

Africa State
of Mind

GUIDE & CAPTIONS

Information and commentary by
curator Ekow Eshun

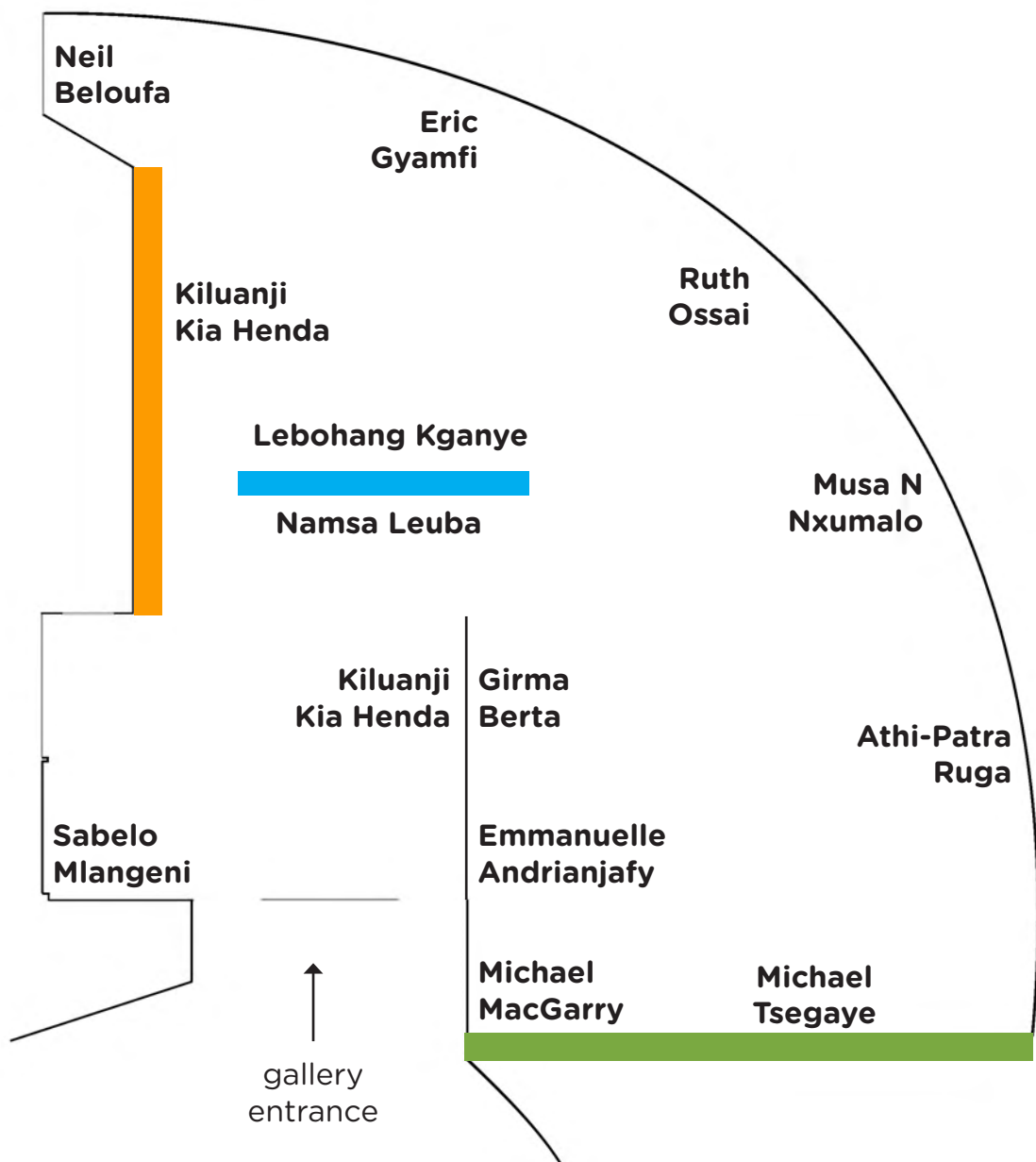
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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Africa State of Mind is presented in three sections, each exploring a different theme:

Zones of Freedom Inner Landscapes Hybrid Cities

Please feel free to take this guide along with you while you move around the gallery, and replace after use for the next visitor to enjoy.



un-doddo-free-for-zones

Zones of Freedom brings together artworks that explore questions of gender, sexuality and identity. Many of the photographers work within societies that have conservative views on sexuality, where queer and trans identities are seen as challenges to normality. Homosexuality is illegal in 34 out of Africa's 54 nations, and in Mauritania, Sudan, southern Somalia and northern Nigeria it is punishable by death.

Photographers including Athi-Patra Ruga, Ruth Ossai, Eric Gyamfi and Sabelo Mlangeni have a powerful dual role to play. Their work is both an expression of individual artistic practice, and an assertion of visibility where LGBT+ perspectives go unrepresented.

Athi-Patra Ruga's colourful scenes are populated with characters whose identities are in a state of transformation, suggesting gender as something fluid and performed, rather than fixed. Eric Gyamfi's portraits from urban Ghana, and Sabelo Mlangeni's photographs from rural South Africa, emphasise everyday expressions of love, desire and community. Their images reject the prejudice that queerness is fundamentally "un-African".



Country Girls series,
2003-2009

SABELO MLANGENI **(b. 1980, South Africa)**

Sabelo Mlangeni's *Country Girls* offers an intimate portrait of gay life in rural South Africa.

Mlangeni took photographs over a six year period from 2003 to 2009 in small towns in the eastern Mpumalanga province. In these locations gay lifestyles are often regarded contemptuously as un-African or un-Christian, and being gay means running the risk of verbal abuse or physical violence. Yet even in such unsympathetic settings, gay people have created space for themselves to work and love and build communities.

Mlangeni's photographs evidence an everyday world of intimacy and affection, humour and connection. They show gay people as vulnerable but visible. A community that demands to be seen on its own terms.

Zones of Freedom



SABELO MLANGENI

Individual captions

1 *Oupa Kuhlale, Wesselton Township, 2009*

2 *Bhansi and Madlisa dancing at the 60s party, 2003*

3 *Nkululeko and friend from Durba, 2003*

4 *Tony from Stanela and Bhuti from Bhetali visit eMlomo, 2009*

5 *Innocentia and Bigboy with friends from Caroline, Ermelo, 2009*

6 *Nyako and Lunga at Nomqghibelo's Tavern, Ermelo, 2009*

7 *Piet Retief, 2009*

8 *Mandla from Piet Retief at Miss Ten Years of Democracy, 2003*

9 *Vintage, 2009*

10 *Palisa, 2009*

11 *Madlisa, 2009*

12 *Xolani Ngayi, eStanela, 2009*



The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction (in 5 Acts), 2017

KILUANJI KIA HENDA (b.1979, Angola)

Kiluanji Kia Henda's series *The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction (in 5 Acts)* draws from a raft of literary and historical references to consider the European gaze on Africa and the myths and stories the continent tells about itself.

In particular, it critiques two persistent narratives about Africa: the colonial-era notion of Africa as a land of "noble savagery" as perpetuated by Europeans such as Joseph Conrad and his 1899 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, and the idea of Africa as a verdant paradise, as proclaimed by populist African politicians.

The central character in the work is based on the dandyish persona of Mobutu Sese Seko, former president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (1965-1997), who styled himself as a father to his people while robbing the country of its wealth. His death in the final image can be read as a cautionary lesson in the seduction of myths.



Video still from *Kempinski*,
2007
13 minutes 58 seconds

NEIL BELOUFA **(b. 1985, France)**

In Neïl Beloufa's film *Kempinski*, citizens of Bamako, Mali, describe their visions of the future.

Addressing the camera directly, they speak in the present tense as if what they imagine has already come into being. The world they describe is a fantastical place of talking cars, telepathic sex, travel at light speed and mobile houses that roam continents. For a while, as the speakers sit in darkness, illuminated only by handheld neon tubes, it seems that anything might be possible.

In centring the film on the citizens of Bamako, Beloufa's film proposes an inversion of international power relationships. Rather than being mere victim to the consequences of globalised change such as war, famine and environmental destruction, the people of the developing world here become authors of their future.



Just Like Us series, 2016

ERIC GYAMFI
(b. 1990, Ghana)

For Eric Gyamfi, the photographs in *Just Like Us* are part of an ever evolving record of the lives of his queer friends in Ghana, whom he considers collaborators in the work.

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Ghana and to counter prejudice against the country's LGBT+ community, Gyamfi aims to create images that normalise their presence within society.

Just Like Us seeks to represent queer people as both members of a distinct community and valuable contributors to the country's social fabric and history. Although the project uses sexuality as a starting point, Gyamfi's goal is to photograph queer people in the wholeness of their intersecting identities and interests. In the process, he seeks to expand the visual account of daily life for Ghana's LGBT+ community which exists outside, yet also inside and alongside, heteronormative society.



*Emmanuel Emenike,
Onitsha, Anambra state,
Nigeria*

RUTH OSSAI
(b. 1991, Nigeria)

“Fine boy no pimples” is a phrase commonly used in Nigeria to compliment young men on their appearance. In this series, Ruth Ossai uses the term as inspiration to push boundaries of gender and identity while photographing a selection of Nigerian youth made up of her cousins, extended family, friends and neighbours.

Produced in partnership with stylist Ibrahim Kamara, the series challenges expectations about what constitutes “womenswear” and “menswear” and what it means to be a boy or a man in Nigeria today. It seeks to prompt conversations about gender in a country where traditional sex roles remain largely fixed.

In creating the series, Ossai is also conscious of working within another African tradition of exuberant portraiture, as exemplified by the likes of J.D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere, Samuel Fosso and Malick Sidibé.

Zones of Freedom



RUTH OSSAI **Individual captions**

1 *Oyi Moses, Feburay , Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria*

2 *Chidiebere Ezugwu and Ifebuche Ezugwu Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria*

3 *Kingsley Ossai, Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria*

4 *Emmanuel Emenike, Onitsha, Anambra state, Nigeria*



Zones of Freedom

16 Shots series, 2016-2017

MUSA N NXUMALO
(b. 1986, South Africa)

Musa N Nxumalo's *16 Shots* series combines photographs from the violent, student-led protests of the #feesmustfall movement in 2016 with ecstatic dance scenes of urban nightlife and musical performances at clubs and parties in Johannesburg.

The series attempts to disrupt simplistic narratives about South African youth as either angry activists or frivolous slackers, proposing instead an intertwining of both viewpoints, with the party as a site of protest and vice versa.

The title *16 Shots* is also a reference to a song of the same name by the Chicago-born rapper, Vic Mensa; a tune that addresses police brutality in the United States. In referencing the song, Nxumalo suggests a transnational link between the struggles of young people in the USA and those of his South African peers in their confrontations with the police.

Zones of Freedom



MUSA N NXUMALO

Individual captions

1 *Wake up, kick ass and repeat!*, 2017

2 *Umhlaba*, 2017

3 *Isigxagxa I*, 2017

4 *Water*, 2017

5 *Are the fees gonna fall or nah?*, 2017

6 *Ghost II*, 2017



Night of the Long Knives
series, 2013

ATHI-PATRA RUGA
(b. 1984, South Africa)

Working in performance, photography and video, Athi-Patra Ruga's artistic approach combines myth, and alternate reality with a sly undercurrent of humour.

Ruga's world is populated with characters whose identities are in a constant state of transformation. The central figure in the *Night of the Long Knives* is drawn originally from his performance series *The Future White Women of Azania*. Engulfed in a cocoon of multi-coloured balloons, the character is in the midst of a racial and sexual metamorphosis, their identity suspended between black and white, male and female.

Here, the body has become the site to explore questions about South Africa's troubled history and present-day politics. Azania is a reference to pre-apartheid activists' dreams of building an African utopia free of white colonial presence. In Ruga's images, that goal remains very much in the realm of fantasy.

Inner Landscapes

Inner Landscapes offers personal and subjective visions of African identity, and questions popular ideas of Africa and 'Africanness'.

As a medium, photography has played a significant role in shaping external views of Africa. During the colonial period of the 19th century, Britain and other European countries invaded and controlled African nations. Photography was used extensively in a supposedly scientific way to survey Africa. This imagery presented Africans as the 'primitive' people of a 'dark continent', as a way of justifying European oppression. Today, contemporary Western news reports often portray Africa as a place of chaos, corruption and disease.

Curator Ekow Eshun says, "Such images gain their power by shrouding bias beneath a cloak of objectivity. By contrast the artworks in *Inner Landscapes* revels in their subjectivity. The work of Lebohang Kganye and Namsa Leuba embraces the particular, the personal and the idiosyncratic, in place of more stereotypical views of Africa".

Inner Landscapes



Weke series, 2018

NAMSA LEUBA (b. 1982, Switzerland)

Namsa Leuba's work delves into the politics of the gaze and its related notion of otherness. She revisits symbols of ancestral belief from a contemporary, Westernised perspective.

The *Weke* series was shot in the Republic of Benin. The work imagines narratives that are inspired by the local traditions of the vodun (voodoo) religion. Benin is the birthplace of voodoo, a belief system which predates many religions by over 10,000 years, and there are many groups in the country that keep its tradition alive.

Traveling across Benin, Leuba met with a number of different voodoo priests and participated in voodoo ceremonies in order to gain a better understanding of the religion's practices. Sourcing models from villages and towns in the area, she created her own costumes and props.

The result is not a documentary account of voodoo culture but a fictive portrayal that imagines new types of communities. While they are based on aspects of the local context, these images take on a new life of their own, rooted in fantasy.

Inner Landscapes



NAMSA LEUBA Individual captions

Flash I, Weke, Benin, 2018

- 1 *Lion*
- 2 *Mask*
- 3 *Elephant*



Flash II, Weke, Benin, 2018

- 4 *Voodoo Priest 'son*
- 5 *Monstera*
- 6 *Pink Hotel*
- 7 *Palm Tree*
- 8 *Voodoo Priest*



Ke Lefa Laka: Her-story series,
2013

Inner Landscapes

LEBOHANG KGANYE **(b. 1990, South Africa)**

Lebohang Kganye began to make the works in *Ke Lefa Laka: Her-story* after the death of her mother. With that loss came a desire by the photographer to explore the possibility of sustaining a connection with her mother.

Searching through her family's house, Kganye gathered together old clothes and photos and began inserting herself into the pictorial narrative of those family scenes. In these new images, Kganye wears her mother's clothes and mimicks her poses. These works became what she describes as "herour" histories, a way of marrying two memories, her mother's and her own, into one new form.

Kganye realised ultimately that she was scared she was beginning to forget what her mother looked like and sounded like, what her defining gestures were. The photomontages became a substitute for the for the fleeting nature of memory and a way to form a conversation that might be able to stretch across time.

Inner Landscapes



LEBOHANG KGANYE Individual captions

- 1 *Ka 2-phisi yaka e pinky II*
- 2 *Kwana Germiston bosiu I*
- 3 *Lenyalong la Thobi II*
- 4 *3-phisi yaka ya letlalo II*
- 5 *Re shapa setepe sa lenyalo I*
- 6 *Ke le motle ka bulumase le bodisi II*
- 7 *Re shapa setepe sa lenyalo II*
- 8 *Tshimong ka hara toropo II*
- 9 *Ka 2-phisi yaka e pinky I*



Hybrid Cities considers African cities as sites of rapid transformation. Three African cities — Lagos, Cairo and Kinshasa — are classed as “megacities”, each with a population of over 10 million. By 2030, it is estimated that the majority of Africans will be living in towns and cities rather than rural areas, for the first time in the continent’s history.

The artworks in *Hybrid Cities* document these changes, revealing both tensions and possibilities. Michael MacGarry’s video explores Kilamba Kiaxi, an entirely new city built in Angola by a Chinese construction company. Michael Tsegaye offers a tour of his home city of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. Emmanuelle Andrianjafy and Girma Berta use street photography in contrasting ways to show how people are developing new ways of living and working within the sprawl of the metropolis.

Curator Ekow Eshun says, “Against a backdrop of poor social provision and uncertain infrastructure, old traditions and hierarchies are collapsing. People organise their labour, housing and economic opportunities on their own terms, establishing communities that struggle or thrive even under pressure. Amid such rapid urbanisation, characterised by ceaseless flows of people, goods and capital, a state of permanent change reigns”.

Hybrid Cities



Future Memories series,
2007

MICHAEL TSEGAYE (b. 1977, Ethiopia)

Michael Tsegaye's *Future Memories* examines the nature of urban change in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the photographer is based.

Over the past decade an upsurge in new construction projects has altered - and to some extent damaged - the social fabric of the city. People who once lived in village-like environments, and in neighbourhoods that were a hive of activity, have now been relocated to anonymous apartment buildings. Many older people have lost their homes and livelihoods.

Future Memories is Tsegaye's attempt to capture what will - or already has - faded into the past. The series provides a visual tour through the Addis Ababa he knew and grew up in, excavating the histories and narratives encased within its physical form.

Hybrid Cities



Video still from *Excuse me, while I disappear*, 2014
19 minutes 11 seconds

MICHAEL MACGARRY (b. 1978, South Africa)

Michael MacGarry's practice as a visual artist and filmmaker is focused on researching narratives and histories of socio-economics and politics in Africa, principally in spaces where contemporary life is in a state of invention and flux.

Excuse Me While I Disappear was made in Kilamba Kiaxi, a new city built outside Luanda, Angola which is to be home to more than 250,000 people. It was built by a Chinese construction company for \$3.5 billion and is the single largest investment project by China in Africa.

The film's narrative follows a young municipal worker who lives by night in the old city centre of Luanda and works by day as a groundskeeper far away in Kilamba Kiaxi. Conceptually, the film is concerned with themes including African science-fiction and the visual mechanics of mid-century European ethnographic cinema.



Nothing's in Vain series,
2014-2016

EMMANUELLE ANDRIANJAFY
(b. 1983, Madagascar)

The origin of the *Nothing's in Vain* series lie in Emmanuelle Andrianjafy's relocation from Madagascar to Dakar, Senegal in 2011. A stranger to the city, Andrianjafy originally struggled to orient herself in a place of noise and crowds and seemingly constant construction projects.

As a way to familiarise herself with her new environment, she took to walking the streets with a camera, eventually amassing a kaleidoscopic body of images that reflected an outsider's fascination with the people and places and accidental beauty of a city in constant flux.

From snapshots of passers-by to the image of a monumental socialist realist-style statue of a man, woman and child rising from a parched and rock-strewn landscape, this is Dakar revealed in its splendour and contradiction.



Moving Shadows series,
2017

GIRMA BERTA
(b. 1990, Ethiopia)

In Girma Berta's *Moving Shadows* series, solitary figures are juxtaposed against vibrant backgrounds, creating images which exemplify the contrasting colours and personalities on the streets of his home town of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Berta describes the intention behind his work as a desire to capture "the beautiful, the ugly and all that is in between" in his city.

A self-taught photographer whose work fuses street photography with fine art, Berta's use of digital media to produce his artworks is itself a commentary on how online and mobile technologies are offering new routes to empowerment and expression for the young in Africa.

Africa State of Mind is a touring exhibition by New Art Exchange (NAE) Nottingham, curated by Ekow Eshun, in association with touring partner Impressions Gallery.

Ekow Eshun (born London, 1968) is a writer, broadcaster and curator. He is Chairman of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group, overseeing London's public art programme in Trafalgar Square, and Creative Director of Calvert 22 Foundation, a leading arts space dedicated to the contemporary culture of Eastern Europe. He was the Director of the ICA, London, from 2005–2010. Eshun's writing has appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *Granta*, *Vogue*, *New Statesman* and *Wired*. He is the author of *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in England and Africa*, nominated for the Orwell prize, and the editor of *Africa Modern: Creating the Contemporary Art of a Continent*. He appears on BBC Radio 4 shows *Saturday Review* and *Front Row* and has been a regular contributor to BBC 2's *Newsnight Review*.
www.ekoweshun.com

NAE is a contemporary arts space in Nottingham that celebrates the region's cultural richness. The largest gallery in the UK dedicated to culturally diverse contemporary visual arts, NAE's mission is to stimulate new perspectives on the value of diversity in art and society.
www.nae.org.uk

Impressions Gallery is a charity that helps people understand the world through photography. Established in 1972 as one of the first specialist photographic galleries in Europe, Impressions has grown to become one of the UK's leading independent venues for contemporary photography. We work with local communities and young people to make photography accessible to all through our events and learning programmes.
www.impressions-gallery.com

