

Press Release

Rue Isidore Verheyden 2
1050 Brussels

24.04 - 01.06.2024

Opening

Wednesday 24.04

6 - 9 pm

on the occasion of Art
Brussels Gallery Night

Seyni Awa Camara Shaping Spirits

The story begins a long time ago in the West African village of Diouwent. The exact date is not clear, some say it was in 1939, others say 1945. A potter gave birth to triplets, among whom Seyni Awa Camara.

Multiple births hold significant importance in the African collective imagination and cosmology. There exists a perception of the world as dual: the “visible” world of humans and the “invisible” world of spirits, gods, and ancestors. The birth of a child is often seen as the product of a transfer from the invisible world to the human world. Certain children, like twins, are considered a direct and privileged link between these two realms. This “mixed” belonging of twins confers upon them a status with sacred and generally ambiguous connotations among humans. Thus, to say ‘twin’ in sub-Saharan Africa is to say half-divine, half-human; but it also means double and dilemma, ego and alter ego, order, and disorder.

The villagers interpreted the multiple births as a troubling sign, a disturbance of the natural order of things, and planned to reject at least one of the children. The myth goes that forest spirits abducted the three children, taking them deep into their foliage to keep them safe from harm. There are no precise details as to why the children returned home, but all accounts agree that they came back one morning, pottery in hand, after four months of absence. “What lies behind the story of the lost and unrecovered little girl in the forest?” wondered Eva Barois de Caevel. The spirits had guided the triplets in the art of creation, an intervention that saved their lives. One of the triplets, Senyi Awa Camara, is an artist who still transforms clay into totemic sculptures today, seemingly influenced by those same guiding spirits. The legend, despite its fictional nature, attests to the power of her work as a conduit to the unknown and the invisible. Camara’s polyphonic sculptures, which combine multiple figures, animals, and perspectives in their vertical constructions, exist between these two worlds.

Those who do not believe in the forest spirits’ story assert that the potter was taught traditional pottery techniques by her mother when she was a child. At the age of 11, she started producing not only utilitarian ceramics used by her family, according to tradition, but also sculptures that she sold on the market in the village of Edjoungou, where ceramics were one of the activities mainly reserved for women. Seyni Camara took advantage of her mother’s moments of inattention to take clay from her. “I hid while making statues. At night, when she retreated to her room, I discreetly introduced the works I had made under the pile of wood. It was the hearth for firing ceramics that my mother lit at dawn,” she recounts, her hands manipulating a small statue of a young mother.

Her work received the international recognition it deserved, when it was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2001. 12 years earlier, Camara’s sculptures were first seen outside of Senegal, at a collective exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1989, under the direction of Jean-Hubert Martin. In this exhibition, titled “Magicians of the Earth,” Camara’s work was noted for its spiritual, mystical, and authentic qualities. But even when exhibited far from the land they originate from, far from the forest spirits and the fires of creation, Camara’s sculptures seem to emanate a palpable energy.

Camara’s work evokes maternity and sexuality. Her creatures with multiple limbs and chests, pregnant human bodies, clinging infants, and indefinable animal shapes depict these and other poignant moments of her life. By mythologizing her own story through these animistic sculptures, the artist has found a way to capture universal narratives of procreation and maternity that strike a chord, regardless of one’s heritage or spiritual inclination. Her work is linked to the human capacity to endure suffering, fear, and loss,

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captured through clay, the elemental material that is itself struck, pushed, and manipulated.

The creation of her sculptures is influenced by her divinations and dreams. Before starting a piece, she sacrifices to the forest spirits, asking them to make the subject of her work appear to her in a dream. Camara then locks herself in her studio and gets to work, shaping the forms that emerge from her mind.

After preparing her clay, sometimes adding ore or other natural substances, the artist begins to shape the ideas that she conjured the previous night. For several days, even weeks, Camara sculpts and molds the complex forms that appear in each work. The clay is crushed with a deflocculant and kneaded for hours. It is very difficult to manipulate due to its rigidity. Her most complex works require many drying and resting stages, taking over ten days of work. She then fires the clay using an ancestral method: the sculptures are baked on a wood pyre before being immersed in a liquid obtained from rotting tree pods. This final step gives the sculptures their color and robustness.

She models human bodies, upright and stretched, standing on powerful feet. Upon firing, they take on reddish or darker shades, depending on the volumes. Small faces or muzzles with round eyes emerge from the folds of the fabric or flesh. These statues can have two heads, one female and the other male, bearded to avoid confusion. Sometimes, breaking from verticality, Camara seats or kneels them. What these figures symbolize – serenity, fertility, meditation, protection – is for everyone to decide.

Seyni Awa Camara (born in 1945 in Bignona, Senegal) lives and works in Bignona. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Sculpting Earth, Painting Sensations*, Almine Rech, Paris (with John McAllister, 2024), *Seyni Awa Camara 1990 - 2022*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York (2023), *Amongst the Living*, White Cube, London (with Michael Armitage, 2022), *Les restes du bruit*, MAGNIN-A, Paris (with Estevão Mucavele, 2022), a duo show with Olaf Holzapfel, Baronian Xippas, Knokke, Belgium (2021), *Maternités*, Baronian Xippas, Brussels (2020), *Seyni Awa Camara entre les éléments*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2011), *El Vientre del la Tierra*, Galeria Kalao, Bilbao (2010), and *Seni Camara (t) Ndoye Douts*, Galerie Nathalie Fiks, Paris (2009).

Her work has been featured in numerous significant institutional exhibitions, including *Ex Africa*, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris (2021), *Radically Naïve/Naively Radical*, ExtraCity, Antwerp (2021), *Alpha Crucis*, Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo (2020), *Art/Afrique: le nouvel atelier _ Les Initiés: selection d'oeuvres (1989-2009) from the Pigozzi Collection of African Contemporary Art*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2017), *Why Africa?*, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, Italy (2007), *100% Africa*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2006), Venice Biennale, 49th edition (2000) and *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris (1989). Camara was the subject of a documentary by Fatou Kandé Senghor in 2015, which was presented at the Venice Biennale.