

Into an Image

cheyanne turions

A seated woman, squarely framed. A dress drapes around her, covering nearly all her body except, noticeably, a bare shoulder, which is lit so that the exposed collarbone draws horizontally across the image. This line resonates with the gesture of her palm and curled fingers as she extends a folded fan just beyond her face. She poses to be looked at, yet the image is conditioned by camouflage: the patterning of what cloaks her and the patterning that she is set against repeat through coloured difference. Diffuse lighting compounds this textural flatness. The boundaries of the clothed body become soft. Her indifferent stare cuts a hard line out of the frame.

There are many words to describe being caught up in the gravity of something—pulled, compelled, impressed—but what these words skirt are their politics. This is the photograph I chose to bring language to, and confronting whiteness means to question the role that exoticism, for instance, has played in my decision.

There's always the problem of describing colour, but this is a problem larger than that. To not centre whiteness means to acknowledge what I see and to then detect the structures that make that seeing so. And then to be there, to steep in the uncomfortable truth that I see a black woman as difference, that the arrangement of shapes in the textiles makes me uncomfortable when I imagine myself wearing these clothes as my own, but that they speak powerfully belonging to another. This photograph materializes for me my whiteness.

Aminata is part of a photographic series documenting Africa's contemporary urban cultures. None of these images, however, is a straightforward snapshot of life; they are entirely staged, co-authored by Diop and the sitters. Each image draws its form from Diop's work as a fashion photographer and its substance from the sitter's cultural profession. It is easy to observe and nonetheless important to note that this photograph is an act of self-determination.

Diop's image takes inheritance (in the form of studio photography and the tradition of textiles) and gives it new life in the present tense. In its individual voice, it proclaims a woman rooted in history yet ambivalent about the contemporary gaze cast at her, seemingly curious about what fruit this mix of attention and disregard can bear. Attending to this photograph means to follow this temperament of concern through, burnishing the image's propositions and my own preconceptions against each other.