

FOAM MAGAZINE

"ORDINARY LIFE"

BY JOSEPH GERGEL

"WHO WE ARE" ISSUE #46, 2017

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featuring:
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ORDINARY LIFE

BY JOSEPH GERGEL

As a photographer working across documentary, fashion and performance, Namsa Leuba's artistic practice defies compartmentalization. Equally comfortable working in the rural villages of Guinea Conakry as she is in the commercial studios of Paris and New York, Namsa Leuba combines an anthropological interest in traditional customs with an aesthetic that is informed by sartorial and design sensibilities. Leuba creates a visual imaginary that explores the signs and symbols of her cultural heritage, from rituals and ceremonies to statuettes and masquerades. Adopting a theatrical approach with careful attention to props, colours and gestures, her projects explore multiple points of cultural collision as she searches for the middle ground between fixed modes of representation.

IS/GQ/ brings together a collection of photographs taken during the artist's six month residency in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2014. While Leuba created several long-term projects during her time in South Africa, this publication consists of the 'outtakes' of images throughout her travels around the country. Whereas her other series focuses on the constructed image, the images in *IS/GQ/* are

spontaneous, unrehearsed and possess a more fundamentally raw character. Some are taken at the height of action, others at quiet moments of reflection. In one sense, they are about a stranger getting adjusted to her new surroundings. In another, they are about an intimate connection with a culture that transcends the visual.

The photographs in *IS/GQ/* are filled with the mundane aspects of ordinary life in South Africa. Images of the urban environment are contrasted with idyllic rural landscapes. These are divided by scenes of nightlife and entertainment as well as portraits of performers, workers, artists and students. While guided by her experience in South Africa, the images do not end at mere documentation. Rather, they have been cropped, manipulated and edited to create an ambiguous narrative. In one image, a man poses wearing a makeshift costume of animal fur, shells and broken cans. The image has been digitally altered to create green-tinted skin and an orange-hue background. The subject becomes isolated on a flat picture plane as his surroundings are edited out. With the clothing and accessories created by Leuba, the image is more about the artist's own cultural imaginary than it is

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is a realistic portrayal of South African culture.

In another image, a young girl in beaded attire, wearing intricate feathers and head gear, gazes intimately at the camera. An actual outtake from Leuba's Zulu Kids series, here the model takes a break from posing as an actor in a much different emotional manner than the staged version. The sepia hue of the photograph suggests an aged yet artificial vintage, contrasting with the black and white image it breaks up on the adjoining page.

Rather than function through narrative continuity, *Isigqi* is more akin to a visual journal than a complete body of work. Taken individually, the images do not quite add up. Their arresting force is formed through their disparate associations, grey areas and disjointed pieces. Whether juxtaposing portraits, still life, or abstracted images, the diverse elements co-exist in a harmonious rhythm that projects a surrealist and psychedelic filter.

Relating to Leuba's studies in art direction, *Isigqi*'s affect is formed in the way the photographs are presented together and speak to one another on the page. The publication is as much about the artist as an editor and graphic designer as it is about her as a photographer. The book's unique layout includes overlapping images, tinting, spacing, patterns and coloured backgrounds. The intentional cropping of photographs makes many images indecipherable. Leuba prioritizes the grain of the pixelated image, with close ups of microphones, teeth

and fire blown up to unrecognizable proportions. Without context, these image fragments begin to speak to each other and suggest implicit connections. The selection further mixes different types of photographic tropes, from reportage and documentary to landscapes and photo-manipulation. In its multi-layered presentation, it is not just what is shown, but how it is shown, and how the viewer navigates the pages of the book as a physical object.

With a culturally diverse background between Switzerland and Guinea, Namsa Leuba's photography examines the representation of African identity through the Western imagination. Leuba's work sparks a conversation between Africa and the West, fact and fiction, and action and representation, speaking to a pluralistic sense of identity in a global and dispersed age. Her work interrogates notions of authenticity and exoticism as she encounters Africa as both an insider and as an outsider. *Isigqi* transcends the documentary tradition to engage theatre, spectacle and the imaginary. In the interplay between these eclectic images, her work toes the line to portray South African culture in a wholly fantastic and contemporary light.

NAMSA LEUBA

(b.1982, CH/GN) is a Swiss-Guinean photographer who explores African identity through Western imagination. She received her BA and MA from ECAL, Switzerland. In 2013, she won the Magenta Foundation's prize for emerging photographers, and her work has been featured in exhibitions including Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain (2015) and Daegu Photo Biennale, South Korea (2014). Her work has been published in *I-D*, *Vice Magazine* and *New York Magazine*. She currently lives and works in Switzerland.

All images © Namsa Leuba

JOSEPH GERGEL

(b. 1986, USA) is an independent curator and writer based in Lagos, Nigeria. He currently serves as a curatorial adviser to Art Twenty One and Arthouse Contemporary, two contemporary art organizations in Lagos, as well as a curator at Moon Man Studios in London. Gergel was co-curator of three editions of LagosPhoto, the international festival of photography in Nigeria, and has written for publications including *Aperture*, *British Journal of Photography*, *DIS Magazine* and *Art Africa*.



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