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VIVIANE SASSEN:
UMBRA

January 26 - April 1, 2017

Viviane Sassen, *Axiom RB01*, 2014

Viviane Sassen: UMBRA

Viviane Sassen (Dutch, born 1972) studied fashion design and photography before receiving an MFA from Ateliers Arnhem, the Netherlands. Some of her earliest memories are of life in Kenya, where she spent three years as a child. When her family returned to the Netherlands in 1978, Sassen was troubled: "I didn't feel like I belonged in Europe, and yet I knew I was a foreigner in Africa," she says. Ten years later, at age sixteen, Sassen revisited Kenya, and she has been traveling and working in Africa ever since. Her home base is in Amsterdam.

In the second half of the 1990s, a time when the boundaries between fashion and art had been re-negotiated, Sassen became interested in new ways of telling stories with photography. She started working for underground zines like *Re-Magazine* and other publications that conflated fashion and art, such as *Purple*, *i-D*, and *Dazed & Confused*. One of the first artists to focus on the expression of cultural diversity in fashion photographs, Sassen took an experimental approach. She moved away from classical ideas about beauty and the central role of the fashion model and opted for formalist compositions executed in harsh sunlight.

Sassen has forged an international career in fashion photography, but she belongs to a generation of image makers that don't make firm distinctions between personal, commercial, and editorial work. For her, photography is nearly always personal. She mentions the American artist Nan Goldin and the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki as two artists whose intimate approaches have inspired her.

Sassen keeps a broad view on things. She is knowledgeable about art history and well aware of current developments in fashion and photography, but her work is equally informed by international contemporary art. The unclassical poses of her models relate to contemporary dance and performance.

Typical of Sassen's style are the abstract elements in her photographs, often including intertwined bodies, geometrical shapes, lush colors, and expressive shadows. Her work is visually tantalizing but also has a psychological depth that recalls surrealism, with references to mental disorientation or disorder, and even death. Although her personal history and memories play a role in everything she makes, her work expresses an uneasiness and anxiety that evoke emotions associated with contemporary life. Also timely are her experiments with abstraction in photography—right now, when so many artists are questioning the medium's traditional boundaries.



Viviane Sassen, *Raging*, 2013

UMBRA is perhaps Sassen's most personal work thus far. Conceived as an installation piece with seven different chapters, each with a distinct character, it contains various media such as photography, video, drawing, poetry, light projection, mirrors, and sound. A number of works were made especially for this installation; others Sassen selected from her extensive archive.

Formally speaking, some of the series presented in *UMBRA* refer to abstract painterly traditions that include artists like Kazimir Malevich (whose *Black Square* painting from 1915 she greatly admires), Piet Mondrian, or Mark Rothko. In other ways the installation refers to literary, scientific, and philosophical traditions, from Plato and Carl Jung to the young Dutch poet and writer Maria Barnas, who wrote poems to accompany *UMBRA*.

Sassen takes visitors on a journey through light and shadow, even bringing their physical presence into the dream world that she has created with *UMBRA*. In *TOTEM*, for instance, projected large-format shadows of human figures move along the walls. Here, the visitor's presence becomes visible through mirrors and the shadows created by walking through the projector's light beam. Image and reality mingle, as if the visitor-viewer were lost in Plato's cave. What is reality, the visitor might ask, confused. Who am I, and who is the Other? As the journey continues, the visitor encounters similar questions about identity, one's inner



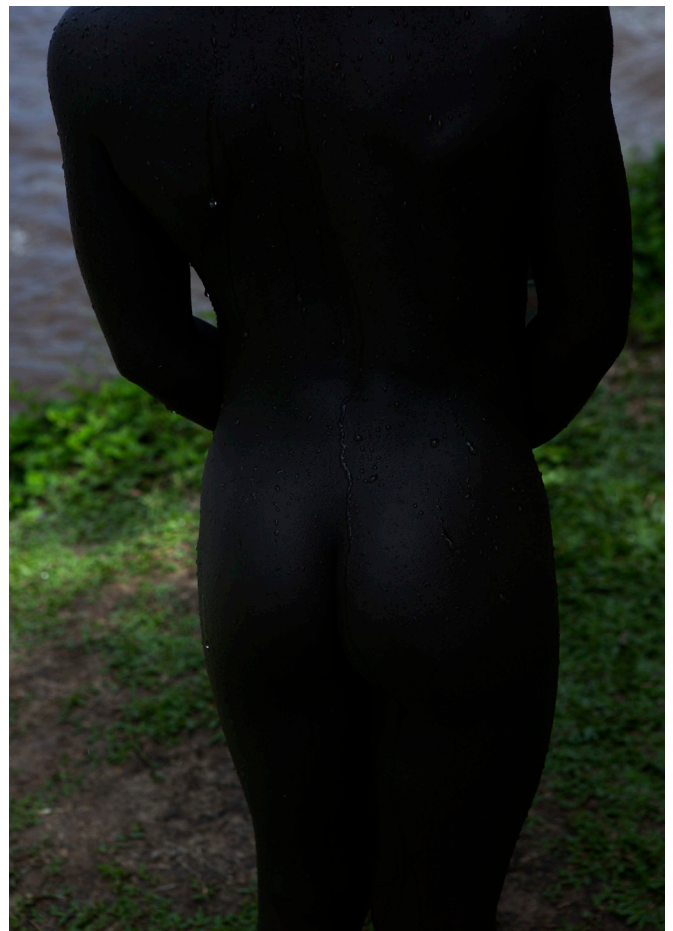
Viviane Sassen, *Zone 01*, 2014

world, and private fears. *LARVAE* is an associative translation of the archetype of the Shadow, as explained in the writings of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Jung, each of us has a dark side to our conscious or unconscious mind. This “shadow side” is the repository of the things that embarrass or frighten us, things that we would rather conceal. *HURLING* consists of a sign language performance of a poem of the same name by Maria Barnas. The hands are those of a deaf South African called Dawid Petro. Here, the word becomes image. Black ink on white paper becomes a shadow in reverse.

Drawings and photographs in various materials give visual expression to thoughts about death in the most personal part of *UMBRA*, called *SOIL*, about mourning a loved one. Small and fragile images of a hole in the ground, empty spaces, silhouettes, and forms that could be graves or coffins symbolize sadness, grief and bewilderment.

Yet Sassen’s message is also hopeful. Ultimately, *UMBRA* may offer the visitor an experience of catharsis—the purification of emotions after sadness and fear—as many sections contain intertwined bodies, geometrical shapes, lush colors, and expressive shadows that evoke one of the driving forces of human life: play.

–Frits Gierstberg
Curator, Nederlands Fotomuseum



Viviane Sassen, *Venus*, 2014

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Viviane Sassen has created campaigns for MiuMiu, Adidas by Stella McCartney, Bottega Veneta, Paul Smith, and Hermès, among others. Her work has been widely published and included in the exhibitions *New Photography* (2011) at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Encyclopedic Palace* during the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), and numerous others. In 2012, Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography in Amsterdam, organized an extensive exhibition of Sassen's fashion work under the title *In and Out of Fashion* that traveled to Edinburgh (GB), Savannah (Georgia, US), Frankfurt (DE), and Winterthur (CH).

Sassen won the Prix de Rome in 2007 and the Infinity Award of the International Center of Photography in 2011. In 2015 she was shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize.

In collaboration with renowned Dutch graphic designers such as Sybren Kuyper and Irma Boom, Viviane Sassen published a number of cutting-edge photobooks, including *Parasomnia*, *Flamboya*, *Pikin Slee*, and *UMBRA*.

Viviane Sassen is represented by Stevenson gallery, Capetown, South Africa.

The exhibition *UMBRA* was commissioned by the Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and curated by Viviane Sassen in collaboration with Frits Gierstberg and Hugo Timmermans.



Viviane Sassen, *Yellow Vlei*, 2014



Viviane Sassen, *Fingersheet*, 2014

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