

CALEB KWARTENG PRAH

Swapping dukes for bus drivers with his multimedia takes on Ghanaian working-class life, Caleb Kwarteng Prah is the painter and photographer putting an Afrocentric spin on art history

Caleb Kwarteng Prah brings photography and painting together in works inspired by everyday Ghanaian life. For Prah, the past provides a rich field for rethinking image-making in the present, particularly by paying attention to the conditions and forces which have shaped the understanding of Black African life and its representations.

The Ghanaian artist's practice is inspired by storytelling, and his process involves close dialogue with his community to inform the stories that he tells. Prah also gives visibility to those who have been overlooked: his 2017 series, *Dukes of Trotro*, he appropriates a work by Italian Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca, which rendered the Duke of Urbino and his wife in side profile staring at each other. Prah recasts the couple as *trotro* (Ghanaian minibus) drivers adopting the same pose, printing their portraits on film mounted on plywood and then cutting them to fit the windowpane of

actual *trotro* bus doors or car boot windows. In this body of work blending photography, painting and found objects, Prah creates a hybrid and distinct language of representation.

By transforming discarded car parts into a contemporary frame for his images, Prah's work probes at the history of how frames' decorative styles signalled what was popular at the time, telling stories about when and where the artwork was completed. In his most recent series, this year's *Portraits of a City, One Minute Instant*, he draws inspiration from personal archives and family albums to think about the representation of Ghanaians from independence onwards.

Here, Prah discusses the importance of African self-representation, and how the histories of painting and photography collide in his approach to contemporary image-making.

text JAREH DAS

What can you tell us about your approach to photography painting? How does the image-making process begin for you?

I've been working with photography since 2016 and it began with taking images of people in the streets – people in markets carrying things on their heads, traders, *trotro* drivers and so on. I was studying painting at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi at the time, but I then switched to photography, so my approach to photography was that it has this connection with painting. I looked back through art history and began to appropriate or rather borrow from some of the representations and images and reconsider them from an African perspective. The first body of work I made, the *Madonna* series from 2016, involved taking images of women in the markets and streets of Ghana and restaging them in the classic biblical pose. *Madonna*, as you know, has this adornment [in paintings], a halo around her head. In my work, I recreated this with found objects connected to the sitter. For example, I used the wooden trays my sitters actually sold their products on to reconstruct the halo above their heads. This project was about finding a way to counter art history and subvert the hegemonic idea of white male dominance in art-historical representations. One thing that was clear to me early on was that I wanted the frame of the photographs to not be neutral. I wanted them to give a sculptural element to the image. This began with using aluminium frames imported from China and used widely in Ghana for windows and doors of middle-class homes, then progressed into using *trotro* bus doors.

And of course, there is this centrality of everyday life we see in the *Duke of Trotro* series.

When I started working on the images for the *Duke of Trotro*, I began to think of what kinds of objects I could use to make the project more interesting. And then I looked at the *trotro* doors and had a lightbulb moment. I also came across a painting by the Italian Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca, commissioned by the Duke of Urbino. He painted an image of the duke and [his wife] staring at each other and this is the pose I took pairing individuals I photographed for the series. The work was framed in that window which comes with the door or car boot. So that's how I started working with parts of the *trotro* buses, bringing together a relationship between individuals and objects from daily life. People's lives connected to art history.

How did you go about getting sitters for your work, given that you are speaking to people while they are working? Did you already know some of them? How did you gain their trust so you were able to document them this way?

The idea for the project came about when I was still an undergraduate student, and initially I got sitters who were mothers of my friends and worked in markets. I explained the project to my friends who would then speak to their mums – so that was how the connection began, which then led to being introduced to other people through their network. It became both an organic and expansive way of extending my network of people to document. In terms of the project, not everyone fully understood what and why I was doing this, so I would explain and show them some of the work, and then we started working from there.

How did the *trotro* doors become a frame for the image and was it straightforward to access them as a material?

In Kumasi, there's a place called Suame Magazine where anyone who needs spare parts for their car goes; it's a place I often visit to pick some of the objects I use to frame my works. I first heard about the area through my friend's dad who is a *trotro* driver, and he connected me to other drivers who would pose for me.

You have a personal connection to your sitters which then extends organically to others in the community. It's also intriguing how the photographs become a hybrid of painting and sculpture, so there's this transference to a three-dimensional language that mimics the actual frame of a *trotro* window, which in itself is a portal into the drivers' daily lives in the city. There's this double meaning in the use of a frame. Did these ideas resonate when you conceptualised this project?

After completing my *Dukes of Trotro* series, I began looking at my family album – a personal archive, if you like, of my family, beginning with my dad's photographs from his congregation. He's a pastor and over the years he amassed thousands of passport-sized images going back to the 1990s. I was also [thinking of] the one-minute passport photo stands dotted across Ghana which are signposted on every corner. I [thought] of all of the unnamed studio photographers who took pictures documenting contemporary Ghanaian life. The studio photographer often recreated a living room setting as a backdrop for photos, framing portraits to give a feeling of an aspirational life within a domestic setting. All these ideas inform my most recent project, *Portraits of a City, One Minute Instant*, which counters the earliest photographs of Africans taken through the lens of whiteness and colonialism, [by] drawing on a post-independence movement in Ghana and across the continent where African photographers began taking pictures of themselves. We see this in the works of James Barnor, Malick Sidibé, JD Okhai Ojeikere, Felicia Abban and so on. My new project is in homage to this legacy and particularly the many anonymous Ghanaian photographers documenting Ghanaian life from that moment onwards. In terms of my family album, I have been working with images of my parents on their wedding day, my dad being ordained as a pastor, and more informal moments of them dancing and celebrating, taken by photographers who are not named, and bringing these images and makers into visibility in the present.

The point you raise about the post-independence development of African photography is so important to African self-representation after colonial rule. We see the urgency as Africans across the continent used the camera as a critical tool for capturing the birth of new nations and independent people. But even today, photography plays a key role in documenting various aspects of life through digital means. When you look back at archival imagery from your family album, what informs you in deciding on the images you rework?

I was very much looking at representational framing in the archive and one thing, as I mentioned, was this recurrence in the studio photos of a domestic setting, the living room set as a backdrop for images. I also observed how, in the 80s and 90s, a Ghanaian photographer called Philip Kwame Apagya began a series where he painted backgrounds to resemble living rooms and his sitters would pose in front of them. I find these images interesting, how they construct a reality, a life that is different to the ones of the individuals who posed in these studios. Linking this new work to my previous series with the *trotro*, I looked closely at the signage of the buses, which often had positive messages in Twi like "*Aware pa*" meaning "Good Marriage", and began to draw on that to title paintings, so for example *Aware Pa* would be paired with wedding photographs. Highlife music is also an inspiration due to its lyrical storytelling of everyday life. I was thinking about images from the archive that coincide with certain tracks.

Your projects are long-term and require a lot of time from conceptualisation to finished work. Is your preference that you work on a particular theme or topic over a long period of time so you're able to explore the possibilities contained within it?

For this new body of work, I want to work over a long period of time as I find these personal archives and arriving at new images interesting. Having said that, I do also return to past projects like the *Madonna* series, which is ongoing. My work takes time and is always evolving.