



Visionary

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Gazing into the future, photographer Namsa Leuba is reconstructing how African women are portrayed

BY KATIE BOOTH 11.02.15

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Across its vast continent, Africa is reinventing itself. In recent years, upswings in mobile technology and access to the internet have opened up lines of communication. With its economy gaining momentum, a burgeoning middle class is emerging in some areas. It's largely thanks to bright-minded thinkers, like the architects behind this [floating school](#) in Makoko, Nigeria, who are finding solutions to structural, social, and technological issues. As innovators in Africa push the boundaries of art and design, the world is taking notice, and taking notes.

Opened on Friday, an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain is spotlighting some of these creative innovators. "[Making Africa – A Continent of Contemporary Design](#)" brings together work from many fields — including furniture design, architecture, urban planning and photography — that are testaments to the ingenuity thriving across Africa. The show invites viewers to reimagine Africa as a place that's actively shaping its own future. Among the talent is half-Guinean half-Swiss photographer Namsa Leuba, who is re-contextualizing images of African women.

Leuba grew up in Switzerland, but her mother was from Guinea, and she was deeply connected to her African roots. Leuba's Swiss and Guinean identities have been a driving force in her photography. "I have two identities, in a permanent struggle, and I just try to reconcile them, to synchronize them," said Leuba in an interview with Women in the World. "I try to explore both sides, but one side has never been better than the other one."

Leuba's series "Cocktail," featured in the exhibition, was inspired by African queens. Fusing high fashion with history, the series is a wonderfully vibrant reconstruction of how African women are portrayed. It's fictional but fabulous, removed from harmful stereotypes perpetuated by the media. "I was inspired by African queens and African women, because they are warriors and they're so strong," said Leuba. "I wanted to re-contextualize African elements, and bring them into a framework of Occidental tastes and aesthetics."

For the elaborate stylings in "Cocktail," Leuba drew from the visuals she grew up with. She carefully arranged each composition, and worked closely with her model. "I told her to pose like a queen; like a contemporary African woman, who has more rights, and more power than ever before," Leuba said. "I want her to be proud of what she is. In this new society, the African woman is tough. She's got all the same rights as the guys, and she's well-respected."

Adorned in plants and patterns, fur and flowers, Leuba's "queens" look as if they've stepped out of a recent issue of *Vogue*. This series was Leuba's first time experimenting with fashion photography, and she's gained wide recognition in the fashion world. Next month, she'll be heading to South Africa to work on an assignment from [EDUN](#), the brain child of Bono and his wife Ali Lewson, which promotes trade and production in Africa.

What's next for this visionary? "I'm going to continue my work with African identity," she said. "I have started to trace how Animism, a major religion in Guinea, has moved from Africa to the West. It's traveled to Brazil, to Cuba, to Haiti, all the way to New Orleans, and has mixed with Christianity. I'm so interested in that hybridization."

Leuba's work was recently on view at [Lagos Photo Festival](#), and will be on view at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao through February 21, 2016. We can't wait to see where her work takes her next.

See more of Leuba's work on [her website](#).