Gay art show to go on in Senegal

Organisers resist pressure to cancel exhibition in country where homosexuality is illegal

By Anny Shaw. Web only
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Gay men from Lagos are the subject of the Nigerian photographer Andrew Esiebo’s ongoing series “Who We Are”

An exhibition about homosexuality in Africa is due to go ahead in Senegal next month, despite a leading academic advising the gallery against it. “The show will cause controversy, but we will not censor ourselves,” says the independent curator Ato Malinda, although she declined to reveal the name of the academic.

“Precarious Imaging: Visibility and Media Surrounding African Queerness” (7 May-18 July), will feature works by Kader Attia, Andrew Esiebo, Zanele Muholi, Amanda Kerdahi M. and Jim Chuchu. Malinda is co-organising the show with Koyo Kouoh, the artistic director at Raw Material Company, a non-profit art centre in Dakar where the exhibition opens as part of the informal programme for Dak’Art 2014, the 11th Biennale of Contemporary African Art (9 May-8 June).

The aim, says Malinda, is to shed light on a persecuted African minority and to examine the African media’s often denigrating coverage of same-sex-couples. Homosexuality is illegal in Senegal, as it is in 37 other African countries, according to
Amnesty International.

Zanele Muholi, an activist and photographer from South Africa, is showing her popular “Faces and Phases” series, which she has worked on since 2007. The photographs, depicting black lesbian and transgender women, have not been shown in Senegal before. “In a lot of these images the women are recognisable; they might be our daughters or the girl next door,” Malinda says. “It is important that people see these women in this light.”

The Egyptian-American artist Amanda Kerdahi M. is also presenting a work about African women. *100 Conversations*, 2014, is a video of Kerdahi interviewing 100 women in Cairo about their sexualities while smoking with them. Women are forbidden from smoking in public in Egypt. To protect their identity, the camera zooms in on the interviewees’ mouths and the conversations were filmed without sound.

Gay men from Lagos are the subject of the Nigerian photographer Andrew Esiebo’s ongoing project “Who We Are”. The series is particularly powerful given the context in which the images were made. In January, the Nigerian president strengthened the country’s anti-gay laws; now same-sex couples could face up to 14 years in prison.

Jim Chuchu, who is from Kenya, where homosexuality is illegal but accepted in some parts of society, is showing three works from his “Pagan” series, which explores the idea that homophobia was a concept introduced by missionaries and colonials. “Chuchu’s work speaks to a known past when the word ‘sodomy’ was unknown by us, and same-sex activities were an accepted preference,” Malinda says. Meanwhile, the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia presents *Collage*, 2011, an hour-long video about the lives of transsexuals in Algiers and Mumbai.

“The time is ripe to talk about homosexuality in Africa,” Malinda says. “In some countries like Uganda the change is happening for the worse, but in some, like Kenya, it is changing for the better.”