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La bella de Luanda

For me, much of the process of taking photos is about control; controlling the light, the model, the technicality of the camera, the tripod, making sure the films are loaded correctly. But mainly it is about imprinting my own vision of the world on someone, on something or on a landscape.

This summer, I was invited to do a 5-week residency in Angola with Ela Espaço Luanda Arte. At the beginning, I didn't really want to go. The logistics were very complicated, the dates, the visa process, and beyond everything I had just moved back to my beloved city of Dakar! I was having a fling with a very handsome man and I didn't want to leave. I remember this work of Sophie Calle called Exquisite Pain; it's about her going to do a residency in Japan and she absolutely doesn't want to go. She forced herself to go yet made it as painful as possible by convolutedly taking the train from Paris to Tokyo.

This is how I felt about going to Luanda. I had to go to South Africa for a show before, and then after months of tergiversation, I finally arrived in Luanda on July 2. I was so worried when I arrived at customs carrying over 6 cameras in my bag and a load of medium format and 35 mm films. Custom always makes me feel guilty. It makes me feel as if I were carrying arms and munitions, maybe because in some countries this is how cameras are seen: the weapons of the dissidents.

The first feeling you have about a new place is very important. Mine happened 22 minutes or so after I landed. I walk out of the airport and someone was waiting for me with a name card. He took my suitcase, we exchanged salutations in my unspoken Portuguese and his non-existent English, and at that exact moment, I was like "what the fuck am I doing here?". My life is complicated enough without having to come to this unknown country, where I don't speak the language and where I don't understand any of the cultural cues... Sophie got to Tokyo, I got to Luanda....

The first few days were tough, I was supposed to work with my driver, a former Angolan policeman named Correia. He was constantly wearing very tight jeans, a beautiful, blue, red and white belt, and always kept his sunglasses even inside. He looked more like a 1980s star out of the Kassav band than a policeman... We were trying to figure out a short narrative that he use to talk to the women I wanted to photograph. We did this few times, and I quickly realized that if this guy came talking to me, next to this neurotic and gesticulating foreigner (me), I would probably believe that the two of them just ran out of a madhouse...

Luckily I met a young photographer who agreed to become my translator. We worked together for maybe two days before heading to Kikolo market on the third.

My working process is very instinctive. Sometimes, I see a woman and follow her for 15 minutes before I decide that I don't want to photograph her, so I just turn away without ever talking to her. Other times, the impulse is so strong that I can literally jump in front of someone as they walk passed. Sometimes, I just see a wall and think how beautiful this wall is, and how wonderful it would be if the perfect lady walked by and then it happens just like that! The gods just conspire to fulfill my imagination.

So on my day in Kikolo market, the gods were indeed with me; leading my steps to this perfect blue wall, and the perfect girl came by. My translator spoke to her, explained her my project and she agreed to pose on the wall. I had barely finished the photos when two armed men were next to me and asked me to follow them...

Turns out I was photographing a police station, an act that is highly forbidden in this country that went through 27 years of civil war... Blue is my favorite color, and in Angola it is also the color of every police station.

The policemen were nice but short, and they asked us to call my driver. When Correia came, they put me back in the car with eight armed guys, informing us to drive to another police station. I thought: "Jeez, I'm going to jail"! I felt like a real criminal, squeezed on the back seat between Kalashnikovs, with no understanding of single spoken Portuguese word despite practicing every evening with my Duolingo application... I was already sending frantic messages to a friend in Paris, so that if I ever went to jail she could reach some important people and work for my release. I can be dramatic sometimes.

My mind was racing, trying to imagine what jails are like in Angola. When we finally got to the other stations, I realized that my armed companions just needed a free ride and wanted nothing to do with me! I got released within 30 minutes, after a policeman had forced me to open my film camera. He simply couldn't understand that I wasn't using a digital camera and was convinced the images were hidden somewhere in the object. After that, I swore to myself that I would never photograph a blue wall in Angola again. This also gave me a good reason to start smoking again, so I asked Correia for a cigarette. Fortunately, asking for cigarette is something you can mimic in every language...

The following day, I was almost loosing it. I relapsed in my bad smoking habits, I had lost my god sent snaps from the day

before, and the project I had in mind before coming simply wasn't taking shape as I imagined. More anxiously, I was scared to go out and shoot again. The logistics were beyond complicated and I had no control whatsoever on anything. Even buying bread was an adventure... Yet, there was also so much to see, so much color! And this constant heartfelt rhythm that seemed to beat through the city. Luanda has a very unique pulse, and I got quickly obsessed with the colors, the shadow, the light that reflected around every corner. I spent the last three years in Paris, which makes you feel like the whole world is grey. The buildings are grey, the walls are grey, the sky is grey, the clothes are grey... Paris makes me forget how colorful the world can be. In Angola, even the toilet brooms are pink. It's like bringing color to the darkest places.

There's this feeling you get when you kind of like someone, but you know you can't, you shouldn't, you mustn't like this person because it doesn't fit any of the requirements you have set for your life. So you resist, because it doesn't go along with this mental image that you build within yourself about how life should be. It's how I felt with Luanda, after two weeks of struggles. I was slowly but surely falling under the spell of this city that looks like nothing I had experienced before. After another few days, the gods came back to favour me. I found the perfect person to work with, a very calm Congolese woman who speaks perfect French and Portuguese, and who could navigate every situation with elegance.

I then was hooked by the street style, considering everything one would wear or carry as an element of fashion. In Luanda, the Zungueiras (women street sellers) are carrying an entire world on their heads. Bananas, avocado, brooms, Tupperware, Teddy Bears, hair extensions, etc... It will go beyond your wildest dreams, but the magic of it is about how it blends with the city. I felt like living in a Pop art bubble. I recently got to the realization that fashion is how a soul expresses itself. Sometimes with restraint and sometimes with exuberance, despite economic insecurity. I now am left wondering about the meaning of the unique aesthetics of this city; is all of this color an act of resistance? A way to conjugate the brutal colonial history, the civil war, the raging capitalism and the most recent economic crisis? Or is Luanda a constant dancing soul?

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L'articolo [La bella de Luanda](#) sembra essere il primo su [Vogue.it](#).