

# BABENGA

The Sacred Forest



THE ART of JEAN MICHEL DISSAKE

---

May 16, 2024 – February 8, 2025

**ROBERT KEITH BLACK AND J. ORMOND SANDERSON, JR. GALLERY  
GREGG MUSEUM OF ART & DESIGN**



**Abama**

Ebony wood, wire, fibers  
16x12x10 inches





# A VISION FOR THE PLANET A VISION FOR THE SPECIES

*the day humans chose to  
separate from the earth is  
the day a part of the soul  
of the earth died.*

VANDORN HINNANT, *MUSINGS* 2/20/18

Jean Michel Dissake delivers visual stories in alignment with ancient Shamanic traditions where the human hand, eye, and heart serve as instruments conveying layers of meaning for viewers to read with their heads tethered to their hearts. Working in this ancient and revered tradition, he delivers images that spark the imaginations of viewers. He offers road maps for one to navigate into sacred territories where Mother Nature presides over Her domain and the influence of mechanized human thinking recedes into the background.

Dissake's work initiates dialogues with his audience assisting in guiding its collective attention to a place where authentic reverence for the sacred dimensions of Nature can be embraced and honored through a proactive stance that can alter the course of our collective journey forward. The Spirit of Nature, the forest, and the Divine

Feminine are all embodied in his hand-crafted meditations. His pieces are declarative statements asking his audiences to awaken and become engaged with their destinies in conscious, deliberate, intentional, and proactive ways.

Having communicated with the artist, heart/mind to heart/mind, I see that he and I have in common a sincere interest in steering the attention of others towards a collective opportunity to co-create a more holistic relationship with the beauty of Nature. This shared vision is articulated in two distinctly different ways, yet a common denominator is our shared reverence for Nature's majesty and our intent to project messages for others to read, comprehend, and respond to.

**VANDORN HINNANT** is a Durham, NC, based artist who explores variations on the "Golden Ratio" theme in his prolific 2D works and sculptural forms. His works of art are in private and public collections in the US, Africa, and Europe. His poems have been published in a number of journals, books and anthologies.

**AT TOP:**

*Diso la Wombe*

*Bicycle wheel, printed aluminum offset printing sheet, wire, copper 42x40x7 inches*

# JEAN MICHEL DISSAKE



**ABOVE:**  
*Purchasing materials for  
art-making in Yaoundé's  
recycling market.*

Jean Michel Dissake is a visionary artist who has embarked on a grand quest. His highly conceptual works illuminate a path to realize unity, share love, and find balance between nature and technology. Intricate sculptural forms are intended to reveal the oneness of creation, sacred order, and beauty in diversity. "I am not just making art," he asserts. "I am making art to save the Tree of Life."

Dissake refers to himself as a global citizen, acutely aware that the world faces ecological, economic, technological and social crises. "I am working to get the answer for the human condition and problems, to inspire and to cure the soul and spirit." He seeks to awaken human beings and to achieve balance in the complex modern world with his multi-dimensional language of art.

The exhibition title, *BABENGA - The Sacred Forest*, references this sweeping vision. *Ba* means "people of" and *benga* means "the continuity." Babenga has personal significance because it is the name of the village in Cameroon's Littoral Region near Douala where Dissake grew up with his grandparents. "I took the name of my village for the exhibition, not just for my village. It talks about all villages and all human beings," he says. His grandfather was the Sawa chief and king of Babenga, and sent Dissake to the traditional African school of the Sawa tribe as well as to public schools. Dissake went on to study economic science at Douala University, but two years later, feeling that he was missing his true calling, he left the university and returned to the land of his youth to live for nine years in a sacred forest near Babenga on the Mungo River.

The forest and the water became Dissake's true teachers. Early in the morning he swam in the river and observed the sun as it reflected on the water and on his skin. Diving under the water he saw colors change as the light refracted. He realized how vines and trees were connected for mutual support and was fascinated by the "lowliest" creatures such as ants and termites, models for cooperation and interdependence.



Aware of accelerating deforestation occurring in the region and across Cameroon, the call of the forest became louder. The forest spirit opened his eyes to nature's laws, fueling his imagination, and encouraging him to begin sharing his discoveries with others by making art. He began using vines, wood, termite dust, palm fronds and water hyacinth to make sculptures. His seminal exhibition, *Ebogás* (The Cry of the Forest), took place in Douala, Cameroon, in 2009, followed by *Palabre Ecologique* and *Link*, all presenting an ecological discourse and call to action.

Dissake declares that everything is linked – energy that flows through the blood and veins of the human body, vibrations that flow in the forest, and the frequencies that flow in cities and the digital world. “The mission we have is to reconnect human beings with nature,” Dissake affirms. While focused on his vision, the work inherently questions the value of established systems, advances in science and technology, and achievements of individuals or nations without connection to nature and the will to care for systems that sustain life itself.

Through his works, Dissake offers a contemporary mythology, a metaphorical roadmap, inviting the archetypal hero in each individual to know their true essence and to realize unity and balance. He summons us to a ceremony and presents a manifesto; to discover the space where humans exist with a new consciousness.

Dissake utilizes both found and recycled materials including computer parts salvaged from motherboards and televisions. He calls his works “Pictosculptures” as they incorporate form, color, sound, and materials and are encoded with meaning. The exploration begins with the line. “Drawing for me is a mystical process,” he explains. “The line is also the vine, the symbol for the veins, nerves, heart, umbilical cord, DNA, the vibration of life energy. It is the line of creation.” *Esombe*, the first sculpture Dissake made using vines from the forest, makes a link between human beings, nature and the universe. The shape refers to the golden ratio and also to the heart.

Symbolic materials in Dissake's art include license plates, bicycle wheels and metal signs reassembled as art that embodies the flux or energy of people, places, and modern cities. Aluminum and copper reflect the light that underlies and animates everything. Numbers and letters are society's codes. Triangles and circles are sacred geometry illustrating the cycles of life and the planets in the cosmos. The circle also represents the sun, a new seed for rebirth, and a portal between the world of sensation and the spirit world. When figures appear, often gouged or engraved deep in these metal or plastic surfaces, they are made of overlapping, interconnected and continuous lines, and depict the souls of people, both ancestors in the spirit world and people on the physical plane.

The powerful allegorical works in *BABENGA - The Sacred Forest* hold information of the past, present and future, and possess an energetic presence designed to activate our senses and open our minds. “I feel sometimes myself as a plant that produces fruit that human beings could eat, or an animal that feels the real vibration



**Esombe**  
Vines, termite dust,  
aluminum offset printing  
sheet, fabric;  
44x19x6 inches



*Continued from page 3.*

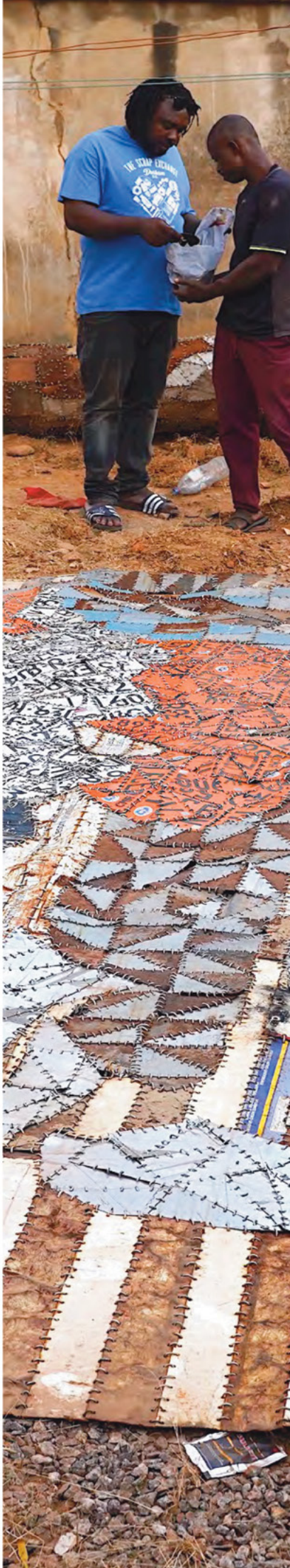
that the heart sends us, the frequency of the world,” says Dissake. Sacred geometry, quantum physics, ancient codes of African heritage, cosmology, sociology, spirituality, laws of nature and world events inform his work; concepts distilled through a unique creative alchemy.

Dissake maintains a vibrant studio in Yaoundé, Cameroon, called Mudiki Free Visual Arts Laboratory, a hive of activity and works in progress with a stream of workers and students as well as old and new friends that enliven the space. Dissake’s goals are carried out through ambitious sculptural works, public art projects and teaching as a professor at Fouban and Nkongsamba universities in Cameroon.

Mudiki Studio has taken on large scale commissions, including *Dibala*, a monumental sixty-foot-wide “Pictosculpture” mural made of license plates cut into triangles and squares and wired together, for the French Institute in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and a mythological steel bull designed and built in residence with La Friche la Belle de Mai in Marseilles, France, for the Jour de Fete 2024 Cultural Olympics.

**MARRIOTT SHELTON** is a multidisciplinary artist based in Raleigh, NC. During ten years in China she studied painting, later earning a MFA and teaching at several colleges. She is a curator for Jean Michel Dissake, and is currently making a documentary film on his life and work. She is also establishing Aspen Grove Contemporary Art, an art retreat and residency program. [marriott.m4@gmail.com](mailto:marriott.m4@gmail.com)

**RIGHT:** *Dissake and helper in the studio work yard with rolled and unrolled portions of Dibala, commissioned by and installed at the French Institute in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2023.*









# EKONGOLO

Jean Michel Dissake has recently made a companion sculpture to his goddess figure, *Kaya Ngona Wuba*, which he calls *Ekongolo*, after a Neptune-like water god, which also stands upon a sphere. *Ekongolo* is traditionally a guardian of ancestral secrets, a spiritual bridge guiding souls towards the divine, honored by members of the *Ekongolo* brotherhood. Secret societies and brotherhoods like *Mungi* and *Ekongolo*, custodians of tradition, played key roles in Sawa cultural transmission by preserving and disseminating the traditions of the *Duala*, a Bantu people of Nubian origin with roots tracing back to Pharaonic Egypt.

Established since the seventeenth century along the banks of the Wouri estuary by their ancestor *Mbongo*, their animist worldview is intimately connected to the water spirits, the *Mengu* deities. Only initiates can decipher the spiritual and cosmic codes. Annually, on the first Sunday in December, they gather in Douala for the Water Mass, central to the *Ngondo* assembly, to discuss sociopolitical issues and acknowledge the creator god, *Nyambe*.

Dissake's anthropo-zoomorphic sculpture combines natural and spiritual elements: horns that evoke the brotherhood's *Nyati* buffalo masks and multiple wings reminiscent of an angel's. The masks proclaim power and resistance, marking their stance against colonization and Christianity. The figure's eyes and metal plates suggest fish scales, symbolizing the connection with water spirits, while metal wires, metaphors for the lianas of the mangroves, breathe life. A red receptacle symbolizes the sacred, accessible only to the spirits of the beyond. Thus, *Ekongolo* becomes a celestial protector, opening the doors to a new world, a universal paradise for peace lovers.

Jean Michel Dissake, despite academic pursuits, was immersed in traditional schools, enriching his work with this heritage. His creations, blending contemporary culture with tradition, carry messages of tolerance and love.

**EDITH MBELLA** is a curator born in Douala, Cameroon, who specializes in the ancient art of Central Africa. After pursuing her education in Paris, running the Oba African Art Gallery in Barcelona, and founding the Edith Mbella Gallery in Madrid, she returned to Douala in 2016 to found Bolo l'Espace Art & Culture.



**ABOVE AND RIGHT:**

*Ekongolo*

Wood, metal, glass, plexiglass,  
fabric, vines, wire, found objects  
81x32x28 inches









## THE MUDIKI STUDIO

In 2015, while I was working on a project in Yaoundé, Cameroon, I first crossed paths with Jean Michel Dissake. I remember entering a narrow alley lined with tropical plants and stepping into another world – the Mudiki Studio.

The hodge-podge of materials scattered about – old rope, tin scraps, coconut husks – seemed to coalesce by some kind of alchemy into mysterious free-standing sculptures that rose from the dirt floor. They were organic and undulating, like the polyrhythmic local Bikutsi music – primordial and futuristic at the same time. Walking among those three-dimensional wonders, I knew I was in the presence of something magnificent.

A salient feature of the sculptures was the thick twisting vines Dissake had painstakingly shaped into armatures and wrapped in thin metal sheets nailed in place. He explained that in his village language (there are over two hundred local dialects in Cameroon) the word

*mudiki* means vine. The vine brings things together, he told me, giving structure and support as it travels from the earth skyward – a symbol for what unites and uplifts us. This same philosophy defined his intention for the Mudiki Studio to be a place where art, nature, and people could come together in harmony.

In Cameroon, art is not taught in schools and art supply stores are nonexistent, yet here was an artist who used humble materials like discarded license plates and termite dust and had concocted methods of joining them together by sewing with wire in order to create something extraordinary. What I saw that day was work that drew from deep ancestral roots, elevated by a singular contemporary vision.

**ANNE HEARTT GREGORY** is an abstract painter living in Durham, NC, where she is a member of 5 Points Gallery. She wrote for the online magazine *Afrikadaa*. Currently she serves as board chair for African Action on AIDS, an NGO in Yaoundé, Cameroon, that supports the education of girls.





## THE ARTIST

Jean Michel Dissake was born in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 1983. After studying economic science at Douala University for two years, he left to live in the sacred forest near his grandfather's village, where he learned directly from nature and began to make sculptures using vines and other found materials. When Dissake won first prize in an international art competition in 2012, art professor Pascal Kenfack invited him to attend master's degree classes at the University of Yaoundé I for free. Kenfack's teachings on the use and interpretation of symbols were influential. Other mentors were Mbog Bassong, shaman from the Bassa tribe, who taught him sacred geometry and gave him books on ancient Egypt; professor, anthropologist, and shaman Mbondji Edjenguele; and shaman Valere Epe. Since founding his studio, Mudiki Free Visual Arts Laboratory, Dissake has had many exhibitions at the national and international level, and was invited to exhibit and represent The Republic of Cameroon in the 2024 Venice Biennale, the world's most prestigious arts exposition. He can be contacted at [astralcelio@yahoo.fr](mailto:astralcelio@yahoo.fr).







# INSIDE THE SACRED RIVER

*For Jean Michel Dissake*

Perhaps the spider virgins searching for the sound  
found it. Perhaps the birds untangled the body  
from the tree. Perhaps the tree folded his spirit  
into the spirit of the body.

Perhaps the tree allowed the body's spirit to stretch  
out take up space become limbs trunks roots.

## ***Trees never tell.***

The hum inside the sacred river. The hum inside the  
wasps nest. The hum of the fire's tongue.

The hum of the snake shedding skin. The hum of the  
vines creeping under skin. The hum of saltwater  
meeting sweet water.

## ***Rivers never tell.***

Cosmic metal portals swallow clocks calendars births  
deaths sunrises sunsets. Cosmic metal portals  
swallow tsunamis tornadoes eclipses  
revolutions. Cosmic metal portals swallow  
languages desires whispers songs prayers  
memories.

## ***Limbs and wombs repent.***

Art becomes throat placenta fingerprints. Art  
becomes quiet cathedral of screams. Art  
becomes faceless nameless river. Art becomes  
smoke leaving its name on doorsteps.

Art becomes the dream fled. Art becomes the  
storyteller inside palms.

Perhaps everything is a tree. Holding ancient  
medicine. Inside sacred rivers.

Where metal numbers whisper inside fire. Where art  
remembers all the dances denied to her.

Perhaps everything is a sacred river. Burying  
reincarnated spirits. Red becomes sky. Blue  
becomes a requiem for binding unflinching  
spirits to a sky that will not bend. Perhaps we  
are all crossing the river where blood is born.  
Perhaps we are all the rivers. Holding all the  
names of everything. Yet to be born.



**JAKI SHELTON GREEN** is the first African American and third woman to be appointed North Carolina Poet Laureate. The author of eight collections of poetry, she is an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow, a NC Literary Hall of Fame Inductee, and a recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature. She lives in Mebane, NC.

### **OPPOSITE AND LEFT:**

***Mutangary*** (details)

*Textiles, wood, metal, found objects*  
108x59x9 inches





The **BABENGA - The Sacred Forest** exhibition was co-curated by Marriott Sheldon and Roger Manley. Photos from Cameroon are by Marriott Sheldon.

Publication design by Leighann Vinesett.

**MISSION** The Gregg Museum of Art & Design at NC State University sparks creativity and encourages exploration through engaging exhibitions, relevant programming, and thought-provoking educational experiences. Focusing on outstanding examples of art, craft, and design, the museum utilizes cross-disciplinary collaborations and its extensive collections to foster critical thinking and expand worldviews. The Gregg serves its diverse campus community and the greater Triangle region in a welcoming, accessible, and inclusive environment.

**ABOVE, DETAIL:**  
**Ekwa' Muato O! / Democracy**  
Engraved aluminum offset  
printing sheet, found objects,  
paint 19x24 inches

**FRONT COVER:**  
**Kaya Ngona Wuba**  
Vines, fabric, aluminum offset  
printing sheets, copper, wood,  
termite dust, wire, other metals  
67x27x28 inches



Gregg Museum of Art & Design  
1903 Hillsborough Street  
Campus Box 7330  
Raleigh NC 27695-7330 USA  
919-515-3503 | gregg@ncsu.edu  
gregg.arts.ncsu.edu



© 2024 Gregg Museum of Art & Design. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission.