



ON THE SURFACE

2021 / Iceland - Mali

Fan Sissoko

Special mention of the jury - Clermont-Ferrand ISFF 2022

Honorable mention - Elba Film Festival 2022

Elie Prize - Festival Court Dérrière 2022

Animation Award - SMAHF 2022



THE FILM

Credits

Director /animation: **Fan Sissoko**

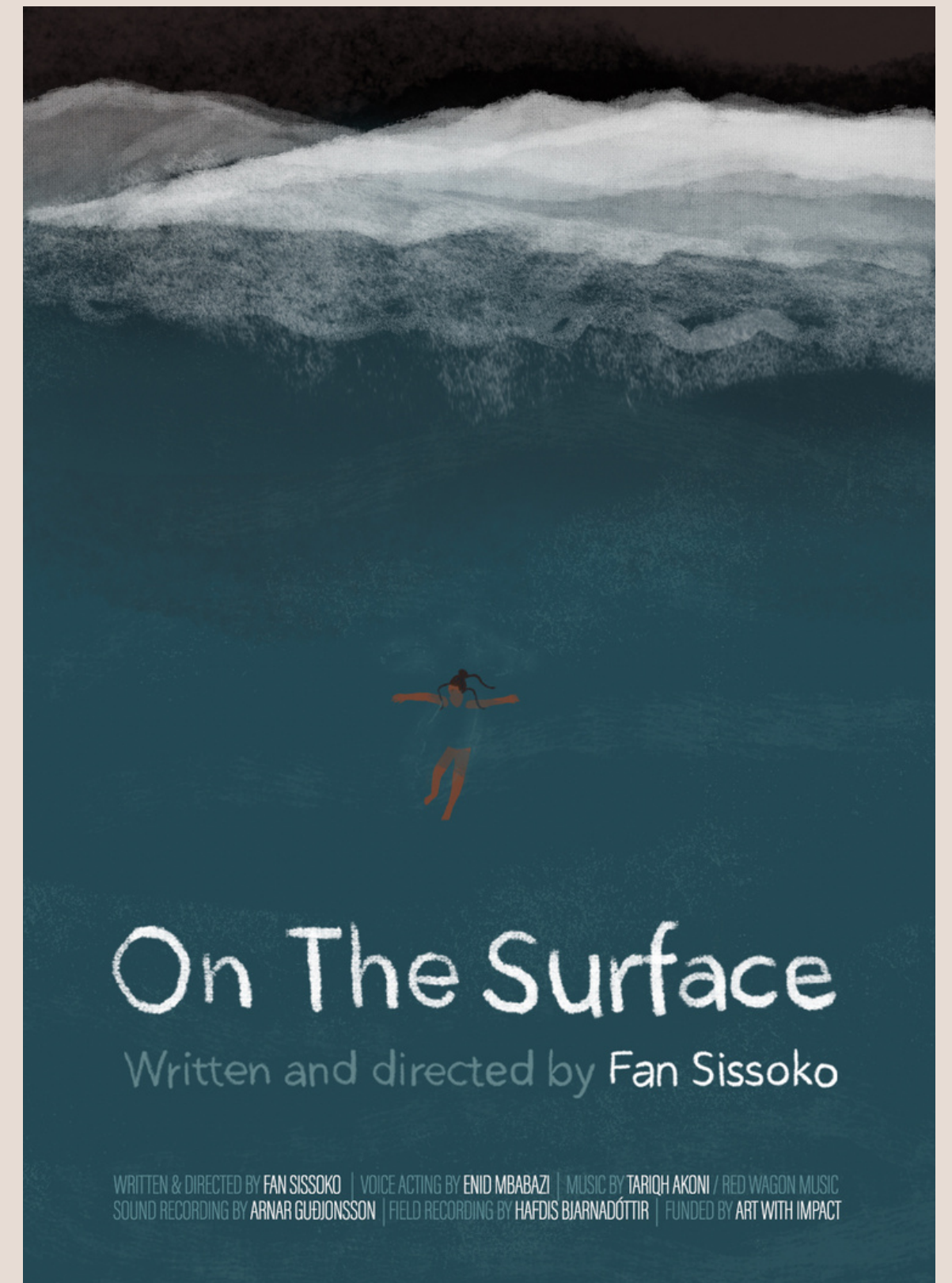
Producer: **Cary MqQueen**

Sound: **Tariqh Akoni et Hafdís Bjarnadóttir**

Music: **Tariqh Akoni**

Voice: **Enid Mbabazi**

Ada goes swimming in the Icelandic sea and reflects on raising a child in a country that feels nothing like home. As she enters the freezing water, she relives her traumatic pregnancy. Soon her swimming eases. Facing her fears is helping her heal.



THE DIRECTOR

Fan Sissoko is a Franco-Malian filmmaker based in Reykjavík (Iceland), with a background in design for social change. Her work explores themes of migration, motherhood, otherhood and neurodiversity. Notable commissions include work for the Migration Museum, the Museum of London, the Science Gallery Dublin and the National Trust.

On The Surface is her first animated short. It was awarded an Art With Impact bursary and was screened in a number of festivals, including Encounters (United Kingdom), Ottawa International Animation Festival (Canada), Margate Film Festival (United Kingdom) and the REX Animation Film Festival (Sweden). It won the Heartwired Award at the Our Heritage, Our Planet Film Festival (United States) and a Special Mention at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival 2022 (France).



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ORIGINS OF THE FILM

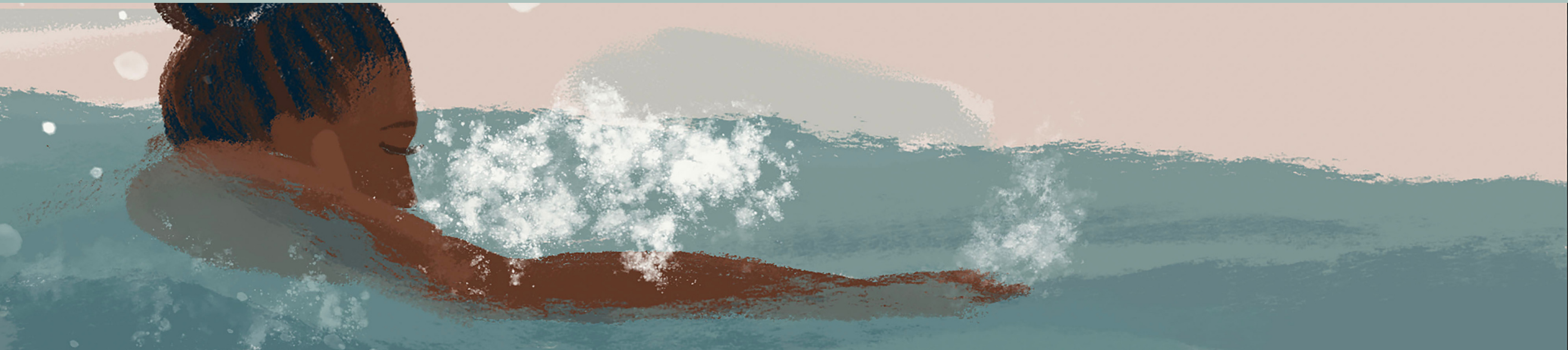
AFROPEAN I

On the Surface was made using digital 2D animation. The images were created on a computer using Photoshop, then each element was animated frame by frame. The treatment is very pictorial, closely resembling a watercolour with pastel colours and subtle transparency effects. These aesthetic choices imbue the film with a particular softness, accentuated by the sound of the waves and the gentle tune that accompanies the character's story. The character is a young Black woman swimming alone in the Icelandic sea. She's initially facing the sea, looking out towards the sun setting on the horizon.

Mountains line the shore and foam caresses the black sand on the beach. The character seems to be challenging this majestic yet hostile landscape. We hear her inner voice that makes up the film's narration. She's talking to her child: "Today you asked me where you are from and I couldn't answer. You are from me and I am not from here". Thus, she introduces one of the main issues of the film: the question of origins and belonging.

On

AFROPEAN II



She describes a feeling of uprooting that she's experiencing, she feels like she's never quite felt at home anywhere. There is an autobiographical dimension to those musings given Fan Sissoko herself was born in France to a Malian father and French mother. The character is also speaking to her, inviting us to delve alongside her into this moment of introspection, as she dives into the icy waters.

AFROPEAN III

In her book *Afropea* (ed. Grasset, 2020), Cameroonian author Léonora Miano calls those people that have Subsaharan origins but that are born in Europe Afropeans. They live as minorities in the countries they have grown up in, which largely determines their self-perception and can lead to identity crises, like our protagonist who struggles to find her place within the Icelandic landscape. As she becomes a mother, she questions her own heritage and what she can transmit to her child: "But I don't know the language of my own mother, how can I hope that you speak mine?" Her worries are embodied by the tangled silhouette reflected in the water. In fact, in her book, Léonora Miano openly invites Afropeans to speak up, to invent a new representation of themselves, like the character in *On the Surface*.



MOTHERHOOD I

When the character dives into the icy water, memories from her traumatic pregnancy resurface in her consciousness. "The doctors, one of them, said that my pain couldn't be explained. She nearly sent me home. She didn't take me seriously. She must think that people like us are strong." We understand that the doctor misdiagnosed her. She refers to a widely held racist misconception that Black people are less fragile, are stronger and not as sensitive to pain. These stereotypes have no medical grounding and are purely born out of a racist worldview.

This particular discrimination affected the care that the woman was given, which nearly cost her and her child's lives. During this story, the character sinks to the bottom of the sea, as if physically translating her anxiety. We see her from below, from a low angle shot through the seabed. The sea turns choppy, the horizon flips around, the waves become menacing. We hear accelerating heartbeats, probably those of her child when he was still in the womb. She manages to avoid drowning by swimming vigorously. This vital force (elan vital) translates her determination.



MOTHERHOOD II

She recovers her balance and floats back to the surface. This time, we look at her from above. Her body is divided up into pieces that float in different directions. The young woman feels pulled apart. She tells us: "I was a bit outside of myself, I think." This image subtly translates the post-partum depression she suffered from. When experiencing PPD, mothers struggle to bond with their babies, they doubt their ability to look after them and feel tremendous anxiety. This is what the character describes: "When I took you in my arms, I felt that you weren't mine".



MOTHERHOOD III

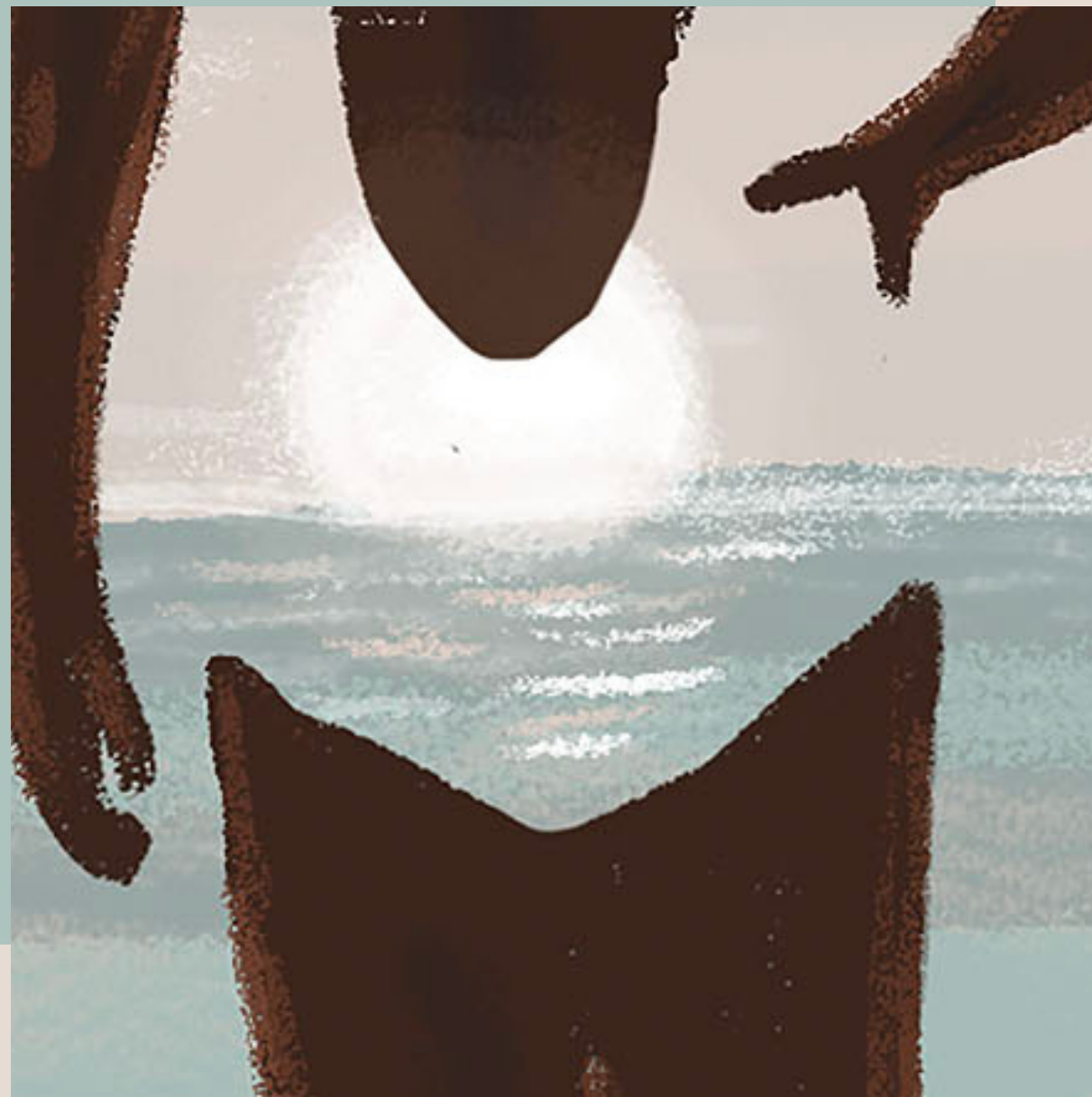
Fan Sissoko tackles a taboo subject, which goes against the prevailing idea of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment for a woman.

. This is also the focus of Alice Diop's *Saint Omer*, which recounts the trial of a woman accused of drowning her 15-month old daughter in the ocean.

Like in *On the Surface*, the film relies on the story told by the young woman and us listening to her testimony. Alice Diop's mise en scene pushes us to look at this woman through the prisms of sex, race and motherhood with a complexity that makes us question our own appraisal of her. The dark side of motherhood is put under the spotlight, making us all question its idealisation.



HEALING



Unlike Saint Omer, however, *On the Surface* is not dramatic. It is filled with tenderness and hope. The young woman finds her path towards healing and balance. The message she sends her child is soft and kind. After the ordeal of the storm, she turns towards the shore. She changes her view of this landscape, which has become familiar.

This communion with the scenery is felt through the transparency of her swimsuit, which lets us see the scenery through her, as if it was part of her body. The element of water is often associated with women and all that is feminine. The sea often incarnates the original placenta of the Earth, a metaphor of the uterus. The character of *On the Surface* fuses with this landscape, which embodies her emotions. Nature heals her.

HEALING

This film has an autobiographical dimension. The director manages to transform a painful memory into a calming cathartic experience. She finally finds the answer that she will give her son who questions their origins.

"We are together here, and I am no longer afraid of these mountains, of this cold. You are from here and you are home"



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[HTTPS://CLERMONT-FILMFEST.ORG/CAFE-COURT-FAN-SISSOKO/](https://clermont-filmfest.org/cafe-court-fan-sissoko/)
(ENGLISH)



[HTTPS://CLERMONT-FILMFEST.ORG/ON-THE-SURFACE/](https://clermont-filmfest.org/on-the-surface/)
(WRITTEN INTERVIEW IN FRENCH)

