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Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou (Porto-Novo, Benin, 1965)
Untitled from the series *Les Demoiselles de Porto-Novo*
2012
Photograph, chromogenic colour print
Edition of 5 + 2 artist's proofs
Artist's proof 1/2
Triptych, 150 x 100 cm for each print
FGA-ACAD-AGBOD-0001

Provenance

Piasa, Paris, 14 November 2018, lot no. 144

Citizens of Porto-Novo is a long-term project by Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou, a well-known photographer from the Beninese capital. It was here that he learnt his trade, by assisting his father, photographer Joseph Moïse Agbodjélou (1912–2000),¹ from an early age. This project has allowed him to explore the contours of a city vacillating “between tradition and progress”² and to observe its inhabitants closely. Intimacy and frontality are undoubtedly the two qualifiers that best describe the series *Les Demoiselles de Porto-Novo* [The Young Ladies of Porto-Novo], to which this untitled triptych from the Fondation Gandur belongs.

¹ GORE, Charles, “Artist interview. Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou”, *African Arts*, vol. 48, no.3, 2015; the artist's file on the website of the magazine *Revue Noire* on the other hand, gives the date 1999 for the artist's death. See *Joseph Agbodjélou*, note [*Revue Noire* [online] available at: <https://www.revuenoire.com/joseph-agbojelou/>] (consulted on 28.01.2021).

² *Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou*, note [Zeitz Mocaa [online], available at: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/leonce-raphael-agbodjelo/>] (consulted on 13.01.2021).



*From the photograph of a historic residence to the painting of a philosophical brothel*³

The intimate character of this triptych comes less so from the nudity of the central figure, with her bust exposed and her face hidden by a mask coming from voodoo fetish markets, than from the space in which this scene takes place. The images were shot in the artist's family home in Porto-Novo, erected by his grandfather and built in a colonial style by Afro-Brazilian workers returning to Benin in 1890.⁴ The work is frontal in more ways than one: firstly, by its dimensions, which position the viewer in front of a life-size body, but also by the angle of the shot which tends towards an alleged objectivity.

In this work, Agbodjélou confronts us with objects of personal memory: in the right-hand image of the triptych, like a *mise en abyme*, we see the photograph of a man—perhaps an ancestor?—placed against a large mirror with a gilded frame that dominates the room's furnishings. The tilted mirror, a device or technique frequently used in photography, and a tip passed down from one generation to the next, bears witness to a certain sense of staging. In the central image, the name Samuel Biléou Joseph Oschoffa and his portrait can be seen on a poster. It serves as a calendar and also features the photograph of Reverend Pastor Benoit D. Agbaossi, his successor at the head of the Church of Celestial Christianity, which today counts thousands of followers in Benin. A bare nail on the wall suggests that the mask worn by the model has just been taken down, keeping her identity a secret. Finally, the last photograph that makes up the left part of the triptych shows a television set and some old furniture, made from a dark-coloured wood whose sculpted details reveal their fine craftsmanship.

Each of these images evokes a heritage and with it, a form of violence: from the transmission of knowledge—photography—to the loss of a loved one; from a spiritual quest to an imposed moral order; from manufactured objects to the disembodied images conveyed by contemporary media. In their own way, each of these photographs evoke tradition and progress, colonization and subsequent globalization, in addition to the distortion, absence and uprooting that such global conditions have generated.

Nevertheless, at the centre of the composition, the presence of a woman with her breasts exposed also evokes a heritage and a topicality, a past and a present. Agbodjélou invokes collective memory, embodied in the flesh of a masked but nonetheless objectified woman

³ This is how critic Leo Steinberg refers to *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Pablo Picasso in his article, originally appearing in the magazine *Artnews* in September 1972, see: STEINBERG, Leo, "The Philosophical Brothel", *October*, vol. 44, 1988, p. 7-74.

⁴ LEVINE, Keiron, "Leonice Raphael Agbodjélou | Demoiselles de Porto-Novo", *Art & Culture, Photography* [online], 2014, available at: <https://www.anotherafrica.net/art-culture/leonice-raphael-agbodjelou-demoiselles-de-porto-novo> (consulted on 26.11.2020).



and a displaced architecture, thereby conveying the history of the colonizer and the colonized. The title of this work unabashedly refers to a painting that has become one of the “masterworks” and clichés of art western history: *Les Femmes d'Alger*, painted by Pablo Picasso in 1907 and on display at the MoMA, New York since 1939. It is a painting that contributed to the renown of its author just as much as it did to the popularisation of modern painting.

If works of art contribute to the constitution of cultural memory in many ways,⁵ the very famous *Les Femmes d'Alger*, as a work of art, undoubtedly evoke an entire section of the Western collective imagination. At the time, this painting caused a scandal: the work depicts five naked women, in a brothel in Barcelona, on a canvas larger than life, their bodies distorted by the artist's brushstrokes. The violation of both artistic and social convention, the repudiation of verisimilitude and a break with the past are just some of the known consequences following the creation of this painting. However, Picasso was inspired by two types of objects produced by other artists: Iberian statues on the one hand, but above all—and this is very clear when we look at the faces of the *Femmes d'Alger*—, the traditional “African” statue.⁶ Despite this obvious influence, “Neg'* art? Don't know it!”⁷ is what the painter declared at the time, suggesting that the artist cannot allow himself to be influenced by any cultural or formal reference other than those born of his own imagination. If the myth of the creative genius and of modern painting that break with all tradition is the (western) legacy of Picasso's painting, then Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou endeavours to offer us a new mythology. By citing this famous painting from western art history, he subverts it to create new conditions for the spectator's gaze. He emphasizes the recycling of forms and the proximity with the subjects.

From appropriation to reappropriation

“I know Picasso's work, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The question of cultural reappropriation was certainly a major factor when I worked on these series. That being said, the majority of the elements in these works are deeply personal, relating to myself, my family and the history of my country. These photographs were taken on-site, in my family's house [...] The girls come from neighbouring villages and are dressed in the traditional fashion. The masks

⁵ BROCKMEIER, Jens, “Picasso's masks: Tracing the flow of cultural memory”, *Culture & Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2017, p. 156-170.

⁶ The rather imprecise term “African” intentionally replaces the term “primitive”, which according to Lucy Lippard is “the most insidious and widespread term faced by artists of colour,” cited in BOUVARD, Émilie, “Les Femmes d'Alger Africaines” in in OTTINGER, Didier ; WIDMAIER PICASSO, Diana ; BOUVARD, Émilie (dir.), *Picasso.Mania*, Paris, Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux – Grand-Palais, 2015., p. 92.

⁷ In April 1920, in the third issue of the modern art and literary review *Action*, a survey was published under the title “Opinions on neg'* art”; to which Picasso provocatively responded “Neg'* art? Don't know it!” cited in BOUVARD, Émilie, “Les Femmes d'Alger Africaines”, p. 94. *The wording of this quote is original. The word “negro” has a strong racist connotation, for more on its history, click [here](#).



they wear come from the voodoo fetish markets of Porto-Novo and the surrounding area.”⁸



While Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou states that appropriation was a question that preoccupied him during the execution of this series, it is however, a personal work – and it is this examination of identity that drives him. Inheriting the practice of studio photography (France Photo was the name of his father’s studio) and vernacular imagery⁹ on and in Africa, the artist focuses, both in his work and his approach, on the events, places and people to whom he feels personally attached.

Fig. 2: Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou, *Egungun Masquerade III*, 2015, photograph, pigment print on HP Premium satin photo paper, edition 2/10, 148 x 110 cm, FGA-ACAD-AGBOD-0003 © Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou, Fondation Gandur pour l’Art, Genève.

Whether he explores traditional festivals as in the *Egungun* series (fig. 2), or the transporters of goods to the Benin border in *Borderlands* (fig. 3), the photographer undoubtedly forges links with a diverse community and participates in the writing of a local history and its links to the globalized world.

In *Les Demoiselles de Porto-Novo*, Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou worked with models from local villages, careful to protect their identity by masking the face of the woman whose bare upper body is shown. Yet by doing so, he also places her body at the heart of history – not only of modernism or colonialism, but their ramifications up to the present day. At the risk of rendering it essential, he exceeds the conditions that have allowed a Euro-centric discourse to take shape.

⁸ AGBODJÉLOU, Leonce Raphael, interview in “Focus sur la collection: Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou”, Canadian Photography Institute [online], 05.06.2019, available at: <https://www.beaux-arts.ca/photoblogue/focus-sur-la-collection-leonce-raphael-agbodjelou> (consulted on 02.01.2021)

⁹ Vernacular photography, from the Latin word *verna*, meaning household or house-born slave, refers to a useful photography, in other words done without any artistic objective, and primarily an amateur form of photography. On this topic, refer to CHÉROUX, Clément; BROUÉ, Caroline; MERCIER, Antoine; GUNTHER, André, *La photographie vernaculaire*, France Culture radio programme, dated 15.11.2013, available at: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-grande-table-2eme-partie/la-photographie-vernaculaire> (consulted on 01.02.2021)



Fig. 3: Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou, Untitled, *Borderlands* series, 2012, photograph, chromogenic colour print, edition 4/6 + 2 artist's proofs, 150 x 100 cm, FGA-ACAD-AGBOD-0002, © Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.



“Therein lies the fault line between imperial and postcolonial discourse, for to admit to the paradigmatic breach produced by the encounter between African sculptures and European artists would also be to question the narrative of modern art history,” notes author and curator Okwui Enwezor,¹⁰ insisting on the fact that the concept of *art for art* advocated in the discourse of the European avant-gardes constitutes just one way of considering art and art history. Moreover, this paradigm of the autonomy of art is based on the denial of its social function, which is what Agbodjélou’s work attempts to revive.¹¹

If the *Demoiselles de Porto-Novo* triptych cites Picasso’s work in passing, it is in an attempt to better reflect the other dynamics at work between art and life. Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou places his work at an important juncture. From modern painting to so-called vernacular photography—whether this is ethnographic photography used as a tool for colonial expansion or studio portraiture inscribed in the history of independence—Agbodjélou as the author of these images offers a fresh look at an environment troubled by history, and wherein power dynamics are enacted through art history. He puts his work at the service of a local memory and community, whose trajectories speak to a wide population.

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February 2021

¹⁰ ENWEZOR, Okwui, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 34, no.4, 2003, p. 61.

¹¹ The photographer has also spearheaded the founding of a photography school: the Centre de Formation Professionnelle France Photo Video, a school devoted to Porto-Novo’s youth.



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