

Harper's Bazaar  
Hiver 2018

## A Boat Full of Dreams

Those visiting the Parrish Art Museum in Watermill, New York until the end of October encountered a colossal boat floating atop empty glass bottles. The tension between the boat's heftiness and the fragility of tightly-lined borders underneath best encapsulates the crucial elements Barthélémy Toguo has been investigating in his multidisciplinary practice over the decades. Standing as an immobile wooden vessel occupied by tens of fabric bags covered with African patterns, *Road to Exile* (2018) embodied—not unlike other works in his *The Beauty of Our Voice*-titled exhibition—humanity's inherent struggle in search of an honorable life and the consequences faced en route. The show-opener that Cameroon-born artist created over the summer during his residency next door at the Watermill Center manifest the risks—be that sharp glasses or reckless waves—many assume in hopes of ideals waiting on the horizon. "Renaissance artists depicted the plague in Florence; Picasso witnessed Nazis dropping bombs onto Guernica and illustrated the catastrophe," says Toguo, explaining the artist's inherent role as an absorber of the good and the bad that constitute a society's collective history. "As an artist of this generation, it's my duty to remain conscious about the atrocities of the times."

Doing justice to the 51-year-old artist's cross-disciplinary practice, his first exhibition at an American institution exhibited his community engagement work alongside a thought-provoking selection in photography, painting, installation, and performance, spanning across the museum's Herzog & de Meuron Architects-designed slick architecture. Despite this long-awaited US debut, Toguo has been one of the most prolific voices of his native Cameroon, exhibiting extensively in global art extravaganzas in Havana, Venice, Sydney, and most recently, Japan. While the global art world has slowly caught up with his long commitment to issues of migration and the effects of post-colonialism on identity politics, Toguo has been exploring ways to re-define art as a social catalyst, questioning artists' responsibilities for their communities. "The artist always has to be present and ready to talk about what is currently urgent," Toguo believes, referring to Albert Camus's acceptance speech for the Nobel Literature Prize in 1957 as his inspiration.

*Mobile Cafeteria* (2018), an immersive installation revitalising the African street café tradition with its communal table and seats placed on brightly-colored rugs, reflects his interest in activating the gallery space through social interaction and intimate discussions around crucial topics—and not to forget Ludo board game and African football broadcast

Cameroonian artist  
**Barthélémy  
Toguo** gives voice  
to the silenced.  
*Osman Can  
Yerebakan* writes  
on his evocative  
multifaceted oeuvre



Installation view of *Platform 2018*,  
Barthélémy Toguo: *The Beauty of  
Our Voice Road to Exile*, 2018.  
Mixed-media installation, wood  
boat, fabric bags, plastic bottles,  
and glass bottles. Image courtesy  
of Parrish Art Museum

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49 HarpersBazaarArabia.com/art Winter 2018

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on a TV. In the meantime, the most important element—coffee—is not overlooked. In 2007, Toguo established an organic coffee farm at his multipurpose cultural center Bandjoun Station in Western Cameroon where a broad range of artistic mediums have found a venue for a community strongly deprived of cultural and agricultural resources. The center also houses the artist's private art collection which includes near one thousand regional and international artworks from all across Africa and some from Europe. The majority of the collection stems from his exchanges of works with fellow artists. "After seeing so many museums around the world, I didn't want to build just another similar concept. However, in order to introduce art to the local community, I had to use music," the artist explains, referring to the station's annual music festival Gold Star currently on its fourth edition. "Then came celebrations of weddings and births, and even funerals." Produced at this alternative museum by local workers, each coffee package of the eponymous coffee line exhibits a watercolor by the artist and sold at fairs to art-goers. Hiring locally and determining the price value, the artist reacts to drastic imbalances of trade between east and west, handling issues of exploitation and labor through the piercing impact of art and soothing flavor of coffee.

During the opening reception, Toguo was present at his built-in café, serving guests samples from his coffee. The bitter flavor of the beans echoed with Stupid African President, a group of life-size photographs surrounding the cozy installation with political satire. Parts of an epony-

mous series Toguo conceived in 2006, the photographs show the artist performing absurd situations as an African president. In *Forest Destruction*, he dons a purely white outfit and a serious facial expression ridiculed by a large chainsaw he balances on his head; *Afrika Oil* shows him drinking last drops of a bottle inside a barrel emblazoned with words "Afrika" and "Oil?"

A self-claimed "news junkie," Toguo is a nomad of his own kind, in constant transience travelling the globe and uniting communities whose mobility and freedom to travel face social and bureaucratic blockage. *Head Above Water* is another geography-defying project Toguo initiated in 2004 to raise voices of regions enduring socio-political turmoil, from Cairo to Tunisia. Handing each individual a postcard adorned with his art, the artist asks them to transfer their hopes and dreams onto the card. Unbeknownst to many are large Latinx and Native communities in the Hamptons, which promoted the artist to visit high schools of such communities and deliver postcards during his residency. The result is a large scale installation of postcards spanning the museum's hallway akin to a mosaic of colours and figures, but most importantly, of dreams. Additions of cards from Lagos and Mexico City strengthen the global dialogue and manifest the genuinely inherent nature of human experience regardless of geography or tradition. Inclusivity is the thread weaving Toguo's expansive practice into a colorful tapestry, whether he serves coffee to art collectors at a fast-paced art fair in Europe or hands postcards to children in Kosovo to give them a platform to express their hopes. ■

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE PARRISH MUSEUM

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The ARTIST



Left: Installation view of *Platform 2018*, Barthélémy Toguo: *The Beauty of Our Voice Road to Exile*. 2018. Mixed-media installation, wood boat, fabric bags, plastic bottles, and glass bottles. Image courtesy of Parrish Art Museum Photography by Jenny Gorman Above: Barthélémy Toguo © Barthélémy

Toguo / Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Paris & Bandjoun Station Cameroun Below: Images from the *Stupid African President* series. 2006. Digital inkjet print.

