

So much for cultural openness



Peter Aspden Culture

Abraham Oghobase is a Nigerian photographer in his mid-thirties whose witty and original pictures are gaining him an international reputation. His work is based on the documentary tradition, but it is given a distancing quality by the artist's own presence in the photograph. This combination of reportage and performance art, while not unique, compellingly adds layers of complication to otherwise straightforward depictions of the socio-economic tensions of his homeland.

In a recent series of work, he shows walls of buildings in the centre of Lagos that have been filled with scrawled slogans advertising various services. Then he poses in front of them in gestures that are amusing, mysterious or ironic. One such advertisement – “Sexual Disease/Fast Ejaculation/Weak Erection”, followed by a telephone number – shows Oghobase at the side of the frame, curled up asleep. Another, “Piano Lesson”, has the artist playing what looks like the solemn notes of a sonata in the foreground.

Some months ago, these very same pictures were shortlisted by the jury of the Prix Pictet for photography (of which I was a member), which addresses the theme of environmental sustainability, for this year's prize. Swiss bank Pictet gives SFr100,000 (£66,200) to the winning artist, and the competition regularly attracts the world's most distinguished photographers. The inclusion of Oghobase would have been a source of pride for him, and his country's culture.

So it is sad to report that he never made it to the event's prize-giving ceremony, which took place on Wednesday at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. If he had won – and it is not to betray any confidences to say that his work was highly praised by all the judges – he would have been absent from what would surely have been the crowning moment of his career so far. In the end, the prize went to the veteran German photographer Michael Schmidt.

A couple of weeks ago, it was revealed to the judges that Oghobase had been refused a visa to travel to London for the ceremony. As is customary in these cases, no reason was given for the refusal. Appeals from the artist's lawyers were turned down. A note to Britain's home secretary from the Prix Pictet committee seeking explanation was simply ignored.

This is a sorry state of affairs for a country that professes to be in the vanguard of cultural openness, and a city that considers itself to be the creative capital of the world. Oghobase has travelled widely and is becoming a familiar figure in the world of photography. If the British government has something incriminating on him, perhaps it had best share it: the artist moves freely throughout Europe and the US (he was in Seattle during a recent telephone conversation with the Pictet secretariat).

Of course, recent news of the terrorist attacks in Nigeria, subjected to the amplifying effects of 24-hour news coverage, has been mostly distressing. Does this just prompt a knee-jerk reaction from nervous border control agencies? It is not, to say the least, beyond the realms of possibility. What are their decisions based on? In this instance, we shall never know.

Yet it is precisely in situations such as these when our so-called respect for culture and its various practitioners should kick in. Government and politics are, even in mature western democracies, happily clandestine affairs. Secrecy develops its own logic, its own dark momentum. It becomes a default mode of behaviour. In some cases it is necessary. In most it is not.

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The practice of art is the opposite. It is transparent, expressive and bold. It is also committed to telling truths, even if they prove to be unpalatable to those in authority. This can make life uncomfortable for governments, although this, too, can also be overstated: the ability of totalitarian regimes to absorb dissent in today's climate shows great sophistication, and a shrewd understanding of how art can be diverted or co-opted, where it used to be suppressed.

The theme of this year's Prix Pictet was consumption, and the photographers who participated showed a wide variety of strategies in dealing with their subject. The works of the shortlisted artists are currently on display at the V&A, and form a trenchant, not always predictable, critique of a world that is grievously unbalanced in so many ways.

Lebensmittel, the winning series of photographs by Schmidt, is a measured look at the way food is processed and prepared for our twisted consumption. It makes it points with unruffled insistence.

Oghobase's work, by contrast, is exuberant and a little wild. It conveys the desperation of a society in which every act of consumption is something that can be bargained for on every street corner, in bright, bold letters, and in whispered telephone conversations.

If we want to understand what is happening in Nigeria today, we need to listen to that country's young and intelligent voices. News reporters do a fine job under the stress of sharp deadlines. Politicians – some of them – are articulate, but inevitably compromised by circumstance. It is artists who hint at deeper truths. We have lost an opportunity to learn from one of them, and we don't even know why.

Prix Pictet at the V&A, Porter Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, until June 14. prixpictet.com

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FINANCIAL TIMES | Saturday May 24 / Sunday May 25 2014

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