Between Distance and Desire:
African Diasporic Perspectives

on view
May 1 – December 31, 2025

Works left to right: Africa, Bamana, Male *ciwara* headdress (19th century); Edson Chagas, *TIPO PASSE* series (2014–2019); vanessa german, *BLACK SWAN, or, THE ENVY* (2022). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

The Soloviev Foundation Gallery

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The exhibition, *Between Distance and Desire: African Diasporic Perspectives,* imagines future itineraries for traditional African art objects by situating them within the global flows of contemporary Black aesthetics—where self-expression beyond coloniality becomes a provocation for innovative thought and where personal mythologies become a critical mode of inquiry into the representation of African identity. The term African art references vast and diverse artistic traditions from across the African continent and the diaspora. Yet the array of cultural practices subsumed by this Western categorization is neither static nor monolithic. Emerging from thefts of cultural patrimony during the colonial era, Western notions of African art are often marked by fetishistic and ethnographic frameworks. Indeed, the very category of "African" art did not exist in the precolonial period, nor did the word "art" itself translate directly into most African languages. Many traditional African art objects are intertwined with spiritual and social functions. Objects such as masks and sculptures are associated with rituals that manifest in various forms reflecting traditions of different groups. In some cases, objects represent ancestral spirits or mythical creatures serving to connect the physical world with the spiritual realm through symbolic and spiritual use. They play a vital role as a medium of communication, conveying cultural ideas and values through communal ceremonies such as initiation rites, funerals and birth rituals. Today, such understandings of the visual, material, socio-political, and spiritual cultures of the African continent endure.

The forced removal of African artworks from their original contexts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their subsequent commodification for Western markets structure the problematic that the artists in the show confront. Through processes of dislocation and fragmentation, ceremonial objects were displayed in museums and galleries—severed from the costumes, music, and movements that situated them in the social context of performance on the continent. This was an ontological transformation. Estranged and neutralized, such objects became exotic artifacts rather than living cultural enactments and were celebrated for their formal properties rather than their

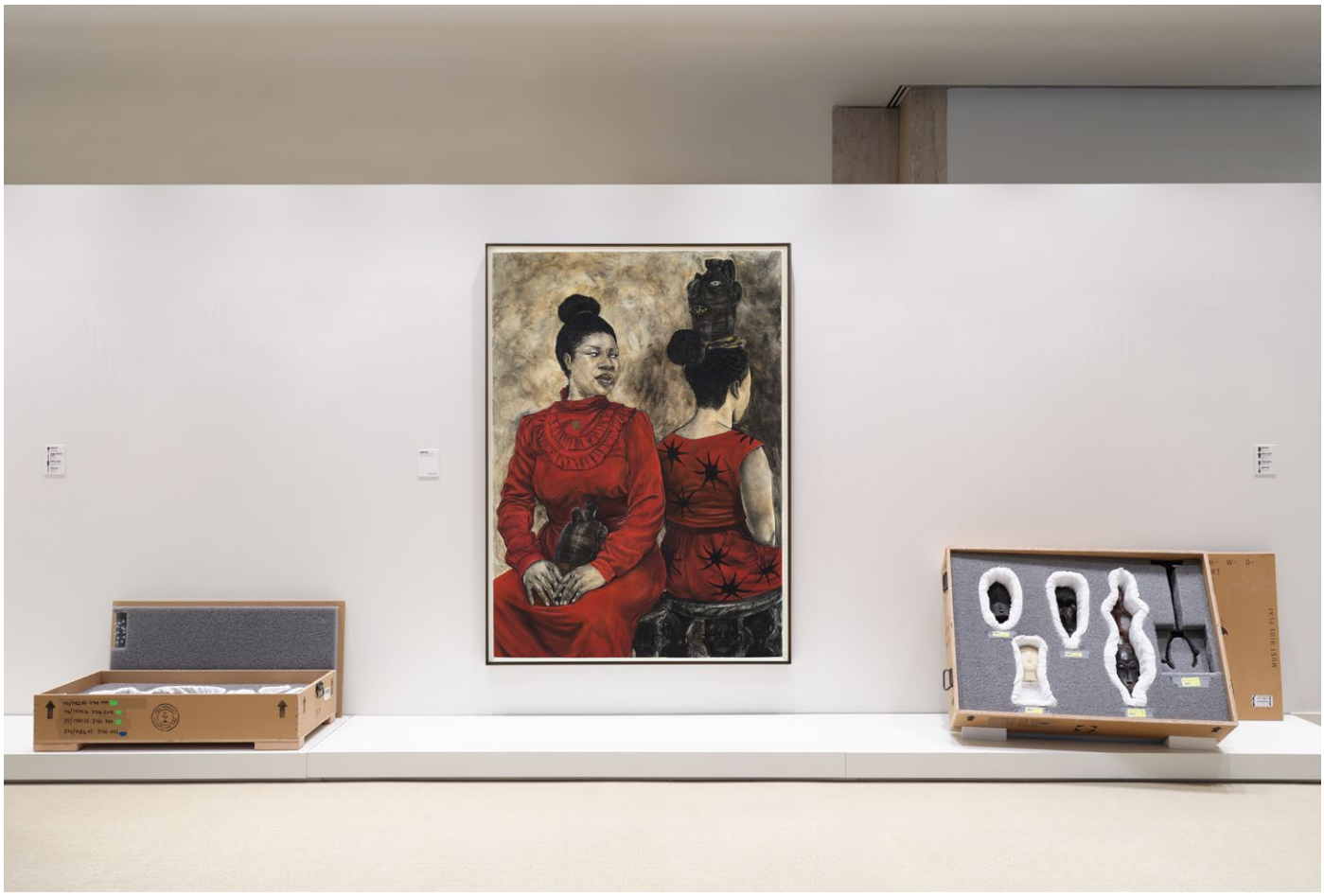
Works left to right: Africa, We-Wobe, Mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Dan, G*ii* mask (19th century); Africa, Ekoi, Mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Dan, Mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Djimini, *Do* mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Baule, *Kpan* mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Guro, Mask (Late 19th century); Africa, Ekoi, Head from a ceremonial costume (Early 20th century); Africa, Lega, *Bwami* society "blind" mask (20th century); Africa, Dan, Mask (19th–20th century); Africa, Baule, Mask (19th–20th century). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

social functions. These maneuvers positioned African artistic practices as motionless "traditions" frozen in time upon contact with Europe. This viewpoint is misleading, obscuring not only the historical and ongoing evolution of African cultures but also the intracontinental exchanges that shaped the emergence of new practices alongside, within, and beyond notions of tradition.

Rather than endeavor to restore these objects to their original contexts, *Between Distance and Desire* aims to reopen the question of African futurity as an operational strategy to transform representations of Black time and space. Working through life experiences of confinement and oppression, Black artists

use traditional objects as archives to critically examine and challenge dominant narratives by recontextualizing histories and highlighting Black experiences. In the exhibition, representations of distance and desire manifest through themes of longing, alienation and resistance as artists negotiate their (dis)connections to these complex histories. Featuring eight contemporary artists alongside artworks from The Soloviev Foundation, its artistic and curatorial interventions utilize modes of play and fantasy to highlight the interplay between traditional and contemporary practices from the Afrodiasporic world. The exhibition therefore takes a speculative rather than historicist approach. It reckons with the ongoing displacements of colonial modernity by resituating traditional African art within the sociopolitical dilemmas of the global present. The challenge becomes, how might we narrate a different story, one that treats Africa as a subject rather than an object of modernity? What do these objects have to say about the issues Africa faces in the present, from urbanization and environmental crisis to gender inequality and racism? The artists represented in the show probe these and other matters with references from science fiction, history, and popular culture to create new visual narratives.

These artists are inspired by a range of African art forms, most notably the mask. African masks have had a massive influence on Western culture with profound implications. In the exhibition, a group of masks is displayed as a collective ensemble, reanimating them for an alternative performance. This approach departs from prevailing art historical and exhibition conventions for traditional African sculpture that tend to itemize each object with an authoritative text recalling its original social context. Tradition shifts from something historically definitive to an unfinished and contested process of meaning making. In contrast to the normative signification of “mask” in Western culture, African masks reveal more than they conceal. They render visible and material things that would otherwise be spiritual and imaginative. Consequently, these masks bear layers of internal and external attributes that reverberate in an ambiguous and contradictory fashion today. They have lived many lives, and this accumulation of histories is evident in this display.



Works pictured left to right: Robert Pruitt, *A Fantastic Saga Through Space and Time* (2021); Africa, Dan, Mask (19th–20th century); Europe, Cycladic, Head and neck of figure (Period: Cycladic II, Spedos variety); Oceania, Vanuatu, Pentecost Island mask (18th–19th century); Africa, Baule, Mask (19th–20th century). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

Between Distance and Desire also considers the lives of objects when they are not exhibited on museum or gallery walls, by displaying them within the shipping crates where they are stored and transported. Indeed, the technology of the crate is an often-elided dimension of African art history and a key infrastructural component in the care of art collections. The practice of crating artworks preserves these objects in time and space yet simultaneously imposes a state of confinement and public invisibility, a kind of entombment that is extremely different from the way these objects were handled in their original contexts. Arranged together with Western antiquities and other non-European objects, these items might be said to enter the crate as culturally specific artifacts and emerge from them as so-called universal artworks. These storage containers

preserve objects and are vessels for mobility that mediate possibilities of presence and access. They are specially designed and fabricated to accommodate the object's precise dimensions, material, and weight. Many artworks spend most of their lives in storage in costly climate-controlled environments. This cultural expenditure on African artworks by Western museums and collectors is strikingly incompatible with the position of their contexts of origin within the capitalist world-system. The question becomes, preservation for whom? Using the crating system specifically designed to secure and economically transport valuable art, the lure of stewardship often reproduces colonial legacies of ownership and knowledge.

These curatorial propositions interlock with the contemporary artistic contributions, which pursue a range of formal strategies. The included artists raise doubt about prevailing visual conventions around the display of African art while putting forth alternative possibilities in a variety of mediums, including sculpture, photography, video, and performance. One key formal tendency represented in the exhibition is assemblage. Combining wood and natural fibers with industrial materials like plastic and rubber, vanessa german and Emmanuel Massillon create a paradoxical space of syncretic grandeur. german's assemblages combine found materials with traditionally crafted objects to form protective ritualistic structures. She refers to these as "power figures," evoking the *nkisi nkondi* sculptures historically produced by Kongo people in the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. Treating sculpture as a process of transformation and healing, german scoured her neighborhood for objects to incorporate into her artworks. In her words, "I surrender myself to the objects that call up to me." Her three-dimensional collages transform these discarded objects into spiritual and contemplative sites. In a similar vein, Emmanuel Massillon assembles seemingly incompatible materials to instigate social critiques, repurposing vernacular phrases and objects to revisualize iconographies of antiblackness. His constructions often incorporate African masks and traverse the politics of gentrification, food insecurity, and medical injustice. Massillon alchemizes these histories into darkly humorous and texturally complex reconfigurations.

Another strategy pursued is figurative portraiture. Through their varied image-making practices, Robert Pruitt and Edson Chagas undermine fraught myths about non-Western cultural practices as estranged from modernity. Working in an Afrofuturist register, Pruitt uses draftsmanship to conjure speculative combinations of Black cultural references, merging the vernacular and the historical with the imaginary. His figurative paintings are at once fantastic, devotional, and mythological. In the works assembled here, gestures of covering, masking, and concealment predominate and suggest how masks can serve as agents of dissemblance and transformation. They shield and protect while activating new ways of moving through the world. By contrast, Edson Chagas interrogates the colonial dynamics of globalization through the photographic medium. In his series *Tipo Passe*, referring to a Portuguese expression for passport photographs, Chagas stages portraits of models wearing African masks and formal clothing. Where the passport photograph is officially designed to give state authorities an accurate visual representation of a subject to enhance security, here the masks obscure the faces of the sitters, obstructing their identification. In so doing, the work questions the legal frameworks that control the mobility of Africans outside the continent. Furthermore, by inserting the African mask into a contemporary context, Chagas interrupts the relegation of these objects to a distant mythological past. The work makes a powerful photographic argument for the syncretism of African and European history.

The question of performance animates the works contributed by Eblin Grueso and Nyugen E. Smith. In his performance video, Grueso reenacts a traditional ritual from his hometown of Santa María de Timbiquí, Cauca, Colombia. According to the custom, every January 6, the popular character *"El Bato"* (meaning the fisherman) goes house to house collecting food to redistribute to the poor. The ritual originally evolved from Catholicism and evokes Jesus's act of feeding the hungry. During the performance, we see Grueso assume the role of *El Bato* dressed in various fabrics, dry leaves, pots and pans, and a distinctive mask, prancing through the streets of Cali Valle where the performance took place. While dancing and vocalizing, he throws a metal pot at the doors and

Eblin Grueso, *El Bato* (2018). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

windows of family homes as if to gather their offerings, pouncing upon his "catch" once he has reeled it in. Grueso's interpretation of this traditional ceremony in an urban context where it has faded due to capitalist development—particularly through the encroachment of the transnational mining industry into Colombia—seeks to acknowledge the survival of Afro-Colombian culture and its ability to adapt to the contemporary world. Smith, meanwhile, is inspired by the *lukasa*, or memory boards produced by the Luba people in the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Big Chune-in (Through Memory)* is a visu-al-acoustic assemblage that commemorates the transmission of Afrodiasporic memory through sound, rhythm, and touch. *Lukasa* are handheld sculptural diagrams that conceptually map Luba history, geography, and political systems. By way of the sound devices used in reggae and dancehall music, Smith

Works left to right: Kim Dacres, *Jack Me Up and Protect My Soul* (2025); Kim Dacres, *Wood & Rubber Offering for Songye* (2025); Africa, Songye, *Kifwebe* mask (19th–20th century); Kim Dacres, *Sheryl* (2022). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

reimagines this technology, analogizing mixing and sampling with the *lukasa*'s mnemonic surfaces. Colorful knobs and wires combine with candles, sequins, beadwork, and hand-carved figurative sculptures, seeming to form a votive dashboard for hypothetical ceremonies. A Luba mask from the collection incorporated into the piece serves as both witness and transmitter, gazing outward as if listening to and recording the frequencies for posterity.

Zizipho Poswa and Kim Dacres reconsider the aesthetic politics of monumental sculpture. Poswa monumentalizes traditional African objects of beauty and adornment into colossal ceramic and bronze sculptures. In her series, *Indyebo yakwaNtu* (*Black Bounty*), Poswa pays homage to the decorative combs and beaded bracelets worn by various pan-African groups throughout history.

Finely decorated as prized possessions, "*cisakulo*" combs were worn by Chokwe men and women in what is now Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to signal wealth and status. These combs were often gifted to women by admirers or husbands to mark important life events. "*Isacholo*," on the other hand, signifies a beaded bracelet understood to bear healing properties, often worn by elderly Xhosa women to alleviate ailments. Passed through generations of women as family heirlooms, this jewelry encompasses a range of cultural, geographic, and matrilineal significances. The scalar augmentation of these treasured quotidian objects both feminizes the historically masculinist genre of monumental sculpture and reveals a spirituality implicit in the act of decoration. The work of Kim Dacres, on the other hand, transforms the rubber from recycled tires into emblems of Black femininity and mutuality. Collecting and disassembling the defunct wheels of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and scooters, she embarks upon a complex path of shaping and layering these rubber elements into her singular figurations. Often assuming the form of busts, the sculptures obtain dynamic effects of lustrous coiling through the articulation of braided hair from the seemingly unforgiving rubber. By contrast, using chains, cassettes, and other metal bicycle components instills a sense of potential movement and tensile strength. Dacres's use of rubber simultaneously evokes the horrific atrocities committed on the rubber plantations of the Congo under Belgian colonialism during the reign of King Leopold II. Correspondences between the intricate geometric grooves carved into the surface of the mask and the rubber tread of the recycled tires recontextualize the colonial past within contemporary material culture. The alluring and forbidding visual registers achieved by Dacres's rough and glossy surface textures ricochet off this violent history.

The Senegalese poet and cultural theorist Léopold Senghor once wrote, "Everything sacred, that intends to remain so, must cover itself in mystery." [1] Senghor's poetics of enshrouding and disguise can be understood as an organizational principle of *Between Distance and Desire*. The relocation of divination to

1 Léopold Senghor, *Liberté 5: le dialogue des Cultures*, (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

an inscrutable region of consciousness and perception is historically in keeping with the original ritual functions of African masks, which facilitated a host of spiritual and social transformations. Rather than trying to uncover that which was concealed behind the mask, the exhibition embraces the multifarious concealments to convey new meaning. In an era characterized by globalization and digital interconnectedness, fostering and reimagining of African art and culture today relies on creative acts.

TUMELO MOSAKA was born in Johannesburg and lives in New Jersey. He is an independent curator and the Mellon Arts Project Director with the African American and Diaspora Studies at Columbia University. Mosaka has worked within and outside museums exploring global transnational artistic practices, especially from Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. He has curated numerous exhibitions and held the position of Chief Curator for Investec Cape Town Art Fair, South Africa and at the Krannert Art Museum (KAM) in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Before joining KAM, Mosaka was the Associate Curator of Exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, NY. He curated important exhibitions such as *Infinite Islands: Contemporary Caribbean Art* (2007) and *Passing/Posing: Kehinde Wiley* (2004).

CULTURAL GROUPS

BAMANA	Mali, Ghana, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Senegal
BAULE	Ivory Coast
DAN	Ivory Coast, Liberia
DJIMINI	Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Mali
DOGON	Mali, Burkina Faso
EKOI	Nigeria, Cameroon
FANG	Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea
GURO	Ivory Coast
KOTA	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon
LEGA	Democratic Republic of the Congo
LUBA	Democratic Republic of the Congo
SONGYE	Democratic Republic of the Congo
WE-WOBE	Liberia, Ivory Coast

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Edson Chagas
Eblin Grueso
Kim Dacres
vanessa german
Emmanuel Massillon
Robert Pruitt
Zizipho Poswa
Nyugen E. Smith

July 1
Lecture by Nana Adusei-Poku
Scholar and curator Nana Adusei-Poku (Yale University) delivered a lecture titled "African Art on Display: From Colonial Trophy to Contemporary Dialogue."

July 19
Artist roundtable
Artists Emmanuel Massillon, Nyugen E. Smith, and Kim Dacres appeared in conversation with curator Tumelo Mosaka about the influence of traditional African arts on their practices.

September 19
Curator discussion
Curators Ernestine White-Mifetu (Brooklyn Museum), Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi (MoMA), and Tumelo Mosaka (Columbia University), discussed curatorial approaches to the African continent's diverse artistic traditions that prioritize African over colonial perspectives.

October 8
Artist performance
Exhibition artist vanessa german delivered a performance responding to the gallery space as a place for ceremonial purposes and contending with the spirit of objects in our everyday lives.

November 21
Poetry reading
The poet Uche Nduka delivered a reading exploring the surreal frequencies of poetic language. This was followed by a musical performance by Nonhlanhla Kheswa.