

Reviving History Through the Lens: Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo and the Forgotten Théâtre Populaire

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From a Cultural Landmark to an Abandoned Ruin, Photographer Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo Brings Burkina Faso's *Théâtre Populaire* Back into Focus



Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo, *THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE 8*, 2019. Print on Hahnemühle William Turner paper, 50 x 50 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Christophe Person Gallery.

On 29 July 1986, Burkina Faso's first president, Thomas Sankara, inaugurated the capital's legendary *Théâtre Populaire*. His main aim was to make culture accessible to all.

Forty years later, the *Théâtre Populaire* is abandoned and overgrown with weeds. The famous photographer Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo gave it a second life through his lens.

His work, on display at the French gallery Christophe Person during the summer, captures the theatre's murals and brings them back to the public eye.



Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo, *THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE 2*, 2019. Print on Hahnemühle William Turner paper, 50 x 50 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Christophe Person Gallery.

Art as mediator

The fascinating 'Théâtre Populaire' series highlights the beauty of the masks painted on the façades and the variety of reliefs and motifs created on the walls by the wear and tear of time. These frescoes are both subjects and witnesses to cultural and political history.

Nyaba's photographs invite us to take a nostalgic stroll through the streets of Ouagadougou, where creativity was in full swing at the time of the inauguration of the Théâtre Populaire. A risk that paid off for the Galerie Christophe Person. Despite the 4,000 kilometres that separate Ouagadougou from Paris, visitors are rediscovering the era of Thomas Sankara and the Burkina Faso of the 1980s and its ancestral tradition of masks.

The exhibition 'In the Land of Honest Men', which brings together seven Burkinabe artists in the famous "Marais" district of Paris, offers a different reading of the country, far removed from the political and security news ubiquitous in the Western media.



Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo, *THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE 10*, 2019. Print on Hahnemühle William Turner paper, 50 x 50 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Christophe Person Gallery.

From athletics champion to internationally acclaimed photographer

Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo was never meant to be a photographer. In his youth, he excelled at running. Athletics prodigy and Burkina Faso champion in the 400 metres in 1998, he won a scholarship to continue his sports career in Paris to prepare for the Sydney Olympics.

Following a series of injuries, he turned to photography, working in a documentary style on the injustices suffered by the African continent. In 2011, he was awarded the European Union prize at the Bamako Photography Festival for his 'Copper hell' series. He was also a finalist in the 2010 Prix Pictet and the 2013 Quai Branly Museum Photographic Residencies winner.



Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo

Building a reputation for the visual arts in the Sahel

In response to the lack of public and private initiatives dedicated to contemporary art in Burkina, Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo and gallery owner and director Christophe Person founded the International Sculpture Biennial of Ouagadougou (BISO) in 2019.

As the first biennial dedicated exclusively to sculpture on the African continent, the success of its first editions has enabled it to become a key artistic event in the region quickly. In its own words, it is a “political and social project” that promotes creativity on the continent. The 4th edition, scheduled for November 2025, will bring together the artists in residence for almost a month around the theme of “Unbearable frontier”.

Amos Traore is a journalist and editor based in Burkina Faso. He is part of Radio France Internationale’s Mondoblog, the largest community of French-speaking bloggers. Since August 2020, he has contributed to the Washington-based International Journalists Network (IJNET), writing high-quality articles on topics such as culture, science, new technologies, and the environment.