Uncategorised

The exhibition *Africa Is No Island*, curated by Jeanne Mercier, Baptiste de Ville d'Avray & Madeleine de Colnet, brings together the work of 40 emerging and established photographers, who work from a distinctly African perspective, at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL), in Marrakech. **Ric Bower** spoke to four of the participating artists: Joana Choumali; François-Xavier Gbré; Maïmouna Guerresi and Ayana V. Jackson, together with veteran Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté and the museum's president Othman Lazraq. This dialogue examines the complexities of identity in relation to the continent of Africa, and the innate power of the photographic process as a tool in the ongoing process of decolonisation.

Ric Bower: The artist usually has to be there to make a photograph; was this necessary presence significant in your decision to adopt photography as your vehicle of expression?

Ayana V. Jackson *(born 1977, New Jersey, USA. Photographer and filmmaker, best known for her focus on contemporary Africa and the African diaspora)*:
Presence is very important in my work; I am conducting a kind of self assessment – of my own identity and of my own body – when I stand in front of the camera. I moved from photographing others to photographing myself, because I was interested in the difficult, or even the potentially violent, relationship between the body and the photographer.

We edit what we see, when we make a photograph. And this fact, by definition, poses many questions as to what lies outside of the frame. This is as interesting to me as that which is finally chosen to be included in the image. My own presence in the photograph posits a distillation of the world out there, through my own perspective.

Ric Bower: And how does this necessary presence operate in relation to you photographing Moroccan landscapes and building-scapes François-Xavier?

François-Xavier Gbré *(born 1978, Lille, France, lives and works in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Photographer useing architecture as witness to memory and social change)*:
So, before the actual making of the exposure, there is a kind of performance in which I am prowling around, I inhabit the space; even in an interior environment, I will be moving from room to room. This then, the performance, is my starting point.

All photography must be a reflection of who you are; we have no choice in this. Even if I am not photographing people, I am defining a possibility, with the frame, from which anyone might be able to see themselves entering that particular space.

Joana Choumali *(born 1974. Fine art photographer based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, looking at femininity, beauty and the representation of the body)*:
When I make a portrait, there is a very tacit exchange of energy between myself and the sitter. My desire is to be forgotten though; to be invisible, to be the least present, because what I photograph is only that which the sitter wants to give to me. I try to erase myself entirely, to become part of the environment; because of this desire I give no direction to my sitters.

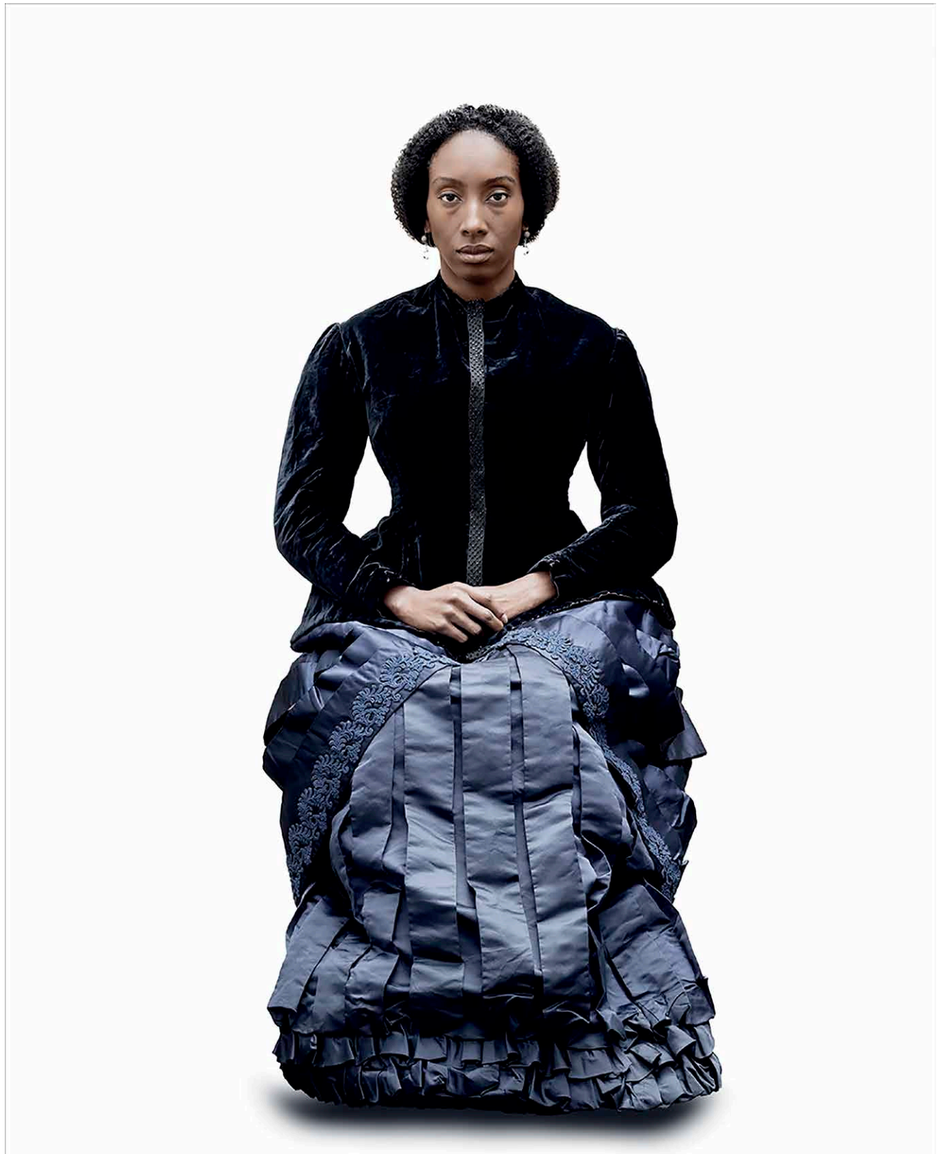
Ric Bower: Is this a kind of humility then? It seems you are curating a particularly sensitive transaction.

Joana Choumali: Yes, there is a certain humility. I felt that I would not be able to photograph collaborators as soon as they turned up to see me. Instead I would talk to them, offering the necessary respect that their tradition dictates. I would ask after their family, and then explain the project and what I was hoping to do with it. After this, I would, very respectfully, ask them to enter the studio and to sit for the portrait. The only direction I would give would be that I wanted to photograph them first from the back and then from the front. There is no decisive moment here, and the relational dynamics would be constantly evolving in the process of making the images. I just took what they are willing to give to me.

There is empathy there too; in some ways I was merging with the individuals; I was photographing in a way that cannot be expressed verbally. I had to respect their silences, and then I had to silently put myself in their shoes.

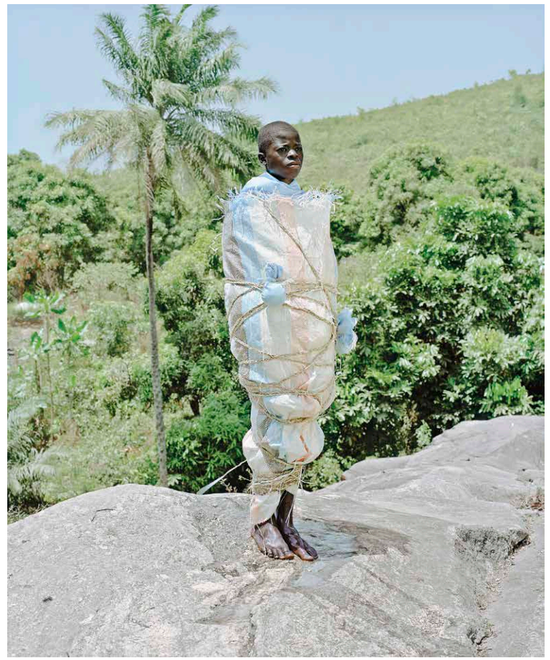
Ayana V. Jackson: There is a lot of silence in the process, I agree with Joana, and there is something meditative about it too. I am performing as another individual who passed on in the late 19th century; I try to evoke a certain emotional state as I do this, I am posing an enquiry. The South African photographer, Santu Mofokeng, has remarked that there is a lot of spiritual work tied into the process of photography – an intangible energy that is present – and I would agree with him.

I am not always aware of what the outcome should be, while making the image, I recognise the work when I see the frame, while making an edit; (that is choosing which images to use from a series of images). There can be millimeters of choreographic, or compositional difference between two frames, but you know which one it is, which one is right.









First spread:
Sarah Forbes, **Ayana V. Jackson** , 2016 (*Dear Sarah* series), archival pigment print on German etching, 130 x 76 cm, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

Second spread:
Elizabeth Theatre I, Tiberias, (*Elizabeth Hotel* series) **François-Xavier Gbré**, 2009, archival print, 80 x 120 cm, courtesy of the artist and galerie Cécile Fakhoury

This spread:
Statuette Kafigeledio Prince – Guinea, (*Ya Kala Ben* series), **Namsa Leuba,** 2011, print on Baryta paper, 35 x 28.8 cm, courtesy of the artist and Art Twenty One Gallery

Statuette Nganga SaleLaye – Guinea, (Ya Kala Ben series), **Namsa Leuba**, 2011, print on Baryta paper, 35 x 28.8 cm, courtesy of the artist and Art Twenty One Gallery

Ric Bower: So photography is, in part, a mystical process… how do you feel about this idea Maïmouna?

Maïmouna Guerresi *(born 1951 Italy. Italian-Senegalese artist, whose intimate photography, sculpture, video, and installation work looks at cultural diversity, Islamic spirituality and ancestry):*
My path in life led me to Muslim Africa, where I met and joined the Islamic Muride Bayfall community, acquiring a new identity with the name of Maïmouna. This was a decision that marked my life as well as my artistic choices.

My artistic practice began with body art. I confronted nature, by using the body and mythology, such as the story of Apollo and Daphne. I myself can be both Apollo and Daphne.

Ric Bower: Can you talk a little more about what you mean by 'body art', and how it relates to the photographs you make?

Maïmouna Guerresi: My first works were created in the artistic context of body art; I was looking for a cosmic connection with nature. I was the main subject. I was confronted with the natural world and with figures of classical mythology. I was inspired by Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture *Apollo and Daphne*. For me, conceptually, photography is very close to a cast sculpture, because it captures that unrepeatable moment of a position, or an expression of the body. This idea is how my first black and white photographic series, titled *Mimesis*, and my sculptural casts, intended as a kind of armour or chrysalis, came into being.

Later, I continued this search for metamorphosis or transformation – even after my conversion and inner transformation – by representing veiled figures where the body becomes a container, temple and metaphor for the soul.

Ric Bower: Othman, can I ask you how you might, metaphorically, break down the walls of your beautiful museum to let the community in? And does photography have a special role to play in this process?

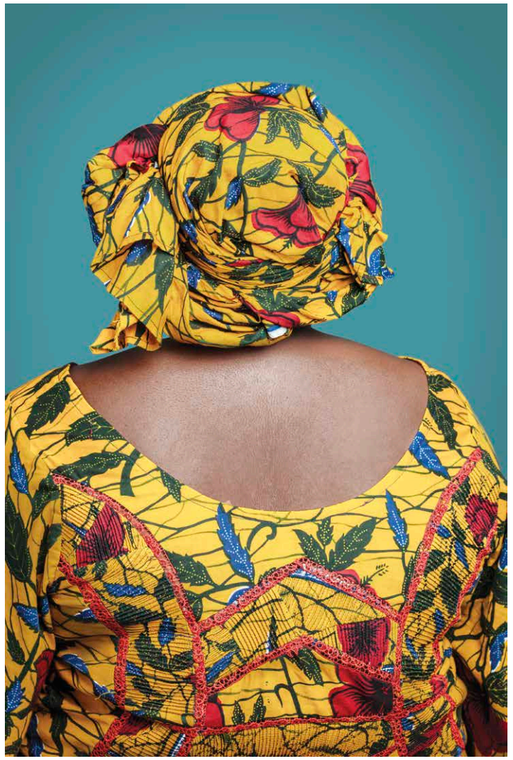
Othman Lazraq *(born 1989, Marrakech, lives in Morocco. Founder and President of the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden):*
Until recently, photography was seen as just another career in Morocco, like being an engineer, but it had no real connection with the art world; a photograph was not perceived as being art. I think we have learned – in Morocco, in Africa and more generally – that photography is uniquely democratic, and so offers opportunities to young artists, which are perhaps not available through other traditional genres of expression. With photography, reality is transcribed, you have to be there.

There is a lack of infrastructure in Africa, we don't have many commercial galleries – a museum like MACAAL offers the community an opportunity to become familiar with the medium; it's the medium of my generation after all.

We have this programme called LCC [La Chambre Claire] here at Fondation Alliances; it's a competition, and we get two to three hundred applicants every year. It's inspiring to see young people applying with 10 exhibition-ready photos, but it's also sad, because there are very few structures in Morocco to help them build on what they have brought to us; there are few art schools here. We are trying to build a foundation with MACAAL; it's a starting point.

Ric Bower: There was a, perhaps naive, belief, in the middle part of the 20th century, that photography had the power to really change things in society – I am thinking in particular of the work of the photo agency Magnum. Ayana, to what extent does that belief still exist in the African diaspora, in New York say? Can photography bring change there?

Ayana V. Jackson: I am very concerned with the political implications of photography. It is a technology that was developed in the the middle of the 19th century, and it was put to use immediately to illustrate the colonial experiment from the perspective of the colonisers, in publications or on *cartes de visite* [visiting cards], a very particular perspective was being propagated. I am very much concerned with the representation of the black, or the non-European, body – the imagery that populates the early archives is exclusively from the perspective of the European. It wasn't until the process fell into the hands of the likes of the Malian photographer Malik Sidibé that this began to change. I have photographs of my great grandparents from the 1890s, where they went into a photographic studio and presented themselves as they wanted to be presented; this was another political moment for photography; it gave a sense of what was outside of the European frame, the only frame that had previously been presented. The fact that more art spaces like MACAAL



and Lagos and Addis photo festivals exist is significant, as they were created for the express purpose of facilitating decolonisation and of communicating the multiple realities that exist as part of what it means to be part of continental Africa or its diaspora. These are spaces in which our narratives can come out, and this is an incredible service, both to humanity as a whole and to us, the people it directly concerns.

Ric Bower: So photography was a tool that reinforced the colonial mindset and now it can be used to dissolve the colonial mindset?

Joana Choumali: Yes it can; it can by preparing the next generation, the kids in Africa and the diaspora. We want to make them comfortable with who they are and the beauty of their heritage; then we can start building a new understanding of being African and being black. Art can open minds; it shows children that they really can bring something to the table.

Ric Bower: Abdoulaye, from your perspective, as an artist who has been practising for a number of years, does the photograph have a particular power for young Africans?

Abdoulaye Konaté *(born 1953 Diré, Mali, lives and works in Bamako, Mali. His practice takes the form of textile-based installations exploring socio-political and environmental issues):* Yes, because people love photos and photographing themselves. It is easier to accept, as a medium, for the African people. and using a camera brings the advantage that one can be in the world without a barrier.

Ric Bower: And what was the attitude of the generation before you to the creative process? Did your parents oppose you when you decided you wanted to be an artist?

Abdoulaye Konaté: My parents were never against my choice to be an artist. I studied fine art to secondary level and beyond. We learned, at the academy, to do anatomy and to work with perspective. We learnt very little about Africa itself, because it was not taught in schools that took a western approach.

Ric Bower: To what extent do you consciously draw upon Malian tradition in your work?

Abdoulaye Konaté: I came back to tradition, but the traditions I learned about were not only Malian; I studied textiles in America – from Native Americans – in Japan, in Vietnam, the Indies and in Arab countries. I do research on how the work is made, on how different materials are used.

Ric Bower: François-Xavier, in the West the hierarchies of modernity have imposed themselves across photography as a medium, leaving a quasi-sacred heritage, which museums adore, but which is entirely separate from the lived experience of photography, which we've been discussing. How can the African approach to photography free the medium from these constraints?

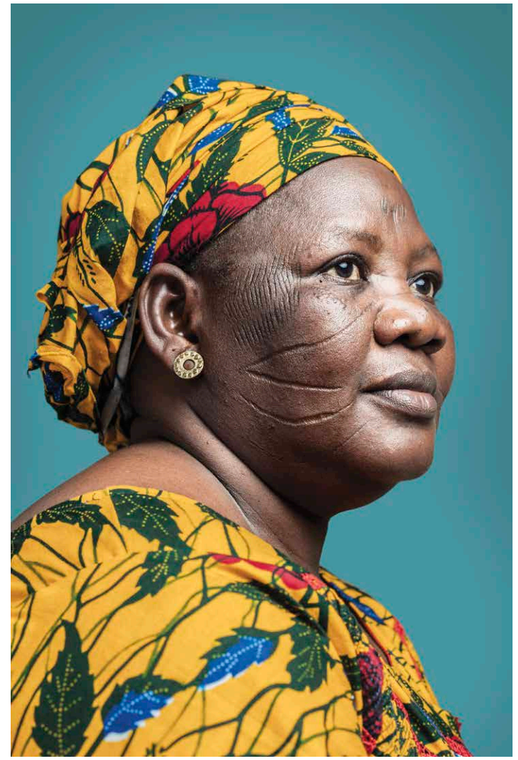
François-Xavier Gbré: We have the equipment today; young photographers are not constrained by technique, they can concentrate on what they want to say. With photography you can transcribe their own reality. Photography is not about ***the*** truth, it is about ***your*** truth, the photographer's truth.

Ric Bower: We suffer from what Kant once referred to as, a 'mania of categorisation' in Europe too; everything has its place, its own little compartment. In Africa there seems to be a fluidity in how things are done, which, in turn, imbues the creative process with a greater agency. How does one prevent African art practice from succumbing to this mania of categorisation we, in the west, suffer from?

Maïmouna Guerresi: Photography is an important and direct means of expression, which the artist can use as they wish. In my case, it is a way to make known my experiences and inner transformations. After my first encounter with Mouridism, in Senegal, and later, after my conversion to Islam, I felt the need to express this change, and the renewed spirituality I was experiencing. I was trying to represent the emotions that I felt when visiting holy places and meeting with the great religious figures of Muslim Africa.

My works from the series *The Giants* are the result of my desire to represent these mystical characters – both men and women – of sub-Saharan Africa and, in particular, the people I met in Senegal. They have developed a new and renewed Sufism through the example of their spiritual guide, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké. He was the founding father of Mouridism and was able to overcome colonial subjugation through passive activism with a spiritual and peaceful Jihad, avoiding war.

Through my photography, I wanted to represent the strength and spiritual energy of these characters, avoiding their physiognomy. This is why I portray ordinary









Fourth spread:
Mme Djeneba (Haabré: la dernière génération series), **Joana Choumali**, 2013-2014, print on Baryta paper, 90 x 60 cm, and 50 Golborne Gallery

Mme Djeneba, (Haabré: la dernière génération series), **Joana Choumali**, 2013-2014, print on Baryta paper, 90 x 60 cm, courtesy of the artist and 50 Golborne Gallery

Fifth spread:
Throne in White, **Maïmouna Guerresi**, 2016, Lambda print on dibond, 200 x 125 cm, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

Throne in Black, **Maïmouna Guerresi**, 2016, Lambda print on dibond, 200 x 125 cm, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

This spread:
Fatiha (Post-Anterior Medium), **Walid Layadi-Marfouk**, 2017, archival pigment print on photo rag pearl paper, 112 x 90 cm, courtesy of the artist

people, friends and family, dressed in architectural costumes, created by me. This has the effect of surrounding them with an unreal, metaphysical dimension.

Ric Bower: Joana, can I ask you about the ritual scarification of your subjects and its significance in your own evolving understanding of identity?

Joana Choumali: Writing is scarification and, in the case of these people, they have their identity cards written on their faces. For them, identity was imposed – they did not have a choice when they were scarified as children – in accordance with their tribal traditions; but now they are condemned to live with it.

In Africa now, identity itself has become an increasingly complex notion; you have to find the most concise way to present yourself in society, drawing from a range of facts including: your official nationality; your colour; where you are living and the things you believe..

What is Africa anyway? Who is really African? Being mixed, as I am, (and living in Côte d'Ivoire), becomes an identity in itself; people tell me I am not really African. This is what I am trying to deconstruct – the notion of Africa we have inherited from outside. It's like the weather though, it's always changing and it's never, ever straightforward. We still have the powerful influence of tradition here too. In Europe, people have the freedom to be who they want, they are almost forced to define themselves, the exact opposite of my portrait collaborators, of course, who have had their identity defined for them. So, in conclusion, perhaps we should stop apologising for not being what we are expected to be.

Ayana V. Jackson: When considering essentialised notations of identity – this mania of categorisation – the global south is boxed together with primitivism and traditionalism. There is a blunt refusal to see the ideas being generated in Africa now as being contemporary. The presumption is that when a black body is presented in a photograph, wearing traditional garments, of any type, that it is a performance, rather than being part of contemporary conversation with the world about identity now. Photography has done a great disservice to the non-European in the past, in how it has facilitated this process of othering. It has allowed those behind the camera to maintain a position of privilege, while denying it to whoever happens to be in front of the camera. Democratisation of the medium has meant the world has been forced to contend with its xenophobia, its classism and its racism. It has also meant that the West has had to contend with the lies it has been telling itself for so many years.

Ric Bower: The title of the show is *Africa Is No Island*; what does the potential dialogue between Africa and its fellow continents, the title implies – particularly with the west – mean for the future?

François-Xavier Gbré: Having an African father and a European mother, I am always between north and south, so to speak; I don't even understand this notion of 'west'! The fact that Africa is now fully connected to the rest of the world has to be good though.

Othman Lazraq: Africa has always been seen as a single bloc and it should not be. Shows like *Africa Is No Island* demonstrate the incredible diversity within this continent. Most of the 54 countries in Africa share a colonial past, but that is about all we share; we have different tastes, different food and different music.

Ayana V. Jackson: Africa is also everywhere, and I take enormous offence that African art is categorised as being 'in fashion'; it's important to resist this idea, even the language is damaging. We have to consider the geopolitical implications of our words, as much as we do the implications of where we put our money. Art is not just about decoration, or providing a distraction for dilettantes who have nothing else to do with their time; there is something significant at work in the process of making art...

Othman Lazraq: ...yes, we really are at the beginning of something promising.

Africa Is No Island *is showing at MACAAL until 24 August 2018*

macaal.org

Many thanks to MACAAL, to the participants in the dialogue, and to Saskia Deliss and Loïs Bower for translation.