

**SHADES OF HOME
IN LIZ JOHNSON
ARTUR'S
PHOTOGRAPHY**

Nisha Merit is an independent curator
based between Johannesburg and Berlin.

Photographers are like chroniclers of life, capturing moments in time, telling a story about the subject in front of the camera, while subsequently telling a story about the person behind it. Taking Liz Johnson Artur's photography as prompts with South African photographer Nontsikelelo Veleko who lives in France, we talk about histories, geographies and the intentionality of photography.

Johnson Artur was born in 1964 in Bulgaria to a Ghanaian father and a Russian mother, who raised her. She was educated in Germany and now resides in the UK. Bulgaria is located at the eastern periphery to the Balkans, a satellite state to the Soviet Union before its collapse in the 1990s and became a member state of the European Union in 2007. Although the Cold War is long over, today's Russia and the EU (by virtue of geographic proximity and shared history) are continuously negotiating their presents, power and representations through ideologies often carried out and questioned through the arts.

Growing up largely without a society that would reflect part of her own heritage, Johnson Artur started to portrait Afro-Russians after meeting her father for the first time in 2010 who studied in Bulgaria as part of the Soviet Union era expansion into the African continent through exchange programmes during the Cold War. Propaganda at that time was distributed mainly through clearly defined representation of strength and virtues on one side while demonising the opposite, reaching its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, most prominently in the information war between the Soviet Union and U.S America. The propaganda of unity of all races through communism was a seductive tool during the time of the Soviet Union, many posters and illustrations showed the global connection and force against fascism. Ideologically strong, it often did not translate well into the actual life of black people in the East still today. This complex history, the question of belonging and the relationship with an often missing father figure, Johnson Artur depicts in her photo series Russians of Colour. "The amount we know about our African heritage varies from individual to individual. Those who grew up and live in Russia still have to justify on a daily basis the fact that they are Russians too," says Johnson Artur.

Photographers are like chroniclers of life, capturing moments in time, telling a story about the subject in front of the camera, while subsequently telling a story about the person behind it. Taking Liz Johnson Artur's photography as prompts with South African photographer Nontsikelelo Veleko who lives in France, we talk about histories, geographies and the intentionality of photography.

Johnson Artur was born in 1964 in Bulgaria to a Ghanaian father and a Russian mother, who raised her. She was educated in Germany and now resides in the UK. Bulgaria is located at the eastern periphery to the Balkans, a satellite state to the Soviet Union before its collapse in the 1990s and became a member state of the European Union in 2007. Although the Cold War is long over, today's Russia and the EU (by virtue of geographic proximity and shared history) are continuously negotiating their presents, power and representations through ideologies often carried out and questioned through the arts.

Growing up largely without a society that would reflect part of her own heritage, Johnson Artur started to portrait Afro-Russians after meeting her father for the first time in 2010 who studied in Bulgaria as part of the Soviet Union era expansion into the African continent through exchange programmes during the Cold War. Propaganda at that time was distributed mainly through clearly defined representation of strength and virtues on one side while demonising the opposite, reaching its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, most prominently in the information war between the Soviet Union and U.S America. The propaganda of unity of all races through communism was a seductive tool during the time of the Soviet Union, many posters and illustrations showed the global connection and force against fascism. Ideologically strong, it often did not translate well into the actual life of black people in the East still today. This complex history, the question of belonging and the relationship with an often missing father figure, Johnson Artur depicts in her photo series Russians of Colour. "The amount we know about our African heritage varies from individual to individual. Those who grew up and live in Russia still have to justify on a daily basis the fact that they are Russians too," says Johnson Artur.

"I don't care about the label but I do want the space" says Johnson Artur in a 2021 podcast which resonates with the South African photographer Nontsikele Veleko who speaks about the notion of home and identity in street photography and the idea of finding oneself in the subject as she has done in her photo series Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder (2003-2009) portraying, people in Johannesburg in a time of a young democracy with new possibilities for identity and representation in South Africa - of defining one's own space, something both women share in their photographic practice: "A lot of photographers were struggling with what to photograph now, because they used to do documentary photography capturing the racism and all the things that were happening during Apartheid and now that we were free, they didn't know what is there to photograph. And I thought to myself there was a time where we were not allowed to be ourselves, not allowed to see ourselves in photographs especially. For me that was important.

As South Africans to look at ourselves and to acknowledge that in a photograph and by doing that I could see myself through the other. A lot of people dressed up as a form of self expression and I liked that, they, amongst the masses, defined themselves not uniformly but uniquely themselves. They would stand out in a crowd and I was really impressed by them, also to see how they suffered to be like this because they were different and not easily accepted. It was about reclaiming the space that is Johannesburg and claiming oneself and saying: I am here, now."

The recognition of the here, now that Veleko is remembering is a moment repeated in many of Johnson Artur's images that largely resign in situ, depicting a fleeting moment of daily life with a hue of random mundanity in which the exceptionality of her framing lies. Nothing seems staged. Her photoshoot of Michaela Coel, known for her award winning television series I May Destroy You, for Garage magazine in 2020 alludes more to a friends day out than a commissioned work. Even the gold dust that illuminates the British actresses face on the cover image feels somewhat completely natural.

In black-and-white or colour, Johnson Artur's photography is not loud, it rather demands close looking as the protagonists own their own moment, their identity and representation. All central themes in her ongoing work. Johnson Artur is often part of her protagonist's identity - that of the diaspora, the in-between, and taking advantage of being a photographer in motion while using exactly that as the moment of arrival. The diaspora hinges on the multiplicity of notions like home and belonging while it is often confronted with the question of "where are you really from" as if only the single origin can be the premise of being. Although Johnson Artur is in charge by choosing the moment and frame of the photograph, she allows for self-determining space thus the act of image making becomes an active collaboration that seeks to acknowledge someone else's story about to be captured.

Veleko agrees that "photography has to be a collaboration. There is a human being in front of your camera with feelings, thoughts... whoever I was photographing was also a part of me but I also realised the moment of transition, people grow up and the city changes and I wanted to capture that very moment in time, the youth, innocence, life and a lot of energy going around."

In following what Veleko says, Johnson Artur ties into the tradition of photographers such as Nan Goldin, who photographed her friends, largely part of the LGBTIQ community in 1980s New York City. Her most notorious work The Ballad of Sexual Dependency was not only a deep desire for a different society but also testimony to the difficult times then. Being personally part of the community afforded her an intimate and compassionate gaze, one that is not exploitative nor judging but similar to Johnson Artur's and Veleko's understanding and loving.

The Black Balloon Archive which started in 1992, is an ongoing exploration of Johnson Artur's visual archive, a collection spanning over 30 years.

It was shown in different iterations and selections, inspired by the song Black Balloon from the 1969 album *Is It Because I Am Black* by US American soul singer Syl Johnson who sings - And it's got so light to see snow white / Oh, one by one and two, oh / Dancing in the sky, you surely gonna spy up high / Up you go, black balloon ...

The Black Balloon Archive was also presented at the 2021 photo festival *Rencontres d'Arles* in France, where Johnson Artur was recognised with the *Kering Women in Motion* photography prize and with that joins the winners of 2019 and 2020 respectively - U.S. American Susan Meiselas known for her work *Carnival Strippers* (1976) and Swiss-French photography beacon Sabine Weiss who, 97 years of age, still contributes to the humanist school of the art, capturing the daily lives of people.

The album title as its lead song follows the same question - *Is it because I'm black?* - that back in the days and still today strikes the pulse of the time and is echoed 52 years later through movements like *Black Lives Matter*, leading to the demand for change towards a rising moment, not unlike the black balloon. At the same time Johnson Artur's project is ongoing so is the struggle not yet a thing of the past.

Photography often speaks of being driven, the act of going and the act of taking images as collecting pieces of a potential whole - the apparatus enables us to collect evidence of that search. While the archive offers not only to hold this evidence but to negotiate and revisit steps taken, questions posed and potential answers gathered about both sides of the camera. Johnson Artur with her extensive archive invites us to come along, going down one's own memory lane from time stamps of style, fashion, ideas of identity, gender and expression. Veleko reminisces about her own drive of being a photographer: "I wanted to make people visible, because there was a time where we were not allowed to be visible.

It is to say: I see you, similar to the Zulu greeting 'Sawubona' which literally means I see you. When you answer back with 'Sawubona' it becomes not only about you but about the society around you."

The society around us is also reflected in the exhibition strategy of Dusha at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, 2019 which shows Johnson Artur's engagement of the images' materialities and an extended concept of the archive. It is here where the artist started her photographic journey in 1986, where she stayed in a majority black neighbourhood of Brooklyn and used the camera as a conduit between herself and her surroundings - *dusha* means soul in Russia. The archive here becomes a strategy to collect, adding to something growing and sacred. A powerful tool to tell stories that have for so long not been recognised publicly. The exhibition includes images in frames, behind museum glass, presented like artefacts, protected and distant as well as unframed prints pasted onto the wall in salon style living room memoria. This juxtaposition of formal and informal makes the exhibition itself an intimate and honest engagement with the subjects and material.

Johnson Artur's intimate engagement shows a sense of place in this world from the past to now. Her images ask the question of if belonging has to be geographically located or if it is enough to be right here, right now. The street, the clubs, spaces with their very own politics become platforms for representation and self-staging in her images. In Liz Johnson Artur's self-titled monograph published in 2016, she reflects on her relationship to photography as '... the only way for me to understand ... why I took all these pictures ... I was hungry ... but I didn't know ... that I was ... it's like when you start eating ... you realize how hungry you are ... and when it came down to pictures ... I now realize ... how hungry I was ...'

In her recently opened exhibition at *Foam*, in Amsterdam Johnson Artur distills the essence of her photographic oeuvre to: of life of love of sex of movement of hope - the driving principles her work oscillates between and arguably life itself.