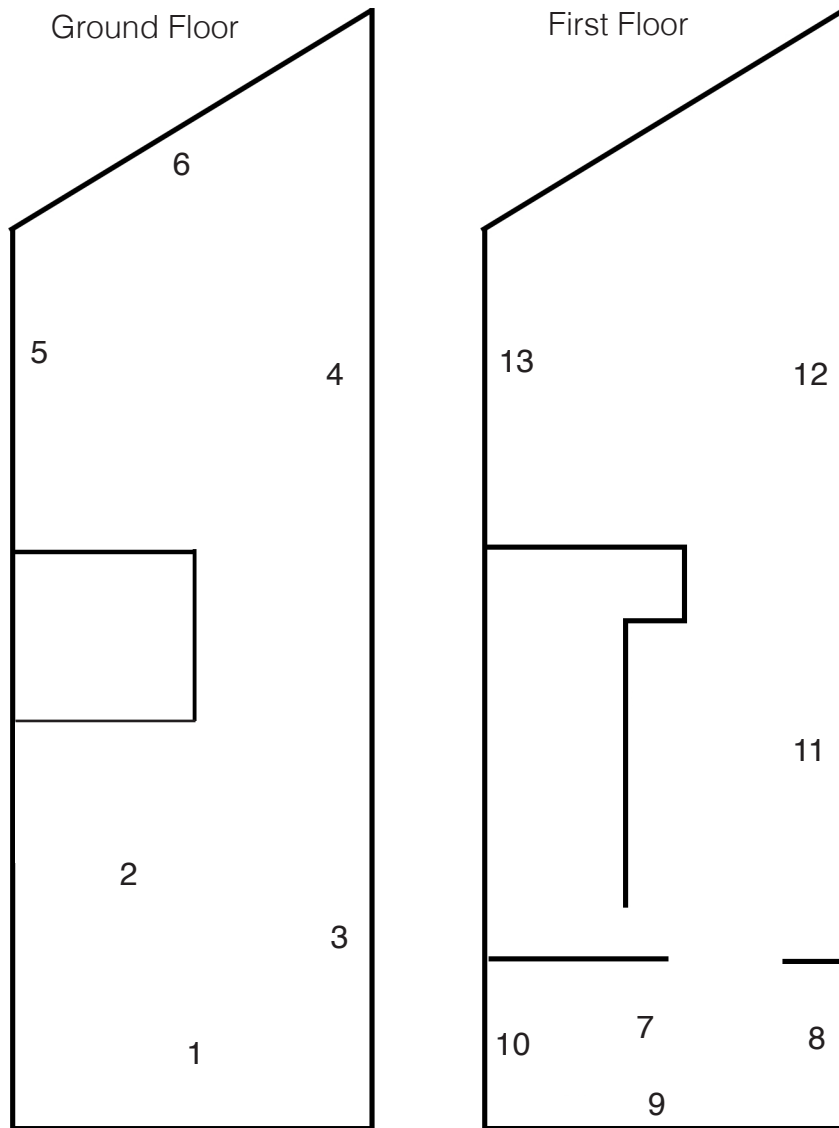


Mimosa House



1
Leporello, 2020
colour pencil on paper

2
De-fossilization of the Look, Dialogue with Madonna Del Parto, 2018
40 drawings on paper

3
Les Vieilles, 2016
series of drawings on paper

4
De-fossilization of the Look, Dialogue with Madonna Del Parto, 2018
pigment and mixed media on canvas
Collection of Stefaan Declerck & Sabine Bouckaert

5
Les Vieilles series

6
La Vieille, 2023
pigment and vegetable oil

7
Healing Room, 2023
Participatory installation

8
Les Vieilles, 2016
series of drawings on paper

9
The Witness, 2020
acrylic on canvas

10
Les Vieilles series

11
Les Vieilles series

12
De-fossilization of the Look, Dialogue with Madonna Del Parto, 2018
pigment and mixed media on canvas
Collection of Wilfried & Yannicke Cooreman

13
Les Vieilles series

Pélagie Gbaguidi (b.1965) is a Brussels-based Beninese artist. Gbaguidi calls herself a contemporary 'griot', which she defines as someone who functions as an intermediary between individual and collective memory and ancestral past. Her work is an anthology of the signs and traces of trauma and is centred on colonial and postcolonial history. Pélagie Gbaguidi has participated in the Berlin Biennale (2020), documenta 14 (2017), the Lubumbashi Biennale (2019) and the Dakar Biennale (2004, 2006, 2008, 2014 and 2018), among others.

Pélagie Gbaguidi: De-Fossilization of the Look

When I draw – it's a need, it's vital.
Pélagie Gbaguidi

Seeing Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* (c. 1460) for the first time was a great revelation for Pélagie Gbaguidi. This early Renaissance depiction of the Madonna features unusual iconography: the Virgin appears very human and real, quite unlike the traditional depictions of her as a modest, holy, and all-accepting woman. Her blue dress is partly unlaced, exposing the white undergarment that covers her rounded belly; she looks visibly tired and immersed in her thoughts. Gbaguidi uses the image of the Madonna as a catalyst for reflecting on women's condition throughout history, and how the perception of womanhood was influenced by patriarchal expectations of chastity, obedience and passivity.

The title of the show – *De-Fossilization of the Look, Dialogue with Madonna del Parto* – quotes the title of a series of works (212 drawings and 2 paintings – of which 40 drawings and both paintings are on view here, at Mimosa House) inspired by the *Madonna del Parto* in 2018. But what does it mean to de-fossilize the look? A fossilized look suggests a rigid, constrained, pre-conditioned way of looking. De-fossilization, therefore, is a suggestion to unfreeze the look and challenge the way we see and interpret images.

Gbaguidi's all-seeing and all-touching eye dissects the image into fragments, reshuffles them and creates a mosaic of afterimages and bodily impressions. We spy church bells, floating candles and musical notes, eyes and tears, ladders and wings, gargoyles and women carrying weights, trinities and roses, vessels and boats; we hear outbursts of joy and weeping, prayers and screams, gospels and choirs; we witness ascensions and descents, annunciations and baptisms, worship and cursing. The marks and lines on paper swirl and rotate in all directions at once, as we follow the artist's gestural painting in this joyful and unapologetic ode to seeing.

In this radical re-imagination of religious iconography and dichotomy, the artist merges good with evil, curses and prayers, menstrual and holy blood... Cherishing her connection with animistic and matriarchal worldviews, inherent to Benin's pre-colonial culture, Gbaguidi de-sacralizes the conventional Christian imagery by infusing it with bodily, ancestral, animated and polytheistic visions.

Gbaguidi destabilizes the linearity of perspective and narrative with a fisheye lens: she grasps everything at the same time, enveloping her subjects and dissecting them into fibres, as if looking at them from within. The artist states: "I draw without perspective: my perspective is a perspective of a child, of a bird, of an insect, and of a fish."

While the *De-Fossilization of the Look* series is inspired by the depiction of a pregnant Madonna, Gbaguidi's *Les Vieilles* (Old Women), 2016, derives from photographs of women that the artist encountered in the colonial archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, outside Brussels.

How can we look at and process violent images? Do we have to take a blinded and aseptic stance to avoid feeling triggered by them? Gbaguidi channels the horrific imagery through her own body into a series of gestural and automatic drawings on paper, amplifying her impressions and liberating the women from their victimhood.

Les Vieilles are uncontainably expressive; they strike exquisite and potent poses. Drawn in free and vibrating lines, they exude power and agency. Their feet grow from the ground and their spiralling hair and halos connect them to the cosmos. Both metaphorically and literally, these Old Women are planetary creatures whose wisdom and resilience hold the universe together.

Gbaguidi cites Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *The Dangerous Old Woman* as a source of insight into the power and wisdom of these characters: "Giftedness is not a quiescent experience; it is an experience of a golden fuse at the center of the psyche flashing, signaling, giving off energetic impulses in every direction."

The women whirl and vibrate with live energy; they menstruate, vocalize, move, and hold their bellies in their arms. We encounter a warrior woman who dexterously holds a spear in her arms, a woman who emanates words as if for the first time, and another one who occupies the whole length of the gallery's back wall, enveloping the defunct chimney breast. Adamantly rejecting their muteness and marginalization, these old women resist being labelled as useless and unseen, and reinstate their position as witnesses and survivors of colonial atrocities.

Gbaguidi seeks to establish an affective connection with her subjects, viewers, and participants, stating that "to draw people we need to touch them", and questions aseptic and detached forms of human interaction and social indifference. Here, she has taken the first-floor gallery space to create a communal space for healing and repair. She invites visitors to choose a piece of fabric, sew a button onto it, and add the resulting work to a large wall collage made collectively. This action invites us to retreat and concentrate on the introspective potential of meticulous manual labour. Engagement with the audience is characteristic of Gbaguidi, who once invited people to collectively wipe a painting from a wall. This was an impossible task as she had used permanent paints, all in order to manifest the irreversibility of violence once incurred. In another example of socially engaged practice, Gbaguidi made face masks to protect women who work in inhuman conditions in Congo, breaking stones and inhaling the harmful stone powder.

Throughout Gbaguidi's work, her body acts as a seismograph that captures and transmits the visual impressions, memories, and energies of the images it has absorbed. Gbaguidi's paintings are embodied; she paints them through and with her body. She often uses her body parts both to draw from and to create bodily impressions on her canvases. Gbaguidi rejects aesthetic authority and representational depiction, and transmits the sensorial, the carnal, and the affective instead. Her automatic drawings and paintings form a sign language that resists deciphering and avoids direct interpretation, while acutely and methodically transcribing the human condition.

text by Daria Khan, curator and founder of Mimosa House