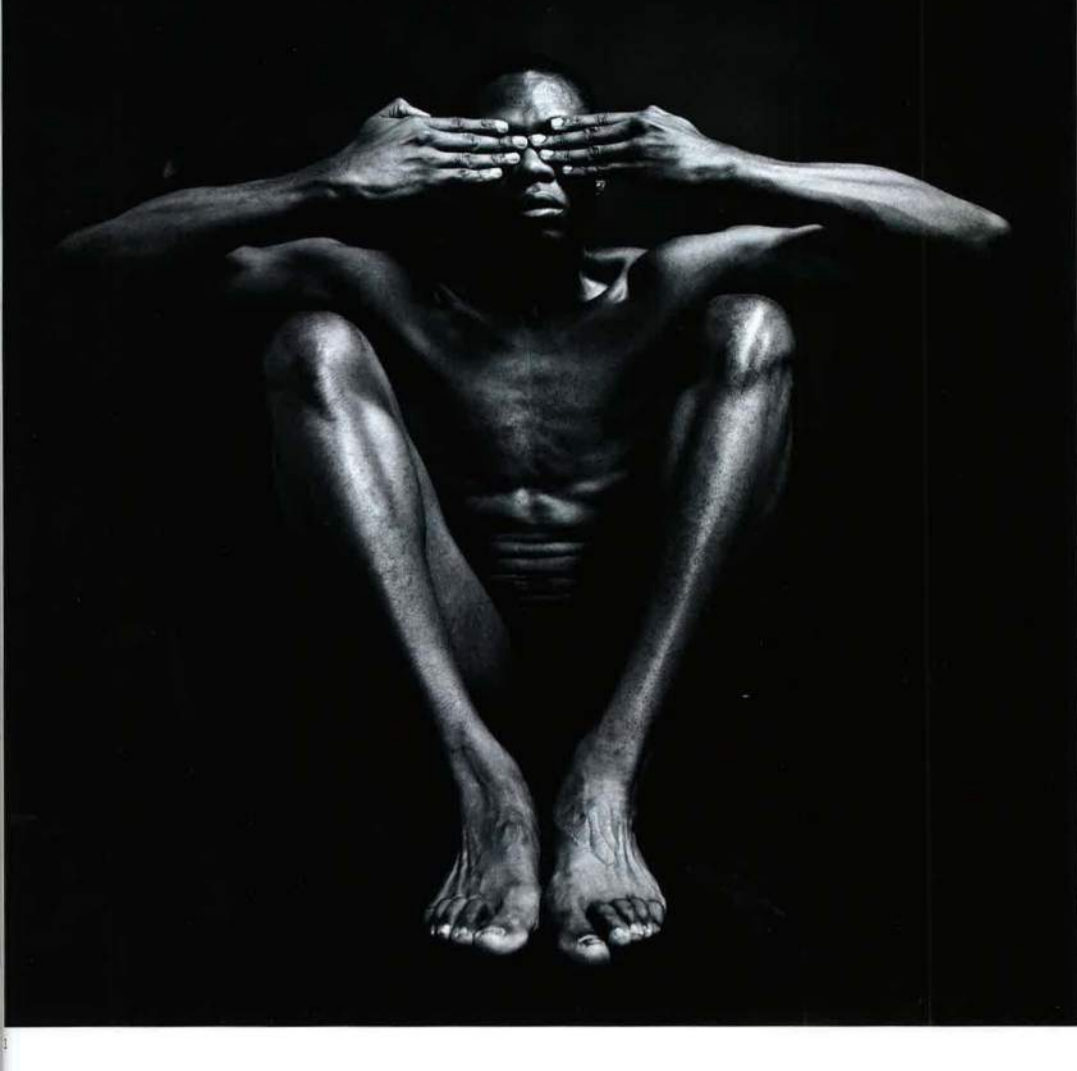


THE ART OF EXILE

Twenty-five years after his death, Rotimi Fani-Kayode's work is as relevant as ever, the curators of a new show at Tiwani Contemporary tell Tom Seymour – particularly in light of the anti-gay legislation newly adopted in the Nigerian-born photographer's homeland



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- 1 *Cargo of the Middle Passage*, 1989
All images © Rotimi Fani-Kayode, courtesy
Autograph ABP & Tiwani Contemporary, London
- 2 *Bronze Head*, 1987
- 3 *The Golden Phallus*, 1989
- 4 *Nothing to Lose VIII (Bodies of Experience)*, 1989
- 5 *Every Moment Counts (Ecstatic Antibodies)*, 1989

In January, President Goodluck Jonathan signed a new law into effect that allows Nigeria's courts to punish same-sex "amorous relationships" with penalties of up to 14 years' imprisonment. Gay organisations – from advocacy groups to nightclubs – are now banned, and "aiding and abetting" a gay man or woman is punishable by law. Landlords, family, neighbours, friends and employers of gay people are now seen as criminals in the eyes of the Nigerian courts. And in areas to the north of the country that have adopted some form of Shari'a law, gay people can be stoned to death.

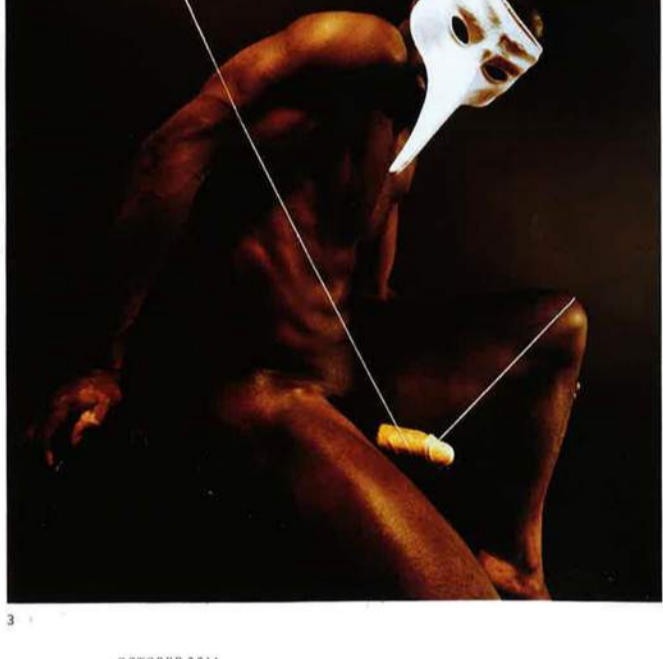
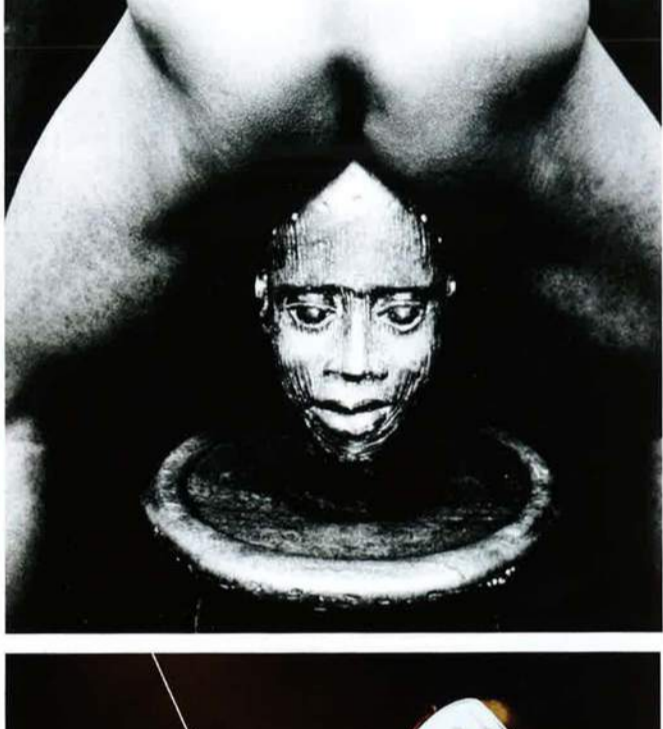
He may not be as outspoken as Simon Lokodo – 'ethics and integrity' minister of Uganda, who recently responded "why would I eat my own faeces?" when asked whether he would ever consider kissing another man – but Goodluck is clearly a homophobe. However, these remorseless measures were not passed out of a sense of conviction; rather, it's because they're popular. And Nigeria is not alone.

Across Africa, homosexuality is viewed as a depraved, immoral act. It remains a taboo, silently seen but only discussed by conservatives with voices of righteous condemnation. Gay Nigerians, as a result, compare their lives to the black men and women living under South Africa's apartheid, or slaves in America's southern states – denied the most basic human rights, victim to the most remorseless social bigotry, mortally threatened by a state unafraid to use its invasive powers.

Goodluck should spend a few quiet moments at Tiwani Contemporary, a gallery in London's Fitzrovia district focusing on Africa and its diaspora, where Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989) will be on show until 01 November. There, he might reflect on the life of the influential photographer, a gay Nigerian who died 25 years ago, but whose values live on.

Fani-Kayode was one of the first Africans to portray his sexuality through photography, once writing: "I make my pictures homosexual on purpose." Yet his photos are not a gratuitous response to the establishment; they are layered and contradictory, emotionally raw and breathtakingly physical. They consistently consider and challenge us, then plea for our acceptance.

"Rotimi opened up a new space of critical enquiry around the representational politics of the black body, and the exploration of cultural and sexual difference through staged photography," says Renée Mussai, one of the



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show's two curators. "His work is as seductive, transgressive and as relevant now as it was then." Mussai is also curator and head of archive at Autograph ABP in east London, the organisation that Fani-Kayode co-founded a year before his death.

Born in 1955 in Lagos to a prominent Yoruba family, Fani-Kayode was educated in English Christian schools and was forced to leave his country to escape the Biafran War, arriving in Brighton as an 11-year-old refugee in 1966. Homosexuality had been legalised four years earlier in the UK (though some Nigerian historians relate Britain's colonial influence to Africa's homophobic attitudes). When he came out, his family rejected him, and in 1976 he left Britain to study fine art and economics at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He then moved to New York and studied for a Masters in fine arts at Pratt Institute; while there he met and became a

friend of Robert Mapplethorpe, who he later recognised as a touchstone influence.

For both of them, photography was not just an art form, nor was it just a mode of expression, or an exorcism of emotion. His photography was, Fani-Kayode wrote, "a weapon, if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and, indeed, my existence on my own terms".

A weapon with a fine blade, and forged from many experiences. "Rotimi's photography is quietly transgressive," says Maria Varnava, director of Tiwani Contemporary. "His work forces the viewer to consider the space beyond the obvious: beyond homoeroticism and simplistic readings of Africanness."

She refers to one of his most iconic works, the 1987 photograph *Bronze Head*. "It is as much about the loss of wholeness, the fragmented body, a break with the past, a diasporic and sexual, as it is about the faith of what this ambivalent new state will create."

This complex aesthetic comes from an identity defined by loss and a sense of being an outsider, she says, pointing to a quote by Steven Nelson in *Transgressive Transcendence in the Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode*: "To experience exile – be it cultural, familiar or sexual – is often to experience an existence that is constituted by a loss of wholeness, one defined by its fragmentary nature. To experience exile is to retain, in the words of Thomas Paved, 'a faith in the homecoming'."

Fani-Kayode died in Brixton, south London, in December 1989, having returned to live in the UK six years earlier; while recovering from an AIDS-related illness, he suffered a heart attack. He was 34, an artist still very much discovering himself, still far from the peak of his creative endeavour. One can only guess how influential he might have been in the time of men like Goodluck Jonathan. *TF*

www.autograph-abp.co.uk



On view

Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989) is on show at Tiwani Contemporary in London until 01 November. www.tiwani.co.uk

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