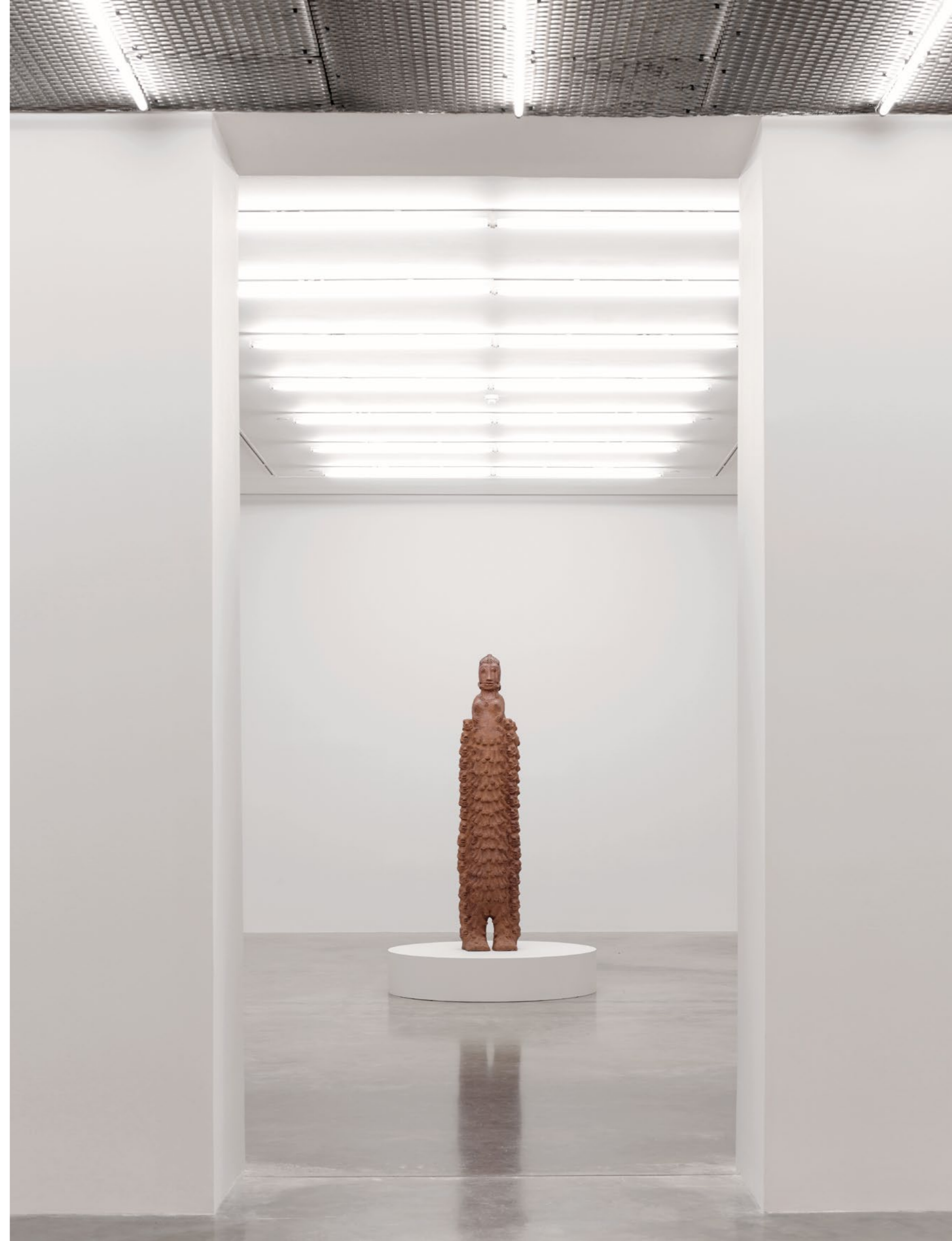


Tale of Tales: SEYNI AWA CAMARA

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 excitation 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, 1990. © André Magnin



Studio, Bignona, Senegal, 1990. © André Magnin

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 McEvilley,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: Estevão Mucavele & Seyni Awa Camara installation view at Magnin-A Gallery, Paris, 2022. © Grégory Copitet. Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris



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



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



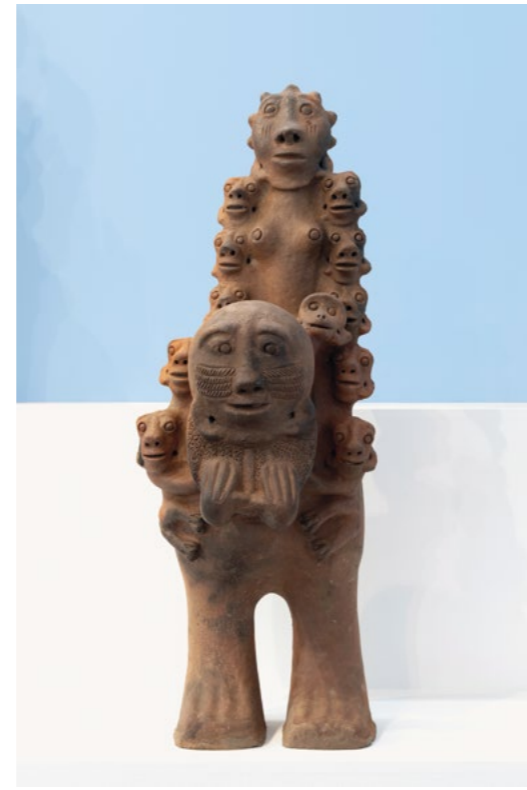
Untitled (detail), 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood). Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London



ELIKOURENE 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 agnile, 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



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



- 1 Doris Bonnet, *Corps biologique, corps social: procréation et maladies de l'enfant en pays mossi; Burkina Faso* (Paris: Orstom, 1988).
- 2 Adama Ouedraogo, "Perceptions, connaissances et attitudes concernant les naissances gémeillaires en Afrique subsaharienne: le cas du Burkina Faso et du Sénégal," *Dialogue* 229, no. 3 (2020): 185–204.
- 3 See for example Thomas McEvilley, "Opening the Trap: The Postmodern Exhibition," in *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (New York: McPherson, 1992).
- 4 Lucy Steeds, ed., *Making Art Global (Part 2): "Magiciens de la terre" 1989* (London: Afterall, 2016).
- 5 Maureen Murphy, "Seni Awa Camara," <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/seni-awa-camara/>.
- 6 Maureen Murphy, "Les chefs d'œuvres naissent libres et égaux," <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/ft/archives/1555>, my translation.
- 7 Eva Barois De Caevel, "The Body of One, the Body of All," trans. CG Traductions, John Tittensor, in *Cosmogonies, Zinsou: An African Collection*, ed. Pauline Faure (Milan: Silvana Editoriale; Montpellier, France: MOCO Montpellier Contemporain, 2021). The Mbaye quote comes from Sabrina Daniel-Calonne, "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/>.
- 8 Laure Solé, "Seyni Camara, l'artiste mystérieuse de Bignona," *Le Petit Journal*, May 25, 2019, <https://lepetitjournal.com/dakar/seyni-camara-lartiste-mysterieuse-de-bignona-257938>, my translation.
- 9 Virginie Ehonian, "Giving Birth: Rencontre avec Fatou Kandé Senghor," 2015, <http://www.iam-africa.com> (website no longer available).
- 10 Laure Solé, "Seyni Camara, l'artiste mystérieuse de Bignona."
- 11 Roger J. A. Wilson, ed., *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (New York and London: Prestel, 1999).

SEYNI AWA CAMARA (b. 1945, Bignona, Senegal) lives and works in Bignona. She models 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); *Seni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2011); *El Vientre de la Tierra*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2010); and *Seni Camara & Ndoye Douts*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris (2009). Her work has been presented in numerous important institutional exhibitions, including *Ex Africa*, Musée du quai Branly-Jaques Chirac, Paris (2021); *Radically Naive / Naïvely Radical*, ExtraCity, Antwerp (2021); *Alpha Crucis*, Musée Astrup Fearnley, Oslo (2020); *Art/Afrique: le nouvel atelier_ Les Initiés: sélection d'œuvres (1989–2009) de la collection d'art contemporain africain Pigozzi*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2017); *Why Africa?*, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, Italy (2007); *100% Africa*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2006); and *Magiciens de la terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris (1989).

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