

Fabrice Monteiro, [Untitled #7 from The Prophecy](#), 2014



Color inkjet print, 38 1/8 x 53 7/8 inches

J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2020.10

Gaïa, the mother earth, exhausted by her incapacity to maintain the natural cycles of the planet in the face of new modes of life and consumption, resolves to send her djinns, to let them appear to the humans and deliver a message of warning and empowerment.

– Fabrice Monteiro ¹

¹ Alexander, Michael, "Senegal Pollution = Trashion Art," *Conscious Living TV*, <https://consciouslivingtv.com/triple-bottom-line/senegal-pollution-trashion-art.html>

Artist's Biography

Fabrice Monteiro (Belgian/Beninese, active in Senegal, b. 1972) is a contemporary photographer based in Dakar, Senegal. His work, which regularly appears in internationally recognized exhibitions and displays, unites elements of fashion photography, photojournalism, and portraiture, to raise questions about society, politics, religion and history. Born in Belgium to a Belgian mother and a Beninese father, Monteiro grew up in Benin. As a young man, he returned to Europe and trained to be an engineer, but instead fell into a successful career as a fashion model. While Monteiro was living in New York from 2007–2008, photographer Alfonse Pagano became his mentor as Monteiro began reinventing himself as a photographer. At first, Monteiro practiced fashion photography—a genre with which he was very familiar—but soon felt compelled to produce works that addressed issues important to him.

The subject matter and underlying themes in Monteiro's photographs often reflect aspects of his transnational identity. For example, his series *Marrons, Les esclaves fugitifs (Maroons: The Fugitive Slaves)* (2011) stems from the history of one of Monteiro's ancestors, a man with the Yoruba name Ayedabo Adogun Odo, who was given the Portuguese name Monteiro when he was enslaved in Brazil. The photographs in *Marrons* comprise portraits of black men wearing reproductions of various shackles used to subdue and punish slaves.² Through his portraits of West African men re-enacting disturbing truths of an economy sustained by slave trade, Monteiro confronts oppressive commodification of the Black body for financial gain. In his words, "See, this is what we are able to do to our equals in the name of nothing but money. Racialism and later racism were nothing but alibis to justify that treatment."³

The Prophecy, another photographic series by Monteiro begun in 2013, raises a set of ethical questions related to the environment, abuse of natural resources, and the effects of mass consumption. Similar to *Marrons*, which exposes realities of an unjust economic system, *The Prophecy* portrays contemporary issues dealing with environmental justice and their complex relationships with sustainability.⁴ After Monteiro transitioned from modeling to photography, he settled in Dakar, Senegal, a vibrant center for art and culture in West Africa. Dakar is situated on the Atlantic coast, which also made the city attractive to Monteiro, who enjoys surfing. However, Monteiro was shocked by the pollution he encountered on the beaches, as well as in the city and its suburbs. He decided to start a new project combining storytelling, fashion photography, and photojournalism to highlight site-specific environmental issues within the context of West African culture and traditional beliefs.

² The series *Marrons* can be viewed here, though the viewer is warned that the images may induce trauma: <https://fabricemonteiro.viewbook.com/marrons>

³ Libsekal, Missla, "Fabrice Monteiro: Marron, A Beautiful Nightmare on Shackles and Slavery," *Another Africa* (January 7, 2014)

⁴ The series *The Prophecy* can be viewed here: <https://fabricemonteiro.viewbook.com/>

Initially, Monteiro intended the photographs to be illustrations for a book designed to teach Senegalese youth about ecological problems, like garbage and littering. He hoped the book and his photographs would inspire children and their families to change their behaviors. Instead, the ongoing project evolved into a series of fine art photographs raising awareness about environmental issues in Africa, Australia, and the Americas. Monteiro plans to continue producing prophecies around the world. He created the eighth prophecy about threats to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The two most recent prophecies—numbers 13 and 14—confront capitalist-driven environmental destruction affecting Native communities in South and North America, respectively, gold mining in Columbia and coal mining in Texas.

The versatility of Monteiro's work is apparent from the wide range of exhibitions that have featured it globally: from *Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women* at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, to shows of African photography such as *Afrika - im Blick der Fotografen* (*Africa – in the View of Photographers*) at the Weltkulturerbe Völkinger Hütte, Germany. In 2019, the Chazen Museum of Art hosted the first exhibition in the United States of what at the time was the full series of thirteen photographs. The exhibition was part of an extended, cross-disciplinary program at UW–Madison interrogating the long-term effects of plantation economies on the environment.⁵

⁵ For information on the UW-Madison program, see: <https://humanities.wisc.edu/research/plantationocene/>; for information on plantation economies, see: <https://edgeeffects.net/plantation-legacies-plantationocene/>

Location

Untitled #7 is installed in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Untitled, #7 from *The Prophecy* is a large color inkjet print created by Fabrice Monteiro. Produced in 2014, the photograph measures three feet, two and one eighth inches by four feet, five and seven-eighths inches and is horizontal in orientation. The photograph depicts two figures in a rundown interior setting. In the center of the photograph, a dark-skinned figure kneels with arms folded in front of their waist and hands overlapping. Their head points downward and their eyes are closed. Their entire body is wrapped in clear plastic wrap and a patterned blue piece of cloth-like material hangs from their shoulders like a cape and extends onto the floor like the train of a dress. A wire cage-like petticoat functions as a skirt and extends outward from the figure's waist. The figure also wears a series of long necklaces, a decorative arm band on their upper left arm, and bracelets around each wrist. The figure kneels in shallow water of an interior space. Assorted objects float in the water around the figure including domestic objects like metal pans, plates, and a bucket. A red toy fire truck and stuffed animal lie directly in front of the figure. Behind and to the left of this figure, another person is seen. A dark-skinned male is lying on his back, legs bent at the knees, barefoot, with one hand resting on his stomach. He wears a white t-shirt and red track pants rolled up at the knee. He is lying on a cot inside a small alcove created between two remnants of brick wall. A white curtain hangs from a metal rod inside the doorway of this space. The roof of this alcove is made with corrugated metal held down by bricks. To the left and slightly behind this alcove and the kneeling figure, a brightly lit room is seen. The room has a narrow opening and glows yellow as if a lamp is inside. A patterned curtain hangs in the doorway, glimpses of nondescript furniture can be seen, and a small photograph hangs on the wall. To the right of this room, two closed green doors almost meet the corner of a long interior wall. This concrete wall was once painted as evidenced by the rusty orange top quarter, but the paint has eroded revealing stained concrete underneath. Numbers resembling a mathematical formula are written in the painted section of this wall with the number 07640 underneath. Weathered corrugated metal acts as a roof over this whole room though it sits loosely atop two long wooden beams and does not entirely enclose the room. A green plastic bin and a small blue broom sit atop the left edge of the roof while what resembles a large blue and green tea kettle hangs from a white rope. A dark blue sky, suggesting evening, is seen in the background of the photograph.

Content and Context

Untitled #7, from Fabrice Monteiro's series *The Prophecy*, depicts a *djinn*—a spirit in Senegalese folklore—emerging from stagnant water in a flooded home in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar, Senegal. The city and its suburbs regularly flood during the rainy season due to a lack of resources to plan, build, and maintain adequate drainage systems. Flood waters, which often become polluted, disrupt lives by closing schools and businesses, driving people from their homes, and in some cases causing death. In September 2020, the entire city of Dakar was hit with a record amount of water—a year's worth of rain in a single day. In recent years, Pikine Irrégulier Sud, a housing settlement within the municipality of Pikine, has especially suffered from flooding exacerbated by erratic weather resulting from climate change. The area was originally developed during a prolonged period of drought, when its low-lying marshlands were a preferable alternative to parched land. However, more storms during the rainy season regularly fill the flood-prone neighborhood with fetid pools of water.

Untitled #7 represents one issue on a list of environmental threats that inspired Monteiro when he began conceptualizing *The Prophecy* series. Assuming the role of a *griot*, a storyteller in West African traditions, Monteiro formulated a narrative which he then dramatized and photographed at sites representative of the different ecological problems. As in *Untitled #7*, the seventh prophecy in the series, each of the color photographs depicts a djinn materializing, for example, in garbage heaps, fire-ravaged forests, motor vehicle exhaust, eroded coastlines, and polluted waters. The end result is a pantheon of deities, rooted in the ancient traditions of multiple cultures and brought together to send a common message relevant around the world. As Monteiro tells the story, Gaïa, mother and guardian of Earth in Greek mythology, calls upon the djinns to reveal themselves to warn humankind that its ways of living are unsustainable and will ultimately devastate the planet.

To dramatize his apocalyptic tale, Monteiro collaborated with Ecofund, an online community advocating for the preservation of Earth's natural environments, and Senegalese fashion designer Doulsy (aka Jah Gal), who created costumes that materially signify each ecological concern. Inspired in part by African masquerades and evoking haute couture, the designs incorporate tar, rubbish, nylon fishing nets, animal remains, firewood, rubber tires, and electronic waste. At once beautiful and horrifying, the djinns offer no solutions to the problems they portray. As in African masquerade culture—in which masked and costumed dancers ritually transform into ancestors or spirits—evocative costumes make present an otherwise invisible force so the viewer can engage with it. Monteiro's djinns conjure the souls of landscapes altered and erased by humans, but in so doing also embody unseen, transformative effects of those environmental changes on the people who live and survive there.

For the djinn in *Untitled #7*, Jah Gal tightly wrapped the model's entire body and face in plastic wrap. The blue plastic cloth forming a long cloak extending behind the model into the water is a type of floor covering used in Senegal. Monteiro and Jah Gal thus envisioned the spirit rising, like the flood waters, from the ground beneath the home. The djinn was inspired in part by Mami Wata, a water goddess associated with wealth and fortune in West Africa and the Caribbean. In Monteiro's photograph,



however, Mami Wata appears immobilized; a portent of lives stifled by economic and environmental misfortune. The plastic-wrap costume, intended to function as a low-tech special effect of watery skin, at once reveals a body trapped and suffocating. The djinn thus symbolizes both the floodwaters and their effect on the people who cannot afford to leave their homes in Pikine behind. Instead, they live in pools of water. Some of the family's possessions—toys and household items—soak in the flood waters. The resident of the home lies in a small dark room on the left where the floor is elevated, and the doorway to the right of the djinn has been shortened in attempts to raise the level of the floor with added sand, demonstrating the inhabitants' adaptation to their new, unpleasant environment.

It is significant that the metamorphoses of place and body in *Untitled #7* is set in a impoverished neighborhood in Africa, a continent exploited for centuries through colonialism and racial oppression to profit others. Today, ongoing wealth disparity ensures that the world's poorest peoples will suffer more acutely from environmental pressures—like climate change, pollution, overfishing, and mining—than the economic powers that benefit most from the industries driving those problems. Together, the flooded home, water-soaked possessions, trapped homeowner, and immobilized spirit in *Untitled #7* implore us to see and contemplate one family's fraught relationship with the environment. The scene challenges each of us to consider how our own consumption and quality of life affects both the future of the planet and the lives of others. What we do with that knowledge is up to us.

Discussion Questions

1. Is there evidence of a sustainability message in this work? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Compare and contrast the two figures in this photograph. How are they alike and how are they different? What is their relationship, if any?
3. The central figure in the photograph has been wrapped entirely in plastic wrap. What was the artist's intention here? What do you see that makes you say that?
4. Today, ongoing wealth disparity ensures that the world's poorest nations will suffer more acutely from environmental pressures. Imagine the djinn, or central figure, appearing in a wealthy area. How would seeing the djinn in a prosperous urban area change the message of this work?
5. Think of an environmental crisis currently affecting your community. If you had to create a djinn based on that environmental crisis, what would it look like? What materials might you need for its costume? Where would the djinn be located?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Not all these artworks are currently on view; click the titles of each to determine if they are currently on view in the museum, and in which gallery.*

Unknown (Nigerian, Ijo People), [Ekine Masquerade Headdress for Water Spirits](#), mid-20th century.
Wood, pigment, metal, 21 1/2 in. high x 8 1/2 in. diam. Gift of Michael Oliver, Class of 1966, 2001.6

This masquerade headdress of the Ijo people in Nigeria represents concepts similar to those Monteiro employed in *Untitled #7*. The abstract, tubular eyes evoke the all-seeing water spirits while the facial scarifications and mouth suggest humanity. The birds gathered on top carry messages between spirits and humans. *Ekine* is a men's society that performs masquerades in devotion to water spirits.

Phyllis Galembo (American, b. 1952), [Okpo Masquerade, Calabar South, Nigeria](#), 2005; printed 2008.
Ilfochrome print, 49 3/4 x 49 11/16 in. Ruth C. Wallerstein Endowment Fund purchase, 2009.3

This work is one from a series of photographic portraits of masqueraders. Anonymity is an integral part of the Okpo masquerade, in which the mask transforms a human into a spirit. The Okpo costume features a knitted body mask with *ekete* basket elements made of palm frond shoots surmounting the head and shoulders of the adolescent boy wearer.



Unknown (Ivorian, Guro People), [Seri Mask Honoring Mami Wata](#), 1960s. Wood, enamel paint, 21 9/16 x 12 9/16 x 6 1/8 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2001.8

Seri masquerades entertain, surprise, and delight dance competition spectators with inventiveness and agility. Mami Wata—a water spirit worshipped throughout Africa—crowns this mask. Her image is based on a nineteenth-century German image of a snake charmer that came to Africa around 1900, denoting her association with international commerce and wealth. Her presence in Seri celebrates beauty, prosperity, status, and modernity.

Alison Saar (American, b. 1956), [Stanch](#), 2017. Woodcut on vintage linen seed sacks, 42 x 20 3/4 in. Transfer from Tandem Press, 2020.8.53 and Alison Saar (American, b. 1956), [Breach](#), 2017. Woodcut on vintage linen seed sacks, 42 1/4 x 20 1/4 in. Transfer from Tandem Press, 2020.8.56

These pendants by Alison Saar depict Black Americans displaced and migrating from their homes as the result of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Saar undertook her research of this historical flood in response to destruction she observed in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina, which disproportionately affected people of color and the poor. Alongside Monteiro's photograph of the flooded home in Pikine, comparisons and contrasts might be observed between the representations of the human bodies in floodwaters and the material objects that characterize homes and identities.

Additional Resources

Auslander, Mark, "By Iron Possessed: Fabrice Monteiro's Maroons: The Fugitive Slaves," *African Arts* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2016): 62-67: https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/AFAR_a_00300

Grist, *Environmental Justice, Explained* (January 26, 2016), 3 minutes, 33 seconds:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dREtXUij6_c

Hay, Mark, "A Flood of Good Intentions in Senegal," *Good* (April 2, 2015):
<https://www.good.is/articles/pikine-senegal-flood-basins-living-with-water>

Juzga, Marcia, *Documentary The Prophecy / Dakar, Senegal* (August 9, 2015), 18 minutes, 51 seconds:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZi_i-LauzY [see 5:18 for footage related to *Untitled #7*]

Kimani, Natalie, "Fabrice Monteiro: The Art of Conversation through Photography," *The Designers Studio* (April 6, 2018): <https://tdsblog.com/fabrice-monteiro/>

Libsekal, Missla, "Fabrice Monteiro: Marron, A Beautiful Nightmare on Shackles and Slavery," *Another Africa* (January 7, 2014): <http://www.anotherafrica.net/art-culture/fabrice-monteiro-marron-a-beautiful-nightmare-on-shackles-slavery>

Monteiro, Fabrice, *The 14th Prophecy – The People under the Coal* (June 24, 2020), 4 minutes, 29 seconds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xTb4An23K4>

ProPublica, *A Brief History of Environmental Justice* (August 4, 2017), 3 minutes, 35 seconds:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30xLg2HHg8Q>

Reliefweb, *Flood control in Dakar's informal settlements*, (January 20, 2016):
<https://reliefweb.int/report/senegal/flood-control-dakar-s-informal-settlements>

Reuters, "NowThis News: Dakar, Senegal, Hit with Year's Worth of Rain in One Night," *MSN.com* (September 12, 2020), 3 minutes, 4 seconds: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/other/dakar-senegal-hit-with-year-s-worth-of-rain-in-one-night/vi-BB18WUlv>

Smith, Elliot, "Record Flooding Hammers the African Sahel, the Latest in a Series of Shocks," *CNBC* (September 10, 2020): <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/10/record-flooding-hammers-the-african-sahel-the-latest-in-a-series-of-shocks.html>