



PHOTOGRAPHY

Cosmic challenge

JOHN GREEN recommends a photography project which confounds stereotyped views of Africa

WE'RE used to seeing photographs and photographic reportage on Africa but invariably through the viewfinders of privileged white individuals. Rarely do we see the continent through the lens of black and indigenous photographers, and the radical and fascinating book *African Cosmologies* offers a welcome counterview. Based on work made from multiple perspectives over 60 years, the book and its related exhibition and art programmes have been put together for the FotoFest Biennial 2020 and it presents the work of 33 artists, living and dead.

Lead curator Mark Sealy has a special interest in the relationship between photography,

social change, identity politics and human rights. His recent book *Decolonising the Camera*, published by Lawrence & Wishart, focused on the racial politics at work within photography, raising issues of race and representation, the legacies of colonialism and the importance of decolonising institutions.

African Cosmologies continues that line of thought. In it are the widest range of styles, distinct methodologies and subject matters, with most of the photographers challenging perceptions of Africa and of photography itself.

With such a varied, complex and daring mix of perspectives, artists naturally adopt profoundly distinct approaches. Here, studio-based conceptual methodologies meet photo documentary and journalism, while poetic or fantastical per-

spectives are allied with direct calls to activism and resistance.

Each artist is represented by a careful selection of images and a concise essay about their approach, with many informed by first-person accounts. Working in a wide range of media including art and documentary photography, installation, video, text and image, mixed media and sculpture, their projects focus on intersecting aspects of the social, economic, and historical factors that shape their world views.

Themes of liberty, rights, representation, class, gender and sexuality, activism and conflict, flight and migration, racism, integration, the environment and the building of postcolonial nations are all present.

Through examples of African photography and art, cultural

critic Olu Oguibe examines the ways that photography is just as subjective as other arts and, when approached uncritically, is used to reinforce the preconceptions, interests and prejudices of its makers.

In her report from Bamako, art historian, critic and curator Christine Eyene traces a path through a diverse range of artists and projects, illuminating shared concerns of identity, self-representation, critique and optimism, while Faisal Abdu'Allah negotiates cultural displacement within the black British community.

In one of his images, a pristine gold-plated barber's chair serves as a flourishing space for conversation, activism and care and Abdu'Allah, who maintains his own barber's shop in addition to his art practice, understands the various roles

the barber plays as hair expert, storyteller and therapist.

The barber's chair is the locus of this exchange. Put on a pedestal and plated in gold, it becomes a symbolic object and a status symbol divorced from its proletarian origin.

Blazing Century, the first instalment of a multi-faceted art project, was conceived and developed by French-Nigerian Oxford-based artist Wilfred Ukpog. Each image in the series – titled BC1 to BC10 – is site-specific and set within a geographical location, often one embroiled in sociopolitical and environmental issues. Filtered through a fictional and futuristic lens, it redefines art's role in building and shaping a future world.

Table Manners (2014-16) is the work of artist Zina Saro-Wiwa, who filmed individuals in the

Niger Delta eating a traditional meal. As they eat, the subjects occasionally acknowledge the camera, looking up from their plates towards an assumed viewer as guest at their meal.

Eritrean photographer Dawit L. Petros, in his series *In the Stranger's Notebook*, chronicles a journey across Africa, evoking alternative notions of migration that take place within the continent. His aim is to counter popular narratives of an ever-present desire of Africans to leave their homelands.

Embracing art, photography and political commitment, this is a riveting book that challenges many prejudicial concepts about Africa, photography and humanity as a whole.

■ *African Cosmologies: Photography, Time and the Other* is published by FotoFest, £45.

RADICAL AND FASCINATING: (Left to right from top) *Oikonomos*, 2011, by Angolan photographer Edson Chagas; *Self-Portraits* by Togoan Helene A Amouzou, 2008; *Four Twins*, 1985, by Nigerian/UK Rotimi Fani-Kayode, a gay photographer who died in 1989; *By and By, I Will Carry this Burden of Hope, Till the Laments of my Newborn is Heard* (*Blazing Century* series) by Nigerian Wilfred Ukpog; *Thulani II, Parktown*, 2015, by South African Zanele Muholi; *Every Moment Counts*, by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, from the series *Ecstatic Antibodies*, 1989