

From: Dawit L Petros's best photograph: a shipwrecked Japanese trawler
Interview by Karin Andreasson
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'We're used to seeing overcrowded vessels from Africa washing up on the shores of Europe. But here was one that had travelled the other way'



'There are ship graveyards not far from this spot'... a photograph from the series Act of Recovery (Part 1) by Dawit L. Petros

I came across this ship in 2014, a few months into a long, slow journey I was making from Nigeria to Italy. It was a Japanese fishing trawler, and it had washed up on the shores of Nouakchott, on the west coast of Africa, having developed engine trouble.

It was almost sunset – the cinematic hour. The sky was warm and the scene was just so inviting. But I knew this golden moment was transitory, as I had been coming to the wreck again and again at different times, noticing how the light changed with each visit, and how many other people were visiting it. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do with it.

The shot became part of my project, called *The Act of Recovery*. I was looking at the complex narrative of migration, across Africa and Europe. We are used to seeing shipwrecks on the shores of Europe, as overcrowded vessels transporting African migrants north get washed up like carcasses. But this shot seemed to invert that notion. Here was an outlier, one that had travelled the other way, heading south. It wasn't yet another displaced African body. That made it feel powerful.

There are ship graveyards not far from this spot. I had seen photographs of them by the Tunisian artist Zineb Sedira. When I first encountered this ship, I thought about her shots, which are all about the repurposing of western waste. But unlike Sedira's graveyard ships, this vessel had not been stripped and looted. It was still functional. All its elements, including the radar, were still in place.

I used a documentary style but, as with all the images in the project, it did involve a certain amount of staging. I had seen children climbing on the ship for a better look, while adults stood back, observing from a distance. I didn't want to dictate the scene too heavily, so I just turned up with a group of people who hadn't been told what to wear and let them approach the ship. Their clothes reflect all the colours you tend to see at that time of day. My friend Mohammed – on the far left – wore a blue fabric that seems to extend the sea.

I spent the first part of my project travelling through the continent with 10 African artists, filmmakers and photographers, all crammed into a Ford Econoline van. Travelling by road across Africa is quite difficult. Some countries are more easily reached from outside the continent, as opposed to within. This journey was much more than a traditional road trip, though. We did public presentations and ran workshops wherever we stopped. I got to know local film-makers and would screen their work alongside my own at outdoor cinemas for anyone to see.

As we travelled further north, I thought a lot about the Mediterranean Sea. It ought to be a means of exchange, but for many it has become an impenetrable boundary.

Dawit L Petros's CV

Born: Asmara, Eritrea, 1972.

Studied: History and art in Montreal, Boston and New York.

Influences: Stuart Hall, Zineb Sedira and Abyssinian scholar Fesseha Giyorgis.

High point: "Attending my first exhibition in Africa at Addis Foto Fest with my mother."

Low point: "Abandoning a long-term project after years of fruitless struggle."

Top tip: "The prepared mind will formulate important questions and pursue them diligently."