

Self-Portraits of the Artist as Historical African Figures

In his debut US exhibition, Omar Victor Diop inserts conspicuously absent historical black male figures into Western art.

By Bansie Vasvani
April 20, 2017



Omar Victor Diop, “Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)” (2014), pigment inkjet print on Harman Hahnemuhle paper, 47 1/4 x 31 1/2 in. (all images courtesy of the artist and Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris, France, unless noted)

Self-portraits have been part of art history ever since artists used their own reflections to determine how a viewer might perceive them. This trope of self-empowerment takes a different turn with Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop’s series of self-portraits in his debut US exhibition, [Project Diaspora](#), at the SCAD Museum of Fashion + Film in Atlanta.

HYPERALLERGIC

Diop's discovery during a residency in Spain of a classical painting by Diego Velasquez of his African assistant Juan de Pareja led to his investigation of other European representations of prominent African figures who have long been relegated to the dustbin of history. His intent was to recontextualize the significance of Africa and its people, especially because of its enduring depiction in the media as a region of tribal warfare, famine, death, and disease. He wanted these "unsung heroes," as he refers to them, to reemerge and retell their stories.



Omar Victor Diop, *Project Diaspora*, installation view at SCAD Museum of Fashion + Film (courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design)

What began as a casual experiment in Spain where he dressed himself as these historical figures led to a deeper engagement with his subjects once he returned to his studio in Dakar. Eschewing his common practice of using his favorite models in his photography, Diop's self-portraits became a tool through which he worked to dismantle stereotypical images of derelict African refugees flooding Western shores. He began to see himself as an ambassador for reframing the African black male from a historically omitted vantage point. Yet unlike Kehinde Wiley's deeply subversive portraits of African Americans dressed as European figures, in which he deconstructs the power of European portraiture, Diop's impersonations are entrenched in historically accurate images.



Omar Victor Diop, “A Moroccan man (1913)” (2014), pigment inkjet print on Harman Hahnemuhle paper, 47 1/4 x 31 1/2 in.

For instance, “St Benedict of Palermo” (2014) is based on a sculpture of the anointed Moorish friar attributed to Jose Montes de Oca of Italy. In his self-image, Diop stands in a regal coppery-gold gown with his hands extended out to his congregation. His image consecrates the benedict, who was born to African slaves before his eventual beatification by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743 and canonization in 1807 by Pope Pius VII. Similarly, Diop’s “Olaudah Equiano” (2014), dressed in a fashionable British 18th-century cravat and jacket, depicts the distinguished freed slave who documented his advocacy for the abolition of slavery in London in his 1789 autobiography.

HYPERALLERGIC



Omar Victor Diop, “Dom Nicolau (Circa. 1830–1860)” (2014), pigment inkjet print on Harman Hahnemuhle paper, 47 1/4 x 31 1/2 in.

Akin to New York–based Nigerian photographer Ike Ude’s self-portraits in his series *Sartorial Anarchy*, in which Ude’s choice of clothing from different eras eclipse time and place, Diop’s meticulous reproduction of lavish costumes from the past are transformative in the way they communicate his subjects’ aspirations. Apparel here is a symbol of the historical personages’ status in the societies in which they lived. Diop intentionally presents these figures exactly as they appeared in various European paintings and engravings in order to regenerate an interest in the role of Africans in Europe and to reestablish their forgotten contribution to history.

However, Diop’s reengagement with yesteryear also comes with a bit of ironic humor. His otherwise historically accurate figures all appear with accouterments relating to soccer, like balls, cleats, shin guards, gloves, and a red penalty card. For instance, the young prince of Congo, Dom Nicolau, who, in 1845, at the tender age of 20, was sent to Lisbon to protest against Portuguese intervention in his country, is seen in his silk finery with one foot on a soccer ball. While the inclusion of these objects introduces a touch of levity to the hard-fought stories of Africa’s predecessors, they are also reminders of the narrow pathway that an underprivileged child from Africa must walk in order to succeed. Soccer here is the double-edged nemesis of the African people: Both revered and patronized by the West, it is perceived

HYPERALLERGIC

as Africa's main achievement in recent history. By commingling the old with the new, Diop inserts conspicuously absent historical black male figures into Western art while making it amply evident that there is more to African history than sports.



Omar Victor Diop, *Project Diaspora*, installation view at SCAD Museum of Fashion + Film (courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design)



Omar Victor Diop, *Project Diaspora*, installation view at SCAD Museum of Fashion + Film (courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design)

[Project Diaspora](https://hyperallergic.com/373482/self-portraits-of-the-artist-as-historical-african-figures/) continues at the SCAD Fashion Museum (1600 Peachtree St., Atlanta) through August 20.

<https://hyperallergic.com/373482/self-portraits-of-the-artist-as-historical-african-figures/>