

**THE NEW BLACK
VANGUARD:
PHOTOGRAPHY
BETWEEN ART AND
FASHION AN INTERVIEW
WITH ANTWAUN
SARGENT BY SARAH
FORYAME**

Sarah Foryame: Before we get into talking about The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion exhibition, I think it is super important to understand your journey into this field, especially for young black creatives who have experienced or going to experience this important exhibition. You're an independent writer, curator, and critic, tell us more about how you came to be.

Antwaun Sargent: I started 10 years ago, writing about artists of my generation living here in New York - artists like Awol Erizku, who is in the book - who were really making their concerns known in the city. I was just so fascinated by their perspectives on not only the sort of mediums that they were working in but also on questions of race, and identity and desire. I just kept on going to their studios and writing about their work and through that process deepening my understanding of black artistic production and specifically my understanding of this generation's take on art. Writing led to an impulse to be a curator. I always say that curating is just writing with objects, and I think that once you've written a lot about different artists, the mind in a natural way drifts to putting objects into space itself. It has been 10 years since I started writing and entered into the art world, but I just keep on exploring. I got my art education in artist studios, in the galleries of art museums, and through an unrelenting curiosity to know more.

Sarah Foryame: You highlighted previously that, 'the artists are operating in different contexts and thinking in different ways.' The photographers come from various backgrounds geographically, medium-wise but also being of different stages in their career. What was the thinking behind bringing all these image makers together to form The New Black Vanguard?

Antwaun Sargent: I just saw these photographers thinking about the possibilities of a photo differently. The thread that I could draw between the differences apparent in their practices was a real understanding or curiosity or appreciation about the ways in which dress, self-presentation, and fashion intersect with the histories of black portraiture. Despite the fact some are working in Lagos and some are working in Los Angeles and some are working in London or working in South Africa or New York, the common thread is their fidelity to exploring the history of photography through these contemporary notions of self-presentation and style. And in bringing them together, they are all sort of mostly young, I think that there's no one over mid 30's, so they all in my point of view still at the very beginning of their careers which is important because the way that they have come to photography in a lot of ways is through a contemporary context. Many of them came to photography through being online, through Tumblr, or Twitter, Instagram or the camera phone. You see that technology in the ways they are constructing images which is also a really important thing to point out. Photography in one way could be understood as the advancement of technology, as technology improved, cameras got better- as we've entered this age of digital platforms, social media and cameras in our pockets, our relationship to images have changed. These photographers are the first generation of image makers who are grappling with this new reality. I think that is also a thread that runs through the exhibition, that runs through the book, is the ways in which these photographers built their own audiences and made their concerns known first outside of traditional magazines and museums which allowed them a certain freedom to make images from their space of community.

Sarah Foryame: The history of representation of the Western Asian and North African region is very much a discussion

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that has historically and continues to take place. Tasweer has consciously called for the term “Middle East” to be referred to as Western Asia and North Africa. Photography has been at the forefront of shaping how the region, its culture and diversity of people are seen and also unseen. What were your thoughts when you knew of the potential of exhibiting this show here in the region?

Antwaun Sargent: The camera has played a role in how we see everything and how we see everyone. In particular in relation to this exhibition *The New Black Vanguard*, what we are talking about is the reimagining of blackness through a new generation. If you think about some of the historical anthropological images that have come to dominate the imagination about Western Asia or North Africa that has also happened around the world. In America and Europe, so I think this exhibition is one way to show that folks who generally or historically had images taken of them are now doing the taking of photos, they are fighting photography with photography. Having a show in Western Asia allows for us to have that conversation to deepen our understanding of images being constructions of desire, being constructions of beauty, which is not necessarily the truth but it is a point of view worth considering. So being able to present *The New Black Vanguard* in this context allows us to have these sorts of conversations in a local context and address questions like what is the role of photography in Western Asia and North Africa? A show like this also more broadly about the histories of image making that have disempowered and empowered folks. In *The New Black Vanguard*, you see photographers thinking about ways in which they can use the camera to express above all else their individual desires.

Sarah Foryame: Across West Asia and North Africa, multiple image makers and designers both men and women are challenging and experimenting what fashion and image making is and how they want to frame their narratives. The fashion scene in Doha has been super interesting to witness grow, and so many designers and image makers are actively connecting with fashion, art and photography. Where does your own interest in fashion and photography stem from?

Antwaun Sargent: My own interest stems from growing up in a household where fashion was very important and professionally my interest particularly with photography and fashion and the intersections of the two, is about them being the most democratic expressions of who we are. Everyone has a camera in their pocket, or just about everybody and everyone gets up in the morning and gets dressed. Everyone’s engaging in these two mediums on an almost daily basis, so I just wanted to do an exhibition and think about a book and artists who are engaging with the broadest publics possible. Through fashion and photography you get that engagement, there’s a connection that everyone can. Everyone engages in fashion, and the images we see and the bodies that we see dressed say a great deal about power, a great deal about our desires, about our identity, and I wanted to make sure that this first book about photography really dealt with as many publics as possible.

Sarah Foryame: Multiple social media channels have become a digital space where black image makers and creatives in fashion are making spaces for themselves, sharing and publishing their work, collaborating, curating and connecting. Much of the reason is due to institutional barriers and neglect. But we have seen an interesting shift over the years how fashion photography is distributed and published within mainstream media, they have become increasingly inclusive. What are your thoughts on this and how do you think some of these image makers are creating

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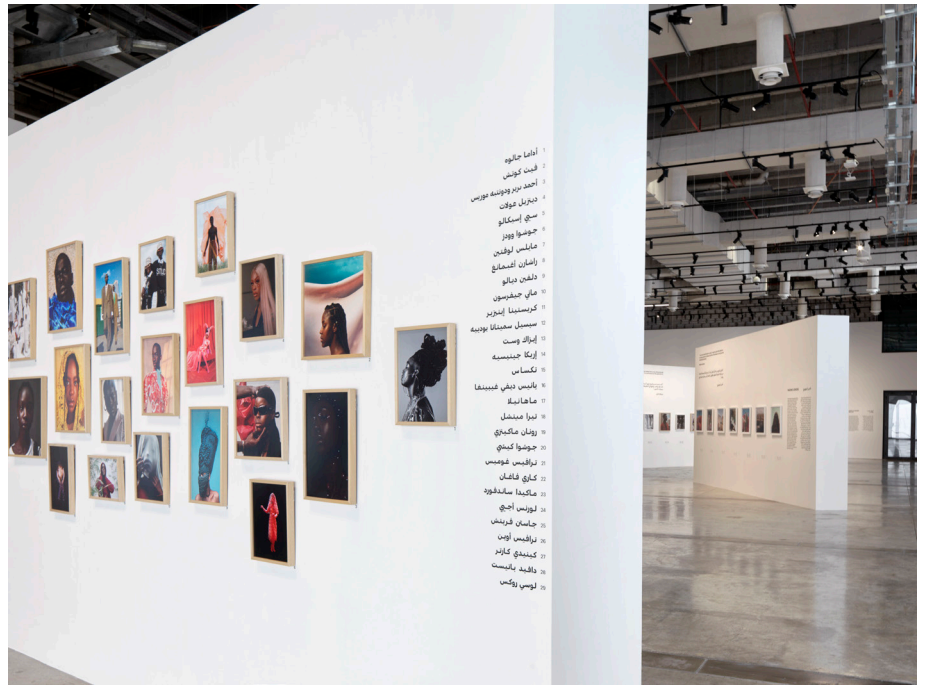
spaces for themselves on and offline?

Antwaun Sargent: A lot of these image makers built their audiences outside of the traditional magazine and traditional museum. I think that is an important thing to note because those avenues were not available to them, institutional avenues were not available to them. Institutional gatekeepers were mostly trying to keep them out of the conversation around photography, the conversation around fashion and these photographers decided they wanted their voices heard and they went about making their voices heard on social media using Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and the phones in their pockets. And later, they also started publishing their own books, their own magazines. They really started to challenge the status quo, and the institutional perspectives in a way that allowed them to say we belong here. I think that challenge has grown so loud that museums and magazines can't ignore their voices or risk not being part of the conversation, risk being irrelevant. They've changed the conversation in a lot of ways, they've created the contemporary conversation around image making that has influenced institutional spaces like museums and magazines.

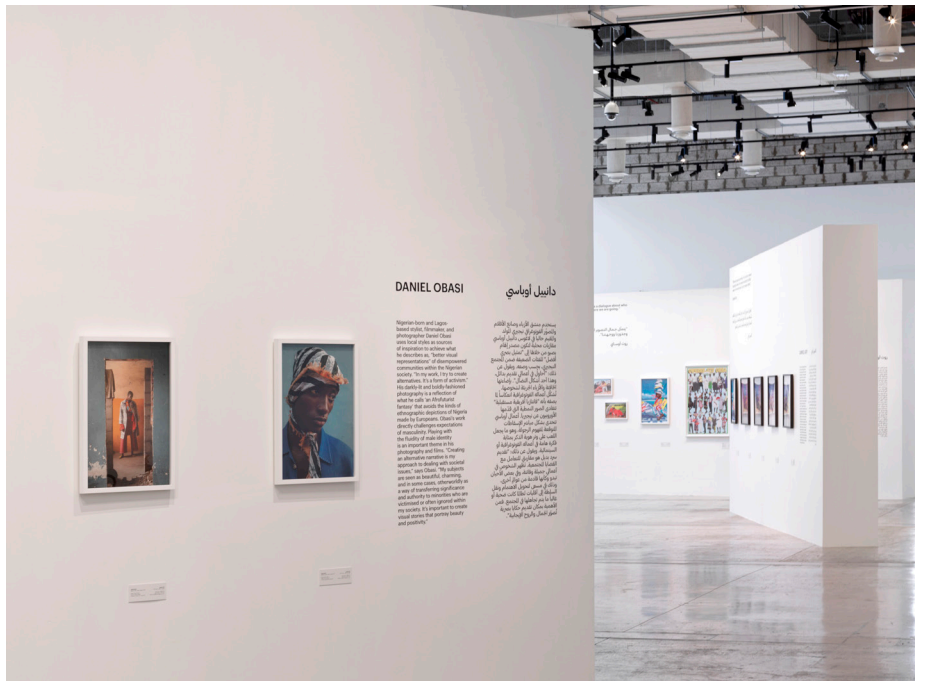
Sarah Foryame: I haven't been this excited about an exhibition since El Anatsui had his exhibition in Doha in 2019, and to my knowledge, the fact he was the first artist from an African country (Born in Anyako, Ghana, and residing in Nsukka, Nigeria) to hold a retrospective show in Doha which was so significant to me on a personal and professional level. It opened up conversations in my circle on being African and black living in the Middle East, representation worldwide and interestingly enough, on fashion too. And now, The New Black Vanguard is here in Doha, and it's opening up conversations on fashion, art, photography and the representation of black bodies and lives. What type of conversations do you hope spring from the exhibition being in Doha?

Antwaun Sargent: What I would like after folks see the show, see the ways in which these artists are creating, is for them to think about how the lessons of the images can be applied to local communities in Doha. I think that each of these photographers are working in vastly different contexts around the world. What they have stood up and said is that in their communities' people deserve to be seen. The beauty of those communities deserve to be seen, the desires of those communities deserve to be seen and I think that if we had folks in communities around the world and communities like Doha decide to image what beauty is in a local context, what desire looks like in a local context, representation looks like in a local context, I think we will have a very different photo, and that different photo would allow us to see the richness and the singularity of each of those communities. I hope The New Black Vanguard being in Doha is a way to spark or shine a light on the ways in which photography and creativity can be seen and created in a local context. Because that's what each one of these photographers are doing, I brought them together but if you think about them individually, each one is creating their own images in their own way in their own community. I think that is important for art. I think it is important for art to have these local connections. It's a way to tell the story of people who live in various communities and not just one. We've privileged one type of story and what The New Black Vanguard says is that there are many more great stories to be told.

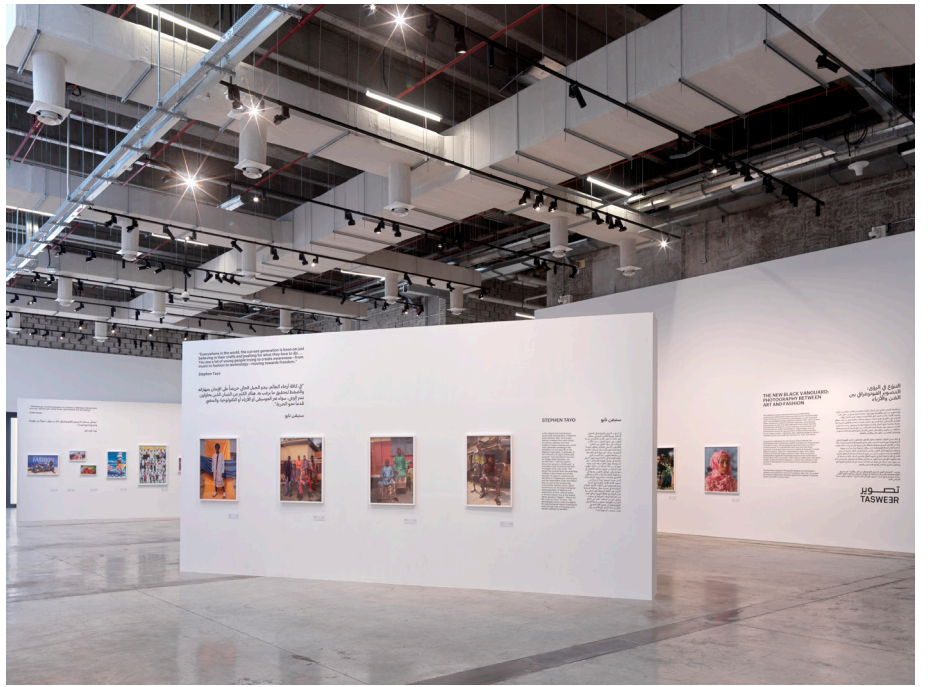
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The exhibition presents selected works by groundbreaking contemporary artists whose vibrant portraits and conceptual images merge the genres of art and fashion photography in ways that break down long-established image-making boundaries. Their work has been widely consumed in traditional lifestyle magazines, ad campaigns, and museums, as well as on their individual social-media channels, reinfusing the contemporary visual vocabulary around beauty and the body with new vitality and substance. These images open up conversations around the representation of Black bodies and Black lives as subject matters. Collectively, they celebrate people of colour's creativity and the cross-pollination between art, style, and culture.

Consciously challenging the stereotypes of Black identity, the participating artists counterargue against homogenous representation of people of colour. The photographs shown here serve as a form of visual activism. It's a perspective often seen from this loose movement of emerging talents who are creating photography in vastly different contexts—New York and Johannesburg, Lagos, and London. A salon wall featuring images created by many other young Black photographers signals the expanding presence of this movement in visual culture today. The results—often made in collaboration with Black models, stylists and fashion designers—present new outlooks on the medium of photography, and the notions of race and beauty, gender and power.

The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion—initiated and organised by Aperture Foundation, New York—is curated by Antwaun Sargent with curatorial support from Tasweer's Charlotte Cotton and Sarah Foryame Lawler.