

# REVIEWS

BOOKS,  
FILM &  
MUSIC



SPOTLIGHT  
ON ART

Mali, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and Benin Republic are among the countries represented. Featuring over 25 contributors, the exhibition combines internationally-acclaimed artists like El Anastui (Ghana/Nigeria), Romuald Hazoumè (Benin), and George Osodi (Nigeria), with emerging voices like Emeka Ogboh of Nigeria, who is passionate about the use of sound in bringing the hustle and bustle of Lagos to the gallery space.

The common denominator among all of the artists is a recognition of basic needs and desires in their individual countries and collectively on the continent. Nyani Quarmyne, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo and George Osodi's adept ability to capture the devastating effects of climate change and globalisation on the lives in different regions of Ghana and Nigeria leaves the viewer with chills.

These artists come together to create a melting pot of contemporaneous work that reflects dynamic and diverse artistic voices using modern and traditional mediums from film and photography to found objects.

They bring to the fore a long-overdue discourse, both within Africa and with the West. If ideas of economic and cultural exchange, environment and sustainability and the place of tradition in contemporary culture in the 21st century West Africa were needed, these artists make the world listen.

West Africa's relationship with the West has altered over the years from one that centred on the legacy of colonialism and textile trade during that era to one where Africans are now telling their story on the global stage and on their terms. Here is a collection defining West Africa's moment in the art world.

## SUB-SAHARAN ART

**We Face Forward:** Art from West Africa Today, an exhibition shown in Manchester and London during the Olympics, defines West Africa's place in the global art world. **WORDS** *Belinda Otas* • **PHOTOGRAPHY** *We Face Forward / Manchester Galleries*

**“W**e face neither east nor west. We face forward,” said Kwame Nkrumah during a famous speech in 1960. The founding father of Pan-Africanism was about to be elected the first president of a newly independent Ghana.

It was this confidence and hope in Africa's rebirth that inspired, informed and influenced the organisers of 'We Face Forward', a pivotal touring exhibition of West African Art.

Art is cultural, social and personal based on the individual meanings we derive from or attach to what is before us. Art also reflects how frail our humanity can be. After all, it is influenced and inspired by what is in our immediate environment; the events of life,

personal or societal that spark the need for meaning and dialogue.

Born at three central galleries in Manchester and moving to London during the 2012 Olympics, *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today* puts West African artists at the heart of England's artistic landscape during a summer that will go down in history.





El Anatsui

## SCULPTURE

**El Anatsui** (Ghana/Nigeria)

'In The World but Don't Know The World' is a monumental wall sculpture made from liquor bottle caps and foil wrappings. It tells the story of trade between early Europeans and West Africa, when alcohol was first introduced. Alcohol was a commodity that Europeans traded for slaves and

major European companies were founded on the wealth produced by exporting gin, schnapps and brandy to the continent.

In this wall sculpture, metal takes on a fluid and fragile quality. The work is rich in 'cascades of colours,' from copper to gold to blue and red. The depth of embedded meanings present a versatility that transcends a single



Nnenna Okore

artistic narrative. One is invited along the journey of each bottle cap, into a rich history of trade and the tradition of textiles that depict a narrative or story.

**Nnenna Okore** (Nigeria)

A critically-acclaimed artist, Okore uses everyday materials – old newspaper, yarn, dye and coffee – to create sculptures. 'When the Heavens Meet the Earth,' includes fraying, tearing, teasing, weaving, waxing and sewing; repetitive processes which she learned by watching local Nigerians perform daily tasks.



Abraham Oghobase

## PHOTOGRAPHY

**Abraham Oghobase** (Nigeria)

'Untitled 2012' by Oghobase explores consumerism and how people in Lagos use the landscape to advertise their products, a practice that Oghobase describes as guerrilla marketing.

**Nyani Quarmyne** (Ghana)

Poignant and immediate, 'We Were Once Three Miles from The Sea' brings climate change to the fore as people living near where the Volta river empties into the Atlantic, lose their homes to land erosion and the effects of global warming.

**Charles Okereke** (Nigeria)

'Once in a Blue World' documents the Festac village settlement in Lagos. 'For products to be attractive the images must glamourise, so ironically I was doing the same,' says Okereke of his photography techniques borrowed from the world of advertising. Super-saturated colours turn the polluted canal into



Charles Okereke

a glittering night sky. Okereke captures a seemingly luxurious floating world.

**George Osodi** (Nigeria)

In his series of captivating images taken over four years, Oil Rich Niger Delta, chronicles the dramatic effect that oil mining has had on the people and environment in the Niger Delta region. Osodi humanises and gives a voice to citizens, whose struggles and concerns about the future have been largely under wraps.

**Abderramane Sakaly and Hamidou Maiga** (Mali)

Decades ago, Africa was often the photographed but rarely the photographer. However, the likes of ▶



Nyani Quarmyne



Francois-Xavier Gbré



George Osodi

Abderramane Sakaly and Hamidou Maiga picked up their cameras and started documenting the lives of wealthy Malians on their terms and at key moments of celebration in their lives. Aptly put, theirs are “aspirational images, constructing a new sense of self and identity.”

**Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo** (Ghana)  
‘The Hell of Copper’ by Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo takes on the issue of technological waste in Ghana, documenting the 10km ‘electronic graveyard’ of Aglobloshie Market in Accra, where unwanted computers and electronic products from Europe are shipped.

**Francois-Xavier Gbré** (Ivory Coast)  
If you wonder about the positioning of architecture in West Africa’s cultural history, look no further. Gbré explores the architectural evidence of colonial history, revealing what the artist terms the ‘absurdity that power brings.’



Abderramane Sakaly

Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo





## TEXTILES

**Victoria Udondian** (Nigeria)

The youngest of all the artists, Udondian, travelled to Dakar, Accra and Bamako to research the impact secondhand clothing has had on the textiles industry and on cultural identity. Her piece 'Aso Ikele' ranges from textiles made in Manchester for export to West Africa in the eighteenth century, to handspun cotton, made in Mali for DKNY.

**Duro Olowu** (Nigeria/England)

Fans of fashion designer Duro Olowu include household names like Michelle Obama. He brings his signature silhouettes, sharp tailoring and textiles inspired by his Nigerian upbringing, to the Manchester Costume Gallery with his Spring/Summer Collection.

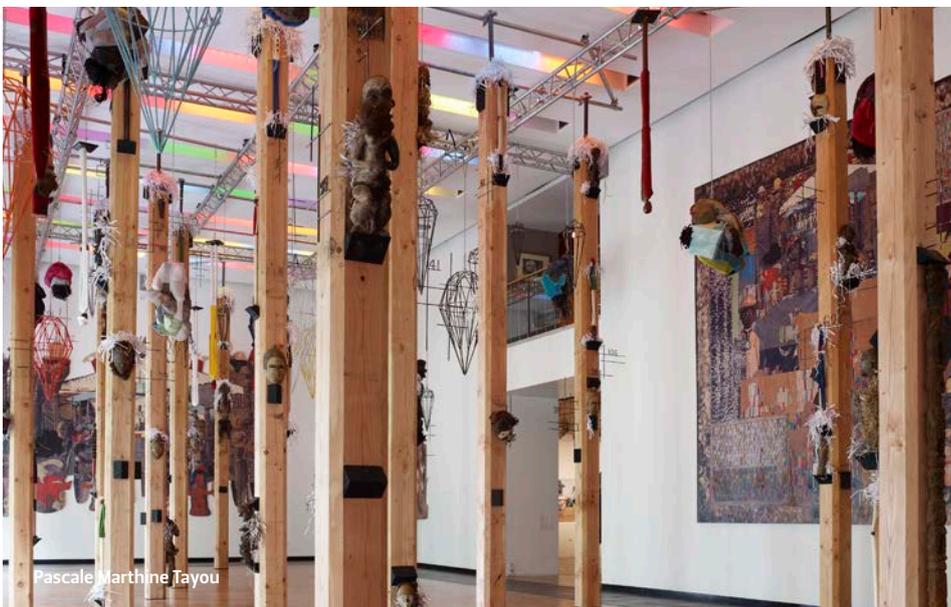


wryly humorous but also reflects on stark realities such as the daily struggles of the street vendor. In 'La Roulette Béninoise' he explores the illegal oil trade between Benin and Nigeria. Plastic jerry cans are heated over flames to expand their carrying capacity, but this also weakens the containers. His poignant documentation sheds a disquieting light but also allows us to connect to his subjects.

**Barthélémy Toguo** (Cameroon/France)

'Purification' is one of the most emotional pieces of art on display at Manchester's Whitworth Gallery. Toguo describes his watercolour painting, which depicts the atrocities of violence on its victims, as a work which purges the acts of genocide over the last century. Displaying different postures of violence, it also has the human rights acts scribbled over it to emphasise an urgent need to respect human life.

**We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today** will be on display until the 16th September 2012. [Wefaceforward.org](http://Wefaceforward.org)



Pascale Marthine Tayou



Barthélémy Toguo

## INSTALLATION

**Pascale Marthine Tayou** (Cameroon/Belgium)

'The World Falls Apart' by Pascale Marthine Tayou is inspired by Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. A work of mystic spirituality, this man-made forest contains wooden African sculptures made for the tourist market, steel diamonds hanging from chains and translucent forms stuffed with discarded food packaging and crowned with wigs. The distinction between trade goods and sacred objects is blurred in a cross-section of history, imagination, economics and globalisation.

**Romuald Hazoumè** (Benin)

An ardent critic of Western consumerism and its effect on life in Africa, Hazoumè's work is often



Romuald Hazoumè