

Victoria-Idongesit Udondian, *Nsinam me ken di Owo*

January 23–March 14, 2026



Installation image, courtesy of Avey Alexandres

Finding the thread: Context Toward Humanizing Migration

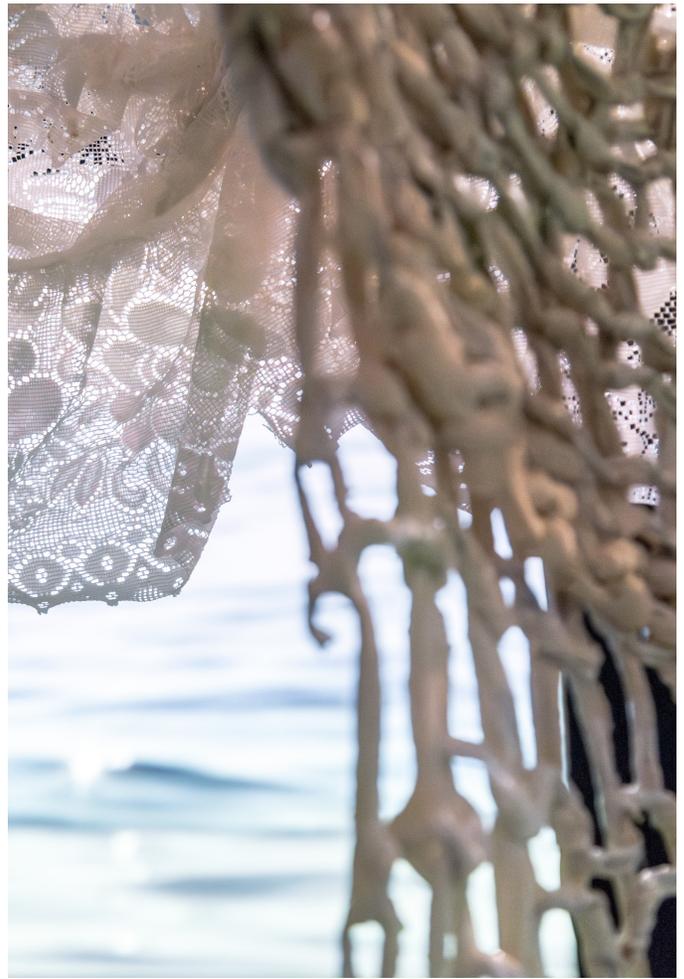
Curatorial Essay by Kyle Butler

Victoria-Idongesit Udondian's work has long been concerned with the ways in which culture, migration, colonial history, and capital are evident in fabrics and fashion. She finds histories and narratives in how textiles move around through trade, manufacturing, and thrift. For *Nsinam me ken di Owo*, Udondian connects narratives told by refugees and immigrants with larger global machinations of labor, production, and power.

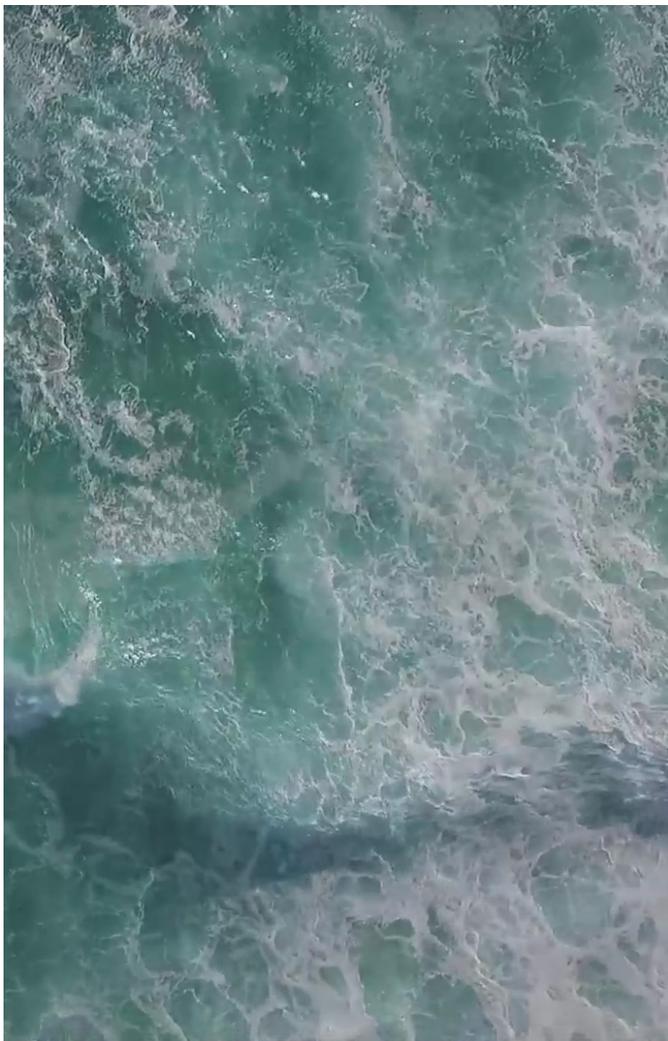
The narratives Udondian gathered came partly from the immigrant and refugee artists of Stitch

Buffalo. Stitch is a uniquely valuable resource for Udondian's work. The textile arts center seeks to empower its refugee and immigrant artists by facilitating the production and sale of handcrafted works, largely from donated secondhand materials. Udondian sees Stitch as an important resource for cultivating a sorely needed sense of place for its artists, many of whom are having to recalibrate their lives after displacement from their homes due to conflict, lack of resources, violence, or oppression.

During a residency at the center, Udondian collected stories from the artists, presented among the three video projections in the exhibition. They are wide-ranging, recounting the lives they left behind and the struggle to adapt. Their identities are hidden, cropped away, or blurred out of concern for privacy—some feared for the safety of those back home if they spoke openly. The exhibition draws its title from a poetic plea for anonymity by one interviewee: “how can I be nobody *and* tell my story,” translated into Efik (a Nigerian language). In another interview, a Pakistani migrant describes the disorientation that comes from losing the standing they had at home, how they lost the community that they were a respected member of. This concern seems to recast “*how can I be nobody*” as a reflection on trying to become *somebody* again.



Akaisang ye Beyong cages 1277, 1245 (detail) and still from *How Can I Be Nobody* installation, courtesy of Aveye Alexandres



Still from *Akaisang ye Beyong cages 1277, 1245* installation

The interviews in the videos are briskly woven together with footage that expands the context around these stories of migration. Newscasters explain labor shortages in England stemming from Brexit, crops rotting unpicked in fields, and reliance on and abuses of migrant labor. Scenes of water, ports, and infrastructure allude to travel and trade. Migrants are shown enroute, some incapacitated at the roadside. Clips from civil rights and labor protests add historical context. One interviewee expresses frustration at the perception that migrants are taking resources away from Americans. Another contemplates whether to wear a traditional veil, concerned that it may provoke Islamophobic abuse. On top of the difficulty of rebuilding a life, they must also survive persistent anti-immigrant sentiments that seem only to escalate as the world takes an ugly turn towards nativism, nationalism, and exclusion.



Akaisang ye Beyong cages 1277, 1245 (detail), courtesy of Avey Alexandres

At the center of the gallery, an array of hijabs—cast from the body of Udondian and project collaborators—hover in the air like a ghostly crowd. A fabric hardener allows them to hold their form, as if dressed over bodies that are no longer there. The absent figures allude to lives lost in migration and the communities left behind. The second-hand clothing they are constructed from implies an additional narrative that parallels stories of change and rebuilding. A common material of Udondian's, the clothing also references the global market that shuttles used clothing to countries like her native Nigeria.

Below the floating garments are hands cast from the refugee and immigrant project collaborators. They are sweetly personal for how they represent those from whom they were cast, but their disembodiment suggests violent separation and alienated labor. Video of water is projected across the sculptural array of hands and headwear, submerging them in echoes of the shores and harbors featured in the wall projections.

Nsinam me ken di Owo continues Udondian's efforts to contextualize migration with the conflicts that necessitate it and with the stories that define it. Through humanizing narratives, contextual reports, and symbolic sculptural forms, Udondian challenges viewers to recognize the precarity of marginalized communities. To grapple with the lived realities of migrant and immigrant labor in a global economy intertwined with social upheaval, conflict, and prejudice.

The interviews provide humanizing narratives important to countering anti-immigrant sentiment. The clips otherwise provide an impressionistic context of global conflict, prejudice, and an economy intertwined with social upheaval. And the centerpiece sculpture of hands and headwear symbolizes these narratives through the vehicles of labor, fashion, and culture.



Akaisang ye Beyong cages 1277, 1245, 2020-26, cast-off clothing, water-based fabric hardener, plaster (detail), courtesy of Avey Alexandres

Artist Biography

Victoria-Idongesit Udondian's work is driven by her interest in textiles and the potential for clothing to shape identity, informed by the histories and tacit meanings embedded in everyday materials. She engages with repurposed materials to create large-scale sculptural elements and interdisciplinary projects that examine the intersection of migration, labor, and global trade systems. In 2020, Udondian was awarded a Guggenheim. She has participated in numerous residencies, including Fountainhead (Miami, FL), Instituto Sacatar (Brazil), MASS MoCA (North Adams,

MA), Fine Arts Work Center (Provincetown, MA), Villa Strauli (Switzerland), and Fondazione di Venezia (Italy). Her work has been exhibited at The Armory (New York, NY), the British Textile Biennial (UK), Bronx Museum (New York, NY), the Children's Museum of Manhattan (New York, NY), the National Museum (Lagos), the Whitworth Gallery (Manchester), the South London Gallery (UK), and Museo Textil de Oaxaca (Mexico). Udondian received an MFA in Sculpture and New Genres from Columbia University, NY, and a BA in painting from the University of Uyo, Nigeria. She is a Visiting Associate Professor at University at Buffalo, NY.

Major support provided by: The Cameron and Jane Baird Foundation, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, DownRoot Fund, part of the Crossroads Community Fund, Erie County Cultural Funds, M&T Bank, Ovation Stand for the Arts, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and through the New York State Council for the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature. Additional exhibition support provided by Marketing Tech and individual donors.

