

NINO MIER GALLERY

NEW YORK | BRUSSELS

SEYNI AWA CAMARA



CONTENTS

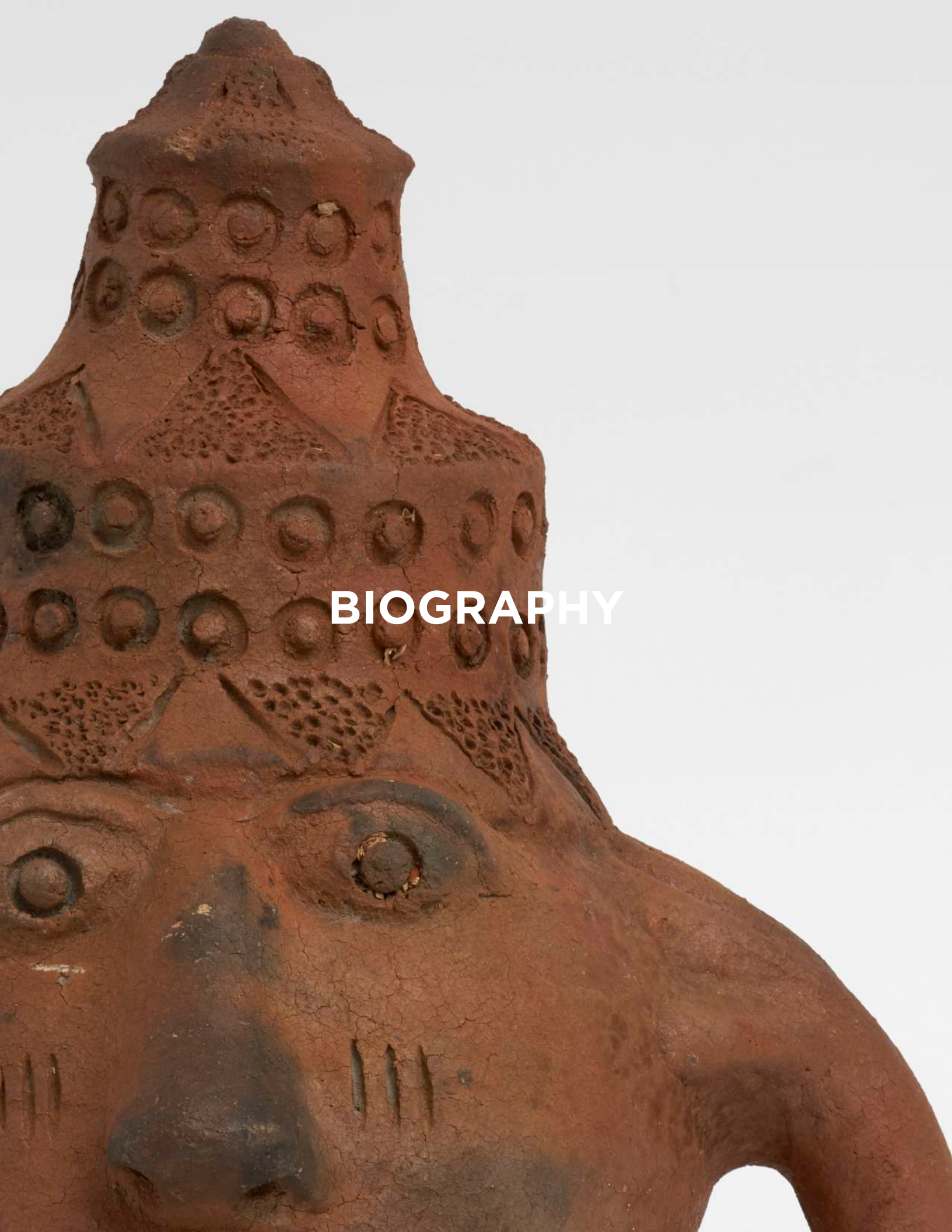
BIOGRAPHY 2

SELECTED WORKS 3

SELECTED PROJECTS AND EXHIBITIONS 15

PRESS 34

CURRICULUM VITAE 39



BIOGRAPHY

SEYNI AWA CAMARA

Seyni Awa Camara
b. 1939, Casamance, SN
d. 2026, Bignona, SN



Seyni Awa Camara was a Senegalese ceramicist who created many-headed, totemic works that evoke bestiaries and maternity scenes. The artist, who was known locally as the “Magicienne de la Terre,” was introduced to traditional pottery techniques by her mother when she was a child. As Camara grew older, she began producing not only the utilitarian ceramics used by her family, but also sculptures to sell in the market near her home. After the anthropologist Michèle Odélyé-Finzi began collecting her works in the 1980s, Camara began to receive increasing attention from the international art world. Now the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, lived and worked in her native Bignona until her passing in 2026.

Seyni Awa Camara (b. 1939, Casamance, SN; d. 2026 Bignona, SN) has had solo exhibitions at Baronian Xippas, Brussels, BE; Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES; Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR; De Crescenzo & Viesti, Rome, IT; and Gallery 39, Dakar, SE. Her group exhibitions include Foundation Louis Vuitton, Paris, FR; Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, IT; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, ES, among many others. Camara is the subject of a 2015 documentary by Fatou Kandé Senghor, which was presented at the Venice Biennale.



SELECTED WORKS

**sample selection does not reflect current availability*



Andre di diatole, 2021
Fired clay
41 3/8 x 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in
105 x 42 x 30 cm
(SAW21.003)

Untitled, 2021
Fired clay
12 5/8 x 11 3/4 x 7 7/8 in
32 x 30 x 20 cm
(SAW22.008)





Untitled, c. 1998
Fired clay
26 3/8 x 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in
67 x 34.3 x 29.2 cm
(SAW21.005)



Untitled, 2021
Fired clay
63 x 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 in
160 x 40 x 30 cm
(SAW22.001)





Acrobate femme TOUCOULEUR, 1998

Fired clay

7 7/8 x 5 7/8 x 5 1/2 in

20 x 15 x 14 cm

(SAW22.004)



Untitled, c. 1996
Fired clay
15 x 14 5/8 x 5 1/2 in
38 x 37 x 14 cm
(SAW22.018)



Boubakabe, 2021
Fired clay
37 1/8 x 13 3/4 x 13 3/4 in
94 x 35 x 35 cm
(SAW22.007)



Untitled, 2000
Fired clay
25 5/8 x 9 1/2 x 7 7/8 in
65 x 24 x 20 cm
(SAW22.027)



SELECTED EXHIBITONS AND PROJECTS

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

SHAPING SPIRITS

2024

BARONIAN XIPPAS GALLERY
BRUSSELS, BE

1990 - 2022

2023

NINO MIER GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY, US

MICHAEL ARMITAGE: AMONGST THE LIVING, WITH SEYNI AWA CAMARA

2022

WHITE CUBE
LONDON, UK

Seyni Awa Camara

Shaping Spirits

Photography by Isabelle Arthuis. All images courtesy Baronian and the artist.



SHAPING SPIRITS

2024
BARONIAN XIPPAS GALLERY
BRUSSELS, BE

Gallery Baronian is pleased to announce an exceptional exhibition featuring around forty sculptures by Senegalese artist Seyni Awa Camara. This will be the largest and most complete exhibition ever made of her work.

Seyni Awa Camara is renowned for her exceptional talent in the field of sculpture, exploring a variety of themes through her art with profound sensitivity and remarkable technical mastery. Her work has long remained in the shadows, and we are delighted to bring it to the fore with this remarkable exhibition.

Albert Baronian became acquainted with Camara's work through a friend of his living in Cap Skiring. Following this exchange, we now work closely with her, commissioning pieces from her every year, in order to build up a substantial body of sculpture for this major exhibition.

The sculptures on display were created between 1991 and 2024, and represent a diverse selection of her work, offering visitors a glimpse of the richness and depth of her artistic expression. It is organized around the various themes that characterize her work and her world: maternity, animal bestiary, family and spirits. It promises total immersion in Camara's distinctive artistic universe.











SEYNI AWA CAMARA: 1990 - 2022

2023
NINO MIER GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY, US

Nino Mier Gallery is pleased to present sculptures by Senegal-based artist Seyni Awa Camara. On view from May 4 – June 10, 2023, *Seyni Awa Camara: 1990 - 2022* marks the artist's first exhibition with the gallery. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue featuring a new essay by curator, writer, and art historian Eva Barois de Caemel.

Seyni Awa Camara creates totemic works evoking subjects ranging from bestiaries to motor vehicles and maternity scenes. Camara's sculptures are influenced by her dreams, where she first divines her forms. After preparing her clay, sometimes adding ore or other natural media to the mixture, the artist begins to sculpt her works. Over the course of many days, sometimes weeks, Camara carves the complex forms appearing in each work. She then fires the clay on a wooden pyre before immersing it in a liquid obtained from putrefied tree pods. This final stage lends the sculptures their color and robust, textured quality.

The artist, now in her eighties, was born in the Casamance region of Senegal, where she still lives and works in the village Bignona. An oft-cited local legend posits that she and her brothers were kidnapped by forest spirits when they were young. For over four months, they taught the children about pottery. Camara and her brothers reappeared one morning, pottery in hand, after four months of absence. In actuality, Camara was introduced to traditional pottery techniques by her mother when she was a child. As Camara grew older, she began producing not only the utilitarian ceramics used by her family, but also sculptures to sell in the market near her home. The legend, despite its fictiveness, speaks to the force of her work as a conduit to what is unknown and unseen. "What is behind the story of the little girl lost—and not found—in the forest?" Caemel has queried. "There is [...] a perception of the world as double: the "visible" world being that of men and women, and the "invisible" world that of spirits, gods, and ancestors." Camara's polyphonic sculptures—which conjoin multiple figures, animals, and perspectives within their vertical constructions—mediate between those two worlds.









***MICHAEL ARMITAGE: AMONGST THE
LIVING, WITH SEYNI AWA CAMARA***

**2022
WHITE CUBE
LONDON, UK**

White Cube Bermondsey is pleased to present 'Amongst the Living', an exhibition of works by Michael Armitage alongside sculptures by Seyni Awa Camara.

Following Armitage's show at Kunsthalle Basel, 'You, Who Are Still Alive', this exhibition features recent paintings and works on paper produced during the past three years in London and Nairobi. Having admired the work of Senegalese artist Seyni Awa Camara over many years, Armitage has included a group of Camara's terracotta sculptures in this, the first major presentation of her work in the UK.

Set within East Africa, Armitage weaves narratives drawn from literature, film, politics, history and myth. The subjects for these new paintings are drawn from a wide range of sources, reimagined with a sensibility that might be likened to magic realism. Whether painted outdoors in Kenya or in Armitage's London studio, his landscape, or urban vistas, collide timescales – compressing past and present, the real and imagined. Multiple viewpoints, superimpositions of outlines and figures, saturated and vaporous swathes of vivid colour and passages of translucent wash create a dense pictorial language in which materiality and form effortlessly meld, where subject and subtext have equal status and thematic power.

Painting with oil on Lubugo, a cloth made from fig tree bark from Uganda that is traditionally used in ceremonial burial rituals, Armitage's choice of ground is resonant: an attempt, he has remarked, to both locate and destabilise the subjects of his paintings. Beaten, stretched taut and then sewn together, Lubugo has a characterful, natural tactility with pitting, texture and holes that offer a resistance to paint. Working with this ground, in Armitage's paintings the surface and support work together as integral components of the pictorial space.

Account of an Illiterate Man (2020), inspired by a patch of virgin forest near the artist's family home, shows a dark mass of indigenous vines and creepers, some of which are known to possess medicinal properties. This thicket of vegetation with its potential for healing represents a hidden culture of knowledge: a wisdom and understanding not associated with literacy but with a waning oral tradition. Similar natural forms populate Cave (2021), a painting in which we look down into a chromatic, rainbow coloured embryonic sac enclosing a head and body, seemingly blown into shape through a valve by a man and a woman. Both works are characterised by imagery where nothing appears grounded, their forms seemingly fixed only by the luminous intensity of the colour palette.

Painting en plein air within the Kenyan landscape for the first time, the artist created two works based on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's acclaimed novel *The Perfect Nine* (first published in 2018). An epic story of the struggle between nature and nurture, it chronicles the attempts to secure husbands for the ten daughters of the East African Gĩkuũyũ people's founding father. In *The Perfect Nine* (2022), Armitage depicts Warigia, the tenth daughter, who is born severely disabled yet becomes the unlikely heroine of the story. Warigia (2022), portrays her as she realises she is cured of her disabilities – emerging from the lake as she pulls her body upright using a boulder for support, she is followed by a strange monitor lizard who seems to bear witness to the event.

Conceived on the scale of a classical history painting, *Dandora* (Xala, Musicians) (2022) takes its point of departure from the film *Xala* (1975) by Ousmane Sembène. Featuring a gathering of nomadic musicians, trash pickers and livestock that roam a landscape of smouldering rubbish heaps, it reimagines this neglected space. Linking the abject with the phantasmagorical, this is a panoramic vision of Dandora, Nairobi's principal rubbish dump, where foragers and animals habitually assemble. *Three Boys at Dawn* (2022) considers similarly urban subject matter – street boys sniffing glue for a temporary high. Here, flowing, fused forms suggest the illusory or magical nature of a dream, in which flamingos transfigure from plumes of smoke

and meander out of the boys' exhaling mouths.

Exploring individual subjects within the throng of communal assembly, Armitage's painting *Head of Koitalel* (2021) confronts the violence of Kenya's colonial legacy. In this work Armitage exhumes the story of Koitalel Arap Samoei (1860–1905), an Orkoiyot and spiritual and political leader of the Kenyan Nandi people who led the revolt against the British and was subsequently tricked and beheaded. In sympathy with the painting's tragic subject, the stitching visible in the Lubugo cloth provides a compositional dynamic that demarcates areas of colour and dramatically bifurcates Koitalel's severed, lifeless head. *Curfew* (Likoni, March 27, 2020) (2022) references more recent political upheaval, using reversed perspectives, overlaid imagery, brilliant colour and dense crowd scenes to convey the urgent, chaotic nature of life during the Covid lockdown of 2020 and 2021. By contrast, in *Holding Cell* (2021) violence is inferred, the subtext of an image based on the accounts of overcrowding in Nairobi police cells.

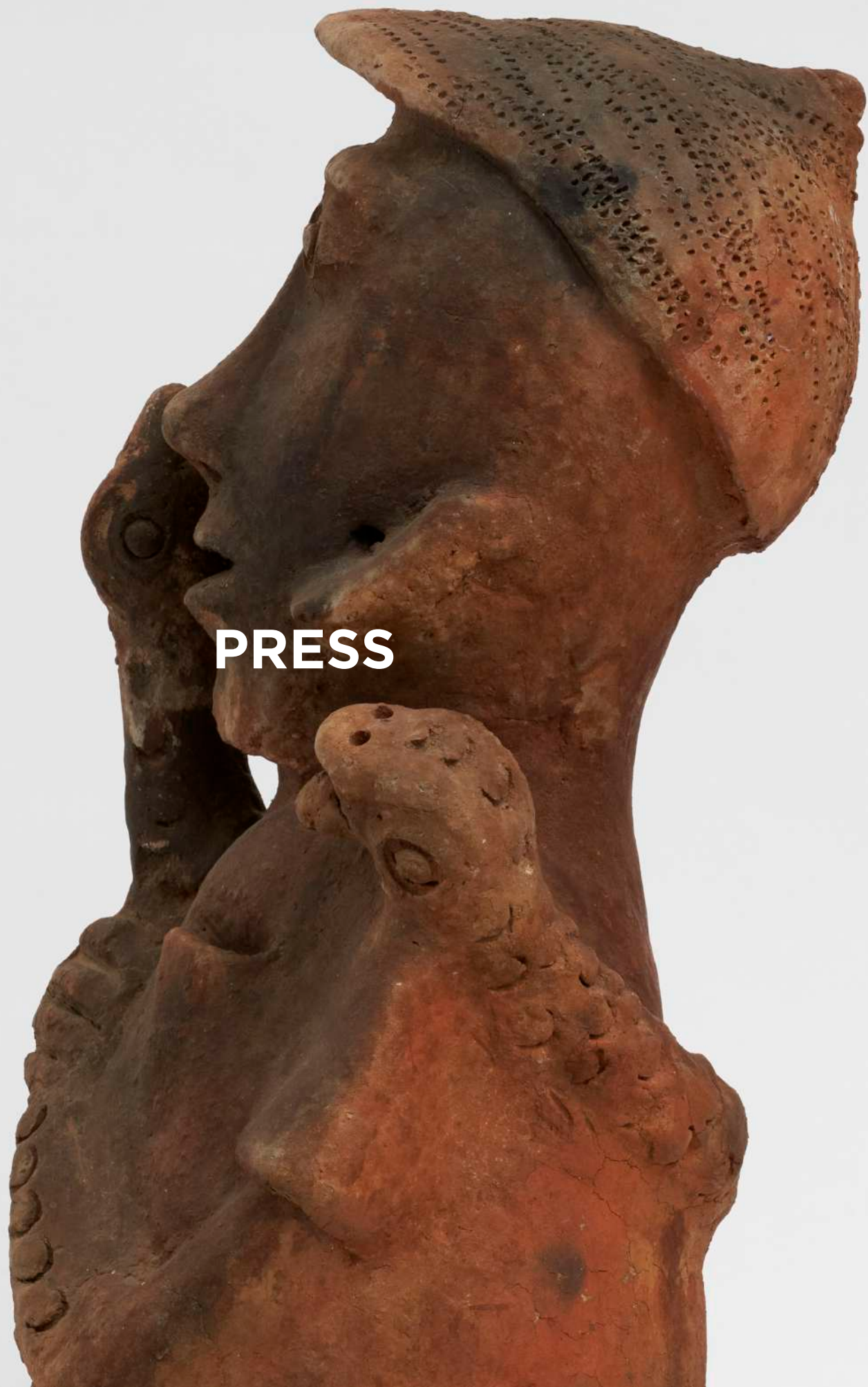
As Elena Filipovic has written, Armitage's paintings describe the contradictions of a post-colonial modernity where matters of life and death are always present. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the painting *You, Who Are Still Alive* (2022) in which a supine figure is caught between states of existence, a mask-like apparition hovering just above his face; a spectral focus within a sparse composition.











PRESS

PRESS

MOMA (POST: NOTES ON ART IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT)

JUNE 2024

BY MAUREEN MURPHY

APARTAMENTO

SPRING/SUMMER 2023

BY PABLO CENDOYA

MOUSSE

MARCH 2023

BY EVA BAROIS DE CAEVEL

ARTSY

SEPTEMBER 2022

BY AYANNA DOZIER

CONTEMPORARY ART OF AFRICA

1996

BY LOUISE BOURGEOIS

JUNE 2024

Seyni Awa Camara, The Power of Modeling

By Maureen Murphy

“Seyni Awa Camara doesn’t belong to any artistic school,” wrote art critic Massamba Mbaye in 2016.¹ She resists any classification and has always considered herself a singular artist, whether in the context of her own country or in that of the international art scene (fig. 1). As Mbaye stresses, Seyni Awa Camara (Senegalese, born c. 1945) could easily have been excluded from the history of art built in the aftermath of independence in Senegal under Léopold Sédar Senghor’s patronage and with state support, when artists were trained at the Dakar “école des arts,” mostly as painters. Except for Younoussé Seye (Senegalese, born 1940), no women participated in the exhibitions organized to promote national Senegalese art. Younoussé Seye was the only woman to display in Dakar (solo exhibition, Théâtre Daniel Sorano, 1977), Algiers (Pan-African Festival, 1969), and Paris (*Art sénégalais d’aujourd’hui*, 1974). And contrary to most men, she did not benefit from academic training; she learned from her mother who worked as a batik dyer. Camara also inherited her skills from her mother, who was a potter in Casamance (Senegal). Both artists grounded their practices in family knowledge and later developed in more personal directions. Camara certainly gained more attention than Seye over time, especially outside of Senegal. At the turn of the 1990s, her bold statues were displayed in Paris (*Magiciens de la terre*, 1989), Las Palmas (*Africa Hoy, Africa Now*, 1992), and Venice (Biennale Arte 2001 — *Plateau dell’Umanità*, 2001). They are now part of important collections such as the National Museum of Art (Oslo), the Theodore Monod Museum in Dakar (see fig. 4), and the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain (Paris), as well as held in many private collections, some of which are in Senegal (Jom in Dakar and the Musée Khelcom in Saly Portudal). If her creations have stood the test of time, they have also crystallized many of the binary opposites that still structure the art world’s expectations, such as art and craft or the collective and the singular, or the caution deemed necessary by the West in validating any artistic process developed in the so-called peripheries. Looking at the history of global contemporary art from the perspective of Camara’s work and career reveals the ways in which globalization operates, especially regarding women artists from Africa.

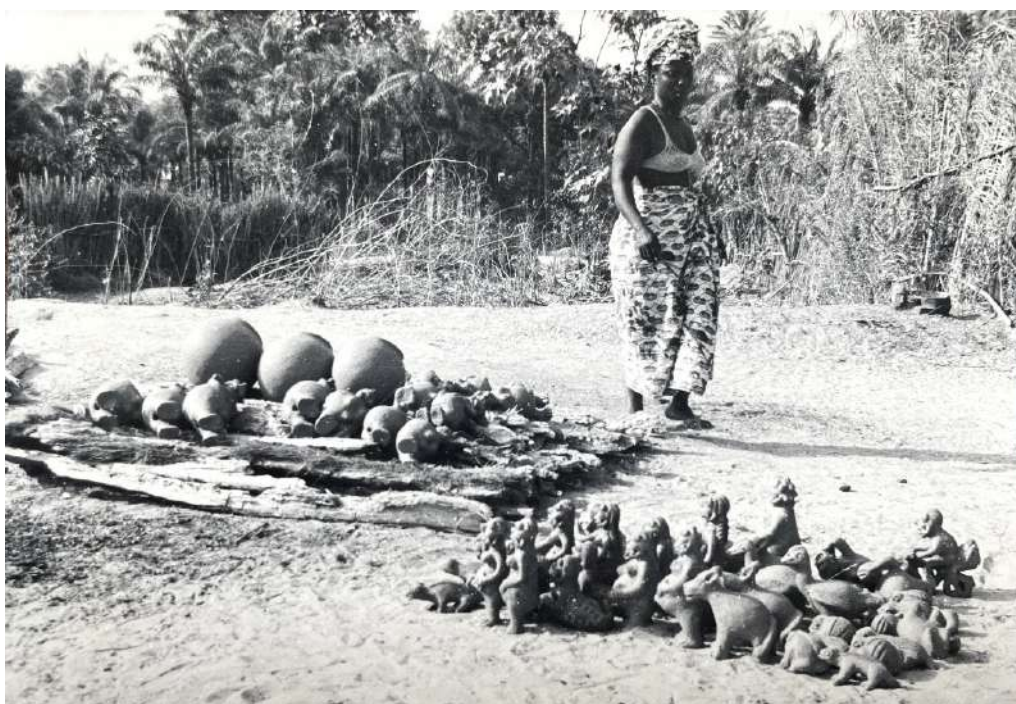


Figure 1. Seyni Awa Camara in Bignona, Senegal, early 1980s. © Michèle Odeyé-Finzi archives

Seyni Awa Camara's figures are striking, and yet they are not meant to please or seduce. They stand free, strongly anchored by their feet, and are sometimes double-headed. With their large smiles, their visible teeth, and their bulging eyes, they often look provocatively happy. Their size varies from a few inches to several yards high, but they are always frontal and hieratic; they are sometimes covered with smaller figures, who cling to their torsos and legs (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Seyni Awa Camara. *Family*. 2006. Clay, 37' 7/16" (95 cm) high. Jom Collection, Dakar

When Camara started making these sculptures in her village in Bignona (Casamance, Senegal), people were scared; she could not show them publicly. Michèle Odey -Finzi recalls that when she met the artist in the early 1980s, Camara was selling utilitarian pots in the local market.² She was keeping her personal sculptures at her home outside the village in a special room that she had dedicated to them. There, statuettes ranging from maternity figures to zoomorphic ones, small frogs juxtaposed with large cats, trucks, or monkeys (fig. 3), covered the floor. They were made of clay of various shades depending on how they were fired, which is less the case today.



Figure 3. Sculptures in Seyni Awa Camara's home, Bignona, Senegal, early 1980s. Photo by Mich le Odey -Finzi from *Solitude d'argile: L gende autour d'une vie; sculptures de Seyni-Awa* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994)

Mystery and rumor surrounded her activities and continue to do so: some wonder if she is still alive and if it is she or rather a sibling who is making the sculptures sold today. A triplet, she was about twelve years old when she disappeared into the forest with her two brothers. As the story goes, they stayed hidden for about four months and geniuses protected them and taught them how to model clay. When the three children finally returned to the village, one of them (Allassane) was carrying a sculpture that he said the forest geniuses had taught him to make. Camara told anthropologist Michèle Odeyè-Finzi that all three of them had been initiated into art by mystical forces—a story that perfectly fit the expectations of the West. It only needed to be relayed by the art world to become magical, which happened in Paris in 1989 at the *Magiciens de la Terre* (*Magicians of the World*) exhibition.

A lot has been said and written about *Magiciens de la Terre* as it betrayed many of the hopes it had raised of being the first truly inclusive and international exhibition. According to the Centre Pompidou, which mounted the show, one hundred artists from all over the world were represented in the French capital: fifty from the West and fifty from “the rest” or “non-Western countries.”³ This Eurocentric division was reinforced by the selection criteria: the works of artists from Asia, South America, and Africa were the result of religious, rural, or mystical practices, while those from Europe and the United States were technological, conceptual, and often self-reflexive in nature. Global modernisms were excluded as curator Jean-Hubert Martin feared they would be considered mere copies of Western styles.⁴ The “Picasso syndrome” theorized by Partha Mitter for Indian artists easily applies to any artist from the Global South, and instead of presenting artists who questioned modernism from different perspectives (such as those affiliated with the Dakar School or Laboratoire Agit’Art in Senegal), Martin and co-curator André Magnin chose artists whose work implicitly reenacts the opposition between the “primitive” and the “modern.” This dual approach revived the primitivistic fashion that took place in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the European avant-gardes drew inspiration from the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, hence contributing to their paradoxical integration into the Western canon.⁵ The “problem” with this exhibition was not the art or the artists, but rather the burden of representativity it imposed on the artists as their art was led to incarnate one part of the world in comparison or contrast with another.

Still unknown within the contemporary art scene, Camara’s statues were exhibited next to those of Louise Bourgeois (American, born France. 1911–2010), one of the few “great women artists” at the time, to quote art historian Linda Nochlin.⁶ Bourgeois served as symbolic validation for Camara, a gesture that was reiterated in 1996 when Bourgeois was invited to write about Camara for a book titled *Contemporary Art of Africa*: “I recognize her originality and a certain beauty. Now, beauty is a dangerous word because notions of ‘beauty’ are relative. So let me be very clear: the work gives me pleasure to look at. As one artist to the other, I respect, like and enjoy Camara.”⁷ Camara always considered herself an artist even though she lacked academic training (in the 1980s in Senegal, only 30 percent of girls went to school, and 93 percent of those attending art school were men⁸). “She enjoyed or missed the privilege of going to art school (a blessing in disguise),” continued Bourgeois. “But there need be no apologies for naïveté or technical shortcomings. Her genuinely expressive figures have a coherence in style.”⁹



Figure 4. Seyni Awa Camara. Untitled. n.d. Théodore Monod African Art Museum, Dakar

Camara started making sculptures when she was six years old. She learned from her mother and used to hide zoomorphic figurines in the burning oven among the pots and amphoras her mother was making to be sold at the local market. At the age of fifteen, she was forced to marry a much older man and stopped creating. Though she was pregnant four times, she never gave birth; moreover, she fell seriously ill and had to undergo several operations. Like too many women in Senegal and around the world who are forced to marry at too early an age, Camara had to fight. She came back to art when she left her husband and found in sculpture a way to survive and rebuild herself. Her creations are testament to the power of a woman who not only persisted in a practice many considered strange or marginal, but also was able to make sense of it. She fashioned a unique style and, in the process, built herself a home and secured stable sustenance for her family.



Figure 5. Seyni Awa Camara's works cooking in Bignona, Senegal. Clip from Fatou Kandé Senghor. *Giving Birth*, 2015. Film: color with sound, 30 min. © Fatou Kandé Senghor

Drawing inspiration from her surroundings, Camara has been prolific and consistent, often dedicating her efforts to pregnant figures and expressions of the maternal. In 1989, for instance, she showed a series of feminine statues covered with small smiling figures that seemed to be budding from them. The energy and power of this work results from accumulation, from the repetition of motifs that creates a tension and challenges any easy apprehension of their meaning. Faces suddenly appear on a belly or the knees, radiating like a sun. Camara's anonymous characters wear jewelry, they have scarifications and elaborate hairstyles. They command our attention with their round eyes, but yet repel us with their silent, empty stares.



Figure 6. Exhibition view of Seyni Awa Camara, *Solitude d'argile: Sculptures, livre, photos, projections*, Galerie Tilène, Paris, April 29–June 6, 2004. © Michèle Odeyé-Finzi

Camara believes these figures can heal both herself and others. Indeed, she once cured a couple who could not have children, helping them give birth to twins, as she recalls in Fatou Kandé Senghor's film *Giving Birth*.¹⁰ Healing takes time, as does the making of sculptures, which in Camara's case, begins with the fetching of clay from the *marigot* (swamp) and is followed by the fine grinding of shellfish and the mixing of the two ingredients.



Figure 7. Seyni Awa Camara in her studio in Bignona, Senegal, 2006. Clip from Fatou Kandé Senghor. *Giving Birth*. 2015. Film: color with sound, 30 min. © Fatou Kandé Senghor

Once the modeling has been completed, the firing stage, which takes place in the open air of the concession yard, begins (fig. 5). As is always the case with ceramics, some pieces break or explode, while others endure the flames and come out just fine. Camara can count on the help of her family and is often shown surrounded by the young men (her second husband's sons) who work for her, obeying her orders, preparing the pellets she progressively adds to her hollow figures (fig. 8). Though Camara trains those who assist her, she does not intend to pass down her style or her secrets, as she states in Kandé Senghor's film. Her art is personal, unique; she believes she received a gift from God and that when she dies, her production should stop.



Figure 8. Seyni Awa Camara and an assistant in her studio in Bignona, Senegal, 2006. Clip from Fatou Kandé Senghor. *Giving Birth*. 2015. Film: color with sound, 30 min. © Fatou Kandé Senghor

Camara has been living from her art since the 1990s, but to her great regret, she sells mostly to foreigners. As she recounted in 2006: "People don't know me in my own country. I survive thanks to foreigners' orders. They buy my work and then they leave. My own country ignores me. They don't know who I am."¹¹ Fortunately, things have changed since then. The Théodore Monod African Art Museum organized a show of her work in 2018 and acquired some of her statues. The *Dak'Art* biennial included several of her ceramics in the national pavilion the same year, including her in a national survey of art, and her fame continues to grow within the Western art market.



Figure 9. Seyni Awa's Home in Bignona, Senegal. Clip from Fatou Kandé Senghor. *Giving Birth*. 2015. Film: color with sound, 30 min. © Fatou Kandé Senghor

I wish to thank Francesco Biamonte, Bassam Chaïtou, Michèle Odey-Finzi, El Hadji Malick Ndiaye, and Fatou Kandé Senghor for the information and images they so generously shared with me for this essay.

¹ Massamba Mbaye, *Terre de lumière: Seyni Awa Camara* ([Dakar]: Musée Khelcom, 2016), 7.

² Michèle Odey-Finzi, *Solitude d'argile: Légende autour d'une vie; sculptures de Seyni-Awa* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).

³ *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition page, Centre Pompidou website.

⁴ In a conversation with Hans Belting, Jean-Hubert Martin stated: "I often saw the école de Paris being assimilated [in Africa], for example. If I had shown these works in the exhibition, everyone would have said they were imitations of Western art of the 1950s, say. The trick was that I was looking for, and found, something quite different." Jean-Hubert Martin, "Magiciens de la terre: Hans Belting in Conversation with Jean-Hubert Martin," in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 209.

⁵ Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 537.

⁶ Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, 50th anniversary ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2021).

⁷ Louise Bourgeois, "Seni Awa Camara," in *Contemporary Art of Africa*, ed. André Magnin and Jacques Souilou (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 54.

⁸ Abdou Sylla, *Arts plastiques et état au Sénégal: Trente-cinq ans de mécénat au Sénégal* (Dakar: Université Cheikh Anta Diop, 1998), 125.

⁹ Bourgeois, "Seni Awa Camara," 54.

¹⁰ Fatou Kandé Senghor, *Giving Birth* (Dakar: Waru Studio, 2015), video with color, sound, 30 min.

¹¹ Seyni Awa Camara, interview by Fatou Kandé Senghor, in *Giving Birth*.

apartamento

SPRING/SUMMER 2023

130

SEYNI AWA CAMARA

TEXT BY PABLO CENDOYA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAUDIA MAURIÑO

apartamento - Bignona



Talking about Seyni Awa Camara is not easy, as her life and work are linked to many mysteries and rumours, deliberately maintained or perpetuated by the chasm that can exist between her reality and that of the art world. Amid an abundance of contradictory information, the following text attempts to provide insight into Seyni's personal history and artistry in order to better understand the oeuvre of this master sculptor, now approaching her seventh decade in ceramics. It is based on five years of exchanges with Seyni at her home in Bignona, a small town surrounded by forests in the Casamance region of southern Senegal. This essay relies on conversations with Seyni filtered through her family, paired with careful analysis of the limited available documents on her life—especially those in her own voice.

Although already familiar with Seyni's works, I came into contact with her family for the first time in 2018 during the Dakar Biennale, the city I currently live in. It was then that I met two of her co-wives' children, who live with her. From that moment on, I have maintained a close relationship with the family, trying to understand Seyni's art and her history, which remains, in many respects, more a source of questioning than of certainty.

In Seyni's own words

Most, if not all, recorded accounts of Seyni's origins in clay start with her disappearance in the forest as a child. As she told Michèle Odey-Éfinzi in her 1994 book, *Solitude d'argile*:

One day, my brothers and I had disappeared; we were 12 years old. People were looking everywhere for us. No one spotted us and yet, we were there. We consumed what God gave us. Everyone in the village contributed to buying animals as offerings, that is to say for sacrificing, in order to find us. They bought oxen, goats, sheep, chickens, etc. But my father and mother wouldn't accept money or animals from the village; it needed to be their own money to make us come back. They searched for us in the forest; we were in the forest. We were hidden by God's spirits. During this time, the spirits taught us to work the earth to make pottery. They looked for us for four months. We watched them looking for us. One day, [my brother] Alassane became visible again. He was carrying a piece of pottery in his arms. Everyone asked him who had given him this statue. They couldn't believe that God had taught him to make this pottery, which looked like a hairy man with sticking-out ears. They said he was a devil, a spirit of the forest. Then my brother Adama reappeared, he too with a statue in his arms. Unmoving, he remained standing with the earth in his arms. Then, finally, I appeared a few days later. I was carrying the same character in my arms. Nobody recognised me; they didn't want to believe it was me, Seyni. I had to find things to recount to be accepted. No one in the village had ever seen statues like ours. They wanted to know who had taught us to do this kind of work. But everyone was afraid of it. We answered, all three: 'It is God, God alone. We saw only him and he alone saw us'. We were asked, 'Where were you?' We replied, 'We are the children of God. It was God who brought us here'.

A remarkable birth

Seyni is said to have been born of triplets or quadruplets, which, according to local tradition, only happens once every 50 years in a community. These births occupy a special place in many West African

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara





cultures, and in the immediate region are both a source of wonder and apprehension, conferring on her a special status since birth. Though her age is uncertain—due to the lack of formal regional records at the time of her birth—we do know that she was born between 1939 and 1945 (thus is aged between 78 to 84 years old today) in the village of Djivente, near Oussouye in southern Senegal.

Her Muslim father was of Guinean Mandingo origin (a West African people that founded the former empire of Mali and contributed to the Islamisation of the Casamance region, which had traditionally been animist). Her Catholic mother was Serer (among the oldest population in Senegal, whose strong identity remains alive to this day and is linked to the history of the pre-colonial Serer kingdoms of Sine and Saloum). Seyni is Muslim but remains highly influenced by animist traditions and beliefs, in particular those of the Kassa subgroup of the Diola people, who make up the majority of the Casamance region.

When Seyni speaks of god, she seems to refer indiscriminately to the god of the Muslim religion as well as to the spirits of the animist religions. Seyni herself says she becomes a vehicle of a divine creation. Her family notes, 'She understands that it's her destiny', a power 'that god has bequeathed to her'. Her sculptures reflect the parallel between divine and artistic creation, as well as the founding myths of the creation of the world and of humans; she merges work/creator and god/creator to give life.

Recurring images

Seyni spent her childhood in Oussouye, the traditional centre of power in Casamance, where the King of Oussouye (a religious, spiritual, and traditional authority for a large part of the Diola community) reigned. Thereafter, she faced a number of personal trials. She was married at a young age to a man much older than her, and had a series of unsuccessful early pregnancies. Her family told me that she did have one biological child, who doesn't live with her today and is a marabout (at once a sort of religious guide, guardian of traditions and myths, and traditional therapist and medium).

Figures of pregnant or totemic women, from which small heads emerge, dominate Seyni's work and are often interpreted as reflecting the difficult pregnancies she experienced. In the essay 'In Seni Camara's Womb', Eric Girard-Miclet suggests that we can look at these works as family trees: 'At the bottom the ancestors represented by masks cover the legs, and then the generations are stacked on top of them, all the way up to the final bust carrying the lastborn'.

Seyni often represents women with an attitude of power, driving men in cars or motorbikes, carrying weapons, or fleeing with their children under their arms—taking their destiny resolutely into their own hands. She also qualifies some of her works as self-portraits, often those where a woman appears without children, sometimes adorned with necklaces or associated with animals. But a wide variety of motifs exist—which Seyni has often said represent images from visions—ranging from animals of different scales (recognisable or imaginary) to hybrid human-animal characters and spirits of the forest.

A growing family tree

Around the age of 20, perhaps as a consequence of the hardships her body endured, Seyni suffered from an illness for several years, keeping her bedridden much of the time. Neither family nor others around her

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara



*I have never seen others work the earth like I do.
I have no tools, it is not necessary, I have my hands of God.
My husband fetches clay from the backwaters, it's far away, you have to dig.
Afterwards, I let it rest for 15 days, I knead it, I add water and salt,
I mix for a long time... and I throw.*

Seyni quoted in Michèle Odeyé-Finzi's book *Solitude d'argile*.

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MOUSSE

JANUARY 2023

Tale of Tales: SEYNI AWA CAMARA

By Eva Barois De Caemel

Tale of Tales: SEYNI AWA CAMARA

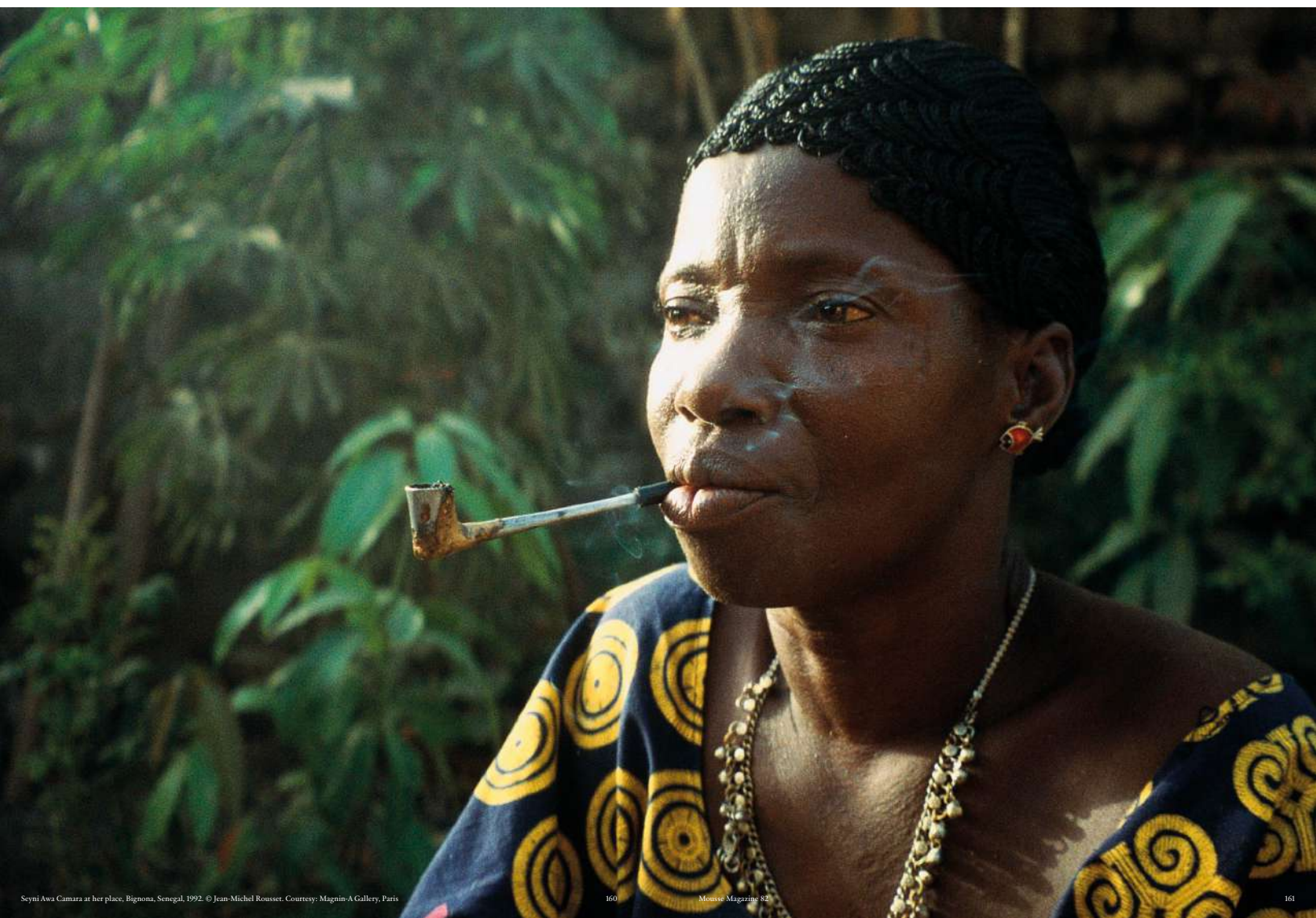
BY
Eva Barois De Caevel



Tale of Tales: a desire to write on SEYNI AWA CAMARA's life and work following the many projections she has had to endure, or welcome. A wish to relate how the reading of her practice became a global tale made of many tales. Some were endemic to the place where she was born; some were more globally African; some were emblematic of the countless stories Western art history needs to feed its narrative when it comes to non-Western artworks. Among these paths, maybe somewhere at the crossroads, stand Camara's clay statuettes. They can be in a marketplace in Casamance or distributed worldwide. If you have seen them in person even once in your lifetime, you remember the encounter. Camara's journey is a very peculiar one. Many artists are the heirs and guarantors of specific and local craft techniques; fewer transform these techniques into a nonconformist creative practice that seems alien to their very communities; and to some falls the destiny of being discovered by a Western eye, grasped by a Western hand, elected and presented on the global art scene not as outsider or intuitive art genius but as a decreed African contemporary artist. In Camara's story, as it has been taught to us, forces bigger than her left her no choice than to transcend her known formal and material repertoire. Even an artist like Esther Mahlangu—a world-renowned Ndebele painter born in Middleburg, South Africa, who pushed the skill of mural painting, taught by her mother and grandmother, to a point of perfect balance—whose path might seem close to Camara's, stayed close to inherited practices she did not have to break with. Camara was cursed—by her community, her family—and so were her forms at first, but in that curse lay the space to produce something different. This curse was part of the fascination and excitement surrounding her works. Here I will tell some of the many tales around the life and work of Seyni Awa Camara. In the end, stays the clay. In the end, the clay stands.



Michael Armitage, Seyni Awa Camara, *Amongst the Living* installation view at White Cube, London, 2022. © Seyni Awa Camara.
© White Cube (David Westwood). Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London



Seyni Awa Camara at her place, Bignona, Senegal, 1992. © Jean-Michel Roussel. Courtesy: Magnin-A Gallery, Paris



Seyni Awa Camara at her place, Bignona, Senegal, 1990. © André Maguin



Studio, Bignona, Senegal, 1990. © André Maguin

Born in the 1940s, Seyni Awa Camara grew up between Djivente and Ossouya in the Casamance region of Senegal. Born among triplets, she disappeared with her siblings in the forest for several days until we stopped looking for them. Upon her return, she held balls of earth in her hands. From this moment, she started working with clay.

That is the legend. The place is real, however. The forest does exist. But the experience of the little girl born among triplets in Casamance in the 1940s is more difficult to perceive and describe with acuity. What is behind the story of the little girl lost—and not found—in the forest? Multiple births occupy an important place in the collective African imagination and cosmogony. There is, still, a perception of the world as double: the “visible” world being that of men and women, and the “invisible” world that of spirits, gods, and ancestors.¹ Adama Ouedraogo, who has been researching twins and triplets in Senegal and Burkina Faso, more specifically in Bandafassi, Niakhar, and Mlomp, a rural community in Casamance, explains that the birth of a child is often considered the product of a transfer from the invisible world to the human world: “Some children, such as twins, are considered to provide a direct and privileged link between these two worlds. This ‘mixed’ membership of the twins gives them a status with a sacred and generally ambivalent connotation among humans. Therefore, to say ‘twin’ in sub-Saharan Africa is to say half-divine, half-human; but it is also to say double and dilemma, ego and alter ego, order and disorder.”²

Camara coming out of the forest, clay in hands.

But it is not the first contact with clay. Or is it? Camara’s whole family has made, and still makes, pottery according to ancestral knowhow. The family heritage was transmitted to the young girl by her mother. That’s a story that tells how she got the skills, but not how she came to her art. At some point, her hands formed human and animal figures, iconic characters. On that front, she is self-taught, as the Western classification would put it.

THE TALE OF THE MAGICIANS

It is often said that Seyni Awa Camara is one of the group of artists introduced to the African contemporary art scene—like a new land—with the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. It is a tale with a genesis and notable episodes, like any tale. *Magiciens de la terre*, a contemporary art exhibition held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris, was partially thought to be a reparation for the much-criticized 1984 show “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art as well as the typical ethnocentric practices that permeated the Paris Biennial. Specifically, it sought to correct the problem of “one hundred percent of exhibitions ignoring eighty percent of the earth” by offering an international panorama of contemporary art that featured 50 percent Western and 50 percent non-Western artists shoulder to shoulder.

Magiciens de la terre obviously had its own (big) issues: it needed to be criticized and rethought, for instance via an exhibition held in the meantime, *The Other Story* (1989), curated by artist, writer, and editor Rasheed Araeen at Hayward Gallery in London. That show brought together the art of “Asian, African and Caribbean artists in post war Britain” to reflect on colonial legacies and establish the work of overlooked artists. More generally, the un-deconstructed optimism of *Magiciens de la terre* had to be tempered. This critical work has been done and is being done, and is not the purpose of this essay. For those interested, I would suggest to read Thomas McEville,³ whose journey from his work as part of the *Magiciens de la terre* team of thinkers, editors, and writers, to his long-term critical reexamination of the exhibition itself, but also of all the debate it generated, is remarkable. Another helpful work is Lucy Steeds’s 2016 book *Making Art Global (Part 2): “Magiciens de la terre” 1989*.⁴

“Like several other artists exhibited in 1989, Seyni Awa Camara had no international plans for her work, rather choosing to restrict her production to the local market of Bignona, the Casamancian village where she was born. While she still lives there, Seyni Awa Camara now exports her sculptures worldwide,” explains art historian Maureen Murphy.⁵ Yet her works were acquired and distributed by collector Jean Pigozzi after the exhibition, and today, his fellow André Magnin sells her pieces in his Parisian gallery. Most of the known photographic portraits of Camara—smoking, her eyes both lost and focused; at work, in the courtyard of her house, smiling—were taken by Magnin. Pigozzi and Magnin have told us many tales as they mahouted their African artists through the Western world.

But Murphy asks a crucial question: If we consider that the 1989 *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition marked the entrance of extra-Western contemporary art onto the stage of the international art market and raised the question of equality in the contemporary world, how did it shape the way contemporary artistic creativity is perceived today in the West?

In 1989, it was not the artists of the Dakar School that were retained for the *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition. In relation to the diversity of creative work taking place during that period, who were the artists whose work was accepted? For Senegal, the curators chose to exhibit Seyni Awa Camara, a self-educated craft artist who sold her sculptures in the markets of Casamance. The Dakar School was undoubtedly deemed too academic and was not retained for the show. Yet there also existed a dissident arts scene, critical of the Dakar School, involved in performance and actionism and dominated by Issa Samb. This artistic current was not retained, either, for it was no doubt insufficiently “African” or authentic, too close to Western forms of artistic creativity.⁶

That’s one tale, with its authors: the tale of one form of African creativity chosen and staged for the Western world.

A MOTHER’S TALE

I wrote some time ago that Seyni Awa Camara’s practice is “in all its singularity . . . a lifetime’s meditation on the maternal, mothering body, an autobiography in clay, in

statuettes described by Senegalese critic Massamba Mbaye as ‘nothing but heaped pregnancies in every possible form.’ A bodily practice, in a given place.”⁷ That is still how I feel it. Camara’s work evokes motherhood and sexuality. It may be about her childhood, marked by a tale you now know, or about her multiple difficult pregnancies, or about the various children she raised and mothered without being their biological mother.

A known explanation is to say that her pottery is intuitive, therapeutic, cathartic. But that sounds like a disappointing (Western) categorization. There is something to understand as some sort of link from one mothering to another—from the mothering of the earth, as a material and as a land (that primordial forest), to her own mothering of living beings and sculptures. Some sort of continuity between flesh and the raw material. Something I cannot really explain from the epistemology I sit in.

Married at fifteen, Seyni Awa Camara went through at least four traumatic pregnancies that weakened her health. Her first husband abandoned her at home. Then came her second husband: Samba Diallo. He encouraged her to do pottery and sculpture. He died in 2004, and long played the mediator between Seyni Camara and her visitors.

That is the well-known story. Now she lives with her many adopted sons in Bignona.

A hypothesis:

“The statuettes of Seyni Awa Camara very often represent pregnant women, maternal figures surrounded by many children. Can we compare the outlet of Seyni Awa Camara to the ordeals that the Kagnalenes impose on themselves to regain their fertility? Maybe. . . In Casamance, fertility and childbirth are the only guarantees of social status for a woman. In a region where rice cultivation requires many hands, a woman who cannot give birth or who has miscarriages is excluded from society, discredited. To remedy this, some isolate themselves in a society of women and undergo many hardships to regain their fertility.”⁸

It was difficult. Remember: her first works were considered cursed. After baking the statues, she stored them in a closed, dark room. With her growing fame, the stock was discovered. Some sculptures are as tall as her. Some are taller than her. They are not statuettes anymore.

In 2015, some of Camara’s sculptures were exhibited at the Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor. A movie was part of the exhibition. Its title was *Giving Birth*.

TALES FOR THE SCREEN

Seyni Awa Camara has been the subject of several films. The story is visceral, its fascination intact. In 1990, Philip Haas dedicated a documentary film to her, shot in Bignona: *Magicians of the Earth: Seni’s Children*. And in *Entre los elementos*, a 2013 documentary film by Jesús Ahedo, you can witness Camara saying: “There will be no continuation after me, and thus I find myself

compelled to accompany my work until the end of my days.” It is true that she is having difficulty finding someone to take over her manufacturing process, but some recent visitors recall that her eldest son, who has been helping her for a few years now, devotes himself to this art with pugnacity.

Entre los elementos depicts the environment in which the works are created, and Camara’s working and firing methods. The four elements (earth, water, fire, and air) give their title to the film since they are so important to her creative process. For Ahedo, the four are essential to achieve the culmination of her production: the dough is crushed with degreaser and kneaded for hours; it is very difficult to handle because it is so rigid. And her most complex works require many drying and resting stages, taking more than ten days to create. The final cooking is done over a wood fire for an average of three hours, then the sculptures are immersed hot in a liquid made of rotting tree pods to give them color and durability.

A thought from the filmmaker: “Seyni is a zero-degree artist, in a natural state, hardly related to or contaminated by the concerns of the market or the dominant trends.”

In 2015, Senegalese filmmaker Fatou Kandé Senghor released *Giving Birth*, a documentary film dedicated to Camara’s life, from her first marriage and her difficulties in giving birth, to beings of flesh and of blood, to the moment of creation of her first clay children. Of course, it is about sterility, and about art. But, as Kandé Senghor explains, “It is an attempt to relate how such an art takes root in the mystical memory, which is imperceptible,” through an actual body that stands for it in the present time. This body is Camara’s. She adds that “although she is an actress of her time. . . her creations question the notion of the transmission of an acquired knowledge which is positioned in the present and helps us to build the future. We cannot do without this past that we try in vain to suppress by ignoring, for example, colonization and admiring the globalized beings that we are. . . It is a film that speaks to the Senegalese with peacefulness.”⁹

There is a lot of silence in *Giving Birth*. For a few minutes there, Camara seems to escape the many tales: she is more complex. As Laure Solé put it: suddenly it is Camara, “with her timid extravagance, with her eccentricities, with her love for flashy accessories, kung fu movies, and unexpected outfits.”¹⁰

As Kwame Anthony Appiah reminded us in his introduction to the catalogue *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (1999), in most of the languages spoken in Africa to date, there is no easily translatable word for “art.”¹¹ Seyni Awa Camara’s works are neither the product of *traditions*, nor of a *disrupted tradition*. They are works of art that exist in the impossible translations of that word, in their own way, in a world dominated by a hegemonic definition of the work of art and its primary status as a commodity. It’s quite simple: we can stay peaceful and look at them.



Les restes du bruit: Estêvão Macavele & Seyni Awa Camara installation view at Magnin-A Gallery, Paris, 2022. © Grégory Copitet. Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris

166



Untitled (detail), 2000. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood). Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London

167



Untitled (detail), 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood), Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London

168



Untitled (detail), 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood), Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London

169



ELIKOURÈNE ETEHEMBA, 2022. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Baronian, Brussels / Knokke. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis



ANINADE ASEKOL DI DIABOT, 2022. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Baronian, Brussels / Knokke. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis



ANAHANDI ACEKOLE, 2022. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Baronian, Brussels / Knokke. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis



Anare agnille, 2021. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels. Photo: GRAYSC



TBC, 2021. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels. Photo: GRAYSC

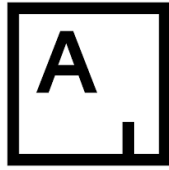


Bonhokabe, 2021. © Seyni Awa Camara. Courtesy: the artist and Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels. Photo: GRAYSC

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- 7 Eva Barois De Caevél, "The Body of One, the Body of All," trans. CG Traductions, John Tittensor, in *Cosmogonie, Zinoue: An African Collection*, ed. Pauline Faure (Milan: Silvana Editoriale; Montpellier, France: MOCO Montpellier Contemporain, 2021). The Mbaye quote comes from Sabrina Daniel-Colonne, "Seyni Awa Camara, la potière de Casamance," *Jeune Afrique*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/448616/culture/arts-plastiques-seyni-awa-camara-potiere-de-casamance/>.
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SEYNI AWA CAMARA (b. 1945, Bignona, Senegal) lives and works in Bignona. She molds clay in the yard in front of her house and fires it in an open-hearth kiln. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Amongst the Living*, White Cube, London (2022); a two-person show with Olaf Holzapfel, Baronian Xippas, Knokke, Belgium (2021); *Maternités*, Baronian Xippas, Brussels (2020); *Seyni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2011); *El Viento del la Tierra*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2010); and *Seni Camara & Ndeye Douts*, Galerie Nathalie Fika, Paris (2009). Her work has been presented in numerous important institutional exhibitions, including *Ex Africa*, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris (2021); *Radically Native / Naïvely Radical*, ExtraCity, Antwerp (2021); *Alpha Crisis*, Musée Astrup Fearnley, Oslo (2020); *Art/Afrique: le monde atelier... Les Initiés: sélection d'œuvres (1989–2009) de la collection d'art contemporain africain* Pigeot, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2017); *Why Africa?*, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, Italy (2017); *100% Africa*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2006); and *Magiciens de la terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris (1989).

EVA BAROIS DE CAEVEL is an independent curator who lives and works in Pantin, France. Her working interests span feminism, postcolonial studies, the body and sexualities, the critique of Western-centered art history, and the renewing of critical writing and speech. She won the 2014 ICI Independent Vision Curatorial Award and has published numerous texts in exhibition catalogues and specialized magazines. She notably coedited *Condition Report: On Art History in Africa* (Motto and RAW, 2020). She was curator for publications at RAW Material Company, center for art, knowledge and society in Dakar; guest curator at the Lagos – Photo Festival in 2018; and curated the exhibitions *The Warming of Tentacles*, Maïeille Galerie, Paris (2017); *Every Mask I Ever Loved*, ifa Gallery, Berlin (2017); and *On fait des dessins dans la terre*, 31Project, Paris (2021). She taught art history at ENSIA Lyon and Villa Arson, Nice, and is currently teaching at MOCO Esia Montpellier. As curator and researcher, she has contributed to many international conferences and symposia. In 2020 she received a curatorial grant from the Centre national des arts plastiques. As part of the Africa 2020 season in France, she curated an exhibition with Karla Kameli, *Elle a allumé le feu du passé*, FRAC PACA, Marseille (2021).



SEPTEMBER 2022

Seyni Awa Camara's Awe-Inspiring Sculptures Reflect Her Artistic Origin Story

By Ayanna Dozier



Portrait of Seyni Awa Camara by André Magnin, 2000. Courtesy of the artist and Magnin-A.

Birthered from equal parts make-believe and daily ritual, Seyni Awa Camara's majestic humanoid clay sculptures evoke mythological deities, and are derived from her encounters with the folk gods of Senegal's Wolof people. Born around 1945 in Bignona, Senegal, the Diola artist has been making work for the past five decades and receiving increased institutional recognition throughout Europe and Africa in the last twenty years.

A selection of Camara's mythical sculptures that were made between 1983 and 2019 are currently on view in London through October 30th in "Amongst the Living with Seyni Awa Camara," White Cube's two-person exhibition with painter Michael Armitage. Described as "truth revealers" by Camara's longtime gallerist André Magnin of Magnin-A, the sculptures participate in the ever-expanding mythos of Camara's journey to becoming an artist, making her the lead architect of her own narrative.



Seyni Awa Camara,
Sans titre, 2019
Magnin-A
Price on request



Seyni Awa Camara, detail of *Untitled*, 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara.
Photo by David Westwood. Courtesy of Magnin-A, Paris and White
Cube, London.

Magnin first encountered Camara's practice while researching for the 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" (Magicians of the earth) at Centre Pompidou, where he was assistant commissioner of the show. The presentation was curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in response to the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 group exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," which recreated colonial exhibitionist frameworks around African art.

On anthropologist Michèle Odey  -Finzi's recommendation, Magnin made a fateful trip to Senegal to learn more about African art in an effort to not replicate harmful curation practices. In the spring of 1988, Magnin met Camara in Bignona. While he was initially drawn to the miniature clay sculptures she was selling at the local market, it was the elaborate, large-scale works in her front yard that he found astonishing. "It was incredible," Magnin recalled. "I suddenly felt as if I were backstage in a theater of characters and objects without a stage."



Seyni Awa Camara, *Untitled (Janus)*, 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara.
Photo by David Westwood. Courtesy of Magnin-A, Paris and White
Cube, London.



Seyni Awa Camara, detail of *Untitled (Janus)*, 2019. © Seyni Awa
Camara. Photo by David Westwood. Courtesy of Magnin-A, Paris
and White Cube, London.

Camara describes her practice as both habitual and divine. She previously told Magnin in Wolof, “I think. I have an idea. I work.” This daily practice has contributed to the abundance of work that Camara has produced over the years. Her creatures look like human-animal hybrids from another world. They are, for the artist, deities revealing themselves to her through visions and dreams. The emergence of these figures lies at the heart of Camara’s artistic journey and the mythology around her origins.

As Camara recounted for the 1994 publication *Solitude d’argile: légende autour d’une vie: sculptures de Seyni-Awa*, she got lost in the wilderness with her twin brothers when she was 12 years old, but they were protected from the harsh climate by the hidden genies of Wolof folk gods. The genies taught them to work the earth to make pottery. In Camara’s account, she and her brothers returned to their village remade of clay, unrecognizable to their community. “They couldn’t believe that it was the gods who had taught us to make this pottery,” Camara said in the same interview. “No one in the village had ever seen statues like mine. They wanted to know who had taught me to do this kind of work, everyone was afraid of it.”



Portrait of Seyni Awa Camara by André Magnin, 2000. Courtesy of the artist and Magnin-A.

“Many rumors surround Seyni’s life, her origins, her marriages, her uncertain births,” Magnin said of her grandiose artistic origin story. “Her life is organized around a particular exchange with her ram’s horn [that’s] surrounded by fabric sewn with buttons. She calls it her genie. She talks to it and asks for permission to make new pieces. [Her community] hides her works because, in Bignona, her sculptures are scary. Seyni is also scary.”



Seyni Awa Camara,
Sans titre, 2019
Magnin-A
Price on request



Seyni Awa Camara, *Untitled*, 1983. © Seyni Awa Camara. Photo by Ollie Hammick. Courtesy of Magnin-A, Paris and White Cube, London.

Camara's delightfully frightening sculptures provoke audiences to consider what beings exist beyond our world. In this way, she is a conjuror of mystical realms, transcribing her vivid, imaginative experiences through clay. The less fantastical, but no less impressive, narrative of Camara's origins is that she first learned to make pottery from her mother.

Magnin described Camara's process as an utterly unique experience that was supported by her late husband who, in life, would acquire the clay and mix it for her. Camara fires the clay in an open courtyard, covering her sculptures with branches, straw, and the splinters of roasted tree trunks. "Seyni has a traditional practice but a very unique and personal achievement," Magnin said, referring to pottery's traditional association with women in Wolof culture. "She is the only one to do this work. It is a totally unique work that the gods have inspired her to do."

As Camara's practice continues to reach Western audiences outside of France, Magnin notes the changing attitudes toward pottery since Camara's 1989 debut exhibition in Paris. "Today, her work is no longer viewed as a traditional potter's sculpture, but as a work of art in its own right," Magnin explained.

Camara's sculptures are mythical and awe-inspiring and speak to how the mainstream art world is lowering its barriers and beginning to recognize self-taught artists and customs outside Western institutions and historical canons. Camara's work functions as both a relic of the past and an oracle for others, allowing them to face the hidden gods of the universe in the flesh.

Ayanna Dozier

Ayanna Dozier is Artsy's Staff Writer.

1996

Seni Awa Camara
In Contemporary Art of Africa

By Louise Bourgeois

Contemporary Art of Africa

Edited
by
ANDRÉ
MAGNIN
with
Jacques
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Seni Awa Camara

Born 1945 in Bignona, Senegal

Lives in Bignona

Louise Bourgeois



Seni Awa Camara in Bignona,
Senegal. 1992

Sitting in the noonday sun and inhaling smoke from a long, thin pipe, Seni Awa Camara has a quiet naturalness, like a flower that blossoms only for those who dream. For a long time, perhaps longer than she can remember, the Senegalese sculptor has smoked in the sun and worked in the sun, making thousands of clay images that have revealed themselves to her, images that merge with her observation of the world as she experiences it, and images of those closest to her—parents, partners, friends, children. “I reflect, I have an idea,” she says simply.

Camara displays her fantasies and eccentricities at the marketplace in Bignona. Her work, well known in the region, is presented for milling throngs to see and examine in the vast outdoors, next to fresh potatoes and ripe tomatoes and cucumbers. Though I have never been to the marketplace, I find it strangely exhilarating that curious tourists and locals can find sculpture for sale among fleshy, smooth-skinned fruit and raw vegetables.

Do you want something to eat, drink, smoke, or admire? You must choose. The amazing bazaar allows everything, except pretense. Camara gets immense satisfaction from communication with her customers who have the courage to bet on her gifts out in the open, putting down cash. When money is exchanged, there is an assortment of thrills.

Camara shows and sells far away from the mainstream of any art world, as most of us know it. She enjoyed or missed the privilege of going to art school (a blessing in disguise). But there need be no apologies for naïveté or technical shortcomings. Her genuinely expressive figures have a coherence of style.

According to the Camara legend, she started modeling figures thirty years ago. The question people ask is, how old is she today. It is a boring question, because age does not matter. And to ask the question instantly raises the issue of credibility, always a sticky subject. In the marketplace, her husband will say anything to please a customer or to please her. The only important element is her vision. Camara is a woman in the prime of life.

Her figures are kneaded with her fingers from very fine, fresh clay that is sifted and resifted. After the clay has hardened, the works are arranged by size in her open kiln—really a big hole in the courtyard of her house—which looks like a sizzling barbecue. They bake on a burning wood fire at a low temperature. When fully fired, they are exhibited unglazed and without paint. The marble coloring comes from exposure to the flame. Some of the pieces are four feet high; most are no larger than a porcelain doll, and just as fragile.

Though she believes the omnipresent Devil is lurking nearby, she ignores him with friendly fantasies of smiling, laughing individuals and formal groupings of people who are pleased with themselves and each other. Her sculpture is not erotic. Sexuality is discreet, sometimes missing entirely. One intriguing work, for example, is of a mother and father, each clasping an infant. The mother has breasts—indeed, the baby she holds is greedily consuming her milk. Yet Camara’s view of the family is primal and seen from a child’s eye: the parents are joined above the hip and have no sexual organs. Mother, father, babies—all the bodies blend amid a confusion of limbs. Each touches the other playfully. There’s hugging, embracing, nestling together.

The players in her theater of everyday life, whether in groups or perched singly on a tractor or motorbike, exude warmth and affection. They also accept twentieth-century civilization. Her protagonists, despite the shadow of demons, have no problem with modern transportation. In fact, it captures their imagination, along with a fussing and braiding of hair until it becomes a mask or a kind of hat.

Faces and shapes may be exaggerated, but happily, no one is on the attack. Camara’s predominating theme is that of friendly affection. Like everyone else on earth, she seeks an intimacy—a need to relate to someone in a gratifying fashion. However interesting, the imagery is repetitious. But it is also personal. I recognize her originality and a certain beauty. Now, beauty is a dangerous word because notions of “beauty” are relative. So let me be very clear: the work gives me pleasure to look at. As one artist to the other, I respect, like, and enjoy Camara.

Opposite:

Untitled. 1980–90. Terra-cotta,
28 × 10½ × 11½" (71 × 27 × 29 cm).
Collection Jean Pigozzi





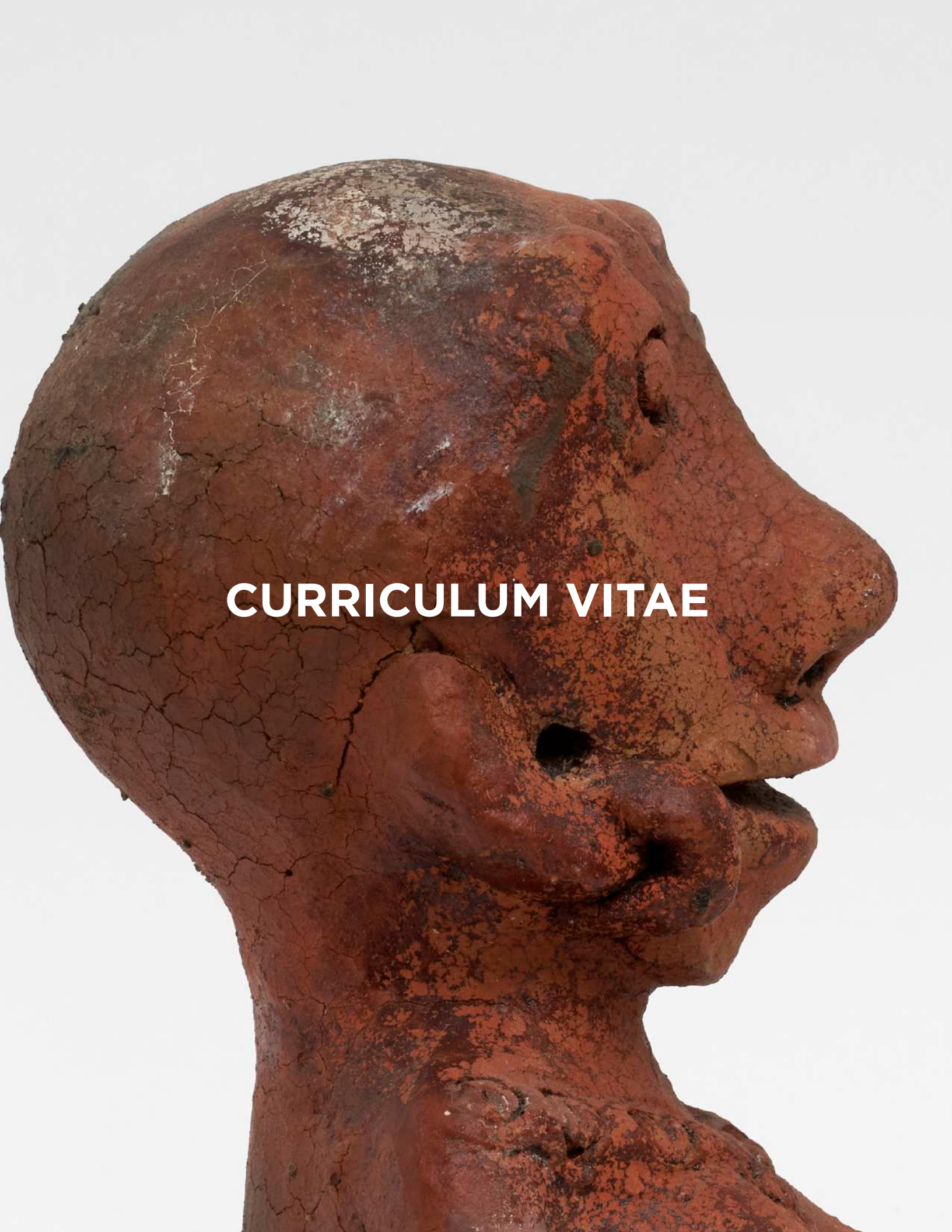
Untitled. 1980-90. Terra-cotta, $31\frac{1}{8} \times 11 \times 7\frac{1}{8}$ "
(81 × 28 × 20 cm). Collection Jean Pigozzi



Untitled. 1992. Terra-cotta, $57\frac{1}{8} \times 13 \times 9\frac{1}{16}$ "
(145 × 33 × 23 cm). Collection Jean Pigozzi



Untitled. 1980-90. Terra-cotta, $15\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{8}$ "
(40 x 35 x 32 cm). Collection Jean Pigozzi



CURRICULUM VITAE

SEYNI AWA CAMARA

Born 1945 in Casamance, Senegal
Lives and works in Bignona, Senegal

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 *Shaping Spirits*, Baronian Xippas, Brussels, BE
- 2023 *Seyni Awa Camara: 1990 - 2022*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2020 *Maternités*, Baronian Xippas, Brussels, BE
- 2011 *Seyni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES
- 2010 *El Vientre de la Tierra*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES
- 2009 *Seyni Awa Camara & Ndoye Douts*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR
- 2008 *Seyni Awa Camara – Terracotas*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES
- 2007 Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR
- 2004 De Crescenzo & Viesti, Rome, IT
- 1990 Gallery 39, Dakar, SE

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 Femmes, curated by Pharrell Williams, Perrotin, Paris FR
- 2023 *KERAMIK*, Buchmann Gallery, Berlin, DE
Tot hier en verder, Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, NL
- 2022 *Michael Armitage Amongst the Living, with Seyni Awa Camara*, White Cube
Bermondsey, London, UK
Les restes du bruit, Seyni Awa Camara & Estevão Mucavele, MAGNIN-A,
Paris, FR
Cosmogony: Zinsou, an African Art Collection, Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst,
Amsterdam, NL
- 2021 *Radically Naïve / Naively Radical*, ExtraCity, Antwerp, BE
LES FLAMMES – L'âge de la céramique, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, FR
Seyni Awa Camara / Olaf Holzapfel, Baronian Xippas, Knokke-Heist, BE
Ex Africa, Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, Paris, FR
CosmogoniesZinsou, an African collection, MO.CO. Hôtel des collections, Montpellier, FR
- 2020 *Alpha Crucis*, Musée Astrup Fearnley, Oslo, NO

- 2017 *Art/Afrique: le nouvel atelier_Les Initiés: selection d'oeuvres (1980-2009) de la collection d'art contemporain africain* Pigozzi, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, FR
- 2016 *Galeristes*, Carreau du temple, Paris, FR
- 2012 *Figure Libre*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR
- 2011 *Chic Art Fair*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR
- 2010 *Africa? Una nuova storia*, Complesso del Vittoriano, Rome, IT
- 2009 *Seyni Awa Camara & Ndoye Douts*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris, FR
- 2008 *Why Africa?* Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, IT
- 2007 *100% Africa*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, ES
- 2005 *Arts of Africa*, Grimaldi Forum, Monaco, FR
African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection, Museum of Fine Art, Houston, TX, US
- 2001 *Rocca di Umbertide*, Contemporary Art Center, Umbertide, IT
Biennale de Venezia, 29th Edition, Venice, IT
- 2000 *Il Ritorno Die Maghi*, Orvieto, IT
- 1992 *Africa Hoy*, Contemporary Art and Cultural Center, Mexico City, MX
 Groninger Museum, Groningen, NL
 The Atlantic Center of Modern Art, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, ES
- 1991 *Senegal*, Galerie des Instituts Für Auslandsbeziehungen
 Landesmuseum, Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, DE
- 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, FR

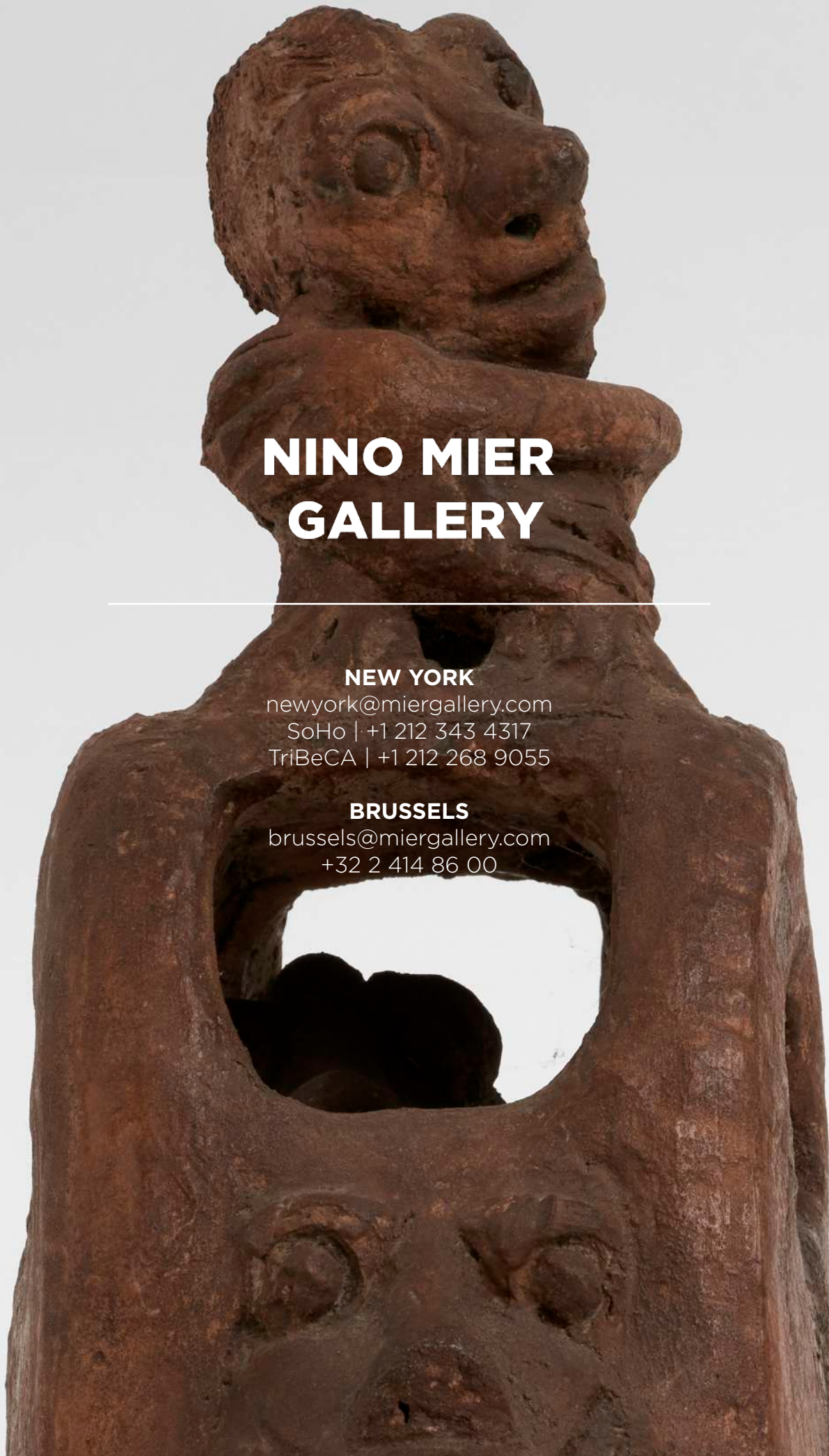
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- 2021 Philippe Dagen, *Ex Africa*, exh. cat., Paris, Gallimard., pp. 240, 241
 Louise Bourgeois, "I respect, like, and enjoy Camara", *Woman Paper*, limited edition
 Something We Africans Got & Fiac, Paris
 Joseph L. Underwood & Chika Okeke-Agulu, *African Artists From 1882 to Now.*, pp. 68
 (Phaidon Editors)
- 2017 Suzanne Pagé, André Magnin, Angeline Scherf, Ludovic Delalande, exh. cat.,
Les Initiés: selection d'oeuvres (1980-2009) de la collection d'art contemporain africain de Jean Pigozzi, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, FR
- 2011 *Seyni Awa Camara: Entre los Elementos - Entre les Eléments*, exh. cat. and DVD
 (Bilbao: Galeria Kalao)

- 2007 André Magnin, *Why Africa?*, exh. cat. (Milaan: Electa & Pinacoteca del Lingotto Giovanni e Marella Agnelli)
- 2006 Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin, *100% Africa*, exh. cat. (Madrid & Bilbao: TF Editores & Museo Guggenheim Bilba)
- 2005 Douglas Herbert, *Arts of Africa: The Contemporary Collection of Jean Pigozzi*, exh. cat. (Genève & Monaco: Skira & Grimaldi)
 André Magnin, *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, exh. cat. (London & Houston: Merrell & Museum of Fine Arts Houston)
- 2001 Valerio Dehò, *Tribal Soul, Metropolitan Body. Contemporary African Art / Anima tribale, corpo metropolitano : arte Africana contemporanea* (Bologna: L'Artier), see pp.66-69.
 Enrico Mascelloni, 'Seni Awa Camara', in *Regine d'Africa*, exh. cat. (Verona: Adriano Parise), see pp.31-58.
- 1996 Louise Bourgeois, 'Seni Awa Camara', in *Contemporary Art of Africa* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), see pp.54-57.
- 1994 Michèle Odeyè-Finzi, *Solitude d'Argile. Légende autour d'une vie, sculptures de Seyni-Awa* (Parijs: L'Harmattan)
- 1991 André Magnin, *Africa Hoy: Obras de la Contemporary African Art Collection*, exh. cat. (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno), see pp.67 -71.
- 1989 Jean-Hubert Martin et al., *Magiciens de la Terre*, exh. cat. (Parijs: Editions du Centre Pompidou), see pp. 112-113.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Jean Pigozzi Collection, FR
 André Magnin Collection, FR
 Art et Marges Musée, BE
 Museum Fünf Kontinente, DE



NINO MIER GALLERY

NEW YORK

newyork@miergallery.com

SoHo | +1 212 343 4317

TriBeCA | +1 212 268 9055

BRUSSELS

brussels@miergallery.com

+32 2 414 86 00