

Omar Victor Diop: 'I want to reinvent the heritage of African studio photography'

The Senegalese photographer impresses the Arles festival with his vivid metaphorical portraits of African historical figures

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Detail of *A Moroccan Man* (1913) by Omar Victor Diop is a portrait based on an original painting by José Tapiro y Baro, a Catalan painter and close friend of Marià Fortuny with whom he shared an interest in Orientalism.
Photograph: Courtesy the artist



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Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop's latest work, *Project Diaspora*, is a series of elaborately staged portraits of himself in various historical guises. These are based on actual paintings from the 15th to the 19th centuries, but also refer to the contemporary world, particularly the world of football. The series is on show at the Arles photography festival (until 20 Sep) where he has been shortlisted for the Discovery award.

How did the *Diaspora* series come about?

It started with me wanting to look at these historical black figures who did not fulfil the usual expectations of the African diaspora insofar as they were educated, stylish and confident, even if some of them were owned by white people and treated as the exotic other. Individuals such as Albert Badin, a Swedish court servant in the 18th century or Juan de Pareja, who was a member of Velázquez's household in the 17th century. I wanted to bring these rich historical characters into the current conversation about the African diaspora and contemporary issues around immigration, integration and acceptance.

And where does football fit into this conversation?

Soccer is an interesting global phenomenon that for me often reveals where society is in terms of race. When you look at the way that the African soccer royalty is perceived in Europe, there is a very interesting blend of glory, hero-worship and exclusion. Every so often, you get racist chants or banana skins thrown on the pitch and the whole illusion of integration is shattered in the most brutal way. It's that kind of paradox I am investigating in the work.

Would you describe the photographs as self-portraits?

I'm not that comfortable with that term, no. They are metaphorical portraits in which the idea of black identity is central. I enjoyed being the subject and the object of the photographs, but, no, they are not self-portraits in the traditional sense. Part of me wants to reinvent the great heritage of elaborate studio photography that we have in Africa - and which every other young African artist is reacting against.



Do the portraits reflect your own experience in any way?

Of course, but perhaps not in the expected way. I am a middle-class, well-travelled, professional black man from [Senegal](#). I grew up in Dakar so I had no village to go back to. My dad is a chartered accountant, my mother is a lawyer, all my brothers work in finance, so my family is a very corporate family. Until 2012, I was working in that world too, first as a consultant and then in investor relations. I am the first artist in my family. Even in the art world, though, as an African artist, you can be treated as the exotic other. I think all these definitions need to be redefined, but how do you redefine the notion of Africanness if you walk away from it? It has to be done from within. Those questions are all there in the work also.

How did you make the leap from finance into art?

It started with a camera I bought with one of my bonuses! I started shooting a series I called *The Future of Beauty* and a photographer friend encouraged me to submit it to the 2011 Bamako Biennale. To my disbelief, it was selected. I thought the email was a bad joke from a friend. Now, I am at Arles festival in the Discovery award... Good things happen to those who really wish for them.

📷 Jean-Baptiste Belley was a native of Senegal, born on the Island of Gorée and former slave from the French West Indies who bought his freedom with his savings. During the period of the French Revolution, he became a member of the National Convention and the Council of Five Hundred of France. Original painting by Girodet. Photograph: Omar Victor Diop /Courtesy of Magnin-A (Paris)



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