



Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology at Harvard University

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Joana Choumali Named 2020 Robert Gardner Fellow in Photography



JOANA CHOUMALI, ©Abbas Makke 2020

(June 2, 2020, Cambridge, MA) The Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University, is pleased to announce the selection of the 2020 Robert Gardner Fellow in Photography. Following an international search, the Gardner Fellowship committee awarded the fellowship to photographer **Joana Choumali**. The fellowship provides a \$50,000 stipend to begin or complete a proposed project followed by the publication of a book. Choumali (1974–), a visual artist and photographer born and based in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire (formerly called the Ivory Coast), will use the fellowship to create *Yougou-Yougou (Secondhand Clothing)*, a photographic and mixed-media project exploring how imported western clothing affects community identity and exposes inequalities created by colonial legacies, transnational trade, and global power relations.

“During these challenging times, when the arts are more important than ever in bringing us together, we are delighted to be able to continue this important program. Since 2007 this fellowship has supported emerging and mid-career photographers from six continents to document, as Robert Gardner put it, ‘the human condition anywhere in the world,’” said Jane Pickering, the William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology. “I would like to extend my deepest thanks not only to Robert Gardner (1925–2014) and his wife, Adele Pressman, but also to the anonymous award committee and nominators, and to the extraordinary artists who were invited to submit proposals for this highly competitive award.”

The thirteenth recipient of the fellowship, Joana Choumali, studied graphic arts in Casablanca, Morocco, and worked as an art director in an advertising agency before embarking on a photographic career. Her work focuses on the “innumerable cultures” of the African continent. She works mainly on conceptual portraits, documentary photography, and mixed media, most recently embroidering directly on photographic images with what she calls, “a slow and meditative gesture.” “Joana Choumali’s works extend the boundaries of photography into exciting new territory,” said Peabody Museum Curator of Visual Anthropology Ilisa Barbash. “Choumali starts with a traditionally flat medium and then layers thread and fabric to add dimension, texture, color, and new meaning. What begins as an instantaneous image produced by the technology of digital photography becomes enriched, politicized, and transformed by Joana’s beautiful and painstaking hand-sewing.”

Choumali plans to ground her Gardner Fellowship project, *Yougou-Yougou*, in an “anthropology of clothing.” She will look specifically at what happens when western “fast fashion”—secondhand clothes, and message T-shirts—is imported to African consumers, many from less affluent classes. “My aim is to demonstrate that through this clothing our Ivorian community (more precisely, the dynamic youth) generally appropriates culture, incorporating styles and messages into their self-presentation, imagination, and social practices.” Choumali will investigate the sociopolitical implications of this in Côte d'Ivoire, and possibly adjacent countries.

As Choumali’s frequent collaborator, sociologist Maria Anney explains, “During the pre-colonial and colonial eras, the regions of sub-Saharan Africa underwent massive extractions of their natural resources sent to the West, and at the same time their local markets were invaded by secondhand Western products, thus rendering Africans dependent on cheap and used imports. Many articles and social studies have produced some important data about this fact. The phenomenon of secondhand message T-shirts provokes many questions: Who buys these, and why? What is the influence of these messages on the social imagination of the communities who wear these secondhand clothes? How much room do consumers have to maneuver between the original message (which they may not—or even want to—understand) and their own political concerns? What does it mean to sell foreign ideologies in this way?”

Choumali’s mixed-media techniques, says Anney, “make visible the way in which social codes circulate through an object (the clothes) and an active body.” After photographing people wearing message T-shirts, Choumali says she will “manually intervene on the portraits by superimposing textiles, embroidery, and collage to create a relief effect.” “The freedom offered by this technique,” says Anney, allows Choumali to “reclaim the imposed message, inviting us to reflect on a new history or third life of these T-shirts.”



AS THE WIND WHISPERS, Series ALBAHIAN, 80 x80 cm ©Joana Choumali, 2019

In November 2019, Choumali was the first African recipient of the Eighth Prix Pictet for her series *ça va aller* (it will be okay) on that year's theme of Hope. According to The Prix Pictet website, the chair of the 2019 jury, Sir David King, declared, "In an extremely strong field, [Choumali's] work stood out as a brilliantly original meditation on the ability of the human spirit to wrest hope and resilience from even the most traumatic events." *Ça va aller* was Choumali's response to March 2016 terrorist attacks at Grand Bassam, a small holiday town near Abidjan. "To me, Bassam was a synonym of happiness, until that day. Three weeks after the attacks, a kind of melancholy invaded the town. I decided to wander

the silent, empty streets and shoot with my iPhone. Most of the pictures show empty places, people by themselves. Back home I felt the need to process this pain and I discovered that I could do so through embroidery. Each stitch was a way to recover, to lay down the emotions, the loneliness, and mixed feelings I had. As an automatic scripture, the act of adding colorful stitches on the pictures has had a soothing effect on me, like a meditation. Adding embroidery on these street photographs was an act of channeling hope and resilience.”



Left to right: MR. POUSNOUGA; MRS. DJENEBA; MRS MARTINE K. All from Series HAABRE, THE LAST GENERATION ©Joana Choumali, 2014

Choumali’s earlier works exhibit an equally bold but more traditional approach to photography. Among these is the book, *Haabré: The Last Generation* (Fourthwall Books, 2016), which contains a series of studio portraits of people who are among the last generation to “bear the ritual scarification associated with a number of ethnic groups in various parts of West Africa.” She combines these with interview excerpts from her sitters which reveal “a range of responses to scarification, from pride to ambivalence and even outright rejection of the facial markings.” As she explains on her website, “These portraits and texts examine the complex role of tradition in an urban setting such as Abidjan and suggest the shifting nature of the concepts of beauty and identity.”



Left to right: AKAN ATTIE, AKAN EBRIE, SOUDANAISE. All from Series RESILIENTS ©Joana Choumali, 2014

Choumali has exhibited her work at the Museum of Civilizations (Abidjan); the Donwahi Foundation for Contemporary Art (Abidjan); the Rotonde des Arts Contemporary Art Center (Abidjan); the Vitra Design Museum (Basel); the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (Marrakech); the Museum of Photography of Saint-Louis (Senegal); the Tropen Museum (Amsterdam); the International Photography Biennale of Bamako; the Photoquai Biennale (Quai Branly Museum (Paris)); the Lagos Photo Festival; and PhotoVogue Festival.

In 2014, she won the CapPrize Award and the 2014 Emerging Photographer LensCulture Award. In 2016, she received the Magnum Emergency Grant Foundation, and the Fourthwall Books Award in South Africa. In 2017, she exhibited her series Translation and Adorn at the Pavilion of the Ivory Coast during the 57th Venice International Biennale. Her latest mixed-media series, Alba'hian, was exhibited at the Zeitz Mocaa Museum of Contemporary Arts (Capetown). Her work has been published in the international press: CNN, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Huffington Post, *Harper's Bazaar Art*, *El Pais* (Spain), *Le Monde* (France), *Le Temps* (Switzerland), *La Stampa*, *The Internazionale* (Italy), *The Guardian*, and *The Financial Times* (Great Britain).

About the Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography

The fellowship funds an “established practitioner of the photographic arts to create and subsequently publish through the Peabody Museum a major book of photographs on the human condition anywhere in the world.” The fellowship committee invites nominations from experts around the world; nominees are reviewed and selected by a committee of four. The fellowship provides a stipend of \$50,000, and is unique in its dedication to funding professional documentary photography.

The fellowship was given by Robert Gardner, award-winning documentary filmmaker and author, whose works have entered the permanent canon of nonfiction filmmaking. Gardner's works include the documentary films *Dead Birds* and *Forest of Bliss* and the books *The Impulse to Preserve: Reflections of a Filmmaker* and *Making Dead Birds: Chronicle of a Film*. In the 1970s Gardner produced and hosted Screening Room, a series of more than one hundred 90-minute programs on independent and experimental filmmaking. The series, considered an invaluable historical record of modern cinema, has been transferred to digital format for archival preservation by The Paley Center for Media in New York City. Robert Gardner received Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees from Harvard University and was director of the Film Study Center from 1957 to 1997. He was also founder and long-time director of the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts and taught the Visual Arts at Harvard for almost forty years. Gardner was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. His most recent book was *Just Representations* (Peabody Museum Press and Studio7Arts, 2010), a collection of Gardner's short prose pieces about film and anthropology. In April 2013, Robert Gardner was awarded the James Smithson Bicentennial Medal by the Smithsonian Institution. He passed away in 2014.

Robert Gardner Fellowship Recipients

2007 Guy Tillim (South Africa). Tillim's fellowship took him to five African countries where he documented grand colonial architecture and how it has become part of a contemporary African stage. His fellowship work was exhibited at the Peabody Museum in 2009 and was co-published as *Avenue Patrice Lumumba* by the Peabody Museum Press and Prestel (2009).

2008 Dayanita Singh (India). Singh's fellowship project began as a visual diary and evolved into "photographic fiction." The work was exhibited in the 2011 Peabody Museum exhibition *House of Love* and was co-published in a book of the same name by Peabody Museum Press and Radius Books (2011).

2009 Alessandra Sanguinetti (USA/Argentina). Sanguinetti used her fellowship to continue a multiyear profile of two girls living in rural Argentina and their wider social networks for a project called *The Life That Came*.

2010 Stephen Dupont (Australia). Dupont's fellowship work, a study of cultural erosion as well as a celebration of Melanesian people, was exhibited at the Peabody Museum in *Stephen Dupont: Papua New Guinea Portraits and Diaries*. A two-volume presentation of the work, *Piksa Niugini: Portraits and Diaries*, was published by Peabody Museum Press and Radius Books (2013); it took First Place in the 2014 New England Museum Association book awards.

2011 Miki Kratsman (Israel). Kratsman continued his long-term creation of a vast portfolio of photographs that explore how the medium of photography can be used to turn an ordinary moment in a person's life into one that is "suspect." His photographs present Palestinians in the occupied territories as targets of the Israeli soldier, as *shahids* (martyrs) within their own neighborhoods, and as "wanted men" by the state. The resulting volume, *The Resolution of the Suspect* (Peabody Museum Press and Radius Books, 2016), was awarded First Place in the 2017 New England Museum Association book awards.

2013 Yto Barrada (Morocco/France). Barrada's project, titled *A Hole Is to Dig*, engages the complex terrain of paleontology in her native Morocco. She explores her topic from multiple human perspectives: those of scientists, museums, and cultural heritage professionals, as well as those of collectors, plunderers, and forgers of fossils.

2014 Chloe Dewe Mathews (United Kingdom). Dewe Mathews continued a five-year project documenting the lives of people who live on the shores of the Caspian Sea in Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, examining their relationship to these resource-rich and contested lands. Her book, *Caspian: The Elements*, was published by the Peabody Museum Press and Aperture (2018). The volume was awarded Best in Category (Illustrated Books) at the 2019 New England Book Show and First Place in Books from the American Alliance of Museums. An exhibition of her work is currently on view at the Peabody Museum.

2015 Deborah Luster (United States). Luster is investigating violence, place, and the penal system, with a focus on Louisiana's Angola Prison. The site of the prison has witnessed slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction, Black Codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, the Trustee System, segregation, mass incarceration, and now the COVID-19 crisis.

2016 Ilana Boltvinik and Rodrigo Viñas of TRES Art Collective (Mexico). Boltvinik and Viñas are developing the second phase of their project *Ubiquitous Trash*, an art-based research series on beach waste. The project began in Hong Kong in 2015; fellowship funding took it to the beaches of Western Australia. Drawing on the disciplines of biology, archaeology, economics, and anthropology, the artists' work created a complex understanding of material waste and its circulation around the globe.

2017 Sammy Baloji (Democratic Republic of Congo). Baloji's project juxtaposes views of architecture, industrial ruins, and giant anthills with portraits of the people—workers, villagers, urbanites, and the Gendarmes Katangais, a rebel resistance group—in the copper-rich Katanga province of DRC. His work is a visual exploration of place-based themes of identity, post-colonialism, social history, and memory.

2018 Zhang Xiao (China). Zhang's project expands on earlier work in Shanxi that focused on individual performers in *shehuo*, the annual spring festival, documenting the disconnect between the actors' contemporary lives and the ancient traditions. Zhang is now revisiting the festival to examine another aspect: its current shift from traditional meanings and representations to kitsch entertainment and mass consumption.

2019 Azadeh Akhlaghi (Iran). Akhlaghi is completing post-production of images, documentation, and research for *The Vicious Circle*, a project that explores eleven pivotal incidents in Iran that took place from the time of the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The result will be a manuscript for a book that combines photographs of detailed event stagings with archival images, historical documents, and eyewitness interviews.

About the Peabody Museum

The Peabody Museum is among the oldest archaeological and ethnographic museums in the world with one of the finest collections of human cultural history found anywhere. It is home to superb materials from Africa, ancient Europe, North America, Mesoamerica, Oceania, and South America in particular. In addition to its archaeological and ethnographic holdings, the museum's photographic archives, one of the largest of its kind, hold more than 500,000 historical photographs, dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present and chronicling anthropology, archaeology, and world culture.

Location: The Peabody Museum is located at 11 Divinity Avenue in Cambridge. The museum is a short walk from the Harvard Square MBTA station.

Hours: The museum is temporarily closed due to COVID-19. When open, the museum hours are 9:00 am– 5:00 pm, seven days a week. The museum is closed on Thanksgiving Day, December 24–25, and January 1. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors, \$10 for children, 3–18, \$10.00 for non-Harvard students with ID. **Admission** is free with Harvard ID or HMSC museum membership. The museum is free to Massachusetts residents Sundays, 9:00 am–5:00 pm year-round, and Wednesdays from 3:00–5:00 pm (September to May). Admission includes entry to the Harvard Museum of Natural History. For more information call 617-496-1027 or go online to: www.peabody.harvard.edu.

Media Contact: Faith Sutter 617-495-3397 faith_sutter@harvard.edu

To view more of Joana Choumail's work, please visit the artist's website <https://www.joanachoumaili.com>