

Francis Nii Obodai Provencal

RECENT WORK

Negotiating Space: Old Fadama

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsCaSJHils0>

An ongoing project that explores the existence and future of urban slums through the prism of Old Fadama, a community of over 80,000 people that borders the Korle Lagoon, right at the heart of Accra.

Built on waste accumulation on the banks of the Odaw River and Korle Lagoon, Old Fadama embodies some of the most pressing environmental challenges facing contemporary African cities with regard to water resource conservation and waste management. Old Fadama's domestic waste is discharged directly into the lagoon due to the lack of waste collection services. E-waste from the global north is also dumped on the margins of the lagoon, where local residents dismantle and burn old electronics to extract scrap metal. As catchment area of the Odaw River, Old Fadama is also an open air landfill for all the trash carried along by the Odaw River and its tributaries further upstream. This toxic neighborhood is now the most polluted habitat in the world.

Old Fadama is trapped in a constant process of negotiation between nature and urbanization, between who owns and uses space, between formal and informal activities, and between private and public entities. The backdrop of these negotiations is a long-running political stalemate between city authorities, land owners and slum residents over the community's right to exist.

As one of the collaborators in this project, Nii Obodai documented the daily lives and struggles in Old Fadama. His photos are an integral part of the video *Negotiating Space: Old Fadama*, which is collected by the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In the first phase of the project, Nii Obodai created a short photographic film, *The MisAlignment of a Polarized Black Star*, which reveals the uncertainty and chaos of slum dwelling as community members were evicted and their homes demolished.

The collaborators of this project hope to provide a catalyst for meaningful discourse among civil society organizations, community stakeholders, government agencies, concerned individuals and the broader global community on the environmental and social realities of poverty and unchecked urbanization. Their goal is to inspire action on the restoration and preservation of natural water systems and the positive inclusion of slum communities in the urban fabric of African cities.

Anomaly

Using portraiture to bring together all the people and friends who have inspired Nii Obodai with their spirit and creativity over the last 30 years. Many of them are Ghanaian and from Accra, and are themselves well-known for their unique and important contribution to Ghana's evolving culture.

All That Glitters (working title)

An ongoing project about Ghana's gold, and to a larger extent, about the relationship between people and land, between citizens and the state, and between Ghanaians and the rest of humanity. Through his photos of scarred landscape and rich, intricate characters, Nii Obodai rises above the mundane headlines of pollution and conflicts, humanizing a complex story about greed, redemption and the striving for existence. Nii Obodai has teamed up with Yiting Sun, Chinese writer and traveler, to co-create All That Glitters.

Who Knows Tomorrow

A journey that explores the legacy of independence in the contemporary culture of Ghana. As an artist, Nii Obodai's intention in this project is to create a poetic visual relationship among the land, the culture of Ghana and the question of being.

Who Knows Tomorrow is a collaboration between Nii Obodai and Bruno Boudjelal, a French-Algerian photographer. The book is dedicated to Nii Obodai's father, Henry Sonny Provencal, who had a close relationship with Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah. In producing this book, Nii Obodai was inspired by the conversation he had with his father about independence. It's a photographic examination of the country's enthralling urban and rural landscape.

Nii Obodai's contribution to *Who Knows Tomorrow* includes four photographic poems: *The Passing*, which is about the transient nature of our being; *Portraits as We Are*, a collection of photographs portraying the people Nii Obodai meets in his travels; *1966*, which looks at the visual traces of the overthrow of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah; *Galamse*, which is a panoramic view of illegal gold mining in Ghana, the mines are juxtaposed with photographic images of the furthest coastal village bordering Cote d'Ivoire.

Who Knows Tomorrow is published by Les Édition de l'Oeil, Paris.

Mentation

A three-minute black and white video that portrays the evolution of traditional boxing into Thai Kick Boxing. *Mentation* aims to reflect the intense energy and passion of a small group of dedicated athletes who train with focused discipline and relentless determination to transcend into becoming their best. The film was commissioned by Fondation Blachère.

Zetaheal

A story about a community of Muslims and Christians who worship together in Accra, celebrating their spirituality as one family, understanding that both religions share an ancestral heritage in Abraham. The photographs focus on the energies of the two religions when they celebrate each other in unity.

Heyvaert

A socio-spatial portrait in search of the identity of the neighborhood of Heyvaert in Brussels, Belgium, drawn from the stories of its residents, an exploration of the second-hand car trade that dominates the neighborhood, and archive material. Images and conversations were drawn together in the form of a single-edition neighborhood magazine, and were shown in an audio-visual installation during the 2012 Festival Kanal in Brussels in 2012.

Bani

A photographic study of the relationship between the mosques that surrounds a small village called Bani near the desert area of Burkina Faso and the broader landscape. The chief of Bani is an Islamic prophet; he brought together artisans from all over West Africa to build the mosques.

Liberation Of Soul

A work in progress of audio interviews, portraits and photographic travelogue of people and places Nii Obodai encounters, to explore their vision for the future.

Akotoku Boxing Academy

A photographic documentary about the oldest boxing club in Ghana that has produced world champions.

Nii Kwei's Day

A children's book about a seven-year-old Ghanaian boy, Nii Kwei, who lives in Accra. The book tells the story of his family and his school through photographs and easily understood text. The book was published by Frances Lincoln.

EXHIBITIONS

Another World, November 2005, Bamako, Mali
Who Knows Tomorrow, April 2009, Alliance Francaise, Accra, Ghana
invitation africaines, June 2009, Centre Atlantique de la Photographie, Brest, France
Africa: See You See Me, November 2010, Lisbon, Portugal
Ghana / Who Knows Tomorrow, The Dei Centre, November 2011, Accra Ghana
Identity Bluffs, February 2011, Stedlijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland
Africa.es, February 2011, AECID, Madrid, Spain
For A Sustainable World, November 2011, Bamako, Mali
Neither Black Nor White, Studio Kurtycz, November 2011, Accra, Ghana
We Face Forward, Whitworth Gallery, May 2012, Manchester, U.K.
Chobi Mela, January 2013, Dhaka, Bangladesh
beyond, October 2013, Accra, Ghana

ARTISTIC RESIDENCIES

The Cité Internationale des Arts, 2005, Paris
Clark Bursary, Watershed, 2007, Bristol

WORKSHOPS

50 years Ghana Independence, March 2007, Accra, Ghana
Borders, March 2009, Accra, Ghana

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Born in Accra, Ghana and has lived in England, Nigeria and Ghana, Nii Obodai is at ease with the vast and diverse world of his continent. His work mainly explores his expansive relationship with urban and rural culture, not with a detached eye, but with an artist's passion for conscious expression of self-discovery, and a love of the stories that abound in his world.

Nii Obodai's photographic play is a conduit into a vibrant space. In his travels he discovers and explores the visual essence of Farafina (meaning: land of the black skin in Bambara language). Here we merge into the zone between tradition, improvisation and modernity. We begin to feel the spirit of Farafina, with its adeptness where religions come together, traditions remain in contemporary living, faces of the diaspora return home and spiritual stories are told, from within a landscape of beauty. Nii Obodai is unafraid to challenge the common catch cries of what is accepted to be Africa and African - war, corruption, helplessness, emptiness. We share his positive awareness of the daily lives of millions of ordinary people across the continent. Through his images, the Farafina is living poetry.

Driven by the need to communicate better visually, using what is available to him in terms of ideas, resources and ethnicity, his creative vision is nourished by exchange and through learning processes that have to come from within oneself. He works to pass on as much of his knowledge to the younger generation through personal interaction and workshops.

Nii Obodai is based in Ghana where he works and lives. In 1998, he established Nuku Café in Accra, a vibrant space for contemporary artists to exhibit their art and meet the people interested

in engaging with their passion in a social and supportive environment. Nii Obodai now enjoys facilitating inspirational workshops on photography and continues to travel, exploring and recording the vibrant essence of life. He has exhibited in Accra, Paris, Bristol, Den Haag, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Madrid, Florence, Bamako.