

## Africa's top photographers show off

Written by By Dominic Muwanguzi  
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### In 'Witness' their lenses tackle social-political complexity

An important cultural exhibition opened last week at the Makerere University Art gallery. It consists of works authored by various emerging art photographers from across the continent; Calvin Dondo (Zimbabwe); Monique Pelsler (South Africa); Sammy Baloji (DRC); Abraham Oghobase (Nigeria), Sabelo Mlageni and Michael Tsegaye (Ethiopia), and is a catalogue of what is happening across African cities- "megacity"- as witnessed by these photographers

Sabelo Mlageni presents images of "Country Girls, 2003" showing young women dressed in hip fashion is typical of street culture, and Monique Pelsler's photograph "New German Families" depicting two African children adopted into a German family evokes sentiments of the complexity of cross-cultural identity.

All images are clear testimony to a cultural transition happening everywhere in Africa.

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"These photographs introduce us to artistic research and expression exploring histories as well as present day social realities and culture," remarks Katrin Peters the curator of this exhibition.

While the exhibition examines these important cultural issues, it also awakens the spirit of self-awareness and identity for many of us especially in the context of globalisation. With these photographs, we can appreciate our past and present, and possibly embrace the future with its many challenges.

An example here is the portrait of the Bushmen by Sammy Baloji which speaks volume of our ancestral past with its rich cultural heritage. These have preserved their culture amidst sharp criticism of it being outdated. Nevertheless, it is through this same culture that they have gained identity for themselves and can attract a host of tourists.

Another photo which similarly catches our attention is of the dingy settlements in the outskirts of Lagos. Abraham Oghobase has images of a densely populated Lagos city with eye-sore sights of hovels everywhere and dingy passenger vans ferrying passengers.

Every African city has such settlements and despite their coarse outlook, they symbolise the many struggles of Africans: a hope for a better tomorrow and a thirst to work even in harsh conditions.

Hence, Witness is not an idealistic project. It does not amplify the problems of African or seek to justify any of them through self-pity like many international exhibitions do. It's otherwise, an objective insight into its subject matter.

Conversely, it helps that its presentation is photography; a medium that is more palpable than most in terms of appreciation by the audience.

"Photography is light to appreciate and hinges on a specific reality," says Simon Njami, the initiator of this project.

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However, beneath its aesthetic and cultural values, Witness presents a challenge of political evaluation for many African states; especially during this period when many of them are celebrating 50 years of Independence.

With 50 years behind us, we can question whether we are much better off with the white man gone, or are inviting him back now through neo-colonialism.

With the social- political status quo partly presented by some of the images in exhibit, its justifiable to conclude we have succumbed to neo-colonialism .But now it's all up to us to make the better out of it.

But Witness does not provide us with such answers to create an impression of a politicking forum. It deliberately avoids this path and presents these photos in an objective manner; with no manifestos and pretentions typical of Pan- African idealism.

With this strength, the exhibition is open to all: non-politician and politician; student and business person; young and old, are all invited to make their own interpretations.

As the exhibition sets out to its next destination, Lagos, in mid- October, Uganda can only be lucky to have hosted one such exhibition that is going to leave an indelible mark on the cultural scene.

The exhibition is showing throughout the month of September at Makerere Art Gallery.