

Namsa Leuba

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FEBRUARY 26, 2016 6:30 AM

by CHIARA BARDELLI NONINO

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With two upcoming exhibitions in March (one at The Armory Show in New York and one in Fribourg) Namsa Leuba is one of the most interesting Swiss photographers out there, one capable of blurring the line between art, fashion and documentary and of questioning the clichés in which African culture is often associated with in Western countries. Born in Switzerland from a Guinean mother and a Swiss father, Namsa graduated with a Master in Art Direction at ECAL and has since then gained international recognition for her art. Here's our Q&A:

You often stated that “the focus of your work is researching African identity through Western eyes”.

Well, in my pictures I appropriate different codes and symbols from African and Western culture in order to start a dialogue with my origins. I try to reconcile in a form of cultural syncretism these two identities in permanent struggle and at the same time I question the ambiguity of ethnocentrism. I am also particularly interested the attribution of religious or mystical qualities to inanimate objects known as fetishes. The myths, the force of nature and the deep, intuitive, impulsive culture of Africa offered me a lot of creative inspiration. By recontextualize African elements and symbols through my lens I bring them into a framework of Western taste and aesthetic choices thus radically transforming them.



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Can you talk us about the impact on your work of Guinea's culture on one side and your Swiss upbringing on the other?

All I knew before my first photography trip to Guinea Conakry was that my mother was a Muslim and that my father was a Protestant – although I've not been baptized. I became very interested in the religious aspect of my mother's country. I re-discovered the animistic side to Guinean culture – I had already been exposed to the supernatural side of Guinea when I was a child: I visited <marabouts> (kinds of witches) when I was younger and this time around took part in many ceremonies and rituals. For me it was important to do this work, because now I feel more aware of this situation, the existence of a parallel world, the world of spirits and this has had an extensive influence to my work.

Your work seems to exist in that tiny border between reality and fiction.

When I started photographing in Guinea I did some documentary photography: I was living in the woods with a hunter taking photos of rituals. But even then it was to a certain degree staged photography, since the ceremonies that I photographed were done especially for me and in every statue there was a piece of my hair or my clothes. So my influence was in it quite unmistakably. So yes, I would say that I like to manipulate reality and I try to stay on the border of it.

Are you also inspired by political and social issues?

Sure. One of my early series was on The Black Panther movement. I was always inspired by people who have lived through struggle so I decided to stage a few moments from the Black Panther history in Switzerland using only Swiss-African models.



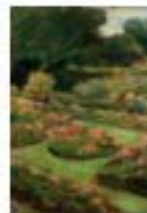
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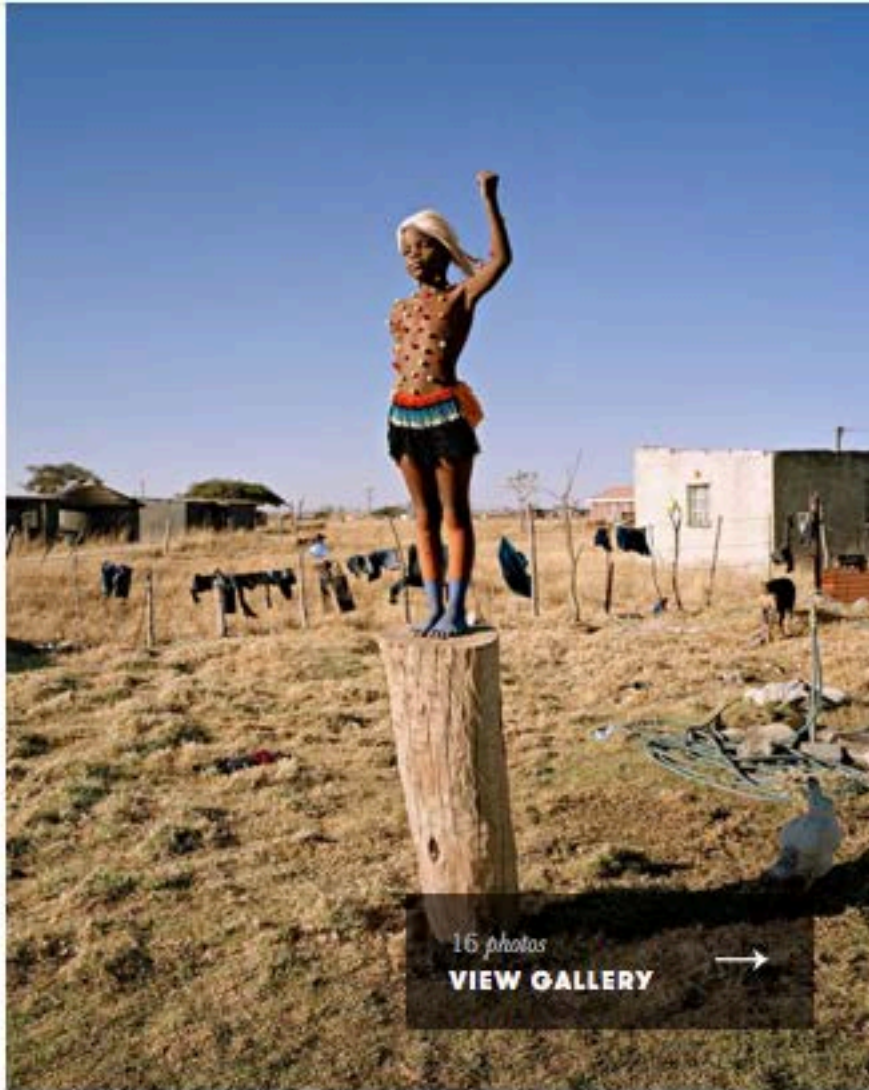


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Sometimes I used a lot of grain to make the photo look blurry. When you are looking at it, you could think that the picture was taken forty years ago. And that's not the only time a political issue became a main theme in my work: the series Zulu Kids, for example, was inspired by apartheid movement gesture.



What do you think about the representation of the African continent and identity in Western media?

The representation of Africa is changing slowly in a good way. We can already see that continent is going forward and in this context, my pictures give just another point of view on Africa.

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Which photographers you admire the most?

I think Stefan Burger is a great visual artist and photographer. <http://stefanburger.ch/>. And I love the work of Joana Choumali.

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Can you talk to me about your latest project *NGL*?

NGL, which will make its debut at The Armory Show, stands for “Next Generation Lagos” and with it I was trying to point to the innovation and creativity of Nigeria’s youth. As I also described it on my website, I produced NGL in 2015 during the artist residency with Art Twenty One in Lagos. I was inspired by the energy of the city of Lagos – its chaos, vibrancy, and determination and I translated this spirit into a unique visual language so I decided to collaborate with local fashion designers and models in Lagos – often times sourced from the street – to create a potpourri collection of clothes, props and accessories. I staged the photos in the studio and portrayed my subjects through a surrealist and psychedelic filter.

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How do you approach and develop your projects style-wise?

I have chosen to focus on the invisibility of the emotions that photographs can make me feel. I use my experience to visualize a photo and get full understanding of an image: all my photographs have been previously imagined in my mind and before shooting, in order not to waste time, I draw the picture I visualized. At the same time, the art of photography allows me to exteriorize my emotions and my past, telling my story through different shots.



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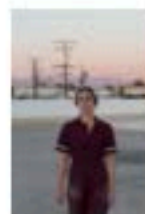
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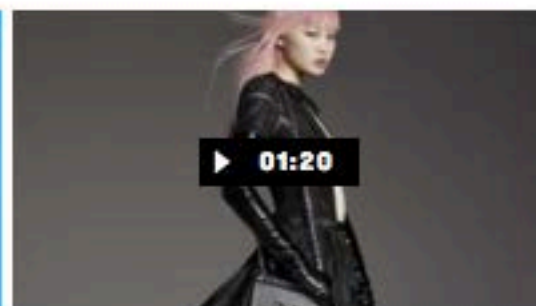


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