

ARSENAL WIEN

FOTO

MICHELLE PIERGOELAM: Across the Water

Opening: January 30, 2026

January 31–May 10, 2026



Michelle Piergoelam, Clap Clap Clap (2022)

© Michelle Piergoelam

How do you remember a story that was never written down? How do you talk about a past that is not kept in archives but lives on in songs, symbols, and myths? These are precisely the questions that Dutch artist Michelle Piergoelam (b. 1997 in Rotterdam) explores in *Across the Water*, her first international solo exhibition at FOTO ARSENAL WIEN. Working with photographic works, textiles, and installation elements, she presents a complex web of family tradition, colonial history, and cultural heritage, inviting visitors to accompany her on a poetic search for traces of the past and the present. Curator Marit Lena Herrmann (FOTO ARSENAL WIEN) explains, "*Across the Water* brings together works by Piergoelam that address the main forms of human communication and create a counternarrative of hope and resistance within the context of slavery and colonialism."

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This long-term project focuses on the largely invisible history of the Surinamese diaspora in the Netherlands that her family belongs to: "For a long time, despite my roots, I knew very little about the culture of my ancestors." This void motivated her need to tell stories from a subjective, personal perspective beyond official historiography.

Piergoelam interweaves myths, dreams, and memories to create new visual narratives. She examines songs that were sung, knowledge about plants that was passed on from generation to generation, and the bonds within African Surinamese culture. Key images include the spider figure *Anansi*, symbolizing resistance and trickery, and *Angisa*, an intricately folded headscarf whose forms transport secret messages. Nature also plays a key role; it is the place of resistance in *Across the Water*, a silent witness of colonial history and a resonance chamber for collective memory.

Piergoelam's artistic language is just as complex as her topics. In densely atmospheric photographs that oscillate between reality and fiction, documentary approaches meet narrative imagery. Darkness and the logic of dreams are threads that run through her oeuvre—not only as an aesthetic decision but also as a reference to the unspoken and suppressed. "I always search for the power of imagination that creates stories," says Piergoelam. "Because many cultural myths contain hidden truth."

The exhibition at FOTO ARSENAL WIEN allows visitors to experience this complex narrative style in a spatial way: Photographs and textile objects are interwoven to create an installation that appeals to the senses in which visitors move step by step through fragmentary spaces of memory. Light and shadow, materiality, and visual language condense into an atmosphere that is equally poetic and political, creating an immersive exhibition experience that has to be seen as well as experienced—challenging viewers to examine their own perspectives on history and identity.

The exhibition, which is part of a cooperation between FOTO ARSENAL WIEN and the Klima Biennale Wien, was curated by Marit Lena Herrmann (FOTO ARSENAL WIEN). A book titled *Fourteen Leaves and a Cup of Water* will be published to accompany the exhibition.

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Michelle Piergoelam, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, is one of the succinct voices of a new generation of photographers who view history not as a narrative that has been concluded but as a dynamic process—borne by the culture of remembrance, collective memory, and the act of retelling. She has received numerous awards for her work, including the second prize for storytelling from De Zilveren Camera. She has been part of the FUTURES network since 2023.

Funded by Stadt Wien Kultur and the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation

Part of the Klima Biennale Wien 2026

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About FOTO ARSENAL WIEN

FOTO ARSENAL WIEN is Austria's new center for photographic images and lens-based media. Inaugurated by the city of Vienna in March 2025, the institution presents and illuminates contemporary photography in all its forms and uses. FOTO ARSENAL WIEN also organizes the platform FOTO WIEN, Austria's largest, biennial photography festival, and, in a collaboration with the Kunsthalle Wien, the annual Festival Vienna Digital Cultures.

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PRESS BRIEFING

January 30, 2026, 10:30 a.m., FOTO ARSENAL WIEN

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Other information and image material are available at

www.fotoarsenalwien.at.