



Omar Victor Diop

Aminata, Le Studio des vanités, 2013

inkjet print, 18.2 x 18.2 cm

Double Negatives

Gabrielle Moser

Pattern, doubled. The same textures, contours, and details repeated, but not identical. Background and foreground intermingle and collapse as my eye zips around the small square of saturated ink. The razzle-dazzle of red frond-like forms swimming upstream in an ochre sea. A pair of calm but bemused eyes above cool magenta lips. Three almond-shaped fingernails placed like descending stairs along the guard of a fan, their hues a near-perfect match. The colours fascinate me in this image, seemingly surpassing both the intensity and nuance I thought possible in colour film. After more than a century of colour photography balanced to make white skin legible, and racialized bodies literally disappear,¹ Omar Victor Diop's image pulses with a spectrum of tones.

But it is more than just colour that I see in this image. In Diop's portrait of the model, Aminata Faye, I see a miniature allegory of photography's doubled promise: that in its mirroring of the world, it conceals as much as it reveals. "I wanted to produce an effect similar to what you get when you examine a photograph beside its negative," writes the poet Jon Sands of his work. "I am struck by how much of what I see in life contains—or is a direct result of—what I don't (or won't) see."² Sands' observation seems simple, but it contains within it the knowledge of this discrepancy between the visible and invisible in photography. However much we might want to see them as identical, a negative and its print are not the same thing merely inverted. A negative contains more information than a single (contingent) print can ever show us, enriching and sometimes even contradicting the photograph it produces.

This double operation of revealing and concealing is more than metaphorical in Senegal, where Diop works. For much of the twentieth century, the art historian Elizabeth Harney writes, *sous verre* painted portraits surpassed the popularity (and affordability) of photographic portraits in Senegal, and they remain popular there today. In *sous verre*, a scene or subject is painted onto a piece of glass in reverse order from a conventional canvas painting: the signature and fine details are applied first, then the volume and contours, and finally the colour blocks of the landscape and background.³ Like a photographic negative, the hierarchy of details is inverted. Significance is built up slowly, in reverse, and hidden from the viewer in the finished product.

The undeveloped negative—the hidden, inaccessible meaning—behind Diop's photograph of Faye is a history of colour studio portraiture in Senegal that I will never have access to—or that never existed. As my eyes skim across its surface, I find myself longing to lay its negative alongside it, and imagine other histories of photographic bodies than the ones we have inherited. A different pattern, doubled.

1 Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34 (2009): 111-136.

2 Jon Sands, "Decoded," *The Best New American Poetry*, ed. David Lehman and Sherman Alexie (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015): 184. I am grateful to Vanessa Fleet for sharing this excerpt with me.

3 Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 182.