

Collection Spotlight: Project Diaspora, Omar Victor Diop

January 25, 2017



Title: *Juan de Pareja and Ayuba Suleiman Diallo* from *Project Diaspora*

Artist: ^[L]_[SEP]Omar Victor Diop (b. 1980)

Nationality: Senegalese

Date: 2014

Medium or technique: Pigment inkjet prints on Harman By Hahnemuhle paper

Image Credit: © Omar Victor Diop, Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

The Block Museum acquired two photographs by the contemporary Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop in 2016. These works are from Diop's *Project Diaspora* series in which the artist explores the history of Africans who found notoriety in Europe (and to a lesser extent in the Americas) during the 15th – 19th centuries. In many cases, the stories of these figures complicate the narratives of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism of this period. Diop uses himself as the subject of photographs that are based on paintings, drawings, and early photographs of historic figures. He was interested in drawing parallels between his contemporary condition as a cosmopolitan artist, moving through spaces in which he is both celebrated and a stranger, and the lives of these historic sitters. Objects associated with the game of soccer (football) are incorporated into the compositions to further connect to the contemporary moment, when players for European teams from the African continent are occupying what the artist sees as similar paradoxical positions.

The photographs *Juan de Pareja* (2014) and *Ayuba Suleiman Diallo* (2014) are based on the paintings *Juan de Pareja* (1650) by Spanish painter Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez and *Ayuba Suleiman Diallo* (1733) by British painter William Hoare, respectively. Pareja (1606-1670) was born enslaved in Antequera, Spain. At the time of the portrait he was working as an assistant in Velázquez's studio. Six months after Velázquez painted Pareja's portrait, he freed him. The terms of manumission, however, required that Pareja remain in service to Velázquez, which he did until Velázquez's death in 1660. After this time, Pareja worked for Velázquez's son-in-law, until Pareja's own death in 1670. After 1650, however, Pareja enjoyed a parallel career as a painter in his own right. Diallo (1701-1773) was born in Senegal to a wealthy, educated, family of Muslim merchants and religious leaders, and was captured and sold into slavery during an excursion to sell slaves on his father's behalf. Transported to Maryland in 1730 or 1731, Diallo was enslaved on a tobacco plantation in that state. He escaped, but was captured and imprisoned. While imprisoned in the Kent County Courthouse, Diallo came into contact with the British lawyer Thomas Bluett, who, through an interpreter, learned of Diallo's background and literacy in the Arabic language. Bluett worked to raise money to secure Diallo's freedom. Diallo subsequently moved in the circles of London's elite, working for a time with Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), the physician and antiquarian whose collection became the foundation of the British Museum, helping to translate texts from Arabic into English. In July 1734 Diallo returned to Senegal. His story was published in 1734 by Bluett as *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa*.

These works expand the Block's holdings in global contemporary art, while building on the collection's traditional strengths in photography. They have the potential to connect to faculty teaching and research in Art History, African Studies, African American Studies, and the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa, among others and compliment work in the Block's collection, by artists such as Fred Wilson, which engage with the representation of Africans in Early Modern European art. They are also compliments to the Herskovits Library of Africana Studies' important collections of colonial era photography from Africa and African Arabic manuscripts.

– Janet Dees, Curator of Contemporary Art, Block Museum

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