

A PRISMATIC VIEW

YANNIS DAVY GUIBINGA AND THE DIVERSITY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

Moving to Canada gave Yannis Davy Guibinga a new creative direction: celebrating the diversity of the African diaspora and challenging mainstream visual narratives that continue to fetishize the black body.

After spending a year at the University of Toronto, where the young Gabonese was studying digital enterprise management surrounded by Canadian and international classmates who had no idea where to find his hometown of Libreville on the map, Yannis Davy Guibinga returned to Gabon determined to make pictures of his birthplace. “The fact that people didn’t know where it was or what it looked like gave me the motivation to capture it, so I could then show them,” he says. Although he had started playing around with a camera during his senior year of high school, this trip was when he truly began to see the potential of the medium. Once back in Canada after his summer vacation, he wanted to continue exploring what photography could enable him to express. He shifted his focus to the community he now belonged to: the African diaspora. “Living abroad also showed me that a lot of people, including some of my compatriots, hold preconceived notions of what an African is supposed to look like, be like, behave like. And these assumptions did not match my experience. The people I know don’t fit in these boxes.”

Through portraiture and editorials, Yannis Davy Guibinga exposes the intersectionality of African identities—how gender, sexuality, race, culture, language, ethnicity, economic status and other markers overlap to determine an individual’s personal and social experience. For example, he points out that the lived realities of queer or gay people from the African continent are seldom talked about or represented in mainstream media because it remains controversial. He explains that countries such as his homeland are still very socially conservative or even oppressive. “They have specific expectations of how you should be performing your identity that don’t match reality,” he observes.

The bulk of visual representation continues to be done by outsiders, mainly photographers from Europe or North America who carry their own set of biases, implicit or not. “One of the big narratives of colonial and post-colonial photography is the idea that Africa is underdeveloped and in need of guidance. This belief was used to justify colonization, the exploitation of the African continent, as well as the intellectual hegemony of Western civilization. If you want to feel advanced or forward-thinking, you need a binary opposite. That’s how Africa is still portrayed. While it may be true for some parts of the continent, it’s not the only reality. These depictions are more harmful than anything,” he notes.

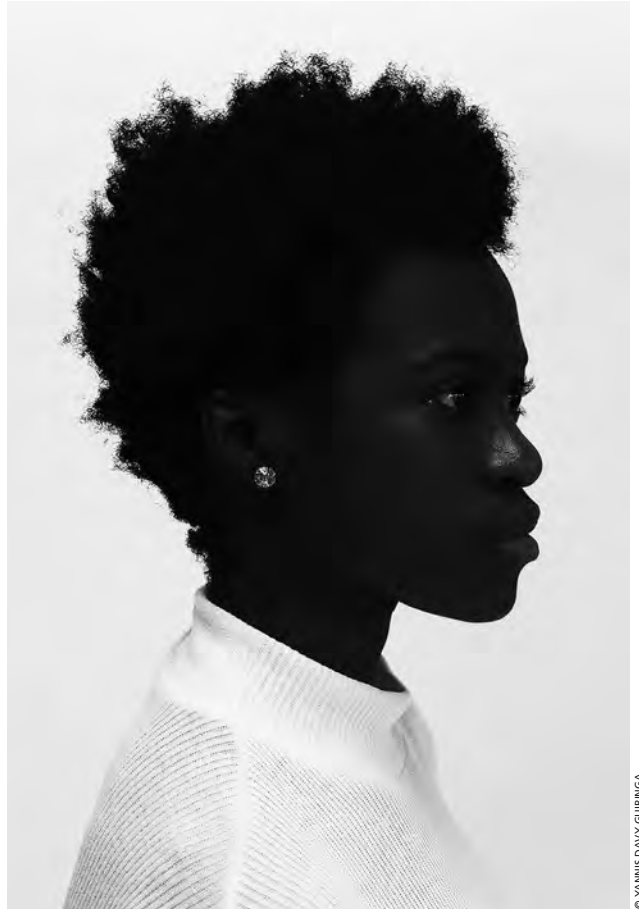
While visual representation has contributed to perpetuating antiquated and damaging conventions, it can also be part of the solution. “Photography disrupts how people think about themselves, about their community, about others,” believes Yannis Davy Guibinga. “It’s a way of talking about issues that people tend to shy away from like sexuality and gender performance.” That’s why he focuses on showcasing how diverse his contemporaries are. “Most of my subjects are roughly my age, part of the new generation that is very conscious of who they are, of their heritage, and very much engaged with the outside world. Through my work, I try to demonstrate that a lot of my peers are not, in fact, congruent with the prevailing stereotypes, and that they don’t abide by the imposed social norms. Still, they deserve as much respect and recognition as anyone else. Their singularity doesn’t make them any less African,” he explains.

These ideas led to his choice to opt for an editorialized feel and bold colours. In an article for *The New York Times*, writer and photographer Naima Green comments that the Obamas’ decision to have artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Serrano paint the portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama, respectively, heralds a significant shift. Green explains that rather than depicting black people in austere settings “as if that is the only environment we inhabit,” these artists





CANON EOS 6D, 50 MM, F/16, 1/200 S, ISO 12 800. © YANNIS DAVY GUBINGA



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CANON EOS 6D, 50 MM, F/16, 1/200 S, ISO 1600. © YANNIS DAVY GUBINGA



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CANON EOS 6D, 50 MM, F7.1, 1/4000 S, ISO 2000, © YANNIS DAVY GUIBINGA

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position them in vivid spaces. The same thinking applies to the work of Yannis Davy Guibinga. “What attracts me the most to editorial photography is the regal aesthetic,” asserts the young man. “I want my subjects to look and feel powerful.” As for the vibrant tones he favours, they are a way to both accentuate contrast and honour his home. “I’m not in Gabon anymore, so I try to compensate and bring a little bit of it in my images. Since the country is on the equator line, it’s very green, very sunny, very radiant. That’s a major visual difference with Canada,” he remarks.

In any case, his work has caught the attention of many, including actress Lupita Nyong’o, who won the Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for her role in *12 Years a Slave*. On her Instagram account, she reposted Davy Guibinga’s portrait of Josef Adamu with the caption “And then God created Man, and it was GOOD.” It’s a sign that his images resonate far and wide.

But Yannis Davy Guibinga isn’t resting on his laurels just yet. Besides attending Collège Marsan in Montreal to refine his photography skills even more, he’s also contributing articles to online publications such as Feature Shoot, where he highlights the work of colleagues invested in rethinking the representation of people of colour—Elsa Leydier, Daniel Obasi and Shawn Theodore, to name a few. For him, a community is “a group of people who share similar experiences and similar views of the world while still being unique individuals; it’s about togetherness, working towards a common future but also recognizing and celebrating individuality.” And that’s exactly what he’s creating with his written and photographic work. He’s highlighting the uniqueness of each subject while also placing the individuals within a group, striving to achieve a more prismatic understanding of Africa. ●



CANON EOS 6D, 50 MM, F8, 1/180 S, ISO 400, © YANNIS DAVY GUIBINGA