

**CECILE  
FAKHOURY**

**François-Xavier Gbré**  
*La Nage de l'Éléphant*

Solo show, from September 25, 2021 to January 1st, 2022  
Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire





For his new exhibition in Abidjan, the photographer François-Xavier Gbré continues his reading of the history of the economic and urban development of the Ivory Coast, a long-term research initiated in the early 2010s. In this new opus, the coastline, the forest and the land are mixed with architecture, in the strata of the eventful history of a country that recently celebrated sixty years of independence.

As an introduction to this new chapter in the work of the Franco-Ivorian photographer, the installation *Emergence, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire* (2013-2020) is a visual study of social and political changes through the built environment, and offers a poetic reading of the Abidjan territory. Wandering through the city, the artist takes fragments, looks at the ordinary and questions its coherence.

In the large body of unpublished photographs that the artist unveils in the exhibition *La Nage de l'Éléphant* (The Elephant's Swim), the city of Abidjan still holds a symbolic place, so much so that it is the showcase of the power in place. Gbré criss-crosses and captures *La Cité* in its various facets, in its moments of grace, such as the view of the Plateau under a curtain of bluish rain; but also in the midst of serious events, such as *La Vierge aux Gravats*, documented in the aftermath of the 2015 evictions in Adjouffou.

Nourished by displacement, the walking photographer's investigation creates an encounter with a hybrid nature in mutation, in a palette of subtle sensory variations, made of red earth, smoke, powdered ochres, scum, corrosions, where storm clouds exhaust the concrete and the sun dries up the wood sections, in a fundamental tension between man and nature. These evolutionary phenomena are deployed in the image *Strates* where François-Xavier Gbré captures a layer of materials, an organism where concrete, yellow earth and green grass are mixed together. *L'Éclat*, a monumental and quasi-fantastic work, illustrates the strange evolution of modern building materials put to the test of the equatorial climate.

As everywhere in the world, economic development has led to a profound change in the natural environment, in a Côte d'Ivoire that has been both admired and exploited for the richness of its resources and the vitality of its flora and fauna. A territory (re)named not exactly after an animal, the elephant, but after ivory. A paradox that François-Xavier evokes in the title of the exhibition *La Nage de l'Éléphant* (The Elephant's Swim), a metaphor for the country's progress, between achievement, clumsiness and even absurdity.

This same symbolic elephant appears in the photographic archives methodically presented by François-Xavier Gbré in relation to his contemporary research. In the exhibition, François-Xavier presents history not in chronology but in resonance. At intervals of decades, current photographs and archives echo each other, and the investigation sketches out cycles and repetitions that culminate in a monumental fresco entitled *La Grande Illusion*, a composite work in which extracts of images dating from the colonial period, independence and the Ivorian miracle, among others, are mixed together. Amongst the yellowed prints and other iconographic material, found on second-hand stalls or on the internet, the

figure of Louis Normand and other photographers from the same period such as Jean Carval appears. Active in Abidjan since the 1950s, their photographs resonate strangely with François-Xavier Gbré's own research in their desire to document pivotal moments in architecture, urbanism and landscape. These archives seem to foreshadow the upheavals that would shape the Ivory Coast of today.

A large part of the recent photographic corpus was produced during the period of the pandemic, when the artist sometimes finds it difficult to navigate between the Ébrié Lagoon and the Marais Poitevin, his two home ports. François-Xavier Gbré explains: «Photography is rooted in the trials of life. Pain and doubt are at the centre of the landscape. Mutilated trees or the scars of the heart, a stranded boat or the loss of freedom of movement, a wall of flames in black smoke or the annihilation of any positive vision of the future, a collapsed bridge or the difficulty of creating a link.» This intimate and personal opening amplifies the evocative power of all the works presented. It brings the viewer closer to the message of the exhibition at a time when everyone is affected by the march of events. By giving a human face to environmental issues, François-Xavier Gbré reminds us that collective history is made up above all of a multitude of personal stories.





Exhibition view - *La Nage de l'Eléphant*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

## Biography



Born in 1978 in Lille (France), François-Xavier Gbré now lives and works between Abidjan (Ivory Coast) and La Rochelle (France).

In touch with time and geography, his work uses the language of architecture as a witness to memory and social change. From colonial vestiges to landscapes redefined by current events, he explores territories and revisits history. This constant dialogue with his environment leads him to use different scales and modes of exhibition, whether in the presentation of meticulous installations, linked to a real investigation of the territory, or in the use of architecture itself to make photography resonate in a physical relationship with the spectator or the public space.

**Exhibitions (selection) :** Ton pied, mon pied (Jimei x Rencontres d'Arles, Xiamen, Chine, 2020), Chine - Afrique : Beyond the colorline (Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, 2020), Sogno d'Oltremare (Museo MAN, Italie, 2019), Afriques Capitales (La Villette, Paris, 2018), Landscape Photography Today (Denver Art Museum, U.S.A., 2018), Recent Histories (The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm, Allemagne, 2017), The Past is a Foreign Country (Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College, USA, 2015), Fragments (Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Côte d'Ivoire, 2015), Abroad (Art

Twenty One, Nigeria, 2015).

His works are included in the following collections : **Centre Pompidou** (Paris, France), the **Smithsonian Institution** (Washington, USA), **Tate Modern** (London, UK), **Queensland Gallery of Modern Art** (Brisbane, Australia), **Société Générale** (Paris, France), the **Walther Collection** (Neu-Ulm, Germany - New York, USA) and recently the **Philadelphia Museum of Art** (USA, 2020) and the **Chazen Museum of Art - University of Wisconsin** (USA, 2020), le **Denver Art Museum** (USA, 2021), la **Collection des Rencontres d'Arles** (2021), le **FNAC - Fond National d'art contemporain** (France).

Awards : Winner of the **Prix Découverte Louis Roederer** of the Rencontres Contemporaines de la Photographie d'Arles (2020)



Exhibition view - *La Nage de l'Éléphant*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

**Solo shows**

- 2021 • *La Nage de l'Éléphant*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
- 2020 • *Ton Pied, Mon Pied*, Jimei Festival X Rencontres d'Arles, Jimei, China  
• *Émergence, Abidjan*, Côte d'Ivoire 2013-2020, Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Le Cap, Afrique du Sud
- 2018 • *Sogno d'Oltremare*, Museo Man, Nuoro, Sardaigne, Italie
- 2016 • *The Armory Show, Focus : African Perspectives*, New-York, USA  
• *Paris Photo*, Grand Palais, Paris, France
- 2015 • *Chambre avec vue*, Kulte Gallery, Rabat, Maroc  
• *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery Haverford College, USA
- 2014 • *Frgments*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire  
• *Abroad, Art Twenty One (Art 21)*, Lagos, Nigeria
- 2013 • *Surfaces*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

**Group shows**

- 2021 • 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Christie's, Paris, France  
• *Alger, archipel des libertés*, FRAC Centre, Orléans, France
- 2020 • *Nuit Blanche*, les Ateliers Médicis, Clichy-sous-bois, Montfermeil, France  
• *Prix Découverte des Rencontres d'Arles*, Chapelle Laennec, Paris, France  
• *Water is Land is Air*, Latitudes Art Fair, Johannesburg, Afrique du Sud  
• *Chine Afrique*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France  
• *I was here, I saw here*, La Filature, Mulhouse, France
- 2019 • *Palais de Lomé*, Togo

- *L'Afrique n'est pas une île*, Fondation Zinsou, Ouidah, Bénin
- *L'Esprit du large*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Dakar, Senegal
- *L'Esprit du large 2*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
- *1-54 Art Fair*, New York City, USA
- *Cosmopolis*, Mao Jihong Arts Foundation + Centre Pompidou, Chengdu, China
- 2018 • *Recent Histories*, Rencontres de Bamako, Mali  
• *La Cour*, Cinéma de Médina Koura, Rencontres de Bamako, Mali  
• *Landscape Photography Today*, Denver Art Museum, U.S.A.  
• *African Metropolis*, Maxxi, Rome, Italie  
• *Africa Is No Island*, Macaal, Marrakech, Maroc  
• *La Cour*, Paris Photo, France
- 2017 • *Afriques Capitales*, Grande halle de la Villette, Paris, France  
• *Recent Histories*, The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm, Allemagne  
• *Deep Memory*, Kalmar Konst Museum, Suède  
• *Who is still Austrian?*, Kunst Meran Merano Arte, Italie
- 2016 • *Cher(e)s Ami(e)s*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France  
• *Crisis of Presence*, Pori Art Museum, Finlande  
• *Only in the Western world*, Mario Mauroner Contemporary Art Vienne, Autriche  
• *Lueurs noires*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire  
• *Réenchantements*, Biennale de Dakar, Sénégal  
• *Une collection particulière*, Biennale de Dakar Off, Sénégal
- 2015 • *Off des Rencontres de Bamako 2015 - 11<sup>e</sup> Biennale africaine de la photographie*, Blabla Hippodrome, Mali  
• *The Lay of the Land*, Walther Collection Project Space, New York, USA  
• *1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair*, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, USA  
• *Art Dubai*, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, EAU  
• *Présences*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire  
• *Addis Foto Fest*, Addis Abeba, Ethiopie

- 2014**
- Sphères #7, Galleria Continua, Les Moulins, France
  - 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Somerset House, Londres, UK
  - FLOW, Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery, Kyoto, Japan
  - Group show, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
  - New Africa, Kulte gallery & editions, La Villa, Casablanca, Maroc
  - Group Show, Off de la Biennale de Dakar, Sénégal
- 2013**
- Rencontres Picha, Biennale de Lubumbashi, RD Congo
  - 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Somerset House, Londres, UK
  - Rencontres de Bamako 2011 - 9<sup>e</sup> Biennale africaine de la photographie, Fondation Gulbenkian, Lisbonne, Portugal
  - Chinafrique, Festival Les Uns Chez Les Autres, Galerie Contexts, Paris, France
- 2012**
- Biennale Regard Bénin, Cotonou, Bénin 2012
  - We Face Forward, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK
  - Rencontres de Bamako 2011 - 9<sup>e</sup> Biennale africaine de la photographie, Tour & Taxis, Bruxelles, Belgique
  - Off de la Biennale de Dakar, Sénégal
  - Synchronicity II, Twiani Contemporary, Londres, UK
- 2011**
- Rencontres de Bamako 2011 - 9<sup>e</sup> Biennale africaine de la photographie, Musée National de Bamako, Mali
  - Synchronicity - Photoquai, Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris, France
  - The Sovereign African Art Prize, Joburg Art Fair, Afrique du Sud
  - Nuits photographiques de Pierrevet, France
  - Transphotographiques, Lille, France
  - Rencontres de Bamako 2009, Fondation Gulbenkian, Lisbonne; Centre d'art contemporain, Vilnius, Lituanie
- 2010**
- Rencontres de Bamako 2009, Antwerpen FotoMuseum, Belgique; Johannesburg Art Gallery; Cape Town National Gallery Afrique du Sud
  - L'EXPO / PHOTO : prix de la Fondation Blachère des 8<sup>e</sup> Rencontres de Bamako, Fondation Blachère, Apt, France
- 2009**
- Projection at Addis Foto Fest, Addis Abeba, Ethiopie
  - Uprooting the Gaze - Brighton Photo Fringe, Brighton, UK
  - PASSAGES : La résidence - Afriques et créations Fondation Bullukian, Lyon, France
- 2008**
- Matières Sensibles, Lille, France; Milan, Italie
- 2007**
- Arts Visuels d'Abidjan, Fondation Donwahi, Côte d'Ivoire
- Awards**
- 2020**
- Prix Découverte Louis Roederer, Rencontres d'Arles
- 2017**
- Prix Pictet, Space, nomination
- 2015**
- Prix Pictet, Disorder, nomination
- 2013**
- Prix Pictet, Consumption, nomination
- 2011**
- Prix du jury des Nuits photographiques de Pierrevet
  - Sovereign African Art Prize, nomination
- 2010**
- Danny Wilson award, Brighton Photo Biennial, shortlist
  - PhotoAfrica, Centre Andalous de la photographie, second prix
- 2009**
- Prix de la Fondation Blachère, 8<sup>e</sup> Rencontres de Bamako
- Residencies**
- 2020**
- Ateliers Medicis, Clichy sous bois - Montfermeil, France
- 2018**
- Museo Man, Nuoro, Italy
- 2017**
- Kunst Meran Arte Merano, Italie
- 2013**
- RIF, l'Appartement 22, Rabat, Maroc
- 2012**
- Kulturforum Süd-Nord, Porto Novo, Benin
  - Festival sur le Niger - Workshop Painting espace, Ségué, Mali
- 2010**
- Afriques et créations, Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France



François-Xavier Gbré, *L'Épave*, 2021



François-Xavier Gbré, Vitrine and *La Grande Illusion* (detail), 2021

## Collections

Centre Pompidou Paris, France  
Collection Société Générale, France  
Collection des Rencontres d'Arles, France  
Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Usa  
Denver Art Museum, Usa  
Fondation Blachère, Apt, France  
FNAC - Fonds national d'art contemporain, France  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Usa  
Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia  
Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Usa  
Tate Modern, London, UK  
Walther collection, New York (Usa), Neu-Ulm (Germany)  
Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK

- Afriques Capitales, Simon NJAMI, La Villette, Paris, France, 2017
- Réenchantements, Biennale de Dakar, Sénégal, 2016
- *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Brendan WATTENBERG, Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College, 2015
- Présences, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, 2015
- FLOW, Kyoto City University of Arts, Japon, 2014
- New Africa, Kulte Art & Edition, France, 2014

## Articles

## Publications

### Catalogues

- *Africa State of Mind: Contemporary Photography Reimagines a Continent*, Ekow ESHUN, Thames & Hudson, 2020
- *Sogno d'Oltremare*, Luigi FASSI, Giuseppe DI SALVATORE, Museo MAN, Nuoro, Sardaigne, Italie, 2018
- *La Cour*, avec Yo-Yo Gonthier, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, 2018
- *Recent Histories: Contemporary African Photography and Video Art*, Daniela BAUMANN, Joshua CHANG, Onabnajo Oluremi C., Gottingen, Steidl, 2017

- ANDERSON Sean, « Tracks », Aperture Magazine #227, juin 2017
- CESSOU Sabine, « François-Xavier Gbré, photographe des traces de l'histoire », RFI, 2015
- BARBERIE Peter, « A Conversation with François-Xavier Gbré », Aperture Magazine, 2016
- WATTENBERG Brendan, « The Monumental Landscape: François-Xavier Gbré in conversation with Brendan Wattenberg and Emmanuel Iduma », Another Africa, 2015
- NIMIS Erika, « Photographier l'entre-deux », Africultures, 2013



Exhibition view - *La Nage de l'Éléphant*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

In the large metal showcase that inhabits the exhibition space, dozens of archival photographs interact with the works of François-Xavier Gbré. Most of them date from the 1960s and 1970s, following the independence of Côte d'Ivoire, and document the 'Ivorian miracle', a period of major construction projects and economic prosperity linked in particular to the timber, cocoa and coffee trade.

Among the photographs collected by François-Xavier Gbré, two names stand out: Louis Normand and Jean Carval. As photographers, they witnessed the evolution of the Ivorian landscape, accompanied most of the time by their assistants, Marcel and Aké Honoré, and each working with the two major photo studios of the time in Abidjan, Photivoire and Photoclub.

François-Xavier Gbré expresses his relationship with these photographs as follows: «Louis Normand's photographs are exceptional, both in their composition and in their remarkable technical quality. Their discovery was a trigger for me to question my photographic practice. Although our motivations are different, we share the same interest in the evolution of the Ivorian landscape. Treading the ground and facing the subject. The physical experience of the field links us. Indeed, we both have an eye for the environment that we shape on a daily basis and that influences our lifestyles in return. We are also experiencing the Ivorian miracle at two different times.»

A real visual conversation then begins between the work of these photographers and that of François-Xavier Gbré, whose images inhabit his wanderings through the city of Abidjan and its surroundings. «Why continue the search for an image that already exists or that, apart from a few details, resembles the one I imagine finding on my outings? So I slowed down, again, to avoid any repetition in my production and to try to continue the narrative that Louis offered us. I looked for the photographs he had not made, and sometimes I discovered afterwards that he had already made them. And then, with respect, I created images other than by taking a photograph, by using his pre-existing photographs and by mixing different media whose original context disappears in favour of a new image. Through the play of superimpositions, displacements and erasures, a palimpsest effect brings to light the different strata of reading an image, both physical and symbolic...».

Thus, the images of a derailed train or an overturned truck respond to *L'Epave*, taken by François-Xavier Gbré in 2021 in the Ébrié lagoon. Man's liana bridges evoke the roots that are irresistibly intertwined with the weathered columns of an old colonial building in Grand-Bassam (*Hôtel de France #1*, 2021). Also in the showcase are the images used for the photocollage of the monumental mural *La Grande Illusion*. They are rediscovered in their entirety, on a different scale. On the wall, the Abidjan bus, a «1000 kilos», ancestor of the Gbaka, is set against the background of the Finance Tower in Plateau, which was under construction at the time. The Air Afrique plane, flying on 11 September 1966, is in the foreground of the new bar of the Hôtel Ivoire. A little further on, overlooking a dam and a railway line, a majestic-looking Elephant is enthroned. On the left, two crocodiles rest at the edge of a waterfall and a young man removes the bark of a huge iroko trunk with a machete. And many other images, figures to observe, details that are revealed...

Between the window, the fresco and the works of François-Xavier Gbré, the links are visual, symbolic, obvious, sensory, incongruous, poetic or intimate. In the end, they reflect our relationship with the land, the landscape and history.



Exhibition view - *La Nage de l'Eléphant*, vitrine and *La Grande Illusion* (detail), 2021, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire



François-Xavier Gbré

Émergence, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 2013-2020

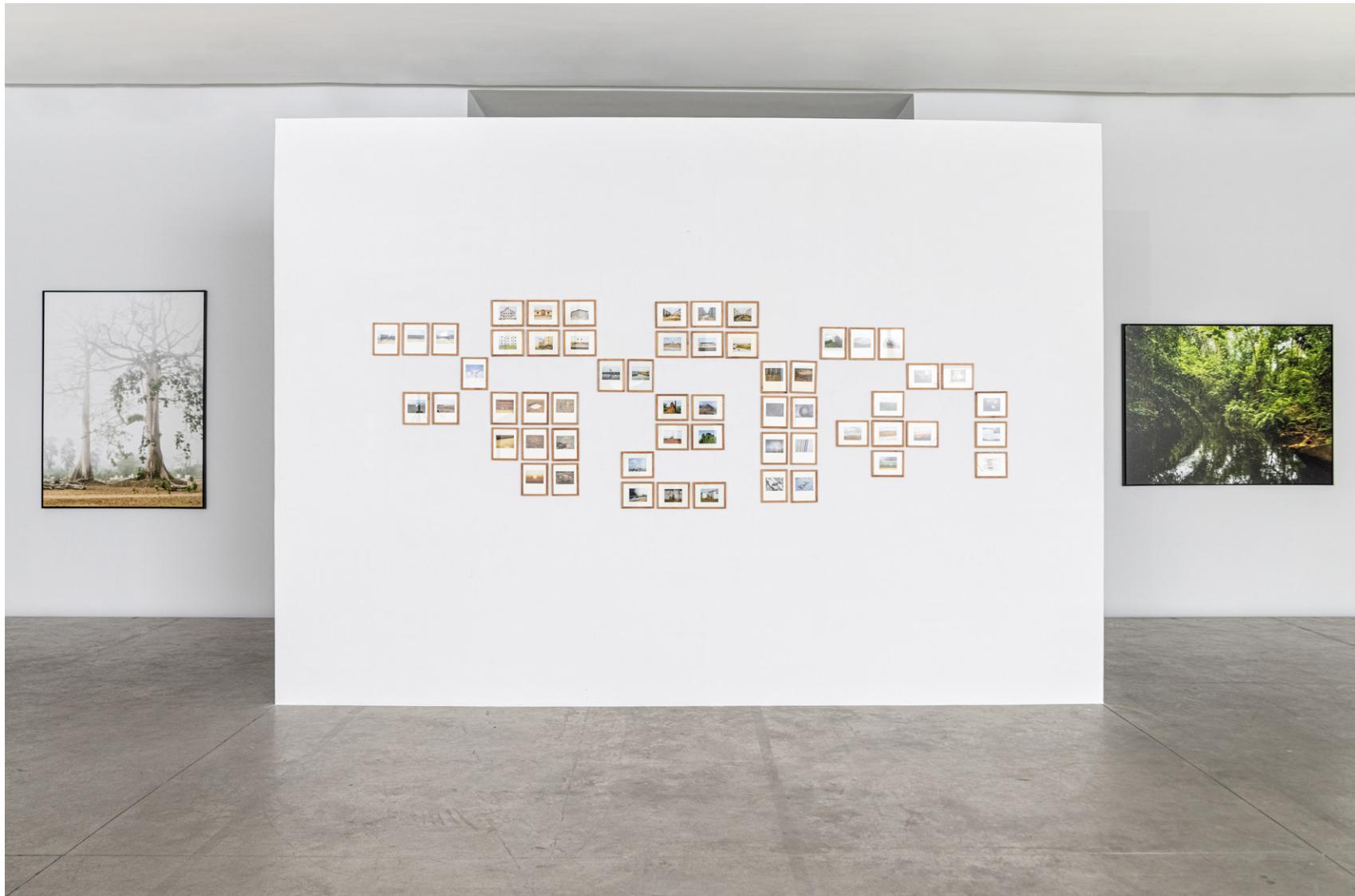
Installation of 57 framed photographs

pigment print on Bonjet paper, 6,75 x 9 cm each

framed natural wood and glass, 13,5 x 16,5 cm each

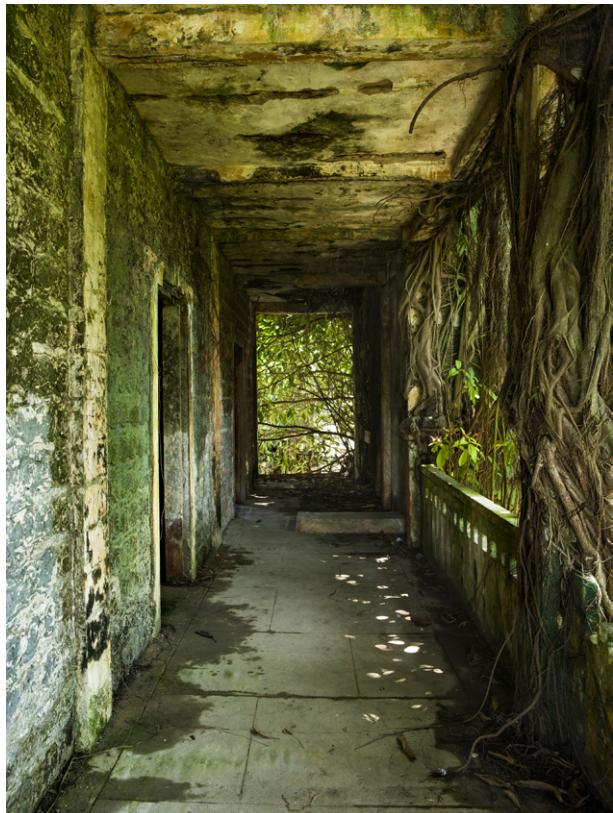
106,5 x 325,5 cm





François-Xavier Gbré  
*Les Fantômes Verts*, 2021  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
90 x 120 cm





#1  
160 x 120 cm



#2  
120 x 90 cm

François-Xavier Gbré  
*L'Eden*, 2021  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
120 x 160 cm





Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond

Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond

160 x 120 cm

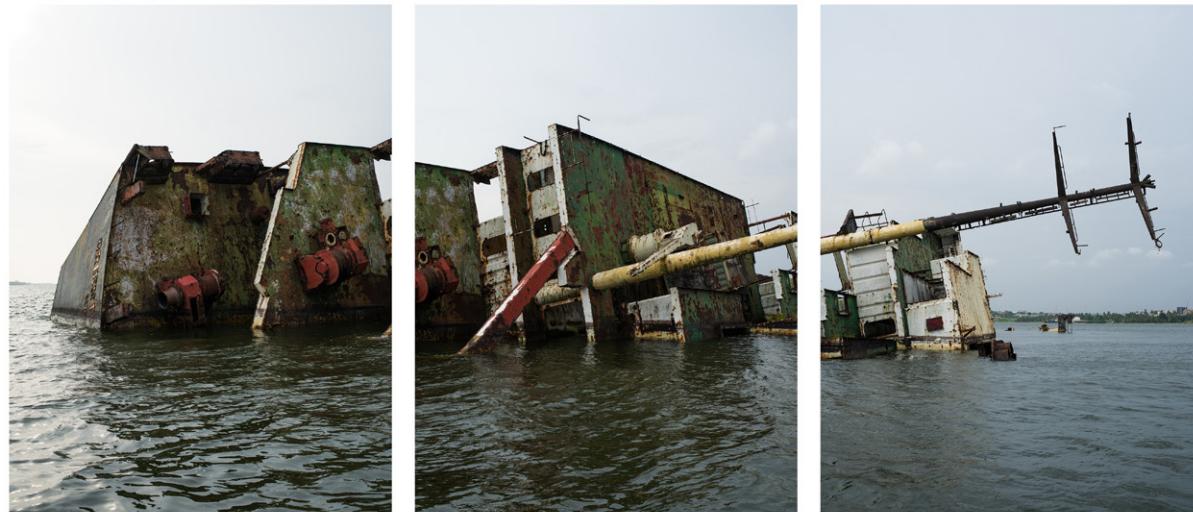


*La Fournaise*



*L'Eclat*





François-Xavier Gbré

*Vierge aux gravats, Adjouffou, Côte d'Ivoire, 2014*  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
60 x 80 cm



François-Xavier Gbré  
*La Cité*, 2015  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
120 x 160 cm





François-Xavier Gbré

2021

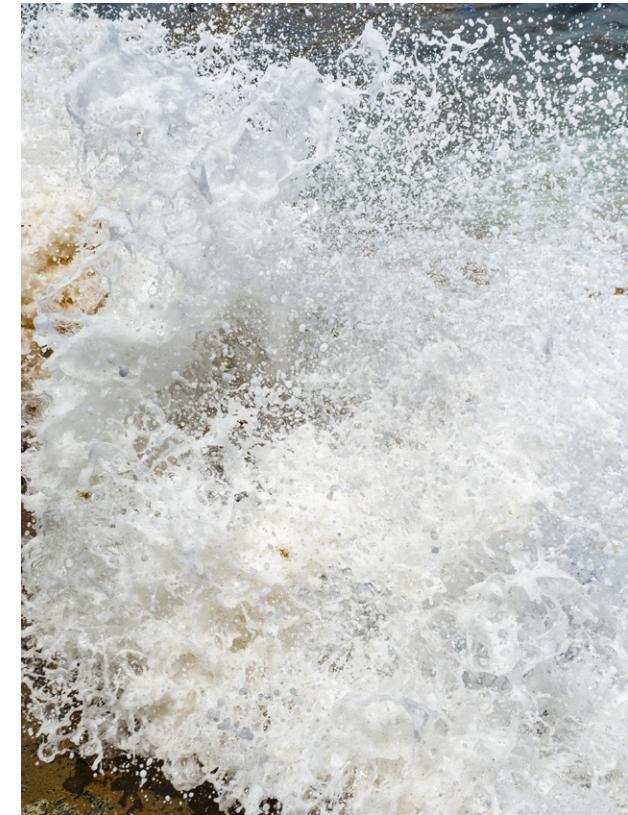
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond

Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond

160 x 120 cm



*Strates*



*La Vague*







*Le Socle*

François-Xavier Gbré  
2021  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
45 x 60 cm



*Campement*

**François-Xavier Gbré**  
*Le Bois Sacré*, 2021  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
45 x 60 cm





*La Cage*



*La Tortue*

**François-Xavier Gbré**  
*La Dernière Danse*, 2021  
Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond  
Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond  
160 x 120 cm



François-Xavier Gbré

*La Grande Illusion*, 2021

Tirage pigmentaire sur papier fine art contrecollé sur dibond

Pigment print on fine art paper mounted on dibond

19,5 x 4 mètres



