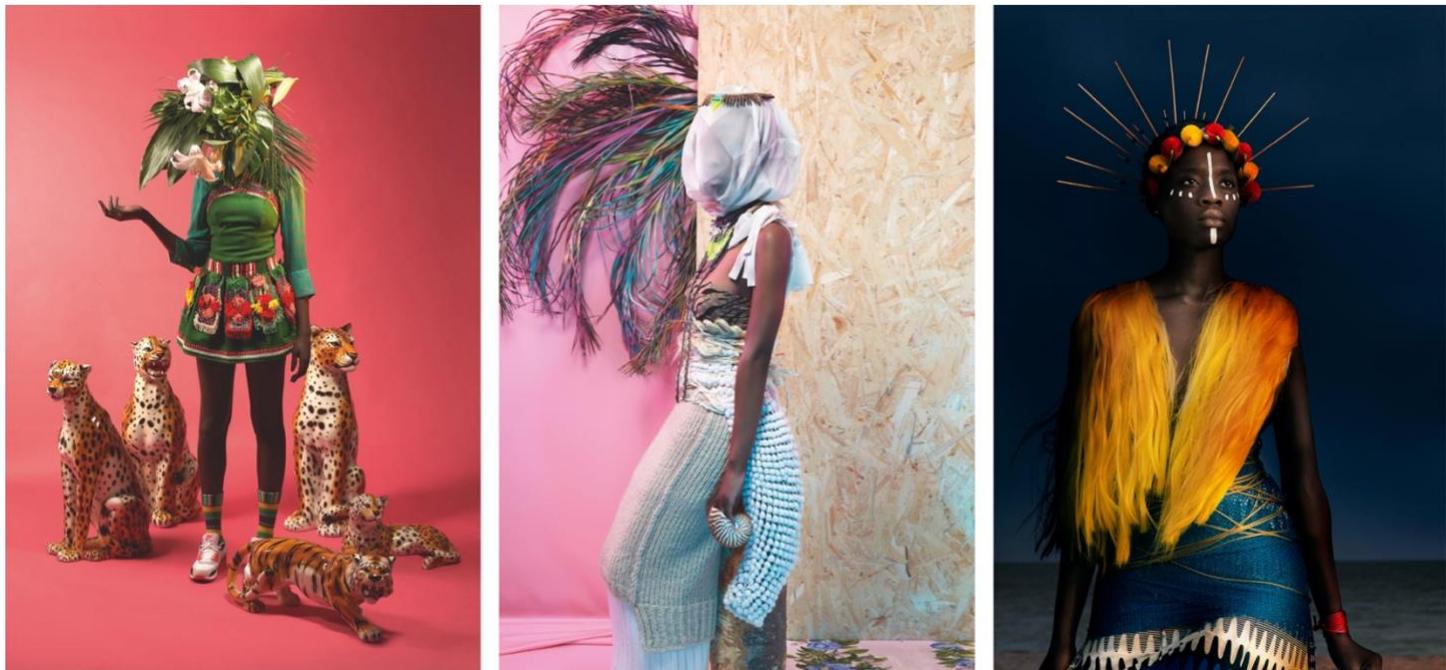


## *Namsa Leuba: Crossed Looks*



### About this Teaching Resource:

This packet features artwork from *Namsa Leuba: Crossed Looks* which is featured at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston from August 27 – December 11, 2021. This packet is intended as a tool to help you look at art with your children/students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussions by reviewing the background information provided. Then use the Questions for Viewing below and artwork reproductions to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. In general, questions for younger audiences are listed first followed by progressively more complex ideas. Feel free to adapt the suggested activities according to the age group you are working with. We encourage you to check out the [Halsey Institute's blog](#) for articles related to the show, as well as interviews with some of the artists.

Share your teaching stories with us! If you use these materials, let us know by email at [halseytours@cofc.edu](mailto:halseytours@cofc.edu)

### About the *Crossed Looks* exhibition:

Namsa Leuba's images are influenced by the Animist traditions of her mother's family in Guinea Conakry, and the visual codes of statues, masquerades, and religious ceremonies in West Africa. They are also inspired by contemporary fashion and design. The result is a unique perspective that straddles reality and fantasy. She re-stages and constructs narrative scenes in collaboration with her

sitters, incorporating bold colors, striking patterns, and intricate clothing and props. Leuba often uses models that she informally meets in the street, who become active collaborators in the portraits. Leuba's photographs pose fundamental questions about the medium of photography and its role in forming our understanding of the cultural "Other." Leuba states: "I have always been characterized as the Other, whether I am too 'African' to be European or too 'European' to be African. In this unique positioning, I am interested in the politics of the gaze—who is looking, who is being looked at, and the medium of which this looking occurs."

Leuba has continued her focus in challenging the visual representation of the cultural other in her newest series, *Illusions*, created in Tahiti. After living in Tahiti for over two years, Leuba collaborated with a group of transgender youths to re-stage imagery reminiscent of the "Primitivist" paintings of Paul Gauguin and "tropical" images in modern art. The series poses an ideological assault to the symbolism of Gauguin's paintings in Tahiti, which fetishized the indigenous female body and its myths of exoticism.

Through her photographs, Leuba ultimately searches for a visual sense of belonging, of finding a vocabulary that speaks to the experiences and perspectives of not fitting in one ready-made mold. The title of this exhibition, *Crossed Looks*, references this diverse perspective, creating an alternative visual proposition that transcends fixed modes of representation.

As a photographer working across documentary, fashion, and performance, Namsa Leuba's images explore the fluid visual identity of the African diaspora. With a dual heritage between Guinea and Switzerland, Leuba draws inspiration from her own experience growing up between two different cultural traditions.

You can learn even more about the exhibition and Namsa Leuba's work by watching [the recording](#) of her artist talk with *Crossed Looks* curator Joseph Gergel.

#### About the Artist, Namsa Leuba:

Namsa Leuba (b. 1982) is a Swiss-Guinean photographer and art director. Leuba studied photography at ECAL, École cantonale d'art de Lausanne/University of Art and Design in Lausanne, Switzerland, and obtained a Masters in Art Direction at ECAL.

Leuba has participated in international exhibitions including *Making Africa: A Continent of Contemporary Design* at the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain; *Africa Reframed* at Øksnehallen in Copenhagen, Denmark; *Daegu Photo Biennale* in Daegu, Korea; the *Athens Photo Festival* in Athens, Greece; *Photoquai* in Paris, France; *LagosPhoto Festival* in Lagos, Nigeria; and a performance in *Off Print* at the Tate Modern, London. In 2018, Leuba was featured in the group exhibition *African State of Mind* at New Art Exchange, London and held a solo exhibition at the Hangar Art Center, Brussels. In 2019, Leuba was featured in the special project *Focus in the Eyes* at Art Basel's VIP Lounge. In that same year, her work was included in the group exhibition *The New Black Vanguard* at Aperture in New York.

Leuba was commissioned by Nike to create the Nigerian campaign for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, and she was commissioned by *The New Yorker* to create a photographic series with emerging Afrobeats musicians in Lagos in 2018. She has produced fashion campaigns for Christian Lacroix, Edun, and La Prairie. She also collaborated with Dior to create two Lady Dior art bags. Her work has been published in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *I-D*, *Numéro*, *KALEIDOSCOPE*, *Foam*,



*Interview*, *Vice Magazine*, *New York Magazine*, *Libération*, *British Journal of Photography*, and *European Photography*. Leuba won First Prize at the Planches Contact Festival in Deauville, France in 2010. In 2012, she was awarded the PhotoGlobal Prize at the Photography Festival in Hyères, France. She was the winner of the *Magenta Foundation Flash Forward Festival* in 2013. In 2018, she was nominated for the *Foam Talent Call*.

Namsa Leuba lives and works between Switzerland and France. Learn more about Namsa Leuba at [NamsaLeuba.com](http://NamsaLeuba.com)

### **Exhibition essay:**

#### ***Beyond Looking: Seeing Namsa Leuba's Photographs***

Introduction by Katie Hirsch, director, Halsey Institute and Bryan Granger, director of exhibitions and public programs, Halsey Institute

Brilliant red bodies pose amid lush greenery. Dramatic lighting illuminates flowing ribbons and beads. While Namsa Leuba's photographs are undeniably striking visually, this aesthetic serves a deeper purpose. Leuba's vibrant use of color and theatrical staging draw us in through the act of looking, but at its core, her work is about the act of seeing. Leuba's photographs function as mirrors, shaking us from our own ingrained perceptions and asking us to consider the ways we have been taught to imagine and see people and cultures from the African continent. Whether we do so consciously or not, we carry the weight of our own visual literacy with us each time we consider an image. Driven by a long history of the camera being deployed as a weapon of colonialism, the West's perception of Africa has been fraught with racist and classist underpinnings. Leuba's images help us both to recognize this fact while also returning the power of representation back to the people who sit for her photographs.

Many of Leuba's photographs feature fantastical masks and human "statuettes" that reference both deeply rooted cultural traditions and our own expectations of material culture from the African continent. These masks and headdresses, constructed by Leuba herself, recall the masks confined to non-Western halls in museums across the globe. As longstanding agents of colonialism, the museum and culture industries have long taken agency from the African continent under the guise of universality. Leuba's photographs challenge us, the viewers, to recognize these centuries of oppression and mythmaking that have accumulated to form our ways of seeing. It is with this aim that the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston presents Leuba's first solo exhibition in the United States—*Namsa Leuba: Crossed Looks*. This publication expands upon the exhibition at a time when the United States is undergoing a reckoning with its systemic racism, which has informed generations of seeing.

Each of the three authors in [the] publication considers a different facet of Leuba's work. This variety of approaches speaks to the complicated layering at play in the artist's photographs. Joseph Gergel, curator of the *Crossed Looks* exhibition, discusses each of the series included in this volume, exploring the numerous ways in which Leuba's dual heritage between Guinea and Switzerland informs her approach. Emmanuel Iduma's essay reflects on Leuba's aesthetic choices, particularly within the context of the current push to reclaim the Black body in the fashion and art worlds. Mary Trent ruminates on Leuba's subversion of Paul Gauguin's hypersexualized paintings of Polynesian women through her use of models from Tahiti's *māhū* and *rae-rae* communities. Had endless pages been available, additional essays could have addressed the medium of photography and its role in establishing the "Other," the psychology of deeply ingrained stereotypes, the dynamic contemporary art movements and initiatives spreading across the African continent, and myriad other issues raised

in and by Leuba's work. No matter what facet of her work is explored, seeing yourself seeing is essential to understanding Namsa Leuba's work.

### Questions for Viewing:

**Reproductions of the artworks in this section have been included at the end of the packet. You can also view the pieces online by [clicking here!](#)**

Take time to look at the images in the *Kingdom of Mountains* and *Khoisan* series slowly. Close your eyes and describe the artwork from memory as best you can. Now open your eyes and look at the artworks again. Why did you remember what you remembered? Why did you forget what you forgot? Why do you think some of these details stayed in your mind after you closed your eyes?

Look at the photographs in the *Zulu Kids* series and the *Tonkōma* series. Both photographic series were made in South Africa by the same person. Would you know that just by looking at them? Do they look like they are images from the same place? What is similar between the two? What is different? What do you see in the photographs that would indicate they are made in the same area?

Imagine the subjects in two photographs from two different series could talk to each other. What would they say? How would their voice sound? What kind of questions would they ask each other? Would they be comfortable if they visited each other? Why do you think that?

Portraits often include several elements such as pose, gesture, facial expression, clothing, and props. Look at the *Mamiwata* photograph in the *Weke* series. Mimic the pose. What words describe how you feel in this pose? Look closely at gesture and facial expression. What can you tell about this person based on gesture and facial expression? How do you think this person is feeling? What might this person be thinking? What do you see that makes you say that?

Look closely at the photographs in the *Illusions* series. Do you think these photographs were taken in an African country like the other photographs in the exhibition? What do you see in the photographs that make you say that? What is similar in these images to the other photographic series in the exhibition? What is different about them? We know that Namsa Leuba works together with the person she is photographing to set up the costuming, environment, posing, etc. for their portraits so that you can see the subject how they want you to see them. What do you think some of the people in these photographs want you to know about them?

### Suggested Activities:

Choose a photograph, it can be any one in the exhibition. Write a description of the artwork to the best of your ability. Now, have a partner read that description and try to guess which photograph you are describing. Repeat this process with a series of photographs. Is it easier or harder to talk about the artworks as groups or individuals? Why do you think that is?

In a small group of three or four, choose a photograph to look at together. Take turns saying a descriptive word about the photograph, point out an object in the artwork, or say an emotion that is conveyed by the subject or the colors and lines in the photograph. How long are you able to go around the circle? Repeat this activity with two more photographs. Does it get easier to notice small details or feel emotions from the photographs are you practice? Why do you think that is?

Namsa Leuba creates photographs that share aspects of communities and people in African countries and regions. She does this in collaboration with the subjects in the photographs so they share their identity together. Many visitors to the exhibition will be surprised to see images of African people that are very different than those in their history textbooks or in popular culture. What do you think people would be surprised to learn about you or your culture? With an adult's permission, use a variety of personal photographs, magazines, old books, scrap papers, or found objects to make a collage using glue, scissors, and construction paper and your variety of materials that communicates aspects of yourself, your home, your community and/or your own culture. What does the word "Home" mean to you? Remember, home can mean something different for everyone. It can be as literal as a house, apartment, city, or town. It can be your favorite toy, comfort food, or a certain scent. Is there a story in your family about how your family came to the United States? Are your parents or caregivers from two very different kinds of families? Do you have talents or skills that were taught to you by someone in your family? The collage can show your national, cultural, or religious identity.

Using a blank sheet of paper, brainstorming things people think about you based on how you look or the things you do, especially things that are not necessarily true. Examples: "People think I am a trouble-maker because I skateboard" or "People think I like pink because I am a girl." Now, write a poem based on stereotypes of your own identity. Debunk the stereotypes by writing positive traits about yourself.

Write 5-line poems like this:

Just because I am a girl,  
Doesn't mean I like to shop  
Doesn't mean I am boy crazy  
Doesn't mean I can't play sports  
*I am a loyal friend.*

Just because I am young,  
Doesn't mean I am naïve  
Doesn't mean I don't care  
Doesn't mean I will "understand someday"  
*I am a human being*

Poetry in Motion: When exploring *Namsa Leuba: Crossed Looks* a lot of descriptive words will come to mind. A fun activity may be using those words to create a poem or song about your favorite photograph, one of the series, or even the whole exhibition. You can work by yourself or with your group, write down single words that pop in your mind, for example: vibrant, serious, exciting. Then once your words are collected, string them together to make a song or poem!

## **Related Readings available through our partners at the Charleston County Public Library:**

### **Nonfiction**

*Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*, edited by Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter

*Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*, Darby English and Charlotte Bara

*Young, Gifted, and Black: A New Generation of Artists: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art*, edited Antwaun Sargent

*See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore*

*Museum of Art*, edited by Frederick John Lamp

*Art Beyond the West: The Art of Africa, India and Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Korea, the Pacific, and the Americas*, Michael Kampen O'Riley

*Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*, Pamela McClusky

*Art of the Senses: African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection*, edited by Suzanne Preston Blier

*The African Lookbook: A Visual History of 100 Years of African Women*, Catherine E. McKinley; introduction by Edwidge Danticat; foreword by Jacqueline Woodson

*Who Will Pay Reparations On My Soul? Essays*, Jesse McCarthy

*Black Futures*, edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham

*Lorna Simpson*, Okwui Enwezor; curator's foreword by Helaine Posner; essay by Hilton Als; conversation with the artist, Isaac Julien, and Thelma Golden; with a preface by Shamim M. Momin

*Known and Strange Things: Essays*, Teju Cole

*Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*, Akwaeke Emezi

*Aftershocks: A Memoir*, Nadia Owusu



### **Fiction**

*What We Lose*, Zinzi Clemmons

*Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo

*Open Water*, Caleb Azumah Nelson

Make sure to check the [CCPL's online catalog](#), where you can read summaries, professional reviews, and, in some cases, excerpts from the titles on this list.

## **Related Readings that are available through the Hoopla Application (browser and smartphone) with Charleston County Public Library:**

There are more than 35 titles in the [African Expressive Cultures](#) series in the Hoopla collection.

*African Art and the Colonial Encounter* (African Expressive Cultures series), Sidney Littlefield Kasfir

*African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear*, (African Expressive

Cultures series), Victoria L. Rovine

*Out of the Dark Night*, Achille Mbembe

*Portraiture and Photography in Africa* (African Expressive Cultures series), John Peffer; edited by

Elisabeth L. Cameron

[Click here](#) to learn more about Hoopla, explore the catalog, and download the app.

## **Related Readings available through the College of Charleston's Addlestone Library:**

Search the Addlestone Library's [catalog online here](#).

### **Books**

*Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa Shades of Empire*, Lorena Rizzo

*Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, Darren Newbury

*Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*, Robin Comley

*Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa*, Jennifer Bajorek

### **Articles**

Terence Ranger, "Colonialism, Consciousness and the Camera" *Past & Present*, vol. 171, no. 1, Oxford University

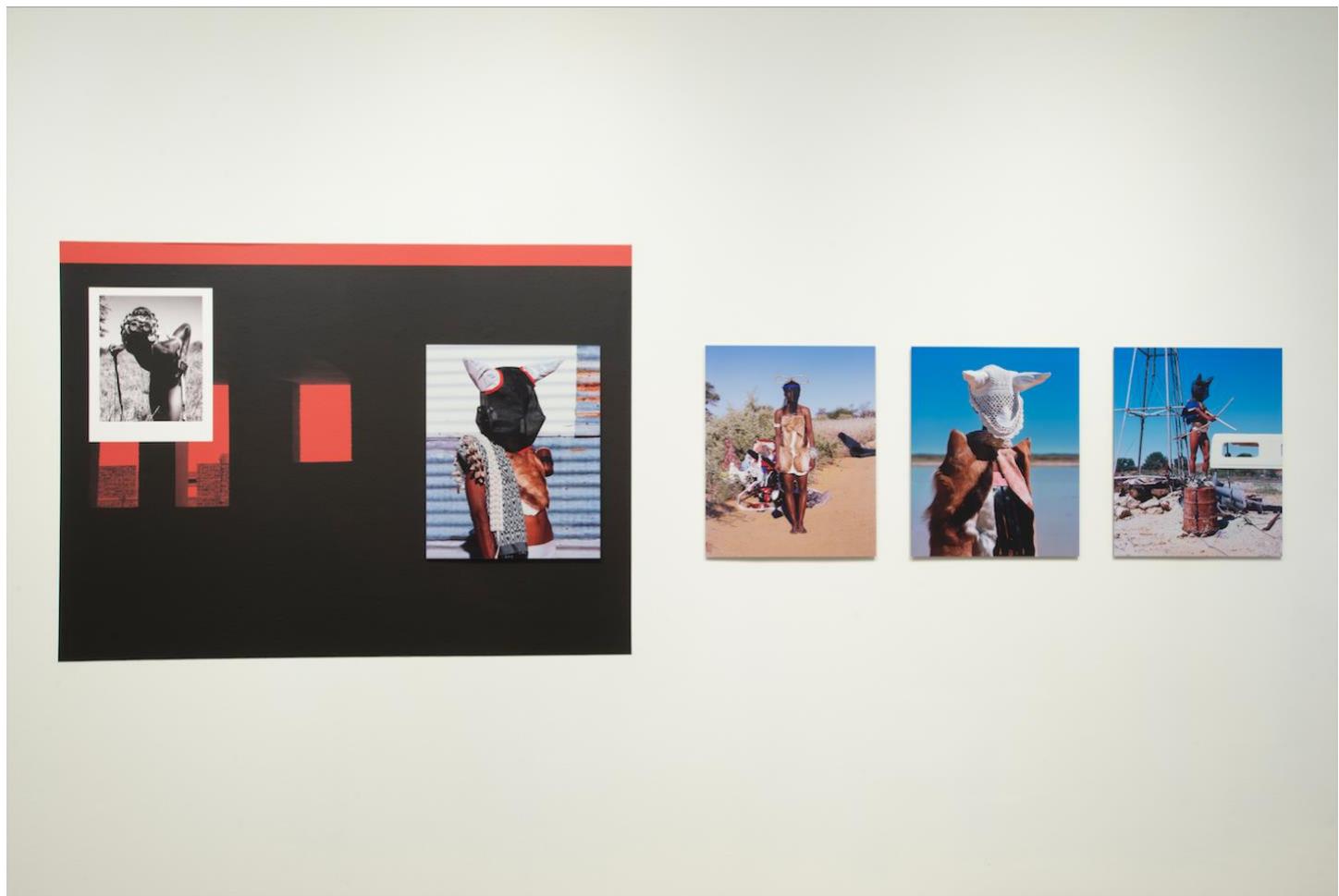
## Artwork Images:

Reproduced below are images of the artworks referenced in the “Questions for Viewing” section. You can view more images of the pieces on the *Crossed Looks* exhibition page of our website by [clicking here](#). We created a virtual version of the exhibition that is accessible [here](#).

*Kingdom of Mountains* series, South Africa, 2014. Installation view and individual works.



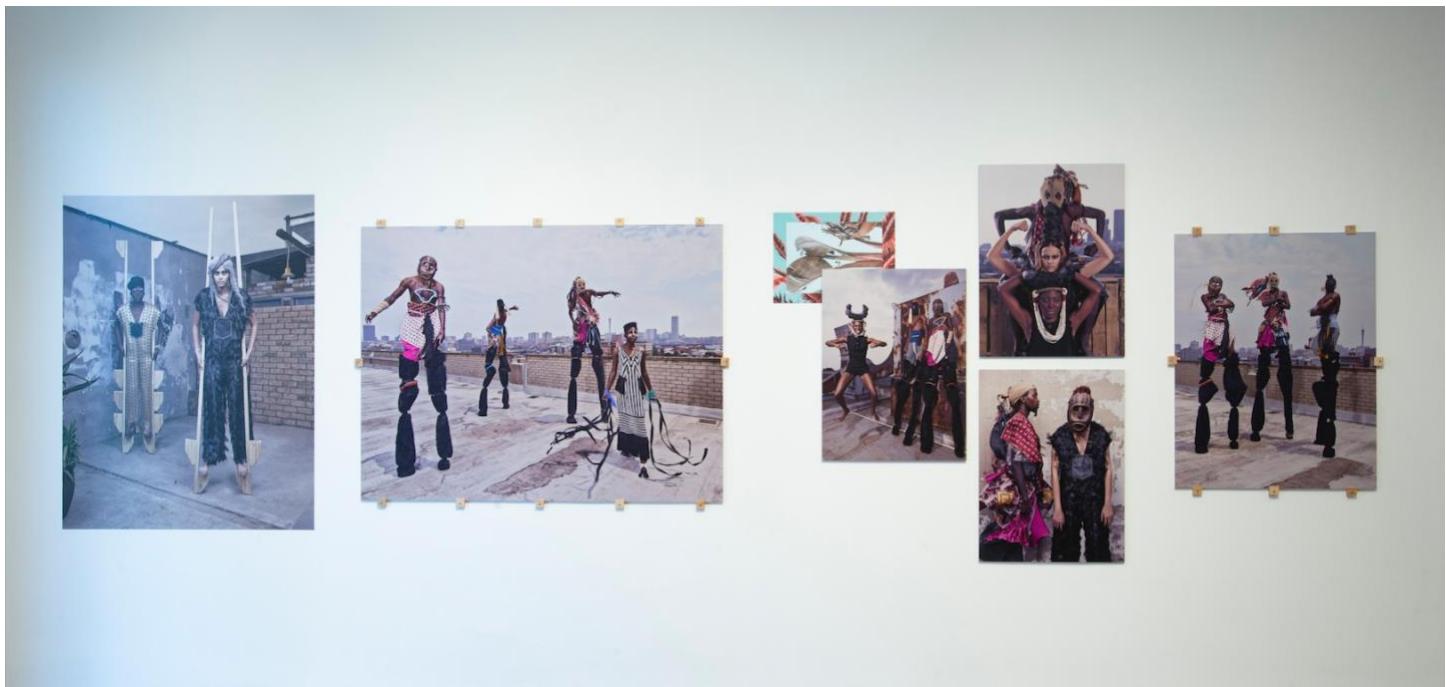
*Khoisan series*, South Africa, 2014. Installation view and individual works.



*Zulu Kids* series, South Africa, 2014. Installation view and individual works.



Tonkōma series, South Africa, 2015. Installation view and individual works.



*Mamiwata*, 2017, archival pigment print on Dibond, from the *Weke* series, Benin



*Illusions* series, Tahiti, 2019. Installation view and individual works.

