Photography" will not offer a historical overview of the practice of photography in Africa. While nods to pioneers such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita may be expected, the focus is on the generation of photographers who are presently carrying these figures' legacy and whose work brings to light the rapid social change that is unfolding on the continent today. Likewise, while each profiled artist hails from a different geographical area of Africa and works in a different genre, from fashion photography to photojournalism, the aim of the series is not to emphasize local specificity, nor to stimulate art criticism. Rather, these artists have clearly been selected to form a panoply of contemporary creative voices capable of offering diverse perspectives on issues of agency and self-representation that are relevant on a continental scale.

Fittingly, therefore, the series launches with a profile of the "Invisible Borders" project, a pan-African road trip led by Nigerian photographer Emeka Okereke. Upcoming episodes will showcase Kenyan fashion photographer Barbara Minishi; highly acclaimed Nigerian photographer George Osidi; South African Neo Ntsoma, a recent recipient of the CNN African Journalist award; Congolese artist Baudouin Mouanda; and former street child Mario Macilau, now a photojournalist whose work focuses on social and economic change in Mozambique.

The series will air weekly from 22 April to 27 May 2013.

** This is the first story by Lara Bourdin, ZAM's assistant online editor.*

First episode Emeka Okereke



22 April 2013 The new Al Jazeera series “The New African Photography” profiles Nigerian artist Emeka Okereke and the “Invisible Borders” collective photographic project, of which he is the founder. Chronicling the project’s 2012 edition, the episode follows Okereke and four other African artists as they set out on a road trip from Lagos to Kinshasa. Above all, it shows the artists engaging closely with the different localities, environments, and peoples that make up the continent, all the while reflecting on what it means to be an African artist, in Africa, today.

These are questions that grow directly from Okereke’s personal experience as a transnational artist and self-declared “border-being.” Born in Nigeria in 1980, he studied photography at Paris’ École nationale des beaux-arts and has since lived and worked between Lagos, Paris, and Amsterdam. He launched the “Invisible Borders Trans-African Photography Initiative” in 2009 as a means of allowing other artists to “discover themselves through interactions with diverse encounters” across the African continent.

Participants featured in the episode include filmmaker Ignacio Evita from Equatorial Guinea, Nigerian novelist Emmanuel Iduma, and former Nollywood actor Ray Okeugo. The focus, however, is on the mentoring relationship between Okereke and emerging Nigerian photographer Lillian ‘Novo, who claims, in an opening scene, that she “does not know if she is an artist.” By the end of the episode, ‘Novo is candidly taking shots of a Cameroonian woman who has invited her into her home, and is finding what Okereke somewhat sentimentally calls “the beauty in the small moments of Africans’ lives.”

Although muddy roads and intransigent border agents prevent the “Invisible Borders” group from crossing from Cameroon into the DRC, the project we are presented in this episode is not a failure. Rather, Al Jazeera aims to show how, through borders they cross and those they cannot, and through the scenes they witness and the people they meet, Okereke, Novo, and their companions indeed seem to find what they initially sought: “a space to define Africa for themselves.”

For more information on the series, see AlJazeera’s press release:

<http://aljazeerapressoffice.tumblr.com/>

For more on Artscape, see: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/>

Watch a rough cut of the episode at the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/63410381><https://vimeo.com/63410381>. The password is BORDERS.

Second episode Barbara Minishi and the 'Red Dress'



29 April 2013 For the second instalment of its six-part series on contemporary African photographers, Al Jazeera brings it spotlight to the sartorial snapshots of Barbara Minishi, one of Kenya's leading fashion photographers.

In keeping with the aim of the series, the episode is a profile of another up-and-coming African artist who is working against the grain of common photographic misrepresentations of the continent. Steadfast in her desire to show that there is more to Kenya than the Masai ("Yes, we have Masais, but I don't have Masais in my backyard, okay?," she quips in the film), Minishi had indeed made a name for herself and for East Africa's fashion industry with her vibrant photographs of the couture creations parading today on the region's catwalk. Simultaneously, this chapter of 'The New African Photography' is a homage to some of the art form's least represented figures, to the individuals who are ubiquitously seen in front of fashion photographers' cameras but who continue to struggle to find their way behind them - women.

Having been told early on in her career that there was "no possible way (she) could make it as a professional photographer," Minishi has first-hand experience overcoming the barriers of gender prejudice that shape the world of fashion photography. Hers is thus a compelling voice for this first of two episodes in the series that will focus on emergent African female photographers.

The episode shows Minishi lending her lens to a project that is precisely intended to "make the women of Kenya stand out." Wearing its title well, 'The Red Dress' follows Minishi as she travels through her country to photograph women from a broad cross-section of society donning the same red dress. With its vivacious crimson colour, its voluminous skirt, and the black and green stripes that stretch across its bodice, the gown was designed as a loud statement in favour of national unity in the lead-up to Kenya's 2013 general election. Likewise, as it shows the spunky Minishi taking snapshots of women ranging from her own mother to presidential candidate Martha Karua, 'The Red Dress' offers a bold look at some of the challenges that Kenyan women face, and the style(s) with which they meet them.

'The Red Dress' airs tonight at 22:30 GMT. The episode will be made available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/>

Third episode George Osodi and “Kings of Nigeria”



6 May 2013 Acclaimed Nigerian photojournalist George Osodi is the subject of the third chapter of the six-part Al Jazeera series “The New African Photography,” airing tonight at 22:30 GMT.

Viewers may be familiar with Osodi as the author of the photographic series “Oil Rich Niger Delta” and the accompanying book *Delta Nigeria – the Rape of Paradise*. Completed between 2003 and 2007, the project chronicles the devastation that has been wrought upon the physical and human landscapes of the Niger Delta since Western multinational oil companies began to exploit the region in the 1960s. By way of a masterfully lugubrious subversion of the aesthetics of the sublime, Osodi poignantly brought the drama of the Niger Delta to unfold in each of the series’ two hundred photographs. This mastery understandably caught the eye of both local and international institutions ten years ago, and has since established the young photographer as a potent voice on the contemporary photojournalistic circuit.

If Osodi’s name may not be new to Al Jazeera’s international audiences, the oeuvre showcased in the episode should be. From the sombre beauty of Osodi’s shots of the Delta, director Katharina von Schroeder’s cameras bring us to discover his more recent project, a series of vibrantly coloured portraits of Nigeria’s traditional monarchs. As Osodi explains, these figures are increasingly occluded from the collective imaginaries of younger generations of Nigerians, even though they are the “custodians of a rich cultural

heritage.” He considers this situation particularly critical in an age where there are frequent clashes among ethnic groups and where, according to him, “lots of people have lost trust in their identity.” As such, his aim in the series is to present the monarchical structure as a “point of unity instead of [presenting] it as something that should divide [Nigerians] as a nation.”

By profiling Osodi and his regal subjects, this episode picks up on themes that have begun to emerge in the two previous instalments of the series: the complex politics of ethnic and national identity in contemporary Africa, and the role of the photographer in stimulating public reflection on these questions. Moreover, by showcasing Osodi’s persistently un-sensationalist aesthetics, it provides us with another eloquent portrayal of an artist who is refashioning the visual modes through which his country and continent are represented, and can represent themselves.

“Kings of Nigeria” will be made available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/>.

Fourth episode Neo Ntsoma in “Generation of Change”

By Lara Bourdin

May 13, 2013 After showcasing two Nigerian artists and one Kenyan, Al Jazeera takes its cameras to the southern tip of the continent for this week’s instalment of its six-part series on contemporary African photographers. Through a profile of the successful female photojournalist Neo Ntsoma, this episode will examine the new photography coming out of the “New South Africa.”



Born in 1980 and trained in the tumultuous years of the early 1990s, Ntsoma is neither a “born-free” nor a photographer of the liberation struggle. Rather, she forms part of the cohort of photographers (of the likes of Nontsiseleko Veleko and Ruth Motau) whose careers have unfolded in tandem with the country’s shift from apartheid to democracy, and who have sought to document that shift through their work. Working for the Johannesburg daily *Star* from 2000 to 2007, Ntsoma established herself as a photojournalist with reportages that imaged the turbulent face of the transition. Although her series on street violence in particular earned her a number of prestigious accolades, including the 2004 CNN Photojournalist of the Year Award, in 2007 she decided to abandon news reporting and to establish herself as an independent photographer. Tired of casting her surroundings in a negative light, her aim is now to “change perceptions” by exploring the types of subject matter that “the apartheid regime didn’t want to show the world.”

the exuberance of youth, the vibrancy of street fashion and dance, the energy of “black people feeling good about themselves, dressed well.” Among her past projects is a series on the culture surrounding kwaito music, a youth movement that she considers “proudly and distinctively South African,” and whose pulsing rhythms and cacophonous sounds reflect what she views as the tremendous creative chaos of her young nation.

The episode shows Ntsoma exploring the genre that she professes to love the most: portraiture. We watch the artist as she revisits the same subjects who she photographed in the 1990s, in the hopes of observing how the hope and idealism of those years has translated into these people’s present. There is an intimacy, and an unquestionable sense of empathy in these portrayals, for her subjects are the same creative types who, like her, have been negotiating the personal, professional, and political challenges of nation-building through their art. Likewise, in its poignant portrait of the artist and her work, this episode offers us another privileged angle with which to reflect on the power shared by youth and photography to challenge, to question, and to redefine the meanings of freedom in fast-changing African societies.

“Generation of Change” will air tonight at 22:30 GMT. The episode will be made available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/>.

Picture: The New African: Ephraim Mologan, © Neo Ntsoma

***Fifth Episode* Baudouin Mouanda**



For the penultimate episode of its six-part series “The New African Photography,” Al Jazeera brings viewers to the streets of Brazzaville with a profile of up-and-coming Congolese photographer Baudouin Mouanda.

Born in 1981, Mouanda has been taking photographs of his surroundings since he picked up his father’s old camera at the age of twelve. While his first projects as an amateur photographer were grim black-and-white testimonials of the ravages of civil strife on the urban landscape, for several years now he has been producing images that highlight the forward movement of Congolese society. His big break as a photographer came in 2008 through his series on the Brazzaville “sapeurs” (from the French acronym SAPE, for Society of Atmosphere Setters and Elegant Persons), the legendary street sartorialists whose colourful avant-garde get-ups have become symbols of the country’s post-war urban renaissance. His candid, movement-filled shots of the well-heeled men earned him several international accolades and have established him as a skilled documentarian of contemporary urban life. Since 2009, he has been a central member of the collective “Génération Elili” (“generation of the image” in Lingala), a group of 20 Brazzaville-based artists whose aim is to promote artistic creation as a vehicle for the Congolese to explore and to assert their cultural identities, their experiences, and their ideas.

Titled “Congolese Dreams,” the Al Jazeera shows Mouanda at work on his latest project, a series in which he explores the ideas and values surrounding marriage in Congo. We follow Mouanda as he abandons the spontaneous style of his “sapeurs” series to stage a series of shots showing different women wearing the same white wedding gown against a variety of destitute urban landscapes. Viewers who have been following “The New African Photography” will be reminded of Kenyan fashion photographer Barbara Minishi’s series on “the Red Dress,” which employed a similar concept and displayed a similarly celebratory aesthetic. Indeed, much like Minishi, Mouanda is concerned with putting forward images of empowered African femininity, which may challenge viewers to question widespread patriarchal values and conservative ideas around women’s roles in the family and in society.

In fact, this episode brings together a number of the themes that have been woven through the Al Jazeera series to date. Showcasing an artist who sees his work as fundamentally embedded in his experience of daily life in the city, it invites viewers to reflect once more on the agency of African photographers in their social environments and on the power of the image to effect social change. Simultaneously, it once more draws attention to the complex and innovative aesthetic strategies that African photographers are mobilising to create images that have the potential to change perceptions of their continent on a global scale.

“Congolese Dreams” will be made available online at:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/2013/04/201342211817638730.html>.

Tonight on Al Jazeera: Mário Macilau's "Unique Gaze"



Al Jazeera concludes its six-part series "The New African Photography" tonight with a profile of Mozambican photographer Mário Macilau.

At twenty-nine years of age, Macilau is the youngest, and the "newest" of the photographers who have been showcased in the series. This hardly makes him any less mature. His practice as a photographer grows directly out of his early experiences growing up on the streets of Maputo during the grim years of Mozambique's long and horrifically violent civil war. Having taken up the medium in 2003, he has devoted the past ten years of his life to capturing the marginalised people and places that he suspects might otherwise go ignored or "forgotten." Viewing his practice as a form of social intervention, he has developed an aesthetic that blends candid lucidity with forlorn solemnity, bringing glints of human warmth to otherwise desolate vistas. Past projects include series on the once-glamorous Grand Hotel in Beira and its present population of informal squatters; on the slum-dwellers of Lagos' Makoko suburb; and most recently, on the generations of elderly living in Mozambique's rural areas.

The project Al Jazeera documents is one that brings Macilau particularly close to his roots, for it is a series on homelessness in present-day Mozambique. South African filmmaker François Verster and his crew travel with Macilau to the town of Chokwe, 230 km north of Maputo, where the floodwaters of the Limpopo River caused mass devastation in February of this year. Although the project is designed as a chronicle on the aftereffects of an environmental disaster, Macilau's real purpose is to shed light on forces that are far more insidious than tempestuous weather. By

immortalising those whose lives have been laid to waste by the deluge, he seeks to bring viewers to question the politico-economic framework that makes it possible for some in his country to live at the mercy of rainfall while others grow rich from surges in foreign investment.

Although it certainly applies to Macilau and his work, the episode title “A Unique Gaze” arguably makes retrospective reference to the series as a whole. For the Mozambican photographer’s soberingly beautiful shots do seem to exemplify the type of photography that Al Jazeera has been aiming to showcase throughout: work that examines, with insight, honesty, and artful nuance, situations that are otherwise impersonally portrayed as flatly hopeless, plainly dire. Indeed, if “The New African Photography” has shown anything at all over the course of its six weeks on air, it is surely that the field of contemporary photography in Africa is a field made up of a vast multiplicity of gazes, each uniquely local, singular, specific; and that it is to these international audiences must look if they are to see beyond the homogenizing filter of time-worn Western lenses.

“A Unique Gaze” airs tonight at 22:30 GMT. Watch the episode online at:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/artscape/2013/04/2013422111558769256.html>.