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SEYNIAWA CAMARA

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Seyni Awa Camara is a Senegalese ceramicist who creates many-headed, totemic works that evoke bestiaries and maternity scenes. The artist, 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 Odéyé-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, the artist still lives and works in her native Bignona.

Seyni Awa Camara (b. 1939, Diouwent, SN; lives and works in 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.

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SELECTED WORKS

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Seyni Awa Camara

Untitled, 2000

Fired clay

55 1/2 x 15 3/8 x 11 3/4 in

141 x 39 x 30 cm

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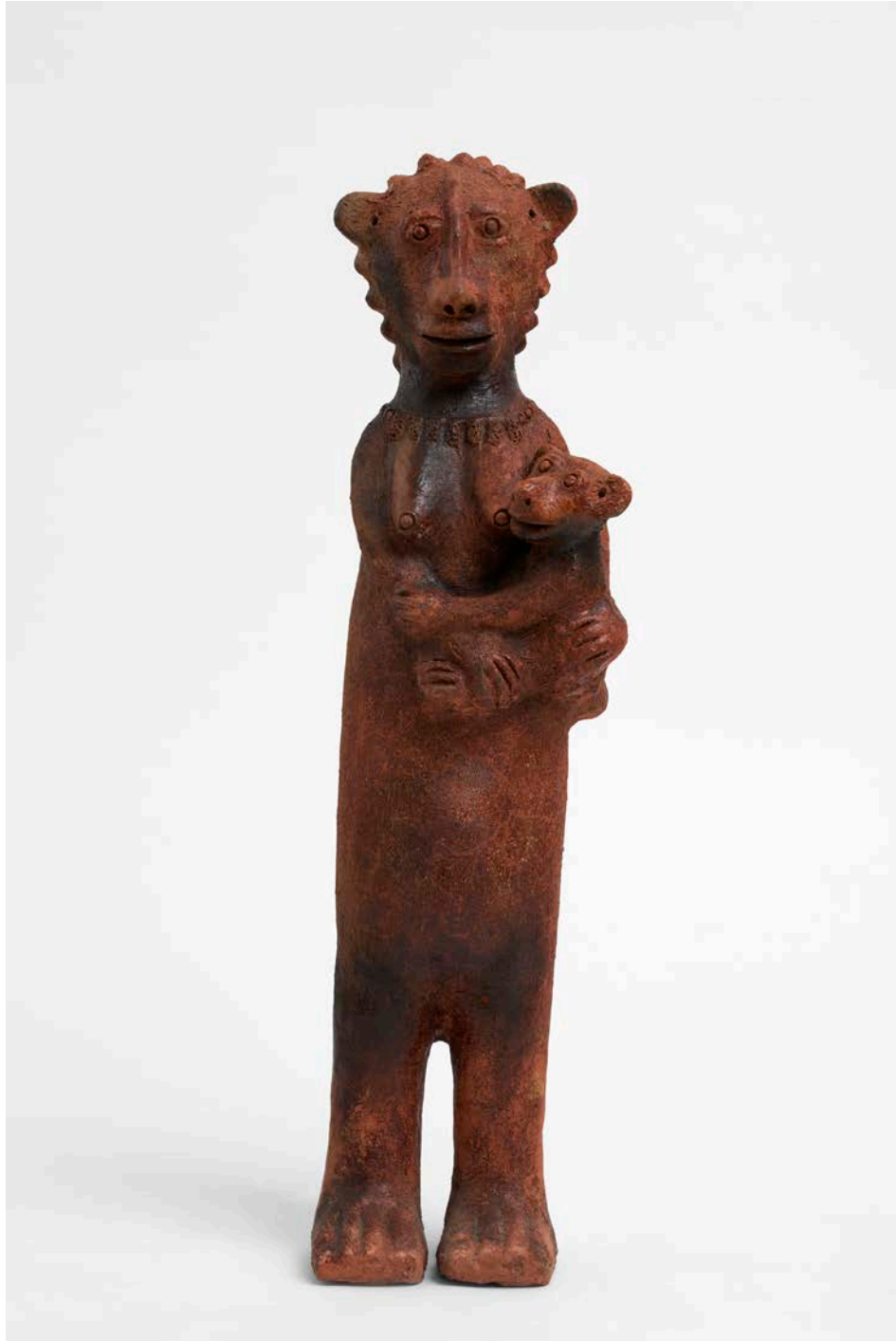
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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, 2000 (detail)

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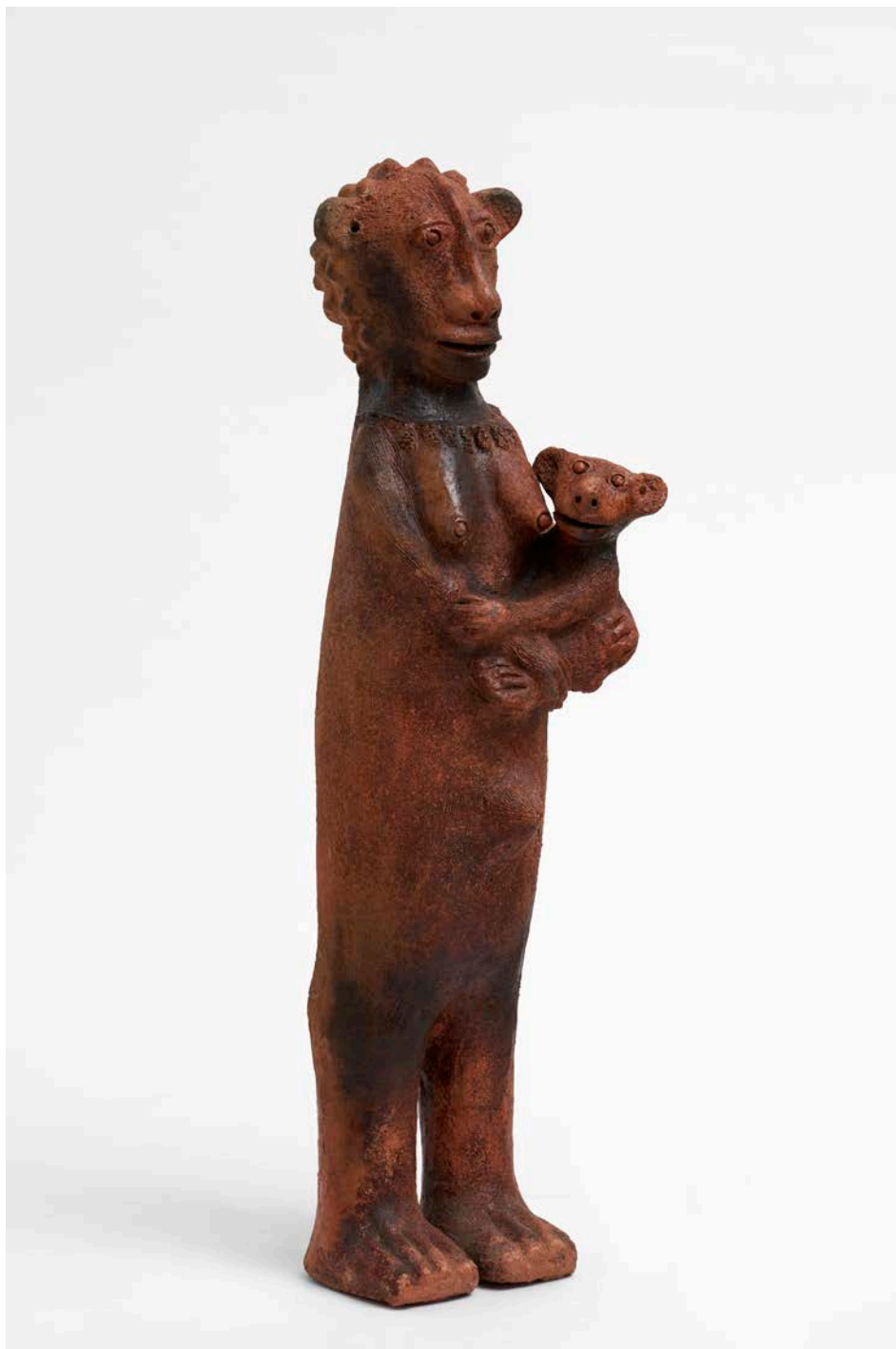
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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1990
Terracotta sculpture
39 x 10 1/4 x 10 5/8 in
99 x 26 x 27 cm

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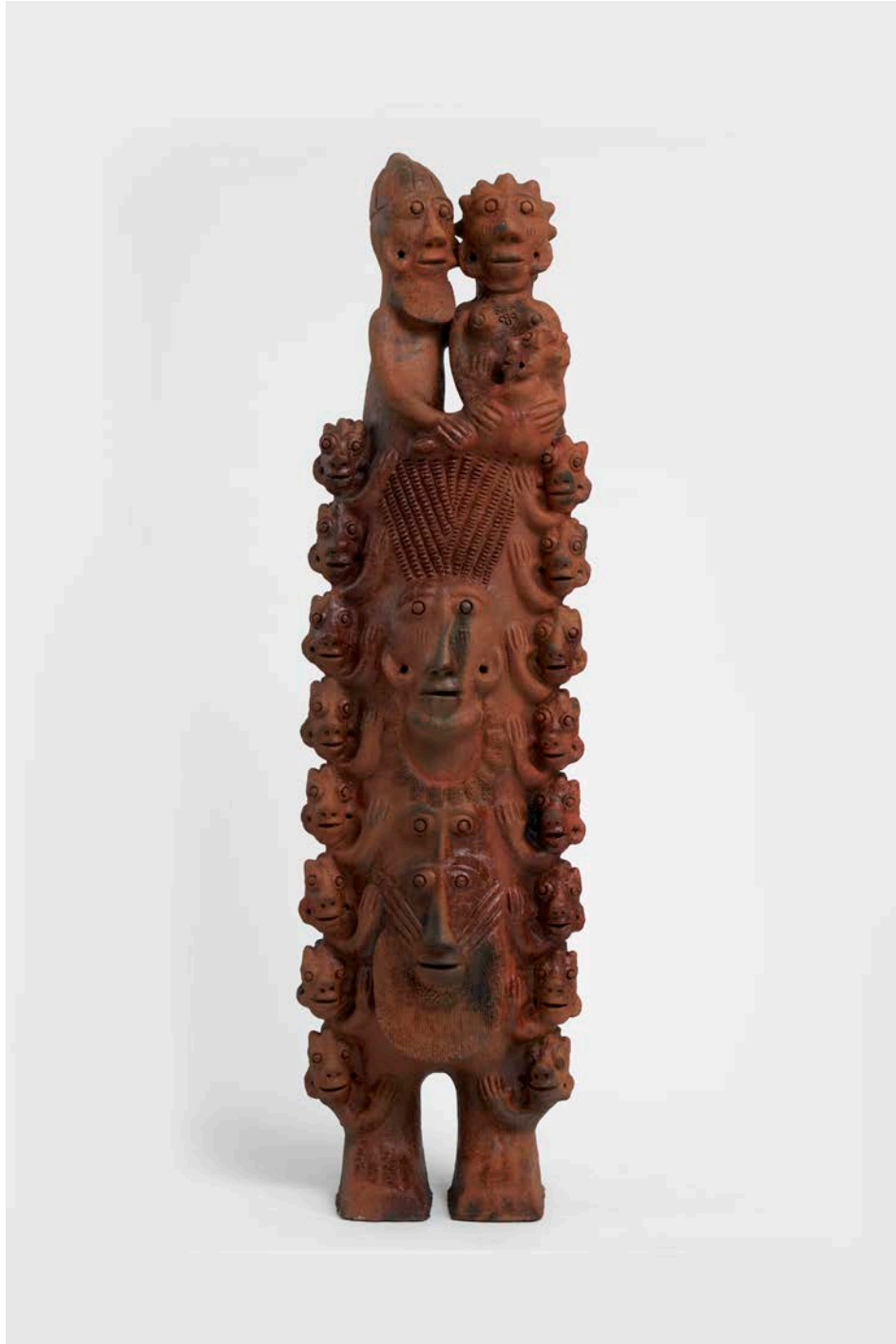
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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1990 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Maternity, 2021
Fired clay
21 5/8 x 7 1/8 in
55 x 18 cm

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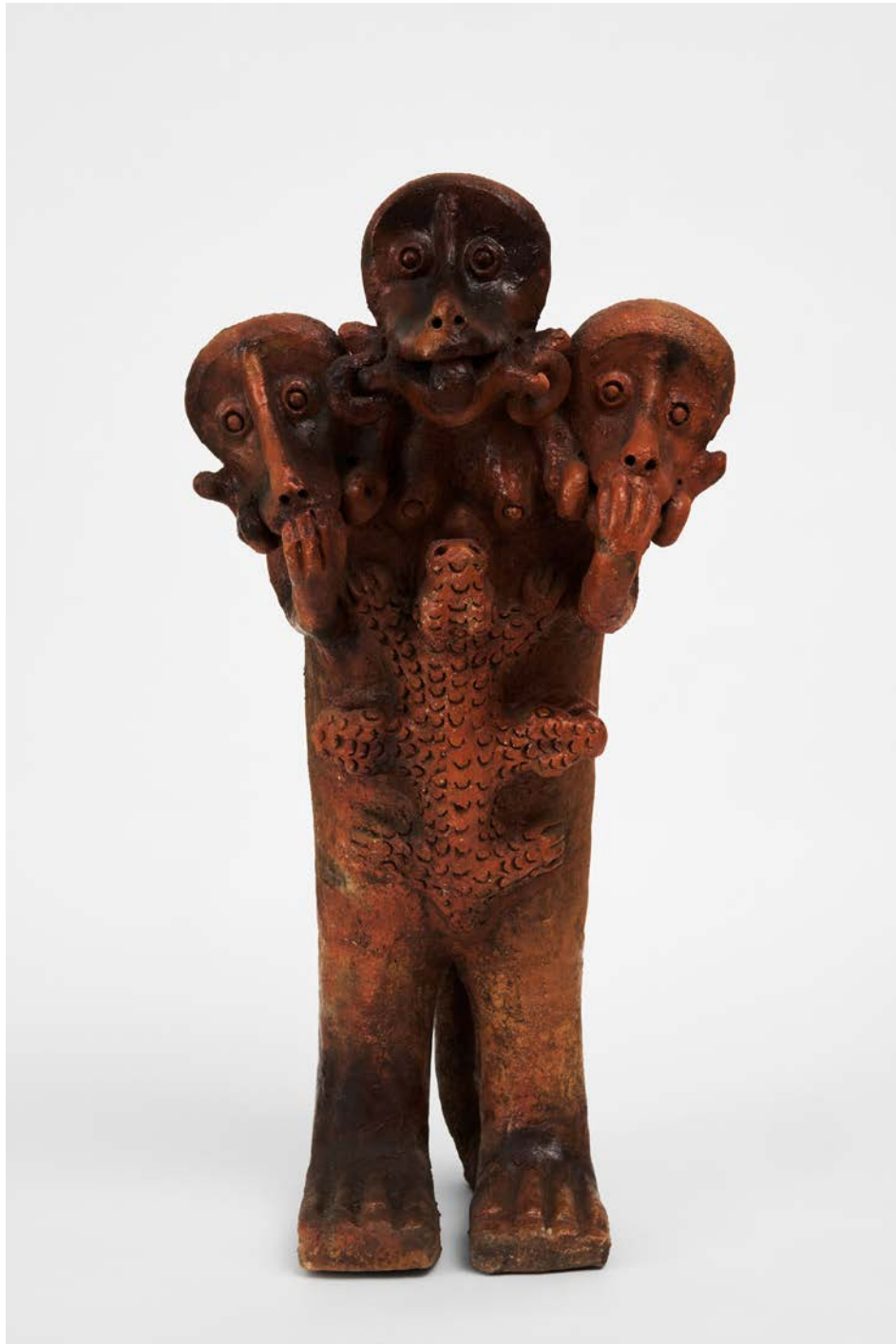
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Seyni Awa Camara
Maternity, 2021 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, 1993
Fired clay
35 x 16 7/8 x 12 5/8 in
89 x 43 x 32 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, 1993 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara

Anare agnilie, 2021

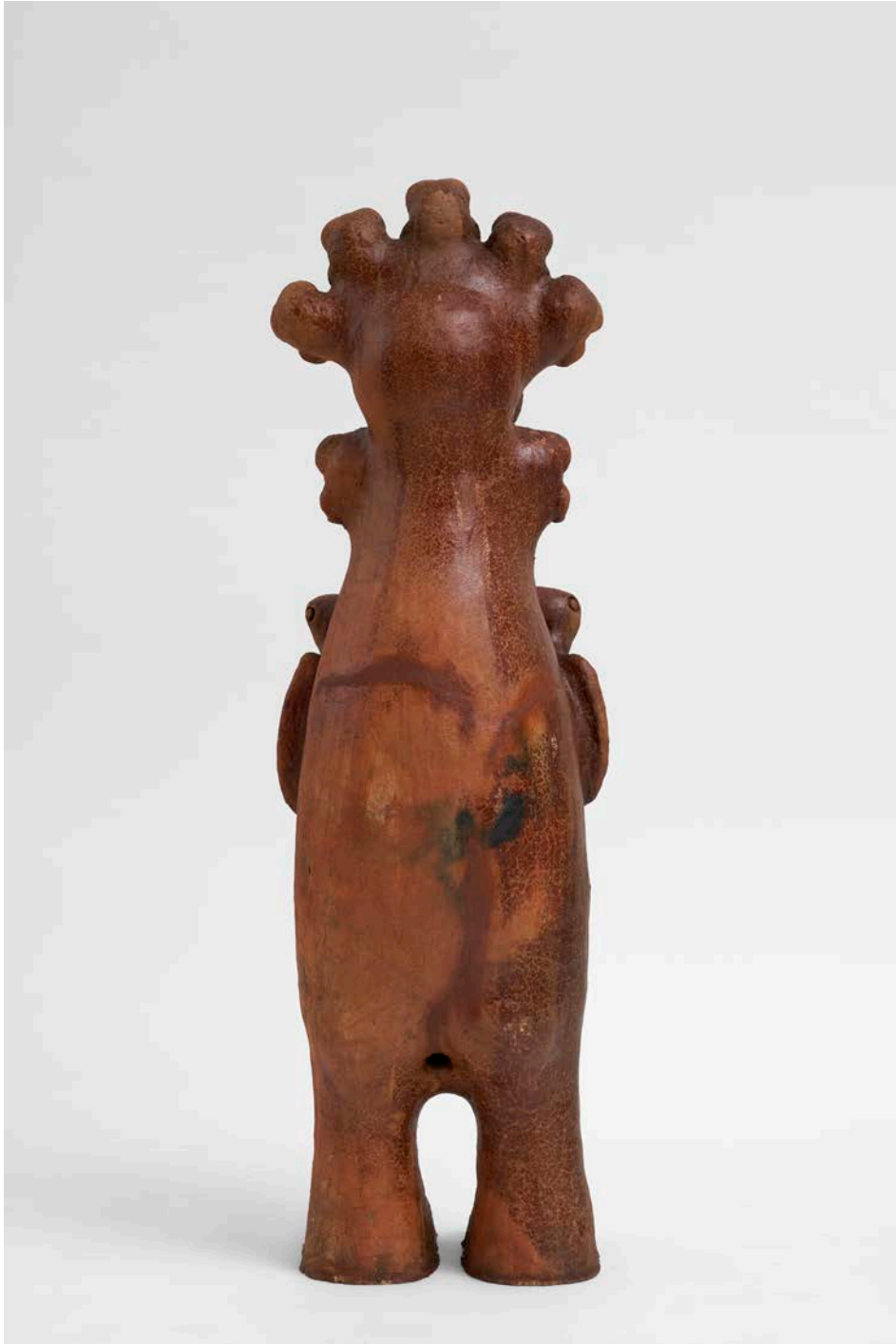
Fired clay

42 1/2 x 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in

108 x 35 x 30 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Anare agnilie, 2021 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Acrobate femme TOUCOULEUR, 1998
Fired clay
7 7/8 x 5 7/8 x 5 1/2 in
20 x 15 x 14 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Acrobate femme TOUCOULEUR, 1998 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1996
Terracotta sculpture
23 5/8 x 11 x 22 7/8 in
60 x 28 x 58 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1996 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1992
Terracotta sculpture
42 1/2 x 11 3/4 x 9 7/8 in
108 x 30 x 25 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, c 1992 (detail)

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, 2021
Fired clay
12 5/8 x 11 3/4 x 7 7/8 in
32 x 30 x 20 cm

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Seyni Awa Camara
Untitled, 2021 (detail)

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INSTALLATION VIEWS

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's 1990 - 2022 | May 4 - June 10, 2023 | Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *1990 - 2022* | May 4 - June 10, 2023 | Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY

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View of Seyni Awa Camara's 1990 - 2022 | May 4 - June 10, 2023 | Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Sans titre*,
2019 | at *Les restes du bruit: Seyni Awa Camara &
Estevão Mucavele* | March 24 - May 22, 2022 |
MAGNIN-A, Paris, FR

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara I at *Michael Armitage Amongst the Living, with Seyni Awa Camara I* September 21 - October 30, 2022 | White Cube Bermondsey, London, UK

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Seyni Awa Camara and Olaf Holzapfel* | April 3 - May 30, 2021 | Baronian Xippas Knokke, Knokke, BE

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Seyni Awa Camara and Olaf Holzapfel* | April 3 - May 30, 2021 | Baronian Xippas Knokke, Knokke, BE

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Maternités* | September 4 - October 24 2020 | Baronian Xippas Gallery, Brussels, BE

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Maternités* | September 4 - October 24 2020 | Baronian Xippas Gallery, Brussels, BE

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Installation view of Seyni Awa Camara's *Maternités* | September 4 - October 24 2020 | Baronian Xippas Gallery, Brussels, BE

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MOUSSE

SPRING/SUMMER 2023

Tale of Tales: SEYNI AWA CAMARA

By Pablo Cendoya

Photography by Claudia Mauriño

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 Odeyé-Finzi 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





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



*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 Odeyè-Finzi's book *Salitude d'argile*.



Opposite page: Seyni smoking her pipe, Bignona, 1992.
This page: Seyni with her second husband, the late Samba Diallo, at her home in Bignona, 1992.
© Jean-Michel Rousset. Courtesy of Magnin-A Gallery.

were able to determine the nature of this illness, be it physiological or psychological, but they believed it to be an unexplained illness linked to tradition.

During this period, Seyni would be imprisoned for an unknown reason and under murky conditions. It would seem that her sculptures (which she hid out of sight within a room of her house) aroused a certain fear and upset in members of the community. Her family says that the first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor—a man of culture who already knew Seyni's work—dispatched his personal driver to get her out of prison. To thank him, Seyni made a bust of President Senghor.

Around the end of the '70s, Seyni separated from her first husband and met the man who was to become her second husband, Samba Diallo, a traditional Peul healer. He told her family that he was able to cure her, and—discouraged by not being able to help Seyni in this way—they accepted this marriage. Gradually recovering from her



illness, she moved with her new husband to Bignona, a small town further north but still in the Casamance region, and with his help, resumed her work as a sculptor.

Seyni was Samba's first wife, but he later married three other younger women, polygamy being a common practice in the region. Seyni lived with her husband, his co-wives, and their children. The family helped her with her creations: harvesting the earth that would be converted into clay, preparing wood for open-air firings, and handling the pieces before and afterwards. Each individual knows their role in this choreography, with Seyni overseeing the entire process. She maintains uninterrupted contact with the material, sculpting almost compulsively and disregarding the surrounding action, as seen in Philip Haas' 1992 documentary *Seni's Children*. Also with Samba's help, she would sell her pieces at a stand at the Bignona market, alongside fruits and vegetables. Seyni has always maintained a form of financial independence, making sure to support herself and her family.

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

One of Seyni's works awaits on open-air firing organised by local initiative Foundation, as part of the Thionk Essyl Arts Festival, 2021.



142



apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

143



apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

Untitled, 1990, 123 x 29 x 25 cm

Untitled, 1993, 89 x 43 x 32 cm



apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

Anoué Aguilé, 2021. 108 x 35 x 30 cm



apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

TBC, 2021. 160 x 40 x 30 cm



Untitled, 1990, 120 x 26 x 22 cm

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara



Untitled, 2000, 65 x 24 x 20 cm

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

At the beginning of the '00s, Samba Diallo died, and his co-wives either left the family home or also passed away, their children remaining with Seyni. She still lives in Bignona today, in the same household with these same children (now married and with children of their own).

A new tradition

Work in ceramics is generally reserved for women in the Oussouye region, and knowledge is passed down from mother to daughter. The potters from her birthplace are particularly renowned for the exceptional quality of their production. They produce everyday items: vessels for storing water, dishes for cooking, and incense or tobacco pots. Seyni was seemingly the first to radically break with this thousand-year-old tradition, going beyond the production of such objects to take on a completely unique aesthetic, which has now greatly influenced the terracotta work in the Oussouye region. 'There is nothing



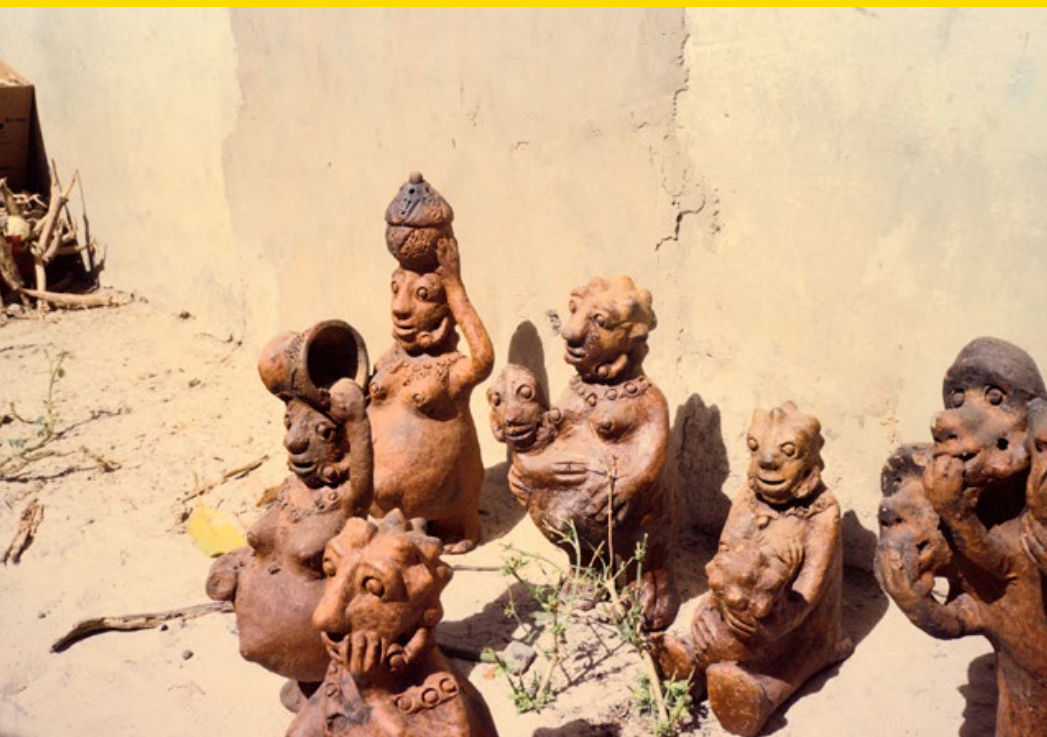
in Casamance that resembles her art', critic Enrico Mascelloni writes in his essay 'New Origins for Ancient Dreams'. 'Indeed, there is no traditional production line from which her small sculptures could have evolved'.

Her process of creating work is still closely associated with traditional beliefs—what Jesus Ahedo describes it in his 2011 documentary *Entre los Elementos* as, 'An oral tradition told in three dimensions'. Each step corresponds to a series of very specific rituals, to which only Seyni and her entourage seem to hold the keys. Her family disclose little about the meaning of these practices, maintaining a certain right to opacity as a way of protecting their traditions. She sculpts only on certain days of the week. She treasures the horn of an ox, the one sacrificed by her parents after her disappearance in the woods as a child; it is always with her, and she must 'feed' it by carrying out animal sacrifices (usually poultry) before firing each sculpture. In Odey -Finzi's book, Seyni claims the horn as 'the voice of God', a 'guiding spirit' that relays instructions and even sets specific prices for each work.

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

The ox horn Seyni uses in her practice, photographed at the 2021 Thionck Essyl Arts Festival.





This page: Seyni's works outside her home, circa 1990. Opposite page: Seyni at her market stand in Bignona, 1988.
© André Magnin. Courtesy of Magnin-A Gallery.



*For each piece of pottery, the horn sets a price, this sum of money must be used for offerings.
If I sell them for more, what's left over is mine, but I must spend the fixed sum on sacrifices,
otherwise the statues will not stand.*

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

Baptism of fire

Seyni systematically fires her work at night, in low-temperature, open-air firings, a common technique in West African ceramics. After the firing, her sculptures remain extremely fragile. Although partially solidified, uneven temperatures can leave portions of the sculptures 'uncooked'. She describes this process to Odeyé-Finzi:

We collect the palmyra palm in the scrubland. When they're small in size, I stack my ceramics with the wood, making several layers. After that, I light the fire. It's nice when there's fire, then little by little, the wood collapses and my work appears red. The statues move: they live. Then everything extinguishes... A few days later, I mix soil with water and I paint the pieces of pottery another colour.

Seyni's artistic methodologies seem closely related to those of agriculture: the clay being harvested only in certain seasons depending



on humidity, prepared before being sculpted—and even tasted, as seen in *Seni's Children*, to test its adequacy. The pieces, once fired at a low temperature, are steeped in a sort of varnish, made from the fermentation of cola nuts. Despite the uneven temperatures that are characteristic of open-air firings, if the correct procedures are followed, the sculptures can come out of the fire in one piece. Mascelloni describes the process in his essay 'New Origins for Ancient Dreams': 'The clay still solidifies, but leaves large areas of varying consistency and above all produces tonalities that sink deep into the clay. In her case the depth is real, since even the considerably larger pieces are... only partially solidified'.

The resulting sculptures seem charged with magical force, a product of divine visions that come to Seyni at night or through her horn, telling her what she will make during the day. This idea came up often when I spoke with her and her children, who told of the protective nature of works that would rupture if a malicious person were to

apartamento - Seyni Awa Camara

At the 2021 Thiaroké Essyl Arts Festival, members of Seyni's family fired her work at the edge of the forest, after traditional rites were carried out.





approach them, removing that person's bad intention. They recount other anecdotes of this nature, such as light or sounds that emanate from the works when stored in large numbers in rooms of the family home. During his exhibition at the White Cube Bermondsey last year, *Amongst the Living*, in which his works were shown in dialogue with those of Seyni's, Kenyan-born British painter Michael Armitage said something in a similar vein: 'The experience of seeing Camara's sculptures is how I would imagine it would feel to meet a voiceless spirit of someone you once knew well'.

From the harvesting of clay extracted from Mother Earth (a symbol of fertility) to the process of firing pieces out in the open (reminiscent of the incineration of a body), plus the form of 'baptism' with which pieces are varnished after firing and the transportation of works in wooden boxes resembling coffins—everything in the different stages of creation provides a striking reminder of birth and death.

Artistic lineage

Although Seyni remains an unclassifiable artist, chronologically speaking she could be associated with the first generation of the Dakar school, which brought together pioneering modern artists in Senegal who emerged after decolonisation. They had been given support by President Léopold Sédar Senghor, who wanted to translate the concept of '*négritude*' into the arts. Among the most important artists were Papa Ibra Tall, Ibou Diouf, and Bocar Pathé Diong, as well as Iba N'Diaye and Souleymane Keita (the latter two having subsequently distanced themselves from Senghor's vision).

Seyni has remained relatively isolated, having had no sustained exchanges with artists of her generation—although many of them went to Bignona to meet her and were interested in her work. Her work has been regularly presented over the past four decades in various exhibitions in Dakar and is now on display in the permanent collections of the city's two main museums: the Musée Théodore Monod d'Art Africain and Musée des Civilisations Noires. However, she has never travelled to Dakar in connection with her work and never attended any of her own exhibitions. She left Senegal only once, to go to Belgium in the '90s, an experience which the family does not remember fondly.

Despite her separation, she can be compared to other artists, in particular to Renata Sadimba, a Mozambican ceramist born in 1945. Renata is part of the Makonde tradition, passed down to her by her mother, and she too goes beyond the production of everyday objects, realising anthropomorphic pieces. Renata also has a strong character, carrying out a creative activity otherwise reserved for men, and is twice-divorced, something that has generated tensions within her community.

Then there is the therapeutic nature to Seyni's practice, which connects her to an artist like Louise Bourgeois, who used her practice as a form of therapy for childhood traumas. Both artists address the condition of womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality (Seyni notably produced sculptures explicitly representing sexual positions). In a 1996 essay devoted to Seyni and her technique, published in *Contemporary Art of Africa*, Bourgeois writes, 'Her genuinely expressive figures have a coherence of style... 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'.



'Beauty is a dangerous word'

Collectors and dealers gradually became interested in Seyni's work beginning in the '70s and '80s. What seems to be her first exhibition was organised in Dakar in 1977, although few details of the show remain. Thereafter, the Italian artist Isaia Mabellini (known as Sarenco) became interested in Seyni, regularly buying works during the '80s and '90s and organising exhibitions. But it was curator André Magnin who elicited a global interest in her work with the historical (and much-debated) exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in 1989. From there, Seyni's work has been presented in countless institutions, including the Venice Biennale, Centro Cultural del México Contemporáneo, Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, and Fondation Louis Vuitton. As *Seni's Children* shows, up until the '90s, Seyni sold her works at the market in Bignona. There are very few artists today with both this degree of integration into the art world and level of estrangement from it. For example—and as is often the case—Seyni and her family were unaware of her works being displayed at the *Amongst the Living* exhibition.

Seyni's work is often present in debates within modern and contemporary African art. There are those like Magnin, whose exhibition spotlighted remarkable and generally self-taught artists little influenced by the global currents of art. There are also those like Okwui Enwezor and Simon Njami—as well as an entire generation of curators and gallerists—defending contemporary artists more formally trained and integrated into Western art currents and techniques.

This is also a debate regarding the commodification of art. It reflects the question of identity and globalisation in artistic creation, of the possible variety of references, approaches, and criteria of appreciation. Her work is an example of a rigorous and autonomous approach to the art world, evolving both inside and outside of it. It is strongly rooted in her personhood, experiences, relationships, and environment, all of which contribute to the work's global echo. Seyni creates a dialogue between the traditional and contemporary world, allowing new modernities to be dreamt up. She imparts an important symbolic heritage.



NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES | BRUSSELS | NEW YORK | MARFA

MOUSSE

MAY 2023

Seyni Awa Camara “Seyni Awa Camara: 1990 - 2020” at Nino Mier Gallery, New York



Seyni Awa Camara “Seyni Awa Camara: 1990-2020” at Nino Mier Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy: Nino Mier Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich

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?” Caebel 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.”¹ Camara’s polyphonous sculptures—which conjoin multiple figures, animals, and perspectives within their vertical constructions—mediate between those two worlds.

At Nino Mier Gallery, New York until June 10, 2023

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JANUARY 2023

Tale of Tales: SEYNI AWA CAMARA

By Eva Barois De Caevel

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





Scyri 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 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 mahoited 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.

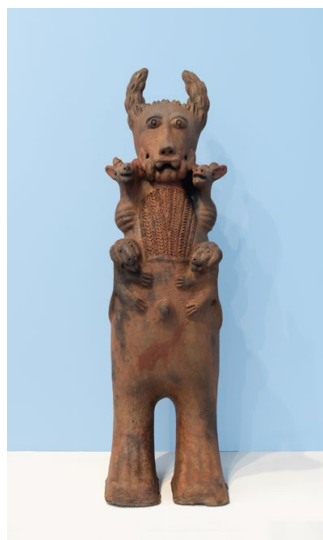




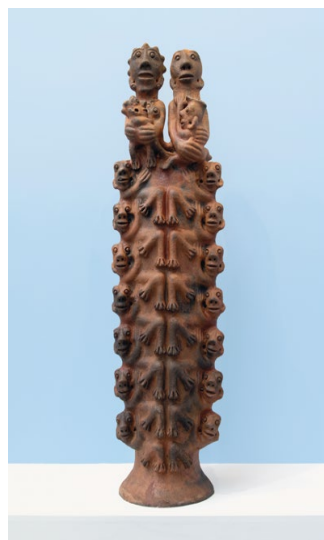
Untitled (detail), 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood). Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London



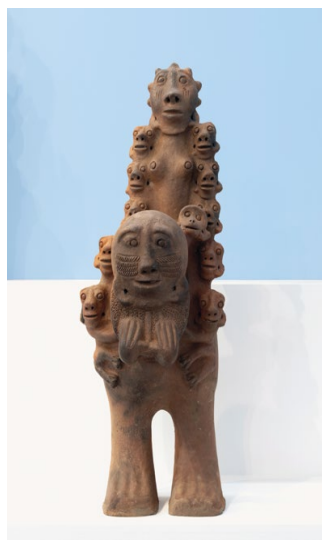
Untitled (detail), 2019. © Seyni Awa Camara. © White Cube (David Westwood). Courtesy Magnin-A Gallery, Paris and White Cube, London



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

- 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 gémellaires en Afrique subsaharienne: le cas du Burkina Faso et du Sénégal," *Dialogue* 229, no. 3 (2020): 185–204.
- 3 See for example Thomas McEville, "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).
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- 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/>.
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- 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 Kippas, Knokke, Belgium (2021); *Maternités*, Baronian Kippas, Brussels (2020); *Seyni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalaao, Bilbao (2011); *El Vientre del la Tierra*, Galeria Kalaao, Bilbao (2010); and *Seni Camara & Ndaye Douls*, 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 Naïve / Naively 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).

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 Widening of Fantasies*, Maëlle Galerie, Paris (2017); *Every Mask I Ever Loved*, ifa Gallery, Berlin (2017); and *On fait des dessins dans la terre*, 3iProject, Paris (2021). She taught art history at ENSBA Lyon and Villa Arson, Nice, and is currently teaching at MOCO Esba 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 Katia Kameli, *Elle a allumé le vij du passé*, FRAC PACA, Marseille (2021).

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



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



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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.

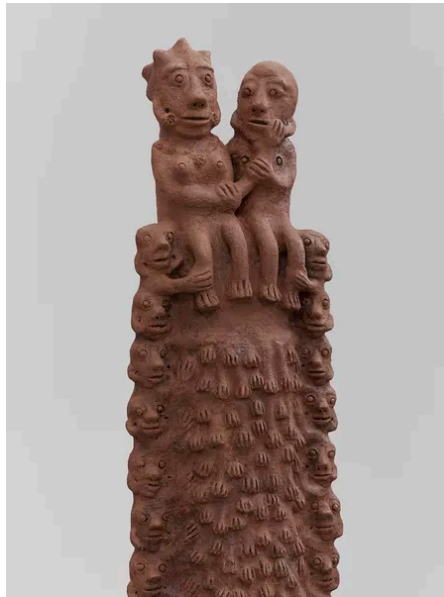
A selection of Camara's mythical sculptures that were made between 1983 and 2019 are currently on view in London through October 30th in "Amongst the Living with Seyni Awa Camara," White Cube's two-person exhibition with painter Michael Armitage. Described as "truth revealers" by Camara's longtime gallerist 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.

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



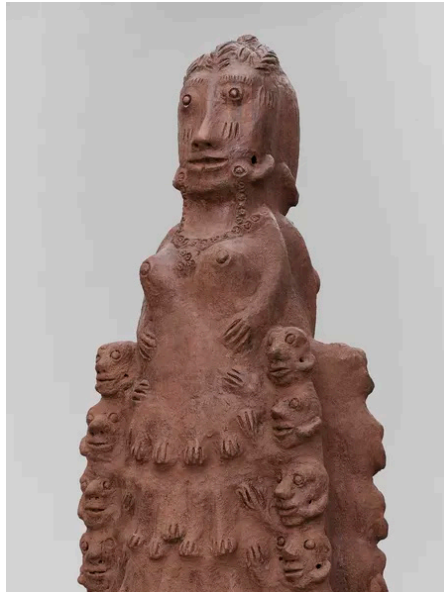
Seyni Awa Camara, detail of *Untitled*, 2019.
© Seyni Awa Camara. Photo by David
Westwood. Courtesy of Magnin-A, Paris and
White Cube, London.

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.

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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.”

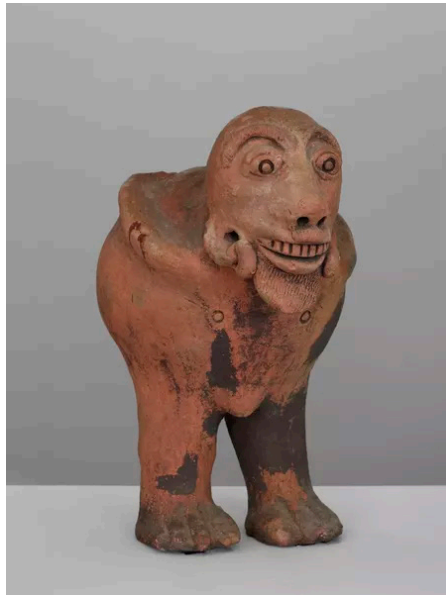
Camara’s delightfully frightening sculptures provoke audiences to consider what beings exist beyond our world. In this way, she is a conjuror of mystical realms, transcribing her vivid, imaginative experiences through clay. The less fantastical, but no less impressive, narrative of Camara’s origins is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

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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.

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.

NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES | BRUSSELS | NEW YORK | MARFA

1996

Seni Awa Camara

In *Contemporary Art of America*

By Louise Bourgeois

Contemporary Art of Africa

Edited
by
ANDRÉ
MAGNIN
with
Jacques
Soulillou

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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 × 11¼" (71 × 27 × 29 cm).
Collection Jean Pigozzi





Untitled. 1980–90. Terra-cotta, $31\frac{1}{8} \times 11 \times 7\frac{7}{8}$ "
(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, 15¼ × 13¼ × 12¼"
(40 × 35 × 32 cm). Collection Jean Pigozzi

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SEYNI AWA CAMARA

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

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Seyni Awa Camara: 1990 - 2022*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US (*forthcoming*)
- 2020 *Maternités*, Baronian Xippas, Brussels, BE
- 2011 *Seyni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES
- 2010 *El Ventre de la Tierra*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao, ES
- 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

- 2023 *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
- 2021 *Radically Naïve / Naively Radical*, ExtraCity, Antwerp, BE
Seyni Awa Camara / Olaf Holzapfel, Baronian Xippas, Knokke-Heist, BE
Ex Africa, Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, Paris, 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

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- 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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2023 *Seyni Awa Camara*, (Los Angeles: Nino Mier Books)
- 2021 Philippe Dagen, *Ex Africa*, exh. cat., Paris, Gallimard
Louise Bourgeois, "I respect, like, and enjoy Camara", *Woman Paper*, limited edition
Something We Africans Got & Fiac, Paris
- 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.

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- 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 Odey-Finzi, *Solitude d'Argile. Légende autour d'une vie, sculptures de Seyni-Awa* (Paris: 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. (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou), see pp. 112-113.