

THE ARTISTS

In This Joana Choumali Work, a Dreamy, Swallow-Filled Sky

The artist used photography, fabric and paint in a reinterpretation of a sunrise that she witnessed in Dakar, Senegal. The work is also a tribute to her mother.

By Alwa Cooper

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In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-seen work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at "The Return of the Swallows" (2021) by Joana Choumali, whose work is the subject of "It Still Feels Like the Right Time," an exhibition on view at Sperone Westwater in New York through April 30.

Name: Joana Choumali**Age:** 47**Based in:** Abidjan, Ivory Coast**Originally from:** Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Where and when did you make this work? I started it in August 2021 and I completed it that October, in my studio in Abidjan. It's a small apartment a five-minute walk from my home, a refuge where I can relax and work and really dig into my memories and emotions, and then translate what I'm feeling.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? It's a mixed-media piece that incorporates paint, embroidery, collage and cutout figures from photographs. None of the photos I use in my work are staged or found; I take them all myself, wherever I'm traveling. The first layer here is a landscape picture I took of a sunrise in Dakar, Senegal, and printed on cotton canvas. Then I recreated the colors of the sky by superimposing several layers of sheer fabric on top of the canvas, sort of as if I were painting with watercolor. I sewed on the silhouettes of the children to fix the sheer fabric. I don't paste with glue — I stitch around each figure, then paint over that. And then I added layers of white sheer fabric to capture the misty atmosphere of the morning. It feels like a quilt or a blanket when you see it in person.

It's important for me to be in between the reality of the picture and the dream of my imagination. I want to create a dialogue between the two, between inner and outer landscapes and between past and present. And I'm fascinated by the symbolism of the sunrise, how it's a new beginning every day. I started this project at a very difficult time in my life, and working on it each morning was both a spiritual journey and a physical exercise that helped me through.

What inspired you to make it? In August, my mother passed away suddenly from Covid-19. We were very close, and it's still difficult for me to talk about. So all the works that I'm showing in the exhibition, including this one, create a kind of journal of my grief and became a way for me to say goodbye to her. Most of the figures in these works are wearing white, which in our culture is the color of mourning. It's the color we wore to my mother's funeral. The silhouetted children in this picture were photographed on Senegal's Goree Island. I was drawn to their innocence and joy, the carelessness that children can have. Sewing images of them onto the piece, I felt like I was creating a representation of my siblings and other relatives and me as children, and was reminded of how we, too, used to be so innocent. The title of the work is "The Return of the Swallows," and it alludes to the return of better times. That also helped me process things: The springtime return of the swallow is, like the sunrise, a sign of new beginnings, and of resilience and strength. It also symbolizes letting go of what you cannot change.

What's a work of art in any medium that changed your life? It could be so many things, but today, the most touching piece of art to me is Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" (1970). I play it often because it was a song that I used to listen to with my family, and now has a very deep meaning for me. When I hear it, I can feel my mother's presence, can see her sewing at the family table on Sundays, listening and singing along as she worked. Through music you can go back: It's as if you are transported to a specific memory. I'm also touched by the comforting lyrics and the voices — it's like a lullaby.

This interview has been edited and condensed.