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ITALIA

LEOPARD - ÉMILIE RÉGNIER

By Rica Cerbarano, May 2, 2018



“Leopard” is a photographic project realised by Émilie Régnier between 2014 and 2016, a series of portraits with a common element: the animalier pattern par excellence, the leopard. An emblem of virility and power for some, a symbol of femininity for others; sophisticated, tacky, provocative, eccentric... Worn everywhere around the world, this universal pattern reveals the unique and atypical personality of each photographed subject.

During the 13th Dakar Biennale, the project will be exhibited from 3 to 23 May 2018 at ONOMO Hotel Dakar, partner of the exhibition together with AKAA FAIR.

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We talked about the project with the author Émilie Régnier, Haitian-Canadian photographer, grown up in Africa. who reflects on African identity and the relation between Africa and the West.

“Léopard” is entirely focused on the leopard pattern and people who wear it, but it can’t be considered a purely aesthetic project. What’s the message behind your pictures?

I am trying through this project to build bridges between the African continent and the West. In Africa, leopard fur is synonymous with power. This strong representation is rooted in the mythology of the animal. In Congo, the leopard is the king of the jungle: the fastest and the most dangerous creature, a symbol of courage and strength. Leopard skin was an emblem for African leaders, an embodiment of their values, and allowed them to send back the image of being, symbiotically, a powerful and respected leader to their subjects and the world.

It also suggests wealth and authority, becoming a national symbol with the famous toque carried by Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo. Western culture played a decisive role in the popularization of the print. In the early 20th century, the leopard had been reserved for women of little virtue and negatively connoted. It is when fashion designer Christian Dior created his leopard print called “Jungle” and his dress “L’Africaine” in 1947 that leopard makes its entry into the world of haute couture, now embodying of haute couture’s daring and avant-gardiste genre of the time. The print became a must-have, it was found in ready-to-wear and was democratized by fashion designers such as Roberto Cavalli, who made it his signature. Breaking all backgrounds, the leopard has become a unique yet globally binding statement upon which to advance the conversation about what connects us as human beings despite our diverse ethnic, social or cultural backgrounds.

And how it is perceived today?

The meaning of the motif evolves with the times, countries and cultures. It is in my own opinion still perceived as both tacky in certain circumstances or extremely chic and elegant in another. What does interest me, is the statement that people are making about themselves while wearing Leopard. I don’t know if you ever wear Leopard print, but it is somehow a way to show something about yourself and often it still refers to the mythology behind the animal. In the West, a Leopard dress can say many things, such as “I am sensual and indomitable”, while a Leopard fur in Congo or Kwazulu Natal is still rooted in a representation of power.

I guess that looking for leopard pattern became a kind of obsession for you in the last years. Finding people, getting to shoot them... Is it still a working project? Are you always looking for new subjects?

The inspiration for the Leopard project came while I was in an art residency in Paris and it became to me obvious by then that the print in itself was a bridge that I could use to develop the discussion about what united us as human despite being from different social, economic or religious backgrounds. I found some people on the street, some people on Google Image, some on Facebook or through contacts. In Congo DRC and South Africa, I worked with local journalist and travel guides. I used a very large spectrum of tools in order to find people who have the relationships I seek to the Leopard print. I am still planning to shoot a few more portraits of people that I have been put in contact with and who related with leopard prints in a very unique way.

Are you attracted by any other patterns? What about your next projects, are you thinking to new patterns as well?

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I am more than ever attracted by patterns, but not only fashion patterns, I am now working on DNA patterns. Patterns can take so many forms, they can be emotional, familial, mathematics, scientific, fashion... I am utterly fascinated by what they reveal about our humanity.

The pictures from your works have always a very powerful aesthetic, but also a very strong content. Is that because of your previous career as photojournalist? What's the difference between the two ways of working and developing a project?

Photojournalism is about the facts/events and to remain objective in front of them in order to relate it the most accurate way as possible. It was a bit of a difficulty for me then, because I often struggle to discern between reality and what goes on my mind. The work I am doing now is more about using what goes on in my head and project it on other people and I get obsessed to find people who are somehow an external representation of my inner universe. One thing I keep from photojournalism is probably the desire for an honest representation of reality and people I photograph.