



# THE ART OF **SEYNI AWA CAMARA**

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE

In 2015, the Senegalese filmmaker Fatou Kandé Senghor released *Giving Birth*, a documentary portrait of the sculptor Seyni Awa Camara. In it, Camara – who was born in 1945 in Bignona, where she still lives – explains:

*I am the first female artist to produce this kind of pottery in Casamance [the area of Senegal south of the Gambia]. Each year, my inspiration can change in any direction. I am multi-faceted. My practice is mystical. I am not just any artist. I have a gift from God.*

Like many Senegalese people, Camara is a Muslim but as a Wolof woman, she also has deeply felt animistic beliefs. She prays to spirits embedded in certain objects and regularly speaks with, and takes guidance from, an ox horn in her studio. It might, for instance, ask her to perform a sacrifice for a sculpture she's making.

In Senghor's documentary, we see Camara at work, sitting on the ground, deeply absorbed in the freestanding clay figures who emerge from her swift hands: bejewelled women with scarification marks, swollen bellies and breasts and legs like tree trunks; hybrid visions of animals – lizard, monkeys, frogs, pigs, horses and birds. Some figures, including the occasional male, have multiple heads; sometimes, faces appear on limbs. Occasionally, the modern world is indicated with references to motorbikes and tractors. The sculptures often feature crowds of child-like creatures that cling to the central trunk of the female body. This vast cast of characters stares out at the world, open-mouthed with enormous eyes and expressions which range from the benevolent to the sinister. They're at once ancient and modern, totems, sentries, imaginary beasts; homages to mothers, spirits, community, culture. Powerfully expressive, at every turn they resist simple readings.

Camara's relationship to fertility and motherhood is complex. At 14, she was married to a much older man. After four failed pregnancies, multiple operations and illness, the union was over. Her second marriage, to Samba Diallo (who died in 2004), was happier. He encouraged her artistic pursuits, and she became a stepmother to his sons. In 1990, the American artist and filmmaker

# THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING



Philip Haas visited Bignona to document Camara's processes.<sup>1</sup> The film is intimate, quiet, observational. We follow the artist and Diallo as they dig clay from the hard ground and mix it with sand and water until it's ready to be shaped; Camara checks its consistency and balance by tasting it. When she sits down to work, she never hesitates; figures emerge rapidly – some are taller than she is while others fit into her palm. Her concentration is fierce; at times, she smokes a long thin pipe. Once finished, the sculptures are fired in an open-hearth kiln; after three hours, they are immersed in water infused in putrefied seed pods, which lends the terracotta its distinctive colour and texture.

Asked about the evolution of her craft, Camara explains she was trained by her mother, who made terracotta water jars; what then transpired is less straightforward. Stories abound about an experience that happened to Camara when she was around 12: she recounts that she and her two brothers were kidnapped by forest genies who taught them how to model clay. When they emerged from the trees four months later, Camara began sculpting her spiritually inspired creatures.<sup>2</sup>

Describing her approach to artmaking, Camara says: 'I just think and I think and then I make some work. God gave me this work. Even my relatives can't understand it. I change my forms all the time.' She indicates to one sculpture and says: 'This is a river animal with animals and humans clinging to it.' Looking at another, her explanation is blunt: 'It's just a sculpture of a woman and her children.' As Fatou Kandé Senghor's observes: 'The mix between mystique and personal despair: it's all there.'

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<sup>1</sup> Magicians of the Earth: Seni's Children, directed by Philip Haas, 1990

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Murphy, 'Seyni Awa Camara, The Power of Modeling', MoMA, 12 June 2024