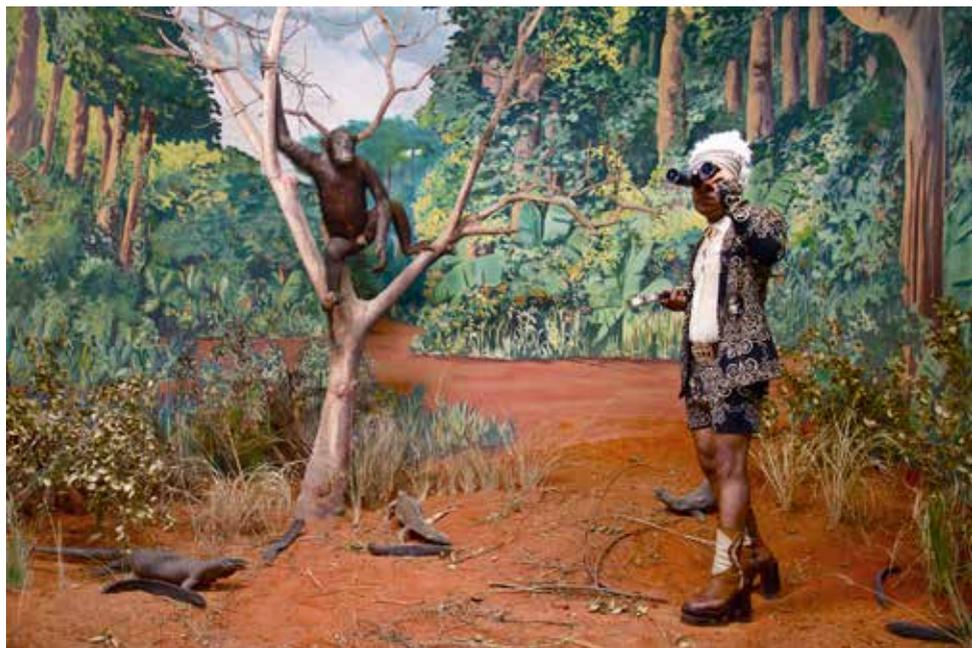


Africa State of Mind



INTRODUCTION

Africa State of Mind explores the work of an emergent generation of photographers from across the African continent. 16 artists from 11 different countries interrogate ideas of 'Africanness' through highly subjective renderings of life and identity, collectively revealing Africa as a psychological space or a 'state of mind', as much as a physical territory.

The exhibition orientates around three main themes. ***Inner Landscapes*** offers highly subjective visions of African identity, in the process interrogating prevailing ideas of Africa and Africanness. As a medium, photography has played a significant role in shaping external views of Africa. Ethnographic-style imagery of the colonial period presented Africans as the primitive people of a dark continent. Contemporary news reports often portray the continent as a place of chaos, corruption and disease. Such images gain their power by shrouding bias beneath a cloak of objectivity. By contrast the photography in this section revels in its subjectivity, embracing the particular, the personal and the idiosyncratic, in place of more stereotypical views of Africa.

Zones of Freedom brings together photographers whose works explore questions of gender, sexuality and identity. Many of the photographers in this section are working within societies where socially conservative views on sexuality and gender dominate. For example, homosexuality is illegal in 34 out of Africa's 54 nations and in Mauritania, Sudan, southern Somalia and northern Nigeria, it is punishable by death. In countries

Cover:

Kiluanji Kia Henda

In the Days of a Dark Safari

The Last Journey of the Dictator

Mussunda N'zombo Before the

Great Extinction: Act II (2017)

where queer and trans identities are seen as the very antithesis of normality, the work of photographers such as Athi-Patra Ruga, Ruth Ossai, Eric Gyamfi and Sabelo Mlangeni takes on a dual role. It is both an expression of individual artistic practice and an assertion of visibility in circumstances where LGBT+ perspectives often go unrepresented.

Hybrid Cities considers photography centred on the African metropolis as a site of rapid social transformation. Of the largest cities in Africa, three - Lagos, Cairo and Kinshasa - can be classed as “megacities”, conurbations with a population of over 10 million. That number is set to double by 2030. The share of the continent’s population living in urban areas will pass 50 percent around the same time. Amid such rapid urbanisation, characterised by ceaseless flows of people, goods and capital, a state of permanent change reigns. The works in *Hybrid Cities* document the African city engaged at a period of unprecedented acceleration, revealing both the tensions and possibilities of that condition.

Africa State of Mind takes place at a time in which popular Western views of the continent still remain distorted. On one hand, an “Africa rising” narrative, celebrates the development of an emergent middle class and the growth of a tech sector driven by a young aspirational population, while glossing over the inequalities of income and opportunity that still hinder social progress in many countries. On the other hand, there’s the reductive stereotype of Africa as a land of

would-be migrants and corrupt rulers – a vision given ugly validation by President Trump’s 2018 description of its nations as “shithole countries”. By contrast, *Africa State of Mind* features photography that seeks to address the complexity of what it means, and how it feels, to live in Africa today.

The exhibition also draws inspiration from the work of the Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr, who has called for fresh consideration of how to understand Africa. Sarr speculates about a new Africa conjured into being by artists, thinkers and cultural actors. The work of these creative figures is intent on articulating the contemporary lived experience in Africa as a thing of nuance and imaginative reach. In so doing they are articulating Africa as a place where there is, as Sarr puts it, a profound “continuity between the real and the possible”.

Ekow Eshun
Exhibition Curator

Zones of Freedom



Sabelo Mlangeni
Country Girls
Xolani Ngayii, eStanela (2009)

ATHI-PATRA RUGA

(b. 1984, South Africa)

Working in performance, photography and video, Athi-Patra Ruga's artistic approach combines myth, and alternate reality with a sly undercurrent of humour.

Ruga's world is populated with characters whose identities are in a constant state of transformation. The central figure in the *Night of the Long Knives* is drawn originally from his performance series *The Future White Women of Azania*. Engulfed in a cocoon of multi-coloured balloons, the character is in the midst of a racial and sexual metamorphosis, their identity suspended between black and white, male and female.

Here, the body has become the site to explore questions about South Africa's troubled history and present-day politics. Azania is a reference to pre-apartheid activists' dreams of building an African utopia free of white colonial presence. In Ruga's images, that goal remains very much in the realm of fantasy.



Athi-Patra Ruga

Night of the Long Knives I (2013)

MUSA N NXUMALO

(b. 1986, South Africa)

Musa N Nxumalo's *16 Shots* series combines photographs from the violent, student-led protests of the #feesmustfall movement in 2016 with ecstatic dance scenes of urban nightlife and musical performances at clubs and parties in Johannesburg. The series attempts to disrupt simplistic narratives about South African youth as either angry activists or frivolous slackers, proposing instead an intertwining of both viewpoints, with the party as a site of protest and vice versa.

The title *16 Shots* is also a reference to a song of the same name by the Chicago-born rapper, Vic Mensa; a tune that addresses police brutality in the United States. In referencing the song, Nxumalo suggests a transnational link between the struggles of young people in the USA and those of his South African peers in their confrontations with the police.



Musa N Nxumalo

Wake up, kick ass and repeat! (2017)

RAPHAËL BARONTINI

(b. 1984, France)

Raphaël Barontini's *Tapestry from an Asteroid*, gathers references from across past and present to explore representations of African identity.

Barontini's work combines antique and Western classical imagery (Velasquez's *Infante*, 17th century portraiture, Roman sculptures), cut and mixed with a photographic portrait of a man from the Tutsi people of Rwanda. With its painted cosmos-like background, the piece also gestures to Afrofuturist ideas which suggest the most fitting way to articulate black experience is through science-fiction and fantasy. This idea is reinforced by the dune of black sand at the base of the tapestry, alluding to lunar or uncharted landscapes.

The sand is also grounded in a physical reality, furthering Barontini's fusion of fantasy and history in his work. It relates to his personal experience of visiting family on the islands of La Reunion and Guadeloupe, places characterised by beaches composed of volcanic black sand.



Raphaël Barontini

Tapestry from an asteroid (2017)

RUTH OSSAI

(b. 1991, Nigeria)

"Fine boy no pimples" is a phrase commonly used in Nigeria to compliment young men on their appearance. In this series, Ruth Ossai uses the term as inspiration to push boundaries of gender and identity while photographing a selection of Nigerian youth made up of her cousins, extended family, friends and neighbours.

Produced in partnership with stylist Ibrahim Kamara, the series challenges expectations about what constitutes "womenswear" and "menswear" and what it means to be a boy or a man in Nigeria today. It seeks to prompt conversations about gender in a country where traditional sex roles remain largely fixed.

In creating the series, Ossai is also conscious of working within another African tradition of exuberant portraiture, as exemplified by the likes of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, Samuel Fosso and Malick Sidibé.



Ruth Ossai
Chidibere Ezugwu and Ifebuche Ezugwu
Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria (2017)

SABELO MLANGENI

(b. 1980, South Africa)

Sabelo Mlangeni's *Country Girls* offers an intimate portrait of gay life in rural South Africa.

Mlangeni took photographs over a six year period from 2003 to 2009 in small towns in the eastern Mpumalanga province. In these locations gay lifestyles are often regarded contemptuously as un-African or un-Christian, and being gay means running the risk of verbal abuse or physical violence. Yet even in such unsympathetic settings, gay people have created space for themselves to work and love and build communities. Mlangeni's photographs evidence an everyday world of intimacy and affection, humour and connection. They show gay people as vulnerable but visible. A community that demands to be seen on its own terms.



Sabelo Mlangeni

Country Girls

Nkululeko and friend from Durban (2003)

NEIL BELOUFA

(b. 1985, France)

In Neil Beloufa's *Kempinski*, citizens of Bamako, Mali, describe their visions of the future.

Addressing the camera directly, they speak in the present tense as if what they imagine has already come into being. The world they describe is a fantastical place of talking cars, telepathic sex, travel at light speed and mobile houses that roam continents. For a while, as the speakers sit in darkness, illuminated only by hand-held neon tubes, it seems that anything might be possible.

In centring the film on the citizens of Bamako, Beloufa's film proposes an inversion of international power relationships. Rather than being mere victim to the consequences of globalised change such as war, famine and environmental destruction, the people of the developing world here become authors of their future.



Neil Beloufa

Video still from *Kempinski*, (2017)

ERIC GYAMFI

(b. 1990, Ghana)

For Eric Gyamfi, the photographs in *Just Like Us* are part of an ever-evolving record of the lives of his queer friends in Ghana, whom he considers collaborators in the work.

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Ghana and to counter prejudice against the country's LGBT+ community, Gyamfi aims to create images that normalise their presence within society.

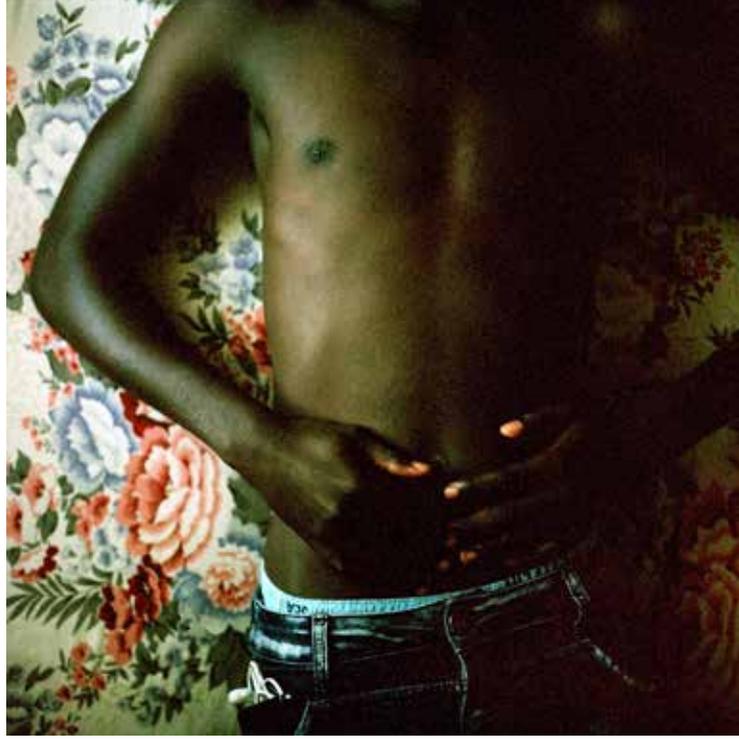
Just Like Us seeks to represent queer people as both members of a distinct community and valuable contributors to the country's social fabric and history. Although the project uses sexuality as a starting point, Gyamfi's goal is to photograph queer people in the wholeness of their intersecting identities and interests. In the process, he seeks to expand the visual account of daily life for Ghana's LGBT+ community which exists outside, yet also inside and alongside, heteronormative society.



Eric Gyamfi

Just Like Us, Untitled 7 (2016)

Inner Landscapes



Mimi CheronNg'ok
Untitled (2014)

KILUANJI KIA HENDA

(b.1979, Angola)

Kiluanji Kia Henda's series *The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction (in 5 Acts)* draws from a raft of literary and historical references to consider the European gaze on Africa and the myths and stories the continent tells about itself. In particular, it critiques two persistent narratives about Africa: the colonial-era notion of Africa as a land of "noble savagery" as perpetuated by Europeans such as Joseph Conrad and his 1899 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, and the idea of Africa as a verdant paradise, as proclaimed by populist African politicians. The central character in the work is based on the dandyish persona of Mobutu Sese Seko, former president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (1965-1997), who styled himself as a father to his people while robbing the country of its wealth. His death in the final image can be read as a cautionary lesson in the seduction of myths.



Kiluanji Kia Henda

In the Days of a Dark Safari
The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda
N'zombo Before the Great Extinction: Act I (2017)

NAMSA LEUBA

(b. 1982, Switzerland)

Namsa Leuba's work delves into the politics of the gaze and its related notion of otherness. She revisits symbols of ancestral belief from a contemporary, Westernized perspective.

The *Weke*, series was shot in the Republic of Benin. The work imagines narratives that are inspired by the local traditions of the vodun (voodoo) religion. Benin is the birthplace of voodoo, a belief system which predates many religions by over 10,000 years, and there are many groups in the country that keep its tradition alive.

Traveling across Benin, Leuba met with a number of different voodoo priests and participated in voodoo ceremonies in order to gain a better understanding of the religion's practices. Sourcing models from villages and towns in the area, she created her own costumes and props. The result is not a documentary account of voodoo culture but a fictive portrayal that imagines new types of communities. While they are based on aspects of the local context, these images take on a new life of their own, rooted in fantasy.



Namsa Leuba
Weke series (2018)

MIMI CHERONO NG'OK

(b.1983, Kenya)

In the photo series *Everyone Is Lonely in Kigali*, Mimi Cheron Ng'ok gathers together images taken in locations across Africa, including Dakar, Accra, Abidjan, Kampala, Kigali and Nairobi. The works contain no markers of geographical specificity and their light suggests a liminal state in time that's neither dawn nor dusk. Recognisably tropical elements recur such as palm leaves and baobab trees. But there are also more enigmatic images. A couple on an empty beach. A man lying on a bed, shirtless, his face obscured, and his presence hinting perhaps at love or loss. Ng'ok describes her images as an "emotional cartography", a way of mapping space through the senses so that the Africa we see in her images becomes a place of memory, desire, loss and nostalgia. A place of absence as much as presence.



Mimi Cheron Ng'ok
Untitled (2014)

LEBOHANG KGANYE

(b. 1990, South Africa)

Lebohang Kganye began to make the works in *Ke Lefa Laka: Her-story* after the death of her mother. With that loss came a desire by the photographer to explore the possibility of sustaining a connection with her mother. Searching through her family's house, Kganye gathered together old clothes and photos and began inserting herself into the pictorial narrative of those family scenes. In these new images, Kganye wears her mother's clothes and mimicks her poses. These works became what she describes as "herour" histories, a way of marrying two memories, her mother's and her own, into one new form.

Kganye realised ultimately that she was scared she was beginning to forget what her mother looked like and sounded like, what her defining gestures were. The photomontages became a substitute for the for the fleeting nature of memory and a way to form a conversation that might be able to stretch across time.



Lebohang Kganye
Ke Lefa Laka: Her-story
Ka 2-phisi yaka e pinky II (2013)

Hybrid Cities



Emmanuelle Andrianjafy
Untitled (2015)
From *Nothing's in Vain* (MACK, 2017)

GIRMA BERTA

(b. 1990, Ethiopia)

In Girma Berta's *Moving Shadows* series, solitary figures are juxtaposed against vibrant backgrounds, creating images which exemplify the contrasting colours and personalities on the streets of his home town of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Berta describes the intention behind his work as a desire to capture "the beautiful, the ugly and all that is in between" in his city.

A self-taught photographer whose work fuses street photography with fine art, Berta's use of digital media to produce his artworks is itself a commentary on how online and mobile technologies are offering new routes to empowerment and expression for the young in Africa.



Girma Berta

Moving Shadows II: XII (2017)

MICHAEL TSEGAYE

(b. 1977, Ethiopia)

Michael Tsegaye's *Future Memories* examines the nature of urban change in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the photographer is based.

Over the past decade an upsurge in new construction projects has altered - and to some extent damaged - the social fabric of the city. People who once lived in village-like environments, and in neighbourhoods that were a hive of activity, have now been relocated to anonymous apartment buildings. Many older people have lost their homes and livelihoods.

Future Memories is Tsegaye's attempt to capture what will - or already has - faded into the past. The series provides a visual tour through the Addis Ababa he knew and grew up in, excavating the histories and narratives encased within its physical form.



Michael Tsegaye

FM IV (2009)

**EMMANUELLE
ANDRIANJAFY**
(b. 1983, Madagascar)

The origin of the *Nothing's in Vain* series lie in Emmanuelle Andrianjafy's relocation from Madagascar to Dakar, Senegal in 2011. A stranger to the city, Andrianjafy originally struggled to orient herself in a place of noise and crowds and seemingly constant construction projects. As a way to familiarise herself with her new environment, she took to walking the streets with a camera, eventually amassing a kaleidoscopic body of images that reflected an outsider's fascination with the people and places and accidental beauty of a city in constant flux. From snapshots of passers-by to the image of a monumental socialist realist-style statue of a man, woman and child rising from a parched and rock-strewn landscape, this is Dakar revealed in its splendour and contradiction.



Emmanuelle Andrianjafy
Untitled (2015)
From *Nothing's in Vain* (MACK, 2017)

SAMMY BALOJI
(b. 1978, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Sammy Baloji's photographs document the urban spaces of contemporary Congo. His pictures show a built environment in which colonial-era structures have largely fallen into disrepair and where infrastructure is subject to constant breakdown. Here, the Congolese city is replete with disconnected fragments, reminders and echoes of a former modernity that continues to exist only in a shattered form. If there is a vision for such cities, it mainly lies in fantasies of glimmering Dubai-like new developments, which promise a future far out of reach of most residents. Yet Congo's urban residents are constantly inventing new social spaces to overcome their difficult circumstances. Baloji's photographs capture an urban world where the possibilities of collective action and dreams of a shared future continue to be explored.



Sammy Baloji
Urban Now: City Life in Congo (2013-15)
*Street view, municipalities of Masina and
Kimbanseke* (2013)

MICHAEL MACGARRY

(b. 1978, South Africa)

Michael MacGarry's practice as a visual artist and filmmaker is focused on researching narratives and histories of socio-economics and politics in Africa, principally in spaces where contemporary life is in a state of invention and flux.

Excuse Me While I Disappear was made in Kilamba Kiaxi, a new city built outside Luanda, Angola which is to be home to more than 250,000 people. It was built by a Chinese construction company for \$3.5 billion and is the single largest investment project by China in Africa. The film's narrative follows a young municipal worker who lives by night in the old city centre of Luanda and works by day as a groundskeeper far away in Kilamba Kiaxi. Conceptually, the film is concerned with themes including African science-fiction and the visual mechanics of mid-century European ethnographic cinema.



Africa State of Mind is a touring exhibition by New Art Exchange (NAE) Nottingham, curated by Ekow Eshun.

Ekow Eshun is an independent writer and curator. He is Chairman of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group, overseeing London's most significant public art programme, and Creative Director of Calvert 22 Foundation, a leading arts space dedicated to the contemporary culture of Eastern Europe.

NAE is a contemporary arts space in Nottingham that celebrates the region's cultural richness. The largest gallery in the UK dedicated to culturally diverse contemporary visual arts, NAE's mission is to stimulate new perspectives on the value of diversity in art and society.

Michael MacGarry

Video still from *Excuse me, while I disappear* (2014)



Mimi CheronNg'ok
Untitled (2014)

EXHIBITION TOUR DATES

New Art Exchange, Nottingham:
29 September - 16 December 2018
www.nae.org.uk

Impressions Gallery, Bradford:
29 March - 15 June 2019
www.impressions-gallery.com

See NAE's website
for further tour dates.

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New Art Exchange
39-41 Gregory Boulevard
Nottingham NG7 6BE
0115 924 8630
info@nae.org.uk



designed by Saria Digregorio