

## Zhora Opoku

Zhora Opoku (\*1976 Altdöbern, former GDR) is a German-Ghanaian artist. She lives and works in Accra, Ghana and is represented by the Mariane Ibrahim Gallery Chicago/Paris. For a large part of her work, she resorts to the medium of photography, which she applies to various natural materials using different printing processes. Thematically, her series of works deal with the construction of identities under socio-political, historical and cultural influences from an Afro-diasporic perspective. Identity appears as a fluid construct that undergoes constant change under varying influences.

*"Through my personal background, I am constantly referencing how identity can be transformed according to the place of our origin or upbringing and that we have to accept ourselves as global citizens".*

Most recently, she was artist-in-residence at the artist space "Black Rock Senegal" in Dakar, founded by Kehinde Wiley.

### **Life and Education:**

Zhora Opoku began her artistic training in the field of fashion and photography. She first completed a Master's degree in fashion, costume and textile design at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (2003) and then worked for the artist and fashion designer Henrik Vibskov. In 2007, she was then discovered by the Victoria and Albert Museum and was exhibited there as part of the exhibition "Black Style" (2007). In 2009, she finally turned her back on the fashion world to concentrate fully on the visual arts.

As the daughter of a German mother and a Ghanaian father, she decided to look more deeply into her own African identity and moved to Accra, her father's homeland, in 2011. In the course of her experiences in Ghana and the research on the traditional Ghanaian textile industry associated with her work, she became more intensely involved with the framework of cultural memories and the formation of identities. As a result, Opoku always situates her works in a larger socio-political framework, starting with her own family biography and from an Afro-diasporic perspective. Her works have been shown internationally, in various exhibition venues: Nubuke Foundation, Kunsthaus Hamburg, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Royals Museum of Ontario, Cleveland Museum of Art and others.

<sup>1</sup> <https://marianeibrahim.com>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zohraopoku.com/about> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Zitat der Künstlerin in: Sharvari Alape: Inside Artist Zohra Opoku's Ethereal Studio In Senegal, 08.06.2020, <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/culture/art/we-step-inside-artist-zohra-opokus-ethereal-studio> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.artbaseafrica.org/artist/zohra-opoku>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Sharvari Alape: Inside Artist Zohra Opoku's Ethereal Studio In Senegal, 08.06.2020, <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/culture/art/we-step-inside-artist-zohra-opokus-ethereal-studio> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021

## **Artistic Work:**

In addition to photography as the starting point of her artistic process, Opoku draws on a wide variety of media for her works. Thus, she uses installations, videos, performance and sculptures to stage her works. Among other things, she deals with the cultural significance of fashion for society, the way societies deal with textiles and how this influences or overlays the formation of identities. For this purpose, she restages materials and traditions to show what socio-political influences clothing and fashion have on the history and culture of Africa.

The exploration of textiles began with her "Handwash Only Series" (2008).

She photographed clotheslines in Dakar, fascinated by their formal-aesthetic qualities. In her work, "Who is wearing my t-shirt?" (2010) draws attention to the socio-political implications of this trade machinery by re-staging second-hand clothes acquired in Germany in new designs and staging them photographically in the context of actions in Germany and Lagos. This shows how the introduction of a Western style of dress is imported, overriding and destroying the existence and development of the domestic garment industry. This, in turn, has a negative impact on a West African identity that is conveyed in particular through fashion and the cultural codes associated with it.

The work "The Billboard Project's" (2014-2015) also addresses similar issues. Another thematic pillar in her work series deals with the lives and possibilities of women.

Thus her work "WoMen ON BIKES" (2011), where she develops a utopian version of women in Africa, empowered in their flexibility and freedom through the use of bicycles.

In "The Harmattan Tales" (2018), she portrays Muslim women from different African countries and their practice of faith, focusing on the wearing of the veil and the aesthetics of Muslim dress. Furthermore, she refers to the different stages of unveiling that exist within her community, making them unquestionably visible.

<sup>1</sup> nataal gallery talks: interview conducted by Azu Nwagbogu and Maria Pia Bernardoni of the African Artists 'Foundation and Art Base Africa, <https://nataal.com/zohra-opoku> abgerufen am 29. Oktober.

<sup>1</sup> Christina Waechter: Who is wearing my T-shirt? 15.07.2010, <https://www.jetzt.de/redaktionsblog/who-is-wearing-my-t-shirt-507381> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021, nataal gallery talks: interview conducted by Azu Nwagbogu and Maria Pia Bernardoni of the African Artists 'Foundation and Art Base Africa, <https://nataal.com/zohra-opoku>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober.

## **Community exist, which makes them visible beyond doubt**

The reason why textiles play an overriding role in Opoku's work becomes particularly clear in the work "UNRAVELED THREADS" (2017). Here, the artist deals with her Ghanaian family history. She creates collages of family photographs screen-printed on pieces of fabric and restages the story of her father, an Asante king (Nana Opoku Gyabaah II, Chidomhene of Asato/Akan) of the Volta region, from her perspective. In doing so, she immerses herself in Ashanti culture and shows the enormous importance of kente cloth, which is passed down within families and is a carrier of meaning that serves to commemorate dynastic and family history. By arranging the printed fabrics in a collage-like manner, she symbolises the intertwining of the present and the past, which becomes visible through the combination of photography and material.

Much of her work demonstrates the practice of collage, a technique Opoku brings with her from her work in the fashion industry. She appreciates the experimental aspect of collage. There are no fixed rules, everything can be arranged together, the most diverse media and materials. Furthermore, she experiments with different printing processes and background materials. The resulting effects, which arise from apparent errors in printing the motifs, then become part of the work process and flow into the final composition of a work. These stylistic devices make up her genuine artistic language of form and can also be found in her current works. In "The Myths of Eternal Life" (2020/21), Opoku deals with death, the human spirit, the handling of the collage. There are no fixed rules, everything can be arranged together, the most diverse media and materials. Furthermore, she experiments with different printing processes and background materials. These stylistic devices make up her genuine artistic language of form and can also be found in her current works. In "The Myths of Eternal Life" (2020/21), Opoku deals with death, the human spirit, dealing with one's own mortality and a possible afterlife. This thematic reorientation arose in the face of coping with her breast cancer diagnosis with which she was confronted in 2019. A selection of this series of works was on view at the "Eclipse" Athens Biennale 2021 and in the online group exhibition "The Last Museum" at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin.

### **• Selection of Works by Zhora Opoku:**

- Who is wearing my SHIRT? (since 2010)
- WoMen ON BIKES (2011)
- Handwash Only (2011-2012)
- Billboard Project (2014-2015)
- Body Mask's (2014-2015)
- Unravelling Threads (2017)
- The Myths of Eternal Life (2020/21)

<sup>1</sup> Sharvari Alape: Inside Artist Zohra Opoku's Ethereal Studio In Senegal, 08.06.2020, <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/culture/art/we-step-inside-artist-zohra-opokus-ethereal-studio>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> „After the prayer, before the prayer |2018“ <https://www.zohraopoku.com/videowork>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Elis: Unraveled Threads | 2017, <https://www.zohraopoku.com/unraveled-threads> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Elis: Unraveled Threads | 2017, <https://www.zohraopoku.com/unraveled-threads> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021, nataal gallery talks: interview conducted by Azu Nwagbogu and Maria Pia Bernardoni of the African Artists 'Foundation and Art Base Africa, <https://nataal.com/zohra-opoku> abgerufen am 29. Oktober

## **Einzelstellungen<sup>1</sup>:**

- 2019 Prismes sector, Paris Photo, Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Paris, France 2018 Art Dubai, Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
Harmattan Tales, Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Seattle, WA  
2017 Unraveled Threads, The Armory Show, Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, New York, NY  
2016 Draped Histories, Kruger Gallery, Chicago, IL  
Sassa, Gallery1957, Accra, Ghana  
2014 The Billboard Project, Public art exhibition, Accra, Ghana  
2013 Post No Bill, Jamestown Community Theater Centre, Accra, Ghana

## **Stipendien und Residenzen<sup>2</sup>:**

- 2022 New Roots Foundation/ La Nueva Fábrica, Antigua, Guatemala Triangle Art Association, Artist Residency, Brooklyn, NY  
2020 Black Rock, Artist Residency, Dakar, Senegal  
2018 ART Dubai Residence, Tashkeel Studios, Dubai, United Arab Emirates 2016 Sacatar Artist Residency, Salvador da Bahia, Brazil  
2015 Research Residency, Iwalewa Haus, Bayreuth, Germany  
2014 Artist Residency, Jan van Eyck Institute, Maastricht, Netherlands 2013 Visiting grant for Salon Urbain de Douala, Cameroon  
Art show funding, Accra, Alliance Française + Goethe-Institut, Ghana 2012 Artist residency, Art OMI, Ghent, NY  
2008 Prêt-à-partager, Aktion Afrika, German Cultural Fund Couture Commune, Artist residency, Künstlerhaus, Stuttgart, Germany

## **Ihre Werke sind in folgenden Sammlungen vertreten:**

Tate Modern, CCS Bard College Hessel Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Cleveland, Clinic Collection, The Royal Museum of Ontario, The Faurschou Foundation, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida

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<sup>1</sup>[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ebdade7783126540bff7b5d/t/60c646a499b3c572ebb78d2c/1623606948956/ZohraOpoku\\_CV\\_May2021.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ebdade7783126540bff7b5d/t/60c646a499b3c572ebb78d2c/1623606948956/ZohraOpoku_CV_May2021.pdf), abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021

<sup>2</sup>[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ebdade7783126540bff7b5d/t/60c646a499b3c572ebb78d2c/1623606948956/ZohraOpoku\\_CV\\_May2021.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ebdade7783126540bff7b5d/t/60c646a499b3c572ebb78d2c/1623606948956/ZohraOpoku_CV_May2021.pdf), abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021

## Individual references:

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„After the prayer, before the prayer |2018“, <https://www.zohraopoku.com/videowork>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021

THE MYTHS OF ETERNAL LIFE | 2020-21, <https://www.zohraopoku.com/myths-of-eternal-life>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

Ashley Elis: UNRAVELED THREADS | 2017, <https://www.zohraopoku.com/unraveled-threads>, abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

Christina Waechter: Who is wearing my T-shirt? 15.07.2010, <https://www.jetzt.de/redaktionsblog/who-is-wearing-my-t-shirt-507381> abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

Enuma Okoro: In the Art of Tonia Nneji and Zohra Opoku, Poignant Narratives of Healing, 13.11.2020; <https://www.vogue.com/article/tonia-nneji-and-zohra-opoku-narratives-of-healing>; abgerufen am 29. Oktober 2021.

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