

Fotomuseum Winterthur 26.02.–29.05.2022

I have seen

Frida Orupabo

a million pictures of my face

and still I have no idea

Artist talk with Frida Orupabo and Doris Gassert, curator
Saturday, 26.02.2022, 11:00–12:00

Tour and talk with Olivia Fahmy, art historian and collection curator of African Contemporary Art and the Diaspora, and Trinity Mesimé Njume-Ebong, art educator, curator and researcher at the intersection of art and social science
Saturday, 09.04.2022, 14:00–15:00

Sound performance by Legion Seven, in cooperation with Museum Rietberg
Wednesday, 18.05.2022, 18:00–18:30 and 19:15–19:45
at Fotomuseum Winterthur

Thursday, 19.05.2022, 18:00–18:30 and 19:30–20:00
at Museum Rietberg

More information: www.fotomuseum.ch. Subject to change due to the current situation.

Frida Orupabo
Frida Orupabo (b. 1986) lives and works in Oslo, Norway. After studying sociology, she worked as a social worker with sex workers and victims of forced prostitution. Since 2013, Orupabo has been publishing her work on Instagram under @nemiepeba and since 2017 she has been exhibiting as an artist. Fotomuseum Winterthur is showing Orupabo’s first solo exhibition in Switzerland. Her work has been included in solo and group exhibitions internationally, including the São Paulo Art Biennial (2021), Kunsthall Trondheim (2021), Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2020), Venice Biennale (2019), Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin (2018) and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm (2018).



fotomuseum winterthur

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www.fotomuseum.ch, Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11:00–18:00, Wed 11:00–20:00, Mon closed

Curated by Doris Gassert, with support from Nicole Doppmann. Texts: Doris Gassert, Nicole Doppmann
Editing: Simon Cowper, proofreading: Therese Seeholzer, Julia Sumi, graphic design: Laura Prim & Aurelia Peter
The exhibition title is a quote from *I Know I Am Not an Easy Woman* (2015) by US American poet and musician Elaine Kahn.
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Norwegian Nigerian artist and sociologist Frida Orupabo creates analogue and digital black-and-white collages and video installations from visual material circulating online. From photographs from the colonial era as well as from contemporary imagery, from ethnography, medicine and science to art and pop culture, Orupabo dissects representations of the Black, mostly female body as a means to negotiate themes of colonial violence, racism, sexuality, identity and belonging. In rearranging and newly reassembling the dissected fragments, Orupabo creates figures of resistance that challenge how and what we see in a present-day reality that remains permeated by colonialism.

This challenge is quite literal, and it is expressed in the direct gaze that Orupabo inserts into her collages. It is an insistent demand, one that we encounter immediately as we enter the exhibition: Here, a piercing gaze stares down at us, from the head of a Black woman that Orupabo has placed, visibly twisted, on the body of a *white* pin-up girl. With one hand, she is touching a tapestry as if it were a veil waiting to be lifted, so as to reveal something hidden—a gesture that is emblematic of Orupabo’s artistic strategy which seeks to irritate and challenge our ways of seeing. Through digital collage, Orupabo inserts the Black woman not just into an image but into a visual norm that she seeks both to reveal and to challenge: the prevailing *white* norm that continues to exclude or confine the Black female body, leaving it either un- or under-represented, or forcing it into stereotypical representations that degrade it to a (hyper) sexual object.

By working with and simultaneously against the forms of representation that are spawned by this norm, Orupabo challenges the colonialist legacy that is inscribed in the gaze. In doing so, the ways of seeing are exposed as anything but neutral: what and how we see and perceive, how we make sense and assign value is always shaped by historically conditioned, cultural and social power relations that we have internalised. Yet the direct encounter between the gaze of Orupabo’s figures and our own opens up a moment of resistance, a space in which we are challenged to reflect on our own position as we renegotiate history and its effects on the present.

ROOM 1: The challenge of the direct gaze continues to bear down on us as we become immersed in Orupabo’s audio-visual universe. Working with snippets of photographs, videos, and text collected from the internet, the artist creates visually tense arrangements that unfold associatively, at once harmoniously and antithetical. Orupabo started using the social media platform Instagram—on which the nine-part installation is based—nearly a decade ago as an ordering system, a form of expression and a personal archive, venturing with her work into a public arena for the first time. In the video installation, she arranges and condenses images and texts from a wide range of sources into multi-layered narratives that seek to liberate the depiction of Black lives from one-dimensional representations and attribute to them instead the complexity, ambivalence and contradictions that form part of every human existence.

Orupabo’s exploration of personal and cultural belonging is also the starting point for her delicate, sculptural collages. In order to write herself into the (hi)stories that leave Black women invisible or twist the images she cannot recognise herself in, Orupabo dismembers images of Black bodies before reassembling them layer by layer. Orupabo’s artistic practice reads as a decolonial strategy that appropriates violent colonial images in order to turn them against their original function—that of objectifying, degrading and dehumanising. Processes of objectification, fixation and ‘othering’ are deconstructed, exposing in a discomforting and disturbing way how photography significantly contributes to the formation and perpetuation of colonial power relations.

ROOM 2: Orupabo’s collages are pervaded by subtly resistant and emancipatory moments: the direct gaze or the clenched fist; figures that fly or remain in a graceful, suspended state. They express pride and dignity as they attempt to transform the confining categories of image and imagination that they demonstrate or evoke.

Batwoman exemplifies this dynamic by defying the racist gaze that looks down on Black people as if they were animals with a mixture of unwavering strength and graceful ease. Orupabo has not removed or retouched the logo of a picture agency which remains visible in the watermark on the photograph but instead appropriated it. Even when images from colonial archives circulate freely on the internet, the image rights are owned by primarily *white* institutions—which means that they not only financially benefit from these images but also have a say in the context in which they may appear. The collage furthermore reads as an ironic take on the superhero, a role usually reserved for men. *Batwoman* cares little for male fantasies. Instead of squeezing herself into a skin-tight bodysuit, she flutters away with her bat-like body, free from any sexist expectations. The collages presented here are an expression of Orupabo’s aesthetic exploration that attempts to escape the voyeuristic, sexualising and sexist gaze by rendering the gender of the collaged bodies increasingly indefinable. Finally, Orupabo expands her visual language by including motifs from Renaissance paintings as well as references to figurative painting.

In Orupabo’s collages, the fractures stand out visibly, like scars. They mark the violent, spatially and temporally dissociated colonial experience whose legacy continues to shape the everyday realities, life experiences and images of today. By appropriating the colonial visual memory, by tearing it apart, reassembling and rewriting it to narrate different potential (hi)stories, the scars also visualise the process of emotional labour. Perhaps they imply the possibility of healing—if we accept the challenge of the gaze, confront its moments of irritation and ambivalence, and become aware of its complex legacy and ways in which it operates.

Doris Gassert: Frida, in your artistic practice you create collages from images that circulate on various online platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, eBay and Google. Can you describe the criteria you apply in gathering visual material online? What captures your interest in an image?

Frida Orupabo: It’s always hard to speak about what I am looking for because it’s a very intuitive process. I don’t have a strict practice when it comes to finding material for my work. But what I can say for sure is that I love images. I look everywhere and at everything. Sometimes an image will pop up when I’m reading about a topic I’m interested in, like an illness or a gynaecological topic. I might collect it without having an idea yet of how to use it for my work. At other times I’m just looking at things online and one thing leads to another. What catches my attention are either visual elements that I find beautiful — be it a shape, a colour or a texture — or something that I find disturbing. It’s often something that is familiar but with some type of a twist. I also use Google, but I’m not very good when it comes to searching for a particular image online. When I track down something specific for a collage, like a hand or a foot, I use eBay, where the possibility of enlarging the image usually gives you a much better resolution than on Google.

DG: Is your visual research limited to the internet as an expansive digital archive or do you also search through physical archives?

FO: I have also searched in physical archives, but it’s a different kind of research as it takes more time and effort to gain access and intensively look for things. For me, everything opened up with the internet, which I only got after I had moved to Oslo for my studies in 2005. Back then I used to work with and manipulate images from my personal archive, like family photographs. But once I got access to the internet, I never looked back.

DG: The images you appropriate in your work are primarily taken either from historical archives from the colonial era or deal with how this ‘colonial gaze’ is perpetuated up to today. Having encountered such a wide range of visual material expressing the colonial domination of Black people, their lives, bodies and experiences, can you describe some of the visual norms, patterns and absences that you work with and against?

FO: I’m specifically interested in the representation of Black women — how we are portrayed, how are we talked about, how we are made visible, and how we are ignored. Most of the time Black women are rendered invisible and/or made hyper-visible by being pushed into categories and boxed into one-dimensional stereotypes. In my work and in my life in general, I am constantly reminded of this. For my collage *Girl on Horse*, for example, I was looking for a black girl riding a horse, but there were so few images I could find. A ‘woman’ usually means *white* woman, meaning that searching for images of a ‘woman’ will only lead to images of *white* women. Whenever I need something for my work, I have to remember the category ‘Black’: Black babies, Black beautiful women, Black women riding horses, Black pin-up girls... Searching for images can be at times very tiring and upsetting because it tells you in such a direct way what you already know. This includes everything from real-estate advertisements to children’s books. I think it was this direct encounter at a very early age with the images I saw around me in advertising, movies and illustrations that led me to start making collages. I wanted to remove that head, those arms and legs and replace them with my own limbs so that I too could be seen in that dress, or so that I too could be part of that event or moment. In the words of Octavia Butler, you have to write yourself in. You have to create that story for yourself when it’s not there. Every time I search for something online and it’s nowhere to be found, I am reminded of this.

DG: What you express here are striking examples of the dominating *white* gaze. It is certainly an issue that receives too little attention in the public discourse in Switzerland and many viewers might not intuitively be aware of it. You are addressing a norm that is rarely questioned as a primarily *white* representation because it appears as if it were an unalterable given. Yet norms are always constructed and linked to social judgement. As various cultural and visual theorists have shown, *white* people are usually assigned a status that equates to ‘human existence’, something your example illustrates: a woman is generally thought to be *white*, be it in the heads of people or in the images that the Google search engine spits out for us. This falsely ascribes a universal status to the *white* gaze — which is also a male gaze, and a cisgender-heterosexual one on top of that — which has historically led *white* people to shape the world in their image and define and fix un(der)represented groups through their point of view. This has spawned stereotypes that dehumanise, sexualise and pathologise the Black body as the ‘other’: some of these representational patterns persist until today. Is there a dominant stereotype that you encounter and feel challenged by in your work?

FO: I encounter many stereotypical images of Black women, but those of hypersexualised bodies, in particular, confront me with a fundamental problem: How do I use these images to show or speak about my own sexuality without falling back into the stereotypical category of the hypersexualised Black woman? Is it possible to show a naked woman without her being objectified by the viewer’s gaze? How do I manage to grasp and reveal the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of what makes us human, sexuality being one fundamental aspect? I find this to be something which Black people are often denied within Western discourses. It’s the same with the stereotype of the ‘angry Black woman’. You don’t want to be angry because you don’t want to be defined as such. But at the same time I am angry and I have the right to be. For me, collage is the best medium to explore what I can do in terms of questioning, recreating and breaking with something that I don’t agree with, or that I don’t recognise. Yet sometimes I think it’s impossible, and that’s something I’m struggling with. In various conversations about my work I’ve come to realise that it didn’t always come across the way I want it to.

DG: Isn’t this the dilemma you find yourself in when you are challenging the dominant gaze with the very images it has produced, even if it is by reading them against the grain? Doesn’t the act of reproduction, despite the twists and disturbances you apply in your practice, always entail the risk of affirming and fixing the dominant gaze, even as it holds out the promise of challenging and destabilising it?

FO: I would say, yes, there is always a risk. Or maybe ‘risk’ means that you either succeed or you don’t, but I think the result will always be something in between, and everybody has to judge that for themselves. The only thing I can do is trust myself. Trusting myself when it comes to my work is not the problem. It’s more that I lose control of the work as soon as it leaves the studio or is posted online. Now I think more about what I show than I used to, especially when it comes to posting on Instagram. I’m afraid of the twists you mention, which can be read into the images and that you have no control over. But at the same time, I want to continue to create freely and without fear. When I didn’t have many followers, Instagram felt like a safer place, where I could post things without having to think too much. But when I started to gain more followers, I found that photos were reported and removed. This suddenly made the space unsafe. I remember posting a photo of a lynching scene which only showed the *white* spectators, and within a few minutes the photo was removed. I don’t even know if it was because someone reported it or if Instagram itself took it down. I remember feeling sick. The censorship was so direct, and the warnings that followed from Instagram so threatening. No face, just a system that aggressively deletes things that ‘they’ think violate community guidelines.

DG: I find the shocking example of photographs of lynchings, where Black people were murdered as a spectacle, interesting in terms of how they were used in an overtly racist US American visual mass culture to uphold the social order of *white* supremacy and the dominance of the *white* gaze. They were taken not only to be published in newspapers but also distributed as postcards among *white* communities; in contrast, they received only little attention in history books. So the infrastructures of image dissemination also play an important role when it comes to questions of making something visible or invisible.

Today, as you point out, it has become extremely complex to identify who controls and filters what can be seen and what must remain hidden, and for what reasons and motivations. I am also thinking of Big Tech companies like Meta and anonymous users of their online platforms, all of whom interfere in obscure processes of silencing and censorship without any transparency. Recent research has also demonstrated how algorithms can perpetuate biases and influence how we perceive the world. Discussing the images themselves, the networks in which they circulate and the contexts and representational strategies they are embedded in becomes all the more crucial, and at the same time more complicated.

FO: It is important to have a critical dialogue about these images. I am a bit shy, so writing and speaking in the digital realm has always been something I have dreaded. However, once my work was exhibited, I realised that I needed to have some control over how it was perceived by trying to define my own work, first and foremost for myself. It's a terrible feeling to be misunderstood in a profound way. The colonial archive is full of images that were taken to dehumanise, objectify and control. At the same time, there are so many moments that speak directly of strength and resistance — elements I look for in the gaze or the position of the body. Therein lies an ambiguity that interests me. I'm interested in *what* we see and *how* we see. The layering of different bodies and body parts, the twisting of limbs, the direct positioning of the gaze are, for me, an attempt to escape the narrow and violent understandings and discourses of who I am or who we are — an attempt to create a body of work (and a life) in which the *white* gaze does not dominate. I want to create complex narratives and empowered subjects while breaking stereotypical representations of what it means to be a Black person. I want to create subjects who look back and ask questions rather than being mere objects, a distant other that can be described and boxed in.

DG: This need to contextualise your visual practice through language indicates how politically charged the field of representation is and how complex questions of the gaze are in this context. At the same time, it also marks a significant shift in your career. Your practice follows first and foremost a very personal urge to situate yourself in the world, and it's something you have been doing for yourself for a very long time. Did being 'catapulted' into the art world after US American artist Arthur Jafa discovered your Instagram feed in 2017 change or influence your working process?

FO: My working process was and still is very therapeutic and calming for me, it is something I have always done alongside my work and studies. Now that I'm working full-time as an artist, I'm very thankful that I still manage to work the same way I used to. I still do it for myself. It's something I have to do. When I'm not working, I feel bad and restless. I think of my work as something that sustains me. I want to create works that speak to my own reality and put my own experiences and life at the centre. I was born in Norway and raised there by my mother, who is Norwegian. My father, who is Nigerian, went back to Nigeria when I was three years old, and we only reconnected many years later. For as long as I can remember, I was asked questions like 'Where are you really from?', 'Why is your mum *white*?' and 'Why are you Black?'. Hence, my sense of belonging has always been ambivalent. At the core, my practice is the same as it has always been, but at the same time, after my first exhibition with Arthur Jafa, many things changed.

DG: One of them being that your work is now exhibited around the world. Different audiences, each of them with different backgrounds, experiences and personal as well as social understandings of identity, will be looking at your collages and confronted by their direct gaze. Some viewers will be more and some less aware of all the complexities — some of which we have addressed — that such an encounter entails. To what extent do you take your audiences and the reception of your works in the exhibition space into account?

FO: When I'm working, I don't think about the audience or the exhibitions for that matter. Only when I come across a review, do I get self-conscious. I am aware that it will be seen by other people, but the most important thing for me is that I never send out anything that I don't feel comfortable or confident about. I have to trust my own eye and gut feeling, because that tells you if something is working against what you are trying to achieve. For me, my work is very sensitive, and I feel that when I blow up the collages to almost life-size — when I add layers and create these subjects that now live with me in my apartment — they become alive. While making the works for my show at Kunsthall Trondheim last year which are now presented at Fotomuseum Winterthur, I thought a lot about the tension between identity, representation and sexuality. I wanted to move away from evident sexual markers — like a vulva or breasts — to desexualise these body parts, to twist the limbs so that these areas are harder to see, harder to recognise. I've been wanting to get away from the physical body by working more abstractly. Some days it feels like that's the only possible way to break free, while on others it doesn't. There are just new problems that arise, like running away only to run right back into it. But all of this is part of the process — the dialectics of writing oneself in.



Girl on Horse, 2021
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Turning, 2021
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