



WHITE EBONY SKIN DEEP

YETUNDE
AYENI-BABAEKO





WHITE | EBONY

SKIN DEEP

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Curated by Sandra Mbanefo Obiago





May 25 - July 19, 2019





Foreword

We are delighted to be collaborating with SMO Contemporary Art and Temple Muse in support of a body of work that really speaks to a topic of great importance to Hogan Lovells, diversity.

As one of Nigeria's foremost female photographers, Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko's work with the Albino Foundation has led to a truly remarkable catalogue of photographs that make you stop, think and reflect on your perceptions and biases. It is a beautiful, thought provoking collection and we are pleased to be given the opportunity to be a part of it.

We hope you enjoy it as much as we do.

Andrew Skipper
Partner and Head of Africa Practice, Hogan Lovells
Board Member of Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C



Curatorial Foreword

Yetunde Ayeni-Babeko's art sits boldly at an intersection between creative expression and social justice. Her images are never easy. They take time to digest. There is an elegance and beauty, as well as a defiant clarity which emanates from each of her works. Her art has a stylistic purity which celebrates the human form, with both a sensitivity and boldness, that remains unforgettable. But beyond the power of her artistry, there is an urgent message for social change which gets stronger with each show.

White Ebony (Skin Deep) is the fourth exhibition I am curating for Yetunde Ayeni-Babeko. With each showcase, her ability to lure, entertain, shock and expose gets more poignant. From creating mystic portraits of women in outer-worldly resplendent landscapes, in *The Collectors' Series* in 2011, to juxta-positioning perfectly sculpted bodies of dancers against iconic Lagos landscapes and slums in her solo exhibition *Eko Moves* in 2015, to images about migration which included a black

and white portrait of a man whose head appears to be blasted into pieces in the *Wanderlust* group show in 2017, Ayeni-Babeko never stops ripping through the envelope of artistic expectations.

She is an artist increasing her expressive momentum fueled by years of problem solving in a dynamic environment, where infrastructure challenges keeps everyone thinking and creating outside the proverbial "box". Her training in advertising and fashion photography is evident across the spectrum of her work. She has become a master at manipulating studio lighting, placing her subjects within unique settings along with a careful selection of props and costuming, to present striking images with nuanced symbolism, rooted in her growing maturity as a sensitive artist and committed social activist.

Ayeni-Babeko is an exemplary artist. Her work rises out of a depth of conviction and research which shows a certain exactness and acute attention to detail which is

rare. Her mixed race heritage allows her to have more of an outsider's perspective in Africa and Europe, which gives her the freedom of comparison and fluid cultural referencing. The influence of her Germanic heritage steeped in precision, intertwined with her curiosity and Nigerian cultural "flow", provides a "Weltanschauung" which weaves a rich tapestry of north intertwined with south.

In *White Ebony (Skin Deep)*, we see a clear influence of European art with Ayeni-Babaeko's African reinterpretation of classics such as the *Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, which she interpreted in the work, *The Girl with a Blue Scarf*, alongside *Swinging Through Life*, the depiction of a young ballerina twirling through time and space, which was inspired by the impressionist *Ballerina paintings* by French painter Edgar Degas.

But artistic influence aside, *relationship* is a key driver in Ayeni-Babaeko's work.

Each image in *White Ebony (Skin Deep)* was inspired through intimate discussions over many months with members of the Albino Foundation, who spoke to her about the realities of living with albinism in Nigeria. Her photographs highlight these challenges, touching on stigmatization, self acceptance and actualization, community and family, relationships, depression, alienation and discrimination vis-à-vis the luminous beauty and essence of each individual she photographed.

While stylistic images of people with albinism have become more frequent in the art world, Ayeni-Babaeko's exploration of albinism starts from her personal experience of not "blending in" with Nigerian society. It is her empathy with her subjects that shines through each work, touching the viewer profoundly, and challenging us to take a moment to decipher the symbols and metaphors embedded within her work.

Over the past eight years I have seen

her creative expression take on a more painterly quality, in which background textures and lighting have lent her works a quieter, wiser interpretation and treatment. From the prideful stance of a woman surrounded by white ruffles in the signature *White Ebony* photograph, to the clustering of actual family groups in her *Mother and Daughter* series, to *Twins*, a photograph of two brothers nestled like “two peas in a pod”, holding each other’s heads with sibling compassion, one twin’s white skin a stark contrast to his brother’s deep brown skintone.

Ayeni-Babaeko reveals a deep love and closeness of community through her photographs in which siblings, spouses, daughters and mothers with albinism are embraced, within the safety of family, while fighting social pressures manifest by “severe forms of discrimination and violence... where albinism is shrouded in myth and dangerous erroneous beliefs,” according to the United Nations fact sheet on albinism.

Most of Ayeni-Babaeko’s subjects have their eyes closed or covered referencing a vulnerability to bright light and visual impairment common with people with albinism. But in closing their eyes, they observe us with defiance, accentuated with the brilliant costuming the artist has used to highlight their luminous pride against the dark background of society. Ayeni-Babaeko used both the process of in-depth-interviews and the luxurious feel of makeup, costuming and hairstyling to create a heightened feeling of celebration and beauty that is palpable within each frame.

The renaissance quality and style of her images, softens the punch of her more controversial zipper series, where a dark skin is being revealed under a white skin that is being unzipped, exposing new layers of self which society misunderstands and judges. In the *Protector*, we see the large figure of a dark skinned grandmother guardian angel watching over a mother

and daughter with albinism, who are sharing a joke, emitting so much emotion and joy, under the protective aura of the grandmother.

It is our prayer that the photographs in White Ebony (Skin Deep) arouse interest, curiosity, empathy and eventually inspire action, towards supporting persons living with albinism, and that this translates into donations towards the Albino Foundation's projects, which focus on healthcare, education, economic empowerment initiatives, legislation and advocacy.

A special thanks to Andrew Skipper and Abena Poku and the Hogan Lovells team, who have supported this project with great interest, and who sponsored the exhibition. Sincere thanks to all the members of the Albino Foundation who agreed to be photographed, as well as Jake Epelle, the visionary Founder and CEO of the foundation, for his leadership and for his commitment towards empowering persons with albinism.

As always our deep thanks goes to Avi and Kabir Wadhvani of Temple Muse for offering their platform for important social causes, and to my SMO team Nneoma, Moni and Majid, for working tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that this exhibition is a success. I am grateful to my family, Joe, Amara, Dante & Manuela who are my best supporters and who constantly encourage me to combine my development background with my current art focus.

Lastly my respect, admiration and thanks goes to Yetunde, who continues to use her gift to strengthen society by documenting the lives of those on the periphery of our communities, who need to be celebrated through her inspiring art.

Thank you and enjoy the show.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio
Curator



Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko

Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko was born in Enugu, Eastern Nigeria in 1978 to a Nigerian father and a German mother. She moved to Germany as a child and completed her high school diploma (Abitur) before embarking on a photography apprenticeship majoring in advertising photography at Studio Be in Greven, Germany. On completing her apprenticeship in 2003, she returned to Nigeria and joined Ess-Ay Studio for a 12 month photography program, facilitated by Invent, Germany. This experience spurred her to deepen her photographic skills by enrolling at Macromedia, a school for art and design in Osnabrueck, Germany.

Ayeni-Babaeko returned to Nigeria in 2005 and worked as free-lance photographer, before opening her own studio in 2007 (www.camara-studios.com). She has been active as a photographer with social conscience chronicling the life of modern Nigeria. Besides her fashion and documentary photography, Ayeni-Babaeko has facilitated numerous photography workshops in partnership with the Goethe Institute, mentoring young female photographers.



Artist Statement

The first time I saw a Person with Albinism (PWA) was in Nigeria. Maybe I had seen one in Europe before, but it was in Nigeria that I recognized a person with albinism for the first time. Among all the brown skinned people, their skin color stood out, and I couldn't help looking at them longer than necessary.

I immediately felt a kind of connection because here was a person, who like me, did not have the "right" skin color to blend in.

Through my work with persons with albinism I have learned a lot. I have learned that standing out because you are from a different country or have a mixed race heritage, is one thing. But being born and bred in a country where people with the same ethnicity and culture discriminate against you, is another.

Nigeria is home to the PWAs I photographed. Their families are Nigerian, and they speak, breathe and live the same culture, but

still they feel as if they are not accepted. Moving forward is hard, and leaving is not an option.

I have discovered that many people have actually never engaged with the topic of albinism. Through my art, I want to discuss the struggle of persons with albinism. I want to encourage the viewer to look deeper. The images with the zipper remind us that they are Africans to the core, hidden under a skin that simply lacks melanin.

My art is inspired by the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Due to their light color eyelashes and eyebrows, persons with albinism always remind me of the kings and queens in the paintings of the great Renaissance artists. I hope that through my lighting, composition and interpretation, we will open up new conversations, and recognize the beauty and importance of persons living with albinism.

Yetunde Ayeni-Babeko

In One Boat, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Mother with Daughters, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Protector, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Woman with Baby, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019





The Beautiful Ones Have Come Here To Stay

We live in a rapidly changing world - one that has evolved over centuries - yet retains at its core, tribal and social identities, with the idea of “otherness” central to the construction of majority and minority identities. These social identities reflect the way individuals and groups internalise established social categories leading to othering groups that do not “look like us”. The othering has been responsible for quite a number of ills in societies, whether it is the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the caste system in India and parts of Eastern Nigeria, the early modern witch hunts in Europe, killing of twins in some parts of Nigeria, or the ill-luck associated with albinism (or good luck, depending on which ritually depraved mind you ask), humans have over the years narrowly-mindedly defined those who qualify as full members of society.

While an overt negative response to these kinds of othering - ostracization being more common, and killings in

extreme cases - appear to have been abolished in civilised societies, one cannot deny *subtle* displays of group-based difference, racial profiling, for instance. The problem of the twenty first century is still the problem of othering. It is on one of such ‘differences’ that Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko, who is yet to shy away from where most tend to not look, chooses to focus her lens through the *White Ebony (Skin Deep)* project.

Due to misinformed myths and superstitions, Persons with Albinism (PWAs) have lived endangered lives, in various parts of Africa, most especially in places like Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa and Nigeria. Despite a far higher prevalence in these parts of Africa than in any other part of the world, albinism - a hereditary condition characterised by a lack of the pigment melanin, resulting in pale skin, light hair, pale eyes and impaired vision - is poorly understood in many African societies. It is commonplace for PWAs in many

such communities to be stigmatised and dehumanized, surrounded by superstitions, mocked, abandoned, faced with violence, and, in severe cases, killed. One of the hotbeds of this absurdity and misguided beliefs about albinism is Malawi. It is so prevalent that it is the headline of a recent BBC report about Malawi's current electioneering: *Malawi election: Albino killings, the president's fake death and five more things*. The news stated, "A UN report suggested that attacks and killings of people with albinism increase during election periods because of false beliefs that their body parts can bring good luck and political power when used in witchcraft related rituals".

The absurdity of many of these myths would be almost comical if the consequences on PWAs were not so dire – depending on the community, the bodies of PWAs have been said to possess magical powers, cure diseases, or deliver fortune. Facing all kinds of

exclusion beginning at the smallest familial unit and extending all the way up to the highest levels of society, PWAs have to learn early how to safely navigate spaces that the rest of society may not have to give thought to.

Specific areas of a PWA's life necessitate prime focus and special intervention requiring both governmental and societal involvement, including healthcare, advocacy and social awareness, social/political inclusion and education. For instance, long exposure to direct sunlight can cause damage to a PWA's skin. In what ways does the government take this into consideration when planning elections which are usually conducted for long hours under the sun, or planning school buildings without exposure to sunlight, or in providing primary healthcare that covers their specific needs? What about socio-political protection from various forms of societal abuse and discrimination? Yes, the country is

constantly faced with a plethora of challenges and the government is oftentimes overburdened, but turning a blind eye to the plight of an often marginalised group is akin to burying our head in the sand, as if by ignoring that a problem exists, it will magically disappear.

In a world that has produced PWA superstars like the reggae musician Yellowman, singer-songwriter Salif Keita, composer Hermeto Pascoal, fashion model and jazz musician Connie Chiu, supermodel Shaun Ross, amongst several others who have gone on to achieve profound success in spite of albinism, Ayeni-Babaeko's *White Ebony (Skin Deep)* speak volumes, both literally in the voluminous and elaborate nature of their making, and symbolically as a voice for thousands of nameless PWAs still being relegated and, in many cases, stigmatised. It is a call to action. We cannot provide solutions to problems we refuse to see. These images are first

an invitation to see and recognise – that PWAs exist in our society, that they walk among us, that they are a part of us – and perhaps, upon recognition, we can further the process of inclusivity.

In these striking photographs, the eloquence in composition and the masterly execution of making the images bridge contemporary art photography and classical studio portraiture. In two digitally manipulated photographs titled “See Me” and “Underneath” we see a male and female subject respectively unzipping, or more appropriately, peeling their albino skin to reveal a darker skin. Ayeni-Babaeko reveals her intention with these images: “PWAs are reminding you that they are Africans through and through, hidden under a skin that simply lacks melanin”. These two images take a more contemporary, albeit unsettling, approach to the feelings people with albinism tend to scream every day at the world around them. The elegance

of the models in “Umbrella” and “The Girl with a Blue Scarf” remind us of classy old portraiture style. Here Ayeni-Babaeko elevates her subjects above any prejudice and misconception the society may have about them and places them on a pedestal.

The importance of Ayeni-Babaeko's *White Ebony (Skin Deep)* cannot be overemphasized. This project is doing the all-too-important work of peeling off societal layers and forcing us to see what we would prefer to pretend isn't there. By presenting these images, the photographer compels us to find beauty beyond the conventional standards. This is not a freak show; it is a normalisation of the “other”, an integration of those who may not “look like us”. It is a vital work of equity and inclusion in a society that has perfected the not-so-subtle art of un-looking.

With *White Ebony (Skin Deep)*, the photographer has painted some of the

most beautiful pictures of PWAs you have ever seen with her camera. She has also sounded a clear message to society: people with albinism belong. A lack of melanin should not translate to a lack of compassion for these beautiful ones amongst us.

Victor Ehikamenor
Artist, Writer, Photographer

With White Ebony (Skin Deep), the photographer has painted some of the most beautiful pictures of PWAs you have ever seen, with her camera. She has also sounded a clear message to society: people with albinism belong. A lack of melanin should not translate to a lack of compassion for these beautiful ones amongst us.

Victor Ehikamenor

In The Dark, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Embracing It, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



The Girl With Blue Scarf, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



In Tune, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Nystagmus, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



The Truth, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Commitment, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



All Hands Needed, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Twins, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Us, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



White Ebony, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



In Conversation

Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko with Nneoma Ilogu & Sandra Mbanefo Obiogo

Nneoma A. Ilogu: Please tell us about how *White Ebony (Skin Deep)* was inspired.

Yetunde Ayeni-Babaeko: My decision to do this body of work was triggered by a phone call made by Mr. Jake Epelle, the founder of the Albino Foundation to my husband. He initially wanted an advertising campaign as a charity project. Due to my husband's hectic schedule at his agency, the project kept being postponed, until I found out about it. I suggested that since they were too busy to handle this ad campaign, they should hand it over to me because I've always been interested in persons living with albinism even though I didn't know much about them. I wanted to explore the issue through my work and the camera. My husband was happy I stepped in so I called Mr. Jake and pitched the idea of a photography exhibition instead of an advertising campaign, and he was thrilled with the idea. Him running the Albino Foundation made it easier for me to enter their world and meet them as a

group, especially since they hold regular meetings. I found them to be educated and enlightened. They were excited to work with me after they got to know me and my work and track record with projects like this. They were also happy to get the focus and attention. After building this body of work, I approached my favorite curator, Sandra, and the rest is history.

NAI: You said you've always been interested in albinism. What were some interesting facts you discovered during your research that you further explored with your photography?

YAB: To be honest, before I started engaging with the Albino Foundation, I didn't have a clear idea about the direction of this body of work. I saw persons with albinism on the street, and I knew they were sensitive to light exposure and that was about it. After I started working with them, I gained a lot more knowledge. What shocked me the most

was what persons with albinism can't do because of their genetic disposition. For instance I was surprised to learn that they find it difficult to vote.

NAI: Why is that?

YAB: Legally they are allowed to vote, but in Nigeria, the process of voting is not conducive because of the long queues and the long hours of standing in the sun. It's organizations like the Albino Foundation which have been fighting to change things. Starting last year, persons with albinism are being provided magnifying glasses at polling booths to help them read the ballots. Finding out this particular limitation was quite shocking. I also didn't know how difficult their lives can be. In many parts of Africa including Nigeria, a lot of people still believe that persons living with albinism have magic powers and so in the hinterlands especially, they are still used as sacrifice. They told me that even in Lagos, they are very careful about going out at night. They

also face educational disadvantages because they can't see what is written on distant chalkboards. They can read and understand concepts but they can't see what is written up on the board. Also employers often discriminate and tend not to hire them because they believe persons with albinism are sickly.

NAI: Did you find out any statistics such as the rates of people with albinism (PWA) born in Nigeria?

YAB: I don't know the numbers but it is something we should be able to look up. But even then, their numbers are under-represented because most of them are still hidden. The Albino Foundation is trying to get an accurate census of persons living with albinism in Nigeria to aid in passing of protective legislation.

NAI: You spoke about having access to the albinism community through the foundation but how did you select the people you photographed?



Was there any criteria or did you photograph every member you met?

YAB: I did it by releasing a casting call in their WhatsApp group which I had been added to for this project. I would let them know the date, time and venue of a shoot, and invited whoever was available and interested and they came. I made specific requests on the group chat, for instances when I wanted to show specific things like siblings or twins where one is an PWA and the other isn't, or babies with albinism.



NAI: Looking at the works, there are some recurring themes like the girls in the classroom that reminds me of a work from one of your previous exhibitions, 'Eko Moves' where you had the dancers in the classroom. How did you select your locations for this series?

YAB: I chose the classroom for instance and because the lack of access to education is an important recurring

issue in Nigeria. In 'Eko Moves', I photographed dancers in the classroom because we wanted to show that dancing is a form of education. With this White Ebony (Skin Deep) project, I wanted to highlight that education is a huge issue because they are often prevented from getting an education and that's why the classroom is a recurring symbol of education. All the other photos were taken in the studio because I photographed them in the renaissance style. I wanted all of my photos to have a painterly quality which requires very controlled lighting which I have in my studio.

NAI: Why the Renaissance?

YAB: When I started photographing them, their pale skin and white eyelashes and brows reminded me of the people in Renaissance paintings so I decided to just go along with it.

NAI: Could you pinpoint some of the



Understanding. Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019

works, and the themes or topics you wanted to communicate?

YAB: I had many conversations with members of the albinism community where we sat down and just talked. Their discussions were always centered around fitting into society and just like me, sometimes feeling out of place in a place because of how they look which is crazy. These are people that are even more Nigerian than I am, they are born and bred here with two Nigerian parents and speak the local languages and still they are on the fringes of society. So that feeling of displacement is what I'm exploring in my work. I asked them how they wanted to be portrayed and they were in agreement with my direction. When I had the idea to show them unzipping, they agreed that that's how they feel.

NAI: Did you face any challenges while photographing?

YAB: One challenge I guess was time. Doing this alongside my regular work has been a bit challenging. We finally started shooting last year October and here we are finally. They were very interested to work with me and loved the experience of being in the studio and being photographed. It was a novel experience for most of them.

NAI: Was there any problem with continuity with the models?

YAB: I definitely had that issue especially because they aren't professional models so some of them felt uncomfortable in front of the camera. I had to do the shoot with the child in the school twice. Also you know how it is at the beginning of a project, there's lots of energy and then normal life takes over and then gaps start increasing and towards the end, things pick up again and we try to catch up.

NAI: What would you say is your goal

for this exhibition and for the people who come to view it?

YAB: Enlightenment and a call for action. If you look at my previous exhibitions, they are usually collaborations with a cause. At the end of the day what I want is for my work and camera to facilitate something that will have lasting impact on the subjects I am shining a focus on.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiango: You are also trying to raise money for sunscreen.

YAB: Yes. Sunscreen is essential to persons living with albinism because of their sensitive skin. In Nigeria, we don't have a sunscreen culture and the ones which are available here are very expensive. They need sunscreen with an SPF factor of at least 50 which is expensive. I always ask people coming from overseas to bring bottles of sunscreen which I can give to the Albino Foundation.

NAI: What are your thoughts on using art for social change.

YAB: Art has to have a reason or a purpose. Because I'm also an advertising photographer, I do a lot of commercial photography which I enjoy, but I also want the work I do to stand for something. So I itch to do work that has a lasting impact and will mean something in the future.

NAI: When I saw your works the first thing that came to mind was colorism which is something that is very big globally. I watched a show called 'black-ish' where they dedicated an entire episode to colorism, addressing the challenges of different skin tones within the black community. A few months ago we had an American celebrity come to Nigeria to promote skin bleaching products. Looking at albinism through the lens of colorism, how do you think this body of work can contribute to that conversation?

YAB: We discussed this issue of bleaching

and they were so upset about it because they would love to have melanin so they won't be as prone to certain conditions like skin cancer. Seeing people voluntarily destroying their melanin with bleaching products is painful; this exhibition could also raise awareness on the dangers of skin bleaching. I also spoke to teenage girls with albinism who said they enjoyed the attention they got from men and that having a lighter colored skin was not all bad.

NAI: How do you see your growth in terms of working with causes over the years? Where would you like to go with this?

YAB: There's always room for growth. My last solo exhibition was four years ago. I like the long gap because it makes every exhibition special. I see the growth in people respecting my work. It's getting easier to get people on board for my projects while in the beginning I struggled a bit because no one knew me. I would like to go more international, especially

with this albinism discussion, which affects the entire African continent.

NAI: I know a lot of young photographers who are discontent with the way photography is perceived in Nigeria. What are your thoughts on the evolution of photography in Nigeria and what is your advice to young photographers in the industry?

YAB: When I came back to Nigeria in 2004, photography was something that roadside people did and parents didn't want their children pursuing it as a career. Since then, the industry has developed with some amazing professional photographers who really pushed for recognition and raised the bar. After about 2010/2012 the ones who jumped on the bandwagon for the money realized there wasn't that much to gain if you are not highly creative and real. So now I can see that there has been a decline in the industry so we are left with people who are really passionate. I've been



Girl With Blue Scarf, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019

seeing outstanding works produced by top-notch photographers and I love that. Going forward, I think these photographers will take photography to another level. Nikon and Canon have started investing in the photography industry in Nigeria. There is still so much more to be done when we consider the need to grow photography as an art form

NAI: I think photography is an important tool in projecting our narrative onto a global platform. Looking at the works of J.D. Ojeikere and the documentation of Nigerian hairstyles and his style of photographing our people, it was very telling of our culture. How do you think we can use photography to push our culture and narrative?

YAB: It is still all about branding. For example the way America brands itself is out of this world, for example the images they promote globally about their cultural sites, such as the Statue

of Liberty. I think we need to do the same thing using images, videos, and all media to promote our interesting sites, like Obudu Cattle Ranch, and culture while moving away from the current images of starving children and animals. Photographers are already doing a good job especially within our difficult environment. Working as a photographer, one often gets overwhelmed by yahoo boys and agberos who stop and harass you. We need measures which protect us while working and make our job easier.

SMO: What are your thoughts about the appropriation of culture. It is interesting that some of your works are referencing the European Renaissance. One of your photographs is of a girl with a blue scarf which looks like the painting of the girl with the pearl earring by Johannes Vermeer. On the other hand European modernists were inspired by African masks? What was your intention in referencing the Renaissance style?



The Truth, Photographic print on canvas,
24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Nystagmus, Photographic print on canvas,
24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019

YAB: When I first looked at the persons with albinism, they reminded me of people from the renaissance period so I just went along with it. On the other hand, like you said, there are a lot of Europeans who borrow from Africa. Now why can't we also borrow from them? For me it worked.

NAI: What are your favourite images in this body of work?

YAB: I think the ones with the zippers because they are making clear statements which are short but impactful conversations with the viewer. And the one with the girl lying down covering her eyes. I like it because you don't see her face but you can see her skin. Also the reality about their limited ability to see clearly comes through this image, vis-à-vis them not being seen for who they are by the outside world. The image also shows her frustration.

NAI: What inspired the style of the images?

YAB: That definitely had to do with my decision to give everything a renaissance style. Back in the day, the people who got painted by Da Vinci and the other famous artists were the elite and royals who could afford to pay for their commissions. I wanted the persons with albinism who I photographed to feel regal and special. I wanted to glorify them.

NAI: It comes across.

SMO: The image of the girl who is covering her eyes, gave me a sense of being underwater especially because her hair looks like it is floating upwards. It felt like a transition from one atmosphere to another. She almost looks like an apparition. Some of the other images also give a sense of spirit, of movement and the lightness of being. What inspired you to create such textures like the little



Swinging Through Life, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019



Protector, Photographic print on canvas, 24 x 36 in, Edition of 10, 2019

girl dancing in her tutu?

YAB: I was intentional because I read about how to achieve multiple exposures without editing which I was glad I was able to do. I didn't layer them, I just opened the shutter and let her dance and then flashed into the scene. I wanted to create a renaissance setting like the ballerinas by Edgar Degas.

SMO: That's exactly what it reminded me of. And what about the photograph of the guardian angel?

YAB: I wanted to portray a mother protecting her children from the sun.

SMO: What about the process of putting this body of work together, from costuming to production, set design and so on.

YAB: There were lots of cost implications to producing the images. I did most of the styling myself. I went to the market

to look for fabric and jewellery and other things I thought would add to the renaissance feel. I worked with a hairstylist and a makeup artist. As much as it improves the photography, it also helps for the models to go through that transformative process because it makes them feel special and relaxes them in front of the camera. I didn't put a lot of makeup on their faces especially around their eyes. I even got a bridal basket which could be worn and put fabric over it, so it looked like a ball gown.

NAI: Looking at the works I can see how they look like spirits, reminding me of what you said about people thinking they are magical; that comes across in the way you photograph them. There's something fairy-like about them. There also seems to be inner anguish portrayed in some of them like the man with the zipper as opposed to the girl with the zipper who appears more sad.

YAB: If you talk to them you will also get that sense especially with the men. They want to be men who can provide and have a family and everything everyone else has. But it's just so difficult for them to achieve. It's easier for the girls because they get attention from men. At the end of the day, they stick together because they understand each other and their struggles better.. I feel they should be out there mingling more with society.

SMO: There are a number of artists who have depicted persons with albinism from a very exotic point of view. How do you think your work is different?

YAB: It's easy to create a striking image with a person with albinism because of how unique they are. But these models were not just put in front of my camera for me to photograph them. I was able to really connect with them through long conversations about their daily struggles, sharing with me what their life is like and all this knowledge

translated into these images. The typical photographs one sees of persons with albinism is often more abstract to make it more pleasing and entertaining to the eye. My work is not there to make you feel good, its purpose is to trigger you to think and expand your knowledge.





Yetunde Ayeni Babaeko

Exhibitions

2017 Wanderlust, Group Exhibition focusing on migration, curated by SMO at the Wheatbaker, Lagos

2014 Eko Moves, Solo Exhibition, a collaborative dance project with The Society for the Performing Arts of Nigeria (SPAN), an adventure with professional dancers performing across the city of Lagos, curated by SMO at the Wheatbaker, Lagos

2014 Battle Scars, an exhibition celebrating breast cancer survivors, at the Goethe Institut, Lagos

2012 Itan, Solo Exhibition, interpreting Yoruba Mythology, at the Porsche Center, Lagos

2011 The Collectors Series, Group Exhibition, inaugural art exhibition curated by SMO at the Wheatbaker

2011 The X-Perspective, Goethe Institut, Lagos

2010 Reconstruction in Reverse, Omenka Gallery, Lagos

2009 A Perspective of Contemporary Nigerian Photography, Group Exhibition, Omenka Gallery, Lagos

2008 Body Landscapes, Goethe Institut, Lagos

Workshops

2018 GTB Days of Dorcas

2018 Business of Photography

2017 Fashola Foundation

Special Thanks

Models:

Rachel Adebisi
Uche Chisom Calister
Oduniyi Oluwayemisi
Omotola Beatrice
Onasanya Mojeed
Taiwo Olateju Moses
Kofoworola Komolafe
Igbojionu Esther
Jessica Hyacinth
Ewhero Efemena Oluwatosin
Onasanya Mariam
Adeoshina Grace
Humphrey Ugochukwu Azubuike
Adesanya Victoria
Celestina Enekhai
George Onyah
Mustapha Adedoyin
Ajisebioba Omowunmi
Alliayat Ayoola
Hamzat Kabirat Adeola
Ifain Abefe Banty
Precious Okorigwe
Oluwasina Lois Oluwaseyi
Ruth Princess

Jake Epelle
The Albino Foundaton
Shola Balogun
Willborn Igwilo
Funke Olotu
Hope Osiemete
Steve Babaeko
Louis, Lamar and Austin Babaeko





Established in 2006, The Albino Foundation (TAF) is principally an organisation set up and run by Persons living with Albinism (PWA). TAF is an independent nongovernmental organization registered in Nigeria with the Corporate Affairs Commission. We are a special focus organization advocating for the recognition, respect for the rights and socio-economic inclusion of people living with albinism. The Foundation works to create awareness about the social challenges that PWA face in Nigeria and the world by working with governments and development institutions in Programme areas that improve the health and social wellbeing of PWA in Nigeria as well as assist and empower them to find their rightful place in society. The Foundation has achieved national spread with 36 functional state chapters across the country including FCT, Abuja.

www.albinofoundation.org



Curator

Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio is a multi-faceted writer, photographer, poet, art collector & curator, and award winning filmmaker. She has curated art shows and worked with the local creative industry to promote the best of Nigerian art.

She ran the communications program in Sub-Saharan Africa for environmental group, WWF International for eight years before founding and running Communicating for Change, a media for development social enterprise in Nigeria for fourteen years. She is a social activist and her campaigns, films, radio programs and publications have touched on themes such as human rights, women's empowerment, health including HIV & AIDS, environment, democracy and good governance. She organized conferences, workshops, and symposia for Nigeria's growing film industry and helped develop a course on Media Enterprise at the Pan African University.

Obiagio produced and directed many films over the years, including a five-part documentary film series, Red Hot: Nigeria's Creative Industries, featuring artists from the film, music, performance and visual arts sectors. She was Associate Producer of the feature film, Half of A Yellow Sun, adapted from the award winning novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

She has been involved in many community initiatives and served as a trustee of the Convention on Business Integrity (CBI), was a member of the Advisory Council of the Nigerian National Film Institute and has served as a member of the jury of the Nigeria Media Merit Awards. Obiagio is a Fellow of the Aspen Institute's African Leadership Initiative for West Africa (ALIWA) and has served as Sunday School teacher since her teens. She received an M.A in Telecommunications from Michigan State University, and a Bachelor of Education degree in English and German from the University of Manitoba, in Canada. She is happily married with three children.





Having opened its doors in May 2008 Temple Muse is West Africa's leading luxury concept store focusing on designer home & giftware, fashion & accessories as well as art & design. Our strength not only lies in offering the very best of world-renowned brands, but also in nurturing homegrown talent from across the continent.

The iconic flagship store equipped with its very own champagne bar is located in the heart of Lagos and possesses a "gallery-like" open feel, where clients can relax & indulge in all things wonderful.

Over the years Temple Muse has developed a reputation as being one of the leading art spaces in Nigeria having hosted a number of critically acclaimed exhibitions, and through continuously offering its clients cutting edge contemporary art.

www.temple-muse.com





SMO Contemporary Art specializes in showcasing contemporary art in non-traditional exhibition spaces, focusing on established and emerging artists based in Africa and the Diaspora.

SMO priority areas include art curating, research and documentation, valuation, events, film and photography, training and artist talks. SMO has expertise in organizing exhibitions & events which provide a platform for the creative industry to inspire and strengthen humanity's aspiration for the good society.

www.smocontemporary.com

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