

Exhibition: *Imagining Black Diasporas: 21st-Century Art and Poetics*

Dates: December 15, 2024–August 3, 2025

Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image captions on page 5)

(Los Angeles, CA—October 31, 2024) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Imagining Black Diasporas: 21st-Century Art and Poetics*. Illuminating aesthetic connections among 60 artists working in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are among the first to examine nearly a quarter century of production by Black artists.

“Diaspora” is a word typically associated with displacement. People move and are forcibly moved, and their cultures disperse. But diasporas also provoke creative acts of survival, as people reinvent their heritage through art. Artists featured in the exhibition interpret their heritage through the clues and motifs their predecessors left behind. Some reflect on the impact of the slave trade, while others respond to migrants’ experiences in this century.

Imagining Black Diasporas expands the Pan-African exhibition canon, which has historically focused on the Black Atlantic by showcasing artists working adjacent to the Pacific. The exhibition presents artists across generations including established makers Igshaan Adams, Mark Bradford, Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Deana Lawson, Ibrahim Mahama, Abdoulaye Ndoye, Wangechi Mutu, Lorna Simpson, and Yinka Shonibare. The works of emerging and mid-career artists Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Josué Azor, Samuel de Saboia, Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo, Chioma Ebinama, Chelsea Odufu, Zohra Opoku, and Alberta Whittle are presented with L.A.–based artists including Edgar Arceneaux, Widline Cadet, Patrisse Cullors, Awol Erizku, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya.

The exhibition is curated by Dhyandra Lawson, Andy Song Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA.

“Often art historians focus on Black artists’ biographies or write evocative accounts of their experiences of oppression, before critically examining their innovations or use of materials,” said Lawson. “Diaspora’s general definition as a displacement from origins excludes all the creativity the term entails. *Imagining Black Diasporas* highlights Black artists’ aesthetic decisions to amplify their insights.”

“With more than half of the artworks on view recently acquired for LACMA’s collection, *Imagining Black Diasporas* is an extension of the museum’s commitment to Black artists working everywhere and points to the future of even more global collections of contemporary art at LACMA,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director.

Exhibition Organization

Seventy works of painting, sculpture, photography, works on paper, and time-based media are organized into four themes: speech and silence, movement and transformation, imagination, and representation.

The first section, **Speech and Silence**, explores the power and limitations of language. Speaking out or staying quiet can have fatal consequences. Artists across regions use the written word as a visual motif and explore the aesthetic language of quiet and erasure. In tandem, silence is also examined as a creative state, anticipating speech like a pause before a beat.

In **Movement and Transformation** artists depict the human body in motion, examining histories of migration and the transformational power of movement. In this section artists move their bodies to enact or resist confinement, from a work depicting a dancer’s body flowing in a copper mine in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, to dancing in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Diaspora is vast and crowded. The artists featured in **Imagination** use abstraction and collage to examine a cacophony of experiences. Here, fragmentation is a key aesthetic strategy that interrogates the authority of images and the erasures embedded within them. Abstracted landscapes frame diaspora as psychological terrain, while reinterpretations of imagery from museum catalogues, history books, print media, and the internet create complex layers of meaning.

Dehumanizing pictures of Black people justified European conquest throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite such portrayals, in 1839, American abolitionist Frederick Douglass identified the power of photography to transform how people saw one another and themselves. The exhibition’s final section, Representation, presents a series of portraits and self-portraits by photographers who

critically engage with the history of the medium, from its role in imperialism to the politics of looking and being seen. The artists create depictions related to longing and disappearance, putting themselves at the centers of their personal or ancestral migration stories.

Exhibition Highlights

Igshaan Adams grew up in Bonteheuwel, a predominantly working-class township in southeast Cape Town. The designs of his beaded textiles like ***Aunty Lovey se Kombuis (2022)*** are inspired by the geometric patterns found in linoleum floors common in homes throughout the township. With glass beads, shells, and wires, Adams highlights the material aspects of domestic spaces along with the memories held within them. The works' geometry also resembles the patterns that form in the soil when people cross racially segregated borders that separate the townships.

The portraits in **Sandra Brewster's Blur** series (2017–20) have the materiality of a wallet-sized photographic keepsakes with the presence of towering sculptures—spanning 20 feet high. Brewster's parents were part of a large Guyanese migration to Canada and the United States during the 1960s and '70s after Guyana gained its independence from Dutch and British control in 1966. The Brewster family arrived in Toronto from Guyana in the 1960s, settling in the immigrant-dense suburb of Pickering when the artist was nine. Throughout her life, Brewster has observed the challenges immigrants in her community face.

Widline Cadet works in Los Angeles as an artist and professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is known for a distinct visual language that explores visibility, Black femininity, and interiority. In the self-portrait ***Seremoni Disparisyon #1 (Ritual [Dis]Appearance #1) (2019)***, she uses photography to examine her experience as a Black woman who migrated to the United States from Haiti and the acts of survival her relocation entailed.

In ***KAMARIA KPATASCO GRC (2019)***, **Ibrahim Mahama** depicts the tattooed forearm of a migrant and friend of the artist, on top of leather he salvaged from passenger seats from the Gold Coast Railway in Ghana. The British government ordered the construction of the Gold Coast Railway in the 1890s to transport military machinery, mined resources, and produce. The leather background in *KAMARIA KPATASCO GRC* loosely resembles the shape of the continents of Europe and Africa, suggesting interactions between the Global North and the Global South, as well as those between cities in Ghana.

Frida Orupabo searches platforms like Google, Instagram, and Pinterest, collaging digital images into otherworldly compositions. Orupabo's collages such as ***Untitled (2018)*** and ***Untitled (Sources unknown except Shadman Shahid [bottom left]) (2019)*** are fantastic and often grotesque. Arms and legs bend in irregular directions; subjects defy the logic of space and scale. Orupabo's practice evokes the

nonsensical way the mind constructs images in dreams and intervenes in the way Black people have been historically seen and portrayed.

Adam Pendleton has said he became fascinated with language when the so-called stand-your-ground laws in force in thirty-eight of the 50 U.S. states gained widespread attention amid Black Lives Matter protests. Pendleton said he wanted to create a language that could stand its ground. Pendleton's *Our Ideas #4 (2018–19)* comprises 32 prints the artist assembled into a grid. Repurposing images of tribal masks from African Chokwe, Punu, and Dogon tribes, ceremonial artifacts, and photographs of Black people, he overlaid these with shapes and phrases that symbolically threaten to overflow their frames. Pendleton creates a space where the urban collides with the rural, the refined with the barbaric, and the white with the black.

In *Dibujo Intercontinental (2017)*, Cuban artist **Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo** wrapped a rope around her waist and tied it to a wooden boat, attempting to drag it across a piazza in Venice, Italy during the 2017 biennale. The rope is the line—the drawing—that connects Delahante Matienzo to her Chinese and African ancestors.

Lorna Simpson began composing icy landscapes on panels with photographic imagery, paint, and ink in 2016. Drawn to the linguistic connections of ice to isolation and to the solemn majesty of night landscapes, Simpson has developed a meditative, at times disquieting, series of landscapes. For *Detached Night (2019)*, she layered silkscreened images of glaciers and smoke, dripping indigo acrylic onto fiberglass and canvas into an engrossing vision of an icy world most humans have only seen in photographs. She added fragments of editorial text and advertisements. While the photographs in the painting portray a recognizable landscape, their imperfect registrations mirror the fragmented activity of the subconscious.

Publication

Mirroring the exhibition's thematic structure, *Imagining Black Diasporas*'s catalogue explores connections established and emerging artists based in the U.S. with artists working in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Europe. This includes the practices of Josué Azor, Mark Bradford, El Anatsui, Theaster Gates, Isaac Julien, Wangechi Mutu, Frida Orupabo, Calida Rawles, Yinka Shonibare, and Lorna Simpson. Edited with text by Dhyandra Lawson. Original poetry by Dionne Brand, Ytasha L. Womack. Additional contributions by Sammy Baloji, Widline Cadet, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, and Frida Orupabo. Afterword by Michael Govan.

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About LACMA: Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 150,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: (Left) Lorna Simpson, *Detached Night*, 2019, © Lorna Simpson, photo courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth; (center) Ibrahim Mahama, *KAMARIA KPATASCO GRC*, 2019, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Ralph M. Parsons Fund, © Ibrahim Mahama, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (right) Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo, *Dibujo Intercontinental (Intercontinental Drawing)*, 2017, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Contemporary@LACMA, 2021, © Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo, courtesy of the artist, photo by Marnix van den Berg

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