Witness: An Artist’s Journey Into The Past

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis as a social documentary, using images to provoke awareness of the emotions of children, their lives during the 15-year old Civil War that was in Liberia, West Africa. This thesis will visually explore different timelines, the past, the present and the future of children depicted. In depicting the past, the images capturing specific moment of what a child had to witness during the war. In depicting the present images showcase the aftermath of the war for children who have survived, and finally, for the future, images showcasing how the lives of some of the children have changed because of sacrifices made by people who observed the war and its consequences. Inspiration was gathered from several groups of artists that covered events such as the Great Depression, Vietnam, the Holocaust, etc. These artists include: Henry Mayhew, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks among many.
Witness: An Artist’s Journey Into The Past
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First, I would like to thank God for His love and grace that He gives so freely. Without the love and support of my wife Wendy and my Mom and Dad (Neyor and Fungbeh II), my four siblings, Nyempu, Kormahyah, Kulubah, Fungbeh III, this thesis and exhibit would not be possible. I thank all of you for your love and support. I would also like to thank Wayne Dyer, David Dixon, and Cher Cornett for their guidance and input. Their knowledge has been vital to my success as a student, teacher, and professional designer.
# ABSTRACT


# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


# LIST OF FIGURES


Chapter

1. THE PAST ................................................................. 7
   Introduction.................................................................... 7

2. SIGNIFICANT OF THE STUDY ........................................... 9

3. HISTORICAL INFLUENCES & WORK .................................. 10
   Discovering Art.............................................................. 10

4. EARLY INFLUENCES........................................................... 12

5. EVOLUTION OF WORK, PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN INFLUENCE .......... 16

6. CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 24

FIGURES:

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................... 27

VITA .............................................................................................. 29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wisdom Grandma YeahYeah</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Home Alone Hanna</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Who Will lead Us? Josiah</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Labor Work</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Leftover</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: THE PAST

Introduction

As a young Liberian, life for me has been like an emotional, physically exhausting roller coaster ride. In order to fully absorb the effect of that ride, my mind is forced to communicate with my body, guiding it to adjust to the turns and twists of life, all the while holding on tightly. Looking back, it was not so long ago, that I had no idea where life would take me. During the civil war that ravaged my beautiful country about twenty-one years ago, I regularly dodged bullets and sought out safety in dark places while trying to get my hands and mouth on anything that would satisfy my growling stomach. I owe everything to the almighty God for giving me the ability to navigate and adapt to the twists and turns life has presented me.
After living in multiple countries (mostly due to running away from the turmoil and violence in my own), I was forced to continuously adapt to different cultures. Decisions forced upon me by the circumstances of war afforded me very little in the way of childhood. So, you can imagine my surprise when, at the beginning of a new life in the United States about twenty years ago, I discovered my artistic abilities. I soon fully embraced them and sought to make them a permanent part of me.
CHAPTER 2: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Growing up in a country that is caught in the throes of war takes a heavy toll on a person’s mind, especially the mind of a child. Children are the lost and forgotten casualties of war, and the world may not understand or properly acknowledge this group of victims. It’s a shock when there can come a time when the basic necessities of life (food, shelter, safety) that we take for granted are not always readily available to everyone. This thesis is significant in that it provides a voice for the children and those who died unnecessarily during the war in Liberia. This is my Witness, my personal experience, and my statement of the horrid effects of war on children. It is spoken as one who witnessed the war at an early age, one who was lucky enough to escape and then return soon after the war to witness first hand the devastating effect that it had on the children. I hold great hope that this thesis, by providing a powerful insight into the effects of war, will rally others to think through alternative means for solving conflict in their countries. An entire country can be destroyed in one day, but it then takes decades to rebuild. Please join me in hope as I strive to build the future of Liberia one child at the time.
CHAPTER 3: HISTORICAL INFLUENCES & WORK

*Discovering Art*

I was fortunate enough to escape the 14-year-old Liberian Civil War that claimed nearly 300,000 lives and victimized millions. I then became a graphic designer in the great United States of America where my family and I had taken refuge. I had the opportunity to use my design ability as a means to express my creativity and to escape the harsh reality of all I witnessed in Liberia.

Whenever I watched the evening news and saw what was happening in my beloved country of Liberia, I had flashbacks remembering the many casualties I witnessed and the atrocities we endured and overcame in our quest to escape. Many times I would deny my feelings by blocking my thoughts or by painting and drawing still life pictures of peaceful and colorful things in my environment such as a bowl of fruit on top of a mirror or the landscape outside my window.

I used art as a means to escape into another reality. This helped me to elevate my mind to new dimensions in time and to escape and erase bad dreams and visions I often suffered. After years of using this strategy as a way to recover, I fell in love with art. My creative nature evolved, and discovering that, I sought to fully embrace it.

After years of healing, I started to forget the bad dreams and began to look forward, pondering upon my future. However, the need to reconnect with my past is always with me, hanging like a storm cloud over my creativity.

After my creative talents matured, I would often reflect back to my journey through the war. I worried I was not mature enough to fully capture my experiences and to properly showcase visually what I and many other children had endured because of
the civil war in Liberia. I longed to accurately depict what happened and the effect it had on an entire generation.
CHAPTER 4: EARLY INFLUENCES

My visual interpretation of what took place in Liberia was always buried deep in my mind, trying to snake its way into my many projects. I never really saw it as a reality, nor did I see it as a means to satisfy the hunger and urge I felt to expel the horror through my creativity. Whenever I told my story, it was oral. Many who heard became emotional and immediately suggested I write a book or find some other means of telling my story, so that more people could be made aware. But I have always been afraid of writing anything; long papers, essays, etc. I was definitely more comfortable expressing myself with my designs.

In the early stages of my life, I was a painter. I was deeply influenced by Leonardo Da Vinci and Vincent Van Gogh. Da Vinci captivated me with his multiplicity of talent as a true Italian Renaissance artist. I was fascinated at how one man could have so much talent and be a master of all forms. I fell in love with Mona Lisa’s Secret. I sought to learn from the “sfumato” technique he used to capture the soul of the lady in the picture. I admired his use of soft edges to give the image more depth and space. I studied his paintings and tried to imitate the same techniques in my own portraits even though my medium would evolve from Portraiture Painting to Photography. I try my best to carry on with the same type of technique as is in the portrait below of my grandmother entitled, Wisdom. When I create a portrait, I seek to capture more than just an image; there’s a story behind every image I take. The saying goes, image speaks louder than words. Every time I capture an image, I’m not merely taking a photograph; I seek to visually communicate a story that has an intimate connection with the photograph.
Wisdom was captured with a Cannon Rebel XTI and was digitally enhanced in Photoshop to achieve the variation of color interpretation. The artistic colorization in particular was intended as an alternate color interpretation to help enhance YeahYeah, my grandmother’s story. After successfully sheltering her family through 15 years of civil war, Grandma YeahYeah is ready to live another life of nurturing her great-grand and grand kids. At the age of 75, Grandma YeahYeah has been a powerful force throughout her society and culture. She has successfully mothered 27 children and is represented as the mother of her village. Younger women seek to be like her. They are privileged to sit at her feet for advice. Men respect her presence. Her attendance in a room signifies honor and esteem. Though she did not have proper schooling, Grandma’s knowledge and wisdom surpass those of many people with college
degrees. The Elders and Town Chiefs seek her wisdom and advice when making important decisions. She knows the signs of the time. Her predictions are normally worth believing. She’s also known to pray things into reality. The town people have a saying for… "She has a way of having intimate conversation with God. If she wanted it to rain she would have her wish." Every morning, she gathers her grand children and leads them into powerful prayer devotional in her prayer room. She is the family’s most valuable treasure. Many first girl children are named after her. Out of her mouth comes warm greeting of wisdom and powerful knowledge. In her arms lies infinite love of nurturing. Grandma YeahYeah is a valuable treasure that keeps getting better with age. This is why I entitled the image Wisdom and sought by every means to encapsulate her character and soul in one photograph.

The use of colors and light to create the reflection of light over the image supports the iconic feel. Using an overtone of warm golden brown color gives the image a subtle glow, almost making it feel iconic and supernatural. I sought to capture her soul in a photograph like Leonardo captured the spirit of the Mona Lisa in his painting.

I admired Van Gogh’s ability to visually connect his work with the mental struggles he endured in his life. The extent to which his mental health affected his painting has been a subject of speculation since his death. Despite a widespread tendency to romanticize his ill health, modern critics see an artist deeply frustrated by the inactivity and incoherence brought about by his bouts of illness. According to art critic Robert Hughes, “Van Gogh’s late works show an artist at the height of his ability, completely in control and “longing for concision and grace”. Sometimes it’s art that finds us, not the other way around. As an artist I can relate to Van Gogh’s mental trauma that he express throughout his work. Artists tend to be mirrors of the society in which they live, a reflection of the nightmares or struggles they have.
I found my world swirling around like a kite in the wind, my traumatizing childhood of my escape of the Liberian Civil War had left me in a lonely demoralizing position. After living in multiple countries (mostly due to running away from the turmoil and violence in my own), I was forced to continuously adapt to different cultures. Decisions forced upon me by the circumstances of war afforded me very little in the way of childhood. You can imagine my surprise when, at the beginning of a new life in the United States about twenty years ago, I discovered my artistic abilities. I soon fully embraced them and sought to make them a permanent part of me.

My life has been filled with many colors, shapes, smells, and visions that led me along the path that has brought forth the work you are about to experience. I have been a witness to many things that shaped and molded my vision as an artist. In order for you to understand my passion, and to understand my determination and zest for life, you must take a walk in my shoes.
CHAPTER 5: EVOLUTION OF WORK, PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN INFLUENCE

My ability to design has evolved, led by many influences beginning with God. He has given me spiritual guidance and has been my instrument for finding my way whenever I am doubtful or confused. When graphic design found me, I was amazed at how Paul Rand said so much but did so little. I was captivated by the psychology of Herbert Beyer, whose core belief was that the designer is not separated from the creative process, and in order to be fully effective, the whole designer, head, heart and soul must be included in the creative process.

Over the course of my career I have evolved as an artist and borrowed, even adopted, influences from several different artists who have strongly impacted my life. I am no longer an artist living in the past, but seek to create the future with my work; so that it will strongly impact society, and hopefully serve a purpose bigger than just myself.

I am now deeply influenced and touched by many artists who have told stories that have changed the dynamics of society and created cultural movements by means of visual expression.

There are many ways to tell a story. Many do so using poetry, fine art, television, verbal communication, video, and photography. Though many artists in the past used one or more of these mediums to express thoughts about the reality of life and its impact on people, the one that stands the test and span of time has always been photography. Photographic images are used to alter and stimulate people’s imagination, thereby affecting their lives for a long time.

I have chosen to use photography to showcase a series of events and life
experiences that many people and myself have witnessed during and after the Liberian Civil War. My decision to use photography as an expressive medium was influenced by many inspiring designers who used photography to tell stories in ways that have changed and affected society. The expression, “a picture is worth a thousand words” may be a cliché, but the power of photography to move people and preserve important moments has proven this phrase to be true.

According to Vicki Goldberg, in her book The Power of Photography, “photographs have a swifter and more succinct impact than words, an impact that is instantaneous, visceral, and intense. They share the power of images in general, which have always played havoc with the human mind and heart, and they have the added force of evident accuracy.”

Time and time again, we have come to realize the power of photography and its impact on us as a generation and its monumental role in influencing our society. The review of literature will cover brief inspirations from several groups of artists that have covered events such as World War I, World War II, the Great Depression, Vietnam, the Holocaust, the Dust Bowl, and other crucial monumental events.

When photography is used as a creative means to tell a story and show the reality of an event, it can supersede any other means to say, “This took place”, and leave the viewer questioning their own motivation to do something about the situation. Throughout history a handful of artists have been fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time and capture events that helped to change the course of society.

For many of these artists, such events gave a great sense of fulfillment when they accomplished work that spoke beyond merely expressing a visual creative ability they developed over time. The art is not separated from the artist, or the design from the designers, they are essentially one.
Robert Capa was an extraordinary pioneer who used photography as a means to bring attention to his horrors of war. During his coverage of five wars, he sought out the emotion of his characters so the pain of war was very apparent in the faces of the individuals involved. He once stated that “it’s so easy to stand aside and be unable to do anything except record the suffering around one…. the last day some of the best ones die. But those alive will fast forget.” What was fascinating about Capa’s style was his ability to capture the soul and emotion of people enduring hardship in war. According to John Steinbeck as stated in The Concerned Photographer, “Capa’s pictures were made in his brain - the camera only completed them. He could show the horror of a whole people in the face of a child. His camera caught and held emotion.”
It was easy to spot children who were orphans, abandoned, with little care or attention from anyone. Children simply did not understand how to find happiness. Sometimes, I would bring cookies and candy with me whenever I went out to photograph. I tried to cheer up many of these children, but most children kept a deep stare that held so much sorrow and emotion and would not crack a smile no matter how hard I tried.
Wherever I went, children followed. Many kids just want a piece of candy or cookies. For most, that served as a whole day’s meal. These children typically work intensively, selling wood or volunteering on someone’s farm before they can get something to eat. Many people easily influence them because they have few guardians.
This was the case for me when I first returned to Liberia, I was emotionally moved by the struggles around me that the only way I could express my emotions with my camera. I was focused on the children, I related to them more than anything else. I was once like them. It was like looking in the mirror looking right at myself. I was a part of history but my story ended differently than these children’s. Therefore, snap after snap, I captured the emotions and story behind each child as I reflected and faced the demise I had escaped when I left the continent at the age of eleven. Home alone made me reflect on how life would be like if my single mother at the time would have been killed. My misery would have been as deep as this little orphan child in the image.

When I came across groups of children, roaming around the streets of Liberia, I envisioned my life during the war, if I had no mother, no father as was the case for so many children in my next photography, “Who Will Lead Us?”. The only influence that is pressed on these children was from the hands of the people who murdered their parents. This is how many children became child soldiers. From the sight of this, I realized how blessed I am. My mother remained strong guided by the spirit of God, as she became our hope, guardian, and compass for escaping the war.

As a visual communicator, I am also motivated by a group of designers who used their creativity as an effective means to communicate a message to society. Over the course of my short artistic journey, artists such as Johnny Florea, Dorothea Lange, Ron Haeberle, Huynh Cong, and Lewis Hine have also influenced me. They all had one thing in common, which was the use of photography as a highly efficient means to communicate a powerful message to audiences all over the world.

Dorothea Lange’s iconic image “Migrant Mother”, gently and beautifully captured the hardship and pain of what so many Americans were experiencing at the time.
Because of Dorothea Lange’s famous image of “Migrant Mother”, an entire nation became aware of the state of poverty that struck the Nipomo, CA farmers. Soon after the picture was printed, relief was sent to feed this population. I seek that my work has the same affect. It’s easy to get caught in the demands of society, working to pay the bills and practically doing anything as a designer to survive. Many people have to do anything to pay the bills and keep surviving. Most times people don’t have a choice. I, however, don’t want to sit behind somebody’s cubical and take orders all day from an angry manager who leads a miserable life. I will rather not use my talent if that is what I have to do to live. I’ll find me the next job at McDonalds or my local group home if I only want to survive. I’ve had enough misery in my short span of life. Therefore, I have chosen to lead my artistic life as a Concern Artist whose work is a contribution to the art community for an impact to my society. If I’ll work and create design, let it be an influence to society as Dora thea Lange did with the Migrant Mother.

When Allied forces liberated the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, Johnny Florea was one of the photographers whose work helped to convey the full extent of the horrors far more convincingly than words could ever describe.

Throughout history, photographers have used their medium as an advocate and voice to further expose social issues. At the beginning of the 1900s, when the industrial revolution was taking off, photographers used the medium to bring the horrific living conditions of the industrial age to the public’s attention.

Lewis W. Hine, one of the renowned photographers of the 20th century, photographed poor immigrants at Ellis Island and traveled the country seeking images of the nation’s oppressed in hopes of raising awareness about dangerous working conditions, poor housing, and a variety of other social concerns. Hine’s pictures
started as documents but ended as a tool of persuasion and publicity. His belief was that people who knew the facts would act diligently to get the truth out. He also believed the document had to be trustworthy and had to serve as an effective form of publicity for the cause.

As Vicki Golberg stated in The Power of Photography, “it is difficult to point to a single photograph by Hine that stirred the public to action. His work often underlined the fact that photography most often achieves its force by addition or multiplication. A single photograph may be powerful, but it seldom does the job alone. Pictorial influences tend to be cumulative. Image after image of tenements, of child labor, of civil rights outrages tends to load down the mind until it snaps under a particularly strong assault. Time and reputation are photography’s greatest allies in the battle for influence.”
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

With this in mind, I decided not only to write a book to share my experiences in Liberia but to display a multitude of images that hold a powerfully significant visual message for the masses. Through self-reflection, I have come to the conclusion I did not return to Liberia simply to take photos. I went back to Liberia to feed a hunger and find the artist that has been hiding within every work of art I had previously created. Through that, I have been blessed to assist desperate children in obtaining better opportunities and a better life by bringing attention to their situation. Using my talents and skills of designing for a purpose, I believe my commitment today is to Save More Kids and help rebuild children’s lives that have been destroyed, children who are not given a fair chance to thrive.

If you would like to order a copy of WITNESS, please contact:

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I would often wonder into rural places around Liberia, photographing life and experiences of children. I came across a massive field on one of my journey where mothers, fathers, and their children were hauling sand from a lake to provide for their daily necessities. I was particularly stunned at the extreme labor children had to endure, not because they were being forced but because they had to. For many, it was their only source of surviving.

FIGURE 4 LABOR WORK
Jan 2009
Gbarnga, Liberia
As I strolled from the neighborhoods to the market places, I started to notice something; the children and the condition they were in. What I was not mentally or emotionally prepared for was the amount of devastation the war had on children.
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