

Steptoe

Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

Jehad Nga

Libya-United States (b. 1976)

Untitled, No 5870, Turkana Series



Work

Many of Jehad Nga's photographs were taken in his capacity as photojournalist for major newspapers and magazines. Yet, they are undeniably art. His is a much slower and deliberate process than is typically the norm for photojournalists. Nga chooses to take relatively few photographs, paying greater attention to details. It helps that he does not use digital cameras, carefully choosing his assignments, opting for such publications as *The New Yorker* and *Time Magazine*, which place greater focus on images.

From the outset, Nga has used his camera to tell stories that shed light on the human condition. That commitment has taken him to many troubled places, both in the US and around the globe, including Libya, his father's homeland. His visually striking images add profound depth to stories, highlighting the truth, and giving meaning to the adage a picture is worth a thousand words.

His *Turkana* series is a stunning example of his purposeful aesthetic and documenting mission. Brilliantly colored portraits showcase the dignity and beauty of the dwindling Turkana tribe, who live in northern Kenya along the shoreline of Lake Turkana, the world's largest desert lake.

While on assignment covering the impact of climate change in Africa, Nga was sensitized to the plight of the Turkana, whose nomadic and pastoral way of life, if not their very existence, are threatened by drought and its effects, including violence and conflict over increasingly limited resources. Known as great survivors, this nearly 900,000 strong tribe that has built a life in a harsh and inhospitable terrain, receives little assistance if any, all but forgotten in the claws of climate changes that have devastated their region.

Driven by his desire to bring attention to this forgotten tribe, Nga documents the faces and figures of its members in their traditional regalia, bestowing upon them such dignity and regal beauty, highlighting their value both as individuals and as a culture.

To achieve this, the photographer opted to isolate the depicted from their surroundings, photographing his subjects in a specially built hut that let in no natural light. Using his own source of light, Nga created highly contrasting and intensely powerful and dramatic works, color saturated silhouettes and portraits that blend into deeply black backgrounds. Inspired by the "chiaroscuro" light to dark manner made famous by Caravaggio, and his own experience in theater productions, Nga's light to dark method gives a living quality to the images, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

Removing his subjects completely from their environment by photographing them in a freestanding hut built for this purpose, Nga refuses to allow the harsh terrain of the region become the defining element of his work, but rather forces the viewer to confront the human subject in front of the lens.

About the Artist

Celebrated photojournalist Jehad Nga was born in 1976 in Smith Center, Kansas, to a Libyan father and an American mother from Missouri. In the 1960s, his parents lived in Libya's capital of Tripoli, where his father owned a hotel and casino, a regular haunt of Libya's cosmopolitan society. His mother was a schoolteacher. This life came to an abrupt halt in 1969 when Muammar Gaddafi's brutal regime tore the country apart and appropriated his father's hotel. This devastated his father, who spent his life on the watch for freedom in his homeland. Ever since he could remember, the photojournalist recalls, his father was consumed with thoughts of a life and country lost, dreaming about the end of Gaddafi, remaining distant, aloof, and lost in his thoughts and dreams.

The years that followed saw the family hopping from country to country in Europe, Africa, and the United States. When Nga was a week old, they moved back to Tripoli, only to leave again four years later, moving to London, where Nga spent the rest of his childhood, attending American schools, but growing up immersed in the cultures of both sides of his family.

As for many Libyan exiles and their children, Libya's image and reputation as a terrorist state did not make Nga's childhood years easy, especially during times of intense conflict between Libya and the United States. It was not until he spent time in Libya after the demise of Gaddafi, watching the turmoil play out and the true character of the Libyan people emerge, that he began to feel the pangs of a national attachment to his father's homeland.

Moving between countries and continents made for a life marked with gaps and loose ends, making it difficult for Nga to develop a firm sense of identity or of belonging to any particular country or culture. He compensated by learning to accommodate both his parents' cultures, as well as the cultures of the places he has lived in, creating a kind of multiplicity or diversity that have impacted many of the choices he has made, including the fact that he spends much of his life photographing different cultures around the world.

The Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and the death of Muammar Gaddafi were defining moments for Nga, as they helped him understand, for the first time in more than 30 years, his father's past and his anguish, especially as he noticed the spark of hope for new life in his father's eyes. Nga was the first journalist in Libya on assignment for *The New York Times*, aided by his Libyan passport.

Nga has covered many conflict stories, including the Iraqi war, Liberian civil war, Darfur conflict, illegal immigration in South Africa, Ghanaian economic reform, Syrian political reform, and conflict in the Middle East.

He was selected by *Photo District News*, *American Photo Magazine* and *FOAM Magazine* as an emerging photographer. In 2008, *The Frontline Club* – London's hub for independent journalists – declared Nga "One of the most talented emerging photographers on the international scene."

Nga's photography has appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Fortune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Telegraph*, *Time*, and *Vanity Fair*, among many other publications. In 2005, he received the Picture of the Year International Award (POYI) for his coverage of the Darfur war and the refugee crisis in Chad. In 2006, he received the same award for his coverage of Operation Steel in Iraq. He has also been awarded by the Chinese International Press Photographers for his coverage in Uganda, Chad, and Darfur, while *Photo District News* granted him the "Top 30 Under 30" award. His work is included in the Boston Museum of Modern Art, The Elton John AIDS Foundations, Davis Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts, The DeCordova Museum of Art, and was also included in the 2011 African Biennial.