

EUROPEAN PHOTOGRAPHY

ART MAGAZINE · NUMBER 101



Joana Choumali Awoulaba/Taille Fine

Born in 1974 in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Lives in Abidjan

www.joanachoumali.com

I have been documenting local manufactories in Ivory Coast which produce mannequins customized to the idealized African concept of beauty. In Ivorian popular culture, the Baoulé term *Awoulaba* is applied to beautiful women with impressive measurements: a pretty face, large breasts and thighs and, above all, large buttocks. *Taille Fine* is the term used to identify skinny women models or mannequins that reflect Western standards of beauty.

The local manufacturers produce mannequins with full-figured bodies. They are generally painted in lighter colors and only occasionally in darker hues. Women are constantly exposed to and influenced by fashion dictates, models imposed by the media, and global standards that can hardly represent the wide variety of human body forms. Beauty, then, becomes a projection of the atmosphere and trends that converges upon a society at a particular time in history. What is to be considered beautiful and attractive merges with what is supposed to be liked, what is supposed to be considered beautiful by popular standards.

My conceptual compositions constitute the hybrid representation of what a "perfect woman" is supposed to be: simultaneously authentic and idealized. I superimpose images of real women's body parts onto the perfect shapes of the mannequins that I ordered from the local manufacturers. By doing so, I evoke the "Venus" celebrities who embody "perfect beauty" in popular culture today.

Awoulaba/Taille Fine explores the complex, contradictory notion of femininity, beauty, and the image of the body in contemporary Africa and, by extension, throughout the world, as can be observed with the increasing worldwide obsession with large breasts and, more recently, also enhanced buttocks. What is to be considered a perfect body? Should we model ourselves on the soulless perfection of the mannequins that surround us? Or should we develop our own concept of beauty and identify models who can represent us in a way that is more authentic?

Joana Choumali

What inspires you?

I am greatly inspired by social phenomena, but I also find artistic inspiration in my own life.

How would you characterize yourself in one word?

Resilient.

What prompted you to start photographing women?

I use photography to explore various questions. Photographing women thus came naturally. I wanted to explore what it takes to be a woman in contemporary society, beyond the normal clichés.

Which female artists do you admire the most?

I was most inspired by Frida Kahlo, because of her courage and passion. She overcame so many obstacles in her life. Resilient, free spirited, creative, and determined.

Would you call yourself a feminist?

If a feminist is a person (of any gender) who believes in equality between women and men, who makes an advanced reading of society, witnesses the plural realities of women. If feminism means revealing the "life story" of women, encouraging female leadership and providing the means to vary the patterns of identification of young women through my art... Then I can say that, yes, some feminist values are reflected in my work.

How would you distinguish between the female and the male gaze?

In the past, the majority of photographs were produced by men, depicting women in a way that pleases the male gaze, through advertising, magazine covers, pornography etc. Today, women photographers exercise their right to freely express who they are, how they feel about themselves and other women, just as men always did about themselves. There is a new narrative about what is femininity, identity, sexuality, and the plurality of beauty. The female gaze shifts the point of view to a more challenging, wider, and more profound image of what it means to be a woman. The more we're exposed to different points of view about what it means to be a woman, the more we can capture the plurality of womanhood, far removed from clichés and prejudice.

Which equipment did you use for this project?

I used a Canon 5D Mark III camera for both documentary and studio photos.

Do you think photography has the power to change society?

Photography can indeed play a role in society, since it can question social situations and habits or reveal breakthroughs in society. It can also create a dialogue between communities. A photographer can make a testimony, a statement that unites people through his or her work. So, yes – I believe that photography definitely has the power to change society.



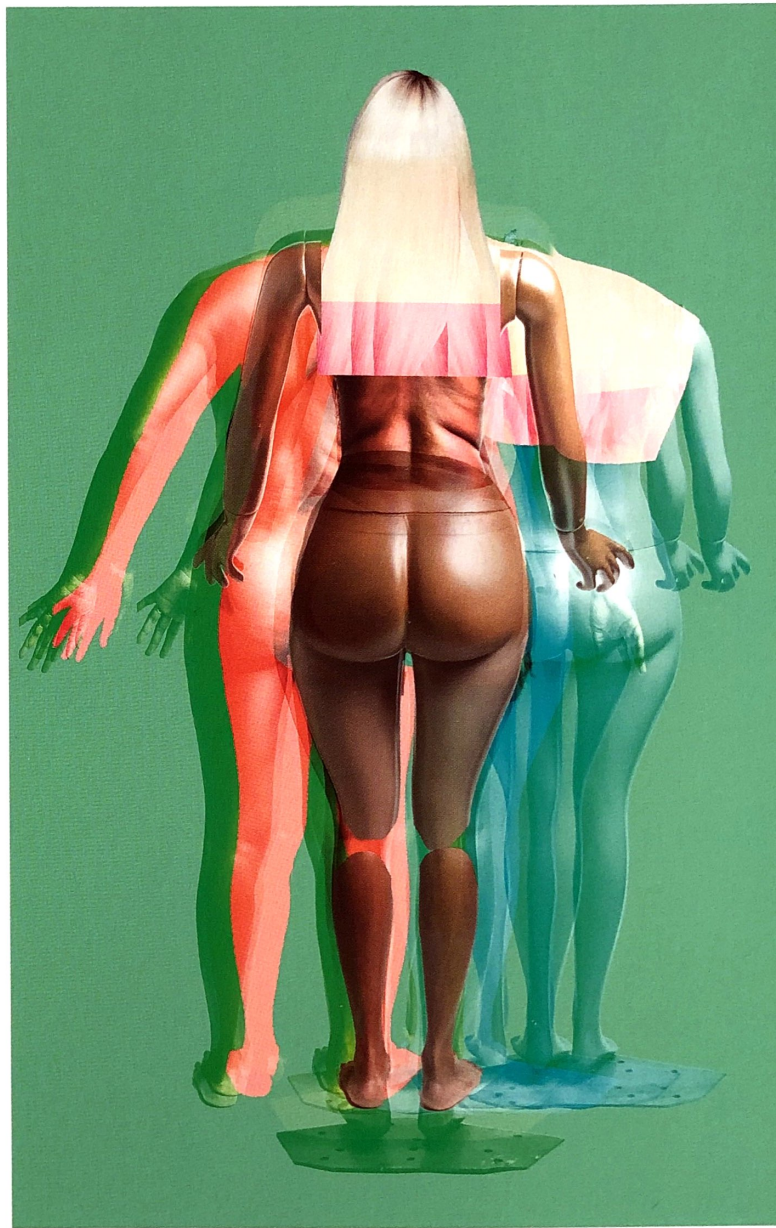
Venus 2. The Black Taille Fine (Front), 2015. From *Awoulaba/Taille Fine*



Venus 2. The Black Taille Fine (Back), 2015. From *Awoulaba/Taille Fine*



Venus 5. The Light Awoulaba (Front), 2015. From *Awoulaba/Taille Fine*



Venus 5. The Light Awoulaba (Back), 2015. From *Awoulaba/Taille Fine*