

WRITERS MOSAIC

Misan Harriman

In Conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

'Robert Frank, and I love this quote so much, said about photography is that 'the eye should learn to listen before it looks.' If you are not able to see the world clearly, you should wait until you understand how to see the world before you hold the seemingly inanimate object called a camera.

— Misan Harriman

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Gabriel Gbadamosi talks to the photographer, Misan Harriman, about his exhibition, The Purpose of Light.

[Music]

Gabriel Gbadamosi (GG): Misan Harriman. Thank you for speaking with *WritersMosaic*, that's me, Gabriel Gbadamosi, at the moment. And we're going to come to your extraordinary exhibition. I understand that it's been a smash hit over the summer.

Misan Harriman (MH): It has. I mean, there have been hundreds of people coming every day, which is, I'm being told, it has just never happened.

GG: Well, let me basically frame for listeners something about the exhibition, which I hope they'll go to themselves. It's at Hope 93 Gallery, Eastcastle Street, just north of Oxford Street. And it's several rooms over two floors of very large, black and white photographs of protesters, demonstrators, at a range of events and I understand in a range of countries. They are placed on the wall just slightly higher than us. And when you look at them in all their vividness and clarity, you have the sense of these people as heroic. I think that's intentional. But I'll come to a discussion of the exhibition and particularly of its title, *The Purpose of Light*, and leave that hanging as a question for the listener for a while. But I'll just ask you about one photograph. Generally, the photographs are of ordinary men and women, children, but there's one of Francesca Albanese, the special rapporteur or spokesperson for human rights in Palestine, in the

occupied territories. Her eyes are tightly closed, and the expression of her face is of pressure but also of determination and hope. That's quite a complex and powerful mix of human emotions that you have captured in a photograph. Can you speak to us about that photograph, taking it?

MH: Yes, and I think before I speak about that photograph, what I will say is that not long ago, a lady came in, and she didn't know that I had this image. And she was walking, and I saw her turn, and she saw it, she walked towards it, and it was as if her knees gave way. I mean, she—

GG: She trembled.

MH: More than trembled. I mean, she was on the floor, looking up at this image. And when she got onto the bench, she didn't even want to engage in a conversation.

GG: Well, it's very much a Willy Brandt moment when he fell to his knees at the memorial for Auschwitz. It's a lot of pressure. But please, speak to us about the photo.

MH: For me as an artist, some of the things—I'm not always there, and then I get told things. But I saw this, and it was hard to process. Francesca's portrait was

serendipitous in many ways because it was days before the exhibition was due to open. And if you know how I work with print, it takes a while to get these images sorted. And I got a call from her team saying she would love to meet. I'm a huge fan, and she's aware of my work. And I was like, 'Anywhere.' And I always have my camera bag with me. So I didn't know whether she would want me to take her portrait or not initially. And we met in Leicester Square. She'd just finished an interview, I think with LBC. And she was very humble saying, 'Oh, I'm not photogenic.' Very sweet and quite shy when I politely begged to observe her humanity with my lens. And then she said, 'Of course.' And as she was settling herself and just took a deep breath and closed her eyes and relaxed, in the moment, I knew the decisive moment was already there at the beginning of the shoot.

GG: That's a very interesting phrase: observing humanity with your lens. As I understand it, you came very late, relatively speaking, to photography. You've only been practicing since about 2017, which is only about eight years.

MH: Yeah. I'll be 48 in December, and my wife got me a camera for my 40th, so yes.

GG: And you're self-taught.

MH: YouTube self-taught. Yeah, I'm someone that really struggles with traditional teaching structures, so I would have really struggled in a fancy art school for photography. I know that. And there's something about a guy or a woman in their garage making a badly lit video about aperture or shutter speed that I love because—

GG: Okay, you're a nerd.

MH: I'm a nerd, but also there's no sense of failure. And I think the judgment of those that are neuro—not neurotypical, that see the world differently, process the world differently, and I'm certainly one of those, makes it hard for us to learn in the way that we need to. And I, at 40, decided I'm going to do it my way and look for people that will help me on my journey, using this thing called the internet.

GG: So presumably you've always, not necessarily with the lens, but the lens of your mind, your eye, your imagination, been observing humanity.

MH: Yes.

GG: I wanted to take us back so that people get a sense of who you are. Now, as far as I understand, you hail from the southeastern oil producing Delta area of Nigeria,

around the town of Warri, and that your paternal grandfather was an Englishman, Mr. Harriman, who worked for John Holt, the West Africa Liverpool Company—

MH: You really have done your research.

GG: —that my grandfather also worked for as a cocoa farmer and produce buyer in the western region of Nigeria.

MH: You're joking. So they could have known each other?

GG: I'm sure they probably did. So moving on, he married your paternal grandmother, who was an Itsekiri woman. Can you tell us about her and more generally about the Itsekiri? Who are they?

MH: Well, she was a [missing identifier] woman, and I never knew [missing name] because again, she—I met her a few times when I was very little. But you have the Ijaw and [missing identifier] people from Warri and Sapele, right? And it is the oil producing—inland oil producing region. So the first oil in Nigeria is found within that region. And it's actually quite heartbreakingly for me because so much of the tragedy of the wealth of our great nation, Nigeria, like many post-colonial situations, has been

used into a capitalist machine that the people haven't seen. And I've been on a journey, age 47, of unlearning and decolonising my own worldview and mind through the proximity we have to information that many people didn't have a generation or two ago. And I've just finished reading Omar El Akkad's book, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. Have you read this book?

GG: No, but I see that it's one of the slogans held up by a protester amongst your pictures.

MH: It's a life-changing read.

GG: Yes, it is.

MH: It's a third-culture kid talking about neocolonialism, white supremacy, the hyper-extractive capitalist structures that we have to all exist in as [the] world is today and asking the question: is the status quo okay?

GG: So let us turn then, full on, to this complex, extraordinary show. Let's deal first of all with the title you gave it. What is, Misan, The Purpose of Light?

MH: Well, Robert Frank, and I love this quote so much, said about photography is that 'the eye should learn to listen before it looks.' If you are not able to see the world clearly, you should wait until you understand how to see the world before you hold the seemingly inanimate object called a camera, right? A lot of young people come to me saying, 'Oh my God, how do I get all the reach and followers? How do I become a famous photographer?' I always say, 'Put the camera down. Put the camera down and ask yourself why you should hold the camera. Look at the people whose shoulders you must stand on. Look at the work of Mo Amin, Gordon Parks, Bruce Davidson, Eve Arnold, particularly the early Blitz work of Cecil Beaton.' I mean, I can name so many, and these are people I was obsessed with growing up. So I didn't have a camera, but I was obsessed with filmmakers and photographers. And all I did was either go to the library, read photo books, buy photo books when I could afford them, and/or watch every film that I could.

Light is a central element of imagery. There is no imagery without light. And I believe that social media and algorithms and how we consume imagery has reduced the importance, for a long time, of what a still image can do. And I'm putting on this show to remind people, not just the emotions of what I've captured, but the importance of imagery, and that is why it's called The Purpose of Light. I think, as Nina Simone said that 'to be an artist is to reflect the times that we live in.'

GG: Let's look at the great panoply, the great anti-war pageant that a spectator encounters going into the exhibition. It's not only anti-war, it's about the Black Lives Matter movement, it's about the justice for Grenfell, the absolutely horrific burning to death of 72 people in the Tower Block in London.

MH: Biggest loss of life since the Blitz in a civilian building.

GG: Absolutely. It's also about trans rights.

MH: Very important community for me.

GG: It's about the onslaught on Gaza, what I and many other people think of as a genocide going on in our time in full view of the digital iPhone.

MH: I get even a little emotional hearing you use those words because it's such a rare thing.

GG: But nevertheless, these are causes that are profoundly moving and upsetting. But what we're getting are the portraits of people protesting. Amongst the photographers

that you've cited as influences on your development of an eye, visual culture, is Gordon Parks, who documented the civil rights movement. And look what happened to that in the early '70s, where it petered out. What do you think is the difference between Gordon Park's work and your work now in *The Purpose of Light* in our contemporary world?

MH: Well, he's in the canon of—his work is staggeringly good. Staggeringly. And he did high fashion work. They never gave him a *Vogue* cover. They should have. He made films, and the most famous one being *Shaft*. My favourite work by him is an observation of a family called the Fontenelle family. And it's, I think, the greatest observation of what abject poverty in America is. It's a heartbreakingly body of work. And I have obsessed over Gordon's work for a long, long time. I think change is gradual but seismic in each generation when it comes to whether we've moved forward. Because if you look at America today and how the African American man and woman is able to thrive, it's always going to be an uphill struggle for the civil rights of black people, and there's a long, long way to go, but there has been through protest. I think the next move is for this generation to recognise the power of the black dollar and black culture, right? [GG laughs] And what I mean by that is that we've shaped world culture. I say we, you look at the NBA, 80% black, NFL, 80-something percent black, the biggest musicians in the world, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, athletes, LeBron James. And I think there needs

to be a point where those icons have the sense of, *okay, I'm going to force change. I'm dedicating the rest of my life as an artist to collective liberation.*

GG: Yeah. Okay, that's where we are, collective liberation.

MH: And that is what my show is about.

GG: How did you, an English-educated, elite Nigerian, who takes high society, high fashion photographs, front cover of Vogue, the first black photographer in 104 years to get the big September issue, a chronicler of the life of royalty, Meghan and Harry and their children, how did you, this elite Nigerian British artist, activist, entrepreneur, come to a vision of collective action?

MH: I think because when you've looked at enough images as I have and taken enough, you see the thread. You see the thread. You see the trans community come under attack, and you're like, you're trying to tell me that 0.5% of the world, a tiny amount of trans people all over the world, are responsible for, what, industry leaving your seaside town, tourism leaving, automotive and the mines closing down? You're trying to tell me you're going to believe—and if you know trans people as I do, that 99% of the trans people I know are really vulnerable, right, and they've been through hell

and back just to try and—I mean, do you know what it's like to be born into a body that is your prison? Let's call it what it is. These people have been through enough. They are not the enemy, right? So you see that—

GG: One of the most beautiful placards amongst the photographs is one which says, 'If you're blaming immigrants, you're looking in the wrong direction.'

MH: It's by a granny that I'm trying to get in. There are so many legendary grannies. So I look at the trans issue. I look at the ownership of the British newspapers that are attacking the trans people. We also need to look at patriarchy and why there are not women in the room and in the corridors of power relative to the amount of men that have had a good crack at it.

GG: So you are a leader and a teacher.

MH: Yes.

GG: An exemplar.

MH: To bear witness.

GG: Of bearing witness.

MH: Yes. And resistance without—Peter Magubane said this in my film, 'Without documentation, there's no resistance at all.'

GG: In your film.

MH: Yeah.

GG: We'll come on to speak about your film work.

MH: But I also think my images are there to hold your hand and say, 'Your whisper is a roar.' Right, so me documenting the truth of transhumanity, of women's rights, of anti-racism, right, of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, I have images from there. I have images from, obviously, when my life changed forever after George Floyd was lynched, right, on camera. I have a lot of the images that led me to becoming the first black man to shoot the cover of British Vogue and the September issue, which is even more of a thing in fashion. Now, I had a choice then. I could have just been vibes, right? I could have just continued shooting lots of fabulous people and going to lots of

fabulous places, but the streets kept calling me, right? The roar of the streets, I couldn't ignore it. And every single protest movement that has happened since George Floyd, I've been there. Which is why my body of work is quite unique because it's everything from Grenfell to [missing name] to Afghanistan, it's all there. I shot it all.

GG: What you described as the roar of the streets, I experienced like this: walking into the exhibition and going through the rooms, I felt accompanied by the people on the walls and that I could accompany them. I want to ask you about the cultural power of Britain and Nigeria, as you are living through it, experiencing it, and observing it. What do you think it's doing for our culture here in Britain or in the world?

MH: I think—in a far-right protest, I saw a great sign. I think it's in the show. It's downstairs in the show, saying, 'We are here because you were there.'

GG: Sivanandan. The great cultural theorist.

MH: It's, I mean, it's such a—I don't know why people don't use that more. It just says—I love. I love it.

GG: Yeah, they do. It's known.

MH: I think it's, yeah, it's known. And I think Nigerians are not meek, right? So we take space, we do business well, we love music, film, we are in the tip of the spear of what popular culture is today. And some of that has come directly from Lagos via London and to the world. And in sports, of course, we have superstars in rugby and football.

GG: No, no, no, you can't be glossing over football. Nigeria is doing terribly in football.

MH: Well, but in terms of the Nigerian British, we have England players of Nigerian heritage. But it's also been an interesting journey because you're right, the class system comes into it, and I think you just like with South Asian brothers and sisters, that we have been—we come from a generation of looking up to proximity to whiteness. So that can create tricky situations like Rishi Sunak being the first Brown prime minister but having pretty right-wing views and being able to sit and look with his whole chest at a camera and say that he doesn't believe that there's any racism in the UK.

GG: And this is you tiptoeing around Kemi Badenoch?

MH: [GG laughs] I'm not. I would never tiptoe around that. I have a sledgehammer ready to speak.

GG: But let's not go for the ad hominem attacks.

MH: No, no. And that's why I wanted to preface it. We're talking about the South Asian community and the Black community. We can end up, if we're not careful, in 2025, when we are so well informed, is having this generation of Black and Brown voices that are only allowed to be in the corridors of power if they are caricatures, whether it's Priti Patel, Suella, Kemi, even Kwasi, right? And you go to Peckham, right? You mentioned Peckham, and you asked me if any of those people speak for the people there. Where I go, I [missing words], right?

GG: Yeah. I know the place.

MH: I know it well. You tell me if they have posters of any of those people. So I think we need to be really, really careful as a community to realise that we bring so much to the great soup of this nation, and we shouldn't reduce ourselves or become self-hating in order to feel that that's the only way to thrive.

GG: Is there anything that you have experienced around African culture, or let's narrow it down, around Nigerian culture, which you think is of value to the world?

MH: Everything.

GG: Everything. Give us some examples, give us some insights.

MH: Starting from Fela Kuti.

GG: The great musician.

MH: Who kept it very, very real, and he was an activist, a real activist. Now, obviously, you've got [missing name], so many coming up. But more than that, I think Nigerian food is crossing over. There are more Nigerian restaurants that I've ever seen. If you go into a niche in the West End, I mean, it's half full of students from Asia and other parts of the world. Jollof rice is part of English culture now.

GG: Food, music.

MH: Food, music. Also, travel. There's a lot more people wanting to actually go on proper tourist trips, not just to Nigeria, but obviously Ghana is doing that job very, very well as well. And it isn't just African Americans doing the right to return trips, it's actually saying, 'I want to go on holiday and experience the richness and diversity of these nations.' So I think tourism will be a big part of it. I think consuming what is cool. So the aspiration of a genuine African experience, whether it's fashion, which we're very—art, obviously. My dear friend, [missing name], is having a 10th anniversary this year of ART X, the great art fair. So the soft power of culture can change the world.

GG: Yes, it can.

MH: And I think we can be one of the leaders. Also, at least speaking for Nigeria, I think Nigeria, 70% of Nigeria is under the age of 30 as well. And again, the borderless ability of being able to connect and educate yourself through the internet but also reach people.

GG: Do you see any difficulties in the way that African America and, let's say, Nigeria meet and talk? Can they form that bridge effectively?

MH: Yeah, I think they can form the bridge, but I think both cultures are very different, and they have to get to know each other. The source code may be the same, right, and genetically, obviously, we are family, but the lived experience is different. So if the lived experience is different, we have to go through a great learning so we can hold our hands together and build a cultural footbridge, *per se*, that is one that will be immensely powerful.

GG: You've, so far, developed your work in photography, but you are now moving further forward into film. And one of your short films, *The After*, was Oscar nominated, as I understand it, and that's being followed up with further projects. That is the kind of bridge, that is the kind of encounter across which African Americans, almost Africans, for example, can meet each other. Can you tell me a little bit about what you hope to achieve with this further move into film?

MH: Well, I think the intentionality of me as an artist is really important. So the story of *The After* is about grief. And it is a Nigerian man as a lead character, but it's a film for the world. And because I made it with Netflix, it was seen by millions and millions and millions of people. And this is me, a Nigerian man, telling a story with a Nigerian lead, David Oyelowo, right, giving one of the great performances of our time, being nominated for an Academy Award for my first film, showing what happens when we get

given the opportunity to tell our stories in our way. And what I love about it, apart from the film doing well, is that people from all four corners of creation were deeply moved by it, which shows the cultural power of our stories. Because the lead character's name is Dayo, right? It's not James or Bobby. I was very intentional, and everyone soaked it all in.

GG: Yeah, it becomes a joy.

MH: Yes, and David and I are going to have a long—we have a couple of projects that we have in development. And my new film is with another Nigerian filmmaker called Andy Mundy-Castle, who won a BAFTA for his last film called *White Nanny, Black Child*. And this is a film called *Shoot the People*, and it's a feature-length documentary on my life, and it is an observation on what it means to be an artist that refuses to look away when it pays to be apathetic, [music] and it's a really honest observation on protest imagery and what fearless artistry means in the age of fear.

[Music]

GG: The Purpose of Light.

[Music]

MH: Absolutely.

[Music]

GG: Misan Harriman, thank you very much.

[Music]

MH: Thank you very much for having me, sir.

[Music]

Presenter: Gabriel Gbadamosi was in conversation with the writer and photographer, Misan Harriman. To hear more writers, go to writermosaic.org.uk

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Misan Harriman was in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

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