

Coumba Samba

Interview

by

Tosia

Leniarska

Born *2000*

Coumba Samba (b. 2000, Harlem, New York City US) is an interdisciplinary artist based in London, UK. Her work is rooted in studying process, hybridity, materiality and modes of visual communication. Samba investigates the uneasy relationships between the durable and the temporary against a backdrop of uncertainty and accelerated cultural consumption. At the heart of her enquiry is an unlikely event of play, community, collective care or love-making spawning semi-randomly in the universe against the odds of it's unfriendly environment, where color, symbol, humor and naiveté are utilized as instruments for formative and conceptual upcycling.





Stripe blinds, window blind, acrylic and oil paint 102 x 121.5 x 7.5 cm 40 1/8 x 47 7/8 x 3 in, 2023. World as diagram, work as dance installation view at Emalin, London, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Emalin, London Photography: Stephen James



Stripe blinds, window blind, acrylic and oil paint 102 x 121.5 x 7.5 cm 40 1/8 x 47 7/8 x 3 in, 2023, World as diagram, work as dance installation view at Emalin, London, 2023. Courtesy of the artists and Emalin, London Photography: Stephen James

I keep remembering your pink ribbons – when we lived together, you were tying them everywhere in bows. I love seeing that kind of seep into your practice, you have this really interesting way of engaging with the question of what it means for colour to be itself. So now – not ribbons but flags?

A lot of my practice has to do with really bold colours. It kind of naturally led to asking, what do colours mean? And then, what do colours mean in flags? And then, what do flags mean? In the show I'm working on now, there are three rooms of instal-

Well, yeah, first of all, it has a lot to do with abstraction – like with Stripe Blinds being an abstraction of a photo of my sister – the colour being like a conduit able to tell her story. Once an image is broken down into this colour, I also ask, what does it mean to give colour so much power? Like I was saying before, in giving colour so much power, the connection to a flag seems like the most seamless link. When I was doing research for the vinyl floor room, at first it was supposed to be yellow, green and red, which is the flag of Senegal, but also

bloodshed or whatever. And then, for Africa, it was basically that Ethiopia was the first to gain independence. So once other African countries gained independence, a lot of them took on the colours of the Ethiopian flag.

I was thinking about, in a way that you were talking about the picture of your sister as the source for the colours of Stripe Blinds – in general, you seem to use this kind of hybrid or collective authorship, or this idea of hybridity. Because I feel like the way that you appropriate objects or rooms with colour, in the same way you take from pictures taken by your family members, and then process them in some way and appropriate them as your artworks. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Yeah, I recently had this situation where my sister stole my identity for credit card fraud. I have all of this legal paperwork, and recorded phone calls with credit agencies. And then I also have this flash drive, where I got all of her high school photos. I want to do a show about her. I can kind of profit off of this because of what she did to me. It is a funny dynamic, but they're still my siblings. So it feels like their story is also my story. And it so easily could've been me. And it is me.

When we were working on our show, the way that I thought about it was how it seems like through your different siblings, their different memories and objects that you have from them, you sort of rehearse these different strategies that they've taken in terms of either leaning into America or holding on to their Senegalese or Muslim identity, or falling into a system set up against them. It seems like these objects are kind of symbols of the different paths through hybridity.

Yeah. And I think also since we all share the same parents, but there's such a huge age difference between us, I can see the things that were imposed on them by our parents. I have two siblings who were born and raised in Senegal and then moved to New York. And one sibling who only lived in New York. You're having these different narratives. I also have my own narrative, but I think it's interesting when they talk to each other. So much has happened in my family that I feel like the experience can speak about a lot of other crazy fucked up

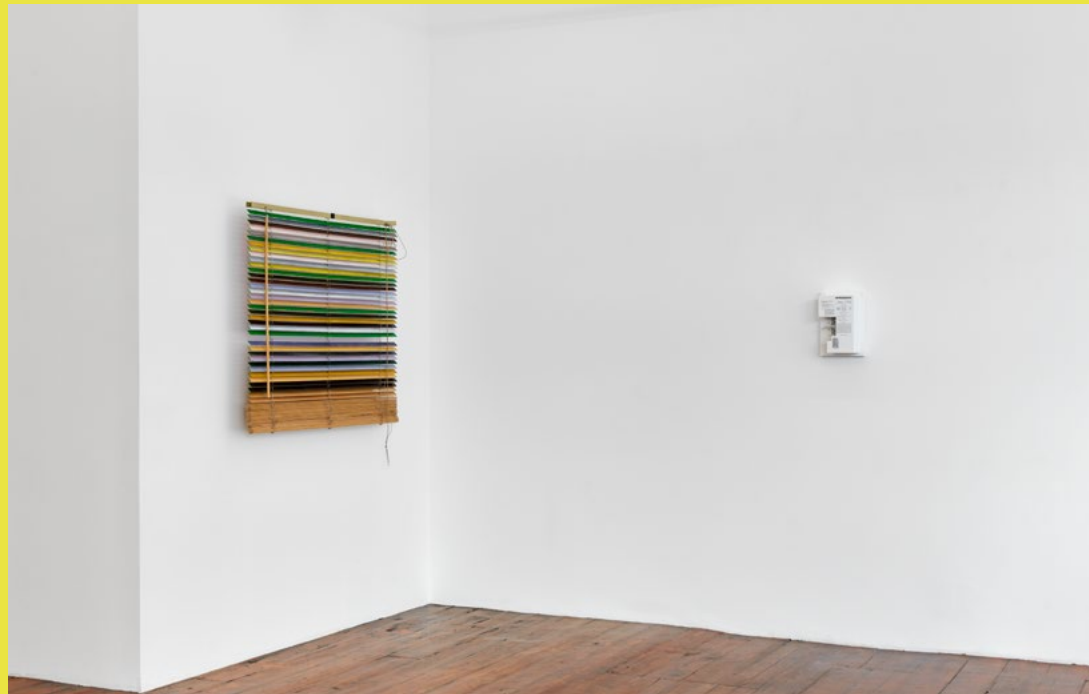


Sand (detail), 2022, Couture installation view at Galerina, London, 2022. Courtesy: Galerina, London

things in the world that I genuinely care about. It gives a lot of material to play with.

I was also wondering about how since you went back to Dakar, a lot of that reference of building materials came from seeing the specific types of cinder blocks and sand between buildings on the streets there. So I was wondering – how do you think about these different cities that you've lived in, so Dakar, New York, London?

I love Senegal. There is a sort of duality there. A place like New York is super hyper-capitalist, everything's fast and in your face and fake designer. Senegal, a French (and British) post-colonial country, is trying to get their footing in something but are left with all this baggage and trash. Trying to build itself up, but it feels like they aren't able to move forward. Politically – sure, but also in terms of building infrastructure, like jobs, just because so much has been taken away. In my work, being able to play with both of those has been really interesting – the sad and the funny and the beautiful of both places. And this is also what my



Installation View, World as diagram, work as dance, Emalin, London, February 3 – March 4, 2023, Curated by Tosia Leniarska, Images courtesy of the artist and Emalin, London. Photos by Theo Christelis.

lations you walk through. The first room is a turtle tank with my turtle Penny in it. But in the second room, the floors will be covered with vinyl in stripes with colours taken from the French flag. The third room is for flag-inspired modernist paintings. The show is a study of flags – of colonialism, of colour.

These rooms, the ribbons, the Stripe Blinds (2023) that we had in our show – are almost like different ways of how you appropriate objects or spaces with colour, and take ownership with colour. Sealing the room with colour, as if painting is like tying a ribbon around a room. Is that how you see it?

a bunch of other African countries. And I realised that I don't want it to be recognisably one flag, so I made some combination, and I was like, great, this is it. And then it turned out that it was the flag of Lithuania.

Ha! Do you know why it is that way? I haven't actually thought about this before, but it does seem that red, white, blue are for France and America and Britain and so many colonial, imperial powers. And then the yellow, green, red is, like you're saying, a lot of African countries. Do you know why that is?

I'm not sure about the red, white and blue. I think I learned about it in school, but it was something stupid, like, red for



Rubber Door (for Box). 2023. Rubber, wood, thumbtacks, 192 x 76 x 6 cm, 75 5/8 x 29 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches.
 Courtesy: Courtesy the artists and Drei, Cologne. Photo: Cédric Mussano

Cell Project Space show is about, where it's America being this dominating presence and having this power over African countries systematically. Exporting their trash and also exporting really weird concepts, whether it's colorism or these ideas of 'rags to riches'. Also it's almost impossible to push back on these authoritative countries, because when Kenya tried to tell the UK 'stop sending your clothes and garbage here', they were threatened with losing money and support to their government. Literally, the EU dumps millions of items of clothes and tons of plastic waste in Kenya every year. How is any country supposed to survive that.

It's a rigged game.

Yeah! Literally – the Cell Project Space project is about a soccer game. I'm doing a performance piece and after the performance, the stage set will stay there as a sculptural piece. I'm getting dancers from Senegal, from this contemporary dance school there called *École des Sables*. I'm collaborating with them because they're very experimental and I want to give back to my country because they are slaying it. So I'm gonna have three dancers from there. The piece is called FIFA. And it is about using all of the dramatics of a soccer game, of getting hurt, or throwing yourself on the ground so that it would be a foul or whatever. Scenes of having to still be 'a good sport', and hyper-masculinity. They like to have some really interesting body movements and language. I like using that and FIFA to talk about everything that I was talking about before, like power dynamics, import and export. Not that the dancers are each representing a country or whatever, but I think more so just what FIFA stands for. And also, the fact that every time I tell someone about Senegal, they respond with football. I don't know anything about football. It's funny that this is their biggest export. This is similar to America where a lot of the black kids that I grew up with, a lot of the boys wanted to be basketball players, even my nephew at some point. I think it's also similar to the piece about my brother where it's kind of about being assigned a future, or assigned a story.

Yeah. Also because in America, you've got the system where you have a chance of get-

ting college scholarships because of sports, that being kind of your only way in that gets funded. Hoop Dreams. The inequalities being so dominating that only if you get good enough at sports, do you get a pass against the system.

Yeah. And also the fact that it is sports and not anything else. This weird voyeurism and obsession with black bodies and culture.

Do you want to talk more about the pieces on your brother?

Yeah, I'm thinking of it as a series called *Box*, where it's all pieces about the same story, but using different materials and a visual language to tell it. The *Rubber Door for Box* (2023) is also related to this. I want it to be ongoing. Nothing is super direct but everything's more abstracted, like this neon construction yellow on black rubber. The fact that it's on a broken door, and also that it's a door found on the street. It's mostly just about the materials, drawing on my brother's experience of incarceration and building work. It's an ongoing assemblage piece with parts that will never meet.

I also want to talk to you about music and how it's related to your visual practice. I know that the connection was there in the show we did together, where you made an installation of speakers and CDs in collaboration with Gretchen Lawrence. Together you also have the music project *NEW YORK*, where the connection is through the idea of found sound, samples being the way that you find objects in the street. Even your lyrics are almost like snippets of diaries or conversations, no?

Yeah, for sure. I think a lot of the values behind our music is that it's all built from free samples, free loops, and the music is free. That you can be building a community and giving back to the community, in the way of not having to buy shit all the time. That everything can be recycled. Not everything has to be owned by someone. Also, it's just a nice feeling to put things out into the world.

When you perform together, these are really way more like art performances than musical performances.

Yeah, I think so. Right now we're working on a new album. I have lyrics about, like,

Cityscape by Gretchen Lawrence and Coumba Samba, found objects, dimensions variable. Installation view, World as diagram, work as dance, 03 February – 04 March 2023, Emalin, London. Photo by: Stephen James. Courtesy Emalin, London.





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Sneaker Pimps
Splinter
1. Half Life 04:37
2. Low Five 04:36
3. Lightning Field 04:11
4. Clut 04:08
5. Destroying Angel 04:39
6. Conspiracy 03:51
7. Superbug 04:27
8. Flowers and Stones 04:47
9. Cute Squid Lunches 04:13
10. Van to Twenty 04:56
11. Splinter 04:48
12. Wife by Two Thousand 04:10

AMPLIFIED HEART
EVERYTHING BUT THE GIRL
1. Everything But the Girl 04:37
2. Everything But the Girl 04:37
3. Everything But the Girl 04:37
4. Everything But the Girl 04:37
5. Everything But the Girl 04:37
6. Everything But the Girl 04:37
7. Everything But the Girl 04:37
8. Everything But the Girl 04:37
9. Everything But the Girl 04:37
10. Everything But the Girl 04:37

СТАТНИ МЕСТА
ГААНЕ ГААНЕ БИВЛА

Cityscape by Gretchen Lawrence and Coumba Samba, found objects, dimensions variable, Installation view, World as diagram, work as dance, 03 February - 04 March 2023, Emskin, London. Photo by: Stephen James. Courtesy Emskin, London.

walking around in the Bronx or something. And now with our performances, like the one at Le Bourgeois, that one was super fun because we were super militant.

Yeah, you're military but also like an air hostess.

Also kind of secretary. We have a message and I feel like through performances we can have that more political side of it be brought out.

What's the message?

The message is anarchy, fuck the government, peace and love, save the Earth, everything should be free.



Photos by Esther Brugeilles

Cool. The last thing I wanted to know is can you tell me why Penny the Turtle is taking part in your upcoming solo show?

Penny is really brave. My other turtle bit her tail off. Penny is the perfect character to tell the story of perseverance and personal survival. And she's really cute. Also, it's like, I don't know, I like the fun of someone walking into a gallery and being like, what the fuck? Turtle in here?



Prison letter from the artists' brother, marker, paper, 2009, 2023. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy: The artists and Arcadia Missa, London



Letter Box, 2022. Wood, keys, coins, dollar bill, receipts and stickers, 48 x 28.5 x 10 cm, 18 7/8 x 11 1/4 x 4 inches. Courtesy: The artists and Arcadia Missa, London



Sand (Abstract), 2022. Sculpture installation view at Galerina, London, 2022. Courtesy: Galerina, London



Couture, Installation view at Galerina, London, 2022. Courtesy: Galerina, London

Courtesy: Installation view at Galerina, London, 2022. Courtesy: Galerina, London



Denominator by Urs Fischer
Special Off-Site Exhibition in
Beverly Hills. Gagosian, 2023.



Denominator, 2020–22. Database, algorithms, and LED cube, 141 3/4 x 141 3/4 x 141 3/4 inches, 360 x 360 x 360 cm © Urs Fischer. Photo: Jeff McLane. Courtesy Gagosian

Urs Fischer