Curated by
Fitsum Shebeshe

Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina Kearra Amaya Gopee Kibrom Araya Nadia Ayari Vamba Bility Elshafei Dafalla Masimba Hwati Chido Johnson Miatta Kawinzi Dora King Helina Metaferia Nontsikelelo Mutiti Yvonne Osei Kern Samuel Amare Selfu Tariku Shiferaw Yacine Tilala Fall

States of Becoming investigates the dynamic forces influencing seventeen contemporary African diaspora artists in the United States. These artists draw from diverse methodologies and experiences to explore their connections with real and imagined genealogies that signify cultural, racial, national, and geographical belonging. They conceptualize hybrid cultures by identifying, redefining, and becoming themselves through their work. The artists practice in numerous mediums—including painting, photography, sculpture, installation, and video—to express the many different methods in which identity is reimagined and remade.

The exhibition is arranged in three groups: artists whose relocation prompted aesthetic transformations by incorporating hybrid aesthetics into their work; artists who share their experiences from their country of origin within their current communities; and artists who build bridges connecting the African diaspora to the United States in their practice. *States of Becoming* aims to contribute to conversations on identity construction in the face of relocation and resettling, exemplifying how diaspora artists navigate the interplay between ancestral African heritages and prevailing American cultural paradigms.

The artists represented, most of whom now reside in the United States, have ties to twelve countries in Africa and one in the Caribbean—Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe—and have roots in American cities including Detroit, Los Angeles, New Haven, New York, and Washington, DC.

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FITSUM SHEBESHE

Fitsum Shebeshe is a curator and painter based in Baltimore and Washington, DC. He holds an MFA in curatorial practice from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Before moving to the US in 2016, he was assistant curator at the National Museum of Ethiopia, where he co-founded the 1957 Initiative to annually celebrate the liberation of African countries from colonialism and curated the 1957 Art Show on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the African Union in 2013. At the Baltimore School for the Arts, he curated Depart Africa in 2017.



Building Hybrid Aesthetics

Works shown here by Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina, Kibrom Araya, Amare Selfu, and, in the following gallery by Elshafei Dafalla, illustrate how relocation and resettlement may lead artists to reimagine their practices and form a hybrid cultural identity, an essential strategy in their new homes. Although techniques vary, the artists combine African aesthetics with American cultural concepts in their works.

Moving between two continents is a transformative journey marked by cultural exchange, exploration of identity, addressing social issues like race, and discovery of new opportunities for recognition and exposure. The artists engage with intercultural interactions, shaping and negotiating their identities within multicultural settings, which profoundly influence their artistic production. As an artist, the exhibition's curator, Fitsum Shebeshe, shares this experience. His journey, which involved relocating and settling in the United States, significantly altered and redefined his perspectives. Similarly, the artists here have navigated the process of assimilation and the search for common ground.



CHUKWUDUMEBI GABRIEL AMADI-EMINA

Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina (b. 1994) is a Nigerian American photographic and video artist, currently residing near Baltimore, Maryland. Amadi-Emina received a BFA in photography and graphic design from Armstrong State University in Savannah, Georgia, and an MFA in photographic and electronic media from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Amadi-Emina's artistic journey began when he migrated to the United States in 2009 at the age of fifteen. He has expanded his perspective on what it means to be Black as an American and an African and has delved into the intricacies of institutionalized racism in his artistic practice.



Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina Nigerian, b. 1994

Bombu Afomo / MineSweeper, 2020
Matte inkjet print mounted on dibond
Collection of the artist

Bombu Afomo / MineSweeper is a gamification of Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina's perspective of his compulsion to assimilate into Baltimore's African American community, asking himself what it means to be Black in America. In this self-portrait, the artist looks through the eyes of a soldier in a war against racism.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Amadi-Emina has experienced periods of uncertainty and frustration. In 2020 he watched the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and countless others on television, and witnessed worldwide protests and media coverage of police brutality amplify the Black Lives Matter movement. Amadi-Emina has directly confronted the challenges of expressing his experience of racism and police brutality from the perspectives of both sides of his identity.

KIBROM ARAYA

Kibrom Gebremedhin Araya (b. 1982) is an Ethiopian artist and art educator who lives and works in New York. He was a lecturer at Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Arts and Design beginning in 2008, and in 2016 he graduated with an MFA from the same school. Most of Araya's work focuses on historical events, personal and collective memories, and social experiences in his adopted home. Araya chiefly uses hand-drawn animation as a medium, but also produces drawings, paintings, and videos.



Kibrom Araya Ethiopian, b. 1982

Self-Portrait, 2021
Gouache on paper
Collection of the artist

Kibrom Araya paints self-portraits to engage in a continuous internal dialogue to chronicle his emotional journey as he adjusts to society in the United States. Here, Araya gazes out of the painting's surface as if through a mirror. He has selected somber, murky colors to depict himself, symbolizing his struggle to adapt to life in the United States as a person of color from a different culture. The painting portrays the essence of his inner states: his perception of himself, and how he wishes to be perceived. It also communicates his desire for the viewer to understand him and his transformation in the United States better.

Kibrom Araya Ethiopian, b. 1982

Zikir (Remembrance), 2020 Hand-drawn animation, 03:53 Collection of the artist

Araya's work reflects the influence of his upbringing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and his theological training. Zikir—"remembrance" in Geez, the liturgical language of the Church—is inspired by stories the artist's father told about Yared, the sixth-century Ethiopian composer who developed the Church's music. According to legend, Yared sat by a tree after fleeing a school where he struggled to excel. He saw a caterpillar straining to climb a tree trunk. Six times it failed, but on the seventh attempt it succeeded. After witnessing this effort, Yared was remorseful for his educational failure and went on to achieve success.

Here, Araya draws each frame of his film by hand, resulting in a multiplicity of drawings that depict how objects move, reminiscent of South African artist William Kentridge's 1990s animated films. As someone who has recently relocated to the United States, Araya sees the narrative as a remembrance, honoring his father's life—full of struggle, grit, and, most importantly, hope.

Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina Nigerian, b. 1994

Fade Catcher, 2021
Matte inkjet prints mounted on dibond
Collection of the artist

In his quest to establish a new life and career in the United States, Amadi-Emina quickly learned to navigate the arbitrary boundaries that define Black identity in his adopted nation. As a first-generation immigrant, he faced many ways race impacts his reconstructed, hybrid identity. Through his artistic practice, he reconciles his daily experiences with the preconceived and often mistaken ideas of African imagery and Blackness in his new country.

Fade Catcher derives its name from the American slang term to "catch a fade" (to get knocked out). With "Who will survive in America?" written in the center of the composition, the artist is asking himself how to keep both African and American cultures not only present, but also alive in his life. This notion explores the complexities of white fear of Blackness and how Black men of the diaspora represent themselves for self-preservation. By using flowers as a metaphor, Amadi-Emina shows how he thought that by moving to the United States his roots in Nigeria would fade away. Yet, by connecting to Black culture in America, he has found ways to stay connected to his roots. Balancing inconspicuousness and confrontation, Amadi-Emina aims to reclaim his identity and create a new framework for himself and others.

AMARE SELFU

Amare Selfu (b. 1979) is a multidisciplinary artist and educator born in Ethiopia and based in Maryland. He graduated from Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Arts and Design in 2004, where he later served as chair of its Painting Department. Amare received his MFA in studio art from the Maryland Institute College of Art. He currently teaches there as well as at Montgomery College. Amare has exhibited in Ethiopia, the US, the UK, and France.



Amare Selfu Ethiopian, b. 1979

Landscape, 2019
Oil on canvas
Collection of the artist

Selfu's relocation to the United States marked a significant cultural and professional shift. Moving from a non-English-speaking, non-Western culture, he faced existential challenges in finding his place as a new member of the African diaspora.

Landscape reflects his efforts to integrate into American society, diverging from the formal techniques he practiced and taught in Ethiopia. Although Selfu advised his students to develop their skills through freehand drawing, he often uses a ruler to paint lines across the canvas. These overlapping lines symbolize boundaries, representing his identity as a member of the African diaspora being rigidly defined in America.

Amare Selfu Ethiopian, b. 1979

Walk in the Rain, 2007
Oil on canvas
Collection of the artist

In his early career as an artist and instructor at Addis Ababa University, Selfu painted realistic figures and landscapes, often using oil on canvas to depict the observable environment. This painting from 2007, before he came to the United States, is rooted in the Ethiopian painting tradition influenced by European art academies. Here loosely painted figures appear to rush through the streets, reflective of both realism and semi-abstraction. After moving to the United States in 2012, Selfu renounced this style and medium.

Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina Nigerian, b. 1994

Ajese Ojiji | The one that fights shadows — "Shadow boxing," 2020

Matte inkjet prints mounted on dibond, boxing gloves Collection of the artist

Chukwudumebi Gabriel Amadi-Emina moved to the United States from Nigeria in 2009. Since then, he has embraced various aspects of assimilation—cultural, institutional, and geographical—as a means of integrating into American society. Starting in Savannah, Georgia, and later moving to Baltimore, Maryland, he developed a hybrid African/American aesthetic.

These photographs reflect Amadi-Emina's ongoing challenges with integration, exploring the collision of cultures inherent in living in America. When he moved to the United States, Amadi-Emina started boxing as a way to deal with his own mental health. From this, he learned "shadow boxing"—the practice of boxing with oneself. The term exemplifies Amadi-Emina's emotional state at the time, struggling with his identity as a Nigerian man in America. In this work, Amadi-Emina's anger is represented in the red background of each photograph, yet at the center, the boxing gloves are a symbol for safety and protection. Living between two cultures requires flexibility and a readiness to constantly reinvent oneself. For Amadi-Emina, this process catalyzes an aesthetic and conceptual transformation, strengthening his ties to his current community while his new identity emerges.

ELSHAFEI DAFALLA

Elshafei Dafalla (b. 1971) is a Sudanese-born sculptor, photographer, painter, and installation artist with a special interest in sound. His work is noted for its political engagement with different world cultures and has been celebrated for its capacity to create solidarity among communities and peoples across political, cultural, and racial differences.



Photo: Jonathan Banks

Elshafei Dafalla Sudanese, b. 1971

Delirium, 2005– Prints on canvas Collection of the artist

Elshafei Dafalla's artistic journey began in Sudan, where he was recognized as a videographer at thirteen. He spent two years capturing the lives of the Umbororo, a nomadic tribe in Sudan and South Sudan, before moving to the United States in 2001. Dafalla's current work focuses on documenting the intersecting paths of the African diaspora in the United States and globally. His artistic practice reflects diasporic experiences, such as navigating the challenges of obtaining passports, visas, or being fingerprinted upon arrival in the US, highlighting the resilience needed to overcome these obstacles.

This installation features a selection from over a thousand fingerprints Dafalla collected from people of the African diaspora, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and America. The use of black and white presents simplicity. Their lack of hue symbolizes a unified humanity, opposing the reductive nature of forms like census and travel documents that categorize individuals. The canvases highlight the deceptiveness of racial divisions; the black-and-white swirls are the result of the fingertips' texture, rather than color. Despite the variations in pattern among these fingerprints, their similarities reside in their humanity.

Looking to Their Roots

This group of African diaspora artists draws inspiration from their native countries' cultures and histories. By integrating elements of their cultural heritage into their work, they explore themes of identity, history, and memory, creating connections to both their countries of origin and their present communities. The artists maintain ancestral links in their practices through research and fostering relationships with fellow diaspora members.

Works by Yvonne Osei, Masimba Hwati, Vamba Bility, Nadia Ayari, Dora King, Chido Johnson, and Nontsikelelo Mutiti (whose work is on view in the Monan Gallery upstairs) demonstrate the various connections maintained by artists of the African diaspora: familial ties and migration patterns; cultural aspects such as language, customs, and traditions; and ideological commitments to Pan-Africanism, civil rights, and anti-colonial movements. Rooted in the experiences of their countries of origin, shaped by cultural encounters in the United States, and influenced by periodic visits to Africa, the artists' sense of belonging in their new homes is reinforced.

YVONNE OSEI

Yvonne Osei (b. 1990) is a Ghanaian artist living in the United States. Her transnational practice explores topics of beauty and colorism, politics of clothing, and how global trade and colonialism impact postcolonial West African and Western cultures. Osei has participated in curatorial and artist projects and fellowships in Ghana and in numerous US universities and museums. She is represented by the Bruno David Gallery.



Yvonne Osei Ghanaian, b. 1990

Between the Voids, 2012 Video, 08:39 Collection of the artist; courtesy Bruno David Gallery

Between the Voids explores the complexity and superficiality of racial categorization and its impact on identity and life in the United States. Yvonne Osei created the video three years after she moved from Ghana to the US. Inspired by the stark differences in how identity is perceived in the two countries, Osei reflects on her experiences as a native of Ghana's Ashanti Kingdom, where Blackness is celebrated as a source of pride and beauty. This contrasts sharply with the discrimination and criminalization of Black people she has experienced in the US.

In the video, Osei uses black and white paint to conceal her face, scratching lines into the paint to reference scarification—an ode to traditional West African identification practices. Between the Voids confronts the black/white dichotomy, emphasizing that Blackness is never purely black, and whiteness is never purely white. Osei refers to these racial constructs as voids, highlighting their inadequacy in categorizing people. She argues that humans exist on a spectrum, constantly evolving and influenced by their surroundings. Osei asks, "Where do you draw the line between black and white?" and "Why should that line even matter?"

MASIMBA HWATI

Masimba Hwati (b. 1982) works across sound, sculpture, video, and performance. From Zimbabwe, he is a PhD candidate at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Wien, holds an MFA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is a Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture alumnus. Hwati also studied and taught sculpture at Harare Polytechnic Art School. He is an honorary research fellow at Rhodes University's fine arts department in Grahamstown, South Africa, and has exhibited widely across North America, Africa, and Europe.



Masimba Hwati Zimbabwean, b. 1982

self, calculating my Father's shadow 1, 2021 self, calculating my Father's shadow 2, 2021 Tintypes printed as matte inkjet prints mounted on dibond Collection of the artist

Masimba Hwati's tintypes, positive photographs made on darkened metal sheets, explore postcolonial themes as inspired by his father's photographs from colonial Zimbabwe. Hwati reappropriates archival and found objects to create his work. In the 1960s, his father used local township photography studios to document himself during the second Chimurenga, a guerilla war of independence. His outfits, inspired by British and American bands like the Beatles and Jethro Tull, made the photos resemble album covers. Discovering these photos as an adult, Hwati was fascinated by the complex ways his father, as a young guerilla, adopted the colonial enemy's aesthetic while opposing British imperialism.

Hwati began this series while studying for his MFA in Michigan. The works convey someone on the move, in a constant state of flux, and resisting racial or political categorization. These themes add layers to Hwati's self-representation, countering a monolithic perception of him as a member of the African diaspora.

VAMBA BILITY

Vamba Bility (b. 1990) is an Ivorian multidisciplinary artist based in New Haven, Connecticut, whose work engages the reverie of diasporic experience, the poetics of mark making, and material history. Using mainly assemblage, Bility employs a vast range of materials and techniques to interrogate recurrent themes and tensions within his vision, including individuality, shared culture, and contested space, among others.



Vamba Bility Ivorian, b. 1990

Kolokwa english. Series N.19, 2022
Oil, oil stick, okra, charcoal, cotton yarn on canvas, bricks
Collection of the artist

Vamba Bility examines established social norms and structures, reinterpreting them to create new meanings and ownership. This work reflects the profound impact of his move from West Africa to the United States as a form of externalized introspection. The trapezoidal shape and inverted portrait challenge conventional structures, expressing the artist's struggle to fit within them. The inset portrait's proportions evoke sculptural busts, suggesting a reflection on self-identity. Displayed on stacked bricks and leaning against the wall, the forms appear rough and independent, rejecting delicacy and obedience.

Masimba Hwati Zimbabwean, b. 1982

Rückspiegel 2, 2022

Found materials

Collection of the artist

Masimba Hwati's sculptures function as both objects and musical instruments, which he occasionally plays himself. *Rückspiegel 2* is an assemblage of found materials, including a brass wind instrument, a trumpet, chimes, bells, and a spear. These components can be activated by a performer to generate sound. Similar to the processes of assimilation and migration, the work draws parallels between the physical and intangible aspects of sound.

Sound travels, circles, weaves, and at times, envelops or passes through gaps rather than confronting obstacles or barriers. This exploration serves as a broader metaphor for Hwati's artistic practice, reflecting how he navigates power dynamics within art and educational institutions in the United States and Europe, whether in public or private spheres.

NADIA AYARI

Nadia Ayari (b. 1981) is an artist originally from Tunisia who lives and works in Brooklyn. Her paintings and sculptures were included in MoMA PS1's *Greater New York* (2022) as well as in many solo and group exhibitions around the world. Straddling abstraction and figuration, Ayari's work often negotiates personal and political themes and calls upon the flora of North Africa as inspiration.



Nadia Ayari Tunisian, b. 1981

Build I, 2016
Oil on linen
Collection of the artist and Taymour
Grahne Projects

Marble IV, 2016

Fresco on marble Collection of the artist and Taymour Grahne Projects

Nadia Ayari's paintings and sculptures captivate with their vibrant colors and intricate patterns. Through abstracted forms, Ayari elevates her subjects—often North African plant life—to protagonists.

In *Build I*, a heavily impastoed branch bisects the canvas, from which thick, pillowy leaves grow. Thin vertical lines of quinacridone red contrast with a lush green-blue background, creating a structured composition of abstract shapes that seem to strive against impending chaos.

Ayari continues to use this juxtaposition in her sculptural work by combining vastly different materials into one form. The base of *Marble IV* is a solid piece of marble with visible rough edges and uneven surfaces. On one side, a small cube-like structure emerges from the marble and the artist applies a delicate fresco to the plaster surface. By using what some may consider "contrasting materials" Ayari is revealing the feeling of combining cultures into one artwork.

DORA KING

Dora King (b. 1965) is a writer, teacher, and poet who mines the interstices of geography, religion, and art to address sublimated histories of loss and familial grief associated with the aftermath of slavery and colonialism. Born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with ties to Nigeria and Kenya, she was educated in New York City. King earned an MA in religion from Union Theological Seminary, an MPhil in cultural anthropology from Columbia University, and an MFA in poetry from Columbia's School of the Arts. She has been a facilitator, curator, and consulting anthropologist for projects in New York City and Sierra Leone.



Dora King Sierra Leonean, b. 1965

Beyond the Lucent Wall, 2007-22

Poem printed on vinyl Collection of the artist

Dora King was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a capital city shaped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by successive settlements of liberated and recaptured enslaved people from the Americas and Africa. As an African of the diaspora, she embodies the hybrid culture of her hometown and its complex history of colonial dispossessions and displacements. Her poetic practice was forged in this crucible of life and death, through Freetown's various artistic forms of reverence for ancestors, from Yoruba masquerades to elegies.

King's poetic journey began with the passing of her grandmother, Etta Marke, initiating her quest to summon the dead (known as *Egun* in Yoruba) onto the page, or in this case, the wall. *Beyond the Lucent Wall* serves as an elegy to Etta, who blended High Church Anglicanism with daily interactions with her Egun.

From a young age, King sensed the presence of the dead. She learned the language of their comings and goings, bore witness to the forty-day ceremonies following death, and the predawn propitiatory practices of blood offerings that have since been discontinued. King's poetry embodies both mourning and retrieval: "You were born and left, over and over again. This is my heirloom... In every photograph, you fade to bluesy then black, your contours of motherloss imbued with grace."

For King, present experience foreshadows the past. Her writing is a continuous exploration of visibility and invisibility, death, and the return of the dead.

Yvonne Osei

Ghanaian, b. 1990

Africa Clothe Me Bare, Paris, 2018

Video, 09:58

Collection of the artist; courtesy Bruno David Gallery

Africa Clothe Me Bare, Paris is part of a series of public performances where Yvonne Osei reinterprets and recontextualizes outdoor sculptures of nude women in Western countries. Without permission or knowledge of the owners, Osei dresses and undresses these sculptures, which often adorn buildings and grounds as mere extensions of water fountains and museum settings.

This performance is a collaboration with the bronze statue *Aurore* by French sculptor Laurent Magnier (1618–1700), situated outside the Hôtel Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau in Paris. Osei wraps *Aurore* in vibrant yellow-and-orange wax print fabric adorned with barcode patterns.

The performance subverts the power hierarchy as a Black female artist liberates white female subjects depicted in stone, bronze, and marble by Caucasian male artists. Osei aims to raise awareness of issues such as global trade, colonialism, and the complex history behind wax print fabrics by draping her sculptural subjects in derivative and reinterpreted West African cloth, symbolizing a reclaiming of cultural identity.

Through the act of clothing and unclothing, Osei reveals the "nakedness" of these sculptures, exposing how female bodies have been exploited and objectified. This transformation elevates them from objects of visual pleasure to embodiments of humanity.

Osei's work interrogates questions of legitimacy, beauty, power, ownership, and authorship of the female body. She challenges: "What distinguishes nudity from nakedness? Who defines which bodies are considered nude or naked? What were the intentions behind these sculptures, and whose gaze do they serve?" These inquiries prompt reflection on the historical contexts in which these sculptures were created, their creators' motivations, and their current role in public spaces.

CHIDO JOHNSON

Chido Johnson (b. 1969) is a Detroit-based artist, born and raised in Zimbabwe and Zambia. With two BFA degrees in sculpture and painting from the University of Georgia, Athens, Johnson earned an MFA in sculpture from the University of Notre Dame. He has worked, exhibited, and taught nationally and internationally. Founder of the Wire-Car Auto Workers Association and co-founder of the Zimbabwe Cultural Center, Johnson is an associate professor at the College for Creative Studies, all located in Detroit.



Chido Johnson Zimbabwean, b. 1969

me me me, 2008

Carved tourist object, other tourist artifacts
Collection of the artist

Chido Johnson's *me me me* delves into the complexities that arise at the intersection of discomfort, irony, shifts in meaning, and uncertainty. Johnson crafted an ebony sculpture resembling typical "airport art"—wooden sculptures made for tourists that mimic traditional African forms—but deliberately stripped away most recognizable features from the original figure, merging assimilation with iconoclasm.

The central sculpture undergoes transformation yet remains imbued with the violence of its original inspiration. Souvenir sculptures are often seen as mere copies, lacking the deep cultural and historical context embedded in traditional African carvings crafted for religious rituals. These ritual objects hold spiritual significance, setting them apart from mass-produced souvenirs.

Johnson values "airport art" for its hybrid nature, blending traditional and commercial elements. Unlike plastic toys, handmade wooden tourist carvings retain a sense of "authenticity" through the touch of their creators.

Chido Johnson Zimbabwean, b. 1969

buck.it, 2008
Carved mahogany, beads, wire, five-gallon
Home Depot buckets
Collection of the artist

Born in Zimbabwe to American missionary parents and raised in Zambia until he was seventeen, Chido Johnson moved to the United States to pursue further education. For Johnson, carving represents a connection to both his Western upbringing and African roots. Using a chisel and mallet to shape wood from a block is an ancient craft recognized in both cultural heritages.

In this installation, the meticulous process of carving mahogany contrasts sharply with the swift action of stacking plastic buckets. In a world driven by fast-paced capitalism, Johnson's embrace of the deliberate slowness of carving becomes subversive. *Buck.it* reflects these juxtapositions, offering a nuanced exploration of conflicting realities inherent in the African diasporic identity.

Connecting the Diaspora to the United States

Tariku Shiferaw, Miatta Kawinzi, Kern Samuel, Helina Metaferia, and Yacine Tilala Fall in this gallery, and Kearra Amaya Gopee upstairs in the Monan Gallery, all have deep ties to the United States. Some are first-generation Americans born to parents of the African diaspora while others moved to the United States in their adolescence.

These artists draw inspiration from their African and American backgrounds to explore themes of identity, gender, race, sexuality, displacement, memory, and cultural fusion. They create a platform for cultural exchange, challenging stereotypes, raising awareness of racial and social justice issues, and fostering collaboration. Their works celebrate African heritage while navigating the complexities of the American experience.

The artists effectively bridge the cultural and geographical gap between Africa and America, serving as integral connectors to the others featured in the exhibition.

TARIKU SHIFERAW

Tariku Shiferaw (b. 1983) is a New York-based artist from Ethiopia who explores mark making through painting, while addressing issues around creating spaces within societal structures. Shiferaw received a BFA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and an MFA from Parsons School of Design, New York. He has participated in many group and solo exhibitions and artist study programs and was recently an artist-in-residence at Silver Art Projects (NYC) and ARCAthens.



Photo: Christopher Garcia Valle, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

Tariku Shiferaw Ethiopian, b. 1983

Forgive Them Father (Ms. Lauryn Hill), 2020
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

In Forgive Them Father (Ms. Lauryn Hill), Tariku Shiferaw displays a black canvas hanging on a screw on which he has painted horizontal blue lines to create "marks." For Shiferaw, these lines define boundaries, redact, or provide evidence of existence. While rooted in a tradition of geometric abstraction, Shiferaw's lines and marks symbolically resemble bars in music inspired by his deep connection to music, shaped by his upbringing in Los Angeles during the 1980s.

The titles of his works often reference genres such as hip-hop, R & B, jazz, blues, and reggae. Shiferaw's use of black and blue carries multiple layers of meaning, referencing the writings of Ralph Ellison (1913–94) and the music of Louis Armstrong (1901–71), among others.



Lauryn Hill, "Forgive Them Father," *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 1998



Louis Armstrong & His All Stars, "Black and Blue," Berlin, 1965

MIATTA KAWINZI

Miatta Kawinzi (b. 1987) is a Brooklyn-based Kenyan Liberian American artist, writer, and educator raised in Nashville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. Their work explores hybridity within the African diaspora and reimagining of self, identity, and culture through abstraction and poetics. They received a BA in interdisciplinary art and cultural theory from Hampshire College and an MFA in studio art from Hunter College. Kawinzi has exhibited and held residences around the world, was a Teiger Mentor at Cornell University, and has taught at Hampshire College and the University of Richmond. They have also worked as a museum, youth, and community arts educator throughout NYC.



Miatta Kawinzi

American, b. 1987

A(f)mrka, 2021

Composite still, video diptych for two-channel SD color video, two-channel audio: vocalization, cassette tape recordings, synthesizer, original electronic score, 06:06
Collection of the artist

This video installation features an experimental dialogue across two screens, overlaying fragments of text on a blue background to explore the intersections between imaginings of "Afrka" and "Amrka." The artist incorporates elements from the Liberian and Black American national anthems, "All Hail, Liberia, Hail!" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing" into the soundtrack. These anthems symbolize the intertwining of two narratives celebrating the resilience and hope of Black people overcoming enslavement and discrimination to achieve freedom in their respective countries.

Miatta Kawinzi, born in the United States to a Liberian parent, embodies and maintains a connection between the two countries. Through the juxtaposition of screens, the installation invites contemplation of multiple spaces and encourages reflection on the social and cultural ties linking Africa and America. It presents African diasporic artists as pivotal figures in fostering global conversation.

KERN SAMUEL

Kern Samuel (b. 1990) is a Trinidadian-born artist who lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut. He received a BFA from the Cooper Union and an MFA from the Yale School of Art. His practice explores the struggle to find meaning within the everchanging ideological, social, and economic conditions of everyday life. Through drawing, painting, and sewing as well as by using symbolic shapes and colors, he addresses themes surrounding order, skin, material, emotions, home, spirituality, and sex.



Kern Samuel

Trinidadian, b. 1990

An Island, 2021

Direct dye and wood glue on canvas with turmeric on paper, steel, magnets Collection of the artist; courtesy Derosia

Kern Samuel navigates the boundary between abstraction and self-representation by employing symbols and forms in his works. In *An Island*, Samuel explores color and texture using spices and dyes. To create the base, the artist painted a blend of direct dye and wood glue onto the canvas, allowing it to dry into a deep, nuanced blue that varies in saturation and tone.

At the center of the composition lies a circle made from turmeric, delicately applied to the canvas. This floating "island" evokes Samuel's childhood in Trinidad, recalling memories of turmeric from his mother's cooking and symbolizing the place that he once called home—a poignant reflection on personal history and cultural identity through the tactile and visual language of materials.

HELINA METAFERIA

Helina Metaferia is an interdisciplinary artist working across collage, assemblage, video, performance, and social engagement. Her work interrogates the body's relationship to sites, especially as related to identity and citizenship. She received a BA in painting from Morgan State University, an MFA from Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Metaferia has exhibited extensively internationally. She lives and works in New York City and is an assistant professor at Brown University.



Photo: Tommie Battle

Helina Metaferia American

My Oracle, 2019
Mixed media collage
Collection of the artist

In Helina Metaferia's *My Oracle*, the artist projects from her eyes a spiral of rainbow-hued images sourced from mainstream art publications like *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, and *Artforum*. This collage emerged from Metaferia's deep dive into archival materials, particularly her fascination with art magazines from the 1980s. Through her research, she discovered a stark underrepresentation of women and people of color, exposing the racial and gender inequities pervasive in the art world—issues often overlooked but crucial to confront.

Metaferia noticed that when artists of color were acknowledged in these publications, it was often through the lens of derogatory categories like "primitivism" that unfairly lumps non-Western art into a vague category of lesser skill. By swirling these images around her own Black body, Metaferia symbolically includes all artists sidelined by the Western art establishment, reclaiming their creative authority and spotlighting the industry's exclusionary practices.

Over time, the images sourced from magazines will fade, leaving Metaferia's vibrant portrait as a lasting testament to the resilience and enduring presence of marginalized voices.

Helina Metaferia American

Reconfiguring the Canon, 2018 Archival inkjet prints, video Collection of the artist

Helina Metaferia's *Refiguring the Canon* series integrates video and photographic documentation of performances that capture the tension between Black bodies and art institutions, particularly African artists and American art museums. Each work represents a fragment of Metaferia's live performances held in museum spaces across the United States in which she asserts her body through seemingly simple gestures in response to iconic works such as Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66) (*New[o]man*) and Mark Rothko's color field paintings (1949–70) (*Responding to Marks*).

Metaferia's aim is to challenge both conceptual meanings and dominant art historical narratives that often prioritize the "white male artist" as the default standard. By placing the Black body in dialogue with abstraction, she seeks to subvert this norm and reconfigure the canon of art history.

YACINE TILALA FALL

Yacine Tilala Fall (b. 1997) is an interdisciplinary conceptual artist based in Washington, DC. She received a BFA from the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. Inspired by her Senegalese and Mauritanian heritage, her practice speaks to the human body and its entangled relationship with the environment, labor, history, and faith. Using natural materials she investigates concepts of self, ritual, and function through performance, sculpture, painting, and installation.



Photo: Grace Roselli, Pandora's BoxX Project

Yacine Tilala Fall American, b. 1997

Les racines du baobab: Dans une famille d'eau (The Roots of the Baobab: Inside a Family of Water) / Trying to Be Whole, 2020

Ceramic vessels, fiber, water Collection of the artist

Tilala Fall draws inspiration from her Senegalese and Mauritanian heritage in her multimedia practice that encompasses weaving, ceramics, and performance art. Her work delves into the human body's complex relationship with its environment, labor, historical events, and spirituality.

The metaphor of the baobab, revered in Senegal as the tree of life, forms the core of this installation. The baobab, predominantly composed of water, symbolizes the element that connects the fragile to the durable, the individual to the social, and the dead to the living. Grounded in the composition of the human body, which is also primarily water, the baobab serves as a conduit to transcendence and connectivity beyond the physical realm.

Looking to Their Roots

The works of Nontsikelelo Mutiti displayed here as well as those by Yvonne Osei, Masimba Hwati, Vamba Bility, Nadia Ayari, Dora King, and Chido Johnson (featured in the Daley Family Gallery downstairs) demonstrate the various connections maintained by artists of the African diaspora to their country of origin: familial ties and migration patterns; cultural aspects such as language, customs, and traditions; and ideological commitments to Pan-Africanism, civil rights, and anticolonial movements. Rooted in the experiences of their countries of origin and shaped by cultural encounters and periodic visits to Africa, the artists' sense of belonging in their new homes is reinforced.



NONTSIKELELO MUTITI

Nontsikelelo Mutiti (b. 1982) is a Zimbabwean-born visual artist and educator. She is invested in elevating the work and practices of Black peoples past, present, and future through a conceptual approach to design, publishing, archiving practices, and institution building. Mutiti holds a diploma in multimedia from the Zimbabwe Institute of Digital Arts and an MFA from the Yale School of Art, with a concentration in graphic design.



Photo: Jasper Kettner

Nontsikelelo Mutiti

Zimbabwean, b. 1982

Everything Is Where It Is Expected (excerpt), 2019

Collected objects, reference materials, beauty supply bottles, tools for hair care and artmaking Collection of the artist

Black Thang (excerpt), 2021

Black resin, concrete, and wax Collection of the artist

In Everything Is Where It Is Expected, Nontsikelelo Mutiti replicates elements of Black hair salons, which serve as vital communal spaces, through an installation that mimics a hairstylist's workstation. A collection of hair combs sourced from Mutiti's native Zimbabwe, Harlem, and her international travels are presented with hair care products alongside tools used both in artmaking and hair-dressing, providing insights into the salon experience as well as Mutiti's artistic practice. Printed materials, including publications co-authored by Mutiti, fill the installation.

Black Thang consists of containers of common products found in African hair braiding salons and Black beauty supply stores that are cast in black wax, resin, and concrete and arranged as typically seen on shelves. While the objects are immediately recognizable, the installation requires familiarity with salon traditions to fully appreciate its layers of meaning.

Nontsikelelo Mutiti

Zimbabwean, b. 1982

KUDUDUNURA (UNDOING) (Part 2),

2021

Adhesive vinyl print
Collection of the artist

Nontsikelelo Mutiti imagines new landscapes by applying her Zimbabwean experiences to foster connections among the communities she has lived in across the United States. Through her artistic endeavors in New York, New Haven, and Richmond, Mutiti shares aspects of her native culture, facilitating a sense of home and belonging in these new environments.

In KUDUDUNURA (UNDOING) Mutiti designs a module inspired by a hair braid pattern that is repeated and printed as one installation. Elements of hairstyles and language from African diasporic cultures are blended, symbolizing a continuous reinvention of identity resulting in a newly imagined identity in the space it occupies. According to Mutiti, relocation and resettlement determine the reimagining of cultural spaces.

Connecting the Diaspora to the United States

Kearra Amaya Gopee and Miatta Kawinzi, along with Tariku Shiferaw, Kern Samuel, Helina Metaferia, and Yacine Tilala Fall (whose work is displayed downstairs), all have deep ties to the United States. Some are first-generation Americans born to parents of the African diaspora while others have lived in the United States since they were young.

These artists draw inspiration from their African and American backgrounds to explore themes of identity, gender, sexuality, displacement, and cultural fusion. They create a platform for cultural exchange, challenging stereotypes, raising awareness of racial and social justice issues, and fostering collaboration. Their works celebrate African heritage while navigating the complexities of the American experience.

In bridging the gap between Africa and America, these artists serve as cohesive links to their peers in the exhibition.

KEARRA AMAYA GOPEE

Kearra Amaya Gopee (b. 1995) is a visual artist from Carapichaima, Kairi (Trinidad), living and working on Lenape land (New York City). Gopee received a BFA in photography and imaging from New York University, an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Their practice focuses on violence in relation to the Anglophone Caribbean and its diasporas. They render this violence elastic and atemporal—leaving room for the manipulation of its history and possible afterlives. Gopee addresses violence's impact on (post)coloniality, migration, intergenerational trauma, queerness, and healing.



Photo: Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

Kearra Amaya Gopee

Trinidadian, b. 1995

Artifact #3: Terra Nullius, 2019

Single-channel video, 11:06
Collection of the artist

Gopee's research-driven practice explores the influence of diasporic Caribbean identity and ancestry on concepts of personhood, family dynamics, and intimacy. Their work delves into how migration and memory shape the manifestations of Anglophone Caribbean families from pre-Independence to the contemporary era.

In Artifact #3: Terra Nullius, Gopee draws upon their own family history as a lens through which to interpret facets of postcoloniality. This includes examining state-imposed travel restrictions, diverse attitudes toward queerness, and mental health issues. Rather than romanticizing traditional family structures, Gopee explores alternative kinships and modes of connection, utilizing practices such as scrying (using reflective objects for divination) and speculative nonfiction. These approaches emphasize agency in constructing models of communication and care in the present context.

Miatta Kawinzi

American, b. 1987

SHE GATHER ME, 2021

HD color video & 16mm color film transferred to video with two-channel audio, original electronic score, wood chairs, silver mylar floor, 11:34

Collection of the artist

Miatta Kawinzi, a multidisciplinary artist based in New York City, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, to a Liberian mother and a Kenyan father. Their work explores hybridity within the African diaspora through abstract art and poetics.

SHE GATHER ME delves into the relationships between softness, fragility, and strength, viewing fragmentation not as rupture but as a fertile ground of possibility. Throughout the film, doubling motifs surface to probe cultural, social, and emotional dualities and multiplicities. Kawinzi integrates analog and digital footage captured in Detroit, Johannesburg, New York City, Santo Domingo, and Tulsa. This visual collage is complemented by poetry and an original electronic score, offering reflections on internal and external landscapes of the African diaspora, both tangible and imagined.

In this exhibition, the video connects diasporic artists who develop hybrid aesthetics and concepts within their adopted cultures with those who incorporate their countries of origin's histories. It also engages African American artists examining their present communities.