

Maya Mihindou's *An Obscure Wound*, 2023

Curatorial Statement

The spirit of *Sarah Maldoror: Tricontinental Cinema* (organized and circulated by Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2021–22) is the celebration of the underrecognized voice of Sarah Maldoror (1929–2020), a daring filmmaker who stood up for the liberation of colonized countries and their people, for justice and antiracism, as well as for poetry and beauty, to the point where she sometimes paid the price for being a free mind and maverick. Sarah Maldoror is remembered as one of the first female filmmakers to document the anti-colonial struggle in Africa. For that reason, she's often labelled the matriarch of African cinema, a weighty title but one that encapsulates the filmmaker's passion, love, and dedication to the camera as a tool for radical, feminist liberation for a continent bearing the weight of colonial oppression.

Our intention with this exhibition is to pay tribute to Maldoror by bringing her films and her voice into the present. Rather than restrict its focus to the past, this tribute highlights the ongoing pattern of resistance to oppression and desire for emancipation expressed in her work. Today, we believe, Maldoror's spirit of solidarity, curiosity, and rebellion is needed more than ever.

This is why we sought to establish a conversation between Maldoror's work and contemporary artists who have become aware of her legacy and ethos. Each version of the exhibition has elaborated new dialogues between artists and across generations, time, and space.

For the original presentation at Palais de Tokyo, we invited Maya Mihindou—a French Gabonese artist and illustrator based in Marseille—to develop a commissioned work as part of the exhibition. Initially, we considered that she might contribute a graphic novel based on Maldoror’s life, but the deepening of Mihindou’s research led us to suggest a mural project to powerfully mark the exhibition’s walls.

Mihindou’s mural at Palais de Tokyo, *La Chercheuse d’or* (The Gold Digger), took the form of an enormous tableau of larger-than-life figures that together conveyed the radical spirit of Maldoror’s life and work. Channeling Mihindou’s research into the numerous cultural and political figures who appear in Maldoror’s films, the mural also included framed silk-screen prints resembling tarot cards. For the Wexner Center commission, Mihindou took these cards as a starting point, creating a new mural based on this constellation of interlocutors, recalling their conversations or imagining hypothetical encounters.

—Cédric Fauq and François Piron





Overview of Maya Mihindou's *An Obscure Wound*, 2023

French Gabonese artist Maya Mihindou's mural is the result of her in-depth investigation of Maldoror's life and work (which also informed her poetic essay, "And the Nerves of our Flesh like Nautical Charts," that is included in the free newspaper publication accompanying this exhibition).

Mihindou's mural takes as a starting point the lifelong friendship between Sarah Maldoror and the poet Aimé Césaire, one of the leading voices of the Négritude movement. In each gallery of the exhibition, Mihindou stages imaginary conversations between intellectual, political, and cultural figures in Maldoror's orbit, depicting seated characters engaged in discussion. Fragments of Césaire's poem "Calendrier lagunaire" (Lagoonal Calendar, 1982) appear across each of the mural's segments, drawing connections across time and space.

Gallery A

Here, the South African singer and musician Miriam Makeba sits before a colonial settler, who confronts her with a rifle. Sarah Maldoror attended Makeba's concert at the Pan-African Festival in Algiers in 1969; she cherished the memory and considered Makeba to be an icon.

To their right, we find the French Caribbean writers Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire speaking to each other. In the space between them, they exchange key ideas: *le tout-monde* (the whole-world) is Glissant's definition of cultural intermixture, while Césaire's Négritude is the idea that all Black peoples and cultures claim a shared African heritage.

Sarah Maldoror dedicated three films to her friend Césaire, while Glissant both produced and appeared in her 2003 film *Regards de mémoire* (Look of Memory), a documentary on the French slave trade.

Gallery B

On this wall, Mihindou depicts two writers, James Baldwin and Marguerite Duras, who were based in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s. Born in New York's Harlem neighborhood, Baldwin was a passionate critic of anti-Black racism in America, while Duras, a former member of the French Resistance, spent her childhood in French Indochina (now Vietnam). Here, Mihindou imagines them exchanging views on the defense of oppressed peoples across the world, addressing the ethical necessity to connect disparate struggles and sites of tragedy. On her lap, Duras holds a newspaper inscribed with the words "Auschwitz—where the sign failed, where language was broken." The passage selected for the newspaper inscription paraphrases Duras, who remarked about the Holocaust: "It is still impossible to approach this event without screaming. It remains inconceivable." The inscription is a reference to the infamous Nazi concentration camp and extermination center where Jewish people and many others were imprisoned and killed during World War II.

Gallery C

In this central segment, Mihindou evokes the geography of Césaire's native land of Martinique, from the volcano of Mount Pelée to the waters of the Caribbean Sea and its islands—which Césaire called “scars of the sea” in his book-length poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Return to My Native Land*, 1939). Elaborating on various facets of Césaire's life, the mural reveals him as both a young man—a poet and rebel—and as an elder statesman and seasoned orator.

Depicted at the base of the mural are diverse figures whose lives intersected with Maldoror and Césaire. A young Maldoror faces Toto Bissainthe, the Haitian actress with whom she cofounded the theater company Les Griots. The French Caribbean author Frantz Fanon signs a copy of his book *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) for Maldoror's life companion Mário de Andrade. Amílcar Cabral, the political leader who fought to liberate Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau, sits with a militant mother and her children. And the elderly Césaire faces African American writer Maya Angelou, who reads “Lagoonal Calendar” in Maldoror's film *Aimé Césaire—le masque des mots* (*The Mask of Words*, 1987).

Gallery D

In this final pairing, African American essayist and activist Angela Davis and Algerian writer Assia Djébar sit face to face. Both writers were active participants in twentieth-century anti-racist, anti-colonial, and feminist movements: Djébar joined the Algerian National Liberation Front in the 1950s, and Davis played a key role in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Sarah Maldoror met Davis and Djébar and dedicated a short film to the latter. She planned a film on Angela Davis, which was never shot. Here, Mihindou imagines their conversation taking place in the present day and depicts an exchange of ideas and emotions in the form of watermelon slices.

Since the 1967 Six-Day War, Palestinian activists have used the symbol of a watermelon slice to circumvent bans on the display of the Palestinian flag (the sliced watermelon bears the flag's four colors: green, red, black, and white). While the watermelon is associated with the Palestinian cause, it also has significance as a trope of anti-Black racism in the United States, one that is still invoked today to inflict harm on Black communities. Like Davis and Djébar, Maldoror devoted her life to struggles for civil rights and against bigotry and racism. Mihindou's mural honors this legacy while also acknowledging the enduring pain and suffering felt by those who have experienced systematic racism, oppression, and social marginalization.

Gallery A

Read about Aimé Césaire's contributions to the Négritude movement: <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/negritude-movement/>

Watch a trailer for Manthia Diawara's 2010 film biography of Édouard Glissant: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=At-Pq8TGBhFA>

Gallery B

Watch an interview with James Baldwin in 1964: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWwOi17WHpE>

Read a recent review of Marguerite Duras's memoir of World War II: <https://www.npr.org/2011/06/29/133811002/a-harsh-tale-of-war-but-an-unforgettable-read>

Gallery C

Hear Toto Bissainthe sing her song "Papa Loko": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGoLiAWJGsk>

Read Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" (1983): <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>

Watch a conversation between Kevin Ochieng Okoth and Ashok Kumar on the ongoing relevance of African revolutionary thinkers, including Amílcar Cabral: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZnH74raj_E

See a trailer for Billy Woodberry's new film biography of Mário de Andrade: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-U_GtF7wal&t=1s

Read about the enduring legacy of philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/06/frantz-fanons-enduring-legacy>

Gallery D

Watch Angela Davis discuss her book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gQBgCfoMAS>

Learn more about the life and work of Assia Djébar: <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/10/djébar-assia/>

Watch a trailer for Manthia Diawara's 2010 film biography of Édouard Glissant: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=At-Pq8TGBhFA>

CAPTIONS

P.3: Maya Mihindou's mural in *Sarah Maldoror: Tricontinental Cinema*. Installation view at Palais de Tokyo, 2022. Courtesy of Palais de Tokyo. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

P.4: Maya Mihindou. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Dwam Ipoméé.