

# ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

## Gathering Together / Adama Delphine Fawundu



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Born in Brooklyn, New York, to a Mende father from Sierra Leone and a Bubi mother from Equatorial Guinea, Adama Delphine Fawundu (b. 1971) seeks to link past and present by embodying feminine African deities, inserting herself into the archive of Black history, and celebrating the transmission of cultural knowledge by her female forebears. Combining photographic processes and ancestral fabric design techniques, Fawundu creates work that explores the significance of hair, cotton, and water as symbols of the legacy of colonialism. At the same time, she celebrates the creative flowering of the African diaspora. Fawundu additionally works as a documentary photographer and writer, a capacity in which she, with Laylah Amatullah Barryn, coauthored the inaugural volume of *MFON: Women Photographers of the African Diaspora*.

The following conversation between Fawundu and the exhibition's curator, Beth Gollnick, expands upon the influence of female elders on the artist's work, the symbolism of the folk deity Mami Wata, and the ways in which forging connections—across cultures, continents, and moments in history—underpins the artist's practice.

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**I took the Mende word *kpoto*, which loosely translates to “harvest” or “gather together,” as an inspiration for this installation. How does this idea motivate your work?**

I was inspired by Sylvia Ardyn Boone’s book *Radiance from the Waters*. Her research on Mende femininity and culture includes the idea of gathering together, which could have several meanings. It’s more than gathering objects; it promotes unity. For example, with textile dyeing, there’s always a circle of people working together—you need people to gather the water and materials, and to participate in the actual process. This is not something that you do alone. Even harvesting is a unified effort for the greater good of the community. I’m thinking about that idea across cultures: What does it mean to understand each other? What does it mean to grow together?

**How does your interest in traditional Mende textiles and textile-making connect you with your family and heritage?**

*Passageways #1, Secrets, Traditions, Spoken and Unspoken Truths or Not* includes a photographic performance in which I posed with my godmother. The dress I’m wearing was hand dyed by my paternal grandma, Adama, in the 1960s as a gift for my mother. I came across that dress and it fit me perfectly, so I use it in many of my works as a symbol of my lineage. The colors are still vibrant, and the cotton extra soft and durable. I scanned hand-dyed fabrics—the technique is called *garra*, a local term used in Sierra Leone—that I’ve collected to create a textured background. My technique is related to the idea of repurposing: the material is scanned and then reused and made into something new.

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My godmother is an elder of our immediate Sierra Leonean community, and the Mende are quite matriarchal. If people have conflicts, they go to the elders and sit down to see how they can work things out. I thought it was really good to use her as a symbol of cultural norms, ideologies, and stories that are passed on from generation to generation. Just as I'm thinking about personal family lineage, I think about the larger connection between Africa and its diaspora. The violence of slavery and colonialism was meant to annihilate and suppress people's rich ancestries. However, our bodies hold on to significant ancestral memories that live on. I see this in the diaspora through expressions of language-making, intelligence, and cultural expression.

**In addition to your godmother, your paternal grandmother also appears in your work—for example, in the piece *Mende Ooman* (Mende Grandmother). What is her role in this piece?**

Growing up in Brooklyn, it's the one photo that I had of my grandmother. I only met her twice in my life—once as a child and then again as a young adult. The civil war in Sierra Leone made travel difficult, and the last time that I saw her was in 1992. She died a few years later. As a child, this was the photo that I would gaze at and imagine what she was like. I thought she was so beautiful, and I loved how she wore her *gele* (head wrap). I felt connected to her as her namesake. In *Mende Ooman #1*, she is facing outward while I am facing inward, as if we are communicating with each other. We are connected—I'm a continuation of her. The piece also is reflective of the patterning and repetition of printed textiles.

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Lately, I've been using my grandmother's textiles in a different way—her patterns have inspired me to make new patterns. I've been making negatives and positives out of them and then using those to make cyanotypes on Guinea brocade fabrics. I've also been making photographic prints on fabrics using patterns I've made digitally of Sande masks. I've used my hair and some of her patterns to make new ones. Sampling, reproducing, and repetition are all part of this process, which is symbolic of ancestry and of the connections that we have across time.

**In addition to appearing alongside your female elders, you are the central subject of many of your photographs. Do you consider these works self-portraits?**

I don't consider them to be self-portraits. They relate to my narrative as a person, but I feel they're representative of an embodiment. I like to refer to them as deities because they move across time. Most of the deities that I'm thinking about are water deities that are rooted in Mende culture, but you find them in different cultures around the world, crossing boundaries. The Egyptian goddess Sopdet and Mami Wata are intertwined; Oxun is a Yoruba water deity. I also thought it was important to embody an African deity in Argentina. It is ironic that a place that denies its African heritage has a national dance that is rooted in *candombe*, a style of music and dance originally from Congo. The first tango, which was developed by Afro-Argentines, evolved from Xangô or Sângó, the god of thunder, who is symbolized by the drum. People don't think about the African diaspora when in South America, but the culture is so rich there that it's another conversation that I wanted to get going.

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**I'd like to talk more about the symbolism of the natural materials—especially cotton, hair, and water—that recur across your work. These elements appear as images in your photographs, prints, and video, and they are also woven, applied, and hung from your textiles.**

In the photograph *Aligned with Sopdet*, I brought in elements from Mende culture, such as the two bells covered in raffia and the horn that the being holds to their ear. I made the hairpieces, thinking about raffia skirts and ritualistic practices. In shielding the eyes, I'm using cotton symbolically. Is it something protective, or are we seeing through it? The eyes are made of cowrie shells, which were used as a commodity but also in divination.

**Hair, as a material as well as a subject, stands out for its central and recurrent role in your work. What does hair represent for you?**

In Mende culture, hair is compared to something that is always growing from the ground, from the earth. We are representations of the earth, and our bodies are a reflection of nature. Our bodies are growing. We don't know that as a civilization because we do all of these horrible things to each other and place people in hierarchies. I think that looking at ourselves through this lens is a powerful thing that could alleviate so much hatred and stress that we put on our own bodies.

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**The concepts of history and lineage are prominent in your practice. Can you say more about these concepts in relation to your archival research for the *In the Face of History* series?**

Working as a teacher in New York City public schools, I would have students who would come to high school thinking that Harriet Tubman was in conversation with Martin Luther King Jr. They would think it's just slavery, then civil rights . . . boom. I wanted to find archival documents that can help us contextualize the present day. Sometimes I was looking for a particular thing; for example, with the *Black Star Line*, I was interested in Marcus Garvey's work. After he founded the Black Star Line, people from Harlem and around the world invested in this ship that would facilitate trade among the diaspora. Most history classes don't go into details about the activism and entrepreneurship in Black towns in the late 1800s.

As a person who grew up in the United States, I needed to know this history and teach it to my children. I find so many documents—documents of progress, but also documents of pain; I really wanted to find newspapers that exposed the tradition of racism that America supported. You have to face this history in order to heal from it. In this country in particular, there has never been a formal attempt to reconcile, to say, "this was wrong and now, how do we make it right?" It's always, "Oh that was so long ago . . . oh you don't need any reparations." Some horrific things that happened in this country have never been dealt with. That's not the way to move forward.

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**What does your image represent in this body of work?**

She's someone who's moving between times. Someone who's witnessing. Someone who was left out of certain histories, so she's taking on many different forms. The images of me come from a series I made, called *My Hair is Apolitical*, that looked at the body as a political thing. How do we break out of that construct? I took all the photographs at the same time, starting with the braids in a style called "fowl waist," like a chicken's bottom. This was a very popular hairstyle in Sierra Leone. Then I did all of these different things to my hair—it's moving, transforming, floating. I use my hair for its sculptural and transformative value.

**The idea of bridging cultures, continents, and moments in history is so important in your work. How does the potential for connection and transformation across such spatial and temporal divides relate to your video, *the cleanse*?**

I was thinking about the idea of taking something that starts on the continent, so I thought about Mende culture and the calling for rain. The chanting that you hear in the film is a song that calls for the harvest. We know that when the harvest is there, we can eat. That ritualistic way of performing is a normal, natural thing to do; this is how we communicate with the earth. I juxtapose that against trap hip-hop music that I took completely out of context. In my way, I'm using all of these pieces to make this new language. We're still chanting. We're doing repetition; we're using those syncopated drums, so now I'm bringing them into this new space. We're using rituals in order to have this change; we're remembering, we're moving forward, and we're going to cleanse.

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The words came from so many different texts that inspire me and that deal with transformation and cleansing. Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, James Baldwin, Erykah Badu . . . I pieced them all together. If you listen to it, some of the quotes you recognize, but if not, you could just think that it's all one poem. It's made for different entry points. I borrowed from the Bible, the Qu'ran, and the Ifá, a Yoruba religious text.

And then, I'm thinking of the simple practice of watching hair transform from something that was straight into something that curls. You could just straighten it, and then the whole thing will happen again. I'm thinking about that cycle, about the cycles of nature, and how our bodies are a reflection of these cycles.

*Gathering Together / Adama Delphine Fawundu* was curated by Beth Gollnick, curatorial associate, with Mitra Abbaspour, Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

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Made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

## CHECKLIST

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Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum (Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund).

### Gallery 1



*Mende Ooman #1*, 2017  
Inkjet print  
Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow



*Passageways #1, Secrets, Traditions, Spoken and Unspoken Truths or Not*, 2017  
Inkjet print



*Untitled*, from the series *For Mama Adama*, 2020  
Cyanotype and block printing on fabric, embroidered with hair  
Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow

### Gallery 2



*Aligned with Sopdet*, 2017  
Inkjet print



*Black Like Blue in Argentina*, 2018  
Inkjet print on canvas, knotted with hair  
Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow



*Here we are, Energy, Mass, Life #2*, 2019  
Inkjet print on fabric, hair



*Oxum at Eko*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper  
Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow

## Gallery 2 (continued)



*Sopdet Illuminates*, 2017  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper

## Gallery 3



*Black Star Line*, from the series *In the Face of History*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper



*Daily Bartlesville Enterprise*, from the series *In the Face of History*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper



*Declaration of Rights of Negros*, from the series *In the Face of History*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper



*Increase of Pension to Harriet Tubman*, from the series *In the Face of History*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper



*Let Us Guide Our Own Destiny*, from the series *In the Face of History*, 2018  
Inkjet print on cotton fiber paper



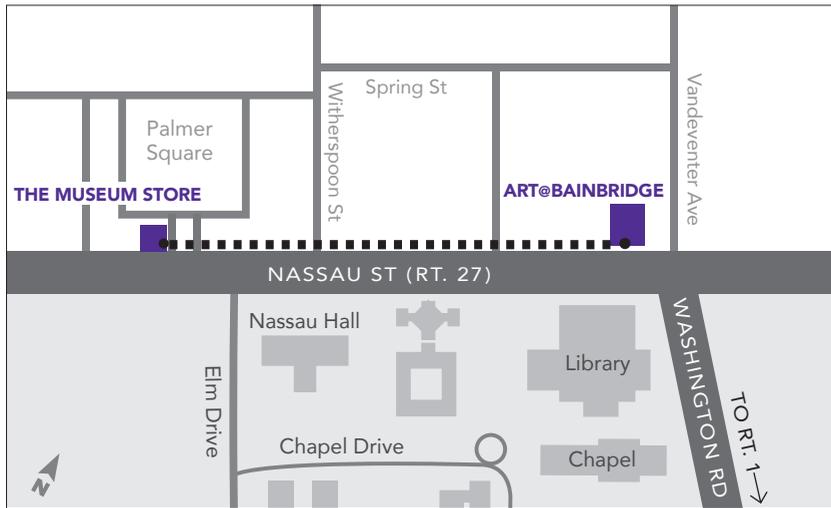
*In the Face of History*, 2021  
Installation  
Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow

## Gallery 4



*the cleanse*, 2017  
HD video  
duration: 10 minutes, 29 seconds

Art@Bainbridge is a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum, located in historic Bainbridge House in downtown Princeton. Coming in November is Art on Hulfish, our new photo-forward gallery and program space in Palmer Square. Our main building is closed as we build a bold new Museum, designed by architect Sir David Adjaye and anticipated to open in late 2024. Visit our website for online exhibitions, videos, live programs, and more.



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