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Reclamation

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Reclamation

by

Laura Day Webb

A curatorial project submitted in conformity
with the requirements for the
Master's Degree in Art Business
Sotheby's Institute of Art

2022

9,731 Words

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Curatorial Proposal

This exhibition will take the form of a group show of African artists who weave cultural heritage with the contemporary, to challenge Western perceptions of African art and culture. Artists Wole Langunju (Nigeria), Prudence Chimutuwah (Zimbabwe), Lincoln Mwangi (Kenya), Moira Bushkimani (Kenya), and Angèle Etoundi Essamba (Cameroon) are confirmed to participate. In addition to the contemporary works by these artists on display, two Nigerian Gèlèdè masks have been generously loaned from the private collection of Olusanya Ojikutu, one from the early 20th century and, the other, whose dating is undetermined. In showcasing these works in tandem, the exhibition creates a connection both tangible and visual between the works of the past and their evolution to the present day.

The title of the show, “Reclamation” is a direct reference to the intention of this exhibition and its artists to restore and recalibrate knowledge of African art and culture to its proper place on a global stage. Through the intertwining of the contemporary and historical, the show refutes the notion of a stagnant Africa. Rather, it proudly showcases the continuation of its artistic practices through current interpretation, while not losing sight of the heritage and history that continue to inspire it. Throughout the works displayed the concept of masking and unmasking both literal and figurative plays a central role. Masks are a broadly recognizable and important part of many African cultures, playing a part in spirituality and ritual dance. In addition, they are a plastic art embodied by many peoples around the globe and therefore have a sense of familiarity about them, despite differences in purpose and meaning that may not be fully understood by those outside of a particular culture. In this instance, masking and unmasking serve as

a conduit to explore key themes central to the artists' works. Nudity, the concealment of heads and bodies, physical masks, and faces laid bare, enable the artists to further examine ideas surrounding identity, corruption, femininity, spirituality, and their relationship to cultural heritage.

The selected artists work across a wide array of mediums from paper mâché and collage, to photography, oil on canvas, and mixed media, underscoring to viewers the breadth of artistry available, rather than relegating African art to a single medium or type. The vibrancy of African art and culture is illustrated through the diversity of artistic mediums and styles while paying homage to heritage and calling on the viewer to acknowledge a dynamic Africa. The ultimate aim of the exhibition is to create dialogue around the ever-evolving nature of cultural heritage, bridge the gaps between communities of diverse backgrounds, and spark interest in further examination of the vast and rich space that is African art. The show will be on view in August of 2022 in New York City at Montague Contemporary Gallery in Chelsea.

Venue

The floorplan below is of Montague Contemporary Gallery in Chelsea, New York where I will be holding the exhibition. I spoke to several spaces to determine costs including the High Line Nine, where I have previously curated an exhibition. Ultimately, having worked with Montague Contemporary before and intending to show artists it already represents, as well as others it is familiar with, I decided to hold the exhibition at the gallery. The owner has generously offered up the space at no cost. The ceilings are 11' high and there is a large window on the opposite side of the gallery upon entry, flooding the space with natural light. The gallery can hold up to 40-50 people comfortably and the space is around 78' x 12.' The entry wall immediately to the right currently sports a mounted television which can be used for displaying exhibition details, rather than physical artworks which slightly reduces the overall hanging space by 6.5.'

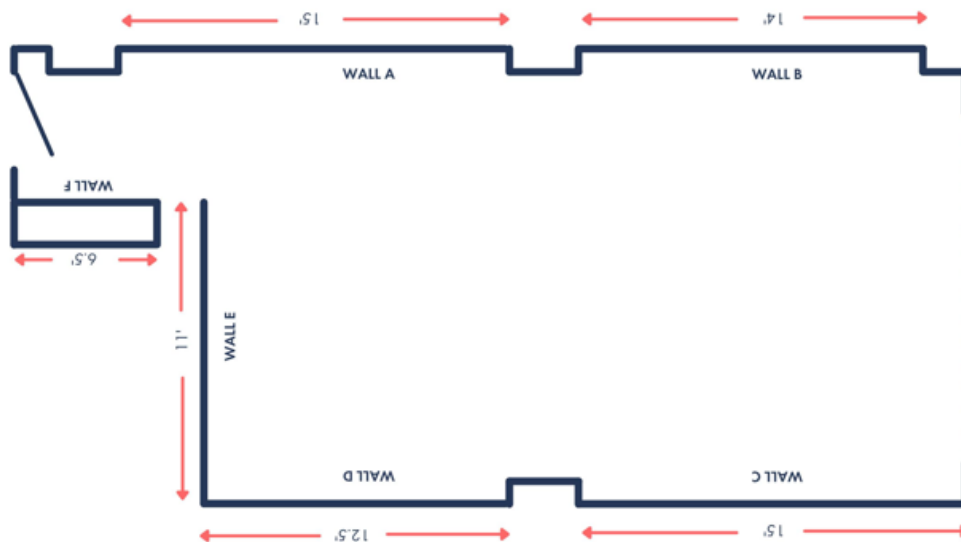


Figure 1. Floorplan of Montague Contemporary Gallery.



Figure 2.

Empreintes 1, 1990
Angèle Etoundi Essamba

Silver Gelatin Print
50.5 cm x 40.7 cm

\$15,716.86



Figure 3.

Africanesse 2, 1992
Angèle Etoundi Essamba

Silver Gelatin Print
50.5 cm x 40.7 cm

\$15,716.86



Figure 4.

Profil Africain 1, 1986
Angèle Etoundi Essamba

Silver Gelatin Print
50.5 cm x 40.7 cm

\$15,716.86

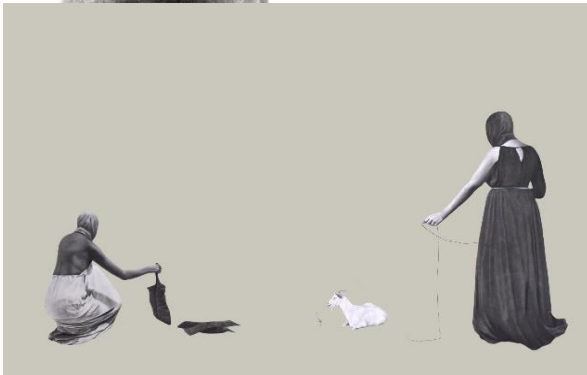


Figure 5.

Wangare and the goat 1, 2020
Lincoln Mwangi

Mixed Media on Canvas
125 cm x 155 cm

\$3,500



Figure 6.

Custom and Creed, 2020
Lincoln Mwangi

Mixed Media on Canvas
125 cm x 155 cm

\$3,500



Figure 7.

Wangare and the goat 2, 2021
Lincoln Mwangi

Mixed Media on Canvas
125 cm x 155 cm

\$3,500



Figure 8.

Ashore, 2021
Moirra Bushkimani

Traditional Fish Trap, Shells, Copper,
Reinforced Paper Mask
29 cm x 29 cm x 45cm

\$1,500



Figure 9.

Aflame, 2020
Moira Bushkimani

Wire, Beads, Reinforced Paper Mask
36 cm x 33 cm x 33 cm

\$1,000



Figure 10.

Yorùbá Gèlèdé Helmet Mask, Nigeria
Date Unknown
Anonymous Yorùbá Artist
Olusanya Ojikutu Collection

Wood, Pigment
39 cm x 30 cm x 33 cm

NFS



Figure 11.

*Yorùbá Triple-Headed Gèlèdé Helmet
Mask, Nigeria*
Early 20th century
Anonymous Yorùbá Artist
Olusanya Ojikutu Collection

Wood
41 cm x 20 cm x 20 cm

NFS

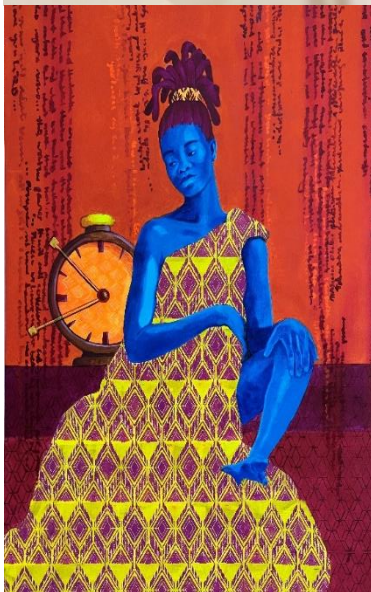


Figure 12.

Nguva isipo VI(6), 2022
Prudence Chimutuwah

Acrylic on Canvas
150cm x 100cm

\$4,500

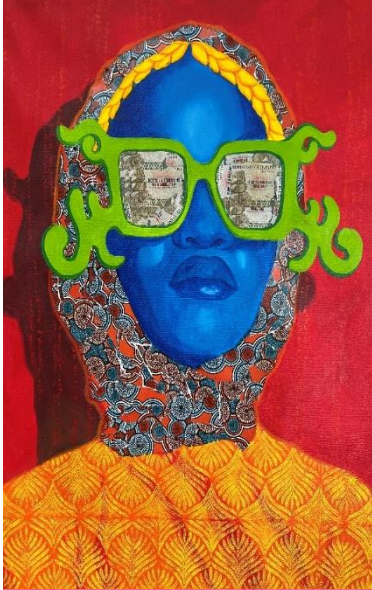


Figure 13.

Face yebasa 1, 2022
Prudence Chimutuwah

Mixed Media Collage on Canvas
95cm x 75 cm

\$1,900

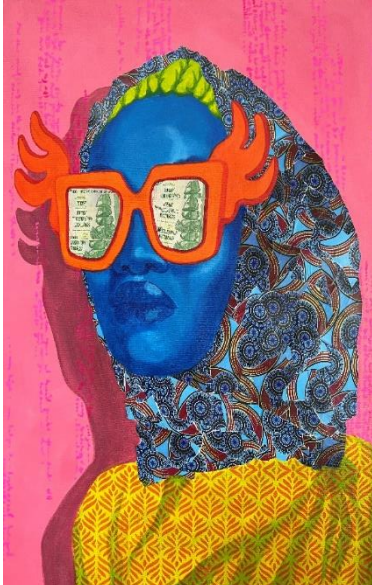


Figure 14.

Face yebasa 3, 2022
Prudence Chimutuwah

Mixed Media Collage on Canvas
95cm x 75 cm

\$1,900



Figure 15.

Goddess II, 2022
Wole Languju

Oil on Canvas
186.69 cm x 144.78 cm

\$24,500



Figure 16.

Gelede Woman II, 2022
Wole Languju

Oil on Canvas
172.72 cm x 149.86 cm

\$24,000



Figure 17.

Gelede Woman, 2022
Wole Languinju

Oil on Canvas
160.02 cm x 125.73 cm

\$24,000

Exhibition Layout

Reclamation Gallery Layout

1. Entrance to Gallery
2. Mounted Television Screen
3. Window Across Wall
4. Wangare and the goat 1, Lincoln Mwangi
5. Yoruba Triple-Headed Gelede Mask, Nigeria
6. Gelede Woman II, Wole Langunju
7. Face yebasa 1, Prudence Chimutuwah
8. Face yebasa 3, Prudence Chimutuwah
9. Aflame, Moira Bushkimani
10. Gelede Woman, Wole Langunju
11. Custom and Creed, Lincoln Mwangi
12. Ashore, Moira Bushkimani
13. Profil Africain 1, Angèle Etoundi Essamba
14. Empreintes 1, Angèle Etoundi Essamba
15. Africanesse 2, Angèle Etoundi Essamba
16. Wangare and the goat 2, Lincoln Mwangi
17. Yoruba Helmet Mask, Nigeria
18. Nguva isipo VI(6), Prudence Chimutuwah
19. Goddess II, Wole Langunju

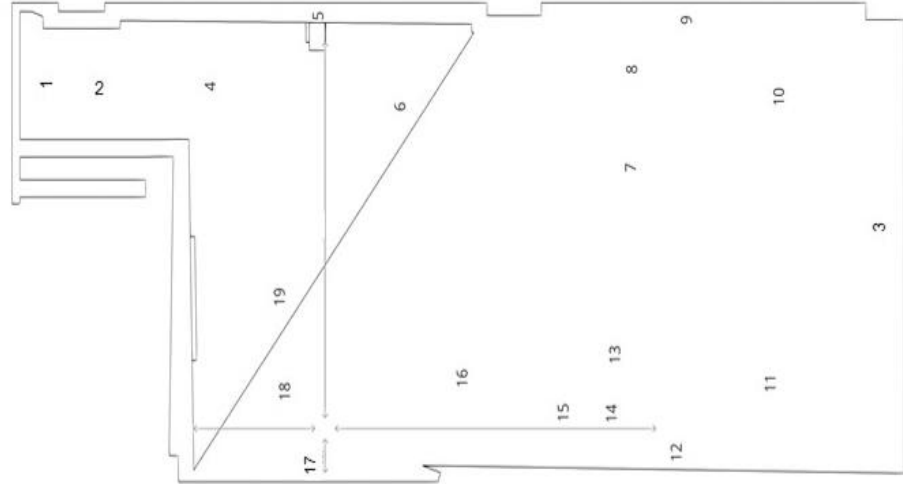


Figure 18. Illustrated exhibition layout of the works in the gallery space.



Figure 19. Rendering of the exhibition layout, as seen upon entering the gallery.

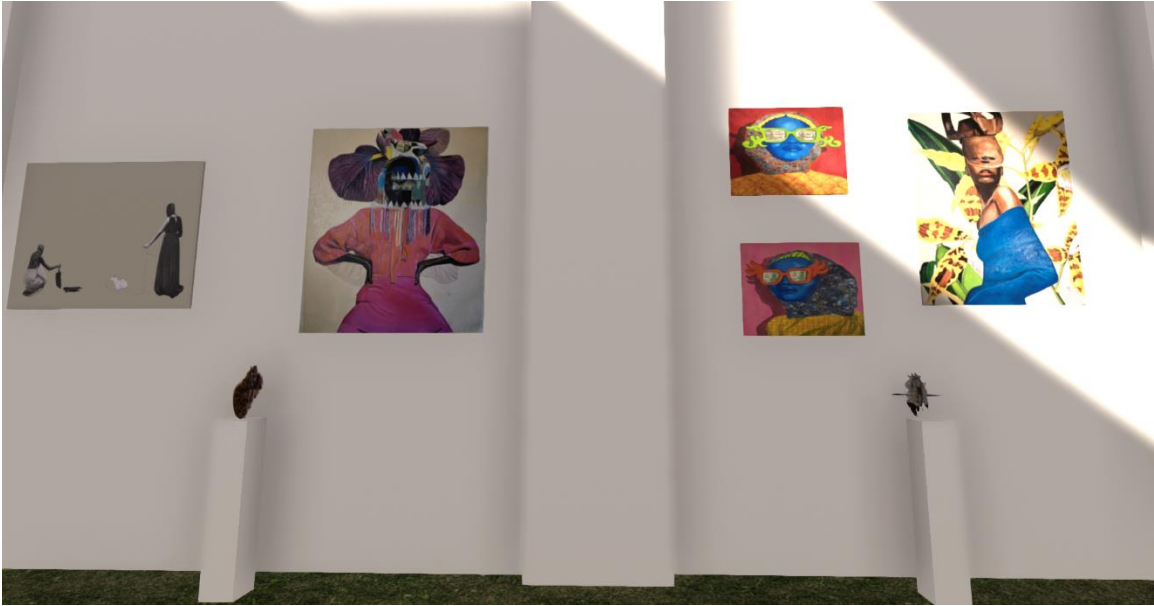


Figure 20. Rendering of the left wall of the exhibition.



Figure 21. Rendering of the exhibition layout from the near right corner toward the back of the space.



Figure 22. Rendering of the right wall of the exhibition.



Figure 23. Rendering of the view from the far-left corner when facing toward the door.



Figure 24. Rendering of the view from the far-right corner when facing toward the door.

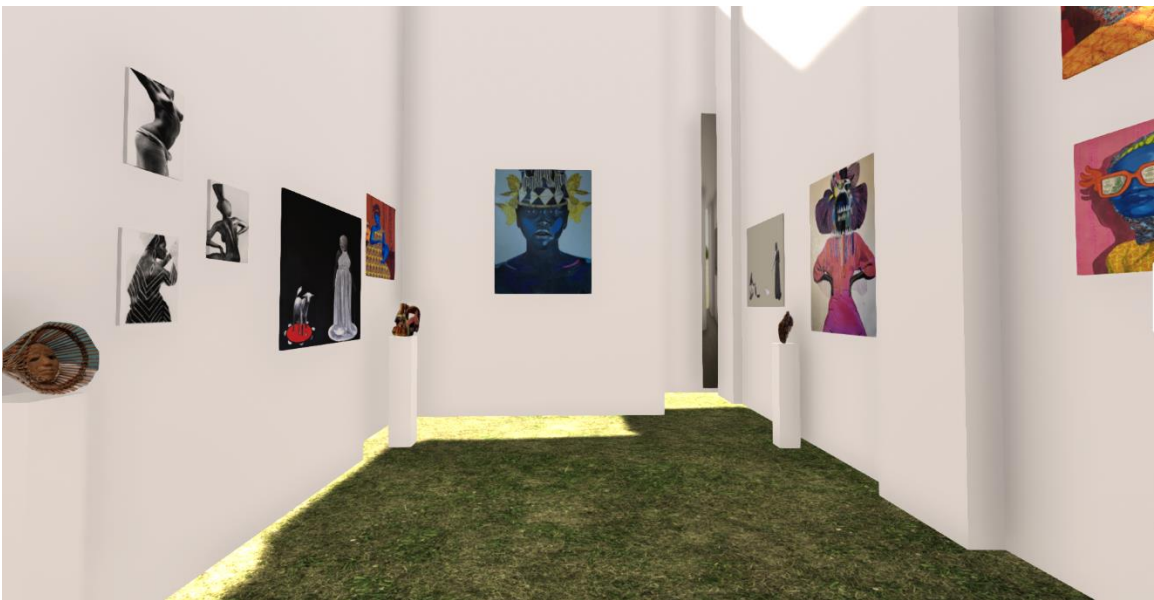


Figure 25. Rendering of the view from the center of the back wall toward the door.

For the exhibition layout, I have chosen to intersperse the works across a single open, white space, rather than solely grouping them by artist, to better interlace the different mediums and emphasize the connectedness of the subject matter and its ties to cultural heritage. Upon stepping into the space, the viewer's eye is initially captivated by the two Nigerian Gèlèdè masks standing like sentries carefully placed atop two white pedestals one on each side of the room. As the viewer peers further into the space and beyond this first layer of historical work, there are two additional pedestals also paired on opposite sides of the room featuring contemporary masks by Moira Bushkimani which sit on rotating stands. Bushkimani's works turn slowly, giving a 360-degree view of their components and creating a non-static layer to draw in the eye and emphasize the ever-evolving nature of cultural heritage and art via their constant transition. They also allude to the original intent of the traditional masks displayed which remain a key element in ritual dance and are worn by dancers in motion, rather than viewed as stationary objects. Interspersed amidst the masks are the paintings, mixed media works, and photographs that make up the majority of the exhibition.

On the left wall, immediately upon entry into the gallery, the first work encountered is Lincoln Mwangi's canvas *Wangare and the goat I* (2020) featuring a figure with her face obscured. Next to this work is Wole Languju's *Gelede Woman II* (2022) sporting a crown (adé). The backgrounds of these two works are of a similar slate tone creating harmony, despite the contrast in the rest of their color palettes. Centered between the two works is the *Yorùbá Triple-Headed Gèlèdè Helmet Mask* from the private collection of Olusanya Ojikutu, tying past and present Nigeria together side by side and creating additional symmetry with the obscured visage of Mwangi's work. Since

masks are traditionally part of an overall costume, the obscured face and figure in Mwangi's work is a reminder that the mask would have been worn and engaged with as part of an ensemble. Further down the left wall, as one makes their way past *Gelede Woman II* (2022) are two canvases by Prudence Chimutuwah, *Face yebasa I* (2022) and *Face yebasa 3* (2022) placed one on top of the other and paired alongside another of Wole Languju's works, *Gelede Woman* (2022). Nestled between the three works is Moira Bushkimani's mask, *Aflame* (2020) on its slowly rotating pedestal. The vibrancy of these three canvases and their contemporary clothing and accessories speaks to the now. However, Languju employs a Gèlèdè mask across his figure's face and the features of Chimutuwah's two subjects are both largely hidden behind oversized sunglasses and headscarves, leaving only the lips visible across all three canvases, and the eyes of Languju's. Again, reinforcing the idea of masking and unmasking with the tangible reminder of Bushkimani's physical mask set amidst them. In contrast to the vibrant colors of this set of works is a grouping of black and white images directly facing them across the room. Lincoln Mwangi's *Custom and Creed* (2020) is the first image to catch the viewer's eye and is situated next to three photographs by Angèle Etoundi Essamba in a triangular fashion with *Profil Africain I* (1986) atop *Empreintes I* (1990), and the third, *Africanesse 2* (1992) to their right. Between these four works is Moira Bushkimani's *Ashore* (2021) mask sculpture on its pedestal and alongside it, to the right of Essamba's photos is Mwangi's *Wangare and the goat 2* (2021). All six of these works employ neutral tones of black, white, or wood, with only a vibrant pop of red beneath the goat in *Wangare and the goat 2* (2021). The contrast between this wall and the one opposite makes for a striking visual, especially with the way light filtering through the gallery's

wall-length window highlights their differences. This grouping of black and white imagery features the nude figures of Essamba's photographs in contrast with the hidden bodies and faces of Mwangi's canvases and Bushkimani's mask, creating a stark distinction between the hidden and the revealed. As one moves to the final corner of the gallery, they are met by Prudence Chimutuwah's brightly colored *Nguva isipo VI(6)* (2022) paired with a Yorùbá *Gèlèdè Helmet Mask* from the same private collection as its neighbor, with its vibrant pigments still intact. The mask is book-ended by the last canvas in the exhibition which sits alone on the wall by the gallery entryway, Wole Langunju's *Goddess II* (2022). Together, these three works create harmony across their shared color palette of blues, yellows, and reds, while the faces of the two figures are bare for all to see. As one moves toward the doorway, Langunju's crowned goddess stares confidently back at the viewer, making for a fitting end to the exhibition.

Angèle Etoundi Essamba (Douala, Cameroon)

Born in Douala, Cameroon in 1962 and educated in France, photographer Angèle Etoundi Essamba is a graduate of the Dutch Photography School in Amsterdam where she currently resides. Essamba is an artist committed to a reflection on the identity of the black woman. She joins the spirit of humanist photography with a strong attachment to the values of communion, observing the world through the women she photographs. Essamba's work lies at the intersection of the social/gender and the artistic field. She aesthetically records a vision of the black woman and African culture, giving a new interpretation of contemporary Africa. In her work, she breaks from stereotypical representations of an Africa torn by famines, epidemics, and wars, instead choosing to celebrate the cultural richness and diversity of the continent. Her photography practice challenges conventional representations of women, by giving her subjects meaning and grandeur, while simultaneously exploring the relationship between tradition and modernity. Essamba's work is encompassed by the words pride, strength, and awareness which she conveys through the regal poses and fearless gazes of the subjects she captures. She focuses exclusively on what individuals radiate outward, whether alone, as a couple, or in a group. In this universe that is hers alone, she controls color with the same artistry as black and white, she masters contrast with a sure touch and handles shadow and light with dexterity and audacity. Since her first exhibition in 1985, her work has been frequently exhibited in museums, institutions, biennales, art fairs, and galleries in Europe, Africa, the United States, Latin America, and Asia including *Renaissance*, National Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2022, *Affiliations*, Venice Biennale,

Venice, Italy, 2022, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, UK, 2021, AKA, Paris, France, 2021, *Renaissance*, Museum of Black Civilizations (MCN), Dakar, Senegal, 2020, ArtX Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, 2019, *Women of the Water*, Claudine Talon Cotonou Foundation, Cotonou, Benin (Solo Exhibition), 2018, *Strength & Pride* Musée de l’Ifang, Dakar, Senegal (30-year retrospective), 2016, *Voiles et Devoilements*, National Museum Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya (Solo Exhibition), 2011, *Dialogues*, UNESCO, Paris, France, 2006. Her photographs are held in several private and public collections and have been featured in various publications around the globe.

Lincoln Mwangi (Nairobi, Kenya)

Born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1996, Lincoln Mwangi studied drawing and painting at the Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts, Nairobi, graduating in 2014. Mwangi continues to live and work in Nairobi where he is also a member of the Brush Tu Art Contemporary Artist Collective. Mwangi is an artist who recalls encounters with daily reality while using different mediums and devices to create his work. He pulls narratives from what he experiences and sees and presents these manifestations as figurative forms and portraits, using them to approach various themes in his practice. Mwangi is drawn to the collective human experience and seeks to capture various facets of it including the question of identity, our relationship to the natural world, life and death, as well as the desires and fears driven by an individual’s environment and unconscious. Mwangi depicts anonymous figures in his works, as an archetype representative of all people, rather than a single individual. Through the obfuscation of his subjects’ faces with a wet cloth, he suggests struggle and uncertainty. Mwangi’s work often features a singular female figure representative of mother nature paired with an animal like a dog, goat, or a physical

object such as a cart. He deliberately repeatedly employs the use of one similar object or animal across his canvases to describe humans using, reacting to, and interacting with the things around them. Mwangi's work has been featured in a number of exhibitions including *Lamu Space Station*, Lamu Island, Kenya, 2022, *Facing the Sun*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Schloss Görne, Germany, 2021, *I have a Dream*, AKKA Project, Venice, Italy, 2021, *Objects, Space, Movement and Facades*, Nairobi, Kenya, 2019, *Behind This Face*, Gravitart Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya, 2019, *Aftermath of Aftermath*, Brush Tu Art, Nairobi, Kenya, 2019, *A Glimpse of East Africa*, Lagos, Nigeria, 2019, *Africa And Other 54 Countries: Focus On Kenya*, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, UAE, 2018, *Walking The Line*, Createhub Gallery, Dubai, UAE, Kenya, 2018, *Pyenga*, Brush Tu Art, Nairobi, Kenya, 2018, *Art to End Slavery II*, Kobo Trust, Nairobi, Kenya, 2017, and Manjano Exhibition, GoDown Arts Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, 2017. In 2017, Mwangi was the Finale Winner at the Manjano Exhibition in the student category.

Moira Bushkimani (Mombasa, Kenya)

Born Muthoni Kimani in Mombasa, Kenya in 1990, Moira Bushkimani has been practicing visual arts in Nairobi, Kenya since 2013. Her primary mediums are mixed from natural and human sources such as burnt beer cans, scrap fabric, bones, feathers, flowers, wire, and vehicle air filters. Objects have always been a great source of inspiration for the artist, because of the inherent energy they possess from passing through many hands before she collects them. Every object has a pull to it and while some may have to sit in the dust for years first, they can suddenly be jump-started by new objects that bond with them. Bushkimani's inspiration not only stems from discovering and implementing interesting objects into her works but from combining unlikely

materials as well. While she works across a variety of mediums including photography, mixed media, collage, and sculpture, masks remain at the forefront of her work, as identity is a large portion of her consideration and inspiration. Being African, in a region where masks were once common, yet coming from a generation where their meaning has largely been lost, she uses masks as a form of meditation. Every mask is molded from her face and begins with newspaper paste. She uses newspapers as a reference to the information we are inundated with daily and therefore take on as our identity. With some of her mask works, she also incorporates feathers and dried flowers to superimpose her desires over those pushed by the press. The meditative aspect of her work stems from the need to maintain one expression throughout the process. Therefore, every thought that causes a micro expression is one to be calmly analyzed, as she waits for the mask to dry. With identity being the central question of today, her works center around the physical act of wearing a mask to remove the contemporary one which distances humanity from its natural environment and the things it loves. Her masks are born out of a desire to recapture humanity's simpler identity; nature, bonding, and all that stems from such connection. Across all facets of her practice, she seeks to find lost information by diving into human nature and its responses to today's pressures. Moira has exhibited her work across Kenya and in Berlin, as well as attended artist residencies in Nairobi, Lamu, and Berlin. She has participated in the East African Women Artists Online Auction, 2021 with Calabar Gallery, and has several upcoming exhibitions anticipated for mid to late 2022.

Prudence Chimutuwah (Harare, Zimbabwe)

Born in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1989, visual artist Prudence Chimutuwah was first introduced to practicing art at Mabelreign Girls High and was inspired by Seminar Mpofu and Colleen Madamombe, both prominent female sculptors. She studied at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe School of Visual Arts and Design from 2009 to 2011 and majored in painting and sculpture. Chimutuwah was inspired by sculptors working at Chitungwiza Arts Center, where she is currently based. While she initially wanted to pursue a career in sculpture, she found it to be a male-dominated field and thus began to reconsider her area of focus. In 2015, Chimutuwah discovered a fascination for collage and since then, she has been collecting recycled material to produce her work. Chimutuwah's images are subtly influenced by contemporary African fashion, text, and symbols. Her work fuses text from novels, magazines, and newspapers, with banknotes, painting, and print-making. Her work primarily depicts women, their daily lives, economic aspirations, spirituality, desire for recognition, the energy they put forth, and the world they dominate or subordinate to. She is inspired by her gender and how it adapts to the ever-changing socio-economic environment and seeks for her work to narrate, describe, and inform the audience on the evolving world of women in patriarchal societies. She views women as the incubators of society. What is within them is nurtured and multiplied. It inspires and shapes her creative vision and through her work, she looks to deposit positive energy back into her fellow women. Her achievements include participating in major group shows at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe and Wild Geese Art Fair, as well as exhibitions including *MaDzimbabwe*, AKKA Project, Dubai, UAE, 2022, *Past & Present*, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2021, and *Freedom*, Gallery Delta, Harare,

Zimbabwe, 2021. Her exhibition, *PURPLE RHYTHM*, was nominated for best exhibition at the National Arts Merit Awards (NAMA) in Zimbabwe in 2020. She was also short-listed as a finalist at the ILO Green Enterprise competition for best mixed media artwork and received an Award of Merit for originality from Gallery Delta in 2020. Her work proudly hangs in several embassies and diplomats' residences in Zimbabwe, as well as private homes and institutions.

Wole Langunju (Oshogbo, Nigeria)

Born in Oshogbo, Nigeria in 1966, Wole Langunju is a 1986 graduate of Fine Arts and Graphic Design at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. He currently lives and works in the United States. Langunju practices a form of Onaism, a contemporary art movement of the Ife Art School. His hybrid paintings of traditional Gèlèdè masks are juxtaposed with images of the modern woman in the Western world, redefining the forms and philosophies of Yorùbá visual art and design. The Gèlèdè masquerade is a performance celebrating motherhood, fertility, and femininity. In combining these themes with Western cultural icons appropriated from the Dutch Golden age, the Elizabethan era, as well as the fifties and sixties, Euro-American eras, and Nigerian adiré batik, Langunju's paintings are both fashionable and imbued with layers of inspiration and meaning. He evolves our understanding of the role of Yorùbá culture, and more broadly African art, to reframe our perspective. Langunju's cultural references, mined from the eras of colonization and decolonization of the African continent critique the racial and social structures of the 19th century whilst evoking commentaries on power, femininity, and womanhood. Langunju has exhibited widely in Nigeria, the

United States, Trinidad, and Germany. His exhibitions include *What Will You Do With Your Own Àjé?*, Montague Contemporary, New York, New York, (Solo Exhibition), 2022, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, UK, 2020, *Yorùbá Remixed*, Ebony/Curated Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa, (Solo Exhibition), 2018, *Navigating Space and Time in African Contemporary and Diasporic Art*, The Basement, London, UK, 2017, *Wole Langunju: African Diaspora Artist and Transnational Visuality*, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, (Solo Exhibition), 2014, *Womanscape: Race, Gender and Sexuality in African Art*, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 2011, and *AFRICA NOW!: Emerging Talents from a Continent on the Move*, The World Bank Art Program, Washington, DC, 2008. Langunju was awarded a Phillip Ravenhill Fellowship by UCLA in 2006 and a Pollock Krasner award in 2009. His work is held in numerous collections, including Collection Leridon and Fondation d'entreprise Francès.

Marketing and Press Plan

The marketing for this show will be grassroots in nature, leveraging the networks of the artists, the host gallery, Montague Contemporary, as well as my relationships across the art world and beyond. Social media and email blasts will be the primary means of engaging with a larger audience. Instagram, Facebook, and an Eventbrite link for the Opening Night Preview will be key tools, alongside a press release to targeted media outlets. Additionally, I will engage with my existing press contacts, as will the gallery in hopes of encouraging coverage and eliciting advance press placements, thereby driving visitor traffic to the exhibition. A page on the gallery's website will also host details about the show and the featured works. This will create a central reference point for those interested in visiting the exhibition to view the curatorial statement and better understand the exhibition's purpose, as well as see and inquire about the works.

Sample press release:

Reclamation

Curated by Laura Day Webb

August 1 – August 31st, 2022

Montague Contemporary

526 West 26th Street, 4th Floor, New York, 10001

Opening Night Reception: Monday, August 1st, 6-8 PM

Reclamation opens in Chelsea at Montague Contemporary on August 1st and will run through the month's end. Curated by Laura Day Webb, this group exhibition features work by five contemporary African artists Wole Langunju, Prudence Chimutuwah, Lincoln Mwangi, Moira Bushkimani, and Angèle Etoundi Essamba in concert with two Nigerian Gèlèdè masks from the private collection of Olusanya Ojikutu. The exhibition is open to the public daily from 10-6 during August.

Featuring a broad array of mediums from paper mâché and collage, to photography, oil on canvas, and mixed media, *Reclamation* explores the diversity and richness of contemporary African art while attempting to reframe Western perceptions of African culture and creativity. The concept of masking and unmasking both literal and figurative

is ever-present throughout the works displayed. Nudity, obfuscation of facial features and bodies, physical masks, and visages laid bare, enable the artists to further explore ideas surrounding identity, corruption, femininity, spirituality, and their relationship to cultural heritage.

Wole Langunju (b. 1966, Nigeria) works primarily in oil. His hybrid paintings of traditional Gèlèdè masks juxtaposed with images of the modern woman, evoke commentaries on power, femininity, and womanhood, whilst referencing the eras of colonization and decolonization in Africa. Prudence Chimutuwah (b. 1989, Zimbabwe) is a mixed media artist who frequently employs collage, to depict women in their daily lives, as well as their desires and dreams, spotlighting the evolving world of women in patriarchal societies. Lincoln Mwangi (b. 1996, Kenya) also utilizes mixed media and is drawn to the collective human experience. He seeks to capture various facets of it by depicting anonymous figures in his works, as an archetype representative of all people, rather than an individual. Moira Bushkimani (b. 1990, Kenya) leverages found objects, sculpture, photography, and collage among other mediums. She seeks to find lost information by diving into human nature and our responses to today's pressures. Photographer Angèle Etoundi Essamba (b. 1962, Cameroon) is committed to a reflection on the identity of the African woman, imbuing her subjects with meaning and majesty, while simultaneously exploring the relationship between tradition and modernity. Together, these artists' works create a dialogue on current issues, while acknowledging the past.

Reclamation calls on the viewer to re-examine any preconceived notions of African art and heritage through the intertwining of contemporary and historical references. It counters the notion of a static Africa through the vibrant and dynamic nature of the works displayed and pays homage to the wealth of heritage still inspiring artists today.

The ultimate aim of the exhibition is to create dialogue around the ever-evolving nature of cultural heritage, bridge the gaps between communities of diverse backgrounds, and spark interest in further examination of the vast and rich space that is African art.

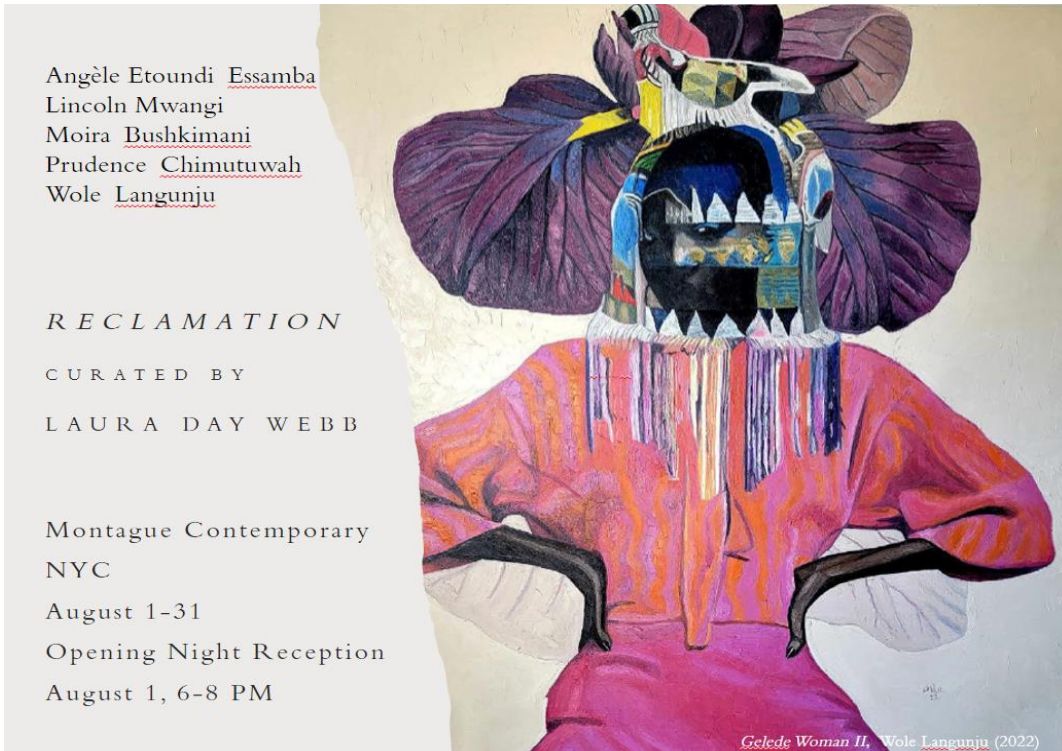


Figure 26. Sample invitation to the Opening Night Reception.

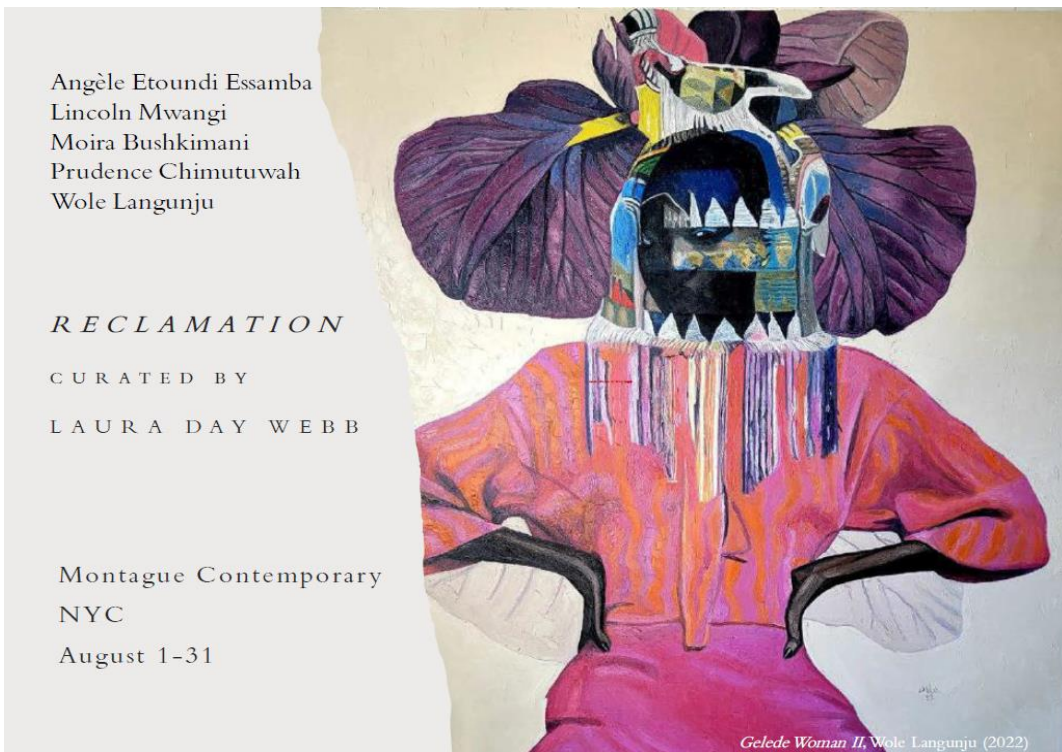


Figure 27. Sample flyer for the exhibition.



Figure 28. Alternative sample flyer for the exhibition.

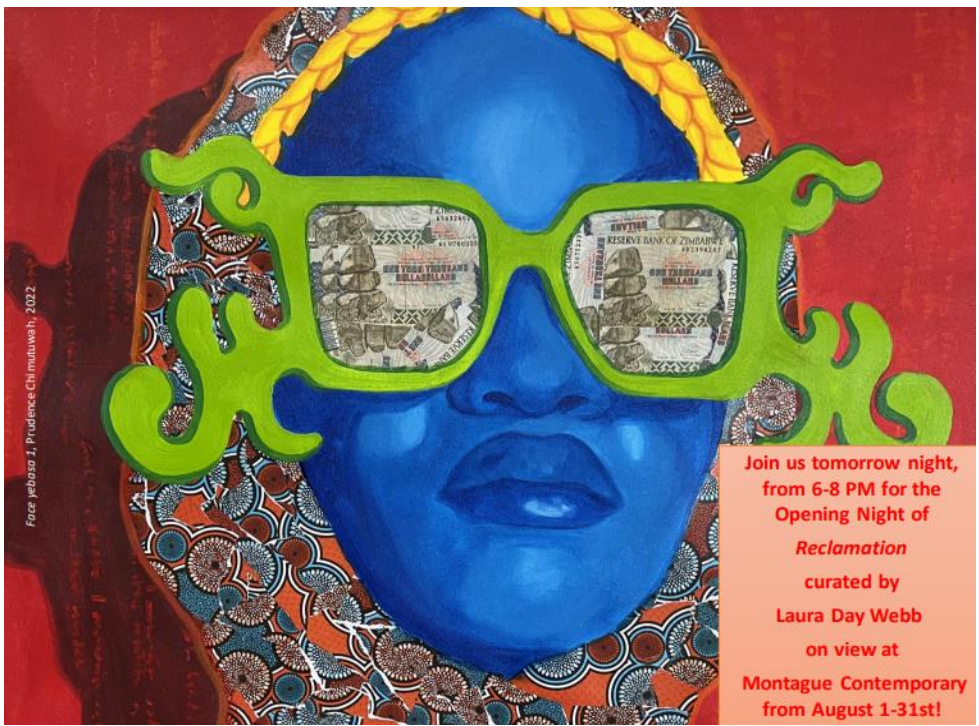


Figure 29. Sample social media story.

AUG
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Opening Night Reception for Reclamation Curated by Laura Day Webb

by [Montague Contemporary Gallery](#)

[Follow](#)

Montague Contemporary
 Opening Night Reception
 August 1, 6-8 PM

Moira Bushkimani
Prudence Chimutuwah
Angèle Etoundi Essamba
Wole Langunju
Lincoln Mwangi

RECLAMATION
 CURATED BY
LAURA DAY WEBB

↑ ♥

Unavailable

Join Curator Laura Day Webb for the Opening Night Reception of the new exhibition, **Reclamation** at Montague Contemporary.

About this event

Reclamation opens in Chelsea at Montague Contemporary on August 1st and will run through month's end. Curated by Laura Day Webb, this group exhibition features work by five contemporary African artists Wole Langunju, Prudence Chimutuwah, Lincoln Mwangi, Moira Bushkimani, and Angèle Etoundi Essamba in concert with two Nigerian Gelede masks from the collection of Olusanya Ojikutu.

Reclamation explores the diversity and richness of contemporary African art while attempting to reframe Western perceptions of both it and African culture. The concept of masking and unmasking both literal and figurative is ever present throughout the works displayed. Nudity, obfuscation of facial features and bodies, physical masks, and visages laid bare enable the artists to further examine ideas surrounding identity, corruption, femininity, spirituality, and their relationship to cultural heritage.

Date and time

Mon, August 1, 2022
 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM EDT

Location

Montague Contemporary
 526 West 26th Street
 #4th Floor
 New York, NY 10001
[View Map](#)

Figure 30. Sample Eventbrite link to the Opening Night Reception.

Budget

Item	Cost (USD)
Venue	\$0, Montague Contemporary has donated their space
Artwork Shipping & Transportation to Venue Broken Down by Artist	
Angèle Etoundi Essamba	\$0, See below for printing and framing costs
Lincoln Mwangi and Moira Bushkimani	\$0, Will reach out to see if a member of the Kenyan community group in NYC can transport back from a visit to Nairobi (Lincoln and Moira are both members of Nairobi's Brush Tu Collective which should make this easier for pick up purposes)
Prudence Chimutuwah	\$0, Montague Contemporary already brought back from a visit to Zimbabwe
Wole Languju	\$0, works are at Montague Contemporary in NYC
2 Nigerian Gèlèdé Masks from Private Collection	\$150, Two masks will be hand-carried from a neighboring state via a train ride.
Artwork Shipping & Transportation from Venue	\$0, works can remain at the gallery until sold. If the artist desires their return, then there will be a DHL fee to consider.
Drinks for Opening Night	Will reach out to various spirits companies where I have existing relationships to seek donations.
Installation	Will do it myself in conjunction with local gallery partner
Photographer for Opening Night Preview	\$0, professional photographer friend is shooting
Exhibition Signage	\$2,000 for one large wall mount with show QR code and 4 smaller texts
Labels for works	\$20, will print at home on stickers which I will purchase
Printing of Materials	\$327 for 100 programs
Stretching and Framing of Works	\$1215 for 4 works by Prudence Chimutuwah and 3 by Lincoln Mwangi, others do not require it
Printing of photos	\$225 for Angèle Etoundi Essamba's 3 works
Framing of photos	\$300 for Angèle Etoundi Essamba's 3 works
4 pedestals	\$0, borrowing from Montague Contemporary
2 rotating bases	\$0, borrowing from Montague Contemporary
TOTAL:	\$4,237

Figure 32. Budget table for exhibition costs.

As the show is reliant upon sponsorship to proceed, creativity in cost-cutting measures has been employed across all aspects of its execution. In March of 2022, the director of Montague Contemporary happened to be in Zimbabwe and was able to pick up the three works from the artist, Prudence Chimutuwah, thereby saving on shipping. The two Gèlèdé masks based in a private collection in a neighboring state will be hand-carried via train. Additionally, utilizing my relationships in NYC and Kenya, I am reaching out to see who may be returning to Nairobi in the coming months and can transport the works of Lincoln Mwangi and Moira Bushkimani with them back to NYC, as the two masks by Bushkimani are particularly fragile. Alternatively, should sponsorship conversations prove fruitful, there may be budget for flights and hotels, enabling the artists to attend the opening and transport their works with them. I will hang the works with help from friends in the art world to reduce costs on that front. The works by Wole Langunju are fortunately already onsite and Angèle Etoundi Essamba's work will be printed in New York and walked over to the gallery from the printer for subsequent pickup by the framer.

This exhibition through the amalgamation of various artistic mediums and styles attempts to comment on the relationship between past and present and dismantle the framework through which Western viewers perceive the art and cultural heritage of Africa. Throughout the works displayed, the artists examine their varied backgrounds and perceptions of cultural heritage, leveraging their creations as vehicles for conversation and exploration. To further this inquiry, two Yorùbá Gèlèdè masks are shown in this exhibition, one from the early 20th century and a second, whose dating remains undetermined. They act as a visual reference to cultural heritage and the past, both recent and remote. Literal and figurative masking and unmasking play a central role in the artists' investigation, with the head and face of the subject whether obscured or stripped bare of any covering, serving as the focal point for the contemporary works displayed and acting as a conduit to explore key themes central to the artists' works. Nudity, the concealment of heads and bodies, physical masks, and faces laid bare, enable the artists to further examine ideas surrounding identity, corruption, femininity, spirituality, and their relationship to cultural heritage. The title of the show, "Reclamation" is a direct reference to the intention of this exhibition and its artists to restore and recalibrate knowledge of African art and culture to its proper place on a global stage. Through the intertwining of the contemporary and historical, the show refutes the notion of a stagnant Africa. Rather, the exhibition proudly showcases the continuation of its artistic practices through current interpretation, while not losing sight of the heritage and history that continue to inspire.

The borders that exist in Africa today were imposed upon the continent during Western colonization without regard for languages, customs, or the boundaries set by its peoples. Therefore, what is now perceived as the cultural heritage of a particular country or region in Africa today is to an extent hybrid in nature, a reflection of the various pre-existing cultures, as well as their exchange with the West. As the Western construct of Africa is so often tied to colonization and slavery, so too is the West's perception of African art, as something of a bygone era stagnant, primitive, and relegated to the far reaches of some dusty corner of a museum.¹ One need only look to the institutions housing these collections to notice a trend towards the placement of these works in ethnographic museums, with The Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris alone housing over seventy thousand African objects.² Many of these establishments were built during the colonial period, calling into question how the art and the people who created it are contextualized within their walls.³ Furthermore, it must be noted that much of the traditional African art viewed by the public today was also created during the colonial period across the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.⁴ Therefore, showcasing these works as representative of the experience of people of the precolonial era further conflates understanding by Western viewers.⁵

¹ Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Art and Religion in Africa: Some Observations and Reflections," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 4 (1994): 294, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1581338>.

² Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics," English trans. Drew S. Burk (Nov. 23, 2018): 23, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

³ Boris Wastiau, "African Art at the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva (MEG)," *African Arts* 41, no. 1 (2008): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447865>.

⁴ John Peffer, "Notes on African Art, History, and Diasporas Within," *African Arts* 38, no. 4 (2005): 70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447737>.

⁵ Peffer, "Notes on African Art, History, and Diasporas Within," 70.

Art has arguably long been a powerful tool for expression, allowing the viewer a glimpse into people, places, and things she may never have the opportunity to encounter face to face. However, even the term “art” itself is a Western construct emerging from around the eighteenth century, whose contemporary definition focuses on “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination, especially in the production of aesthetic objects.”⁶ Therefore, the use of the word to describe works that emerged before this period and across non-Western societies is problematic and has raised much unresolved debate. As Nelson Goodman noted, “when is art?” is really the question.⁷ Both James Clifford and Carolyn Dean argue that the imposition of the word “art” in its current definition and applied to works by non-Western societies is yet another way in which the West has attempted to impose its image on other cultures, rendering them inferior for not meeting or initiating this definition themselves.⁸ The focus on the aesthetic ignores the spiritual component of objects like the two Gèlèdè masks shown in this exhibition, as it deliberately neglects their function in ritual masquerades.

The desire to separate religion and the spiritual from “art” by some art historians, leaves the audience with an incomplete and therefore inaccurate picture of their meaning. However, the viewing of visual arts can encompass both a spiritual and aesthetic purpose. As Gillian Furniss points out, these seemingly diametrically opposed

⁶ *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “Art,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art>.

⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (United Kingdom: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 69.

⁸ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Spain: Harvard University Press, 1988), 196-201.; Carolyn Dean, “The Trouble with (The Term) Art,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (2006): 25–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068464>.

views of the spiritual versus “art” can work in tandem to acknowledge the importance of an object’s spiritual nature, while still admiring its aesthetic qualities, creating a multi-faceted perspective.⁹ Wole Langunju leverages this approach in his contemporary works displayed in this exhibition. Langunju incorporates his Yorùbá heritage into his canvases by forging a connection via objects including masks and crowns that are unlikely to meet the Western definition of “art” but play a central role in kingship and masquerade. In *Gelede Woman* (2022), he makes a Yorùbá Gèlèdè mask, an object with great spiritual meaning, the focal point of the work. Depicting the mask across the face of a female figure in current clothing, he intertwines his cultural heritage with a contemporary twist, as the mask is typically worn by a male dancer during the Gèlèdè masquerade. In bringing these elements together, he creates a work that is both aesthetically pleasing and references the spiritual with a modern outlook.

There is also an implication in the Western definition of “art” that works produced solely for aesthetic value, “fine art” is superior to those steeped in tradition and developed with a purpose.¹⁰ These works are instead relegated to the category of “artifact” or “craft.”¹¹ However, how some African peoples view objects the West would place in the latter category, directly contradicts this notion of inferiority, as in the case of the Mande of Mali. The Mande name each sculpture created, as well as

⁹ Gillian J. Furniss, “Viewing Sub-Saharan African Art With Western Eyes: A Question of Aesthetics in the Context of Another Culture and Time,” *Art Education* 68, no. 6 (2015): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45239772>.

¹⁰ Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, “WHITHER ART HISTORY? Kongo Ins-(Ex)Piration in Contemporary Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 98, no. 3 (2016): 291, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43947929>.

¹¹ Martínez-Ruiz, “WHITHER ART HISTORY?,” 291.

categories of objects, like masks.¹² The name of an object can indicate its spiritual potency but the beauty of the work and its symbolism can also transcend simple utility.¹³ Therefore, an object viewed by the West as functional rather than “art,” like a knife, may hold a place of more importance to the Mali who do not distinguish between the Western notion of art and aesthetics versus that of artifacts and crafts that serve a functional purpose.¹⁴ While the word “art” as the West defines it may not hold the same categories of objects, that does not mean there is no appreciation for the aesthetic nature of an object within African cultures or a lack of words within its languages to describe it.¹⁵ A better way forward requires a more thorough understanding by the West of the culture and history surrounding these works and any purpose they may serve beyond just the aesthetic.

As cultural heritage is mutable and affected by our individual and collective experiences, so too is the art it births. While the life of some works, like wooden masks and sculptures, can be brief, their ephemeral nature allows for an art form that is continually evolving. The Igbo who now primarily reside in southeastern Nigeria, focus on the process of creation in their works, rather than the finished product.¹⁶ The fleeting nature of the end product due to climate and even deliberate destruction allows for the next generation to exercise their powers of creation and creativity, allowing the art form to continually evolve.¹⁷ Similarly, the Moba of northern Togo leave their wooden figure

¹² Hackett, “Art and Religion in Africa,” 298-301.

¹³ Hackett, “Art and Religion in Africa,” 298-301.

¹⁴ Hackett, “Art and Religion in Africa,” 298-301.

¹⁵ Hackett, “Art and Religion in Africa,” 298-301.

¹⁶ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 207.

¹⁷ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 207.

carvings exposed to the elements on or surrounding shrines to amplify spiritual power, whilst deteriorating over time.¹⁸ We may never know the names of those who created much of the traditional African art we see in museums today. Colonization and the introduction of other religions to the continent mean that some of the true connotations of these works may remain forever out of reach on some level. However, as demonstrated by the Igbo's philosophy, that is not to say these works have lost all meaning or relevance. Instead, this seeming void can make space for contemporary artists to honor those who created before them by interpreting and recontextualizing these past works through their own experiences, thereby imbuing them with new meaning for a modern audience.

Nonetheless, the updating of meaning or reinterpretation of it is not without complexity. For some artists, relocation to another country or continent may result in a multicultural expression throughout their works. Whereas others may identify with a particular tribal heritage, rather than a nation-state. Age can also play a role in how artists interpret meaning or the past. An artist born during colonial rule will have a different perspective than one who is several generations removed from it. In the case of this exhibition, Angèle Etoundi Essamba, Wole Langunju, and Prudence Chimutuwah were all born less than ten years after their countries declared their freedom. Additionally, Langunju and Essamba both now reside on other continents, making for an experience that contrasts with those of Lincoln Mwangi and Moira Bushkimani who are over fifty years and a generation removed from Kenya's independence. Added to these factors is

¹⁸ Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Impermanent by Design: The Ephemeral in Africa's Tradition-Based Arts," *African Arts* 43, no. 1 (2010): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29546083>.

the artistic education of the artist. The artistic practices derived from a classroom education focused on the arts will inevitably be heavily weighted toward the Western tradition. This creates a challenge for the artist when attempting to reconcile the techniques she has been taught with cultural heritage of the non-Western variety.¹⁹ There is a balancing act that must take place to ensure that the approach itself does not gloss over the conveyance of a non-Western message.²⁰ The same can be said of the inclusion of both Western and non-Western elements within a work and while the market for contemporary African art is undoubtedly on the rise, it is important not to dismiss or neglect the more traditional artistic production still occurring and evolving.²¹ To laud the rise of the contemporary market as somehow an evolution of outdated and bygone artistic practices by the West is a potential pitfall that should be acknowledged so that it may be avoided.²²

Throughout the works exhibited, emphasis is placed on the head and face of the subject which is further underscored by the ways in which they are concealed and revealed throughout. In many African cultures, the head plays a key role in one's conceptualization, intelligence, and emotions.²³ The Tabwa in Zaire view the forehead's center as the origin of wisdom, while the Kalabari Ijo in Nigeria see the forehead as the place in which the spirit that controls how we behave resides.²⁴ For the Kaguru in

¹⁹ Martínez-Ruiz, "WHITHER ART HISTORY?," 295-296.

²⁰ Martínez-Ruiz, "WHITHER ART HISTORY?," 295-296.

²¹ Martínez-Ruiz, "WHITHER ART HISTORY?," 295-296.

²² Martínez-Ruiz, "WHITHER ART HISTORY?," 295-296.

²³ Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head," *African Arts* 28, no. 1 (1995): 24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337248>.

²⁴ Arnoldi and Kreamer, "Crowning Achievements," 24.

Tanzania, the top of the head is a place of respect and should not be touched.²⁵ To the Itseo in Kenya, the head and heart play separate but critical roles, as the head is the seat of perception and knowledge, while the heart is where strong emotions reside.²⁶ Similarly, the Bamana in Mali believe the head is the seat of intelligence, while passion resides in the liver.²⁷

Of particular pertinence to this exhibition is the role of the head in Yorùbá culture, as the two historical Gèlèdè Masks in this exhibition are from the Yorùbá of Nigeria. The Yorùbá are an ethnolinguistic people whose kingdoms encompass what is now southwestern Nigeria, Benin, and Togo and remain one of the larger ethnic groups in the region.²⁸ Before the colonization of Yorùbáland by the British and French in the late nineteenth century, the Yorùbá lived in autonomous kingdoms or city-states ruled by an Oba (king).²⁹ Evidence of the Yorùbá dates back to the fifth century BC and across the centuries, their artists developed beautiful works in terracotta, bronze, and wood.³⁰ The ancient town of Ife in Nigeria produced some of the finest examples of Yorùbá art and the dynasty of Ife kings continues to this day unbroken.³¹ To the Yorùbá, the head is

²⁵ Arnoldi and Kreamer, “Crowning Achievements,” 24.

²⁶ Arnoldi and Kreamer, “Crowning Achievements,” 24.

²⁷ Arnoldi and Kreamer, “Crowning Achievements,” 24.

²⁸ Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola, *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-28.

²⁹ Usman and Falola, *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, 321-358.

³⁰ John Pemberton, “Art and Rituals for Yoruba Sacred Kings,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 96-97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4113015>.

³¹ Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton, and Rowland Abiodun, “Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought,” *African Arts* 23, no. 1 (1989): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3336802>.

considered the most vital part of one's person and the seat of one's destiny (ori).³² According to the Yorùbá, this inner or metaphysical head is chosen by each newly created person from a uniform group of inner heads.³³ While they appear identical in outward appearance to the selector, each inner head is intrinsically unique and contains the divine power (àse) of the supreme god, Olódùmarè that determines their fate in life.³⁴ Those who choose well will have good fortune in their lives and are said to be in possession of a good head (olóri rere).³⁵ The importance of the head is further underscored by the belief that it is the first part of the body to be created by Olódùmarè and the fact that most babies are born headfirst is cited as further evidence of its vital role.³⁶

Masks and faces are an intrinsic part of Yorùbá art given the head's cultural importance. They can allow us to set ourselves aside to play a role or make room for another spiritual presence to look through, as in the case of some ritual masquerades.³⁷ The Gèlèdé who once donned the masks featured in the exhibition are a Yorùbá secret society whose ritual masquerade performed by men is intended to appease and please "the mothers," a catchall term pertaining to female ancestors, deities, and elder women and the hidden and dangerous spiritual power (àjé) they possess.³⁸ Their power is

³² Babatunde Lawal, "Orí: The Significance of the Head in Yoruba Sculpture," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41, no. 1 (1985): 91–103, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3630272>.

³³ Lawal, "Orí," 91–103.

³⁴ Lawal, "Orí," 91–103.

³⁵ Lawal, "Orí," 91–103.

³⁶ Lawal, "Orí," 91–103.

³⁷ Hackett, "Art and Religion in Africa," 299.

³⁸ William Fagg and John Pemberton III, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), 86-96.

believed to be capricious and as capable of giving new life as it is to turn toward the darker, more corrupt side of its ability to render destruction and death.³⁹ Therefore, by pleasing “the mothers ” the masquerade aims to bring about bounty through their power of fertility over people and land.⁴⁰ Due to the historical nature of the Gèlèdè masks in this exhibition, they must be statically displayed. However, these masks were once the focal point of a dancer’s garb during a masquerade and therefore would have been viewed in motion, as part of a larger costume, rather than an independent entity. The mask would be fixed statically atop a seemingly elongated neck, creating a contrast between the still calm of the mask and the animated movement of the rest of the body.⁴¹ These masks and their wearers become dynamic entities, imbued with the sounds of drums and leg rattles.⁴² To capture that sense of ritual and movement, the two contemporary masks in the exhibition by Moira Bushkimani are displayed on small disks that slowly rotate, creating motion within the space and paying homage to their predecessors’ intended function.

In looking beyond the historical works displayed, two contemporary works shown in this exhibition perhaps best express the relationship between cultural heritage and the exhibition’s themes of identity, corruption, femininity, and spirituality, in their contrasting mediums and how they choose to explore the concept of masking and unmasking. The first is Moira Bushkimani’s work, *Aflame* (2020). In Bushkimani’s

³⁹ Fagg and Pemberton, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, 86-96.

⁴⁰ Henry John Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” *African Arts* 7, no. 4 (1974): 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334883>.

⁴¹ Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal, “Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba,” *African Arts* 8, no. 2 (1975): 42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334829>.

⁴² Drewal and Drewal, “Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba,” 42.

works, her life masks pay homage to the transient nature of wood and paper mâché and the mutability and ever-evolving impermanent state of cultural heritage, history, and identity. She retains the spiritual essence of the mask through her meditative process of carefully examining and limiting facial expression whilst the paper mâché dries upon her visage. Rather than carving her masks, Bushkimani chooses to rely upon contemporary materials. She nods to her heritage through her art form, yet does not shy away from bringing it boldly forward to the present by incorporating found objects and commenting on the corruption and politics of the present day. Born almost thirty years after Kenya declared independence from Great Britain, Bushkimani's work centers around the cultural heritage of a post-colonial environment while looking to the further reaches of the past to masks, an art form she feels her generation has little connection to. To her, the masks she creates become a true face and a form of spiritual meditation. In *Aflame*, Bushkimani makes her first study of fire utilizing wire, beads, and a mask covered in newspaper headlines to give the impression of a face encircled by flames. In donning the mask, one can be free of the demands society and the media place upon us to conform to a certain way of being and the corruption this push for uniformity can engender. Bushkimani seeks purification through the flames to strip away false pretenses and return us to independent decision-making, devoid of the trappings of industry. In donning the mask, she has created to conceal one's identity, she sets the wearer free to be herself, without the restrictions placed upon her by daily life. In being hidden, there is freedom.

Like Bushkimani, Wole Langunju also explores masks in a literal and figurative sense through his work, *Goddess II* (2022) which creates a remarkable contrast with Bushkimani's interpretation of masks and their ensuing freedom. Central to the artist's

practice are the Yorùbá Gèlèdè masks worn by male dancers during their ritual fertility dances and the adé of the Oba. The Gèlèdè masquerades not only appease “the mothers” but also speak about the current social scene, whether it be the latest hairstyles and technology or visitors in the community’s midst.⁴³ This reinforces not only traditional values but also ensures a collective awareness and social consciousness that honors “the mothers.”⁴⁴ Therefore, as trends and customs shift, the masquerades themselves remain dynamic, adapting to the present day. As for the adé, it is the source of the Oba’s power, as it bestows authority upon him and it is the senior queen who places the adé upon the Oba’s head, connecting his inner head to that of all past rulers, through the adé.⁴⁵ In his work, Langunju engages directly with his Yorùbá background, through its art and culture, re-envisioning its elements for a contemporary audience by melding it with elements drawn from a myriad of eras and incorporating Western themes, as well as commentary on womanhood and female power. In his works, he expresses the duality of the contemporary and the historical, the past and the present while still maintaining a sense of harmony throughout the works. In *Goddess II* (2022), Langunju has placed the adé upon the head of a female figure whose striking visage stares directly back at the viewer. The adé and the rituals surrounding it also serve as a reminder that the Oba cannot rule without the support of “the mothers.” It is “the mothers” with their awesome power to create new life or corrupt it that have birthed us all through their blood and connection to

⁴³ Fagg and Pemberton, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, 86-96.

⁴⁴ Fagg and Pemberton, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, 86-96.

⁴⁵ Fagg and Pemberton, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, 86-96.

the earth.⁴⁶ The beaded strands hanging from the adé mask the Oba's face from public view, hiding his humanity and making way for divinity to shine forth.⁴⁷ However, in Langunju's depiction, it is a woman imbued with the divine authority of kingship and, as the work's title denotes, she is no mere mortal but a goddess. She chooses to reveal rather than conceal her face in an embrace of the divine feminine. This overt display of power contrasts with the traditional, more hidden perception of the power of women, tied to fertility and new life referenced in the Gèlèdè masquerades. She is a woman who has embraced her "ajé," the great spiritual power bestowed upon "the mothers."⁴⁸ A power that requires a cool head, great composure, and inner strength to wield and keep hidden.⁴⁹ It is a complex beautiful power with a dangerous edge, and in this overt but controlled display, it repositions the feminine as the power on the throne, rather than behind it. The goddess's striking face is laid bare, her lips slightly open with her eyes engaging directly with the viewer revealing her true identity and unveiled authority.

The Yorùbá are not alone in their perception of female power and identity. The Luba of the Democratic Republic of Congo also view female spiritual power as the covert power behind the throne, as the origin of life, and as possessing the secrets of rulership.⁵⁰ According to the Luba, upon his death, a king would ultimately be reincarnated as a woman, as the power to create new life gave her the strength to protect a powerful spirit

⁴⁶ Henry Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture (L'art et Le Concept de Féminité Dans La Culture Yoruba)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 17, no. 68 (1977): 499-550, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4391558>.

⁴⁷ Arnoldi and Kreamer, "Crowning Achievements," 34.

⁴⁸ Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture," 449-550.

⁴⁹ Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture," 449-550.

⁵⁰ Mary Nooter Roberts, "The King Is a Woman: Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts," *African Arts* 46, no. 3 (2013): 69-71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307397>.

and its knowledge.⁵¹ However, this notion of covert power is subverted yet again in a number of the works by other artists featured in the exhibition. While the role of the feminine, the question of identity, spiritual power, and corruption carry on through Angèle Etoundi Essamba's vintage prints and the canvases of Lincoln Mwangi and Prudence Chimutuwah, the contrast between how the female figures are portrayed is stark. Essamba lays bare the female form in direct opposition to the shrouded female figures so prominent in Mwangi's works. While in Chimutuwah's *Face yebasa 1* (2022) and *Face yebasa 3* (2022), her subjects' visages are obscured with fashionable oversized sunglasses, their hair covered in vibrant headscarves nodding to the modern identity of the African woman with the inclusion of both current consumer-driven culture and prints that hearken to more traditional designs. The banknotes obscuring the lenses of the sunglasses further delve into the mingling of the modern and the historical. Over the past fifteen years, Zimbabwe's economy has cratered and the banknotes preserved in the work are now decommissioned and worthless as a result of hyperinflation.⁵² Chimutuwah notes "The use of the decommissioned notes in my works is me trying to have a peaceful conversation with the notes...due to the times of hyperinflation in Zimbabwe, also it is a way I have thought to be the best at preserving history and adding value and a new meaning to the banknotes."⁵³

⁵¹ Nooter Roberts, "The King Is a Woman," 69-71.

⁵² Mthuli Ncube, "Addressing Zimbabwe's inflation: The role of the digitalization of financial transactions," *The Brookings Institution*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/02/07/addressing-zimbabwes-inflation-the-role-of-the-digitalization-of-financial-transactions/>.

⁵³ Prudence Chimutuwah, email to author, March 21, 2022.

While the approaches and mediums may differ, all three artists showcase African female identity as elegant, powerful, and dignified. Both Essamba and Mwangi use the shadows and contrast of the black and white tones of the images to imbue their figures with life, while Chimutuwah approaches her subjects with vibrant colors that create a striking contrast to the more somber black and white tones. In Essamba's works, there is a sense of physical strength and mental fortitude with the vulnerability of the body bolstered by the sitters' confidence. She celebrates the black female form without embarrassment as its nudity and underscores its beauty. In *Africanesse 2* (1992) this stylized image, like Chimutuwah's, incorporates both a sense of the contemporary and traditional. The portrait has the feel of a high-end editorial image in its composition, with the sitter's defined back and elegant profile. However, the incorporation of a traditional head-wrap appears to add another layer to the work combining the more traditional with the cutting-edge contemporary, imbuing her with the regal air of a crowned queen. In an embrace of self, *Profil Africain 1* (1986) displays a female nude with arms uplifted in a celebratory and open pose, as though accepting her power. *Empreintes 1* (1990) also displays a female figure in profile wearing a head wrap. The elaborate nature of the sitter's body paint places her in a position of high status coupled with an air of noblesse. Essamba notes that "female power is in there but also signs of belonging to the earth, the origine."⁵⁴

In contrast, Mwangi's female portrayals depict universality and grace but there is an underlying sense of uncertainty in the wet cloths covering his subjects' faces. He too draws upon the motif of the earth as the mother of all and the giver of life, as underscored

⁵⁴ Angele Etoundi Essamba, email to author, March 15, 2022.

in *Custom and Creed* (2020) which features his subject in harmony with her environment and sheltered beneath the leafy branches of a large tree. Unlike Essamba, he chooses to obscure her identity from the viewer, giving her a sense of oneness with all, a shared identity. Both artists conjure the spiritual in their references to the earth mother and female fertility, acknowledging the hidden yet detectable power of women, which in the case of Essamba's work, is now embraced openly and is evocative of Langanju's *Goddess II* (2022), in the confidence her subjects radiate from within themselves. Wole Langanju's works *Gelede Woman* (2022) and *Gelede Woman II* (2022) also suggest this sense of latent power as they feature female faces veiled in the case of the former by a Gèlèdè mask and the latter, by an adé. However, in both instances, the concealed features of the women make them more corporeal to the viewer which is reminiscent of Moira Bushkimani's emancipation of self through masking. Their bodies turn outward to face the viewer, their eyes staring back as if in challenge, to be acknowledged, to be seen.

Ultimately, the works displayed refute the perception of an Africa relegated to the past through their vibrancy and the variety of the mediums confronting the audience. They call upon the viewer to strip bare any preconceived notions, to see, and engage with the works, to delve further into the rich intricacies of the mosaic that is African art and cultural heritage. In intertwining past and present with the artists' exploration into notions surrounding corruption, identity, femininity, and spirituality, the exhibition attempts to create a better understanding and appreciation for a continent and its peoples whose art and cultural heritage should have taken center stage long ago.

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