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For Immediate Release:

1-54 CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART FAIR

**Eric Firestone Gallery | Booth #8
439 West 127th Street | New York, New York
May 18–21, 2023**

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce a solo installation by ceramic artist Sana Musasama at the 2023 New York edition of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair. The presentation will be an immersive installation designed by the artist herself. It will incorporate ceramic sculptures across several major series and bodies of work. These will be shown alongside furniture and design from her home and studio, and collected from her international travels.

Musasama is an African American activist feminist artist and global citizen, whose time spent living with women and girls in village societies in Cambodia, South America, Asia, and West Africa has completely shaped her artwork and her humanitarian work. The motto which defines her as an artist is “Inspire, Commit, Act.”



Sana Musasama | *Echoes and Excavations Series #1* | 1984–85
Ceramic
21h x 16 1/2w x 14d in

Musasama grew up in St. Albans, Queens, and continues to live and work in her childhood home. She received her BA from City College, City University of New York in 1974, and her MFA from Alfred University in 1987. Musasama’s first formative trip was to Sierra Leone in the 1970s, where she lived amongst the Mende people. Musasama notes that traveling around the world centered and grounded her, making her understand the differences between what she grew up with, and how others around the world grew up and lived.

During her travels, which often involved living in village societies, she would first get to know people and the culture by going to markets, which were dominated by women. Musasama came to understand how women look out for other women. They shared information with her, teaching her how to stay safe and healthy. They frequently asked, “Where is your mother, to let you roam around the world?” Young girls—the daughters of these women—often became her guides, as she learned the language, how to shop, prepare food, and use tools.

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Sana Musasama in her studio with her “Unspeakable Series,” 2023

She also came to appreciate how clay is everywhere, and that “it comes in as many different colors as we do.” The landscape and the decorative arts were inspirations for her work. The patterns of rice paddies in Vietnam found their way onto the surfaces of her ceramics, as did the sgraffito lines of the temples of Burma. She understood that baskets—which were often lined with clay or mud—were the origins of pottery, and incorporated the patterns of their weaving. Cinnamon plants sold on the side of the road informed leaf patterns. The sight of rows of cabbages inspired her to experiment with walls of clay conveying compression. Musasama recognized that her travels were joyous but also could be uncomfortable, scary, and dangerous, and these feelings were embedded into the forms. Abstract signs and symbols were everywhere: in adornment practices, markings of identity, and clothing that signified specific societies.

Musasama’s ceramics are inextricably linked to her volunteer and activist work. She began working with the New York City organization CASES which provides community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. Musasama made tables with the young people.

Musasama’s “Maple Tree Series” was inspired by the Maple Tree abolitionist movement in the late 18th century in New York and Holland. Dutch colonists, Native Americans, and free indentured African servants joined together in protest against slave labor on sugar cane plantations in the West Indies. Maple syrup was made readily available in the early 1800s when a tin can was developed in which maple syrup could be sealed, stored, and shipped. Abolitionists hoped its popularity would bring an end to the sugar cane industry and thus end slavery on West Indian plantations. They took as their symbol the maple tree Musasama’s tree sculptures, abstracted with elements of the human body, explore connections between trees, sexuality, and human agency.

The “Unspeakable Series” explores female excision. These ceramic wall works are intensely expressive labial forms often wrapped and bound with fiber, and punctured with shapes like nails. Living with young girls, Musasama soon came to recognize the shifts that would occur when adolescents were taken through the ritual practice. As she reflected, “Suddenly, one morning, there were no young girls in the village. They returned thirteen weeks later, changed. Our ritual of sisterhood was no more. They no longer had the sparkle of

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wonderment in their eyes; they weren't carefree young girls any longer. They didn't want to have anything to do with me. I could not understand. I know now that they had been excised."

Although female excision is described as originating in the African continent, Musasama learned that alterations to the vaginal parts of the body are practiced by nomadic tribes all over the world, and even have a long history of use in the United States as a "treatment" for the mentally ill. It was important to Musasama to listen to voices from the societies in which it is practiced, in addition to Westerners. She understood the ritual as involving power and respect, but also one which can be devastatingly painful and potentially fatal. Musasama states "I participate in a process of feminist art which is based on uncovering, speaking, expressing and making public the experiences of women and little girls."

Musasama also came to understand the link between children in the foster care system and the sex industry and human trafficking. Through an article in *Glamour Magazine*, she learned about the Somaly Mam Foundation, which rescued teenage girls and young women who were victims of sex trafficking. She traveled to Cambodia to volunteer for a program that used artmaking and craftwork as a healing modality from this trauma. After her first experience, she knew that she would spend the rest of her life working with these Cambodian girls on beading and textiles. She developed the entrepreneurial "Apron Project" to give girls who lacked education an extra way to make income through their creations. It also honored her mother, who was a domestic worker in Queens and who died on January 2 (the time of year Musasama continues to travel to Cambodia.) On her first trip to Cambodia, Musasama was dismayed to realize she had never been taught about the Khmer Rouge genocide. She began to make ceramic work reflecting the images and remains she saw.

Her "Topsy Turvy Dolls" reflect the antebellum double-sided dolls which were originally created for enslaved children in the South. One side represented a white girl, as Black girl dolls were not permitted in a slave owner's home. In fact, a large skirt would conceal a Black girl doll, visible if the doll was flipped upside-down. Musasama's Topsy Turvy Dolls are installed on motors so they constantly rotate in space. They depict, as Musasama states, "historical women whose shoulders I stand on." They represent subjects including Elizabeth Catlett, Edmonia Lewis, Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks, Frida Kahlo, Harriet Tubman, Anne Frank, Sally Hemings, Serena and Venus Williams.



Sana Musasama | *Unspeakable Series #12* | 1989–2002
Ceramic
8 1/2h x 3w x 1 1/2d in

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Her Braille series—small ceramic tablets with abstracted raised mounds—is dedicated to her own mother, a domestic worker who lost her sight when the artist was a teenager. The “I See Me” dolls are small flat ceramic dolls with movable legs and hair wrapped in glass beads. They reflect her experience as a young girl growing up in St. Albans, Queens, wanting to look more like white girls with smooth hair. The artist’s mother made her a doll that looked like her, with kinky hair.

Musasama’s self-stated goal is to create art “for us,” to tell cultural and historical stories which are often suppressed. Her work, like the “Two Doll” series, often moves past its racist, historical narrative. They speak of cultural pride and self love.

Musasama is the recipient of an Anonymous Was a Woman Grant, among many awards. She has been the subject of solo exhibitions at university galleries including those of Hunter College, New York; Bluffton University, Bluffton, OH; Kean University, Union, NJ; Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; and Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. Musasama’s work is held in the collections of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York;



Sana Musasama | *House Series #10* | 1983–84
Ceramic

41 1/2h x 9w x 2d in

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For further information and images, contact: press@ericfirestonegallery.com