

Dawit L. Petros

The Stranger's Notebook

October 15 - December 14, 2016



ARTSPACE

Here Comes the Stranger

By Emmanuel Iduma

I.

There are men, in photographs by Dawit L. Petros, who hold mirrors against their faces: a man standing on desert sand, a man overlooking the sea, a man on a beach, a man on a rock, a man in front of a train track. They are anonymous in this way, bodies with mirrors for faces. I look at the mirrors and realize I could see myself reflected, if this were technically possible.

In the photograph of a face, depicted frontally, if the eye appears open, an onlooker sees the eye first. So fixed is this eye, and so roving the onlooker's, that what transpires isn't exactly an exchange of glances. What transpires is an animated eye cast over an inanimate one. But since the animated eye can see an inanimate one, the onlooker continues to look, as if hoping for acknowledgment. Hence the dilemma of looking at men with mirrors for faces, mirrors in place of eyes: from the outset of looking at them, there is no eye in the photograph that holds the promise, however improbable this promise, of being looked at in return.

Who are these men? For a little more than a year Petros travelled through parts of Africa and Europe. In his journeys, routed through paths traversed by migrants, he encountered dozens of people aiming to cross the Mediterranean, and those who had crossed over. The photographs in which mirrors are held up are mainly of anonymous protagonists who have left their homes for the fortune of a better life. Their anonymity isn't one of being nameless. It is not merely the anonymity of being "outside the law," or "illegal," in the sense of being unidentified by a state. It is an anonymity aligned in principle with anyone anywhere in the world who might be considered faceless. An anonymity that reconsiders the possibility of the individual being recognized as such, welcoming instead the recognition of a face belonging to many.

The mirrors are held in places of transit. Overlooking the men is the sea, the desert, or the rail track. The anecdotal addressee of the photographs is Mobility, inscribed with a capital M, for the urgency of what it suggests in today's usage—a kind of parenthetical word for migration and travel, for arrival, departure, and terminus.

The migrant lives "in the clarity of the fact of being, not in mysteries. He is both a window through which those who have been left behind may see the world and the mirror in which they may see themselves, even if in distortion."¹ For the migrant,



The Green March (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality),
Tamougrite, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment prints

a person who moves out of a place to settle in another, especially if the process of moving and settling is painful and full of despair, there is no time for anything except practicality, a “clarity of the fact of being.” This practicality is as intense as crouching in a fishing boat hovering above tumultuous sea, and as relatively benign as waiting for immigration papers to arrive. But once practical matters have been taken care of, and the migrant claims a new home, new mysteries are presented: Who are my neighbors? How do I understand them?

This is the challenge of Petros’ mirrors. Put declaratively, it is the challenge of looking back at yourself. The challenge, if we get right to it, is of looking at migrant-strangers as reflections of the fate of all that is human. No one any longer can put away the migrant condition as news from far away. For, “What does it mean to say *I have survived* until you take the mirrors and turn them outward and read your own face in their outraged light?”²

The migrant is thus “a ‘you’ that addresses us as a ‘you’ and thereby allows us to call ourselves ‘I.’”³ Otherwise the mirrors wouldn’t face outward. “There are no strangers.

There are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from. For the stranger is not foreign, she is random; not alien but remembered; and it is the randomness of the encounter with our already known—although unacknowledged—selves that summons a ripple of alarm.”⁴

II.

Petros was born in Eritrea. His family moved to Canada where they naturalized as citizens. In the last decade he has been resident in the United States. A life of itinerancy arguably produces an interest in itinerancy: in May 2014, Petros joined a group of nine artists to embark on a road trip towards Eastern Europe. Departing from Lagos, Nigeria, they traveled along the coast of West Africa, and then northwards, to Morocco, eventually crossing over to Spain. Alone in Europe he travelled to Italy, and made stops in Lampedusa, Catania, Rome, as well as other cities. Then he continued up to Germany, France, and the Netherlands. The entire journey lasted thirteen months.

Here comes the stranger: I infer with this title a sentiment central to experiencing the photographs, films, and installations in *The Stranger's Notebook*. A feeling of estrangement, in the first place, of an artist who arrives “here” from “there.” The works exhibited were made in places where he was indisputably a stranger, arriving to leave soon afterwards—an estrangement culminating in intimacy, however brief. It is brevity epitomized in a life of many homelands, homes “here” and “elsewhere.”

Prior to *The Stranger's Notebook*, Petros' work consisted of painstakingly orchestrated minimalist images. In travels as intense as those he undertook, the resulting work is made in response to the speed with which life unfolds in front of him. He encounters people who, given their itinerancy, are here today and gone tomorrow. He feels in their presence a kind of urgency; it is a matter of spontaneous response. The images in *The Stranger's Notebook* account for the impulse to document itinerant bodies, and an inclination, characteristic of Petros, to offer abstracted meditations on landscape, shapes, surfaces, and color.

III.

I imagine monuments erected in honor of the stranger. Two sets of images by Petros, both alternatively titled *Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality*, are perhaps such monuments. Each set is a triptych. *The Green March (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality)* is of photographs of green fabric thrown into the air, rising above dunes of desert sand and floating alongside azure sky. *Indigo (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality, Part II)* is framed similarly: an indigo scarf thrown into the air, rising



Confrontation (The always incomplete construction of thresholds), Tangier, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment print

above the calm, gray sea.

These scarves are accessories bought in places along Petros' route, mainly from the regions of Mali inhabited by the Tuaregs. Thrown up and pictured as such, the scarves remain at the point of intersection between earth and sky. A point of intersection is the home of strangers. For them a monument is erected in the air.

In *The Shop*, a short film by Petros, a tailor is at work in Maryland, Lagos. He is rendered in low light, and when his face appears it is almost always silhouetted. To contemplate fabric as monument, I listened to the sound made from the tailor's sewing machine. The cloth that is made by him would clothe a moving body. And a moving body, looking for a new home, is the spectacular feature of today's world. "The expellees whom we occasionally see on television show us that to which we would do well to aspire."⁵

IV.

All the protagonists in Petros' photographs face backwards. They stare at what remains unnoticeable to the viewer. There are many ways to account for the significance of this aesthetic strategy. I could point, as I have done, to their anonymity, and to a universal facelessness. In addition, faces and bodies turned backwards invert the criminality that attends strangers, those who arrive in a place outside the framework of the law. Today it is a radical thought to consider a stranger as someone other than a criminal, or a nuisance. And this radical gesture is what the photographs insist upon.

V.

When recounting the origins of *A Stranger's Notebook*, Dawit L. Petros begins at the moment he encounters bone fragments of an elephant, in the course of an artist residency in Salina, Kansas. The bones belong to a circus elephant, known as Snyder, which went wild and was killed on 13 September 1920. The dead elephant is pictured lying as a mound of flesh. Four men stand with rifles above it, and a crowd of men are gathered, arms on their hips in a gesture of triumph. As a circus elephant, it was perceivably a foreigner in the places it was taken to perform. Purchased in 1904 from a firm in Hamburg, Germany, Snyder toured the United States until its death in 1920. Weeks before being shot to death, it allegedly grew violent. Finally uncontrollable, causing a pandemonium in Salina, it was poisoned, and when that didn't work, shot fifteen times until it fell dead.

If Snyder survives in popular imagination only as a fallen beast, how might its story be told differently, with curiosity—less as an enraged beast, but as an itinerant foreigner weary from many comings and goings, a weariness of the peripatetic? With this thought it is possible to imagine how Petros considered Snyder's foreign body symbolic.

Then, traveling and researching in Italy, Petros encounters a travelogue published in Rome in 1895, written by the Eritrean writer Fesseha Giyorgis, following his trip to Italy, titled *About the Author's Journey from Ethiopia to Italy and about the Impressions Made on Him by His Stay in That Country in Tigrinya*. This makes an impression on him. The story of migration hasn't been told properly. The travels of Giyorgis are an effective counterpoint to contemporary narratives of migration, in which travelers from the Horn of Africa are denied the dignity of their choice, as though the decision to pull the ground from one's feet isn't the most courageous thing a person can do.

Giyorgis writes: "When an Ethiopian comes to Europe and sees its goodness, beauty and glamour, that which impresses his whole being can not be told. He marvels when



Act of Recovery (Part I), Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2016
archival color pigment print

he sees the lights at night shining like the sun at day while people tarry back and forth. He admires saying, 'What a country!' He even goes as far as saying that God created this people himself, and not others. Wherever he goes, he sees and hears only new things, things he did not see or hear before in his country. Upon this, he decides he will not leave a country such as this. He compares his country with this country and finds his own country inferior in all aspects. He sinks in the urge and concern to speak in the language of the [host] country. However stutteringly, he speaks in the language. He also acts only in the manner he has heard and seen. He is always happy. Nevertheless, this is only so at the beginning, before he distinguishes the red from the black."

Any attempt to "distinguish the red from the black" is to confront the "always incomplete construction of thresholds." The latter phrase is the title of a photograph by Petros. The photograph comes with a story. In Tangier, he set up his camera to face two boulders that appeared to form a gateway to the sea. He'd come with men from West Africa (men en route to Europe), to make them protagonists of his photographs. At

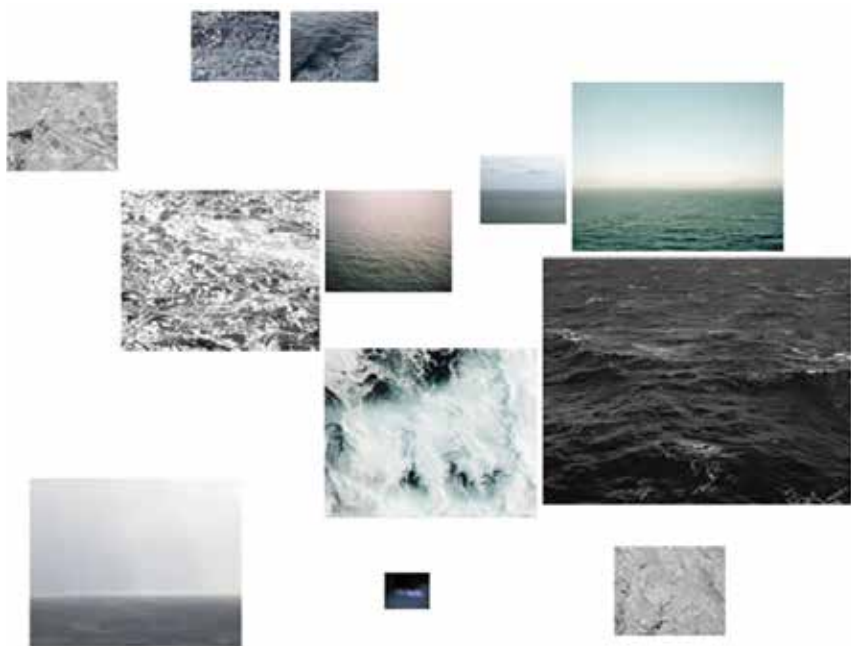
that moment some Moroccans gathered; an argument ensued. There was a conversation about whose land it was, the black Africans or the Arabs, and who was permitted to be there. *Confrontation (The always incomplete construction of thresholds)* is a record of that encounter, fraught with the tension of belonging fully, belonging partly, or never belonging.

There are men in the photograph who are pictured as solitary in the crowd. They do not confer with anyone, or even if they do, they do so while engrossed in their own observations of the sea. It is telling that it is mostly the black Africans who seem solitary, unfazed by the tenseness of the Moroccans behind them. For most migrant black men, Tangier is not intended as a place to settle. It is a place of waiting, however indefinite. They have their eyes towards the sea, and beyond it.

In another photograph, a lone figure stands equidistant from both boulders in Tangier. He does not face the sea. His face is draped with a green fabric he holds tautly, as in the manner of a long, unfurling curtain. The untitled photograph is unlikely to have been taken on the day of the argument, yet it is perceivably a counterpoint to *Confrontation...* It possesses a similar tension—that of the sea. Where in the first photograph men face the sea poised introspectively, in the second a man turns his back to it. In one the sea is a threshold as far as the eye can see. In another the threshold is marked from the point where the sea ends.

The sea ends. Nothing depicts this more figuratively than a fallen ship. For, a fallen ship is evidence of a journey truncated, a journey at its limits, the promise of passengers or merchandise undelivered. In Nouakchott, Petros took a photograph of a fallen ship, titled *Act of Recovery (Part I)*. It shows the point where land meets the sea. There is a small group of people, standing and facing the ship. These are Mauritians. This ship is a Japanese vessel, and has been left to disintegrate in the sea. Those who face the ship approach as though to salvage an item for future use, some of them bend towards a slanting window. Some are poised as though they watch the ship in amazement—as though, emptied of its passengers, the ship moors as the synecdochical migrant-stranger.

What might be salvaged? Scraps of metal retooled for domestic use? Perhaps. These photographs of fallen ships, as Petros could have intended, are glimpsed metaphorically. They depict an active process of recovery. Although Mauritania is occasionally referred to as the largest ship graveyard in the world, the story does not end there. While the photographs depict the catastrophe of a shipwreck, they also depict a reclaiming.



Historical Rupture, 2016
archival color pigment prints

A reclaiming of...what? In *Untitled (Overlapping and intertwined territories that fall from view I)* taken in Catania, Italy, a hand, projected against the sea, holds up an old photograph. The photograph is an image of a group of adults and children heading towards a little house. They appear to be arriving from a journey. Since their image is projected against the background of the sea, it is fair to allege that their journeying have taken them through the sea. Petros asserts that this is an Italian family arriving Libya. It is a black hand that holds up the image of the Italian family. With that gesture, the history of movement along the Mediterranean is told with the ambivalence with which it occurred—the journey has not always been northwards. Europeans, facing economic or political emergencies, have also headed south.

VI.

When reality enters through the apparatus of a camera, what emerges, repeatedly seen in *The Stranger's Notebook*, are fragments of moments and histories. For instance, *Historical Rupture* is a cluster of images of sea waves and seascape. These varying images of the sea, undulant or calm, glinting with the light of sunrise or sunset, capture the extent of its

possibilities. The sea, presented in a montage, testifies to its inexhaustibility.

What is possible with the sea? Simply put, both horror and exchange, flowing and sinking. Édouard Glissant wrote, “O sea, name these ghosts.”⁶ To consider the sea from many vantage points, as Petros requests from his viewers, is to push against the impulse to consider it only as beautiful, or only as horrific. The story the sea tells is fragmentary; stories of the ghosts of those who sank in it, or who crossed it to better lives, or who crossed it to worse lives.

VII.

One evening Dawit L. Petros had a conversation with the artist David Hammons, a kind of godfather for black artists who put commonplace objects to the service of conceptual art. Petros remembers Hammons saying: “Observe the homeless on the street. There’s an immediacy to the knowledge they accumulate.”

I would like this essay, while it ruminates on Petros’ *The Stranger’s Notebook*, to be read equally as an address to immediacy. The “here” in “Here Comes the Stranger,” speaks of a stranger arriving to a life of uncertainty. It is an uncertainty of an exigent life, happening from one day to the next. “Everyday an emergency.”⁷

The Stranger’s Notebook is an account of mobility. It is a travelogue in which the past and present flow together in undulant motions. Therein are fragments, in-betweens, and multilingual testimonies. As it is written, “wanting to describe time is high ambition. All one can do is stretch the inner space where time’s word reiterates, where its light murmurs.”⁸

Notes:

¹ Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2003) p. 14.

² Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 48.

³ Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, p. 20.

⁴ Toni Morrison, “The Fisherwoman,” foreword to Robert Bergman, *A Kind of Rapture* (New York: Pantheon, 1998).

⁵ Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, p. 27.

⁶ Édouard Glissant, “Highest Noon,” in *Black Salt* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 103.

⁷ Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, p. 3.

⁸ Édouard Glissant, “Highest Noon,” in *Black Salt*, p. 99.

Emmanuel Iduma

Iduma was born and raised in Nigeria and is the author of the novel *The Sound of Things to Come* and *A Stranger’s Pose*, a forthcoming book of travel stories. His art criticism and narrative essays have been published in several journals and exhibition catalogues. A lawyer by training, he graduated from the MFA program in Art Writing at the School of Visual Arts, where he is now a faculty member.

Exhibition Checklist

A series of complicated ambivalences, Bamako, Mali, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Act of Recovery (Part I), Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2016
archival color pigment print

Untitled (Prologues), Nouadhibou, Mauritania, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Untitled (Epilogues), Catania, Italy, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Indigo (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality, Part II), Cap Spartel, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment prints

The Green March (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality), Tamougrite, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Untitled, Tangier, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment print

Confrontation (The always incomplete construction of thresholds), Tangier, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment print

Untitled (Overlapping and intertwined territories that fall from view), I, II, III, Catania, Italy, 2016
archival color pigment print

Tra il dire e il fare c'è in mezzo il mare, Lampedusa, Italy, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Historical Rupture, 2016
archival color pigment prints

Nearness and distance constitute a position, Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2016
archival color pigment prints

La tente n'a de porte, 2016
multi-channel sound; 7:21 minutes

About the journey, 2016
multi-channel sound; 7:21 minutes

The Shop, 2016
single-channel video, sound; 5:27 minutes

Forms of Passage, 2016
three-channel video; 7:21 minutes

Untitled (Distance) Cap Spartel, Morocco, 2016
archival color pigment print

All works courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

Dawit L. Petros: The Stranger's Notebook is organized for the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute by Raechell Smith. Special thanks to the artist, Emmanuel Iduma, and Tiwani Contemporary, London.

Support for this exhibition and programs has been provided by the H&R Block Foundation, the Missouri Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to audiences in Canada and beyond.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

Cover Image

Untitled (Prologues), Nouadhibou, Mauritania, 2016
archival color pigment print

Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

H&R Block Artspace
at the Kansas City Art Institute
16 East 43rd Street
Kansas City, Missouri 64111
www.kcai.edu/artspace

Hours

Tuesday-Saturday, 12:00-5:00 pm

Artists. Art. Ideas.

Dedicated to artists, art, and ideas since 1999, the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute presents exhibitions of contemporary art and a range of public programs for a growing audience of students, educators, artists, and the general public.