

# Pascal Robert Gallery

## Artists

Michel Comte  
Aboubakar Fofana  
Tahar Ben Jelloun  
Judit Kis  
Claudio Koporossy  
Klára Kuchta  
Lina Lapelytė  
Josep Maria Martín  
Jon Merz  
Deimantas Narkevičius  
La Ribot  
Mary Prescott  
Allyson Vieira

## Available works by

Paul Cézanne  
Edgar Degas  
Wassily Kandinsky  
Paul Klee  
Fernand Léger  
Kazimir Malevich  
Edvard Munch  
Pablo Picasso  
Man Ray  
Auguste Renoir

## Life Fragments

Aboubakar Fofana

Pre-Opening Reception:  
Friday, June 13, 2025, from 5 to 8 pm

Opening Brunch:  
Sunday, June 15, 2025, from 11 am to 1 pm

Exhibition Dates:  
June 13 to August 9, 2025

Pascal Robert Gallery takes pride in unveiling its second exhibition within the vibrant heart of Zurich's Gallery District – an event that transcends mere institutional presentation to serve as a daring foray into the deep, uncharted waters of contemporary artistic exploration. Aboubakar Fofana's «Life Fragments» not only signifies a milestone for the gallery but also emerges as a potent celebration of the often underappreciated yet omnipresent contributions of those who shape, challenge, and redefine the ongoing cultural dialogue within the art world.

This exhibition, featuring the works of Malian-born artist Aboubakar Fofana, promises to be a radical, multidimensional interrogation of experimental themes – an artistic odyssey that boldly tears through the corridors dividing past and present, forging a space where healing, innovation, and reflection converge. Fofana's practice demands that viewers question the very foundations of conventional aesthetics, utilizing a language steeped in the mythic and the legitimating – rooted in the legends and legacies that have long sustained the collective memory of art. With an unwavering focus on sound, materiality, and spirituality, the show extends an invitation to shatter familiar horizons and embrace a collective openness – an arena where new sources of inspiration beckon, hidden within the liminal spaces beyond tradition.

Driven by an unrelenting commitment to the unknown and the unorthodox, Pascal Robert Gallery champions artists who, whether emerging or established, carve out voices that challenge complacency. These creators deliberately transcend the boundaries of convention, venturing into the shadowed, often tabooed realms of the mind, body, and cultural identity – pioneers forging a new epoch of artistic rebellion. Their works form a visceral symphony of dynamism, discourse, and profound reflection – an impassioned collective force destined to unsettle and elevate the global art community.

Complementing Fofana's visionary works, the gallery further curates select masterpieces from between 1860 and 1940 – testaments to an era marked by ruptures and incandescent sparks of innovation, no less revolutionary in their transformative power than the contemporary practices they illuminate. These historical fragments serve as a clarion call, revealing how rebellion against tradition has always driven art's most radical breakthroughs.

At the heart of this exhibition lies Fofana's «Life Fragments», an evocative homage to unbounded hope, history, and the human spirit. It beckons viewers not merely to witness the evolution of artistic expression but to participate in forging new dialogues – dialogues capable of shaping the very contours of future modernity. Here, art is celebrated not merely as a display but as an eternal, provocative challenge: an ongoing struggle between tradition and innovation, seduction and provocation, past, present, and an uncertain, yet exhilarating future. In this space, art transforms into an act of rebellion and renewal – an unceasing odyssey into the ever-emerging horizons of human creativity.

Aboubakar Fofana  
© The Artist, photo by Robert Wright for New York Times



Aboubakar Fofana (1967) stands as a compelling figure within the landscape of contemporary art, embodying a nuanced dialogue between tradition and innovation, locality and universality. Residing and working across the intertwined urbanities of Bamako and Paris, Fofana's practice exemplifies a transcontinental artistic trajectory that interrogates notions of identity, diaspora, and the persistent legacies of postcolonial history. His work confronts the intricacies of cultural hybridity, positioning itself at the confluence of African heritage and the globalized art world, where paradigms of authenticity and hybridity are continuously negotiated.

Fofana's participation in Documenta 14 marked a pivotal moment in elevating his voice within international art discourse. His contributions to this seminal exhibition were not merely about representation: they were about reframing narratives surrounding African contemporary art from a perspective rooted in intellectual rigor and cultural depth. His oeuvre interrogates the complexities of memory, migration, and belonging through a compelling interrogation of materiality, symbolism, and visual language. His artistic lexicon often employs a sophisticated synthesis of traditional Malian motifs with contemporary techniques, resulting in a body of work that is both deeply rooted in cultural heritage and healing practice. Fofana's approach challenges Western aesthetic paradigms by consciously incorporating Indigenous forms, yet recontextualizing them within a framework that is critically engaged with issues of globalization, political upheaval, and social justice. Moreover, Fofana's practice is characterized by a conceptual depth that invites philosophical reflection on the nature of memory and history. His projects often serve as embodied histories, engaging viewers in a dialogue that transcends superficial ornamentation to confront the underlying stories of resilience, displacement, and cultural continuity. Through layered narratives and multi-sensorial engagement, his art embodies a form of visual scholarship that is as intellectually rigorous as it is aesthetically compelling.

Living between Bamako and Paris, Fofana embodies a sensibility that is critically attuned to the uneven terrains of cultural power and representation. His work exemplifies an ongoing effort to forge spaces of dialogue where tradition can be reimagined and where contemporary issues can be interrogated through the lens of art. Born in Mali, Aboubakar Fofana left the African continent at an early age for Paris. Fofana's founding discipline was calligraphy. Fascinated

by the sign and the trace, he drew on Western and Eastern traditions to help him master his medium. He wondered if Africa had something similar, and then a series of chance happenings revealed a trove of scripts from across the continent. His first major installation was based around these many written forms, ancient and modern, countering the romantic belief that all African societies belong to oral traditions, and reflecting Fofana's can societies belong to oral own spiritual revolution towards Africa as a source of inspiration. And then he remembered a plant he had seen in a forest as a young boy, before his dislocation; a plant that had ordinary-looking green leaves that, when crushed, stained the fingers blue.

Returning to West Africa, he traveled extensively throughout the region, looking for anybody who could teach him to put together a working fermented indigo vat. All the skills had disappeared before he was born, replaced by chemical dyestuffs, leaving only fragments of knowledge. He found much of the information he had been seeking in a library in Paris, pinned into the dry leaves of pre-independence accounts of daily life in West Africa. For many years, he went back and forth between his two worlds, taking the places of knowledge he found in both places and trying to put them into practice.

Fofana's tangible output is the result of a spiritual practice based on his fundamental belief that nature is divine, and this is how he shares his practice with an audience. His skill comes from decades of learning to work in harmony with the forces of nature, and his materials and their work limitations and innate qualities utterly inform every aspect of his work. His indigo vats are alive. They contain few ingredients and no chemicals – the color comes from the indigo leaves themselves, pounded and dried. Bacteria, carefully nurtured inside the vat, make the indigotin pigment in the leaves accessible and help to reduce it to a form whereby it will oxidize directly onto the fabric.

Fofana's work embodies a conscious attempt to hold and defend his techniques and materials, and the environment and human philosophies that gave rise to them. For Fofana, the natural world, along with our own human ability, is where we began, and it is how we will finish.

## The Listener – On Aboubakar Fofana's works

Approaching Aboubakar Fofana's works – be they calligraphic paintings created with indigo (which the artist grows, harvests and transforms into dye with his skilled assistants) and mineral mud (collected from the riverbank of the Niger); or the masterfully dyed textiles, including newly hand-spun and hand-woven cloth as well as meticulously sourced antique garments; or the photographic prints depicting aspects of his practice that expand well beyond the gallery walls one can be struck by the sheer visual beauty of the varied blues and earthen hues. There is also something undeniably fulfilling in encountering the smell and material textures of natural fibres and dyes—particularly in a world where most color is derived chemically, at great expense to the natural environment, and factory-produced textiles constitute the second biggest source of planetary pollution, after petroleum products. Fofana's works can be understood medicinally as an antidote to these poisons.

Yet understanding their fuller significance requires an ear for properties, best summarized in a 1976 essay by the Malian polymath and UNESCO Ambassador, Amadou Hampâté-Bâ. The old African saying goes (and perhaps the artist of today can hear it): «Listen! Everything speaks. Everything is speech. Everything seeks to inform us, to give us knowledge or an indefinable, mysteriously enriching and constructive state of being.»

Although he read the essay some decades later, Aboubakar Fofana did hear the call at the time it was written. As a boy living in Bamako and visiting relatives in Guinea, he received key teachings from his grandmother, who schooled him in the medicinal and spiritual properties of diverse plants, including *Indigofera*. And if this learning was interrupted when he moved to France in his teens, as a young man he did recall his grandmother's demonstrations and chose to return and resume his studies by travelling to the territories of the Dogon and Tellem to seek out artisans who had managed to keep the ancient knowledge of weaving and dying alive (despite the flood of cheap, industrially produced textiles from the technically advanced but otherwise underdeveloped nations of the Global North.) *Life Fragments*, the title of a work and the exhibition at Pascal Robert Gallery echoes an episteme that the artisans who taught Fofana embodied and that Hampâté-Bâ's articulates with comprehensive simplicity: The meaning which we give nowadays to the words «art» and «artist» and the special place which they occupy in modern society

do not entirely match the traditional African way of thinking. «Art» was not something separate from life. It not only covered all forms of human activity, but also gave them a meaning.

Ancient Africa's view of the universe was an all-embracing and religious one, and acts, particularly acts of creation, were seldom, if ever, carried out without a reason, an intention, or appropriate ritual preparations. No one who considers traditional Africa from a strictly secular viewpoint can hope to understand it. Beyond Fofana's connection to tradition and spirit is a very clear sense of history unfolding, not necessarily as progress, but as the past and present-day realities of division, destruction, and systemic violence. The work does not depict any of this literally, but a move beyond depiction does not mean the work is not a part of life's most contradictory and unbearable dimensions. The broken lives of people displaced and dehumanized since 1492 or 1892, the pervasive disrespect and destruction of all life to this day, are sensed, mourned, and repaired. And, like a complex musical composition or a well-brewed Indigo vat, these works contain a mix of emotions. Alongside the acknowledgment of fragmented, even broken lives, there is an insistence that everything the artist creates is part of one vital force. Repair involves remembering. Fragments echo life's infinite variations. Or at least this is what I hear when I get close to the work.

Some ten years ago, when we were first working together on his three major commissions for documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel in 2017, Aboubakar Fofana shared a Bambara proverb at the end of a long conversation about his gradual decades-long formation as an artist, as if to summarize: *Don o don, tulo be taa kalanso*. Translated to English, it means «every day, the ear goes to school», but there is no anglophone way to capture the heart or beat of this wise fact. The fuller translation is perhaps only found in his life's work.





Aboubakar Fofana, «Untitled», exhibition catalogue «Earth and Leaves / Terre et Feuilles», 2020  
© The Artist, photo by François Goudier





Aboubakar Fofana, «Les arbres à bleu», 2012, cotton sheets, metal pedestal, pvc tubes, cotton fruits, sand, dimensions variable  
© The Artist, photo by François Goudier





Aboubakar Fofana, «Life Fragments», 2020, installation with cotton sheets, dimension variable  
© The Artist, photo by Aboubakar Fofana





Aboubakar Fofana, «Africa blessing (No.11)», 2017, print on Fine Art German Etching Paper 310 g, 40 x 53.3 cm  
© The Artist, photo by Aboubakar Fofana



Aboubakar Fofana, «Africa blessing (No.5)», 2017, print on Fine Art German Etching Paper 310 g, 40 x 53.3 cm  
© The Artist, photo by Aboubakar Fofana



«The materials are essential; they have chosen me and I have chosen to submit to their constraints in a fruitful dialogue.»

Aboubakar Fofana







## Pascal Robert Gallery

5 Rämistrasse  
8001 Zürich  
Switzerland

+41 76 433 10 77  
[info@pascalrobert.net](mailto:info@pascalrobert.net)

## Opening hours

Monday, 9 am – 7 pm  
Tuesday, 9 am – 7 pm  
Wednesday, 9 am – 7 pm  
Thursday, 9 am – 8 pm  
Friday, 9 am – 7 pm  
Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm

We are closed on Sunday.

