

SHADES OF HOME IN LIZ JOHNSON ARTUR'S PHOTOGRAPHY

Nisha Merit is a curator, writer and researcher
based between Berlin and Johannesburg.

Photographers are chroniclers of life, capturing moments in time and telling a story not only about the subject in front of the camera but also about the person behind it. Using Liz Johnson Artur's photography as a prompt, we engage in conversation with South African photographer Nontsikelelo Veleko*, who lives in France, discussing 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, located on the eastern periphery of the Balkans, was a satellite state of the Soviet Union until its collapse in the 1990s and became a member of the European Union in 2007. Although the Cold War ended long ago, contemporary Russia and the EU - linked by geographic proximity and shared history - continue to negotiate their present realities, power structures, and representations, often through ideological discourse carried out and questioned in the arts.

Having grown up in a society that largely did not reflect her heritage, Johnson Artur began photographing Afro-Russians after meeting her father for the first time in 2010. He had studied in Bulgaria as part of the Soviet Union's Cold War-era expansion into Africa through exchange programs. During that time, propaganda was disseminated primarily through rigid portrayals of strength and virtue on one side while demonising the other, peaking in the 1950s and 1960s - most notably in the information war between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviet ideology of racial unity through communism was a powerful tool, particularly in the fight against fascism, as seen in posters and illustrations promoting global solidarity. However, despite its ideological strength, this vision often failed to translate into the lived experiences of Black people in the Eastern Bloc - a reality that persists today.

In her photo series *Russians of Colour*, Johnson Artur explores this complex history, the question of belonging, and the relationship with an often-absent father figure. "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 daily that they are Russians too,"* she says.

"I don't care about the label, but I do want the space,"* says Johnson Artur in a 2021 podcast—a sentiment that resonates with Veleko, who explores the notions of home and identity in street photography. She reflects on the idea of finding oneself in the subject, as she did in her photo series *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* (2003–2009), which portrays people in Johannesburg during the early years of South Africa's democracy—a time filled with new possibilities for identity and representation. Defining one's own space is something both women share in their photographic practice.

"A lot of photographers were struggling with what to photograph because they had been documenting racism and the realities of Apartheid. Now that we were free, they didn't know what there was to capture," Veleko recalls. "I thought to myself, there was a time when we were not allowed to be ourselves, not allowed to see ourselves in photographs, especially. For me, that was important—to look at ourselves as South Africans and 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. Among the masses, they defined themselves—not uniformly, but uniquely. They stood out in a crowd, and I was really impressed by them. But I also saw how they struggled to be like this because they were different and not easily accepted. It was about reclaiming the space that is Johannesburg, claiming oneself, and saying: I am here, now."

The recognition of the here, now that Veleko recalls is a recurring moment in many of Johnson Artur's images, which largely remain in situ, capturing fleeting moments of daily life with a hue of random mundanity—the brilliance of her framing lying in its apparent spontaneity. Nothing seems staged. Her 2020 photoshoot of Michaela Coel, known for her award-winning television series *I May Destroy You*, for *Garage* magazine, feels more like a day out with friends than a commissioned shoot. Even the gold dust that illuminates the British actress's face on the cover appears completely natural.

In both black-and-white and color, Johnson Artur's photography is not loud; rather, it demands close attention as her protagonists inhabit their own moment, identity, and representation—all central themes in her ongoing work. Johnson Artur is often intrinsically linked to her subjects' identities—those of the diaspora, the in-between—and she embraces her role as a photographer in motion, using that very movement as a moment of arrival.

The diaspora exists within multiple notions of home and belonging, yet it is often confronted with the question, "Where are you really from?"—as if a single point of origin were the sole premise of identity. While Johnson Artur determines the moment and frame of each photograph, she creates space for self-determination, making image-making an active collaboration that acknowledges the subject's own story.

Veleko agrees: "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. I wanted to capture that moment in time: the youth, innocence, life, and all the energy moving around."

Building on what Veleko expresses, Johnson Artur's work connects to the tradition of photographers like Nan Goldin, who documented her friends, many of whom were part of the LGBTQ+ community in 1980s New York City. Her most renowned work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, was not only a longing for a different society but also a testament to the difficulties of the time. Being personally embedded in the community allowed Goldin an intimate and compassionate gaze—one that was neither exploitative nor judgmental, much like the perspective Johnson Artur and Veleko bring to their own work.

The Black Balloon Archive, which Johnson Artur began in 1992, is an ongoing visual archive spanning over 30 years. It has been presented in various iterations and selections, inspired by the song Black Balloon from the 1969 album *Is It Because I'm Black* by U.S. 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're surely gonna spy up high / Up you go, black balloon..."

The Black Balloon Archive was also showcased at the 2021 photo festival Rencontres d'Arles in France, where Johnson Artur was awarded the Kering Women in Motion photography prize. With this recognition, she joins the ranks of previous winners, including U.S. photographer Susan Meiselas (2019), known for *Carnival Strippers* (1976), and Swiss-French photography icon Sabine Weiss (2020), who, at 97 years old, continued to contribute to the humanist school of photography, capturing the daily lives of people.

The album title and its lead song pose the same question - Is it because I'm black? - a question that, both then and now, remains deeply relevant. It continues to resonate 52 years later through movements like Black Lives Matter, underscoring the ongoing demand for change - a rising moment, much like the black balloon itself. Just as Johnson Artur's project is ongoing, so too is the struggle, which remains far from being over.

Photography is often described as being driven by movement - the act of going, searching, and collecting images as fragments of a potential whole. The camera serves as a tool to gather evidence of that search, while the archive does more than merely hold this evidence - it becomes a space to negotiate, revisit, and reflect on the questions posed and the possible answers found, both in front of and behind the lens. Through her extensive archive, Johnson Artur invites us to embark on this journey, revisiting time-stamped memories of style, fashion, identity, gender, and self-expression.

Veleko reflects on her own motivations as a photographer: "I wanted to make people visible because there was a time when we were not allowed to be visible. 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 highlights Johnson Artur's engagement with the materiality of images and her expanded concept of the archive. It was here, in Brooklyn, that she began her photographic journey in 1986, staying in a predominantly Black neighbourhood and using the camera as a conduit between herself and her surroundings - *dusha* means "soul" in Russian. In this context, the archive becomes more than a collection; it is a growing, sacred entity, a powerful tool for telling stories that have long been unrecognised in public spaces.

The exhibition includes images displayed in frames behind museum glass, presented like artefacts - protected, distant - alongside unframed prints pasted directly onto the walls in a salon-style, reminiscent of living room memorabilia. This juxtaposition of formal and informal presentation makes the exhibition itself an intimate and honest engagement with both the subjects and the medium.

Johnson Artur's deeply personal approach conveys a sense of place that spans past and present. Her images ask whether belonging must be geographically located or if it is enough simply to exist in the present - *right here, right now*. The streets, clubs, and communal spaces - each with their own politics - become platforms for representation and self-staging in her photographs.

In her self-titled monograph published in 2016, she reflects on her relationship with photography: "... 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 realise how hungry you are ... and when it came down to pictures ... I now realise ... how hungry I was ..."

Her recently opened exhibition (2021/2022) at Foam in Amsterdam distills the essence of her photographic practice into a simple yet profound statement: "of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope" - principles that not only define her work but, arguably, life itself.

*The conversation with Nontsikelelo Veleko was recorded on 21. 10.2021.

*www.buala.org/en/mukanda/black-in-the-ussr-the-children-of-the-soviet-africa-search-for-their-own-identity, accessed 19.10.2021.

*<https://podcasts.apple.com/fr/podcast/women-in-motion-podcast/id1462424289?i=1000527224688>, accessed 19.10.2021.