

Barthélémy Toguó Offers Soulful International Voices to The Hamptons

August 14, 2018

by Mary Gregory

“The Beauty of Our Voice,” Barthélémy Toguó’s current “Platform” exhibition at the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Water Mill, NY is a double-edged reflection. Presenting his work in The Hamptons, one of the most picturesque spots on Earth, Toguó brings an awareness of the shadows behind the perfection, the harshness of a variety of places, and the beauty that suffuses all.

[Toguó’s](#) art highlights the beautiful but also challenges viewers to look beyond, engaging audiences with statements on wealth, poverty, climate change, race, migration, colonialism, justice and exile. Curated by Corinne Erni, Senior Curator of ArtsReach and Special Projects at the Parrish, the exhibition brings together a major international artist and a number of new firsts for the museum.



Barthélémy Toguo (Cameroonian, born 1967) Photo: © Barthélémy Toguo/Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Paris & Bandjoun Station, Cameroon.

This is Toguo's first solo museum exhibition in the U.S., though he has participated in international biennials in Venice, Sydney, Lyon and Havana; it is also the first solo show for an African artist at the Parrish. In a groundbreaking collaboration, the Watermill Center and the Parrish selected Toguo for the newly established, invitation-only [Inga Maren Otto Fellowship](#).

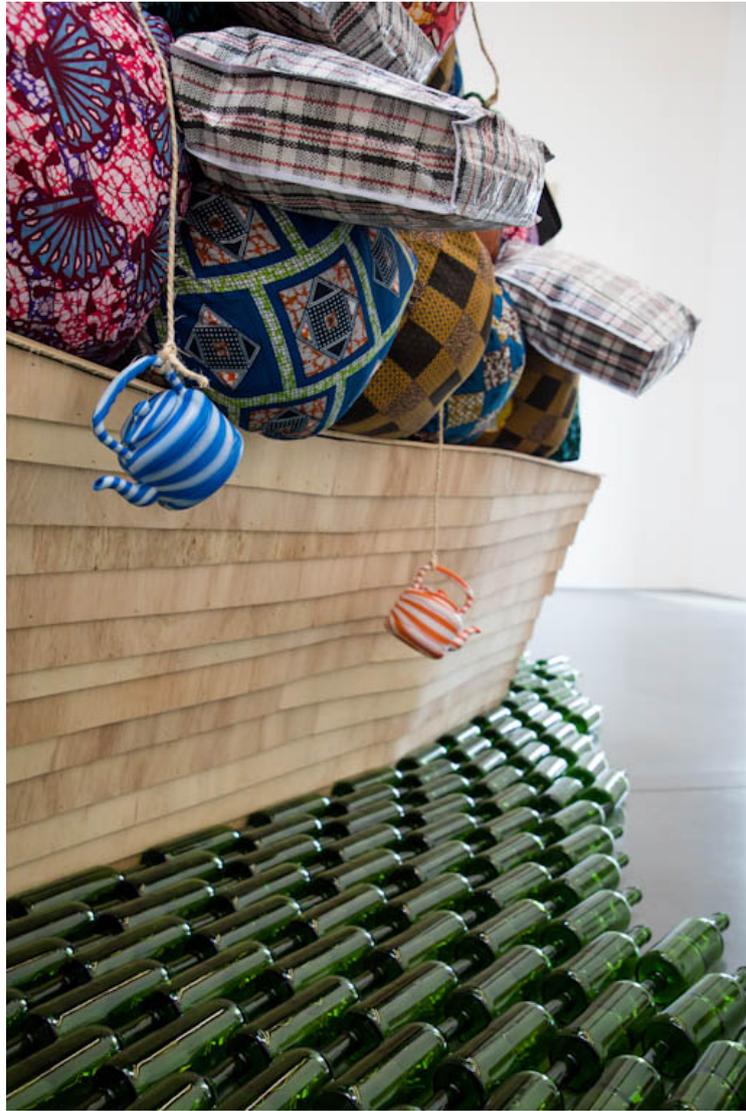
The artist's fellowship residency at [The Watermill Center](#) allowed him to get to know the region and to create some of the work on view. "The Beauty of Our Voice" is also the Parrish's first show organized under the [Dorothy Lichtenstein ArtsReach Fund](#), initiated by a gift from patron Agnes Gund, for artists to engage in work that addresses social injustice.

While at The Watermill Center, Toguo built *The Road to Exile*, the centerpiece of the exhibition, featuring a wooden boat, packed to the point of spilling over with bundles wrapped in colorful, African-printed fabrics, and set it all atop a "sea" of empty glass bottles. The artwork explores hope and despair; social, economic and environmental changes; pilgrimage; politics; and the fraught journeys faced by so many.

"Toguo said once that we're all in some sort of exile," said Erni. "It's this idea of being forced to leave everything behind ... because you can no longer exist where you are."



The Parrish Art Museum's Platform Exhibition, 2018, "Barthélémy Toguo: The Beauty of Our Voice," Installation view: "Road to Exile." Photo: Jenny Gorman. Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum.



Barthélémy Toguo, "Road to Exile," Detail. Photo: Jenny Gorman. Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum.

For the Parrish installation, the boat is surrounded by a selection of nautical paintings, drawings and etchings from the museum's permanent collection. "Those boats are reflecting tranquil harbor life, or they're boats that present wealth, power and commerce," Erni explained. "So, there's a big contrast between that and the boat that Barthélémy has on display. We thought: this creates such a rich tension."

Down the hall in Gallery 10, the installation *Mobile Cafeteria* invites visitors to experience something of Bandjoun Station, an arts and cultural project established by Toguo in Bandjoun, Cameroon in 2007. With African board games to play, a taped soccer match to watch (and Bandjoun coffee served by Toguo at the opening reception), the piece is a transported corner of the artist's homeland, situated for Parrish visitors to experience.

With African board games to play, a taped soccer match to watch (and Bandjoun coffee served by Toguo at the opening reception), the piece is a transported corner of the artist's homeland, situated for Parrish visitors to experience. In Cameroon, [Bandjoun Station](#) has on view its own collection of

African art. It also offers working and living space to artists and grows and sells its own crops, most importantly, coffee.

“He’s thinking a lot about the imbalances of the trade between the northern and southern hemispheres,” Erni explained. “Usually the West and the North determine the prices, which is impoverishing the global South.”



“Barthélémy Toguo: The Beauty of Our Voice,” Installation view: “Mobile Cafeteria” (front), “Stupid African Presidents” (back), “Homo Planta” (right). Photo: Jenny Gorman. Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum.

On view in Gallery 10 are a group of photographic costumed, satirical self-portraits called “Stupid African Presidents,” in which the artist lampoons leaders who’ve overseen the destruction of the environments and the economies of different nations. A recent series, “Black Lives Matter,” pencil portraits commemorating young African-Americans killed by police, is on view, along with a group of watercolors inspired by nature and then extended into imagined possibilities.



Barthélémy Toguo, "Stupid African President—Forest Destruction," 2006, Colored photograph mounted on aluminum and framed with plexiglass. 65 5/8 x 50 5/8. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co.

Toguo dual gallery installations are linked together by The Spine Gallery, which presents "Head Above Water—Hamptons," a collection of postcards sent to Toguo. Since 2004, the artist has asked people in places like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Kosovo, Mexico and Cuba to answer a question about their lives, thoughts, and dreams. Now, he's hearing from The Hamptons.

Some 100 postcards were distributed at high schools in The Hamptons and to members of the Shinnecock Nation asking, "Where do I fit in, in American society?" The answers are poetic, disquieting, brilliant and inspiring. In line with the objectives of the Dorothy Lichtenstein ArtsReach Fund, "Head Above Water" is a way to open conversations that go beyond the exhibition.



"Head Above Water- Hamptons 1," 2018, 96 Postcards with ink stamps. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

"It's really about engaging audiences with themes that you may not expect in the Hamptons," Erni said, "but because of the way that Barthélémy does it, it's not cold or didactic. It's very engaging, very inviting, and it's also beautiful ... I think this is a very important conversation to be had, and because of the new arts initiatives, this is a good moment to have it."



Barthélémy Togo, "Homa Planta D," 2018. Watercolor ink on canvas 18 x 24

inches. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

BASIC FACTS: “Platform: Barthélémy Togo—The Beauty of Our Voice” is on view August 5 to October 14, 2018 at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.parrishart.org.

Copyright 2018 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.