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Portrait by Sarah Makharine

Born to Cameroonian and French parents in 1992, Josèfa Ntjam is part of a generation that grew up with the internet while reconsidering, in her artistic approach, ancient myths and ritualistic practices. Through installations, sculptures, videos, sound works and performances, she explores concepts of fluidity through reflecting on biology, African mythologies and science fiction. Ntjam’s practice appears as an ecosystem of interconnected digital and performative works, all linked by a strong story-telling. Her influences unfold from afro-feminism to science-fiction novels, from Sun Ra to Detroit techno. She uses archives, such as natural sciences books and photographs, in order to assemble words, sounds, stories and images, intertwining historical narratives and philosophical thoughts, confronting them with ancient mythologies, ancestral rituals and religious symbolism. Hence she deconstructs dominant narratives on identity and race, in order to reappropriate history and rewrite new narratives.

Wandering through Josèfa Ntjam’s dense and fascinating corpus of works feels like exploring a cosmogony, or a myth describing the origin of the cos-

dants from Western societies. Her films and installations are the poetic expression of a marginality that exalts the necessity of political and postcolonial struggles while exhuming the silences of the past. Combining public images and private archives, her film *Dislocation* (2022) addresses the Cameroonian war of independence, a story of silence that touches the intimate. Emphasizing the importance of plants, she reminds us that the metaphor for political struggle is encapsulated in the maquis as an ultimate place of resistance, and that the Cameroonian revolutionary maquis were the Bassa forests. The stories of plants are also the stories of revolts and revolutions. Plants are fundamental in Cameroonian culture and, if their ritualistic and healing properties are well-known, less so are their revolutionary and anti-colonial symbolism. For her exhibition presented in 2023 at Fondation Ricard in Paris, *matter gone wild*, Ntjam produced a series of digital collages intertwaving her family archives related to the independence of Cameroon with those of the Black Panthers. The exhibition also denounced systemic police violence—we see the faces of teenagers killed in recent years in France (Zyed and Bouna, Assa Traoré, Nahel Merzouk) in police violence appearing on wallpaper with organic pat-

that is inaccessible or invisible, she began to appreciate the importance of myths in the constitution of a community, and their role in the affirmation of an identity and an independence.

Trained in contemporary music at the conservatory and nourished by the jazz of Alice and John Coltrane as well as the contemporary rap of Casey and MF DOOM, Josèfa Ntjam knows how words and melodies, rhythm and diction have enabled the alternative movements born in oppressed communities to emerge within dominant cultures. Indeed music plays a fundamental role in the artist’s corpus of works. It is through studying classical and jazz music, and particularly practicing clarinet, that she was introduced to art. Later she started using sound and voice, her own, which occupies a particular place in her practice, and where sound appears as a language. She composes sound pieces and regularly collaborates with musicians and composers. Her commission with LAS Art Foundation, presented during the 2024 Venice Biennale and entitled *swell of spæc(i)es*, unfolds a new creation myth where the cosmic landscapes of a cyclical film morph on a large curved LED wall, and is enriched by a soundscape composed by Fatima Al Qadiri. Cut-ups and photomontages also lie at the core of her

Josèfa

mos. Here, planets are transformed into massive viruses and flowers into brass instruments in neon colors. Lush landscapes are filled with oversized mushrooms, strange flying eels, kraken tentacles and luminescent plankton. Voodoo dolls and figurines bearing the effigy of Nubian or Egyptian deities meet familiar faces, such as those of the activist Angela Davis and the rapper Tupac Shakur, brought together in hybrid settings. Displayed on wallpaper or video, through ceramic sculptures and other photographs printed under Plexiglas, these countless elements subtly compose a disconcerting science-fiction phantasmagoria.

Under the auspices of the African divinity Mami Wata, the composer and jazz pianist she admires Sun Ra or the afro-futurist duo and techno pioneer from Detroit Drexciya, the artist draws on varied territories such as biology, rap, poetry and science fiction to create disorder, questioning and movement, and to convey narratives that are divergent from those imposed by the powerful.

As a mixed-race French woman whose family history is closely intertwined with French colonial history, Ntjam points out the systemic oppressions inherited from French colonialism through a reflection on providing a voice to the voiceless and invisible afro-descen-

terns. Later in the exhibition, translucent red cabinets, named “revolt incubators,” speak directly to the viewers offering culinary tips to better lead the revolution. To carry on with the struggle, Josèfa Ntjam invokes an ensemble of rebellious characters, real or fictional, and introduces four figures—the mixotroph, a half-plant, half-animal plankton who embodies the revolt of nature; Marthe, the forest chameleon capable of transforming into a plant to outwit the enemy, a reference to Marthe Ekemeyong Moumié, the leader of the struggle for the independence of Cameroon in 1960; Persona, a black and fluid vortex, half-woman, half-snake and fish and who here tells revolutionary tales; and finally her twin Saturna, a griot-rapper of forgotten memories who claims “We fight together, with the spirits and ancestors in a cataclysm of violated memories.” In *Branchements de Sokhna #2* (2022), she pays tribute to the female warriors of Dahomey, present-day Benin, a group of revolutionary women who fought against the colonial invasion. Another fundamental figure in her work is Mami Wata, the water female spirit from voodoo mythology, who embodies the fight against colonial invasion and praises womanhood. As a child, the artist used to listen to her mother telling her legends from Western and Central Africa. Captivated by occult beliefs and all

practice through the use of hybridization and juxtaposition. Organized in series and composed of found photographs, 3D scanned objects and microscopic views of organic material, Ntjam’s photomontages are produced through accumulation and succession of different layers and bring together historical events and old African representations. They form a micro-organization flowing through the cells of our societies in order to infiltrate and infect dominant political bodies.

One can wonder whether Josèfa Ntjam’s monsters come from a past that doesn’t pass or from a phantasmagorical future, but they certainly belong to a world that never stops mutating, changing, being reborn and believing in a better tomorrow.

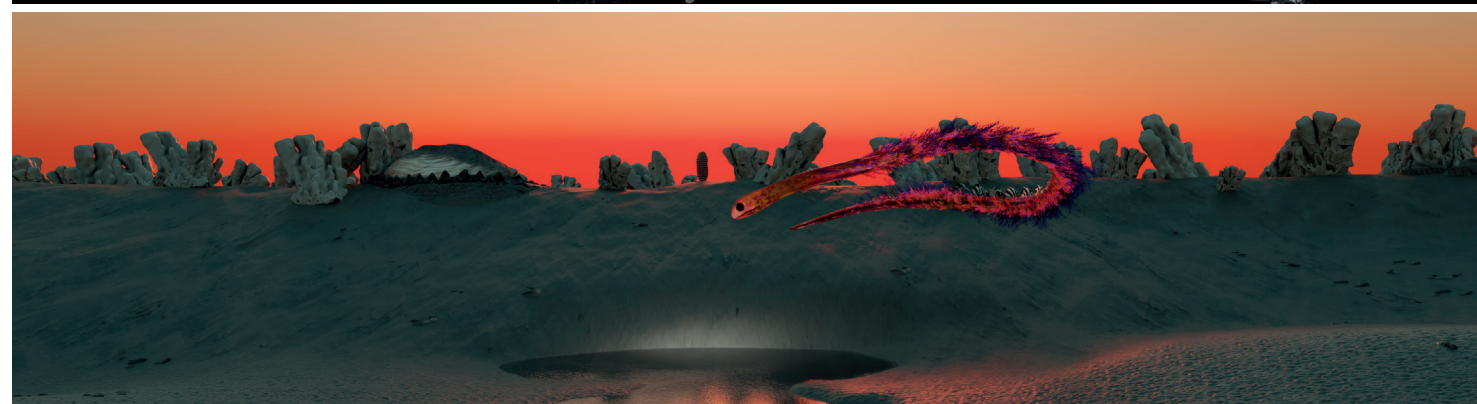
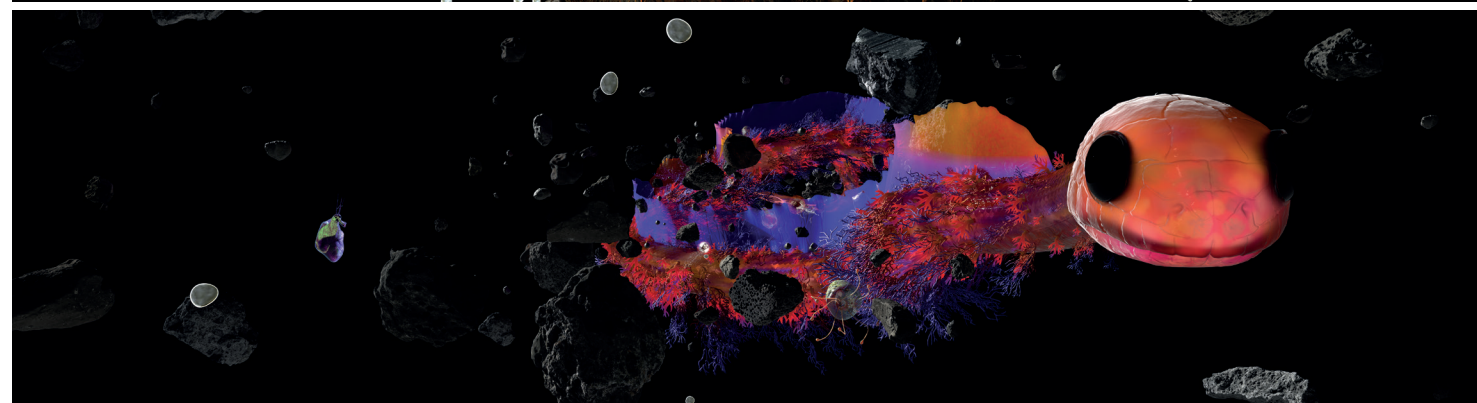
Somewhere, between the genesis and the future of science fiction, she imagines other possible worlds by merging fictional, political, futuristic, radical stories and other realities in which infiltration and revolt would be survival strategies. Between underwater civilizations and intergalactic journeys, mythologies and poetry, the artist offers another experience of contemporary practices by affirming, in a plural voice, her political commitment.

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swell of spæc(i)es, installation views, Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, Collateral Event of the 60th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2024 Commissioned by LAS Art Foundation Photo: Andrea Rossetti ©ADAGP, Paris Courtesy: the artist and LAS Art Foundation (p. 272) *NOMMO VILLAGE MARKET*, 2023 (p. 273) *YASUKE*, 2021 (p. 274) *swell of spæc(i)es*, 2023 (video stills) (p. 275) Courtesy: the artist