



Limited Edition Sarogua Spirits by Zina Saro-Wiwa

PRESS RELEASE

Zina Saro-Wiwa | Illicit Gin Institute

February 3, 2021 - March 3, 2022

OPENING RECEPTION: February 3, 2022

Montague Contemporary is pleased to present our first solo exhibition of Zina Saro-Wiwa, whose versatile artistic practice continues to redefine our understanding of how storytelling can be brought to life through performance, video, photography, poetry and the spoken word, food, and her most recent project focused on the use of African spirits. The exhibition entitled “Illicit Gin Institute” will open on Thursday, February 3 and remain on view through Saturday, March 3. This is the artist’s first solo exhibition at the gallery.



PRESS RELEASE - ILLICIT GIN INSTITUTE

The exhibition "Illicit Gin Institute" will feature new limited edition artworks created as part of Saro-Wiwa's "Illicit Gin Institute", a radical think tank-cum-artistic project founded by the artist dedicated to the exploration of a Nigerian spirit historically known as "illicit gin," as well as several still-life prints from her widely acclaimed Table Manners series.

The "Illicit Gin Institute":

Based between Port Harcourt, Nigeria and Los Angeles, Saro-Wiwa's latest project - the "Illicit Gin Institute" - is a multi-sensorial project through which contemporary art modalities can better understand and express African environmentalism, spirituality, and epistemologies.

Although widely referenced in popular culture as a victim of Big Oil, corruption, and pollution, the Niger Delta remains one of the most beautiful and biodiverse ecosystems in the world. In 2013, when Saro-Wiwa moved back to her hometown of Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta, she began to examine artistic modes of engagement with this historical damage in the pursuit of regeneration and remediation. The overlooked juxtaposition between historically destructive oil refinement and the indigenous tradition of palm wine harvesting and distillation into "illicit gin" served as an entry point for Saro-Wiwa. While historically dismissed as an illegal spirit by colonial powers, due to their inability to tax its production, this affordable and ubiquitous spirit has remained a staple of rural Nigerian culture - a potent symbol of resilience and liberation for the Niger Delta where it has been made for decades using traditional methods and ingredients.

As a result, Saro-Wiwa launched the "Illicit Gin Institute" as an artistic model through which we can explore the ways in which spirits and botanicals interact and illuminate lived histories and rituals from across Ogoniland. The "Illicit Gin Institute" engages audiences in a multitude of engaging events and projects: a craft distillery producing small batch botanical spirits, performance events called Assemblies, an experimental kitchen working with botanicals from the Niger Delta, tastings, lectures, video installations, sculptures, and a podcast.



PRESS RELEASE - ILLICIT GIN INSTITUTE

The craft distillery founded by Saro-Wiwa in Port Harcourt, Sarogua, produces incredibly small batches of 86 proof, twice-distilled palm wine spirit steeped with local botanicals and distilled in repurposed oil drums - a metaphor for the ways in which refining vs distilling has played out in the political and environmental landscape and affirming a commitment to soil not oil as the pathway forward for restitution. Named after a local Ogoni deity, a god of Rain and War, the name Sarogua is based on a poem entitled "The Poem to Sarogua" written by her father, Nigerian writer, television producer, and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, which is read before each ritual tasting.

We are delighted to showcase four incredibly unique and rare spirits as part of the exhibition, each created by the artist herself, hand signed and numbered in limited edition bottles with custom labels featuring her artwork. As an homage to the historical use of gin in West Africa as a form of currency in an otherwise decentralized market, and the potent use of cryptocurrency across Nigeria as a mechanism for economic empowerment, we will be issuing each bottle of Sarogua Spirit with a corresponding NFT. Unlike a purely digital work of art, each NFT is linked to one of the limited edition bottles of Sarogua Spirit, offering collectors the chance to acquire both a digital and physical artwork.

"Table Manners"

The exhibition also features never before seen still-life prints from one of Saro-Wiwa's best known video series, "Table Manners" (2014-2016), wherein the viewer is invited to join the subject in the ritual of eating a meal. Although the title challenges Western views surrounding the manner in which Africans traditionally eat, the work channels ideas of place and power. The act of eating and consuming food in such an intimate display repositions the eater back into the landscape from which the food was harvested, and speaks to agency, power, sexuality, ownership, stewardship. In effect, the performance is sublimated ritual and resistance. An act of insistence which takes on a particular resonance when considering the fractured relationship with the land that has been imposed on Niger Delta peoples over the last 100 years.



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ABOUT ZINA SARO-WIWA

Living and working between Los Angeles and Port Harcourt, Nigeria, Zina Saro-Wiwa (b. 1976, Nigeria) is part of a vanguard of contemporary artists continually redefining and reframing our engagement of contemporary African art and culture.

Saro-Wiwa was named one of Foreign Policy Magazine's Global Thinkers of 2016, recognized for her work in the Niger Delta. She was Artist-in-Residence at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn 2016-2017 and in April 2017 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Fine Art. She has given talks and shown work regularly at biennales and museums around the world including Sao Paolo Biennale, Kochi Biennale, and the Tate in London. Her work can be found in many private and public collections, including MoMA, the Smithsonian, and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, among others.

Her highly acclaimed Illicit Gin Institute Assemblies have attracted curators, collectors, and enthusiasts at multiple venues, most recently at the Aspen Art Museum and the MAK Centre for Art and Architecture in West Hollywood.

ABOUT MONTAGUE CONTEMPORARY

Montague Contemporary believes in changing the narrative of African art and of building a new shared counter-history. By championing unique perspectives and diverse identities in an accessible and engaging way, we aim to foster a new dialogue between audience and artist. Likewise, through innovative shared experiences, international fairs, and dedicated group and solo shows, we hope to bring increased exposure to the exciting world of contemporary African art.

For further information, please contact us at info@montaguecontemporary.com, or visit us at www.montaguecontemporary.com