

## PRESS RELEASE

Seattle, December 13, 2017. **Mariane Ibrahim Gallery** is delighted to present a solo exhibition titled *Harmattan Tales* dedicated to the Ghanaian-German multidisciplinary artist Zohra Opoku. The exhibition opens January 19 and runs through March 17, 2018.

*Harmattan Tales* is a utopian exploration of the cityscape by connecting to Muslim women in Accra, Ghana and discovering life in the city through their lens. Opoku explores these women's personal beliefs and narratives, their acts of veiling and unveiling inherent to their daily rituals, movements in and out of public and private spaces, and the ways in which these movements influence their activities and responsibilities, regardless of age, marital or family status.

Opoku's personal narrative is in great contrast to *Harmattan Tales*. Depicted in *Unraveled Thread*, which debuted and garnered a prize at the 2017 Armory Show, Opoku evoked her personal story of featuring family photographs, personal correspondence and a decoding of untold stories. *Harmattan Tales* is indeed the inverse: it is vehicle for the artist's self-exploration via the intimacy of otherness. This body of work reveals an intricate set of social dynamics, which are shrouded in secrecy for those outside of their circles. These are questions of access, comfort, and respect sustained by delicate threads of trust and respect.

In these images, Opoku creates an undertone of storytelling by focusing on dress codes. The notion of being completely veiled is an intriguing juxtaposition given the ebbs and flows of modern life, where practicality reigns supreme. The brightly colored garments of Hausa women in Ghana are not just an aesthetic statement, but they also determine the aesthetic feel of the market place where these women shop and work.

To achieve these works, Opoku has entered the intimate private spaces of these women's lives, following them with gentle curiosity to capture moments and situations, which sparkle vibrantly. Images of roadside kiosks, mosques, and umbrella businesses become a dream sequence illustrating an almost theatrical stage of little local islands in the red sand, giving the spectator space to let the imagination wonder what stories the scenery is telling. Opoku creates an undertone of storytelling focusing on the politics and aesthetics of Muslim dress, a detail, which is both stunning and disruptive.

Like the Harmattan winds, that blow from and in all directions causing the air to blur, this *Harmattan Tales* is about time, points of origin, lived experience, and the resultant revelations. The women of Opoku's photographs hail from various African countries and they share a faith. They are covered by the veil, but within their communities and amongst one another, there are varying degrees of unveiling, that makes them undeniably visible.

The period of the Harmattan is a time for reflection. Opoku's *Harmattan Tales* reflects on women's lives and experiences as creative spaces of infinite possibility for themselves, their friends, and their families. *Harmattan* centers women as the foundation and dives deeply, through trust and steadfastness, over time, into their private, rarely unveiled, lives.

## About

Zohra Opoku is an artist of German and Ghanaian descent based in Accra. Her work includes installation, performance and visual media. Opoku examines the political, historical, cultural, and socio-economic influences in the formation of personal identities, particularly in the context of contemporary Ghana. Her practice centers around textiles and traditional Ghanaian fashion modes, which have been an inherent part of the country's identity and industry throughout West Africa's complex history and serve as vehicles for her to connect to the abstraction of identity in a tangible way.

While her work relays social commentary and broadly relevant themes around the human experience, each of Zohra's explorations is intimately rooted in personal identity politics. She repeatedly integrates family heirlooms and her own self-image into her visual observations of Ghana's cultural memory. In her exhibition at Accra's Gallery 1957, *Sassa*, she delved into the Ashanti concept, which can refer to a "universal energy" or a "restless spirit," by using a layered combination of installation and photographic work. For the series, Zohra ventured to the Asante region to capture the Ahemaa, Queen Mothers of the Ashanti. She also created a body of work in which her face is obscured by nature in self-portraits, revealing images of the self only completed by the influence of place. *Unraveled Threads* (2017), Opoku's latest project, is a continuation of her work with textiles and photography as expressions of history and culture. In her words, "it's a continuation, for me, of this experience of being limited by my identity."

Exhibited internationally, Zohra Opoku has shown work in association with Gallery 1957 (Accra), Nubuke Foundation (Accra), Centre for Contemporary Art (Lagos), !Kauru African Contemporary Art (Johannesburg), Commune.1 (Cape Town), Kunsthau Hamburg (Hamburg), Iwalewahaus (Bayreuth), Musée de l'Ethnographie (Bordeaux), Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao), Kunsthal (Rotterdam) and Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum (Michigan State University). Her recent residencies include Jan van Eyck Institute Maastricht, Netherlands; Kala Institute Berkeley, United States; and Institute Sacatar Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.

Opoku is represented by Mariane Ibrahim Gallery Seattle.