

## Artist Spotlight Dimitri Fagbohoun, France

[Website: Dimitri Fagbohoun](#)

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By: Adenike Cosgrove



### *Tell us a little about yourself. How did you discover classic African art?*

I was born in Cotonou, Benin and grew up in Cameroon before finally settling in France where I now live and work. My dad was from Sakété, Benin. My roots are African, my ancestors are Nago, and our spirit is Yoruba.

I was thinking this morning about how growing up in Africa, I didn't really pay attention to the art that surrounded me. The Western and American model and lifestyle were what we focused on. It was only when I left did I finally 'discover' the beauty of classical African pieces. I had to leave to change the perception I had of them. I'm now thrilled every day by what I see. I'm still learning a lot, it's an endless process.



'Mask #3', 2012  
Dimitri Fagbohoun



'Mask #4', 2012  
Dimitri Fagbohoun



'Mask #1', 2012  
Dimitri Fagbohoun

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### *Tell us about your work; what's been the inspiration behind it?*

The themes and questions I address are a reflection of my background and heritage. My current body of work is called 'Recollection'. The aim of Recollection is to highlight African art pieces that have influenced Western art or thought. I'm identifying pieces owned by artists—Picasso and Arman among others—dealers, collectors, and ethnographers (Ratton, Pierre Verité, Myron Kunin, Michel Leiris...).



Senoufo Female Statue (*Deble*), Ivory Coast  
Sotheby's In Pursuit of Beauty: The Myron Kunin Collection of African Art New York Auction, 11 November 2014

Jean-Michel Basquiat once said, "*Picasso came to 'primitive art' in order to restore its former glory to Western art and I came to Picasso to restore its former glory to the art we call 'primitive'.*" This is the process I carry, I'm keeping classical African art alive. If you think about it, many of these pieces made that journey. Their uses changed, their forms evolved, their value continues to morph. How can I, as an African artist of the diaspora, reflect on that change in today's current context? And how can my work express multiple identities?



'The Pursuit of Beauty', 2017  
Dimitri Fagbohoun



'The Pursuit of Beauty', 2017  
Dimitri Fagbohoun

*How do you pick the figures and sculptures to use in your work?*

I don't. The very first piece I made came to me. I had a vision of an African white mask, one we used to have at home. I was thinking then about how I could express my beliefs of life after death. This is was shortly after I lost my dad. And the answer came to me. I needed fragility and purity. I needed white ceramics. The transformation of Earth by fire, the four elements captured in one piece.

I'm interested in the alchemic process that reflects life. My intuition is that most of the African art pieces taken from Africa where carrying that energy, and energy that they continue to radiate to this day.



'Alàfo Riri', 2015  
Dimitri Fagbohoun

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*What has been the reaction from collectors of your work? Has it exposed them to traditional African art?*

It really depends. I'm very happy and proud to be part of Didier Claes' collection for example. He's responded very positively. I'm also in Ellen Taubman's collection in New York. But in France, African art dealers and collectors seem to be more conservative. They read my pieces as 'copies' of the classical masterpieces, but yet the narrative and the spirit of this body of work is something else, that I guess, they will eventually found out.

My project was awarded the Smithsonian Fellowship award last year. I plan to continue work on this body of work during my residency at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington. This is conceived as a global project, therefore I look forward to collaborating with others artists from the diaspora, private collectors and museums globally.

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