

Self-portraits of Africa's past

Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop is a prolific image-maker with one eye on history and the other on contemporary popular culture.

Posted [13 Feb 15](#) By [Kelly Berman](#)

When Senegalese photographer [Omar Victor Diop](#) quit the world of corporate communications, the art and fashion world gained a sensual and prolific image-maker with one eye on history and the other on contemporary popular culture. Diop will speak about his lavishly styled body of work as a presenter at Design Indaba Conference 2015.

Diop has photographed the collections of Selly Raby Kane (also speaking at Design Indaba Conference 2015), Elie Kuame and a host of other African fashion designers. His much-celebrated project "The Studio of Vanities" portrayed his fellow artists, designers and creative cohorts in Dakar and further afield – "a generation which endeavours to showcase the African urban universe and its blossoming art production and exchanges". Each subject is pictured in the studio against a highly patterned background in a style reminiscent of the great Malian photographer Seydou Keita, injected with a raw dynamism.

His "[re-]Mixing Hollywood (Onomollywood)" series with French-born American photographer Antoine Tempé comprises 20 photographs inspired by iconic moments of great American and French movies, with a cast featuring a representative sample of the cultural scene in Dakar and Abidjan, where these images were shot.

His "Project Diaspora" is a more personal search for identity and self-discovery in which he appears as the subject. Each photo is a recreation of a famous historic artwork depicting a figure from the African diaspora, many of them slaves or former slaves, seen through the eyes of a European artist. Diop slips a modern-day narrative into these restagings with references to the game of soccer, a world in which many African players have achieved recognition while still facing racism. He produced this body of work while on a residency in M à laga, Spain, where he had his own experience of cultural alienation. The soccer references, [says cultural curator Raquel Wilson](#), "show the duality of living a life of glory and recognition, while facing the challenges of being 'other'."

Here are eight of the photographs in this series:



“A Moroccan Man” (1913), left

This is a recreation of a portrait by Catalan painter Josep Tapiró i Baró, who travelled to North Africa a few times in the 1870s before settling in Tangier, Morocco. He was an “Orientalist”: a group of artists and writers who exoticised Middle Eastern, East Asian and South Asian cultures. His body of work mainly depicts the peoples of Tangier: their styles of dress, adornment and way of life.

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), right

Diop’s riff on an original engraving of freed African slave Olaudah Equiano shows him posing with a goalie’s glove. Known during his lifetime as Gustavas Vassa, he was a prominent figure in London whose activism helped end Britain’s slave trade.



Juan de Pareja (1606-1670), left

Here Diop reimagines Diego Velázquez's portrait of Spanish painter, Juan de Pareja, who was born in Antequera near Málaga. He was a slave who joined the household and workshop of the famous painter. Velázquez painted this portrait around the time he granted Pareja his freedom. He was of mixed heritage, possibly a descendant of the Moors.

Dom Nicolau (c 1830-1860), right

Nicolau, prince of Kongo, is believed to be the first African leader to have written publicly in protest of colonialism. Also known as Prince Nicolas, he published a letter in a Portuguese newspaper in Lisbon in which he criticised Portuguese commercial and political activity and military expansion in Africa. Although his exact birth date is uncertain, engravings made during his visit to Lisbon suggest he was between 15 and 20 years old at the time.



Albert Badin (1747/1750-1822), left

The original painting of this former slave by Gustaf Lundberg shows him posing with a chessboard – here replaced with a soccer ref’s whistle and red card. Originally named Couchi but known as Badin (meaning “trickster”), he was a servant in the Swedish court. He is believed to have been born either somewhere in Africa or on the Danish island Saint Croix.

Jean Baptiste Belley (1746-1805), right

Belley was born on the island of Gorée, Senegal, and taken as a slave to Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). There he bought his freedom and joined the colonial government. Anne-Louis Girodet’s painting “is more than a mere representation of a black man in French uniform,” writes Caroline Pelletier in the *Concordia Graduate Journal of Art History*. “At times it is praised as a celebration of the abolition of slavery, at others it is considered a prejudiced representation of a colonial subject whose French citizenship serves to subdue rather than liberate.”



Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (1701-1773), left

A Senegalese Muslim, Diallo's memoirs of his time as a slave in the U.S. and England were one of the first published first-person accounts of the slave trade. He was set free and returned to Senegal in 1734. >

Don Miguel de Castro (1643), right

The original portrait of de Castro was painted by Jaspas Beck or Albert Eckhout during his trip to the Netherlands. He was sent there by the ruler of Sonho, a province in Congo, to resolve an internal conflict in the region.

Design Indaba Conference 2015, which takes place from 25 to 27 February, is sold out but you can still book tickets for the [Simulcast in Joburg, PE, Potchefstroom, Durban and Cape Town.](#)

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Related Profile



[Omar Victor Diop](#)

This Senegalese photographer uses the medium to capture the diversity of modern African societies and lifestyles.

Omar Victor Diop was born in Dakar, Senegal, where he still lives. Finding quick success with early conceptual projects, in 2012 he was encouraged to end a career in corporate communications to further pursue life as an artist.

With a body of work that includes fine art, fashion and portrait photography – including the globally heralded *The Studio of Vanities*, a series of staged portraits showing the new faces of art and culture scenes in African urban centres – Diop enjoys mixing photography with other art forms and uses costume design, styling and creative writing to give life to inspiration.

He was nurtured in childhood by Afro-Caribbean literature chef-d’oeuvres, such as Maryse Condé and the characters in her novel *Ségou*, who transformed from lives of “aliens” to notable figures in society. Diop sees this as a reflection of his own journey, that has sometimes found him in tiny minorities seeking examples of adaptation to new contexts and ways of being. He imagines art as the only conversation that will never end and takes inspiration from people who redefine their preferred futures daily, believing it is the only way to truly be exceptional and leave a footprint of value for humankind.

Diop has exhibited in Dakar, Arles, Panama City, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Addis Ababa and Geneva.

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