

# Gosette LUBONDO

**Born in 1993 in Kinshasa, where she lives and works.**

Photography is very much a family affair for Gosette Diakota Lubondo.

It all began with her father's uncle, Etienne Nkazi, who was born in 1894 in Bas-Congo. It is unclear how and why he became a photographer, but according to the family's collective memory, he started work in 1914. Evidently, he was one of the very first Congolese photographers. It turns out that one of Nkazi's brothers was a very close disciple of the religious leader Simon Kimbangu. So close, in fact, that he was chained up after his arrest in 1921, and then banished into internal exile in Maniema. Etienne Nkazi remained close to Kimbanguist circles. Late in life, when visiting his brother in exile, Etienne Nkazi settled in Kasongo in Maniema, where he died in 1964, with his photographic archive disappearing along with him.

His nephew, Gaston Yina-Mambu Diakota, took up the torch. Born in 1950, he was still at school when he started taking photographs (1964). He proved to be a skilful and passionate photographer. An expat teacher spotted him and helped him to purchase a good camera. The young man paid back the teacher by selling his pictures at the *Foire internationale de Kinshasa*. He gained confidence and decided to become a professional photographer in 1967, especially since after his uncle had died he replaced him as the regular photographer of the Kimbanguist community.

A long photographic career followed, with ups and downs, and Gaston Diakota continues working to this day, at the age of 70. High points included a venture as a founding partner of a music magazine. For four years in the early 1980s, he was the photographer and kingpin. In the evenings, he would shoot photos at concerts, at the time of the rivalry between Franco and Tabu Ley Rochereau, and in the daytime he would put together the magazine. Low points included a flood that happened shortly after the magazine closes. It destroyed most of his photographic archives. Modern-day admirers of the work of Seydou Keita, Jean Depara, and Malick Sidibé will grasp the impact of such a loss, accentuated by the fact that it followed the loss of his Uncle Nkazi's archive - the photographer during the era of the Belgian Congo.

Gaston Yina-Mambu Diakota and his wife Anne-Marie Mawete have five children. The youngest was born in 1993 and is called Gosette.

Despite Gosette Lubondo's impressive family heritage, and unlike many Congolese artists who, when speaking about their early vocations, claim to have been "born artists", Gosette did not mull over the idea of becoming a photographer from an early age. She discovered photography fortuitously at the age of 14 at a small family gathering. In a surprise move, the organizer declared that the gathering was solely for women and everyone accepted this innovative idea, whether they liked it or not. The all-female gathering meant that the usual family party photographer was not there, so a female replacement was needed. Gosette was entrusted with the camera. And what a revelation! Her snapshots proved popular, but most importantly she discovered an unexpected interest in photography. From that moment on, she worked to perfect her skills by working with her father.

However, taking photos for pleasure was one thing but contemplating making a career out of photography was something else entirely. And while it is one thing to consider the profession, it is something else to opt for the insecure status of a photographic *artist*. Gosette was not ready for it and was not encouraged to take the plunge by her father. Indeed, it was on a sudden impulse, or rather a fruitful moment of confusion, that

she took the step. It was the designation day to register for a higher-education institution in 2011 and Gosette was 18. It had been agreed with her parents that she would enrol at Kinshasa's Institute of Communication (Ifasic). She went into the city and entered the institution's grounds, but something stopped her from actually registering. She found the atmosphere oppressive. She headed back out and made her way to the nearby ABA (Kinshasa School of Fine Arts), went in and realised that just as she had felt uncomfortable a short while before, she felt good in this happy environment, and so she enrolled on the spot. This decision epitomizes Gosette Lubondo: she is independent and intuitive. It took her parents several weeks to realise that their youngest daughter was in fact going to ABA and not Ifasic every morning.

Gosette flourished at ABA. By way of photography, she developed an interest in art. In 2013, she took part in an important internship with the collective of Kinshasa artists called *Les Eza possibles*, and then in a workshop run by the photographer Alexandre Christiaens. She produced her first solo work in the same year. The theme was the imprint left behind by Kinshasa's dilapidated transport infrastructure. This was her first thematic series and was called *Au fil du temps*.

Gosette graduated in Visual Communication in 2014. She also showed her work for the first time in a collective exhibition, *Lady by Lady*, at Kinshasa's Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles. The exhibition was organised by KinArt Studio. In 2015, she took part in the exchanges facilitated by Simon Njami at the 10th Bamako Encounters, the African Photography Biennale. She then joined a photography masterclass promoted by the Goethe Institute and facilitated by Simon Njami once again.

Gosette produced the series which would make her well-known in 2016. In the same vein as her first project depicting dilapidated transport infrastructure, she took over a disused train in Kinshasa railway station. However, this project marks a significant departure from *Au fil du temps/Over Time*: this time round, she introduced and depicted people. This addition proved decisive, both in terms of bringing the station back to life and from an aesthetic perspective. Gosette showcased this work, entitled *Imaginary Trip*, as part of the *Virtual Mobilities* exhibition, which took place on the fringes of the Kampala Biennale in late 2016. It proved to be a success. Her career took off.

She then joined a European agency, which presented *Imaginary Trip* at numerous fairs and exhibitions in Europe, notably in Arles, Art Paris Art Fair, AKAA (Paris), and Mia Photo Fair (Milan).

In 2018, Gosette produced the *Imaginary Trip II* series, for which she received the support of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum. This time, she took over a former school founded in 1936 by a congregation of Christian brothers in the modern-day Kongo Central: Gombe Matadi village school. The Central School, as it was known at the time, sought to centralize secondary school pupils from the region's rural schools. Its vast boarding school housed up to 500 pupils, but it did not survive the policy of Zairianization applied by President Mobutu in the 1970s. However, the Central School had a profound effect on the lives of several generations of residents of Bas-Congo and on the lives of their descendants. Gosette showcased the series in November 2018 at the Quai Branly Museum, with the works being added to the museum's collection.

With this *Imaginary Trip II*, at barely 26 years of age, Gosette has established a strong and coherent artistic identity. She explores the memory of once remarkable and dynamic places that have now fallen into disuse and even have been abandoned. Although dilapidated, they retain an aura and seem to have a soul. Gosette has a gift for making this "soul" visible. In the two *Imaginary Trip* series, she does it by creating meticulous depictions, reconstructions in which real, contemporary characters appear, posing in a way that evokes the past lives of these locations. Some works have a ghostly feel because of the hazy portrayal of the characters. There is even a mystical dimension, albeit discrete, to the second series. In both cases, there is no over-expression or excess, the artist shows that she is serious, respectful of the locations, and humble. And if she

poses in her own photographs, it is definitely not a question of raising her own profile. Firstly, it is because she is the easiest model to use for her lengthy staging process, and secondly because the personal involvement of the artist significantly increases the force of the work.

The scenes sometimes appear timeless in both of the *Imaginary Trip* projects. The past embraces the present and it is hard to tell whether the location or the contemporary visitors are in fact the ghosts. Depending on our personal experience, the exploration that Gosette invites us to undertake rekindles personal memories and calls into question our own relationship with the past. Ultimately, these imaginary journeys are an invitation to us to take a trip back in time. The artist's intention is to stimulate our imagination rather than impose her own storyline. Consequently, these scenes may evoke all kinds of memories: a journey, memories of boarding school, moments of solitude and melancholy, or quite simply a yearning for past times.

It is tempting, to say the least, to analyse Gosette's artistic choices in the light of her family history: the concept of heritage, gratitude towards her ancestors, a refusal to forget, and irretrievable loss. It is worth saying that Gosette takes pride in her family heritage. However, maybe these comparisons are too evident and too easy, and might lead to under-estimating the personal element, the mysterious chemistry that leads some people to take on the duty of depicting the lives of others. While Congolese art contains many references to history, including in photography with Sammy Baloji's work, there are few artists with a specific interest in the marks left by time. Gosette has opted to depict the past, bear witness on behalf of her forebears, and capture the marks that they have left behind. However, instead of confining this remembrance work to her family circle, she has extended it to the whole of Congolese society.

In her ongoing project, *Tala ngai*, Gosette seems to break away from her work focusing on the past. In truth, her sensitivity to the passing of time is expressed in a different way in this project. Instead of bearing witness to the past for people nowadays, she depicts the present for future generations. *Tala ngai* ("look at me" or "visit me" in Lingala) shows one of the faces of contemporary Kinshasa. The starting point was a question raised at the Goethe Institute Masterclass: what does it mean to be African today? Gosette answered the question by photographing 15 women at home, each posing in two ways: as the woman appears at home, i.e. in everyday clothes, and how she presents herself in public, in clothes of her choice. A third shot depicts some of the woman's living space. The project is both a reflection on self-perception and the external gaze, and a record of Kinshasa women in 2020. Initially, we might think that we have already seen this sort of work, but in reality the three shots make the portraits highly original. What do we want to show of ourselves? These women respond with touching simplicity. The medium compels them to be silent, but this does not hinder communication. Quite the opposite: they seem to be speaking to us, and it is clear that they have a lot to say. That's the magic of photography!

3

Pierre Daubert

Biographical introduction to the *Gosette Lubondo* catalogue, Editions de l'œil, 2020