

PARADOX OF PARADISE

NII OBODAI

Christine Cibert (CC): Hello Nii Obodai, how are you and where are you from?

Nii Obodai (NO): I am fine, thank you. I grew up in England, Nigeria and have lived most of my life in Ghana. Since the last couple of years I'm spending more time in Maputo. My family lives here.

CC: So, you are a photographer. How did you become one?

NO: As a child, we had Polaroid and Kodak Instamatic cameras that I played with at home, but I didn't really know anything about photography till much later in life. About 25 years ago, a friend of mine gave me his old Ricoh, a Japanese camera and this set the ball rolling. I am self taught and found some of the best photographers in Ghana to learn from. I am forever in gratitude for the time and knowledge they shared with me. It was a beautiful period of my life. Because of this I'm still learning and love being a photographer.

CC: So how did you really get into photography?

NO: Before becoming a photographer, I worked in business and trading. Having up grown outside of Ghana, I faced the challenge of re-connecting with Ghanaian culture. My relationship with the camera grew as I enjoyed documenting my community of friends in Accra and traveling to discover Ghana. All of a sudden, I realized that I my social environment moved from business to creative friendships. My journalist friends were very instrumental, encouraging me to photograph current affairs and then I started also working for various commercial media businesses. I helped to establish a photo department for a start up newspaper and during that period, I had access to the lab and this was a great support to my photography? This how I became hooked. I started to see myself as an artist. Photography became the way for me to explore and express notions of contemporary and traditional, cultural identity.

CC: When and where do you start exhibiting?

NO: In 1997, I was invited by the US Information Service of the American Embassy in Accra (Ghana) to show with French photographer, Deborah Metsch, in the exhibition, Shadow and Act. That was very exciting to produce my first exhibition, printing my own photographs, etc. A year after, I was invited by Les Rencontres de Bamako where I met brilliant African photographers. That was a mind blowing experience. It caused a paradigm shift. For the first time I realized the power and importance of what photography is.

CC: But then, several episodes occurred...

NO: From then on I start getting published such as in *Revue Noire*, and my career working as a documentary photographer takes off. I created Nuku Café & Studio as space for exhibitions, concerts, restaurant, etc. After a few years of running it I burnt out and out of exhaustion, I crashed and needed to find myself again. In 2005 I became friends with French/Algerian photographer, Bruno Boudjelal. He really helped me to get back on my feet by inviting me to a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. This environment helped me to accept myself as an artist again. Bruno and I then collaborate to make a book called *Who knows tomorrow*.

CC: *Paradox of Paradise* is the title of your first exhibition in Mozambique, what does this title mean?

NO: It's a work in progress that is multidimensional and long term. I have been traveling and photographing in different spaces that include Ghana and Sao Tome and now Mozambique. I'm looking at our relationship with the landscape. The work is a question and its resulting photographs are not fixed answers. They act as starting points for more questions. How can I move beyond the mundane, the ordinary? Is there another truth to be told? For instance, Maputo is a very modern city and I look for places where I can find the juxtaposition with Nature. In the rural place I use storytelling to frame the image. For me the making of the photographs keep bringing up more questions...Is this what we see, what is? How can we read the landscape? Can we let go of what we think is real and maybe experience something new. Who are we in relationship to Nature and the spaces we inhabit?

CC: In this exhibition, there is also a part on Ghana. Can you tell us more about it?

NO: I do have a history and I am very keen to share it photographically. Bringing to Mozambique some of the journeys that I have done in Ghana. Using my some of my past work to give context to who I am and where I'm coming from as an artist.

CC: What would you say about the cultural scene of Maputo and its photographers?

NO: In 2008, I came to Maputo for the first time for a residency. We were about fifteen African photographers from various countries, showing our portfolios, have sessions with different African curators, such as Simon Njami, John Fleetwood, Bisi Silva or Akim Bodé. That was my first introduction into Mozambique and I really loved it. 10 years later, I'm back. And this time my

family lives here. I've started engaging with the culturally dynamic creative community of Maputo, especially with Mozambican photographers, including, Amilton Neves, Mario Macilau and Mauro Pinto. Mozambique has a very interesting photography culture and history to learn from. I'm studying the works of Ricardo Rangel and Kok Nam and seeking the works of more photographers who were instrumental in helping shape the independence vision. We definitely need more young photographers, to help generate radical thinking. We need to have people step out of their comfort zones and open up photography, like what's happening now in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. I would love to see more collaborations. Unfortunately, there's no real public support system to help photographers because the government doesn't feel it needs them as it used to during independence time, which is a shame. Photography is very relevant and Mozambique has a rich history. I'm very optimistic because the legacy is there and the photographers I know of, so far, are very determined and inspiring.

CC: Today, Africa is fashionable, in art, fashion, design, photography, etc. How do you see that?

NO: I don't think its Africa being fashionable. On one side, there's the market and politics of power and privilege that has historically defined Africa. On the other side, in these times, we are at the beginning of a new era driven by access to technology and we are taking responsibility for a self empowered creative vision. The world is waking up to a new and unstoppable phenomenon. I am optimistic because there are many artists breaking the boundaries of old concepts.

CC: Finally, what does it mean to be an African photographer or just to be African?

NO: I make photographs. I'm a photographer. I'm born of humanity.

Francis Nii Obodai Provençal is a photographer based in Accra (Ghana) and Maputo. His photography investigates aspects of the complex relationships within urban and rural culture, recording the dynamic reality of our spirituality and environment, telling stories of the people he connects with. He has exhibited widely including, Addis Foto Festival (Ethiopia), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (USA), Rencontres de Bamako (Mali), Alliance Française Accra (Ghana), Victoria and Albert Museum (UK), Moesegaard Museum (Denmark). Nii Obodai is a founding member of the Accra based, *Beyond Collective*. He has established *Nuku Studio*, which facilitates an annual workshop program to develop photographic knowledge, creativity, visual literacy and better communication skills for photographers. The studio also offers residencies and photographic project management support services.

Christine Cibert, curator.

Thanks: Centro Cultural Franco-Moçambicano & Marc Bréban, Lauriane Schulz, Ana Lúcia Cruz, Damien Capeau, Kioske Digital & Paulo Alexandre, Nino, Vasco, Piratas do Pau & Ab Oosterwaal, Matimba Consultoria & Said Abdel Massih, École Française Internationale de Maputo, Arianna Cepparo, Antonio Manhiça, Leonardo Banze, Alcideo Lucas Fumo, Amilton Neves, George, Ana Catarina Araújo, Gianmarco Romanelli, Milena Compagnucci, Mirella Irace & Vida Pura, Andrea Stultiens, Michel Le Pechoux, Jun, Maiko, Sara Piccoli, Sundiata.

For more information:

www.niiobodai.wordpress.com
christinecibert@gmail.com
Translation in french, see the page:

 **Nuku studio**

