

# HESSE FLATOW

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March 3, 2026 by Les Roka



The most significant takeaway from the Utah Museum of Fine Arts ongoing *sa/l*t exhibition series, has been demonstrating the diasporic knowledge of culture as so spiritually, socially, ethically and epistemologically potent that its most meaningful and historically accurate expressions emerge not through the neutral space of conventional categorization, but rather by honoring the diasporic origins of its cultural authority.

To date, the 17 editions of the UMFA's *sa/l*t series have sparked fresh perceptions about a museum's archival collection of artworks and cultural objects becoming a dynamic vessel of ancestral, memory and diasporic connections. Throughout the lifetime of the series, each artist has considered their relationship with Utah's extraordinary ecological embodiment for their respective show. The latest edition by Adama Delphine Fawundu is breathtaking in its scope of the intersecting and converging realms of spirituality, social history, the indelible footprints of ancestral culture and the indefatigable resilience against colonial power excesses, cultural erasure and environmental extraction. The *sa/l*t 17 exhibition opened last September concurrently with Fawundu's featured work in the Congo Biennale in Kinshasa and the 36th Biennale in São Paulo.

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Simba #1, Adama Delphine Fawundu, salt 17, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.

To stir her artistic language and expression for *salt 17*, she selected from the UMFA's collection of African Art objects of the Kuba and the Yaka peoples of the Congo River Basin including pendant and belt ornaments and a figurine with power materials. She incorporated patterned textiles inspired by the Great Salt Lake, Congo River, the dikenga, turtles, lukasa memory boards and UMFA collection objects.

An epic poem on film, the two-channel video installation in the nearby black box, *Vibrations from the deep*, blends footage from three continents (including locations in Utah) and the Caribbean. Impeccably edited, the video binds the exhibition's composition and thematic structure with fine clarity.

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Detail in *Simba #1* Adama Delphine Fawundu, salt 17, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.

Born in Brooklyn with roots in Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea, Fawundu works in numerous media as a visual artist. Her work as a self-taught photographer was noticed when she worked as a hip hop recording company publicist. As she formed her creative language, she engaged with ritualistic and meditative practices embodied within the Mende, Bubi, Krio and Yoruba cultural communal practices. In tandem, inspired her grandmother's creative interests in textiles, Fawundu made collage fabrics and foundational layers of handmade papers, which include items and materials, including salt, mud, dried and leaves, along with deer suede from Salt Lake City; raffia, rose leaves and cowrie shells from Kinshasa, and palm fibers and natural clay beads from Bahia. Among the pieces in the show 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." In *Simba #2*, the artist notes: "we blood, air and water—recycled through time's endless loop. Near the rhythm. Step forward—for all who came and all to come."

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Simba #2 Adama Delphine Fawundu, salt 17, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.

Yvonne Mpwo, independent curator and founder of bana'pwo, explained, in an exhibition essay, that Fawundu and her grandmother connected through 'kpoto patchwok,' a term coined by the artist. "Kpoto is a Mende word that means 'gathering' ... usually used in reference to gathering objects of communal nourishment like fruits and nuts," Mpwo said. "Patchwok, a Krio word, means 'piecing together,'" adding that the combined term "also embodies the binding spirit in the diaspora." Similarly, scholar [Niama Safia Sandy](#), a curator and scholar, has noted that Fawundu's work "is about finding ways to connect with her kin—a group not merely confined to those who share a direct common ancestor but an expansive definition inclusive of the many who descend from the dispersed, the stolen, those for whom the violence and opportunity wrought by the sea is at once a specter and a fact of everyday life."

Fawundu's video, *Vibrations from the deep*, in *salt 17* is the third the artist has made. Her first, *The Cleanse*, a 10-minute film from 2017, reinforced how she found resonance with the Mende ontology through her connection to her grandmother as well as Sylvia Ardyn Boone's book *Radiance of the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*. The film shows how contact with water transforms straightened hair into its elastic, springy texture and style.

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Detail in *Simba #2*, Adama Delphine Fawundu, salt 17, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.

That film was an artistic statement about liberating one's mind by processing aspects that can transform our worldviews in an individual context. In an [interview published elsewhere](#), she said, "I approached it as if I were making a new language. I thought of how languages are formed in the African Diaspora, using English (or other colonial) words with an indigenous African language's syntax (i.e., Mende, Yoruba)." Fawundu's videos emulate the holistic cohesion in her artwork. For example, *The Cleanse* sampled Fat Joe's 2006 *Make It Rain* and mixed it with a Mende chat that calls for the rain. The video also featured snippets from authors Erykah Badu, James Baldwin, Gayle Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Sojourner Truth and Alice Walker, among others.

These ideals are expanded upon in *Vibrations from the deep*. For this video, Fawundu worked with Abadai Zobo, a professional dancer of Liberian and Haitian descent, who was raised in Brooklyn and was so knowledgeable about African traditional spiritual belief systems that she instinctively knew what the movement shown in the video should convey in terms of Fawundu's artistic intentions.

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By offering exhibition visitors these visual and cinematic collages, Fawundu invites us to ignite and liberate the metaphorical capacities within our minds for understanding the human realities of complicated histories and animating the cultural canons of oral narratives that have crossed oceans, lakes and rivers, intact with their indigenous knowledge.



Still, *Vibrations from the deep* (film), Adama Delphine Fawundu, salt 17, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.

This *salt 17* exhibition suggests just how close social, cultural, ethical and spiritual representations can be connected between Utah and the Congo. Like the Great Salt Lake, the Congo Basin faces a fragile future. In both instances, the local communities now understand the value of the ecosystems they have and are finding the collective will to protect them.

We can meditate upon the parallels of sorrows and reckonings in our respective truths, emerging from the experiences of colonialism, cultural erasure and the effects of environmental extraction. We can consider anew the reconciliation of historical truths with contemporary realities. We can engage the essential challenges of ecopsychology we share, when it comes to rehabilitating and preserving a sustainable, thriving relationship with nature.

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The *sa/t 17* exhibition remains open through June 14. For more information, see the [Utah Museum of Fine Arts website](#).



Unidentified artist, Kuba people, Congo River Basin (present-day Democratic Republic of Congo), Royal belt ornament in the shape of a sheep head, mid-20th century, woven raffia, beads and cowrie shells, 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 1 3/8 inches. The Owen D. Mort Collection of African Art, assisted by the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation. UMFA1985.053.450. Photo: Charles Vaccaro.