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In the Hamptons, This Artist Builds the Boat And Serves the Coffee

Cameroon-born Barthélémy Togo treats serious issues in a vivid style.



Barthélémy Togo with his work "Road to Exile" (2009) at an installation in Portugal. He is creating a version of this installation for the Parrish Art Museum.

PHOTO: BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO/GALERIE LELONG & CO. PARIS & BANDJOUN STATION, CAMEROON

By Susan Delson

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The work of African artist Barthélémy Togo encompasses painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance—and coffee.

Mr. Togo's coffee is grown and roasted by local workers at Bandjoun Station, the cultural center and organic farm that he established in 2007 in his native Cameroon. Adorned with labels based on his own watercolors, packages of Bandjoun Station coffee are sold at art fairs, often in limited editions created for each event.

Mr. Togo plans to personally serve the coffee at an Aug. 4 preview reception for "Platform: Barthélémy Togo: The Beauty of Our Voice," opening Aug. 5 at the Parrish Art Museum in the Hamptons hamlet of Water Mill, N.Y. Like his limited-edition coffee, the show deals with weightier subjects than the materials might at first suggest.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is "Road to Exile," a large-scale installation that made its debut in Paris in 2008. For the Parrish version—each one is slightly different—Mr. Togo built a life-size boat and plans to load it with baggage made from colorful African fabrics and set it on a sea of glass bottles. Reflecting the perilous journeys of migrants and refugees around the globe, the work also suggests a broader interpretation. "We're all living in some kind of an exile," Mr. Togo said in French, with translation by Corinne Erni, senior curator at the Parrish. "We're all immigrants in some way, or migrants."

Mr. Togo could be counted among them. Born in 1967 in Mbalmayo, Cameroon, he studied at art schools in Ivory Coast, France and Germany. Originally working in sculpture, in the 1990s he expanded into photography, video and performance. In 2011 France gave him a major cultural award, and in 2015 the Venice Biennale featured his work. These days, Mr. Togo divides his time between Paris and Bandjoun, Cameroon.

Curated by Ms. Erni, the exhibition is part of the Parrish's annual "Platform" series, which invites individual artists to consider the entire museum, its architecture, landscape and local community as a site for their work. Although Mr. Togo is well known in Europe, "The Beauty of Our Voice" is his first solo museum show in the U.S. It's also the first collaboration in a partnership between the Parrish and the nearby Watermill Center, an interdisciplinary center for the arts that hosted Mr. Togo this past June as an artist in residence.

Presented in one of the museum's largest galleries, "Road to Exile" is surrounded by roughly a hundred works from the Parrish collection—paintings, videos and works on paper that largely celebrate seafaring and global commerce, and ships as symbols of prestige, wealth and power. They offer a provocative contrast to the handmade boat at the gallery's center, with its cargo of hope and desire.

A second gallery houses the latest edition of Mr. Togo's "Mobile Cafeteria," a participatory installation reminiscent of African street cafes. Here, visitors will be able to play African board games, watch recorded African soccer games and learn more about Bandjoun Station as a cultural and agricultural center.

This gallery also hosts works from different series by Mr. Togo, including three from "Stupid African President" (2005–08)—large-scale photographs of the artist that caricature politicians who ruthlessly exploit the continent's resources for their own benefit. That series, Mr. Togo said, is "a way of raising awareness for Africans themselves—that they have to do something about this situation and these autocratic leaders."

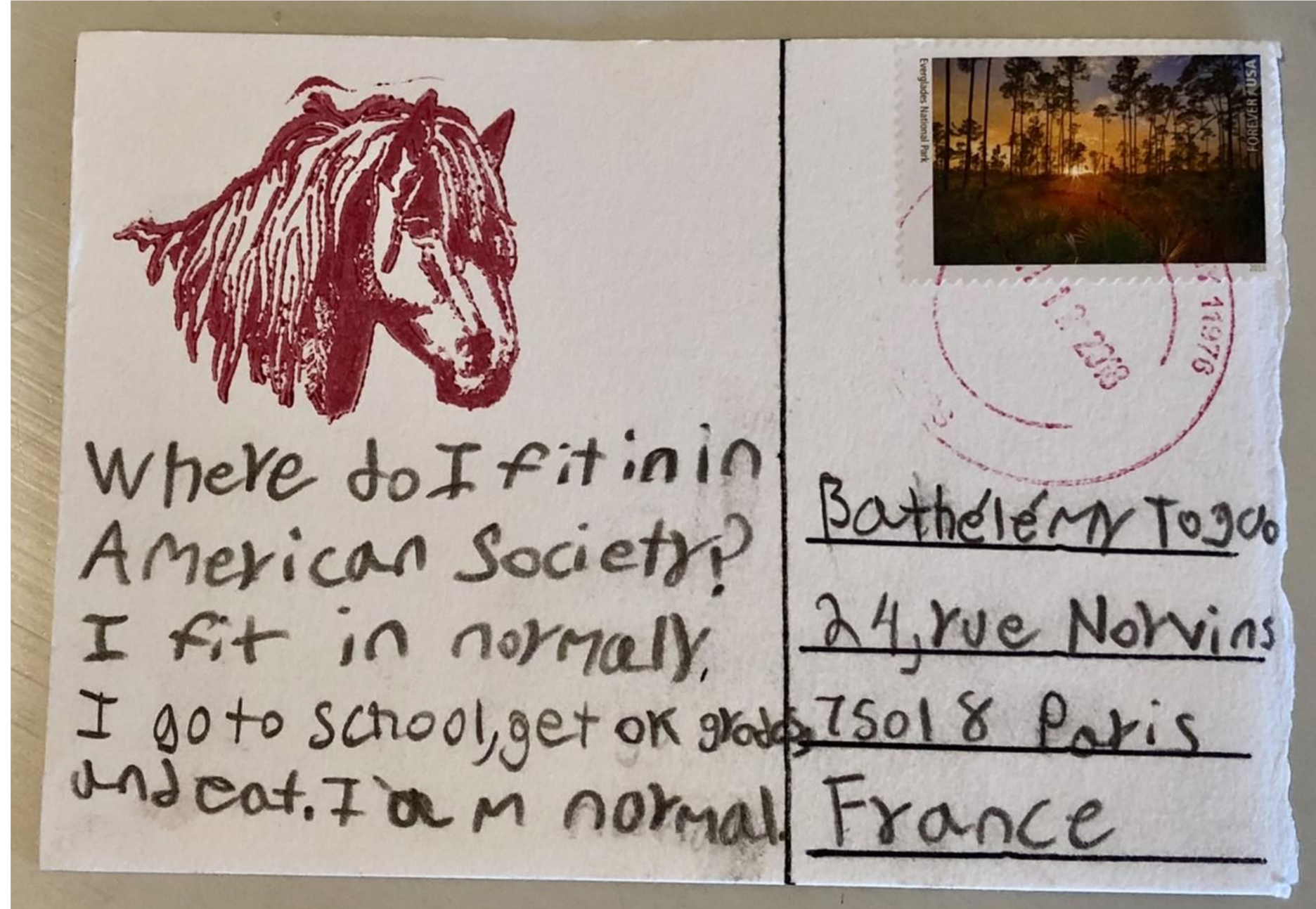


Mr. Togo's "Stupid African President—Forest Destruction" (2006).

PHOTO: BARTHÉLÉMY TOGUO/GALERIE LELONG, PARIS

A series of dreamlike paintings done at the Watermill Center depicts human and animal forms fluidly merging and morphing, dissolving the boundaries between human beings and nature. The relationship with nature is an important topic to Mr. Togo, said Ms. Erni. "As a farmer, he very much sees the degradation" of the environment, she added. The exhibition also marks the debut of "Black Lives Matter" (2018), 10 pencil drawings depicting African-Americans killed by police in recent years. Mr. Togo said that he had been inspired in his work by French author and philosopher Albert Camus, who pointedly questioned the role of the artist in society. "I'm very aware of what is happening in the United States," he said. "I couldn't do my first museum show here without addressing these social problems."

The show also gave Mr. Togo an opportunity to expand one of his most extensive ongoing series. "Head Above Water—Hamptons" (2018) is the latest addition to a world-wide project, begun in 2004, in which people in local communities—often living under challenging circumstances—write to him about their lives and hopes, using postcards that he designs. Mr. Togo said he wanted to make sure that, along with young adults from area schools, the project included members of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, a Native American people of eastern Long Island. "Head Above Water" gives voice to people who are not normally heard, he explained. The 96 framed "Hamptons" postcards are on view in the central gallery running the length of the museum, alongside previous editions from communities in Lagos, Nigeria (2005) and Mexico (2008).



Mr. Togo's "Head Above Water—Hamptons" (2018, detail). There are 96 postcards in all.

PHOTO: PARRISH ART MUSEUM

As for the coffee, Mr. Togo sees serving Bandjoun station coffee at the museum reception as a way to underscore the self-sufficiency that can follow when African producers set the price for coffee as well as art. It's literally a wake-up call.

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