

BLACK+WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

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COOL, CREATIVE AND CONTEMPORARY

APRIL 2020

ZOHRA OPOKU + PAUL BURGESS + MASTERING SHUTTER SPEED + BEST EXTERNAL HARD DRIVES

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## SELF MADE

All images © Zohra Opoku.  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

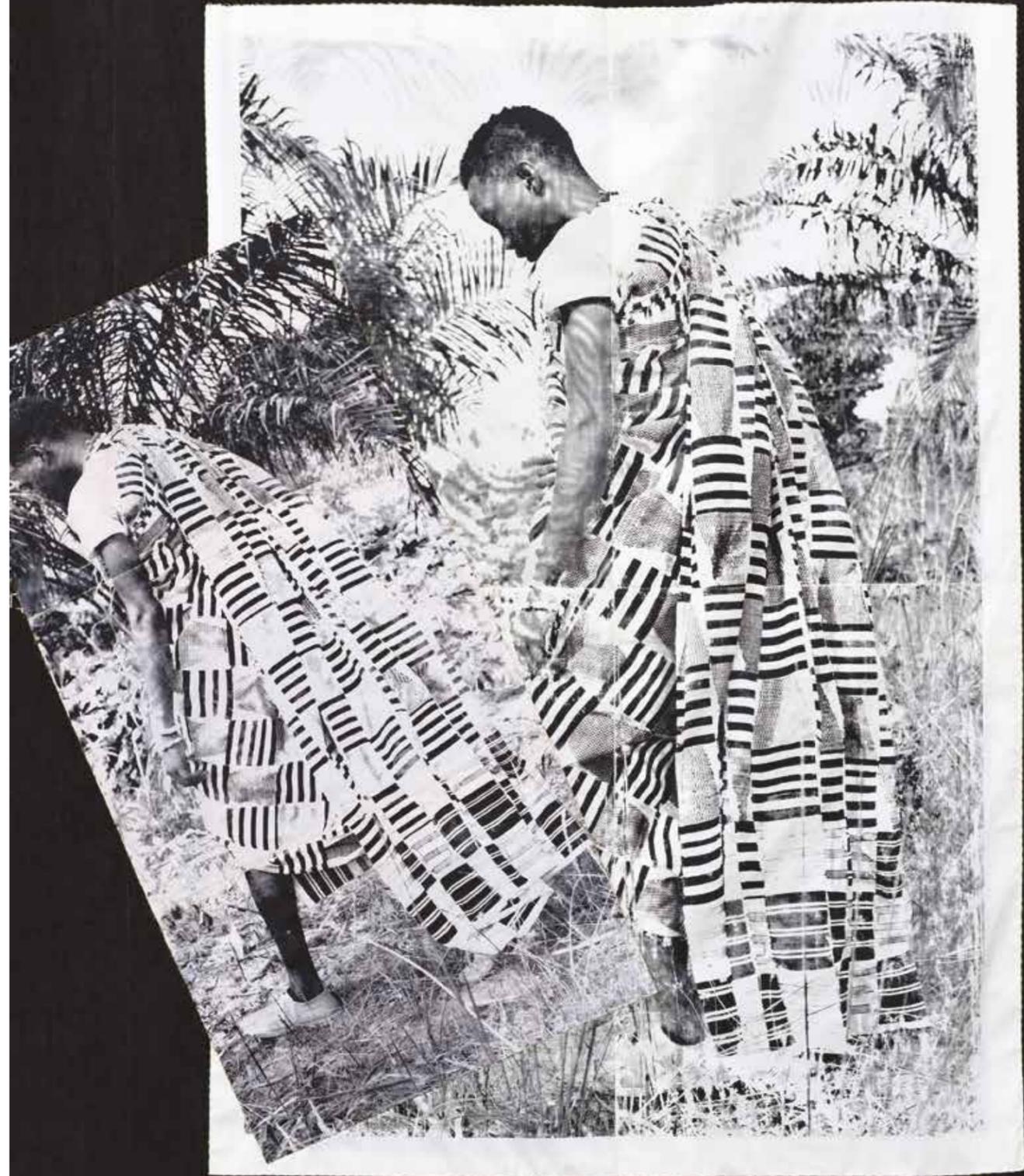
Textile is integral to the photography of **Zohra Opoku**, whose work examines the influences that shape personal identities in the context of contemporary Ghana and the African diaspora. Donatella Montrone reports.



From a rooftop in Dakar, Zohra Opoku looked out over the city and surveyed the easy pace of life on the streets – the charming courtesy of a passersby dressed in traditional attire, the promenade of women in flowing wax-print skirts, the micro-gardens in small urban spaces and the washing lines. She lifted her lens and zoomed in on the billowing fabric drying on the lines, the folds of colour swelling against the more muted tones of community gardens. ‘I was fascinated by the way things were forming and changing constantly – the position of the clothes and their outlines and contours,’ Zohra is quoted as saying. ‘But I didn’t consider what I saw in terms of clothes, or patterns, or colours. For me, it was more about how the wind created different shapes.’

Zohra continued these observations in Ghana and began exploring the symbolism of texture and pattern in contemporary culture – a subject close to her heart. As an artist of German and Ghanaian descent Zohra was raised in Germany and studied fashion at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences but moved to Ghana to ‘discover the other half’ of her identity, she says of her blended heritage. Now based in Accra – ‘a place I didn’t have a chance to grow up in’ – Opoku explores issues surrounding identity using textile as the means with which to express her photography. ‘She examines the political, historical, cultural and socio-economic influences in the formation of personal identities, particularly in the context of contemporary Ghana,’ according to Mariane Ibrahim, the Chicago gallery that represents Zohra. ‘Her practice centres around textiles and traditional Ghanaian dress codes, which have been an inherent part of the country’s identity and industry...and serve as vehicles for her to connect to the abstraction of identity in a tangible way.’ Each of her explorations, however, is intimately rooted in personal identity politics, explains the gallery.

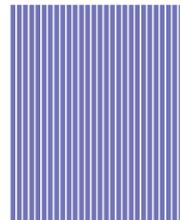
Using a variety of techniques to screenprint her work on to fabric – including cyanotype and the Van Dyke Brown printmaking process – the textile absorbs the image and takes on a new aesthetic, explains the artist of her process. ‘It becomes imbued with new meaning, memories and history.’ >





Above *One of Me III (variation 2/3)*, 2017 Opposite *Secretive*, 2017

*'Disguise and nature play a major role in this work. In self-portraiture, you recreate the "self" as an exercise for learning, growing, contemplating, understanding, healing...'*





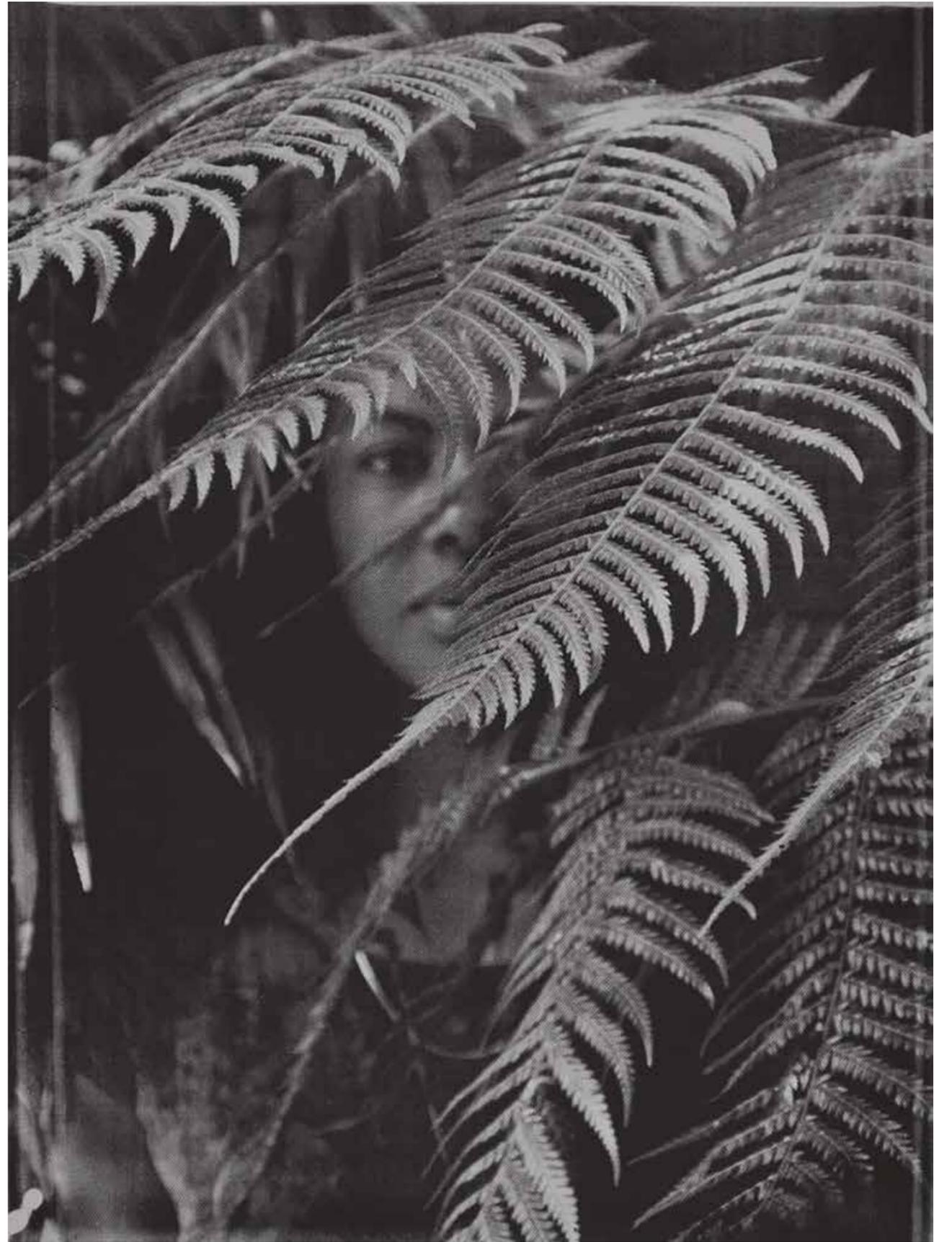
Debie, 2017



Bob's Cloth Ed 1/3,



Life Oak, 2015



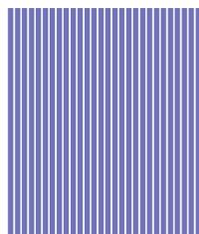
Dicksonia Antarctica, 2015

◀ Zohra honed her craft in the darkroom – ‘I admire “developed images” the most,’ she says, ‘especially because the only photos I have from my childhood are black & white’ – and has experimented with sunlight printmaking on textured surfaces such as wood, natural textiles, garments and even bed linens. ‘The movement of fabric reminds me of bed sheets blowing in the wind,’ she once said of her series *Queen Mothers*, a body of work made in 2016, in which she used bedsheets as a canvas on which to screenprint large-scale images of the Queen Mothers of the Ashanti for a solo show at Gallery 1957 in Accra.

However, in 2016 Zohra turned the camera inwards, exploring her own identity, particularly in the context of contemporary Ghana, and made *Self-Portraits*, a series of black & white photographs in which she is camouflaged by foliage. ‘I am interested in what is hidden behind an image,’ she once said of this series. ‘Disguise and nature play a major role in this work. In self-portraiture, you recreate the “self” as an exercise for learning, growing, contemplating, understanding, healing...’ The use of foliage to partially obscure the face teases the viewer and hints at that which cannot be seen. *Self-Portraits* is screenprinted onto handwashed paper and a variety of other natural textiles. It’s a work of self-reflection, one that evolves with the ever-changing self in the context of an ever-changing society – ‘revealing images of the self only completed by the influence of place’ writes the gallery.

‘I have a permanent search for belonging... for staying authentic, which comes from deep within me. In the end, I bring different influences together. It’s a process.’ Zohra writes.

Top **Nana Opoku Gyabaah, 2017**  
 Below **Bob’s Clan (variation 2/2), 2017**



*Zohra Opoku is represented by Mariane Ibrahim Gallery in Chicago. Her work has been exhibited internationally at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; Sean Kelly, New York; Gallery 1957 in Accra; Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos; Musée d’Ethnographie, Bordeaux; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; Kunsthal, Rotterdam; and the Institute of the Arab World, Paris, among many others. To see more of Zohra’s work, visit her website at [zohraopoku.com](http://zohraopoku.com) or go to Mariane Ibrahim Gallery at [marianeibrahim.com](http://marianeibrahim.com)*

