Lorenzo Vitturi
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Photographer and sculptor Lorenzo Vitturi captures Nigeria's Balogun market

The colliding worlds of a once-grand corporate tower block and a bustling street market

AUGUST 25, 2017 by Lorenzo Vitturi

I discovered Lagos thanks to an invitation from Azu Nwagbogu, director of the African Artists' Foundation, to take up a residency there. I had never been to the African continent before, but I had become familiar with Nigerian culture at the Ridley Road market in London, a neighbourhood that I explored as part of a previous project, "Dalston Anatomy".

After a few visits, it seemed to me that most of Lagos was following a pattern repeated around the world, where local communities and small businesses are being displaced by the arrival of large-scale corporate groups and speculative development projects. On most of the islands of the lagoon, trucks are moving tons of sand to make space for multi-storey buildings made of steel and glass. However, in the heart of Lagos Island, the oldest part of the city, urbanisation is being hampered by the presence of a street market: the Balogun market, the second biggest of its sort in west Africa. Here, I found what appeared to me to be an exceptional case of "reverse" gentrification.

The most striking example of this peculiar process can be seen around the Financial Trust House, a 27-storey brutalist building erected in 1987. Until the 1990s, the area was the financial and residential centre of Lagos, and the building hosted international banks, airline companies and a luxury penthouse.

Today, what used to be clean and shiny is covered by a thick layer of pink Sahara sand, brought in by the Harmattan wind. The only functioning floor is the fourth one, where Alexander Omoniyi Ajayi, the building's owner, is fighting a battle against the incursions of the street market and its informal economy.

On the streets around his building, more and more people, mostly from rural areas, join the market every day to become street vendors and make a living through the sale of cheap products from China. From early morning until evening the market crowd occupies the whole area. Ajayi, with whom I had long conversations, explained that if he doesn't get to work before 8am, he's unable to park his car and reach his office.

To depict this contrasting situation, I focused my attention on both the chaos of the street market and the collapsing interiors of the Financial Trust House, often using the building itself as a viewpoint. While inside the building all is silent — only a few objects have survived the successive departures and the decaying action of time — just outside it, an enormous quantity of products fills the streets.

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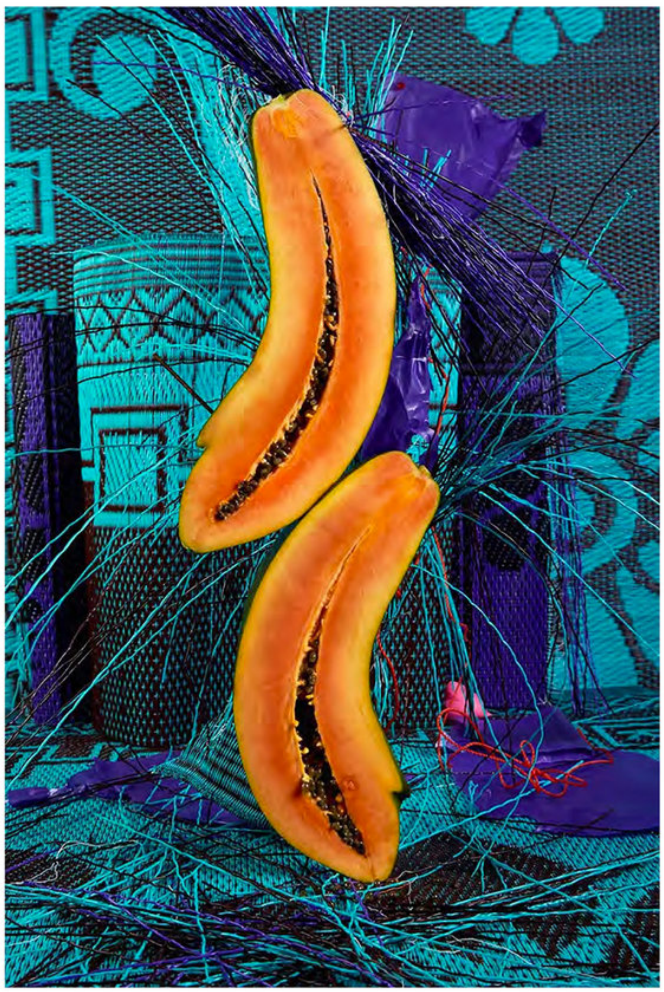
Aside from the traditional shops and stalls, the streets around the building are also taken over by crowds of people. One part of the crowd is made up of people looking for goods to buy and the other consists of sellers, who use their bodies as mobile shops. This unstoppable flux of people and objects creates a compressed, cluttered space and gives shape to a surreal series of hybrid clusters.

Every road corner becomes a sort of stage. The vivid creativity of the sellers is applied to create ephemeral installations, where even the cheapest products find a dignified and unique set-up. I saw soap stalls that looked like baroque altars and hat kiosks that reminded me of Corinthian capitals.

At first sight, local markets appear as ordinary places where people go to satisfy everyday, even trivial needs. But if you take a deeper look at the sellers, products and architectures here, they reveal the complexity of Lagos's society and economy, and that of the geopolitical landscape at large.

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