

Joana Choumali wins 2019 Prix Pictet photography prize

Artist becomes first African to win the prestigious prize, for embroidered pictures created following terrorist attack

• [See a photo essay of the Prix Pictet 2019 shortlist](#)



▲ The 2019 Prix Pictet winner, Joana Choumali, standing in front of her series *Ça va aller*. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Joana Choumali, a 45-year-old photographer from Ivory Coast, has become the first African artist to win the Prix Pictet. The announcement was made this evening in a ceremony at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for the opening of an exhibition of the 12 shortlisted artists.



▲ 'Each stitch is a way to recover' ... an artwork from the Prix Pictet-winning series *Ça va aller* (2016-19) by Joana Choumali. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Choumali won for her series *Ça va aller* (It will be OK), which comprised photographs that were taken three weeks after the March 2016 terrorist attacks at the Grand Bassam beach. She embroidered ornate patterns on the images, describing the painstaking process as “a way to address the way Ivorian people deal with trauma and mental health”.

The attacks, she said, “reopened the mental wounds left by the post-electoral war of 2011”. The tactile art of embroidery was a way to process those painful memories. “Each stitch was a way to recover, to lay down the emotions, loneliness and mixed feelings I felt. As an automatic scripture, the act of adding colourful stitches on the pictures has had a soothing effect on me, like a meditation. Adding embroidery on these street photographs was an act of channelling hope and resilience.”

Choumali’s win is a break with tradition in several ways: she is African, female and her work is marked by thoughtful understatement and a craft-based approach that is in direct contrast with the epic documentary approach of previous winners, who have mostly been male. Only one past recipient, the 2005 winner Valérie Benin, has been female, although this year’s shortlist included six women: Choumali, Margaret Courtney-Clarke, Rena Effendi, Janelle Lynch, Awoiska van der Molen and Alexia Webster.

This year’s Prix Pictet exhibition is a characteristically intriguing mix of styles and subjects, ranging from Ross McDonnell’s starkly dramatic still lifes of discarded prosthetic limbs found in an Afghan orthopaedic hospital to Gideon Mendel’s moisture-damaged images of the struggle against apartheid in his native South Africa. As with Choumali’s embroidered images and Van der Molen’s powerful monochromes of mysterious forests and mountains, these photographic responses to the theme of hope reflect a shift away from straight documentary towards thoughtful, even quietly political, conceptualism.

That said, Effendi’s evocative and powerful portrait of traditional farming communities in rural Transylvania is beautifully observed. The hope expressed here is a fragile one: that this way of life will survive in the face of globalisation. It is an increasingly desperate kind of hope that is in tune with our turbulent times. All in all, then, it is an intriguing Prix Pictet exhibition and prize, with a winner whose work seamlessly merges the deeply personal and quietly political.

The Prix Pictet exhibition is at the V&A, London, until 8 December.

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