

# François- Xavier Gbré

## Tracks

Sean Anderson

What is a ruin? For the photographer François-Xavier Gbré, born in Lille, France, to a French Ivorian family, architectural ruins are manifestations of nefarious ambition. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s in a city where the dominant textile industry was in decline, his first photographs articulated conditions of loss and its effects on the built environment. Gbré trained in commercial photography in Italy and France before relocating in 2010 to Bamako, Mali, and later to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. His technical precision, refined on behalf of clients such as *Elle Decor* and *Casa Vogue*, is evident in his ongoing photographic essay *Tracks*, begun in 2009, an account of decaying urban landscapes in European cities and former colonial capitals in West Africa.

"On a CD or vinyl record, you have different tracks, different songs," Gbré said in 2015. "The tracks can be the roads, the railway, the traces left by imprints." He began to photograph the vestiges of the former Unilever and Poyaud factories in northern France in 2010, and these became the first part of the project. Each chapter of *Tracks*, he says, tells a different story, and, depending on how he configures each section, might include photographs from France, Israel, Mali, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, or Senegal. The most recent "track," made in 2014, explores the Palais de Justice in Dakar, an abandoned modernist courthouse that Gbré returned to for the installation of his work *I Am African* in the 2016 Dak'Art Biennale.

Whether of a former printing factory in Benin, a governor's palace in Togo, or a rooftop in Senegal, Gbré's photographs in *Tracks* reveal the often unseen edges of cities, and challenge how we are implicated by the afterlives of the colonial past. Gbré observes the shifting paradigms of modernity with regard to memory. From an empty lot in contemporary Abidjan, one's view of a suburban tract house or a solitary car in a protective covering presents shared conceptions of security, haunted by aspiration, yet seemingly dispossessed. The value of objects is



questioned, as much as evolving. Gbré's photographs register an uncertain interconnectivity amid careful details—a contract that maps and contains collective desire.

Parallel to these investigations, Gbré's engagement with a number of arts events and platforms across the continent—the Bamako Biennale, the Kulte Gallery & Editions in Rabat, Art Twenty One in Lagos, and Galerie Cécile Fakhoury in Abidjan—reflect a desire to see these visual and spatial provocations as an affirmation of the artist's capacity to deepen authorial identities today. To claim an all-encompassing "African imaginary" here bespeaks an erasure of boundaries, but perhaps this is the idea? Similar to Gbré's process, the interventions of a new generation of photographers—Mame-Diarra Niang in Senegal, Edson Chagas in Angola, Mikhael Subotzky and Dillon Marsh in South Africa—identify both stage and screen for the pitfalls of the states' profligacy.

Gbré's scenes are doubly suspended: first, as components within a legacy of (post)colonial intervention; and second, as records of estrangement. His installations, which range from constellations of numerous small images to immersive wallpaper prints, reference oblique narratives across multiple sites. Like a shallow puddle of water magnifying a history—or an unwanted truth—so, too, a skylight or a disused Renault does not disclose enough information.

Unlike the architectural magazines for which Gbré once photographed, the spaces of *Tracks* cannot easily be consumed, or discarded. Instead, they must be interrogated. *Tracks* is Gbré's history lesson. Whether delayed, confined, or indeterminate, these near instinctual images signal how spatial metaphors do not quite satisfy a pretext for navigating complex histories that are in the process of being unmade. Referring to the Dakar seafront he photographed in the midst of construction—a public vista soon to be a private one—Gbré has spoken about the uncertainties of so-called progress and the false resolution of urban symbols. "One landscape is moving ahead," he says, "but there's also one that's disappearing."



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