

This is Portland

Photographer Intisar Abioto shoots the many faces of her city through a refreshing lens

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
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As Portland continues to shine in the national arts and culture spotlight, it drags along with it the tired portrait of who is or is not the "typical Portlander." Photographer Intisar Abioto breaks up this static representation with her blog and photo project The Black Portlanders (theblackportlanders.com) on which she showcases her portraits of the black Portlanders she meets.



Intisar Abioto

Originally from Memphis, Tenn., 27-year-old Abioto was first inspired to do the project from her own search for community and identity in her new hometown.

One sunny morning, Intisar and I met to discuss the project, her vision for the blog, and her hope to influence the future of Portland's national and global face.

Ann-Derrick Gailiot: *In one of your first posts you say one of your sisters helped you come up with the idea. Could you tell me about the conversation that sparked this?*

Intisar Abioto: To put it straight, we're a family of artists and thinkers and we think about things and make art and come up with ideas and try to implement them. So, I think that one night we were just having a conversation about being in Portland, about being black in Portland. And Hanifah suggested we do something about being black in Portland, telling our story or showing our perspective. ... I think that was kind of a natural progression to just talk to people and take their portraits, and so that was the spark. Talking about black people in Portland and what it's like being here.

A.G.: *So what have people's reactions to the photo project been so far?*

I.A.: They've been really positive. People really appreciate it: from showing an important element of Portland to showing a Portland I experience but I don't see reflected or spoken about in the current local and international or national expression of what Portland is. The story of "what Portland is" is hype now. But that's kind of a sliver of the story. I think it fills a



PHOTO BY INTISAR ABIOTO

Above, Drew and Anthony, one in a series of photos by Intisar Abioto in *The Black Portlanders*. At right, Isaiah, Chris, Tre and Jamal, Portland natives. Bottom right, Thomas, 27, also a Portland native.

certain need — whether it's to be seen, known, acknowledged — and through that to connect with other black people, or people of color, that we are here, doing things, making things, living. It broadens the story and undergirds the story of who we actually are.

A.G.: *Can you tell me about an encounter where you went to photograph someone that sticks out most to you?*

I.A.: There are so many now. I have an encounter, but I didn't actually take a photo of this woman. She looked so interesting and fragile a little bit. She was like, "I'm not the best at being photographed." But she seemed interested still. And I was starting to walk away and she was still talking to me. I had got maybe 10 feet away and then she was like, "yeah it's about helping people, you know?" Just that she was able to see that, that it is about helping people and bringing people in and people being seen. And that kind of experience or response, that this is a photo project, an exploratory project, but it's not about the photographs.

A.G.: *You say it's not about the photographs, so how did you come to choose Tumblr as your outlet, and just this very simple layout of having the photo and just a few lines, if any.*

I.A.: Tumblr's great. Tumblr is good, I think, for reaching a population outside of Portland, and that's also my goal. I want people in Portland to see this population, but I also want it to have an international presence. I want people to know that there are black people and people of color in this city. There's just a simplistic nature to it. I don't want to put too much onto the photos.



PHOTO BY INTISAR ABIOTO

I want these people's image to speak for themselves, and they can speak for themselves. People are powerful, they can tell their stories through their image, too, and I guess as a photographer or storyteller or appreciator of stories, that's what I've been developing — the ability to show that through the image.

A.G.: *So what's for next for you and *The Black Portlanders*?*

I.A.: Well, I think it is actively developing. It's hopeful in its center and that spirit of adventure and seeing what needs to happen in the moment, I want to keep that. As for me, I'm an adventurer, an explorer and I love art and people and I'm learning about myself so hard right now. But I just want to be a great creator in the world. Create things that move people to greatness. I'm learning how to be a person in the world, making art and living and being in community with other people in a powerful way.

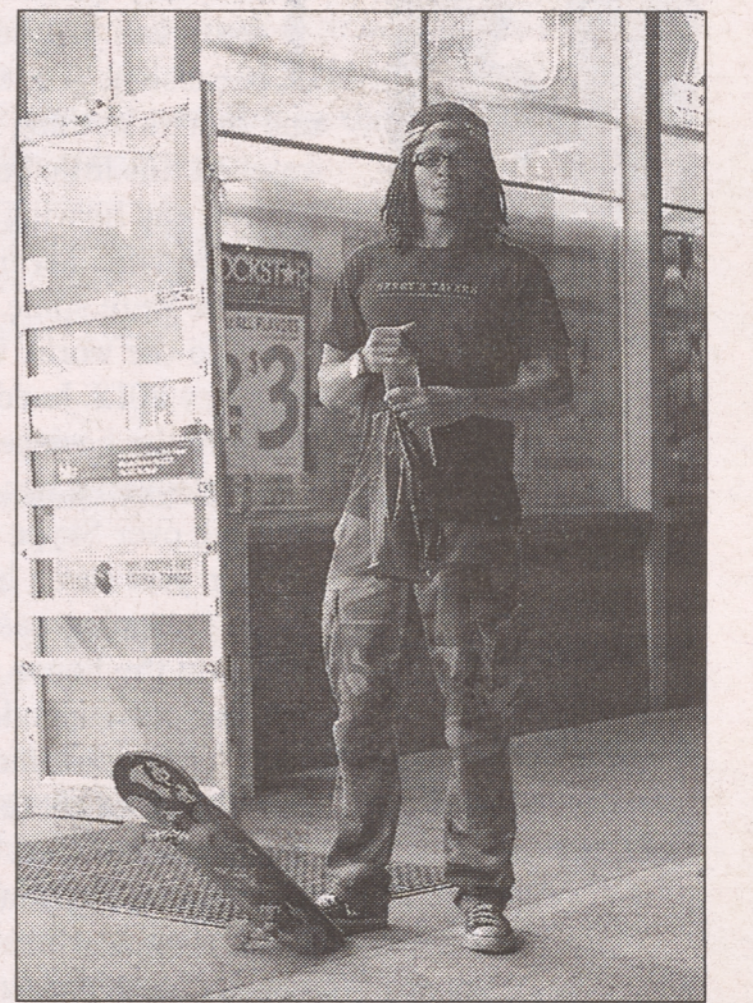


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