

DAKAR



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Emmanuel Tussore, *De Cruce (Crucifixion)*, 2022, wood, metal, sand, dimensions variable. Installation view, Palais de Justice, Dakar. From the 14th Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art.

14th Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art

VARIOUS VENUES

On the opening day of this year's Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art, visitors to the Ancien Palais de Justice could hear chanting emanating from Yrneh Gabon Brown's *A Salted Intermission*, 2020–22, long before entering the gallery that housed the work. The Jamaican American artist stood at the door, addressing his guests in Wolof—*Horom, Horom, Horom! Ndox Lac Rose!*—while requesting visitors “pay” a symbolic offering by scooping sea salt from one bucket into another. Inside, a painted canoe rested on a mound of bone-white seashells, alluding to the port city's centrality not just to the global salt trade, but also to the Middle Passage and its legacies. Miniature sculptures of laborers were perched on buckets of salt water, harvesting their crystalline compounds into ceramic dishes. Brown's fascination with salt's chemical, economic, ecological, and colonial dimensions was sparked by a visit he made five years ago to Senegal's Lac Rose, or Pink Lake, one of Africa's most saline bodies of water. The gallery's atmosphere was thick and savory—dense with layers of historical and cultural entanglement. Notable for its use of place-specific, natural elements, Brown's installation was one of many poignant responses to the Biennial's theme, “*INDAFFA#*,” or Forger / Out of the Fire, in the Senegalese language Serer. Gesturing to processes of creation and invention, the exhibition was initially slated for the Biennial's 2020 edition, which was postponed at the pandemic's onset. Since then, the collective experience of lockdowns, mass grief, activist uprisings, and intensifying climate disasters has added fuel to Dak'Art's call for visionary and transformative thinking.

Nearly sixty artists from the continent and its diasporas were selected by El Hadji Malick Ndiaye and four cocurators to take part in the Biennial. The Biennial's “In” (the title refers to the official, institutional exhibition and four affiliated “special projects”) sprawled across ten venues, while hundreds of independently curated shows (the “Off”) were mounted throughout Dakar. At the Musée Theodore Monod d'Art Africain, contemporary art was interspersed with the museum's historical holdings, binding past to present. There, a subversively hybridized Ku'ngang mask made by Central African Cameroonian Hervé Youmbi (in collaboration with Bamileke artists from Cameroon) was displayed alongside original examples in the museum collection, while François Knoetze crafted a dense web of masklike forms from electronics debris. In Ibrahima Thiam's installation on the lawn in front of the museum, three pairs of vinyl photographs mounted on opposing sides of standing, hinged wooden frames juxtaposed archival images with enigmatic reinterpretations of Lébu mythology.

The “In” projects brought visitors to iconic sites across Dakar, among them the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine and the Musée des Civilisations Noires, but the main draw was the eclectic work on view at the Palais de Justice. Standout projects included Emmanuel Tussore's *De Cruce (Crucifixion)*, 2022, an immersive installation of crucified tree trunks; Kaloki Nyamai's monumental draped collage *Kumavau Nginya Vaa (From There to Here)*, 2021, which depicts an intergenerational dialogue between two African women; and Karem Ibrahim's enigmatic sculpture *Rotten Eggs*, 2022, a monumental steel construction covered in sulfur and cracked eggs. Deploying the symbolism of rot, the latter work instigated conversation surrounding political, ethical, and social decay. The strongest works in “*INDAFFA#*” posited transformation as something holistic and nonlinear that fuses destruction and renewal, life and death. This idea was powerfully conveyed in Beya Gille Gache's mixed-media installation *L'autre royaume (The Other Kingdom)*, 2022, in which a life-size sculpture of a child draped in mud cloth stands in a well beneath a crumbling laterite edifice. Covered in a skin of indigo-hued beadwork, she gazes upward as if she were emerging from the charcoal in which her feet are planted. Akin to Brown's salt-based installation, elemental materials were marshaled here to remind us why, and for whom, we must repair our social and ecological systems—perhaps while casting our era's most toxic paradigms to the fire.

— *Allison Young*

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