



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AÏDA MULUNEH'S STRIKING NEW PHOTOGRAPHS MERGE PERSONAL, HISTORICAL, AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES OF ETHIOPIA



Aïda Muluneh: This is where I am

March 1 – May 21, 2023

JCDecaux Bus Shelters

Citywide throughout New York, NY; Chicago, IL; Boston, MA, and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

February 28, 2023, NEW YORK, NY—Public Art Fund debuts *This is where I am*, an exhibition of 12 new photographs by Aïda Muluneh on over 330 JCDecaux bus shelters across New York, Boston, and Chicago in the United States, and Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. The exhibition marks both the artist's first public art exhibition in Côte d'Ivoire and the first time that Public Art Fund presents artwork on the African continent, expanding the

organization's partnership with JCDecaux beyond the United States. Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Muluneh's practice focuses on her cultural heritage as a way to explore themes of history, politics, sense of place, and other pressing issues such as the climate crisis. For this new series, Muluneh drew inspiration from Ethiopian poet Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin's "This is where I am". Written in 1974—the year that marked both Muluneh's birth and the start of the Ethiopian Revolution—the poem and the resulting body of photographs are markedly personal. The series bridges past and present, as Muluneh examines her experiences as an immigrant and Ethiopian woman, reflects upon the various political regimes she has lived through, and borrows visual language from religious iconography.

Aïda Muluneh is known for her bold color palette and photographs that center stoic African women. Her artworks reference various art historical genres and cultural influences, including Renaissance painting, Surrealism, West African studio portrait photography, as well as Ethiopian body ornamentation. Muluneh maps unique visual lexicons in her work, creating enigmatic, graphically patterned settings composed of hand-painted backdrops. Central to her photographs are figures regally posed in compositions inspired by Christian Renaissance iconographies, alongside motifs and visual cues alluding to the social structures and political formations of her home country. Muluneh's practice counters stereotypical images of poverty and violence in Africa so often distributed throughout Western media, sharing with the public powerful, striking, and multifaceted images of African women.

"Aïda Muluneh's vibrant surrealist portraits comprise individual vignettes that poetically and symbolically portray facets of her experiences as an immigrant and African woman," **says Public Art Fund Adjunct Curator Katerina Stathopoulou.** "These larger-than-life portraits stand as markers of Muluneh's life, bringing these stories into the public spotlight across four cities and two continents."

This is where I am is rich with recurring motifs central to Muluneh's practice. The repetition of eyes, keys, and stars, as well as props that serve as cultural references such as traditional Ethiopian coffee pots, cowrie shells, head scarfs, and Amharic text, can be localized in Ethiopian history, while also inviting viewers to generate their own interpretations. One prominent symbol that Muluneh frequently features in her work, including this series, is the *jebena*, a traditional Ethiopian coffee pot that stands in as the country's most famous export as well as a popular social gathering point amongst local women. Recontextualizing a prominent surrealist symbol, Muluneh also employs the eye throughout her work to reference ways people respond to, turn away from, or bear witness to surrounding political and social injustices. Additionally, for the first time in her career, Muluneh has collaged certain works with photographs drawn from her personal archive, further imbuing the images with layers of historical and personal contexts.

"The history of humanity has been plagued with never ending conflict, mostly in the name of preserving supremacy," **says artist Aïda Muluneh.** "There are no champions in conflict, for the

line is blurry to me. I no longer know where everyone is but all that I know is—this is where I am.”

Muluneh left Ethiopia at a young age and grew up between Yemen and England, later spending time in Cyprus and Canada before attending Howard University in Washington D.C. With a background in film, Muluneh’s cinematic photographs are the result of cross-continental collaboration. They reflect her investment in sharing complex, distinctly African perspectives, as well as her own journeys across the globe. To realize *This is where I am*, Muluneh brought artists from various parts of Africa together in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, where her studio is based, including Ivorian models and scenic painters from West Africa. In this way, the production of this new body of work serves as a point of East and West African unity and creativity, echoing the work’s richly layered and aesthetically cohesive contents. Visually striking and mysterious, *This is where I am* explores complex sociopolitical landscapes and histories, while also maintaining a sense of intrigue, hope, and inviting open discourse.

JCDecaux’s ongoing partnership with Public Art Fund, along with other programs, helps provide a place for artistic voices to reach urban communities. Its spaces, typically reserved for advertising and public messaging, serve as temporary canvases for artists to showcase their new works, encouraging the public to revisit their communities and explore the city. This artistic support is part of JCDecaux’s ongoing commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, contributing to equitable access and more inclusive cities.

“Providing artistic voices on city streets is an important avenue through which JCDecaux supports sustainable development in cities,” says **JCDecaux Co-CEO Jean-François Decaux**. “We are excited to expand our US-based public art program, enabling access to art in our shared urban communities across the globe.”

Aïda Muluneh: This is where I am is curated by Public Art Fund Adjunct Curator Katerina Stathopoulou.

HOW TO VIEW: Now through May 21, 2023, *This is Where I am* will be on view on over 330 JCDecaux bus shelters in New York City, Chicago, and Boston in the United States, and Abidjan in Côte d’Ivoire. This includes 100 bus shelters across New York City, 150 in Chicago, 50 in Boston, and over 30 in Abidjan. [Find a location near you.](#)



In addition, explore the exhibition on Public Art Fund’s virtual guide on the free **Bloomberg Connects** app, which includes exclusive audio content from the exhibition’s curator.

@PublicArtFund #AidaMuluneh

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aïda Muluneh (b.1974, Ethiopia) lives and works in Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire, and has exhibited in numerous countries, including South Africa, Mali, Senegal, Egypt, Canada, United States of America, France, Germany, England, Norway, and China. Her work can be found in the permanent collection at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, Hood Museum, The RISD Museum of Art and the Museum of Biblical Art in the United States. She is the 2007 recipient of the European Union Prize in the Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, in Bamako, Mali, the 2010 winner of the CRAF International Award of Photography in Spilimbergo, Italy, Winner of 2020 The Royal Photographic Society Curatorship award, a 2018 CatchLight Fellow in San Francisco, USA. In 2019, she also became the first black woman to co-curate the Nobel Peace Prize exhibition while serving as a Canon Europe Ambassador. Muluneh graduated from Howard University in Washington D.C. with a major in Film. She is the founder of the Addis Foto Fest, one of the largest photography festivals in Africa.

Muluneh is the founder of Africa Foto Fair 2022, open December 8, 2022–March 26, 2023 in Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire. Her solo show, *Aïda Muluneh: The Art of Advocacy* opened January 12–February 24, 2023 at Efié Gallery in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

ABOUT PUBLIC ART FUND

As the leader in its field, Public Art Fund brings dynamic contemporary art to a broad audience in New York City and beyond by mounting ambitious free exhibitions of international scope and impact that offer the public powerful experiences with art and the urban environment.

ABOUT JCDECAUX

JCDecaux North America and JCDecaux Côte d'Ivoire are members of the JCDecaux Group, the number one outdoor advertising company worldwide, reaching more than 850 million people daily in over 80 countries and 3,518 cities. JCDecaux is working towards more sustainable spaces and is recognized for its extra-financial performance in the FTSE4Good (3.6/5), CDP (A Leadership), MSCI (AA) and has achieved Gold Medal status from EcoVadis. JCDecaux nation-wide operations in the U.S. include airports, billboards, malls as well as street furniture programs in New York, Chicago and Boston. In the Côte d'Ivoire, JCDecaux operates airport, bus branding, malls, digital billboards programs as well as street furniture programs with the Société des transports Abidjanais (SOTRA) and the Municipality of Cocody.

SUPPORTS

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IMAGE CREDITS:

Aïda Muluneh

The faith of fate, 2022

Artwork by Aïda Muluneh

Photo: Nicholas Knight, Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY

Artwork a part of *Aïda Muluneh: This is where I am*, presented by Public Art Fund on over 330 JCDecaux bus shelters across New York City, Chicago, and Boston in the United States, and Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire on view from March 1 – May 21, 2023.