

HESSE FLATOW

Cavallo, Gina. "Gathering Across Waters: Adama Delphine Fawundu at UMFA." *Artists of Utah*, October 17, 2025. Online.



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Gathering Across Waters: Adama Delphine Fawundu at UMFA

BY GINA CAVALLO ON OCTOBER 17, 2025 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))



Installation view of kpoto patchwok at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, featuring Adama Delphine Fawundu's textile works Simba #1 and Simba #2 alongside selected pieces from the museum's African art collection. Image courtesy of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

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In the latest iteration of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' *salt* series, Brooklyn-based artist Adama Delphine Fawundu continues the program's mission of bringing emerging voices in contemporary art to Utah. Known for her work in video and photography as well as layered textile assemblages, Fawundu weaves together memory, ancestry, and ritual to explore how identity flows across generations and geographies. She calls her process *kpoto patchwok*, referring to the Mende word for gathering fruits and nuts for communal nourishment (*kpoto*) and the Krio word for piecing together textiles (*patchwok*). Reflecting this spirit of gathering and interconnection, the exhibition presents her works in dialogue with pieces she has selected from the museum's African art collection.

In the museum's New Media gallery, Fawukdu's "Vibrations from the Deep" brings us a two-channel HD video that is presented on two large screens abutting each other in the back corner of the small black box gallery. This abutting enhances the experience as the images weave between the two panels, with sometimes contrasting imagery that eventually begins to flow together. This is done so smoothly that the two screens become one. The visual effect of the entire piece is luminous, and the large images in the small black box gallery immerse the viewer in a way not always accomplished in video art. The video was filmed in Nigeria, Congo, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malta, Cuba, Brazil and the United States (South Carolina, Utah, Georgia, and Maine). The natural, ethereal sounds of water and voices are an impactful part of the presentation and create an atmosphere that feels both sacred and meditational. Spiritual in its affect and ritual in its movements, the 12-minute video flows as Fawundu is within and surrounded by water—its sounds bolstering the feeling of being in natural harmony—while simultaneously incorporating chalk into her ritual.

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The exhibition catalogue's essayist, Yvonne Mpwo, finds cross-cultural connections in the use of chalk and discusses in detail the role of chalk in indigenous cultures. "If water carries memory, chalk is a tracer. It leaves behind a residue of history that reveals the layers of indigenous epistemologies and, in Utah's Great Salt Lake, colonial detritus along the dry cracks of Earth." Fawundu's use of it in the video implicates its role in both preserving and cleansing. The water, the chalk, the chanting, and the dancing by the artist and others take the viewer on a journey through a shared pathway that spans continents and cultures.

This implied journey in the video reflects Fawundu's actual journeys across the globe to create her work, but even more, to build a living archive of materials—"flora, hair, raffia, cowrie shells, mud, sand, stones, chalk, calabash, dried leaves, and herbs" inform her work, Mpwo tells us. From these travels, she explores and experiences the ways in which we are alike. Her interest in deeply understanding the connections we have across time and geography makes what she produces more deeply embedded with what is at the core of our individual humanity within the context of our communities.

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Fawundu's work also spurs us to consider the community of the museum as a gathering place not just for humans, but for our objects. For several decades now, many museums have opened up their collections to exploration and evaluation by artists and communities who seek to bring light to a world of colonial appropriation that has, for hundreds of years, comfortably settled in the collections of museums. Artists like Fawundu help us to step back and see the life that emanates from what many feel are inanimate objects—objects that were extracted from their place of origin, from their home, from their context. In the exhibition, the artist begins a conversation by selecting and exhibiting six pieces from the UMFA collection, including two works by unidentified Kuba artists—a mid-20th century woven raffia, beads, and cowrie shell pendant ornament for a belt and a woven textile, likely a skirt, of woven raffia, bark cloth, and cotton.

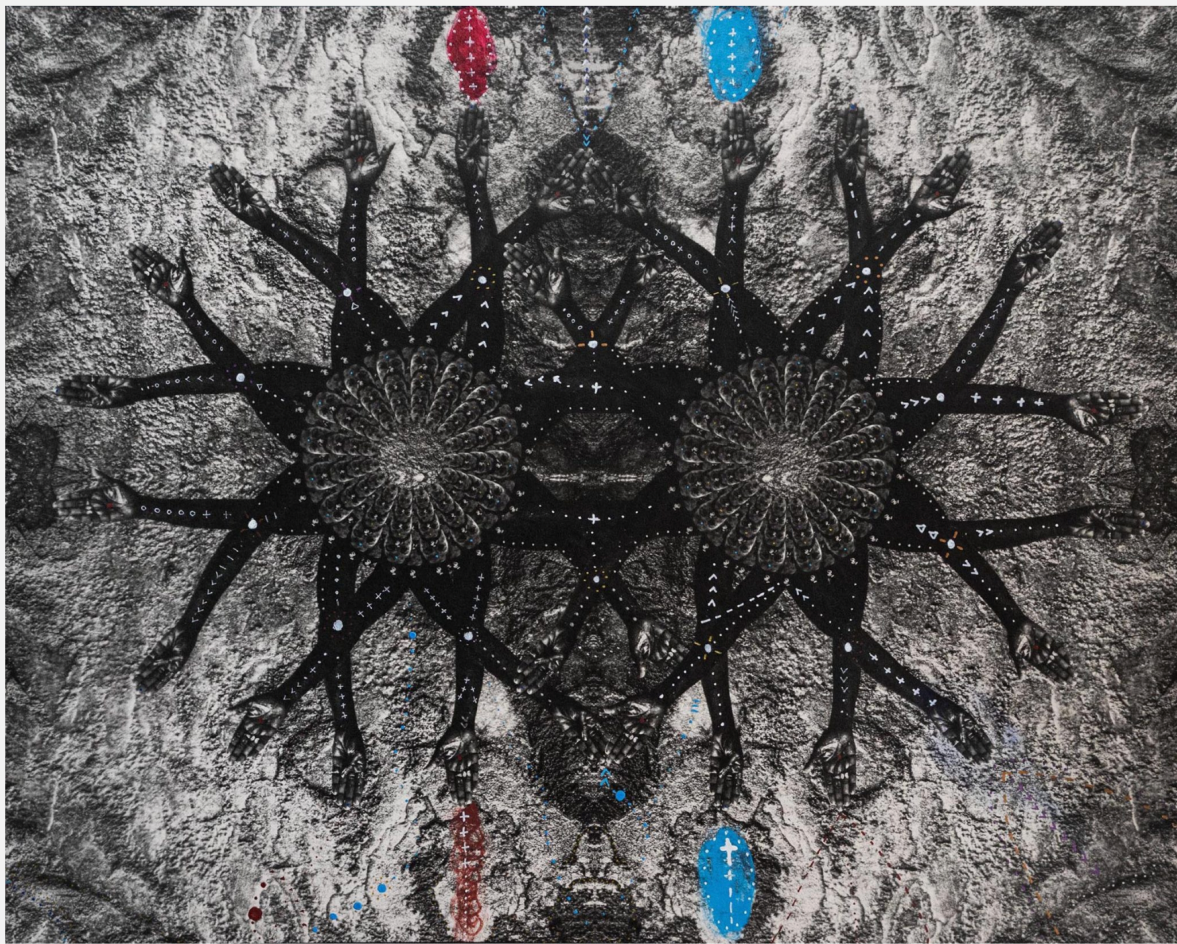
As essayist Mpwo states, "Western institutions cannot continue to hold these objects in silence. The UMFA recognizes that they must invite artists into dialogue." That dialogue has clearly begun and the collections as well as the future visitors to the museum will benefit greatly from it. Within this particular exhibition, Fawundu's own works—"Simba #1" and "Simba #2"—are visual gatherings of all these ideas and efforts. The list of materials for each of these pieces is evidence of the artist's archive as well as her working process. For example, the full title for the first piece is "Simba #1: feet grounded in the earth's deep core, head crowned by a galaxy of stars—she sees: you are me, I am you, we are countless, yet one," and the media includes:

Archival pigment, cyanotypes, acrylic paint, kalaba (kaolin), and mabele chalk on cotton canvas. Antique quilt from Salt Lake City. Handmade banana leaf with jute pulp paper. Healing herbs, Kuba cloth, and raffia from Congo, Brazil, and Sierra Leone. Copper from Ghana. Salt from the Great Salt Lake. Cobalt blue glass bottles, palm fibers, and calabash from Congo and Brazil. Clay beads from Bahia. Cowrie shells from Brazil, Nigeria, Congo, Sierra Leone Turkey and pheasant feathers. Elements of water, wind, and sunshine from Kinshasa, Congo; Freetown, Sierra Leone; Salt Lake City, Utah; Bahia, Brazil; and Lagos, Nigeria.

All these materials tell the story of Fawundu's personal journey, both her physical travels and the journey at her heart where she finds the connections across the diaspora. They also come together into a complex textile piece that is the essence of the "kpoto patchwok" of all her work. They are visually stunning and yet familiar and inviting. Every element is worth a close look, and when viewed together, they all seem to speak to each other, complement each other, to be at harmony with each other.

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Adama Delphine Fawundu, "Kala Sun. Sun of Vitality #3, Ode to the Great Salt Lake," 2025. Hand-printed silver gelatin print with mabele chalk, charcoal, acrylic paint, copper, and archival pigment on silk textile. Image courtesy of the artist.

The three hand-printed silver gelatin prints making up Fawundu's Kala Sun series all include mabele chalk, charcoal, acrylic paint, copper, and archival pigment on silk textiles. Though framed, the prints' textures and vibrancy are just as evident through the Plexi as the varied surfaces are on the "Simba" pieces. Having these prints and textile works surrounding the museum's pieces brings the dialogue to life and even though there is no sound in the *salt* gallery, you can almost hear the movement of the Kuba pieces in use as they would have been originally. Viewing the "Vibrations from the Deep" video first will enhance that experience as you come into the *salt* gallery carrying with you the sounds of the Congo River, the artist, and the world she brings to us.

The final words of Mpwo's essay in the exhibition catalogue sum it up well:

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"What if a museum was not just a container for things, but a stage for spiritual return? What if an object from Kinshasa could speak again? Not through a label, but through breath, movement, and sound? Restitution in this context is not about reckoning with history.

In the end, salt preserves, but it also dehydrates.

Water nourishes, but it can drown.

The dialectic between the Congo River and the Great Salt Lake, between presence and absence, ritual and ruin, reminds us that while some losses are irreparable, they are not ungrievable."

salt 17: Adama Delphine Fawundu, [Utah Museum of Fine Arts](#), Salt Lake City, through June 14, 2026



Gina Cavallo

Gina Cavallo has been a curator, registrar, and executive director in museums for over 35 years. She spent many years as an art critic for publications in Phoenix. She began her career at the Phoenix Art Museum and the Heard Museum, was a founding curator at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, spent two terms managing exhibitions at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and was the Executive Director at the Mission Inn Foundation & Museum in Riverside, California. Her current role is Director of Development for Taproot Theatre Company in Seattle where she also serves as the curator of the Kendall Center Exhibition Series. She moved to Orem in 2024 with her husband, a theatre faculty member

at UVU.