

TRANSGREXION

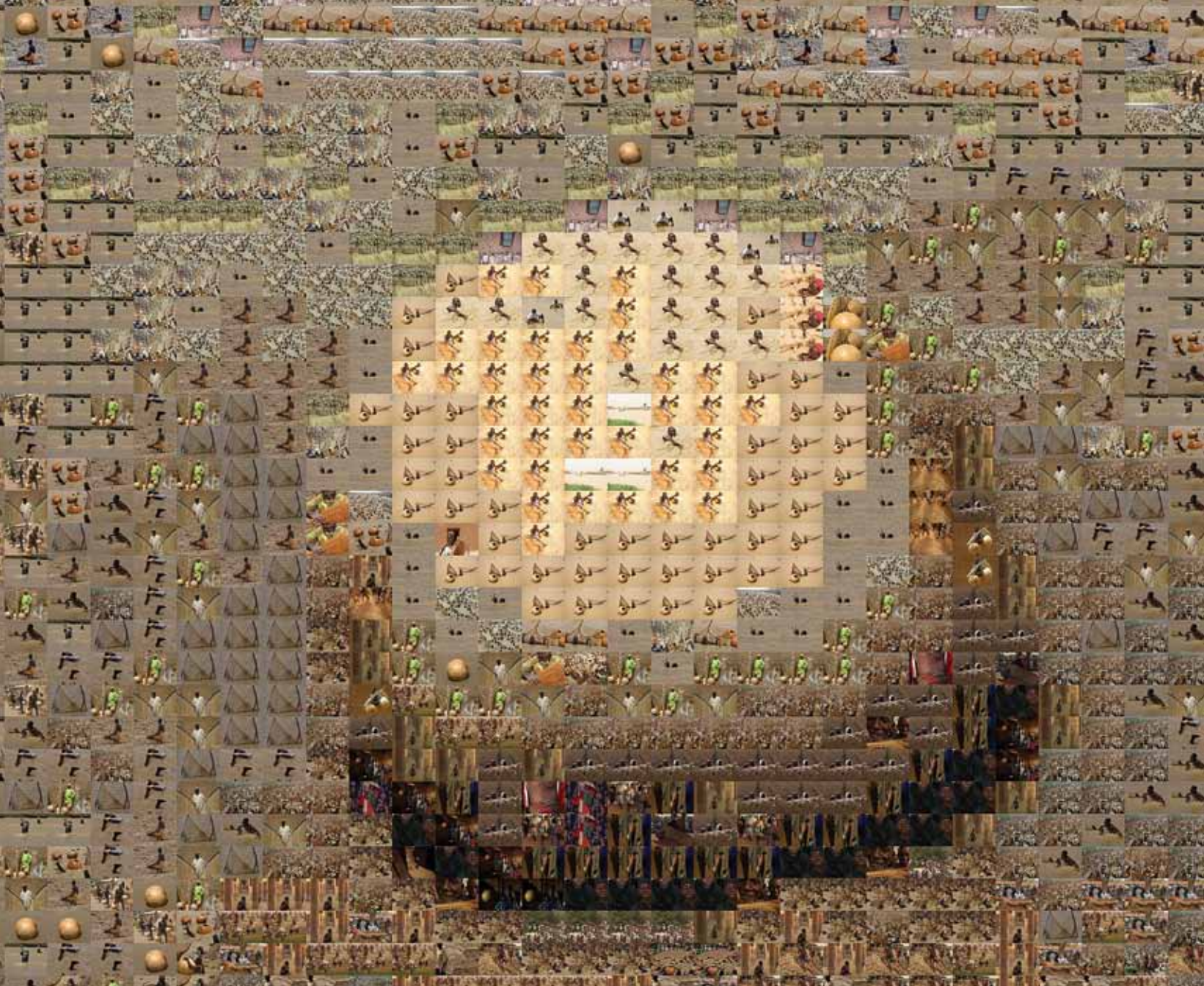
George Osodi

ARTHOUSE
THE SPACE

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Artist's Statement

TransgreXion is a small selection of photographs from only six of the numerous series in which I have worked: Nigeria, The Oil Rich Niger Delta, Lagos Uncelebrated, De Money, Calabar Paradise and Nigerian Monarchs.

Each one of these series has been a journey to engage with the viewer through a long process of research, hard work and patience. Over the years I have documented fascinating beauty, struggle and genius in my homeland's everyday life.

Crafting images that are simultaneously appealing, surprising and sometimes even shocking, I have aimed to open spaces for reflection about what Nigeria "used to be" and what it "could be". Photography is for me, therefore, a means to offer a critical lens into the vibrant and sometimes mysterious forces shaping the sociopolitical landscape of our continent.

George Osodi

Lagos, 2014

For George Osodi the Camera is the Event

*“Photographs do not simply render reality realistically. It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs.”*¹

Susan Sontag

The content of this exhibition is archival to the artist George Osodi as it is to our collective recall. The earliest photograph in this exhibition may have been taken about the year 2005. That span of time evidently may not have accumulated a depth of time to be considered as such that some pundits would demurely call attention to. We may then worry about my declaration regarding the archival nature of what this exhibition projects. It then becomes pertinent to quickly call attention to the works as documentary evidence taken at different times; as such they stand out as a worthy outcome of circumstances that merited the attention they received. The essence of a document as a pile of knowledge is usually to inform humanity – to wake our consciousness from shared poor memory. The camera is a handy tool that privileges such insightfulness. Since its invention some outlandish values have been ascribed to it; the foremost being that it is an invention that constructs reality as the mirror does. From the sensitivity of George Osodi’s hands and perceptual acuity, therefore, come this body of work that provide awareness into diverse dimensions that undergird Nigeria’s lived reality. I am intrigued with this collection, therefore, for its value as constructed knowledge. One of the earliest works here, entitled *Gembu* (2007), holds particular interest for me. The composition reenacts reminiscences in childhood dramatics. The word childhood here is used in a twofold sense. The first skirts a given infancy of our nation and the other relates to our childhood dispositions. Contrary to the hue and cry of agents of child protective rights, the child was a measure of wealth in traditional African societies. The child, as a farm hand in the days of yore, has become the hawkker of sundry goods today who helps families that can hardly make ends meet today cope with living. In *Gembu*, a cluster of children who are child-hawkers/labourers latch themselves onto a building facade made from wood. It would appear as if they are determined to pull down or dissolve through the wall of this building. Indeed they appear to have dissolved through it having perfectly latched onto it. What are they up to? The façade is part of a wall of a television viewing-centre constructed of wooden members. Some spectacle or

an exciting game of football is carrying on inside the enclosure and the children have become part of the spectacle through the openings on the wall of the enclosure, in its wooden fix. The wares they have gone out to hawk now constitute the foreground of the photograph, left alone in their trays at least temporally. Did you partake of this childhood experience even if you were not sent out to hawk some goods?

Gembu, thus, leads in the collection of enduring visual feasts that blend the past of our childhood memories and engagements of our status as a nation and a socio-political space. *Gembu* reconstructs *Egungu* where a wall of clay managing to hold on is written over with decay further complemented by three masqueraders. The masquerader as a tragic figure is in perpetual denial of its identity; I am not myself, no! I am a spirit! Mere transient being! And as all things in transformation the masquerade points always to an obscure destination to the future we look forward to. In a way the *Gembu* and *Egungu* walls become screens that facilitate a vision of the future and at the same time obscure it. In complementary propositions the children and the adult masqueraders confront these walls that are flimsy and in disrepair. Hence, as metaphors, we question if the walls can allow us into the future of our expectations.

Gembu and *Egungu* now, as metaphors, construct the residues of tradition as contained in *HRM Agbogidi*, which remains a traditional institution of note in Nigeria that still forges synergy between the people and the governed. *The Snake Charmer* and *Abuja* only highlight the tensions which tradition as transition – the gradual abandonment of the old for the new – implicates as reality. In these childhood settings in our consciousness, the audiences who watch have come to take some lessons home in the act of being entertained. *Gembu*’s street education may have been transferred to a formal classroom environment today. But being street-wise from engaging the streets from childhood in the past had its value.

This is to say that the individual gains enlightenment through conventional and unconventional means. The education of the child up to this day has never been limited to the school, religious space or the home. The gains of enlightenment from a past in transition to the present are what other titles in this exhibition open up to. They are diverse as they are contradictory. They privilege a certain irony of life. These are located in Calabar de Paradis in its utopian setting and *Carter Bridge* in its synthetic representation; and the failures presented in the dilemmas that confront Nigeria and its wealth from crude oil. These instances interrogate the expectations that past dreams held out for a failed hope in a glorious future. The failures in environmental stewardship and accompanying unpleasant consequences add up to this category of works. Osodi has been in the vanguard of documentary photographers advocating for environmental ethics and eco-aesthetics. Thus the titles that relate to multinational oil exploration companies and a socio-cultural complexity that is diabolic provides such concepts as *Oil Slick*, *Oil Theft*, *MEND*, *Black Market*, *De Money* and *Gas Flare*. The message they bear demand our collective action to stave the dangers they portend. Variously they capture the kernel of environmental irresponsibility. Yet as humans we ought to see ourselves as one with the environment. The images George Osodi puts together here, considering their archival nature, may be seen by some interests as contradictory. But they tell a story that emanates from Nigeria’s infancy to a point where she is marking a millennial milestone. The exhibition is entitled TransgreXion, and such title is bound to stir some curiosity. In examining this body of work, and as one who has always followed Osodi, one cannot but agree with Susan Sontag considering various misrepresentations of the camera in the past that “the camera has ended by effecting a tremendous promotion of the value of appearances. Appearances as the camera records them”². Hence the camera is the event. The enigma of the camera, as the unique object for the record of moments that would have dissolved with each fleeting moment, is the path to appreciate Osodi’s TransgreXion.

But what is the lure to capture opportunistic moments as these works here stand to testify?

Surely, if for no other consideration, can we underrate their worth as unique moments in time? And how they define our history? Sontag

reminds us again that the urge to record captivating moments and issues of delight is the primary oblige of the eye that is focused on the virtues of the camera lens. If it is not unique, if it will not ennoble, the photographer will never invest a modicum of desire on such a spectacle or vista. For this, Sontag reminds, and it is indeed enlightening, that when Fox Talbot patented the photograph in 1841 he used the name “calotype” derived from the Greek word for beautiful – kalos.³ As a consequence, it is believed that the drive that prompts a photograph to be taken is the beauty a photograph’s subject matter offers. But that which is beautiful is presented here invariably as the transgressive. Surely Osodi is not a transgressor. Osodi midwifes beauty. Rather the supposed beauties his camera has recorded remain signposts of societal truths with the confirmations and contradictions they present of reality. The opposing poles of reality, which the photograph provides, in eminent ways, provide instructions regarding who we are, what we have been and what we will be. This I think is the reason they have come to define the transgressive from multiple and multiform dimensions. This is why contemporary aesthetics sees beauty not in mere appearance but in the valued knowledge in each photograph as a symbol. Thus, where one comes to some knowledge from an artwork, what usually follows is the concept of power as accompanying gain; and just one more symbolic capital acquisition. Osodi thus has called on us to move from the realistic beauties he draws from his archives to the intrinsic message they carry within them.

Where we do, we will join Osodi in the journey towards the never-ending “transgreXion”. And this will accord us the privilege to become part of transmitting tradition into new translations; a linked chain that will always renew our past in the present as we look to the future.

Frank Ugiomoh, FSNA; FPACA; MAICA

*Professor of Art History and Theory,
University of Port Harcourt,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria*

(Endnotes)

¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

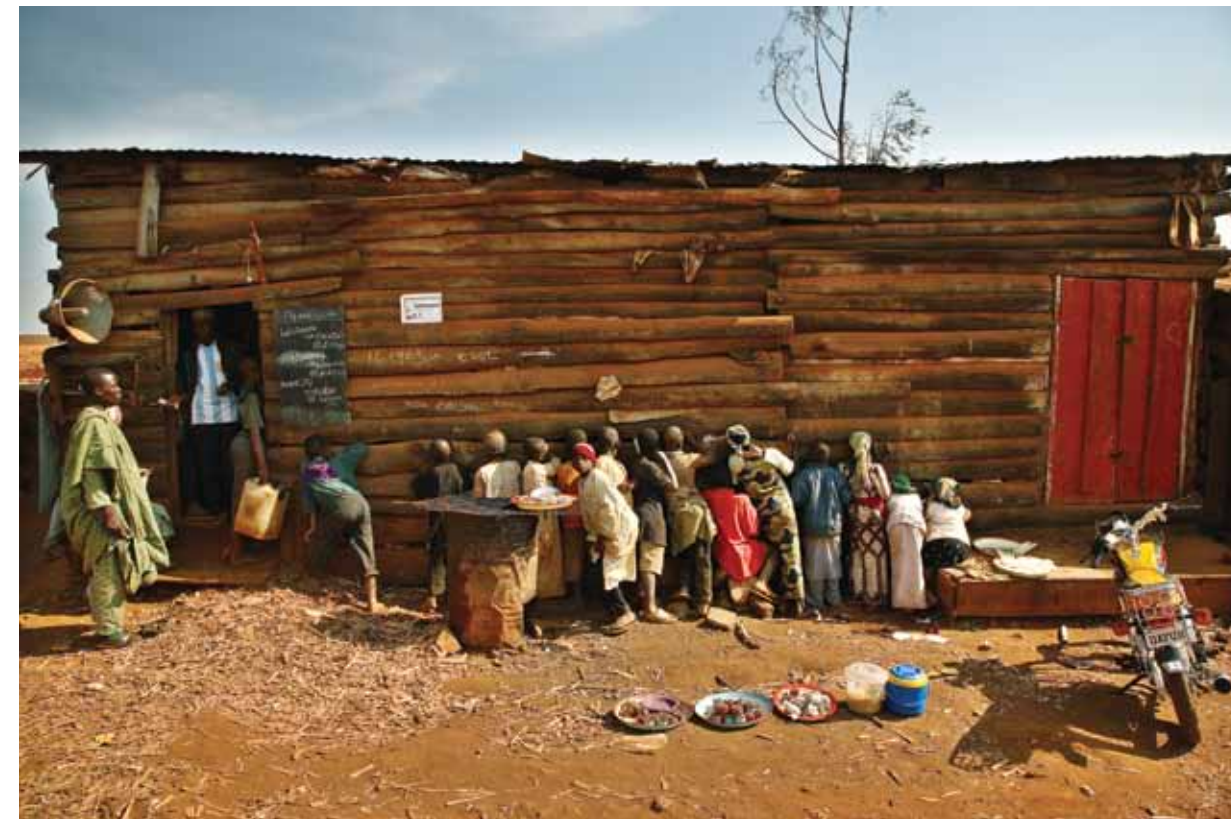
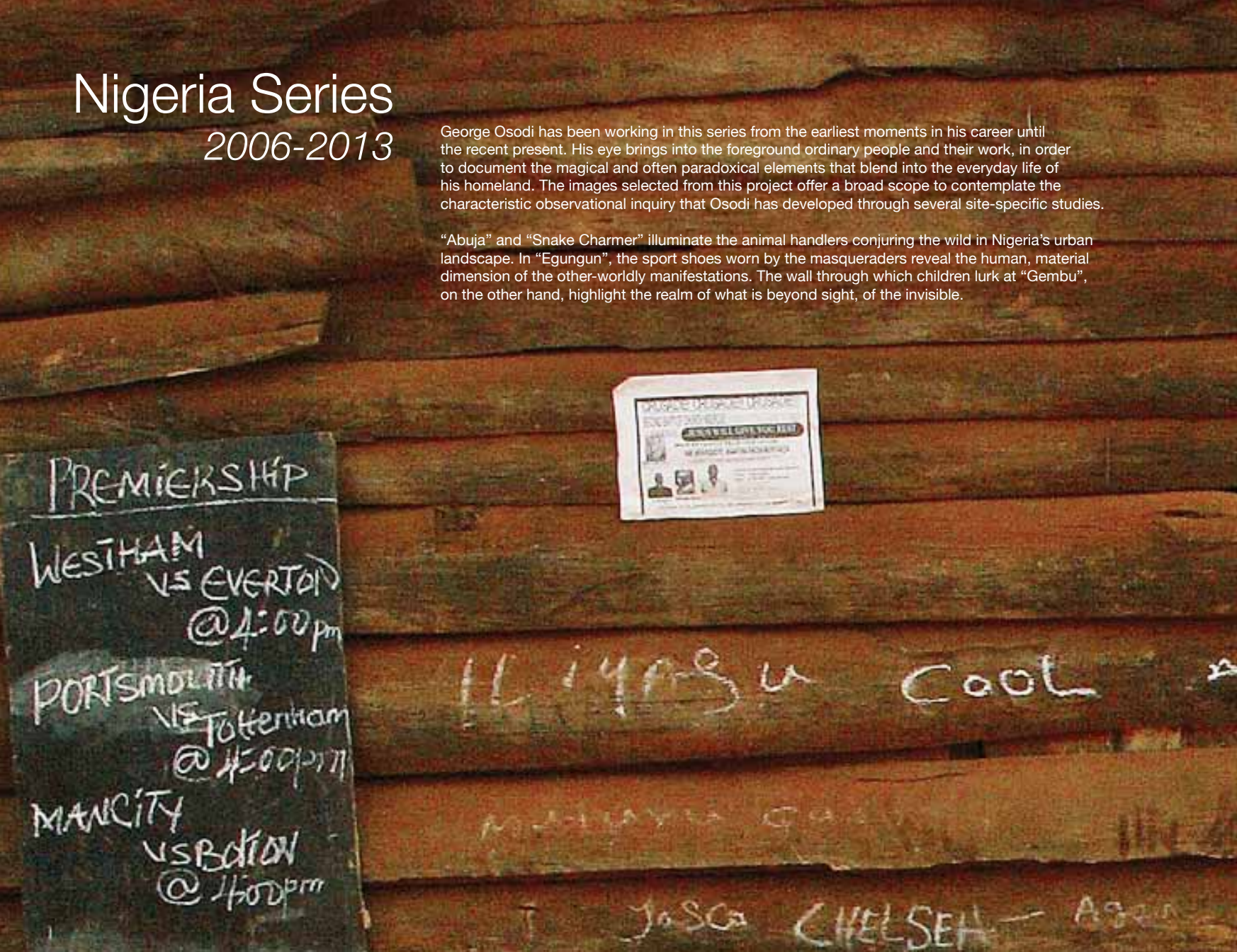
² *Ibid.*, p 87

³ *Ibid.*, p 85

Nigeria Series 2006-2013

George Osodi has been working in this series from the earliest moments in his career until the recent present. His eye brings into the foreground ordinary people and their work, in order to document the magical and often paradoxical elements that blend into the everyday life of his homeland. The images selected from this project offer a broad scope to contemplate the characteristic observational inquiry that Osodi has developed through several site-specific studies.

“Abuja” and “Snake Charmer” illuminate the animal handlers conjuring the wild in Nigeria’s urban landscape. In “Egungun”, the sport shoes worn by the masqueraders reveal the human, material dimension of the other-worldly manifestations. The wall through which children lurk at “Gembu”, on the other hand, highlight the realm of what is beyond sight, of the invisible.

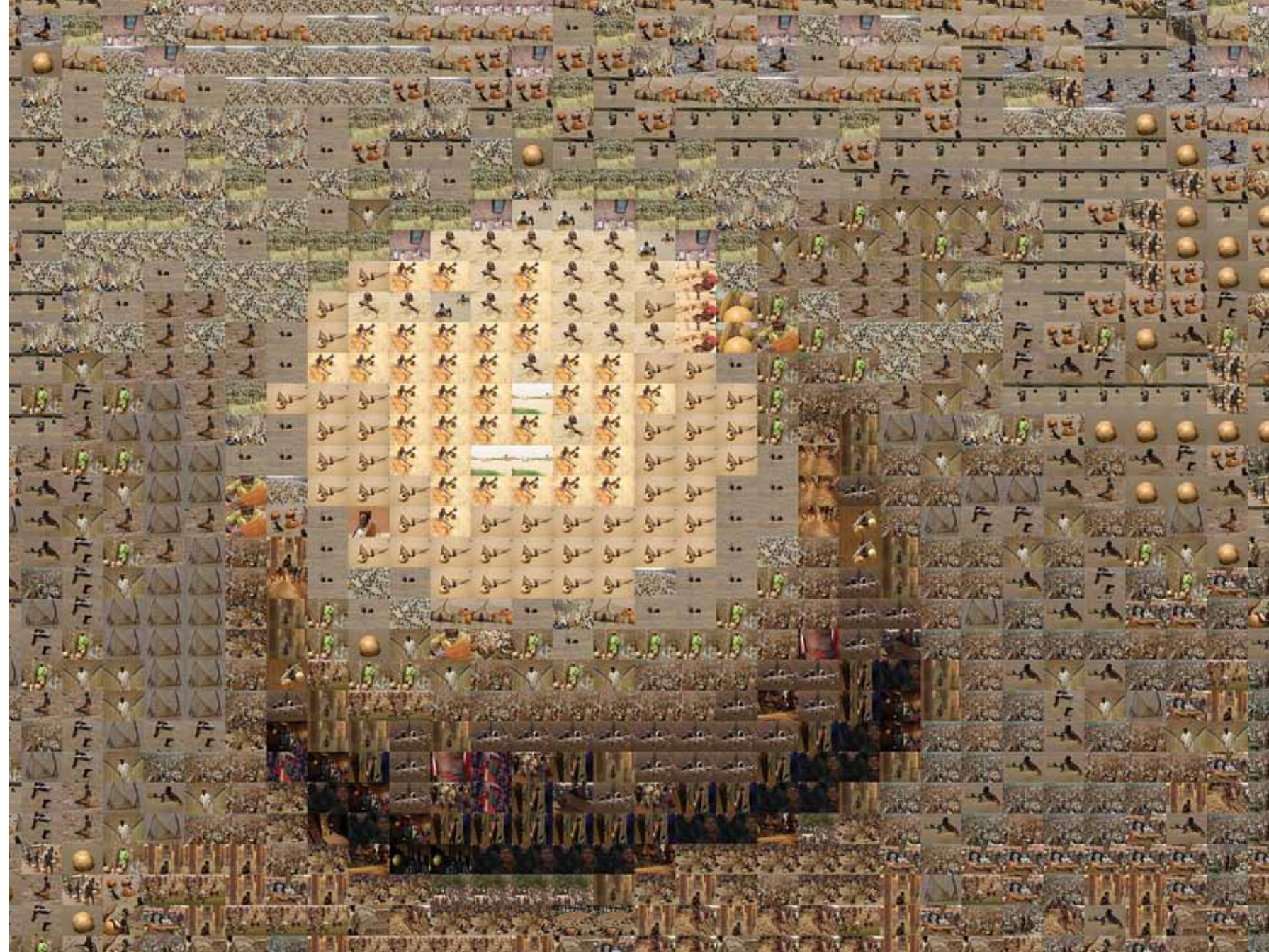


Gembu (2007)
80 cm x 120 cm



Snake Charmer (2007)
120 cm. x 80 cm

Fishing for Peace (2012)
120 cm x 180 cm





Abuja (2006)
80 cm. x 120 cm



Egungu (2012)
90 cm x 120 cm



Egungu II (2012)
120 cm x 90 cm

Oil Rich Niger Delta

2003-2013

Through his long-standing commitment to this series, Osodi is able to craft a story with images that awe, enamour and terrify. The series quickly positioned Osodi onto the international exhibition circuit. Their recent publication in the book *Delta Nigeria - the Rape of Paradise* (Trolley Books, 2011) further legitimizes the value of Osodi's work, not only as art, but also, as archive.



Mend (2006)
80 cm x 120 cm



Gas Flare (2006)
80 cm x 120 cm



Niger Boy (2006)
120 cm x 80 cm



Oil Slick (2013)
80 cm x 120 cm

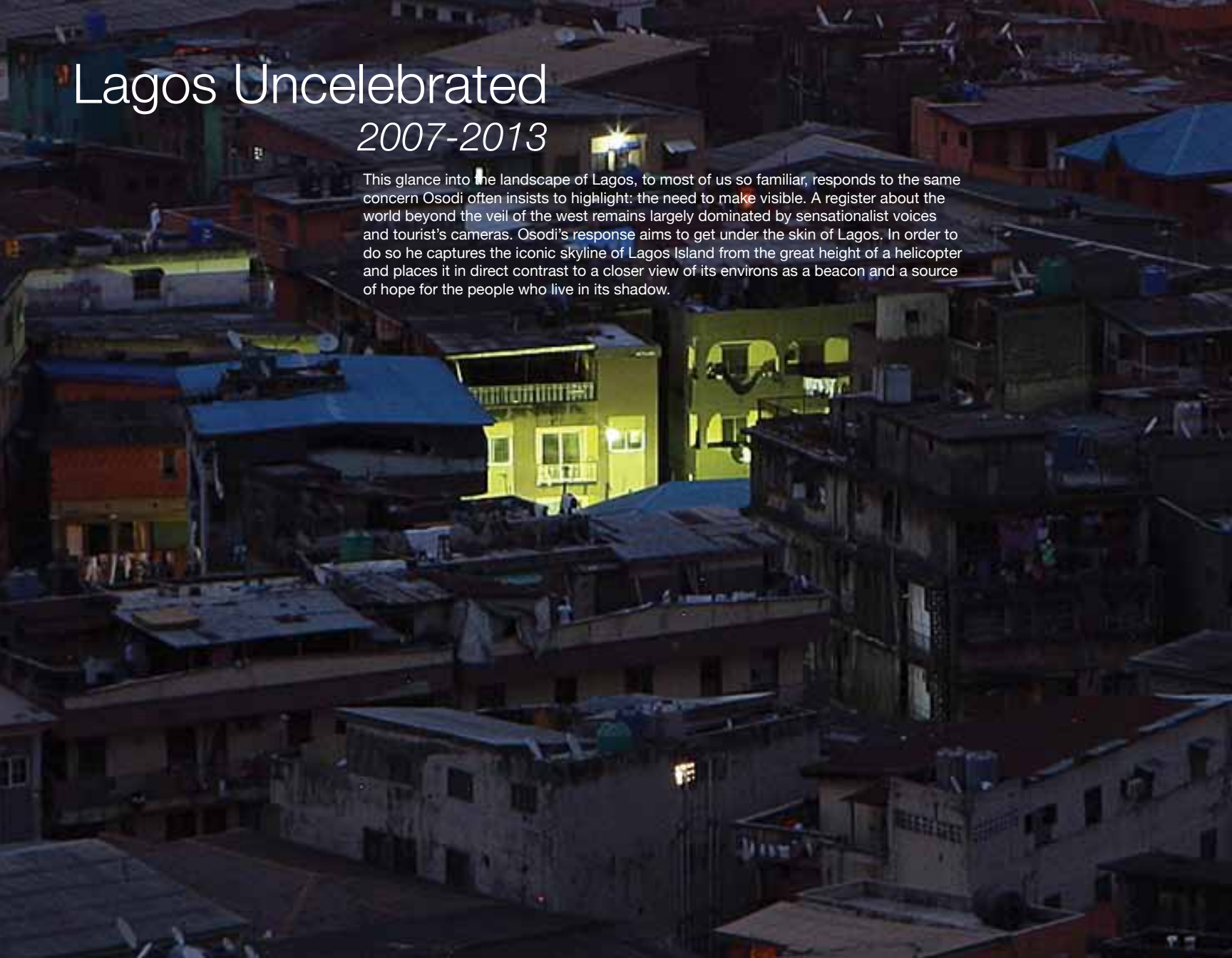


Oil Theft (2013)
120 cm x 180 cm

Lagos Uncelebrated

2007-2013

This glance into the landscape of Lagos, to most of us so familiar, responds to the same concern Osodi often insists to highlight: the need to make visible. A register about the world beyond the veil of the west remains largely dominated by sensationalist voices and tourist's cameras. Osodi's response aims to get under the skin of Lagos. In order to do so he captures the iconic skyline of Lagos Island from the great height of a helicopter and places it in direct contrast to a closer view of its environs as a beacon and a source of hope for the people who live in its shadow.



Kuramo (2012)
120 cm. x 80 cm

Lagos City (2012)
80 cm. x 120 cm



Lagos Lagoon (2007)
80 cm x 120 cm



Black Market (2007)
120 cm x 80 cm



Carter Bridge (2013)
120 cm x 180 cm



Trading Places (2013)
120 cm x 180 cm



Eyo Oniko (2009)
80 cm x 120 cm

De Money

2009

Curious about the impact of gold mining on ordinary Ghanaians, Osodi kept on hearing the expression “De Money, de Money” from the young subjects of his photographs. His puzzlement eased as soon as he realized that De Money refers to the sand in itself; the sand that eventually becomes gold, cash, life and so on. He portrays how Gold is the Bonny Light of Ghana. In this context, Osodi’s usual concern about the relationship between people and their nation also encompasses their relationship with the earth, leading to a tension through the idea that abundance and scarcity rest on opposite sides of the same coin.



above and below:

De Money Obuasi (2009)
80 cm x 120 cm

De Money II (2009)
80 cm x 120 cm

Calabar de Paradise 2011

The two images selected from this series come from Osodi's 2009 visit to Calabar's annual Carnival. His attention, however, is quickly drawn away from the festivities themselves to the quiet moments of preparation happening around them. Here he captures performers in full costume in portrait in front of colourful, oriental backdrops. What do these images from China present? The possibility of other worlds, of paradise?



Calabar De Paradise II (2011)
120 cm. x 80 cm



Calabar De Paradise I (2011)
120 cm. x 80 cm



Nigerian Monarchs

2011- ongoing

This small contribution from Osodi's eagerly anticipated project is a highlight of the brilliant ambitions that George has as an artist-archivist. The nature of the work behind this series suggest that for Osodi art is both a means to create and to document. His painstaking criss-crossing around Nigeria to take portraits and immortalise the nation's countless "Monarchs" when they grant him audience is testament to this. With this series he promises to open spaces that contemplate the future in light of the past, echoing the work that the portrait artists Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasekan began nearly one-hundred years ago.



from left to right:
 Obi James Anyasi II The Obi of Idumuje Unor (2012)
 2A, 120 cm. x 90 cm
 Obi James Anyasi II The Obi of Idumuje Unor (2012)
 120 cm. x 90 cm



Monarchs
 Mini Series



Monarchs
Mini Series (contd.)

PHOTOGRAPHER GEORGE OSODI

George Osodi, a freelance photographer from Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State, Nigeria. He studied Business Administration at the Yaba College of Technology in Lagos, before working as a photojournalist for the Comet Newspaper in Lagos from 2001- 2002. He joined the Associated Press News Agency in Lagos in 2002-2008. His photographs range between photojournalism, artistic documentary and industrial photography. He was chosen to be part of the prestigious Documenta 12 art fair in Kassel 2007.

Osodi has covered many assignments for both local and international media, with his photographs published in many international and local media such as the "New York Times," "Time Magazine," the "Guardian of London," "The Telegraph," "USA Today," the "International Herald Tribune," CNN, BBC Focus on Africa Magazine and many more.

George Osodi works in the collections of:

Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Neue Galerie 2008
Martin Marguiles Collection- Miami 2008
EMET- National Museum of Greece 2010
Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, 2010
ADF collection Paris 2011
Smithsonian 2012
Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs NY 2012
Middlebury Museum of Art, Vermont, 2012
Newark Museum 2013

Plus a large number of private collections.

Art Commissions:

IMAP Portait Commission, London Olympic Park 2012
"TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS" created for MAKE YOURSELF at HOME exhibition at KUNSTHAL CHARLOTTENBORG, Denmark 2010
"Oil N&N" created for HYPOCRISY -The Sitespecificity of Morality exhibition at THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, Oslo 2009

Solo exhibitions (Selection):

A CHILD OF INDEPENDENCE, NIMBUS ART CENTRE, Lagos, 2003
NIGER DELTA CHRONICLES IN LAGOS, NIMBUS ART CENTRE, Lagos, 2003
BEYOND OIL, LONDON RISING TIDE IN LONDON, London Rising Tide, 2004
LIVING THE HIGHLIFE, British Council, NIMBUS Art Centre, Lagos, 2004
LAGOS UNCELEBRATED, GOETHE INSTITUT LAGOS, 2007
OIL RICH NIGER DELTA, Haugesund, Norway 2008
PARADISE LOST, Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, CCA Lagos, 2008
GEORGE OSODI – Galerie Peter Hermann, Berlin 2009
DRIVERS DEXTERITY, AAF Lagos, Nigeria 2009
TOURING PROGRAM of Oil Rich N&N to art galleries in Norway 2010 and 2011

OIL RICH NIGER DELTA- RAW Material Company, Dakar, Senegal 2011
OIL RICH NIGER DELTA- Recontres de Bamako, Mali, 2011
OIL RICH NIGER DELTA – Liverpool Museum 2012- 2013
NIGERIA MONARCHS- Bermondsey Project 2013
NIGERIA MONARCHS - Pullman Hotel 2013

Group exhibitions (Selection):

LAGOS BOMB BLAST, MUSON CENTRE LAGOS, 2002
Lagos Stadtansichten, IFA, Berlin, GERMANY, 2004
NIGERIA OIL RICH NIGER DELTA, DOCUMENTA 12, KASSEL, GERMANY, 2007
BEYOND THE SURFACE, Cite du Livre, Aix-en-Provence France 2007
Lagos Art Intervention in Public Space , In God We Trust, Goethe-Institut, Nigeria 2008
PETRODOLLART, GALERIE MOTTE ET ROUART, PARIS 2008
FRAGILE DEMOCRACY, NORTHERN GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UK, 2008
AFRIKA I OSLO- National Museum of Contemporary Art , Oslo Norway Feb 2009
INTEMPERIES, Oca, Sao Paulo, Brazil , 2009
BIENAL DEL FIN DEL MUNDO Argentina 2009
SCIENCE OF 5 CONTINENTS, Gallery BMB Mumbai, India 2009
AFRICA FAST FORWARD, Belgium 2009
DELTA, Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria 2009
TEMPESTADE, Brazil 2009
RECONTRES de BAMAKO 2009
INCLEMENCIA DEL TEMPO, Uruguay 2010
ATOPIA -CCCC -Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona-2010
GEO- GRAPHICS - BOZAR, Belgium 2010
UNEVEN GEOGRAPHIES, NOTTINGHAM CONTEMPORARY, UK-2010
UNWETTER- Akademie Kunst- Berlin- 2010
INCLEMENCIA- Centre d'art le Lait, Albi, France – 2010
MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME- Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen 2010
HELLS HALF ACRE – LAZARIDES/ OLD VIC TUNNELS- LONDON 2010
POLITICS OF ART- 10th anniversary of EMET- ATHENS GREECE 2010
BREAKING NEWS- Contemporary Art from Africa and Middle East, Modena, Italy 2010
ENVIRONMENT AND OBJECT_PRESENT AFRICAN ART- Tang Museum Skidmore Collage, Saratoga Springs, NY, USA- 2011
NIGERIA, OUR NIGERIA, Presidential Inauguration exhibit, Abuja, Nigeria 2011
ENVIRONMENT AND OBJECT- PRESENT AFRICAN ART – VCUARTS- ANDERSON GALLERY – 20011, Virginia, USA- 2011
" GHANA GOLD- DE MONEY"- 6th CURITIBA BIENNIAL, Curitiba, Brazil – 2011
" Devils Dexterity " LAGOS PHOTO- 2011
"Oil Rich Niger Delta" DON'T / PANIC, Durban Art Centre, South Africa 2011
AFRICA: SEE U SEE ME, Travelling exhibition, US, Portugal, China, Italy, Nigeria, Senegal 2011-2012
THE ART OF DECLARATION, Lagos Uncelebrated, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 2011/2012
OIL - Hartware MedienKunstVerein (HMKV), Dortmund, Germany-2011-2012
ENVIRONMENT AND OBJECT- PRESENT AFRICAN ART Middlebury Art Museum, Vermont 2012
SHOE SHOP, " Black Streets" Goethe Institut, South Africa 2012 RAW MATERIAL Company @ NEW GALLERY, Paris, 2012

WE FACE FORWARD, Manchester Art Gallery – 2012
MUSEUM für VOLERKUNDE MÜNCHEN Zweigmuseum im Residenzschloss Oettingen
i. Bay. – Germany 2012/2013
ART of Photography – SAN DIEGO Art Institute- 2013
GHANA GOLD- Johann Jacobs Museum Zurich- 2013
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Prizes (Selection):

FIRST PRIZE, FUJI AFRICAN PHOTOJOURNALIST OF THE YEAR
2004 (Categories Features and Portfolio)
UN Award - Special Court for Sierra Leone,
(for pool photography of former Liberian president Charles Taylor's
first court trial) April 3, 2006
SONY WORLD PHOTOGRAPHY AWARDS- short listed TOP 10 in the Contemporary
Issues Category- De Money- Ghana Gold series-2010
ART of PHOTOGRAPHY Award – USA 2014

Talks:

Indiana University, USA 2012
Liverpool Museum, Liverpool, UK 2012
Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester , UK 2012
UNIVERSITY OF WALES, Newport, UK 2011
Recontres de Bamako, Bamako, Mali 2011
Tang Museum, Skidmore Collage, Saratoga Springs, New York US ,2011
SITAC – Symposium on Contemporary Art Theory, Mexico City, Mexico 2011
EMET, Athens , Greece, 2010
Borders-Imaged Imagined, Johannesburg, South Africa. 2010
Bodo, Norway 2010
Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK 2010
Forum Stadtpark Symposium , Graz, Austria 2009
Gallery Peter Hermann, Berlin, Germany 2009
National Museum of Contemporary Art , Oslo, Norway 2009
Nigerian Institute of Journalism, Lagos, Nigeria 2006
UNIVERSITY OF WALES Newport, UK 2005
Columbai University, New York, NY 2011

Solo Book:

" DELTA NIGERIA- The Rape of Paradise" George Osodi – Trolley Books 2012

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