

Omar Victor Diop: The newbie photographer who went pro

By Nick Parker and Daisy Carrington, for CNN

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14 photos:

Diop used to work in corporate communications, but gave up a lucrative career to pursue his passion.

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(CNN)It's hard to believe [Omar Victor Diop](#) wasn't always a visual artist. His photographs -- vibrant and surreal portraits that find influence in everything from [Hollywood to early Baroque art](#) -- have the sheen and polish of a true veteran.

Diop, who still lives in his hometown of Dakar, Senegal, originally worked in corporate communications, but gave up a lucrative career to pursue his passion.

"I was good at what I was doing, my career progressed very fast, but something was missing, and I think what was missing was a purpose," he recalls.

In 2010, he started experimenting on the side with street photography. When his first conceptual project, the futuristic "Fashion 2112," was selected the following year to be showcased at Bamako Encounters, Africa's premier photo exhibition, he was stunned.

"I submitted this portfolio and I forgot about it, then I received this email that I thought was spam, but actually said I was selected out of probably 500 candidates. That was the moment I said, 'this is what I want to do. How great would it be if this was my job?'"

Turn weaknesses into strengths

Diop says that far from being an obstacle, his inexperience in the field of photography has helped him:

"I think the fact that I'm not trained gives me freedom, as I'm still building my vision as a photographer."

Inspiration everywhere

Diop's work may seem to draw inspiration from a range of cultures, but this is all part of growing up in Dakar, he says.

"It is probably the most open country in Africa. Growing up... we would watch Michael Jackson, and local start, and (listen to) Arabic music. This (influenced) me a lot in the way I see the world."

Whether reimagining Hollywood scenes with African models or giving local portraiture a Baroque spin, this multinational influence is apparent in his work.

Recently, he collection of self-portraits inspired by 16th and 19th century portraits of African emigres showed at the 1:54 Contemporary Art Fair in New York.

"All of these characters had an incredible personal history, but nobody talks about them," he muses.

"I use myself as a prop to bring them back to life and invite them in the current conversation about the role of Africa and Africans in the whole human experience," he adds.

Advice for future generations

Though Diop was lucky that his work photography career took off shortly after he quit his job, he says that having a fall-back is a good idea.

"A leap of faith is nice, but it's even better when there's a mattress waiting for you down there," he says.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/05/arts/omar-victor-diop-photography-career/>