Contemporary African photography is formed by the lens of the post-colony. African photographers who work on large-scale photographic projects today (which most of the artists whose work was in this exhibition do) deserve praise for persevering under precarious postcolonial conditions. Most of the thirty-six artists whose 150 works were on display in ‘A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography’ at Tate Modern, London, are represented by commercial galleries based in Europe, and the photographs that were in the exhibition respond to the history of Africa. Curated by Osei Bonsu, the show took inspiration from Achille Mbembe’s essay ‘The Earthly Community’, in which he emphasises humanity’s need to unite and stop the ecocide of the planet. Mbembe’s essay informs the exhibition in a number of ways: there is a

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section that dwells on how African metaphysics emphasises caring for the environment which has an echo in the part of the exhibition that looks at spirituality; and the exhibition’s final section, which depicts environmental damage due to our consumption and disposal of technological products, runs parallel to Mbembe’s idea that technological advancement will not necessarily lead to a better standard of living for all.

In the first gallery, striking images of Nigerian monarchy by George Osodi depicted regal leaders unsmiling and sombre—a reminder of what preceded British colonial rule and what is left. A combination of myth and tradition keeps them in power, as is indicated in Osodi’s photographs with their traditional dress and the settings of thrones with red velvet seats fringed with gold leaf headrests. In contrast, in the same gallery were Kudzanai Chiurai’s visceral pictures that he worked on with a cast of models and crew. In this body of work, Chiurai presents alternative versions of well-known art-historical images manifest as counter-histories, in which the artist wrangles with Christianity, colonialism and art history. In a reworking of Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1613), for example, two Black women are depicted beheading a white man, in what could be understood as an anti-colonial revenge fantasy. In another, one of the same women is shown dressed in a white suit and splayed across a crucifix. Below her, a group of women stand in for the disciples. This reinterpretation of archetypal crucifixion images is interwoven with photographic tropes—of dehumanising images of Black women taken by colonial photographers. It also made me think of Andre Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) — a photograph of a figurine of Jesus on the cross immersed in the artist’s urine — and Sarah Lucas’s equally inflammatory *Christ You Know It Ain’t Easy* (2003), in which a representation of Jesus is made out of cigarettes. Christianity, a colonial import, adds to the knowledge that the African photographer’s image is formed by the post-colony.

In the following gallery were the quietly compelling works of Khadija Saye. In her series *in this space we breathe* (2017), Saye drew on her African roots and mixed-faith background (Christian father and Muslim mother) to depict herself in her mother’s clothes carrying out rituals. She makes use of sacred objects such as a cow horn, which is meant to cleanse bodies of impurities.
in indigenous Gambian spirituality. Utilising a nineteenth century photographic process to create her silkscreen prints, the work brings a very spiritual element with its smoky effects. The fact that the images on display are some that were not destroyed in the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in West London (that Saye herself didn’t survive, along with her father) adds to the otherworldly affect that the work evokes. Em’kal Eyongakpa’s *Ketoya speaks* (2016) series deals with the local revolts against the German colonisers in Cameroon. There is something spooky about the interplay of light and shadow here. By showing atmospheric woodlands and ghostly wisps, the viewer is reminded that the death and destruction colonisation engenders is often not far from the African photographer’s mind.

A section on masks served to draw attention to artists employing that tradition. They included Zina Saro-Wiwa wearing a self-designed mask in her *The Invisible Man* (2015) series as a reaction to being told that women are not allowed to don them as they are too heavy. Men, the only gender permitted to be masquerade performers in Nigeria’s Ogoniland, pose defiantly for her *Men of Ogele* (2014) series, leaning against walls, benches and in nature. In the same section of the
exhibition was another feminist piece, a performance captured on camera. Wura-Natasha Ogunji’s *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* (2013) takes places on the streets of Lagos, where the artist and her collaborators dragged gold-painted plastic water containers through the city streets for hours while wearing matching jumpsuits and masks, in a bid to point out inequality based on having a female anatomy. It forces the viewer to consider how far the country has to go in that regard.

Nearby were images inspired by the studio portraiture tradition. Photography studios in Africa were launched mainly in port cities from the 1860s. Images were taken by the colonialists showing tribesmen with hunting tools and wearing indigenous clothing; produced as ‘ethnic’ postcards these were successful commercially in the West. Other pictures were of Europeans who commissioned images of themselves and their families. Prosperous Africans also posed for similar images. Santu Mofokeng (who died in 2020) delved into the photographic archive to display albums of various such families from all over South Africa. Suited and booted, or in the dresses middle-class Europeans wore, sitting beside props and backdrops painted to look like lavish European interiors, the families showcase the ways self-imagination and aspiration worked in that era. The Natives Land Act passed by the South African parliament in 1913, which restricted

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Black people from owning or buying land, meant that strata of society were decimated, lending the images a poignant air.

In an online interview, Atong Atem points out that as the first images taken by Europeans of Africans were problematic, she is keen to overthrow that ethnographic gaze with her studio portraiture. In her Studio Series (2015), Atem takes photographs of fellow first-generation Australians of African descent, some of whom wear traditional attire and accessories like headdress and beads. The backdrops are colourful, with flowers and brightly-coloured patterned fabrics. Ruth Ginnika Ossai also utilises bright backdrops in her studio portraits that are inspired by Nollywood films and Igbo gospel music videos. Members of her community in Nsukka, eastern Nigeria, pose while smiling. There is a joy that exudes from their manner and the way they stand and smile, gazing at the photographer and a never-seen audience. As a viewer, one is overwhelmed by the reverberations of those grins emanating from people who live in perilous and precarious conditions, conditions that get harsher and harsher. As I look at these images again while writing this, I realise they are linked to me by a common humanity. Atem’s images invite you to identify with, to break bread with this community. Hassan Hajjaj has lived in the UK, although he spends much time in his studio in Marrakesh, and has asserted that his work is influenced by British popular culture. His Gangs of Marrakesh portraits, from 2000–2002, have a vibrancy and levity, with the playful poses his female models strike even when veiled. They give the exuberant impression of a girl biker gang, an astonishing conceit in a North African/Muslim context, and adding to the playfulness are the food tins embedded within the frames.
In the central room of the exhibition was one of its disappointments, in my view. Ndidi Dike’s lacklustre installation, *A History of a City in a Box* (2019), spread across the vast central gallery, in which historic images of Lagos are hidden from view in box files, surrounded with reddish soil, is intended to serve as a comment on the colonial archive. This is disappointing as the documents, being hidden, are invisible and therefore do not function as objects should.

In the section of the exhibition titled ‘Urban Transitions’, ‘the photographers… reveal the city to be a space of hybridity, where new patterns and possibilities emerge’.\(^5\) Here, Nigerian Andrew Esiebo turns his lens on the megapolis that is Lagos, displaying its urban sprawl in his *Mutations* series (2015–2022). *Un Regard* (2008–2013) by Congolese Kiripi Katembo (who died of malaria in 2015, aged only 36) is a haunting series in which the artist uses the reflections in puddles to form his images of Kinshasha’s camera-shy residents. ‘The inhabitants are not at ease when they have a camera in front of them. While fleeing their gaze, I came across the reflections of water that opened a rather surreal window with many details that correspond well to the reality of my city.’\(^6\) The images make you pause and become disorientated as you wonder if you are awake, dreaming, hallucinating, flying, or firmly on the ground.

\(^5\) *A World in Common*, op cit, p 172

The last section, ‘Imagined Futures’, interrogated the collective memories fostered by the postcolonial landscape. In *The Afronauts* (2012), Cristina de Middel adopts an approach that is akin to Saidiya Hartman’s ‘critical fabulation’, in which fiction is applied to portray violent histories and the ‘haint’ – one who haunts the present.\(^7\) De Middel focuses on the post-independent confident period in Zambia when a science teacher, Edward Nkoloso, gave himself the title of director of his own creation, the National Academy of Science, which aspired to land Zambian astronauts on the moon and Mars. Nkoloso began a space programme in which he recruited teenagers and led ad hoc training exercises, but the project came to an end due to funding issues. As there wasn’t much archival material, de Middel reconstructed the training Nkoloso might have put his astronauts through in the Zambian outdoors amongst the rocks and fields. Her whimsical take on this (motorcycle helmets, or streetlight covers, and brightly coloured space suits for uniforms) leaves the viewer cognisant of how the continent’s image would have been improved had the programme been successful. Dawit L. Petros’s *The Stranger’s Notebook* (2016) images are also to do with travel, although more earthbound. His clean, precise images have his models, men aiming to migrate to Europe, lifting horizontal mirrors close to border crossings and reflecting places inaccessible to the men.

Cristina de Middel, *Mbulumbulu*, 2012, inkjet print on paper, 28.5 x 28.5 cm, from the series *The Afronauts*, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Tate Gallery

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Maria Balshaw, in an essay for the catalogue of an exhibition in Manchester in 2012, ‘We face forward: Art from West Africa Today’, points out that West African artists attempt to bring about change by galvanising audiences to take seriously the issues of environmental degradation that afflict that part of the continent.\textsuperscript{8} Fabrice Monteiro’s photographic series \textit{The Prophecy} (2013–2020) is a good example, with its focus on a landfill site where around a thousand tons of waste is discarded daily. Monteiro’s fashion background shows in the costumes worn by his models in images that highlight environmental issues, with the models wearing costumes designed by the Senegalese designer Doulasy that draw from masquerade traditions but which are made from rubbish and natural materials.

Mário Macilau, in his \textit{The Profit Corner} (2015/2016) series, explicitly connects the exploitation of the African underclass and Western consumption of electronic devices in documentary-style pictures showing young men at the Hulene dumpsite in his native Maputo, Mozambique, where they attempt to extract valuable materials by burning electronic waste. The hazardous work leads to deaths and health problems, but the waste pickers fight to keep the work due to their dire circumstances, an indictment of the country’s economic situation and the neoliberal capitalist world they must navigate. Is there an aestheticisation of tragedy here, making a modern-day horrific situation more beautiful, more bearable via the choice of black and white imagery that is reminiscent of Sebastião Salgado’s miners similarly eking out a dangerous living? A landslide caused by heavy rain occurred at the dumpsite after Macilau shot this series, so the images do presage death.

\textsuperscript{8} See Maria Balshaw, ‘Facing Forward: West Africa to Manchester’ in \textit{We Face Forward: Art From West Africa Today}, exhibition catalogue, Manchester City Galleries and Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2012, p 5
In Praise of Still Boys (2021) by Julianknxx is a nineteen-minute video in which the artist reflects on Freetown, Sierra Leone, and how his upbringing shaped his past and current reality. Before becoming known as Freetown and the capital of Sierra Leone in 1792, when repatriated slaves were brought back, it was an area from which thousands of captured slaves were taken on transatlantic nightmarish journeys. The film is a mixture of dance, music and poetry, with arresting images of boys growing up near the Atlantic Ocean. At one point his mother narrates his birth story in the creole language widely used in the country, highlighting the diasporic culture facilitated by the slave trade. It is a striking work, if slightly marred by the lack of subtitles, although that is a preference of the artist. I wouldn’t have known what was being narrated if it had not been for the exhibition catalogue, and any gallery visitors must have been similarly locked out because of this perplexing decision.

The African photographer’s image is formed by the lens of the post-colony. This whole exhibition reminded me that the weight of the past is perched on the shoulders of the present, as if the present is a figure standing tall with a cape draped around it, a cape that can’t be taken off no matter how hard the person struggles. This is the conceptual path the exhibition leads you down, a realisation that came to me, and which has stayed with me – the invitation that these two- and three-dimensional works extend. They form a chorus reaching out to you, to me, and more beyond. Mbembe, in his essay, talks about Africa being ‘a potential of originality, a flow of energy, and a unique capacity for resonance, resilience, and creativity’. The artists in ‘A World in Common’ capture that.

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