

Liz Johnson Artur Dusha



Liz Johnson Artur, *Black Balloon Archive*, 1992–ongoing. Chromogenic photograph, 20 x 24 inches.
Courtesy the artist. © Liz Johnson Artur.

For the past three decades, the Russian Ghanaian artist Liz Johnson Artur has photographed people of African descent around the world. She began what she calls her *Black Balloon Archive* in 1991 after visiting Brooklyn, where she stayed with a Russian family in a predominantly black neighborhood. Having grown up in Bulgaria, Germany, and Russia, the artist was inspired by the experience to use photography as a way to connect with other people, and her intimate pictures capture the multiplicity of everyday life in Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean.

Dusha, the Russian word for “soul,” features a selection of photographic works, sketchbooks, and videos drawn from the *Black Balloon Archive*. The exhibition includes some of Johnson Artur’s most iconic pictures from the

past thirty years as well as new photographs, such as portraits of people associated with a monthly East London club night known as PDA, or Public Display of Affection. A copious selection of the artist’s notebooks, filled with photographs and sketches, highlights the ways in which she has organized and conceptualized her *Archive* since the early 1990s.



Audio Tour

Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.



Liz Johnson Artur, *Josephine, Peckham*, 1995. Chromogenic photograph, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist.
© Liz Johnson Artur.

Central to Johnson Artur's practice is her engagement with people, meeting them and "seeing them as individual stories." Two videos and a sound installation show how the artist makes use of her subjects' unique voices as foreground. *Real...Times* weaves together various narratives from London's many different communities—from Windrush protests to the South London creative collective Born N Bread. *AfroRussia* documents the stories of other Russians of African and Caribbean descent. Finally, a selection of Johnson Artur's portraits of the legendary Ghanaian photographer James Barnor is accompanied by a sound collage.

Brooklyn

In 1986, Johnson Artur purchased her first camera and visited New York City for the first time, staying with a Russian family in Brooklyn. The journey was a defining experience. "I took my first steps in Brooklyn," she says. "It was the first place I arrived with a camera. Everything overwhelmed me, the place and the people. These are some of the first pictures I took. For me they represent a beginning."

After the trip, Johnson Artur returned to Germany, where she and her mother had been living, and studied

photography with the aim of going back to New York. Instead, in 1991, she moved to London to enroll at the Royal College of Art. By the mid-1990s, she had begun working for magazines such as *i-D*, *The Face*, and *Vibe*, which allowed her to travel around the world and compile her *Black Balloon Archive*.

Black Balloon Archive

For the past thirty years Johnson Artur has been accumulating the body of work she calls *Black Balloon Archive*. The name derives from the song "Black Balloons," featured on American soul singer Syl Johnson's 1969 album *Is It Because I'm Black?*, which expresses his joy at seeing a large black balloon dancing against a "snow-white" sky.

The artist's *Archive* is a trove of stories, people, and encounters that Johnson Artur documented around London and during her travels since 1991. Unlike most photographic archives, it makes no attempt to be linear, systematic, or complete. "It grows according to my rules," the photographer says. "And it's my strategy for coexisting with the many individuals I've met." Johnson Artur, motivated by a hunger for pictures of and connections with other people, is always conscious of how they want to represent themselves.

AfroRussia

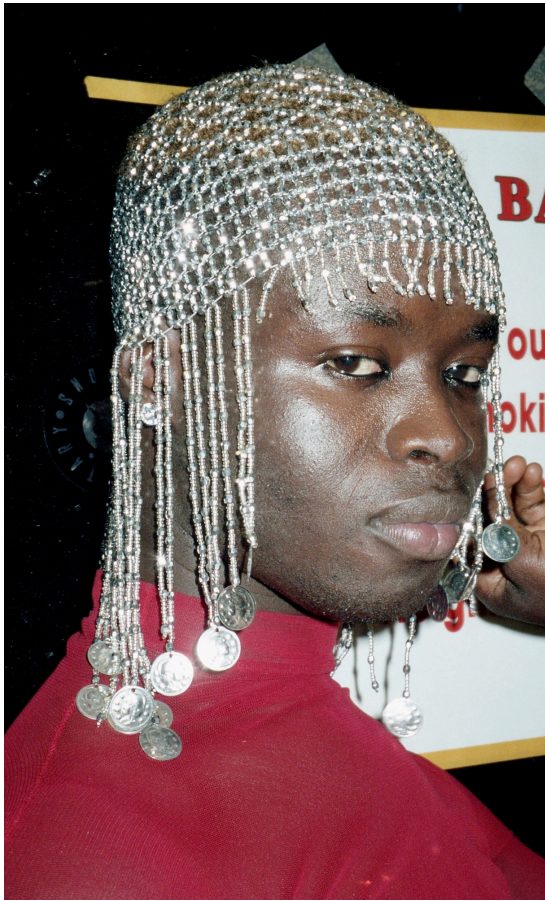
After connecting with her Ghanaian father for the first time in 2010, Johnson Artur traveled to Russia to meet other Russians of African or Caribbean descent. “I went to Russia to hear stories in Russian by Russians who look like me,” she says. Like the artist, many were born to Russian mothers and African or Caribbean fathers who were given the chance to study in Eastern Europe as part of the Soviet Union’s efforts to expand its influence across the African continent during the Cold War. Growing tensions between the foreign students and white Soviets led to violence and protests in the Soviet Union and several Eastern Bloc countries. As a result, many of the students were given exit visas after graduating, although some had already formed relationships and had children. After meeting and filming numerous subjects, Johnson Artur says, “We all agreed that we felt Russian as well as African.”

Born N Bread

Born N Bread is a collective of women from Peckham, a neighborhood in southeast London where Johnson Artur lived for twenty-six years. Since 2015, the group has produced numerous projects, including a zine and a popular biweekly radio show. “During my time in Peckham,” says the artist, “I saw kids growing up, and for me these ladies represent this time.”

PDA

This group of photographs features a close-knit London community of artists, performers, dancers, and clubbers who Johnson Artur met in 2018. Some photographs are associated with the monthly East London club night PDA (Public Display of Affection), which invites DJs, collectives, and artists to perform for their peers and create an inclusive space for self-expression. As with all of her photographs, here she closely collaborates with her subjects.



Liz Johnson Artur, *Untitled (PDA)*, 2018. Chromogenic photograph, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist. © Liz Johnson Artur.

James Barnor

Last year, Johnson Artur began photographing and interviewing James Barnor, who in the 1950s opened the first photo studio in Accra, the capital of Ghana. After Ghana gained independence from Great Britain in 1957, Barnor moved to London, where he continued working for the South Africa-based magazine *Drum*, helping to bring black models into mainstream British media. Barnor returned to Ghana in the early 1970s to open the first color processing studio in the country. He has been based in London since 1993.

“For me, meeting James Barnor was a dream come true,” says Johnson Artur. “He is a legend, and I always wanted to meet a photographer of his stature. On my two visits, I had the great pleasure to listen to his stories about Ghana, arriving in England in the 1960s, and about the people he photographed. He had a story for every picture he showed.” This installation conveys Barnor’s archive and stories in his own words.

Sketchbooks and Sketches

“What I call sketches are the lifeline in my archive,” says Johnson Artur. “Without them, I would have drowned a long time ago.” She fills these books with photographs, drawings, and thoughts that



Liz Johnson Artur, *James Barnor*, 2018. Silver gelatin fiber-based photograph, 16 x 12 inches. Courtesy the artist. © Liz Johnson Artur.

Liz Johnson Artur (b. 1964, Sofia, Bulgaria) has been based in London since 1991. Her monograph with Bierke Verlag was included in the New York Times Best Photo Books of 2016, and her work was recently included in the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. She was a nominee for the 2017 Aimia | AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario) Photography Prize and a finalist for the Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice in 2018. Johnson Artur holds an MA in photography from the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Liz Johnson Artur: Dusha is curated by Drew Sawyer, Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Curator of Photography, Brooklyn Museum. The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis exhibition is organized by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator.

The Artist Talk is generously supported by the Robert Lehman

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Liz Johnson Artur

Saturday, January 18, 11:00 am

RE: Soul

Thursday, March 19, 6:30 pm



**Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis**
3750 Washington Blvd
St. Louis, MO 63108
314.535.4660

Connect with CAM

Visit camstl.org
Facebook [contemporaryartmuseumstl](https://www.facebook.com/contemporaryartmuseumstl)
Twitter [contemporarystl](https://twitter.com/contemporarystl)
Instagram [camstl](https://www.instagram.com/camstl)

Artist's Suggested Reading and Listening List

Selected by Liz Johnson Artur to share insights into her art and ideas.

Books:

Bishton, Derek and John Reardon. *Home Front*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1984.

Ewing, William A. *Blumenfeld: A Fetish for Beauty*. London: Thames & Hudson. 1996.

Goldscheider, Ludwig. *Etruscan Sculpture*. New York: Phaidon Press. 1941.

Hesse, Hermann. *Pictor's Metamorphoses*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1922.

Himes, Chester. *Plan B*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 1933.

Knape, Gunilla. *Ernest Cole: Photographer*. Gothenburg, Sweden: Steidl and the Hasselblad Foundation, 2011.

List, Herbert. *Junge Männer*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1988.

McKay, Claude. *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*. New York: Harper and Sons, 1929.

Meatyrd, Ralph E. *Ralph Eugene Meatyard*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2005.

p'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino*. Unknown publisher, 1966.

Pasternak, Boris. *The Voice of Prose: Volume One Early Prose and Autobiography*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986.

Albums:

Horace Andy. *Natty Dread A Weh She Want*. Stars, 1978.

Alice Coltrane. *The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*. Luaka Bop, 2017.

D'Angelo. *Brown Sugar*. EMI Music, 1995.

Jean-Claude T. *The Bicentennial Poet*. Philadelphia International Records, 1976.

DJ Mentat Feat. Roots Manuva and Seanie T. *Rugged Wid' It*. Beat Asylum Recordings, 2004.

Sunny Ade & His Green Spot Band. *The Master Guitarist Vol. 1*. African Songs Ltd, 1971.

Nina Simone. *It Is Finished*. RCA Records, 1974.