

Adopt a Photograph: Observational Exercise

Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography is an exhibition of selected images by three Cameroonian photographers working in small towns. Jacques Touselle worked in Mbouda, in the Bamiléké highlands of the West Province (now called West Region). Samuel Finlak worked in Atta and Joseph Chila in Mayo Darlé, both in Adamoua Province; both were trained by Touselle. These small business people respond directly to their clients, creating portraits for specific practical purposes including identity photos for individuals and for couples to append to marriage license applications. Photographic portraits are also commissioned for celebratory and sentimental reasons – to share the radiant appeal of children, to honor friendship among young men, to document the fruitful outcomes of one man’s marriages to several women.

The assignment: Choose, or “adopt,” one photograph from the nineteen on display in the Gould Library. By adopting this image, you are embarking on an ever deepening relationship with the sitter/sitters – to be explored and articulated through several written assignments. The first assignment is a one-to-two page typed, double-spaced observational paper.

The first step toward interpreting a visual artifact, and to using it as evidence in an argument, is to look long and carefully. Thus, this first assignment encourages you to look very carefully, in order to understand how the photographer, in collaboration with the subjects, constructs meaning/suggests personality/opens narrative possibilities through subject matter, background and accessories, placement, viewpoint, composition, scale and other visual devices. **Your one-to-two page paper should translate the image into words, and provide insight into how pictures make meaning.** It will also let you practice using language and concepts for the more contextual assignments that follow.

The following questions and prompts are offered to help your eye (and mind) navigate the image:

- **Subject:** What is the subject?
 - If the subject comprises more than one figure, describe briefly what/who, and the nature of their grouping. How are relationships articulated through gaze, gesture, spacing?
 - What is the relationship of the sitter to you the viewer? To the space outside the composition?
 - Where is the main subject placed within the picture/composition?
 - What additional information do you gain from background, backdrops, and accessories?
- **Setting:** Describe the setting briefly, mentioning markers of place, distinctive elements.
 - Studio, home, or public space? Inside or outside?
- **Space:** Is it shallow? Deep?
 - How does the setting/environment of the sitter impact your “reading” of the picture? Direct your attention? Give additional information about the subject?
- **Viewpoint:** Where are you/the photographer, situated in relation to the subject?
 - Are you looking up (meaning the camera was placed low)? Down? Straight-on?
 - How does camera placement impact the resulting image and your interpretation of the subject?
- **Composition:** Squint your eyes so that you no longer SEE your subject, but instead perceive a set of shapes and lines.
 - How are these organized? Are there seeming lines of energy that connect shapes or areas and impact your sense of the subject and his/her relationships?
- **Light (and shade):** How has the photographer used light (and shade) to describe the subject? Direct your attention? Editorialize on character, relationships, or other matters?