

## Joana Choumali: 'I set my imagination free on the photographs'



▲ A detail from *It's Only for Your Good* by Joana Choumali. 'The picture was shot in Plateau, Abidjan. Two women cross a bridge. One is talking to her cellphone, while holding the hand and leading another woman, who follows, blinded by a golden scarf.' Photograph: © Joana Choumali/Courtesy of Gallery 1957

The prize-winning Ivorian photographer captures the energy of dawn in images shot in African cities then embroidered

**J**oana Choumali's interest in photography began when, as a child in Abidjan in [Ivory Coast](#), her family hired a local studio photographer to take a family portrait. "I was fascinated by how he handled the camera and the lighting as well as the way he directed us," she recalls. "It was almost like a ceremony. I remember asking him so many questions. That tacit communication and connection with other people through photography was what interested me the most. I wanted to do the same."

Having studied graphic arts and then worked in an advertising agency in Morocco, Choumali rekindled her childhood fascination with photography in 2011, initially creating work that merged portraiture and documentary to explore "an Africa caught between tradition and modernity". The images here, taken from her new series, [Alba'hian](#) (First Light of Morning), are among the highlights of the digital edition of [Photo London](#), which opened last week. They continue to explore that cultural dynamic but in a much more conceptual way, having been created by overlaying her digital photographs with meticulously hand-embroidered patterns of dazzling colour and intricate design.

She began in 2018 by photographing at dawn in various African cities, including Accra, Casablanca and Dakar as well as Abidjan. For her, daybreak is a magical time in which "there is the sense of a dialogue between reality and dream, between present and past memory", which she hopes to evoke in her work.



▲ Can You See Me, 2020. Choumali says: 'The act of adding embroidery to my pictures came quite instinctively... it responded to a need to touch my work and physically intervene on my photography.' Photograph: © Joana Choumali/Courtesy of Gallery 1957

“In the Agni language, the word *alba’hian* is also a celebration of the powerful energy that comes with the beginning of a new day,” she explains. “I start in the early morning by getting in contact with the land around me, observing the landscapes, the shapes of buildings and objects slowly revealing themselves, the streets and its people awakening.”

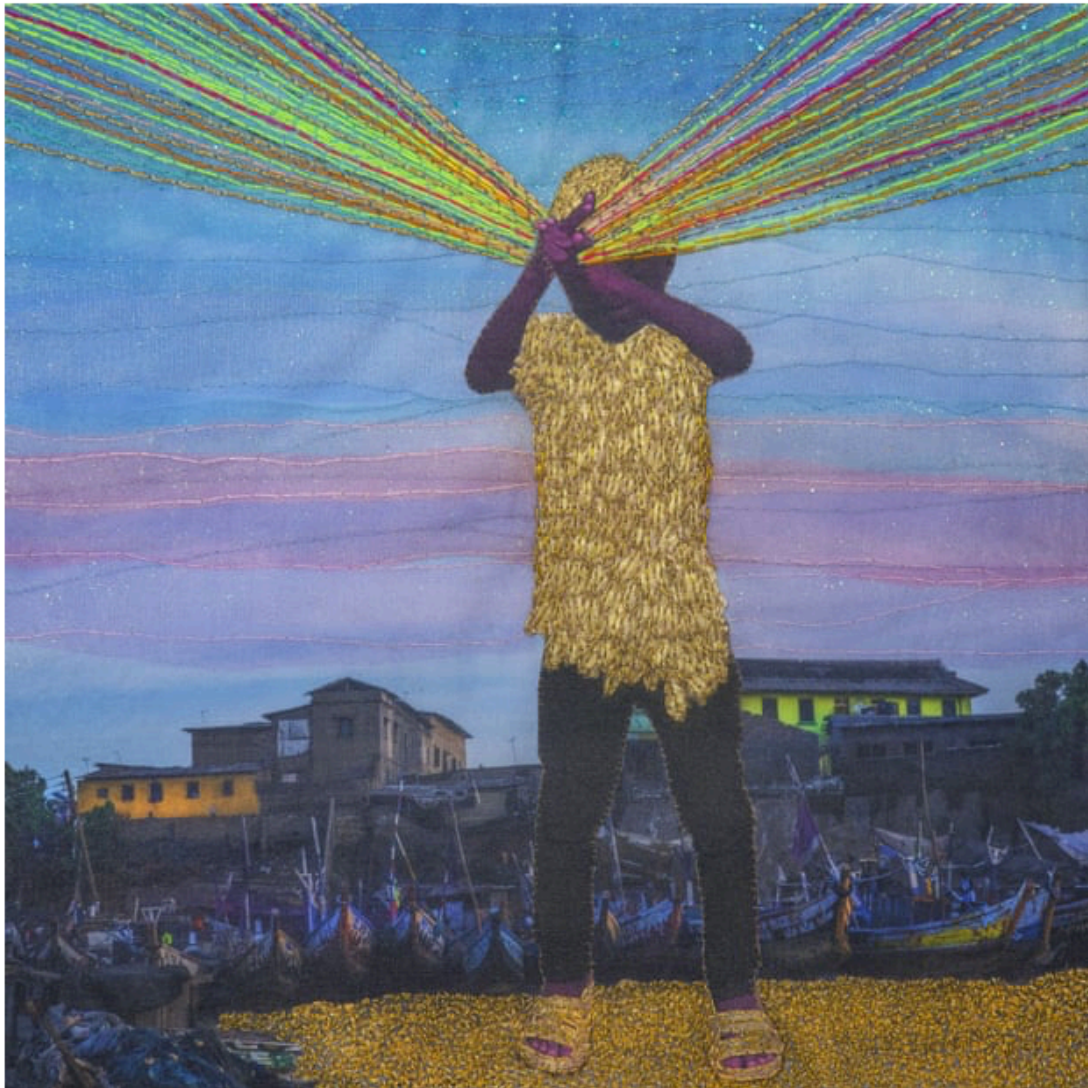


Choumali describes the complex embroidery process that follows as a kind of “layering”, not just of materials, but memories and feelings. “Rather than using Photoshop, I chose to work manually with textiles, thread and needles. I use multiple layers of sheer fabrics, intertwined and embroidered together with portions of cutout images, collages of photographs, and golden paint. The different layers simultaneously veil and reveal the feelings that coexist in my imagination.”



Though she eschews captions, preferring to let viewers interpret her images “as they feel”, the titles give some idea of the emotional landscape she explores in her work. In *Unstoppable*, a young boy mimics the stance of a Marvel superhero, rays of colour emanating from his crossed hands like radiant energy waves. It is, she says, “about self-empowerment, the power of determination, hope and pride of a young black African kid”. In another image, *It's Only for Your Good*, two women cross a bridge, one talking on a mobile phone while leading the other, whose eyes are covered by a golden scarf. “It refers to how women are pressured to please society by following the rules,” she says.

Until 2016, Choumali made traditional photographs that merged portraiture and documentary as in her powerful series *Haabre: The Last Generation*, which deals with the disappearing tradition of facial scarification among emigrants from Burkina Faso living in her home town, Abidjan. In March of that year, her way of working changed dramatically in the wake of the deadly terrorist attacks on Grand-Bassam, a coastal resort just an hour from her home. A few weeks afterwards, she found herself walking through the eerily quiet streets of the town, photographing passing strangers on her iPhone.



▲ Unstoppable: 'The picture was shot in Jamestown, Accra. A little boy crosses his arms in a gesture of superhero. Rays of coloured threads come out of his hands. This refers to self-empowerment, the power of determination, hope and pride of a young black African kid.' Photograph: © Joana Choumali/Courtesy of Gallery 1957

"I used to wander from the entrance of the city to the beach, where the attacks took place, and on to the old historical district called 'Quartier France', the market, the city hall, the beach hotel, and the restaurants," she says. "Most of the pictures show people by themselves, walking in the streets or just standing or sitting alone, lost in their thoughts. Or else they are pictures of empty places. After the attacks, the atmosphere changed and it seemed like melancholy, solitude and sadness had taken over the usually joyful town."

In 2019, Choumali won the prestigious Prix Pictet for the resulting series, *Ca va aller* (It Is Going to Be Fine), becoming the first African to do so. The previous winner, Richard Mosse, described her work as “a brilliantly original meditation on the ability of the human spirit to wrest hope and resilience from even the most traumatic events”. In her acceptance speech, Choumali described embroidery as a kind of self-healing “meditation” in which “each stitch was a way to recover, to lay down the emotions, loneliness and mixed feelings I felt”.

In their merging of the instant - digital photography - with the contemplative - embroidery - Choumali's vivid images occupy a strange hinterland between the metaphorical and the mystical. She once described the slow, meditative act of embroidering as being akin to “an automatic scripture”. When I ask her to elaborate, she replies: “It is a very subtle and particular process. My brain is in full activity but, at the same time, there is a space that allows me to explore my thoughts and the discourse that I would like to express in my work. When I start a piece, I cannot tell how and when it will end. The designs and choices of colours are not planned in advance, I just set my imagination free to express itself on the photography and reveal its message.”

Source : <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/oct/10/joana-choumali-i-set-my-imagination-free-on-the-photographs>