

# BEAUTIFUL DIASPORA / YOU ARE NOT THE LESSER PART



By **Asha Iman Veal** Associate Curator

**Farah Salem**, from the series *Cornered*, 2016

In *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* there is a desire to encourage deep thinking about parallel experiences and relationships between global artists of color and diverse Black artists. By many conventions, works by this group of fifteen artists would not be shown together under identity concepts, yet in this exhibition their interrelated visual conversations defy the political distances and legacies of colonialism that prefer their ideas neither align nor meet.

As a global forum, *beautiful diaspora* testifies to expansiveness—beyond a single-country lens or compressed, commodified narrative. There is a beautiful vastness of wandering and assertion that can exist in the space past assumptions and boundaries. The provocation of *you are not the lesser part* challenges the pervasive social casualness of assigning certain bodies and heritages to the category “minority” (quite a misimagining). Neither negligible nor small, the fullness, agency, and dreams presented by these artists demonstrate that they (we) are not the lesser part of anything.

The exhibition’s two titles invite viewers to become active in thinking about different ways the artists may fit together, or why it might be assumed that they do not fit. This exhibition breaks with more frequent traditions of ethnically separated, disconnected spaces in museology and the art world. It additionally asks why we separate and define humans in the ways that we do, both within contemporary art and within our societies. There is a significance to Black and global artists of color prompting these discussions together in a shared space.



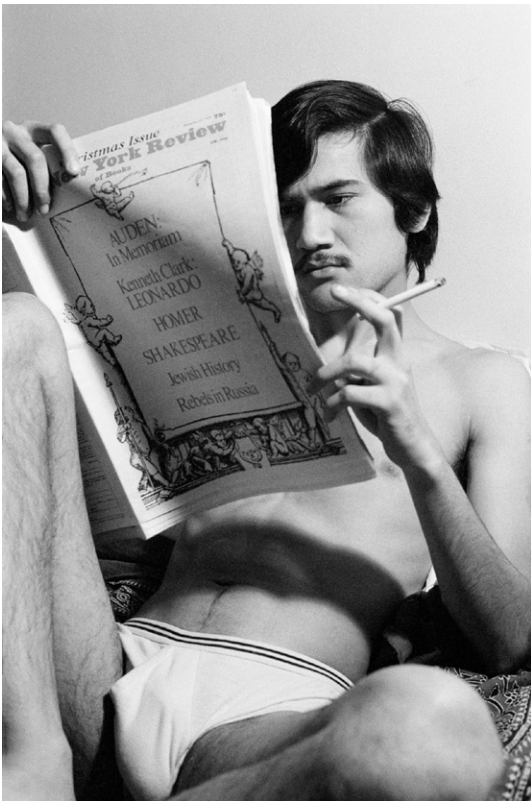
**Widline Cadet**

*Si Ou Ta Dwe Bliye Wout Lakay Ou (Lè Tout Limyè Yo Etenn) Bò Dwat (Should You Forget Your Way Home (When All The Lights Go Off), Right Side, 2021.*  
Courtesy of the artist.

Opening the exhibition, the photography of **Widline Cadet** (b. 1992 Haiti, raised in New York) offers scenes of softness and relationship as she meets the gaze and privileges the beauty of Black women from diasporic cultures. Cadet's compositional pairing of herself beside similarly featured women functions as a visual strategy to convey the nuances of separateness and intersectionality within complex identity. The artist's photographs consist of carefully staged portraits, evoking memory, cultural identity, and her own sense of home in the United States after emigrating from Haiti as a teenager. Her photography explores notions of visibility and hypervisibility, Black feminine interiority, and selfhood, as well as examining memory, erasure, and migration.<sup>1</sup> Cadet cues viewers to this blended experience through mirrored physicality and the choices of material attached to female bodies, such as schoolgirl gingham. In a strong signal of Black women's preservation of autonomy, Cadet and her collaborators often hold a shutter-release remote visibly in hand. The artist has stated: "It is worth noting that the people I photograph are predominantly Black and that alone is a sense of familiarity in me—a Black woman photographing other Black people. There's a desire of wanting them to be seen and I've been fortunate to encounter people who share and embrace that goal in the process of making an image."<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* performs a gentle inquiry into relational intimacy among and as practiced by people of color.

A specific relational intimacy practiced by queer men of color becomes art historical dialogue in the venerable work of **Sunil Gupta** (b. 1953 India). Gupta's selections in the exhibition include several projects from his decades-long portfolio. He has photographed queer and artistic communities in Montreal, New York, Delhi, and London—cities where he's lived during critical points in the social history of the 1970s to the 2000s. Gupta himself migrated to North America in the late 1960s, and thereafter began to informally assemble the photography of his project *Friends & Lovers*, gathering memories of his queer and artistic communities in Montreal (1970s).<sup>3</sup> The images on exhibition from this series include self-portraiture of the artist himself, as well as his cadre of chosen family. Gupta later moved to New York City and shot an iconic series based on strangers' lives—gay men on Christopher Street during its era as an emergent and bustling queer public space (1976). Gupta has said about his subsequent, renowned *Exiles* series (1986–87), "It became a kind of mission of mine, to make photographic images of Indian gay men, in India."<sup>4</sup> For this project, the artist includes autobiographical



**Sunil Gupta**

*Sunil with NY Review of Books, circa 1975.*  
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Bulger Gallery.

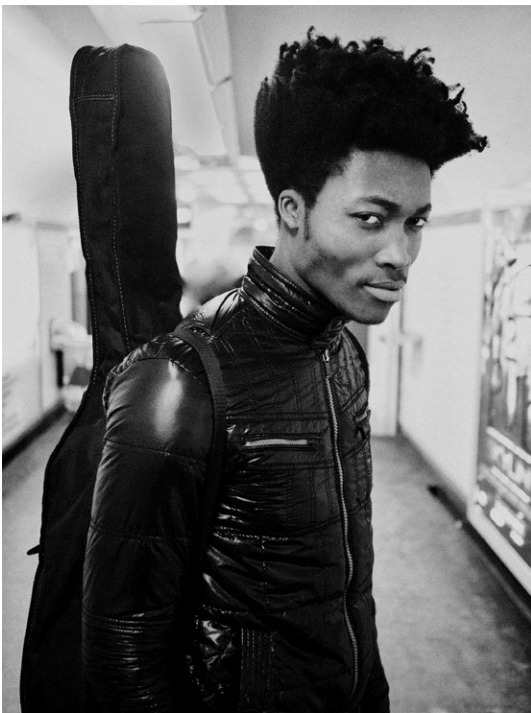


texts from his photo subjects, as well as collaborates to re-stage moments of highly visible connection and physical touch, or solitude and longing.

A driving desire within Gupta's practice is to ensure that his intersectional experience and linked communities are represented in the contemporary and historical cannon—even, and perhaps especially, during turbulent periods of social opposition. The artist's *Pretend Family Relationships* (1988) domestic portrait series was photographed in London during a period of the executive and legislative governments' heightened opposition to same-sex partnerships. *From Here to Eternity* (1999) documents the artist's own health journey after his HIV diagnosis.

Gupta remains active as both an artist and scholar, recently completing a PhD dissertation titled *Queer Migrations* (2019), a theme that befits his own life.<sup>5</sup>

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**Johnny Pitts**

*busker in Paris*, from the body of work  
*Afropean: Travels in Black Europe*, 2010–2020.  
Courtesy of the artist.

The artists in *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* are determined to tell the unique stories of the places they've been.

British-Born **Johnny Pitts** (b. United Kingdom) is the photographer and author of the documentary nonfiction project *Afropean: Travels in Black Europe* (2019), for which he was awarded the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding and the inaugural Ampersand/Photoworks Fellowship (2021/2022). Pitts's photo series introduces the translocal community of Black Europe, visually, through a bricolage of countenances and milieus. For more than five years, Pitts snapped street shots of Black lives in cities including Kiev, Berlin, Brussels, Lisbon, London, Stockholm, and others. He has organized the full body of more than 100 photographs as a visual mapping of connections across cityscapes and languages, blending extraordinary moments and daily life. In a scene in Bern, Switzerland, an elderly woman waits on a subway bench in front of an H&M advertisement with models Waris Dire and Liya Kebede. At a student protest in Rome, Italy, a dark-skinned young woman stares intensely into the camera. In Paris, France, where the largest section of Pitts's photography takes place, scenes range from a leather-jacketed busker in the heart of the city, to throngs of pedestrians in the suburbs. Street signs and metro signs figure heavily in the *Afropean* body of work and signal each specific local context. "I wanted to work on a project that connected and presented Afro-Europeans as lead actors in our own story," said Pitts.<sup>6</sup> The descriptor "Afropean" is a term that Pitts and many others credit to popular Congolese Belgian singer Marie Daulne.<sup>7</sup>



**Jessica Chou**

*Kids hanging out on Newmark Ave., Monterey Park* from the *Suburban Chinatown* series, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist and Anastasia Photo, New York City.

In *Suburban Chinatown* (2013–ongoing) **Jessica Chou** (b. 1985 Taiwan, raised in California) explores the multicultural communities of SoCal’s San Gabriel Valley and focuses on her hometown Monterey Park, which was the continental United States’ first Asian American majority city.<sup>8</sup> While many American suburban areas have become more ethnically diverse than their original charters, pockets across the country have existed ahead of this curve due to a combination of demographic richness and suburban sprawl. Familiar moments found within Chou’s childhood community portray the generational experiences and cultural configurations of contemporary America. These images depict a Sunday morning church choir and its bilingual signage for hymns; there are also teen boys standing on a street corner after school, wearing a SoCal signature–style of long shorts, high socks, and ankle sneakers.

“There are many interpretations of the American dream,” Chou herself has said. “I hope this work updates both the immigrant and suburban story.”<sup>9</sup>

For the original work *Departure Time* (2015), artist **Işıl Eğrikavuk** (b. 1980 Turkey) offers self-portraiture in a tradition of immersive performance, for an insider’s view into life being female in her present and former home countries. In the staged scene, Eğrikavuk herself takes center stage and portrays the narrative of having arrived at an empty train station. She is dressed as a bride traveling on the way to a fictional marriage. Costumed in a powerful symbol of traditional femininity, the artist defiantly breaks from the expected behavior for a woman within her scene. The act of having one’s shoe polished in public space belongs to men only, Eğrikavuk has described. Her specific gesture and dramatized occupation of gendered space contests limitations and signals a protest to expectations of women in public space. For *BUT YOU DON’T* (2018), she stands alone in a reflective body of water in Germany, gesturally asking, *What are the stereotypes people attribute to others based on their kinships, passports, and nationalities?*<sup>10</sup>

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Many of the artists participating in the exhibition have built strong practices and careers while also resisting external attempts at categorizing their work. They’ve learned to navigate, or eschew, institutional structures.

Chicago-based painter **David Heo** (b. 1991 United States) often draws upon mythical references to create new contemporary folklore. Heo is most inspired by three classic figures—the beast,



**Işıl Eğrikavuk**

*Departure Time*, 2015.  
Courtesy of the artist.

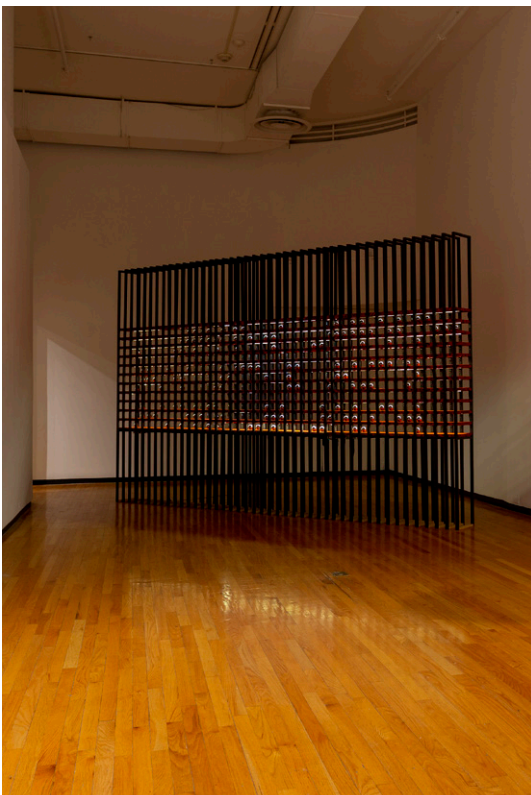


**David Heo**  
*Untitled I–II (wall paintings), 2022*

the flame, and the muse—as well as colorful patterns. For a recent “Breakout Artists” feature profile in *Newcity* magazine, Heo described that while growing up in Georgia, his parents often told their two young children traditional Korean folklore as well as Greek and Egyptian myths.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in his painting practice today, he expresses these early influences and draws upon myth-based memories and historical references. He is an avid people-watcher, and his artworks also place meta-narratives onto quiet frames of everyday life. Heo states a desire to convey human themes such as victory, impulse, heartbreak, anxiety, desire, lust, love, melancholy, happiness, fear, and more. “People may experience the overarching gauntlets of life differently—but the themes are the same for all of us,” Heo has said.<sup>12</sup>

For this exhibition the artist has created intimate wall paintings at multiple locations in the museum galleries, seeking to relate to his fellow artists’ photography by color, pattern, and emotive feel—intentionally leaving representational imagery to the photos. Heo’s color palette of *primary* colors functions as a statement, and intentional complement, to affirm *you are not the lesser part*. The element of pinned rabbits’ feet hints to Heo’s usual featuring of mythical creatures, and his frequent commentaries on violence.

*Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* incorporates several nonphotographic forms alongside traditional lens-based works. **Kelvin Haizel** (b. 1987 Ghana) has created a new artwork based on his practice of fictively reimagining true events. His mixed-media sculpture *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History—Art Review* (2022) is inspired by an open letter by Dr. Graham Coop (professor of evolution and ecology at the University of California, Davis) addressed to the *New York Times* in 2014.<sup>13</sup> In this letter, Coop and a group of 139 cosignatories from the field of human genetics reject the eugenicist theories of human hierarchy put forth by a textbook that was reviewed in the newspaper. Haizel’s large-scale sculpture translates the book’s title into a visual design that’s inspired by braille configuration, using tiny lights and metal balls perched on wooden shelves draped with Ghanaian heritage textiles. The structure presents as a montage of sensory forms. Describing his decision to translate part of the artwork’s title into braille, Haizel has said: “In 2017 while I was conducting research at the Disabilities Department of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, I became friends with a visually impaired student who showed me a medicine label with braille embossing. The visual and braille elements addressed differently abled users, yet had been brought together as a complete image. I became extremely fascinated by this overlap.”<sup>14</sup>



**Kevin Haizel**  
*A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History—Art Review, 2022*





**Damon Locks**  
*Untitled, 2022*

Multidisciplinary artist **Damon Locks** (b. 1968 United States) is internationally known for envisioning and experimenting in futuristic styles and forms long before they reach the mainstream. Locks started out as an illustration major before becoming a multi-genre, internationally performing musician. He is Chicago-based and has become a legendary figure in the city's cultural history—cofounding music projects such as the 1980s punk band Trenchmouth, The (uncategorizable) Eternals, and the fifteen-member Black Monument Ensemble. Locks's dual dedication to visual art and music complements and expands each practice. His visual artworks most often emerge as mixed-media drawings and collage, as well as screen prints and digital prints, and comics. He focuses on narrative themes of protest, unrest, tension, and human landscapes.<sup>15</sup> These layered images can be simultaneously political and fantastically abstract, as evidenced by the original artwork in this exhibition. For *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part*, Locks has created a wall collage of ink drawings that hints at the boldly nonconformist and undefinable styles he's developed. This specific constellation of humanesque characters dispels imagined utopias and visualizes a sixth sense of emotional perception to watch and feel potential onslaughts of harm—referring, in particular, to the past two years, as COVID-19 and structural violence hit Black folks especially hard and without rest. Since his early days as an artist, Locks has felt inspired to create work based on his own feelings and sense of freedom, regardless of what was popular. "Punk music, science fiction, and comics all converged, and the possibilities were illuminated," he has stated.<sup>16</sup> The wall collage is a new form for Locks, as he more often creates drawings on paper.

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**Xyza Cruz Bacani**  
*Angels, from the series We Are Like Air, 2013–2018.*  
Courtesy of the artist.

*Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* also seeks to portray cross-cultural commonalities of family life, extended community, and even loss.

*We Are Like Air* (2013–2018) by **Xyza Cruz Bacani** (b.1987 Philippines) chronicles the migration and domestic labor experience in Hong Kong of the artist's mother, Georgia.<sup>17</sup> This visual story spans two countries, three generations, and two families. Cruz Bacani expresses a wish for migrant laborers and domestic helpers to be regarded by their employers as *family*, as well as for laborers to remain in connected relationships with their *true* families. Georgia, with a quiet strength, features as the emotional center of many of the 150 black-and-white photographs. As the story's

timeline extends, Cruz Bacani opens the viewpoint and shows wider conditions for local domestic helpers, many of whom experience exploitative, unscrupulous employers. The artist wants viewers to see migrant workers, thus her title *We Are Like Air* refers to their invisibility yet omnipresence in society. This is a community of champions of strength. Years before her opportunity to become a photographer full-time, young Cruz Bacani had moved to Hong Kong to work alongside her mother as a helper. She has said, “During the time that I have lived and worked here in Hong Kong as a domestic servant, I’ve always badly wanted to feel like this is my second home, but tragically I have never felt like I belong, and have recently come face to face with the reality that I’ve spent nearly a decade of my life here, living in complete isolation. I am nothing but a mere observer.” To accompany the photos in this museum installation, she has included a cross-stitch embroidery created by migrant workers in Hong Kong, as well as a text-based video work, and a prayer altar.



**Tintin Wulia**  
*December, 2021*

**Tintin Wulia** (b. 1972 Indonesia) offers her newest work, *December* (2021), as a video installation based on the long-ago, forced disappearance of her grandfather from his house in Denpasar, Bali. He was categorized by the government as Chinese Indonesian and taken in December 1965 as part of state-sanctioned mass killings of an unknown number of alleged communist citizens. *December* incorporates patterns from the 30,000-page recently declassified files of the Jakarta US Embassy 1964–68, surrounding the historical event of mass killings.<sup>18</sup> Documents dated December, September, and May, three different months during the killings, are personally significant to the artist: the month her grandfather was forcefully disappeared, the month when the pretext of the killings took place, and the month it became possible for her father’s family to gather again after being separated for safety reasons. The massacre was supported by democratic countries around the world, including the United States as part of the Cold War. “I was born only seven years later, but his forced disappearance as one of my first childhood stories strongly shaped my identity,” said Wulia.

“To safeguard the family as I was growing up during the Suharto autocracy, these stories about 1965 were always passed on secretly, so not even my closest friends knew my story. It was only several years after Suharto fell that I began speaking about it publicly—this was in the early 2000s, and I was over thirty. Thousands, perhaps millions of families with similar experience, have been legally discriminated against, and the Indonesian government never acknowledges their involvement in the killings. My grandfather was never released or returned, and his body was never found.”<sup>19</sup>

Wulia offers this video installation, narrative work of animated drawings, sounds, and fragments from her childhood family stories, while bravely contemplating spatial and temporal distance.

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**Cog•nate Collective**

From the installation *Something to do with crossing*, 2012–ongoing.

Courtesy of the artists.

Many of the exhibition's artists explore impacts of national and economic power.

**Amy Sanchez Arteaga** (b. 1988 United States) and **Misael Diaz** (b. 1987 United States) of **Cog•nate Collective** offer *Something to Do With Crossing* (2012–ongoing) as a mixed-media, photo installation based on Arteaga's former family home that was located a block from the US/Mexico border fence. The family's proximity to the fence separating their neighborhood from Mexicali, Baja California State in Mexico imbricated them in a system of informal exchange: blouses, shoes, bedding, and a slew of other items left unattended on the family clothesline were taken by migrants who had just crossed the border undocumented and independently. In the borrowed garments' place, migrants would leave used t-shirts, boots, or other items.<sup>20</sup> For the installation artwork *Something to do with crossing* this informal object exchange system is replicated as visitors are encouraged to take a photograph of clothing that is hung from the clothesline, and in its place to leave behind an actual article of clothing. At the end of the exhibition, the collected clothes will be donated to the Hotel del Migrante migrant shelter in Mexicali, B.C.

The original installation was accompanied by testimonies of migrants who had crossed the border illegally, juxtaposed with oral history from the Arteaga family. The following excerpts provide a sense of the family members' varied responses to reluctantly sharing their belongings:

*One time I got a call from the Calexico Police Department at midnight asking me about a pair of shorts and a t-shirt they believed belonged to me. After the policeman described them, I knew it was my PE uniform, which my mother had embroidered with my name. An [undocumented] immigrant was wearing it. I never saw it again.*

*Another time someone took my running shoes that I was grateful to have gotten a day before at the swap meet. I washed them and disinfected them with chlorine for a good hour. This time it happened during the day. I saw a man through the window in the kitchen running away with my "new" shoes. I went outside to make sure that it was my shoes, and in their place I found some old boots with spurs attached to them. It was hilarious. I was really sad though about my shoes.<sup>21</sup>*





**Citali Fabián**

*Melina monserrat*, from from *Ben'n Yalhalhj / Soy de Yalálag / I'm from Yalalag*, 2018.

Courtesy of the artist.

Yalateca, Mexican visual artist and storyteller **Citali Fabián** (b. 1988 Mexico) has in large part dedicated her photo practice to documenting—and honoring—the inherent beauty of women from her Indigenous heritage. Social systems based on colorism exist worldwide and have a particular impact on women in the ways that our images are either centered, or not; valued and protected, or not; affirmed, or pressured to change. In this artist's breakthrough work, she applied the antique photo process of collodion wet plate to intentionally darken women's portraits and honor their images outside a frame of lightness.<sup>22</sup>

Now, in her ongoing *Ben'n Yalhalhj / Soy de Yalálag / I'm from Yalalag* series, Fabián creates a community-wide family photo album where Indigenous women are centered and celebrated. This project began as an exploration of culturally specific, visual language through photographic images based on a conversation between the artist and her Zapotec-speaking grandmother. There's a trust that's extended to Fabián by her photo subjects as she documents daily-life images from their shared home. Functioning as a family photo album, *Ben'n Yalhalhj* also includes the community's men. Poignantly, Fabián uses photography to explore ways of addressing identity and connections with territory, migration, and community bonds.<sup>23</sup>

**Abena Appiah** (b. 1998 United Kingdom) is a London-based photographer and filmmaker working primarily in commercial photography and fashion photography. *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* marks her first museum exhibition. Appiah's short film *From Whence You Came* (2020) blends a montage of original Super 8 film and archival family photos, for a layered recollection of her grandparents' 1965 migration journey from the West African coastal country of Ghana to their present-day home of England. Appiah brings her grandmother's actual voice into the film as a narrator who's cowritten the script. This deeply personal view of the artist's heritage and family omits her own voice and body onscreen. A quote from diasporic Black writer and orator James Baldwin ends the film and also relates to the overall title: "If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." In an additional work, Appiah offers selections from her *Skate Gal Club* series (2020), featuring members of the eponymous all-girls skate crew in Ghana's capital city, Accra. The selections focus on two young women, Eden and Harmonie, who pose beside their skateboards before setting off to ride through city streets. The comradeship Appiah felt between and among the young women, as well as with the other members of their crew, bridges a divide across time and space. Appiah herself is a London-based photographer and filmmaker whose family heritage is from Ghana.



**Abena Appiah**

*Eden & Harmonie, Skate Gal Club—Ghana*, 2020.

Courtesy of the artist.



**Ngadi Smart**

From *The Queens of Babi*, 2020.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps the most persistent quality among the artists of *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* is a wealth of imagery that conveys the political, the historical, daily life, and even utopia.

**Ngadi Smart** (b. 1988 United Kingdom) documents Black sensuality and culture with a particular aim to show, “as many representations of African people, and what it means to be African.” The protagonists in her *The Queens of Babi* series (2020) are a young, gold-flecked drag performer affectionately known as “Britney Spears” and rhinestone-adorned associate “Baba.” These two locally award-winning, stunning figures are based in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, and complement Smart’s wider photography portfolio. Smart frequently stages photographs in settings as diverse as natural greenery, private enclaves, and lush beaches. Describing her two *Queens of Babi*, Smart stated: “Both have ambitions that reach beyond drag. Britney wants to be a model and an actress, be an international drag queen, have her own life and freedom to do what she wants, and most importantly, be proud of the life she leads. Baba would like to own a fashion company, start a family, and work in the entertainment industry. Regular desires, that would normally be attainable to any person whose gender and identity would be deemed ‘acceptable’ to carry these out within society’s confines.”<sup>24</sup> Smart herself lives in Abidjan and London, and her family heritage is of Sierra Leone. In addition to natural settings, she is known for photographs and portraiture taken in bustling cities and public streets, with a keen eye on fashion and style.



**Farah Salem**

*Untitled 1*, from the series *Cornered*, 2016.  
Courtesy of the artist.

For her *Cornered* series, **Farah Salem** (b. 1991 Kuwait) brings audiences to various landscapes, structures, and environments across the locale where she’s from. The artist herself appears as an anonymously draped figure at the center of a calm beach, empty concert hall, sterile apartment lobby, and more. She repeatedly hides and folds herself within an open-faced cardboard box. As a performance series, *Cornered* explores the experience of “being in spaces of beautiful nowhere yet remaining trapped in a box that has been created by either society or ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> The artist describes this cerebral and physical condition as the “comfortable discomfort that one chooses to sit with out of fear or lack of privilege and access to stepping out of a containment, whether a mind created limitation, or societal constructed ideologies.”

Salem is an artist and art therapist from Kuwait and based in Chicago. Her multidisciplinary practice is rooted within photography and expands into video, performance, fiber materials, and installation. She investigates the distortion of reality and perception, and questions the potential erasure of sociocultural



conditioning that influences and distorts shared realities. Salem's work maintains an interrogative posture examining the relationship between trauma and systemic oppression, gender-based violence, and identity displacement.

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From beautiful drag performers in Côte d'Ivoire, to festival dancers in a hilltop Zapotec community. From a fair-labor movement begun by domestic helpers in Hong Kong, to dispelling imagined utopias of Black American politics and life.

Solidarity communities are a choice. *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* demonstrates the myriad of options.

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## Endnotes

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