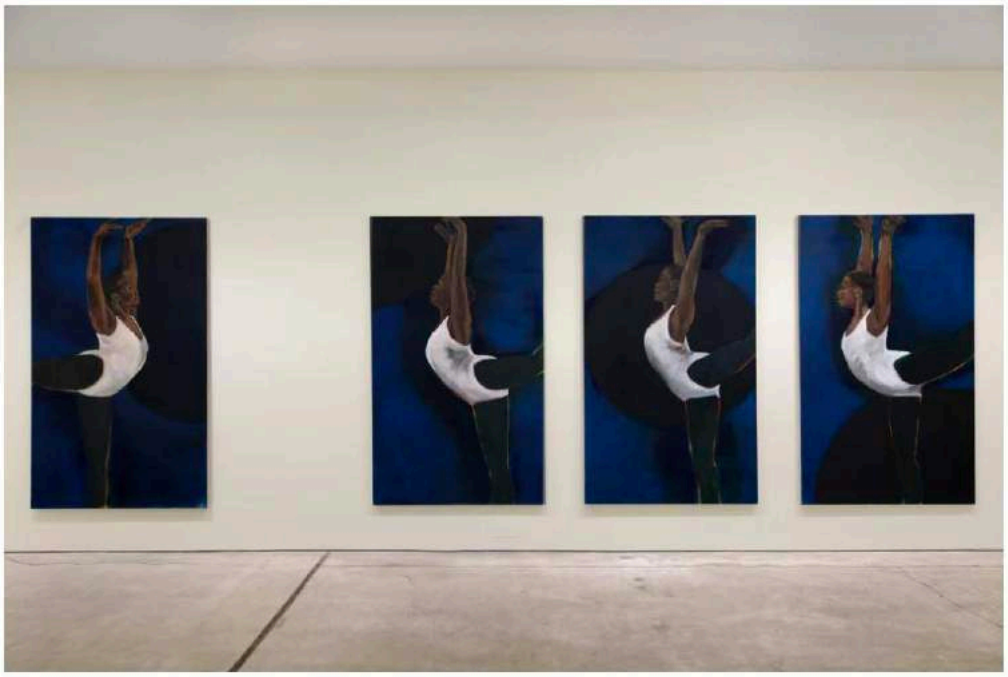
The New York Times

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Harold Haliday Costain photographs the sugar and salt industries; Karl Haendel creates artistic punch lines; and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye ignites the unexpected.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Through Feb. 16 at Jack Shainman, 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-1701, jackshainman.com.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's "Stone Arabesque," from 2018, in the exhibition "In Lieu of a Louder Love." via Jack Shainman Gallery

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has contributed to the renaissance in painting the black figure and has benefited from it. Her show, "In Lieu of a Louder Love" at both of Jack Shainman's galleries in Chelsea, follows Charles White's landmark retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and a new MoMA publication, "Among Others: Blackness at MoMA," which includes Ms. Yiadom-Boakye's work. The game-changing exhibition "Posing Modernity: The Black Model From Manet and Matisse to Today" at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University is still on view for a few weeks.

Despite this momentum, however, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye, who won top honors at the Carnegie International exhibition last fall, still has room to grow as a painter. Her coffee-brown portraits of fictional people register best as groups, like an arrangement of family portraits. They feature people reading, lounging and resting in traditional poses. Her dark palette and the stillness of the figures gives her work a sense of timelessness that has fast-tracked them into contemporary art history: The work already looks timeworn.

The flip side of this, however, is a sense of familiarity and inertness; Her subjects can feel trapped in the canvas rather than liberated by it. The best work here features laughing subjects and a hint of movement. Multiple panels with a female dancer in a white leotard, or a singular canvas with male dancers, suggest something beyond the here and now, a perspective on people, history and looking that you expect painting to elicit.

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ART

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE'S LOVELY, 'LOUDER' NEW PAINTINGS

By Piotr Orlov January 16, 2019

It's a testament to the aesthetic beauty and emotional clarity of British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work that gallery exhibitions of her new canvases have been treated as art-world "events" since just about the very beginning of her career. Then again, the 31-year-old, London-born artist's first critical success came soon after she left art school, and was shortlisted for the Turner Prize as a 26-year-old.

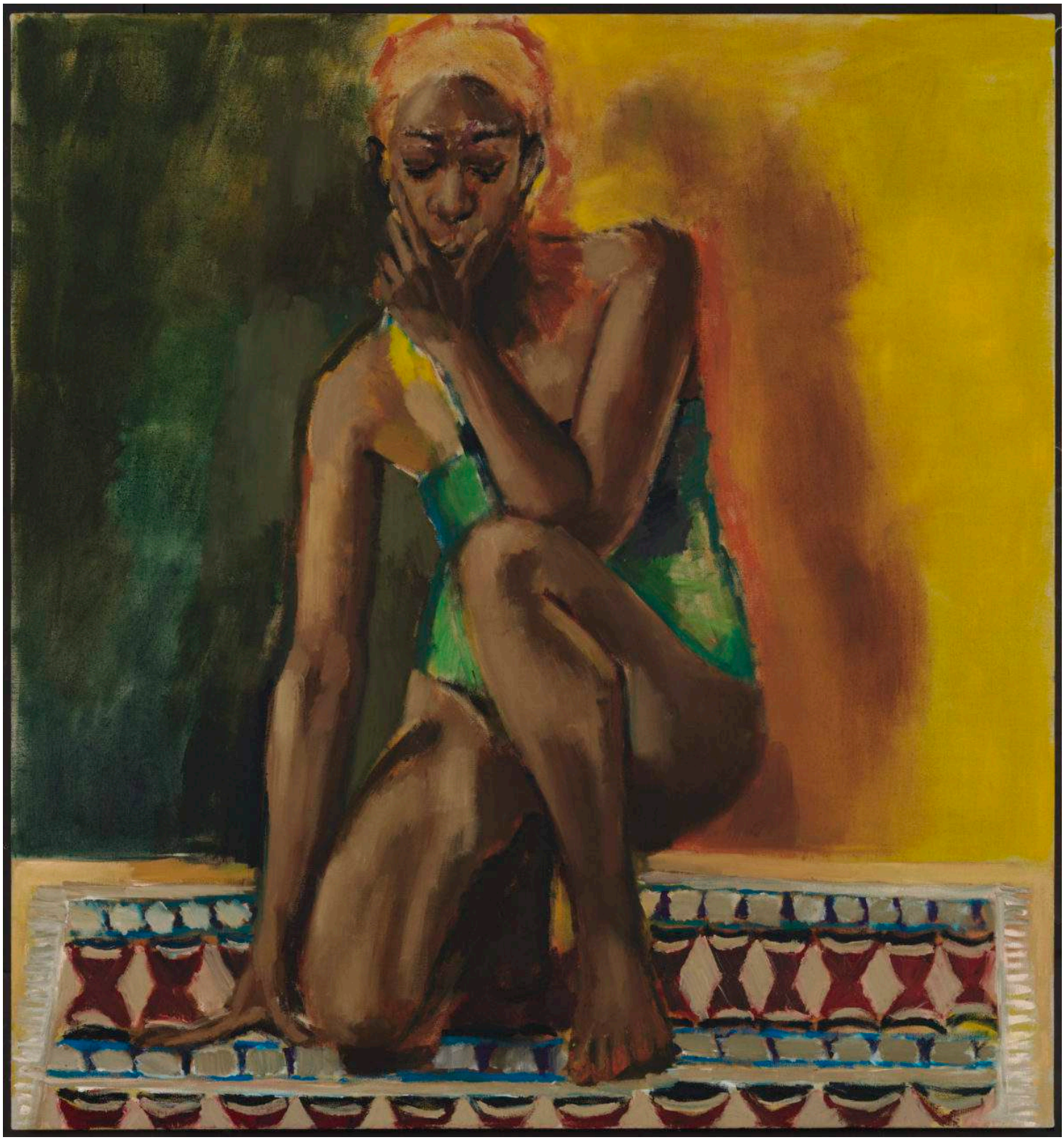
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Level with the Lawn” (2018), oil on canvas, 55 1/4 x 51 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches

Some of the acclaim of Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings — portraits of fictional individuals whose characteristics make them seem anything but made-up — is, in many ways, easy to understand. Or at least, it’s easy to understand what makes them relatable and uncommon. A lot of it is the warm affection that Yiadom-Boakye brings to the details of her subjects’ lives (temporal facial expressions, or the relaxed gesturing of their bodies), making them recognizable and familiar as our contemporaries.

Yet these scenes also take place amidst such quiet settings (the subjects often floating inside monochromatic dark hues), that her pieces also take on the still timelessness of portraits by old masters like Velasquez and Degas. At a glance, we seem to know Yiadom-Boakye's subjects and paintings, just as previous generations have — even if projecting everyday Black lives onto canvases was unheard-of back then.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Stone Arabesque" (2018), oil on linen, quadriptych: 78 7/8 x 47 3/8 x 1 1/2 inches (each)

"In Lieu of a Louder Love," Yiadom-Boakye's newest show at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery (at both its 20th and 24th Street locations), features 26 paintings and is named after one of the artist's poems. It too is an event, Lynette's first exhibition of new work following winning the Carnegie Prize at 2018's Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, among the oldest and most prestigious awards in art (honoring the top painting of the year's exhibition). And though "…Louder Love" contains no radical transformation in the artist's work, there are changes in tone.

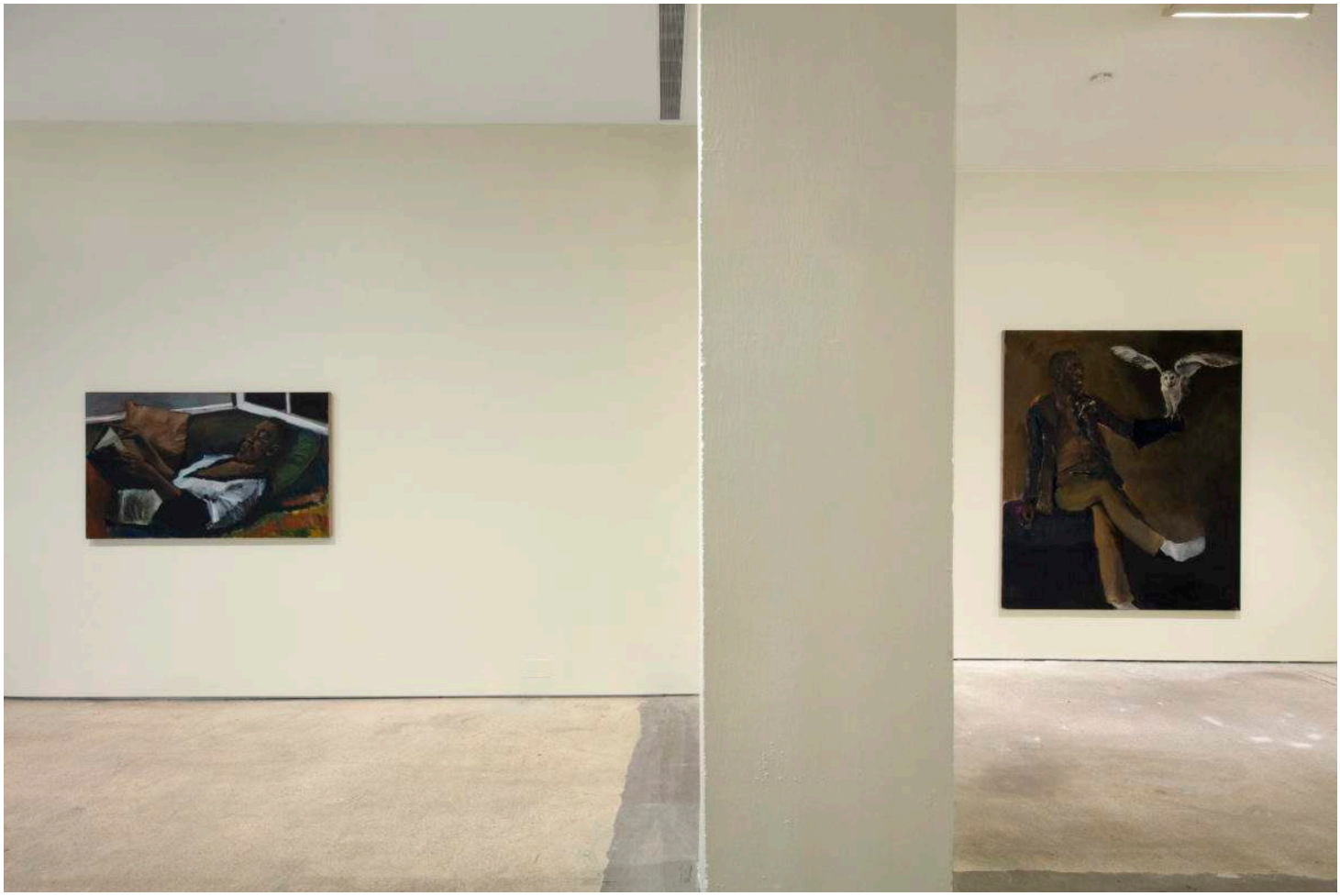


Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Amber and Jasmine” (2018), oil on linen, 59 1/4 x 55 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches

For one, there are new color schemes and context at play here. “Black Allegiance to the Cunning,” which features a smiling man sitting on a stool over a fox, seems to take place in the same checkered, linoleum-floor studio where West African photo-portraiture masters such as Malick Sidibe developed their public practices. Meanwhile, “Amber and Jasmine” features a woman in a headwrap and bathing

suit, leaning on a simply designed, prayer-sized rug — the framing yellow, orange and green background illuminating her modest beauty.

It is not so much a departure as a pivot (or a slight remix), examples of a more expansive playfulness in terms of palette and where Lynette's seeds of inspiration may be blossoming now. Both are qualities present throughout the show.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (L-R), "Rue The Days" (2018) oil on linen, 33 3/4 x 55 3/16 x 1 1/2 inches; "The Ever Exacting" (2018), oil on linen, 74 15/16 x 63 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches

Possibly my favorite of these remixes is "The Ever Exacting," which portrays a seated man, open-shirted in khakis and white tube socks, with an open-winged white owl perched on his forearm. A bird of prey on a powerful man's arm is a well-worn motif of ages-old white patriarchal Western portraits, and also trodden territory for Yiadom-Boakye. But where in the previous subjects she saddled with such a meaning-laden bird brought a seriousness to the canvas, here the man just stares at the owl with a bemused wonder. Not quite smiling, but not weighed down either.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's exhibit, "In Lieu of a Louder Love," is on show at the Jack Shainman Galleries in Manhattan, until February 16th

Welcome to Culture Type!
Exploring art by and about people of African descent, primarily through the lens of books, magazines and catalogs, Culture Type features original research and reporting and shares invaluable interestingness culled from the published record on black art.

Curators Explain Why British Painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Won the Carnegie International's Top Prize

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 19, 2018 • 7:58 am

"Amaranthine" (2018) by Lynette Yiadom Boakeye

A SERIES OF ARRESTING PORTRAITS is on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Single and double portraits are exhibited along with a painting of four black males standing together, seemingly in conversation. Lithe figures, all bare-chested wearing only dark pants, any number of narratives could be assigned to the image by British painter **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.**

At the latest edition of the Carnegie International, a gallery illuminated with natural light is dedicated to Yiadom-Boakye. Her portraits are hung according to her specifications. The lighting and wall color are designed to complement the paintings which are displayed relatively low, at a height that directly engages the viewer. Void of time-bound details, her expressive portraits of compelling characters read both historic and contemporary.

The Carnegie International opened to much fanfare in October. Presented by the Carnegie Museum of Art every four to five years, this year's 57th edition is curated by Ingrid Schaffner, with associate curator Liz Park. The exhibition features 32 artists and collectives, local, national, and international figures, such as Kerry James Marshall, El Anatsui, Kevin Jerome Everson, Leslie Hewitt, Tavares Strachan, and Yiadom-Boakye.

The opening festivities included a variety of programming—artist projects, performances, talks, screenings, and a celebratory gala on Oct. 12, where the Fine Prize was awarded to Postcommodity and Yiadom-Boakye received the Carnegie Prize.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “Radical Trysts,” 2018 (oil on linen, 70 7/8 x 63 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings earned her the International’s top award. The Carnegie Prize includes $10,000 and the Medal of Honor, which is designed by Tiffany & Co., and was first issued to Winslow Homer at the inaugural International in 1896.

The museum describes the International prizes as “prestigious” and the winning artists as “exceptional,” without further explanation about their candidacy. I wanted to better understand the criteria by which the artists were chosen and reached out to the museum to learn what about Yiadom-Boakye’s work stood out among the other artists included in the exhibition.

To begin with, the artists included in the International were selected by a team of all-female curators and researchers assembled by Schaffner (Magalí Arriola, Doryun Chong, Ruba Katrib, Carin Kuoni, and Bisi Silva) that traveled the globe in pairs visiting with artists and viewing their work.

The goal was explore what “‘international’ means at a moment when questions of nations, nationalism, boundaries, and border crossings are becoming ever more urgent” and, in this context, identify artists who best represented the “currents and concerns” of contemporary art.

> The goal was to explore what "'international' means at a moment when questions of nations, nationalism, boundaries, and border crossings are becoming ever more urgent" and, in this context, identify artists who best represented the "currents and concerns" of contemporary art.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, "To Improvise a Mountain," 2018 (oil on linen). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Recognized for her portraits of timeless subjects, Yiadom-Boakye made 13 new ones for the Carnegie International. Her dreamy and dramatic portraits feature fictional figures, people she's imagined and realized on canvas. The characters might be mulling family matters or experiencing relationship challenges, immigration issues, grief, triumph, satisfaction or wanderlust. Perhaps they are weighing what to serve for tea. The specifics are left to interpretation.

A painter who also writes and has penned essays for the catalogs of fellow artists, Yiadom-Boakye gives her paintings poetic titles such "A Whistle in a Wish," "Solar Wisdom," "The Black Watchful," and "No Need of Speech."

Her latest series depicts individual figures in contemplative poses. "Marvels for a Soothsayer" shows a male subject, rendered in profile, with his head cast downward. He is wearing glasses with his dreaded or braided hair pulled back in a bun. The instance may be the first time such cultural details have been represented in her oeuvre.

Yiadom-Boakye's subjects often look away from the viewer and appear aloof or perhaps deep in thought. Even when there are two figures on a canvas, they usually don't appear emotionally connected.

In some of the new paintings, however, Yiadom-Boakye's characters are relatively animated and deeply engaged with each other—a new development. She depicts them facing one another, gesturing, smoking, and expressing emotion with wide eyes. In the Guide published to accompany the International, Schaffner said, from the outset, she was really drawn to her painting: "the brushwork, the personas, the intimacies, the owls, the staging, the drama."

> Curator Ingrid Schaffner was particularly drawn to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings: "the brushwork, the personas, the intimacies, the owls, the staging, the drama."

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, "Marvels for a Soothsayer," 2018 (oil on linen). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

A seven-member jury chose the prize winners. The jurors included three of Schaffner's travel/research partners (Kuoni, Katrib, and Arriola), two representatives from the museum's advisory board, and two members of Carnegie's curatorial staff—Catherine Evans, co-director and head curator, and Eric Crosby, curator of modern and contemporary art.

"Criteria for awarding the prizes are intentionally broad," Evans said. She continued in an email statement: "In selecting the winners this year, jurors started with their top five to ten artists, then after much discussion ranging from the impact of artworks to their resonance with the context of the exhibition to the relevance of their artistic practice in today's world, reached a final consensus."

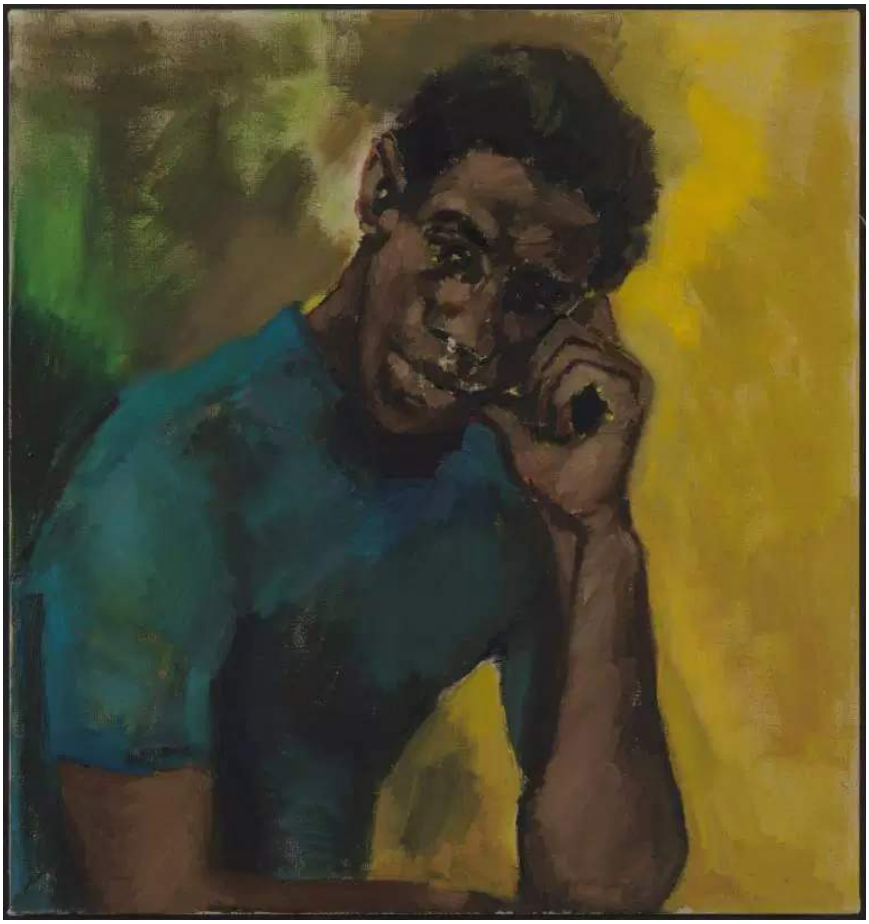
Evans said the Carnegie Prize "is awarded to an artist for their outstanding contribution to the exhibition." Given this standard, beyond the allure of her paintings of fascinating characters, the jury appreciated Yiadom-Boakye's dedication to the opportunity to participate in the International.

“The jury felt strongly that Lynnette Yiadom-Boake’s paintings demonstrated a compelling new development in her work and is a highlight in a rich and exhibition,” Evans said. “In addition, the jury took into account that the artist had created these 13 paintings specifically for the Carnegie International, 57th Edition, 2018.” **CT**

TOP IMAGE: LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “Amaranthine,” 2018 (oil on linen). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “A Whistle in a Wish,” 2018 (oil on canvas, 29 3/4 x 27 9/16 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 2018, 57th Carnegie International. | Photo by Bryan Conley. Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “Keep for a Heart,” 2018 (oil on linen, 33 5/8 x 31 11/16 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 2018, 57th Carnegie International. | Photo by Bryan Conley. Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “Solar Wisdom,” 2018 (oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 51 3/16 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “No Need of Speech,” 2018 (oil on canvas, 90 9/16 x 97 7/16 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, “The Black Watchful,” 2018 (oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 59 1/16 inches). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

HYPERALLERGIC

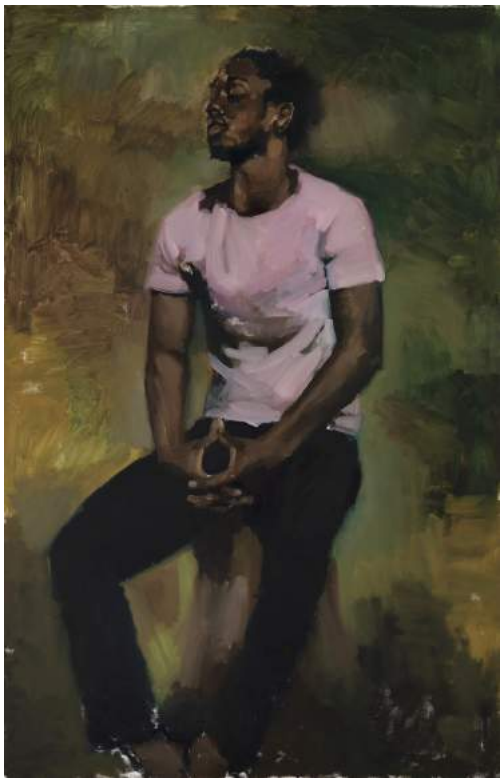
NEWS

Art Movements

Filmmaker Clément Cogitore has won the Prix Marcel Duchamp, painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has won the Carnegie Prize, and more.

Jasmine Weber 11 hours ago

Accolades:



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Coterie Of Questions" (2015), oil paint on canvas, 200 x 130 x 3.7 cm (Private collection. Courtesy Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

Ghanian-British painter **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye** has won the Carnegie Prize at the **57th Carnegie International**. Indigenous interdisciplinary art collective **Postcommodity** won the Fine Prize. Both awards come with $10,000.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Postcommodity won prizes at the 2018 Carnegie International.

Benjamin Sutton

Oct 15

Installation view of works by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in the 57th Carnegie International. Photo by Bryan Conley. Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London.

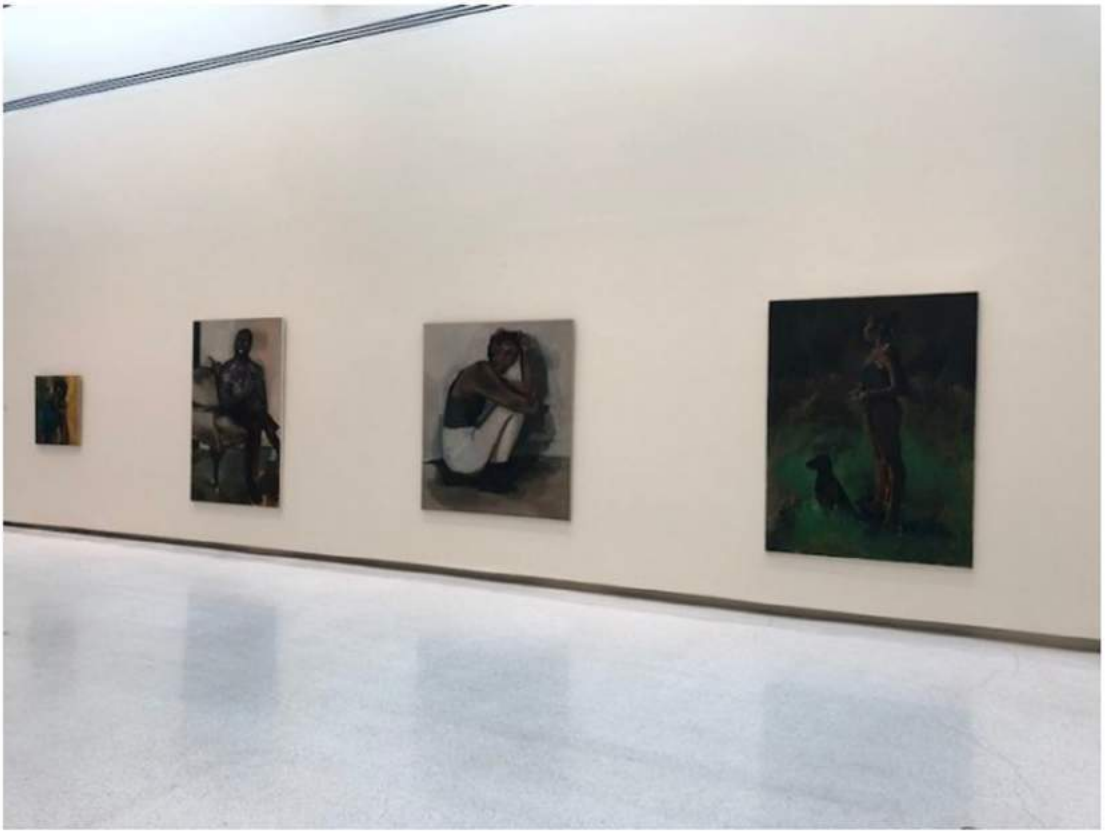
The 57th edition of the Carnegie International, one of the longest-running recurring art exhibitions in the world, opened this weekend in Pittsburgh with the announcement of two major awards: painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye received the Carnegie Prize, which comes with $10,000 and a Tiffany & Co.-designed medal; and the collective Postcommodity was awarded the Fine Prize, which also comes with a $10,000 prize. Yiadom-Boakye's work for the Carnegie International consisted of an installation of her bewitching portraits, while Postcommodity installed on the floor of the Carnegie Museum of Art's Hall of Sculpture an installation that addressed Pittsburgh's industrial history.

The jury for the awards included Vera List Center for Art and Politics director Carin Kuoni, MoMA PS1 curator Ruba Katrib, and independent curator Magalí Arriola. The 2018 edition of the Carnegie International—which opened to the public on Saturday and welcomed nearly 6,000 visitors during its opening weekend—was curated by Ingrid Schaffner and remains on view through March 25, 2019. During the previous Carnegie International, in 2013, the Carnegie and Fine prizes were awarded to Nicole Eisenman and Zanele Muholi, respectively.

ARTNEWS

2018 Carnegie International's Prizes Go to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Postcommodity

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 10/12/18 8:20 PM



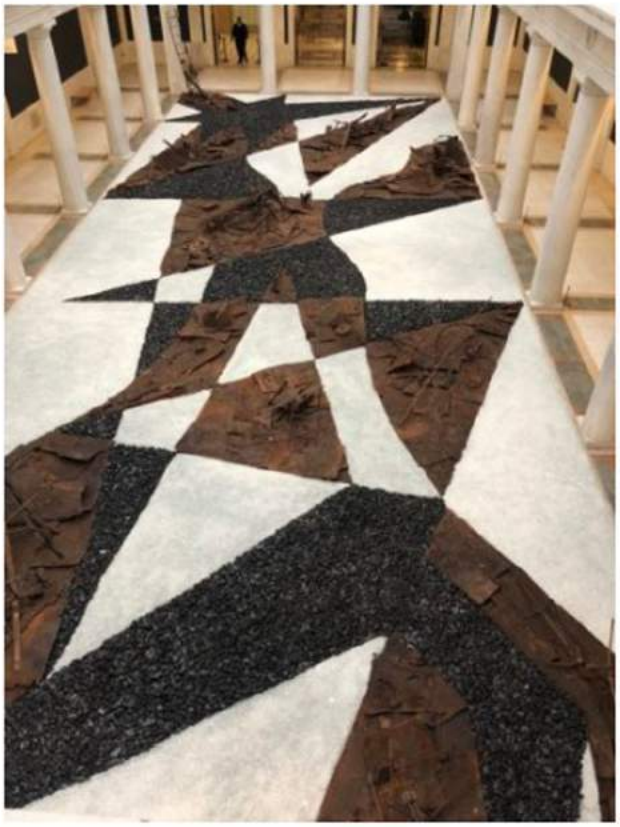
Installation view of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's contribution to the 2018 Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. ANDREW RUSSETH/ARTNEWS

Tonight at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, at a gala dinner toasting the opening of the 57th edition of the Carnegie International, the winners of the exhibition's prizes were announced, with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye taking home the Carnegie Prize and Postcommodity the Fine Prize. Each award comes with $10,000, and the Carnegie Prize also includes a medal, designed by Tiffany & Co., that has been presented to each of its winners since the exhibition was founded in 1896.

Yiadom-Boakye's contribution to the International was looking like a leading contender from the moment the exhibition opened this morning: it's an airy room of tender, nuanced paintings on linen that show young black men and women—all fictional creations of the mid-career artist, who's based in London and of Ghanaian heritage—posing against brushy fields of color. In one, a man holds an owl against a field of whites and grays, both of them gazing at the viewer. In another, a woman faces to the left, standing alongside a dog in a verdant patch of brushy strokes, all greens and browns and blacks.

Postcommodity, a collective whose members hail from different indigenous nations, provides another one of the International's grandest moments, a low-lying installation that covers almost the entire floor of the museum's Hall of Sculpture with angular patches of crushed glass, coal, and rusted steel sourced from the businesses Dlubak Glass and St. Nicholas Coal Breaker, located respectively in the nearby Pennsylvanian towns of Natrona Heights and Mahanoy City. Titled *From Smoke and Tangled Waters We Carried Fire Home* and alluding to the practice of Navajo sand painting, it's been conceived as a kind of graphic score that jazz musicians will be able to interpret from the gallery above throughout the run of the show.

The jury was made up of Carin Kuoni, the director of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School in New York; Ruba Katrib, curator at MoMA PS1 in New York; the independent writer Magalí Arriola, who's based in Mexico City; Ellen Kessler, who chairs the museum's board; Douglas "Woody" Ostrow, who's a board member; Catherine Evans, the museum's acting co-director; and Eric Crosby, its curator of modern and contemporary art.



Installation view of Postcommodity's *From Smoke and Tangled Waters We Carried Fire Home* (2018), on view in the Hall of Sculpture at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh as part of the 2018 Carnegie International.
ANDREW RUSSETH/ARTNEWS

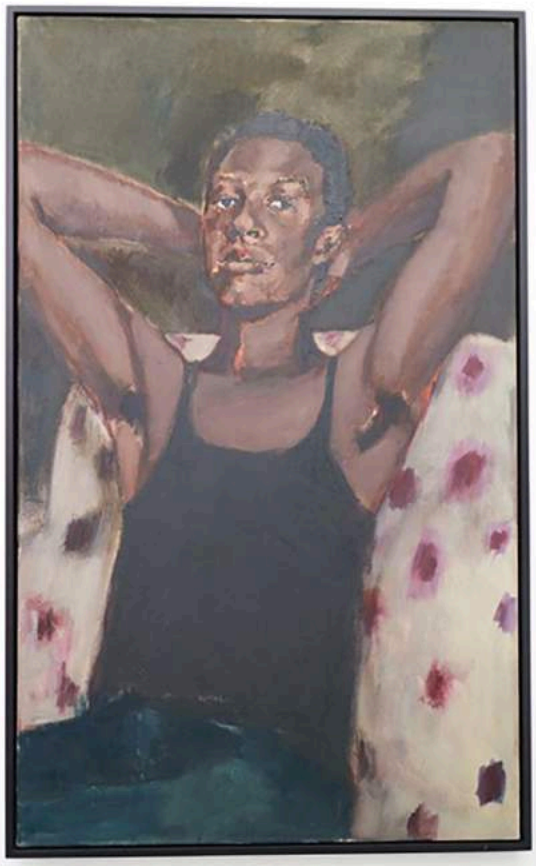
The International, which was organized by Ingrid Schaffner and includes more than 30 artists, opens to the public on Saturday, and as it happens, Yiadom-Boakye will be leading an hourlong drawing program, open to all, at 3:30 p.m. The exhibition runs through March 25, 2019.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Angel Otero shares his top picks from Frieze New York

The Brooklyn-based artist has an upcoming show at the Wexner Center for the Arts

GABRIELLA ANGELETI
3rd May 2018 21:01 GMT



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Parchment Flowers, 2017, shown by Jack Shainman at Frieze New York 2018 © Casey Fatchett

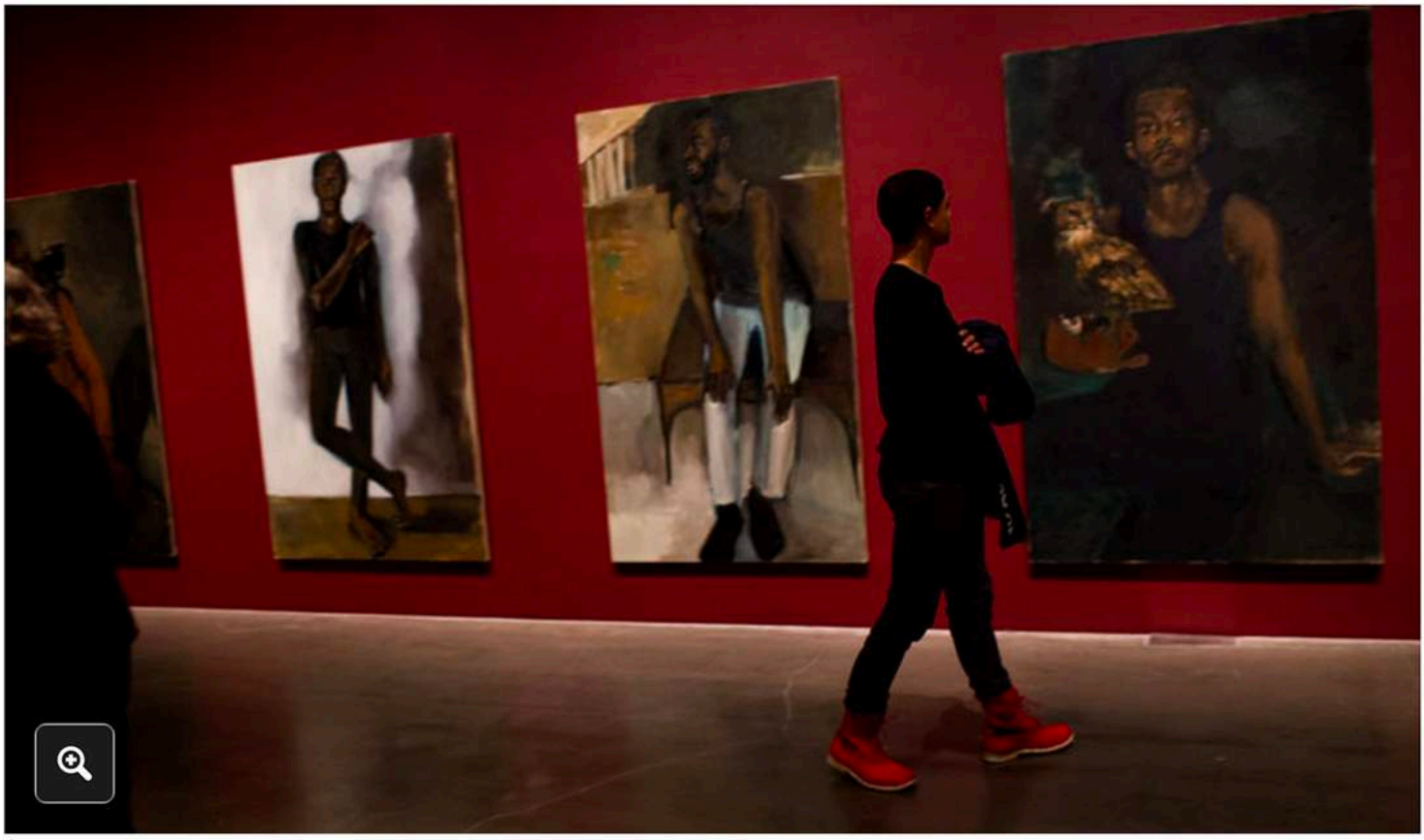
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, shown by Jack Shainman

"Lynette is the most incredible artist and just beautiful in every way. I met her years ago randomly on the street in Miami. She creates these powerful portraits of imagined men and women, never using models. She brings these non-existing people into an existing context. I find all her work very romantic and mysterious."

Art and Museums in NYC This Week

AUG. 24, 2017

The New York Times



A museumgoer passes before, from left, “Ropes for a Clairvoyant,” “A Cage for the Love” and “The Matters,” all on view at the New Museum in “Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher.”
Linda Rosier for The New York Times

Our guide to new art shows — and some that will be closing soon.

‘LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE: UNDER-SONG FOR A CIPHER’ at the New Museum (closes on Sept. 3). This British painter’s canvases of black dancers and dandies are not strictly portraits, but fictions invented by the artist that have the ring of truth. How much finer they could be if only Ms. Yiadom-Boakye would slow down: She insists on painting each work in a single day, and her hastiness is evident in thin background, unkempt borders and lackluster brushwork. Almost everything in this show was painted in 2017; what might she do if she painted not for an exhibition, but for herself? (Farago)

212-219-1222, newmuseum.org

A version of this article appears in print on August 25, 2017, on Page C18 of the New York edition with the headline: Art.

The Trickster's Art

Darryl Pinckney
AUGUST 17, 2017 ISSUE

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher
an exhibition at the New Museum, New York City, May 3–September 3, 2017
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Natalie Bell and Massimiliano Gioni
New Museum/Kunsthalle Basel, 123 pp., $24.00 (paper)

Regarding the Figure
an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City, April 20–August 6, 2017

Kehinde Wiley: Trickster
an exhibition at the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York City, May 6–June 17, 2017

A few years back I ran into Camille Brewer, a black American curator of contemporary art, on Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem. "Look at this," she said. She was turning the pages of *Artforum*, finding black artist after black artist. "It's like *Jet* up in here." Camille was referring to the glossy black news and entertainment magazine that had its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. "Until you get to the [museum] appointments pages," she added. "Then things go quiet again." The black presence in the contemporary art scene continues to feel like a recent cultural phenomenon, though the group and individual exhibitions of black artists that prepared the way for this moment took place some time ago.

A landmark exhibition, "Contemporary Black Art in America," at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, concerned primarily the abstract. It asserted a freedom achieved since the 1950s and 1960s when black artists such as Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Beauford Delaney, and Romare Bearden were criticized for moving away from representation in their work, as if abstraction were a kind of opportunistic calculation. In *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (2016), his study of modernism as a cross-cultural exchange for black artists, Darby English identifies the paradox: if they escape from what he calls the "representationalist, collectivist black-ideological norm," they end up being thought of as not having much to say on "racialist issues."

It was therefore important for some to be able to find Africanist traces in abstract work by black artists. "Painting itself cannot practice discrimination," English wrote. However, by 1970, when Jacob Lawrence's portrait of Jesse Jackson appeared on the cover of *Time*,

The New Museum, New York/Corvi-Mora, London/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: The Matters*, 2016*

the debate about the representational versus the abstract was becoming a sideline. That same year, a black curator, Kynaston McShine, mounted "Information," one of the first major exhibitions of conceptual art, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994," Okwui Enwezor's exhibition of 2001–2002, seen in Berlin and New York, among other places, put on display art that was a synthesis of African artistic styles and European modernism, almost as a peace treaty between cultures. By this time Glenn Ligon, the black conceptual artist, and Thelma Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, had proclaimed the independence of what they called a "post-black" generation. To define "post-black" was one of the aims of Golden's 2001 exhibition, "Freestyle." Ligon and Golden spoke in the catalog of "the liberating value in tossing off the immense burden of race-wide representation, the idea that everything they do must speak to or for or about the entire race." Black artists of the previous generation could say they did not want to be identified as black artists, but there was no need to go into further repudiations of the category when the only rule for black artists was that there weren't any rules more important than to thine own self be true.

The catalog *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art* (2016), edited by Courtney J. Martin, shows that a history of blacks in American art can be told through means other than the representational or narrative. But the collection of Pamela Joyner and Alfred J. Giufridda also includes portrait photography and portrait painting. Time places the representational and the abstract in ever-closer cultural proximity. And the figurative has renewed importance now that painting enjoys a prestige that it has not had during the long ascendancy of conceptualism.

Hugh Honour tells us in *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Vol. 4, 1989) that even though the number of artworks in which blacks were depicted increased in the 150 years from the abolitionism of the slave trade in Britain to the coming of modernism, such works were still a small fraction of those produced because there was no demand for them.* Moreover, there was a profound difference between representations of black people in the visual arts and in literature. They appeared in religious and genre painting, but apart from Goya, few artists in this period were stirred to record the truth of what black people experienced in white societies.

Because blacks were identified with slavery they could be victims but not heroes in Western art, though the exceptions are notable: Henry Fuseli's *The Negro Revenged* (1806), Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819), or Joshua Reynolds's *Study of a Black Man* (circa 1770). But public opinion limited where art sympathetic to blacks could be seen. And the violence of racial segregation in the US and of colonial expansion in Africa called for caricatures of darky inferiority and the ethnography of half-naked savages. Black people were ugly and so was their story. Racism casts a long shadow over art. Today's portraits of black people come from a complex history about the subjectivity of beauty and the presence of blackness in Western art.

The portrait painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye was born in London in 1977. For her solo exhibition at the New Museum, "Under-Song for a Cipher," the three high walls on which her work hung were painted leather-red. Art looks good held up by a color field. In Yiadom-Boakye's seventeen unframed portraits of black people, the paint continues to the edges of each canvas. There are no titles or wall texts beside them. Some are full-length, or nearly so, except for a triptych of horizontal portraits of a black male in profile, not always in the same shirt, reclining on a red striped blanket. Three paintings are of women, one of whom wears a white leotard; another is seated Indian fashion, seeing to the bun in her hair. Two barefoot women in profile in long skirts are depicted together, one seated in front of the other, who stands with a pair of field glasses aimed at something we can't see to our right. It is the only painting in the exhibition that is not of one person or of one person and a cat or a bird.

A young man in a blue sweater sits at a table with a coffee cup; another youth is on a chair, his left leg raised. One guy has a bird; a laughing black youth has a beard. A barefoot brown youth is standing with his right leg crossed in front of his left. He looks straight at the viewer. A black man with beautiful eyes looks at the cat on his shoulder. The largest painting shows a barefoot brown-purplish youth resting on his left elbow in a grassy expanse. The black youths are dark-skinned—dark brown, not black—and Yiadom-Boakye concentrates her impasto in the faces. Dark colors come up in ridges to form hair, nose, shadows, lips, neck, chin; and instead of white pigment unpainted spaces appear in a figure's outline or as highlights on the face. The surface surrounding the figures is very flat, as if scraped. Backgrounds

are a mist or zones holding the figure in place and are not meant to tell us much. The body is a road to the face, the central concern.

The guys are good-looking. A youth in profile in a white T-shirt is somewhat androgynous; a beautiful youth with downcast eyes is a harlequin. A sleeping youth appears Expressionist in his angles. He's got no crotch, but here and there a guy's trousers may sport a V. A young man in a black tank top holds an owl in his gloved hand. He has a thin mustache and his look down his nose at us is full of condescension. The owl, wonderfully painted, has its own fierce expression. In the catalog the painting has a title, *The Matters*. You get the feeling that these guys are meant to be dancers and—maybe it's in what Yiadom-Boakye makes of the openness of their expressions—that they are gay.

It takes two to make a portrait as well as an argument, Hugh Honour wrote. Yet these are not portraits of real people. Yiadom-Boakye has explained that they are composites, from "a combination of different sources: scrapbooks, drawings, photographs." She said she thinks less about the figures than she does about how they are painted. She does not see them as portraits of characters with personalities to capture or suggest. "They exist entirely in paint," as a technical problem to be solved: how to render in oil the fleetingness of the snapshot. Far from photorealism, they nevertheless have something of a stranger's photograph collection. They are private, a riddle.

Yiadom-Boakye has also discussed how she executes each portrait in a single day. If she feels a particular piece hasn't worked out, she destroys it. She says she always remembers the failures. The art she cares about is political because most art is, she says, which may mean that as a black artist she can treat the black body as normal. Her portraits have attitude, but they are not heroic, just as she has said that she is suspicious of beauty and instead goes after the sensual, what the skin gives off. Her approach to portrait painting—the choice to impose a challenge, a framing device, some sort of distancing mechanism—also speaks of her generation, when painting in particular was unfashionable, and conceptual art, installations, were on the way to becoming the new academic art.

There is a purple-backed portrait by Yiadom-Boakye of a dark young woman's head and neck in the Studio Museum in Harlem's summer show, "Regarding the Figure." More than fifty pieces taken from the museum's permanent collection (including paintings, photographs, sculpture, and one work of mixed media) aren't displayed chronologically, but they have the range to make the show about different ways of putting new images of the black (by black artists, following the Studio Museum's mandate) into Western art. Henry Ossawa Tanner's undated lithograph *The Three Marys* shares a wall with *The Room* (1949) by Eldzier Cortor, a small portrait, perhaps of Billie Holiday, and with Jennifer Packer's *Ivan*, a sexy 2013 portrait.

As a young artist in Paris, Hale Woodruff met Tanner in the late 1920s. Tanner was the first African-American artist to win recognition abroad. The French government purchased his *Resurrection of Lazarus* for the Luxembourg in 1897. But it was Picasso who inspired Woodruff the most. He studied with Diego Rivera in Mexico in the 1930s and is best known for his murals at black colleges, yet his struggle with Picasso is still going on in his oil painting *Africa and the Bull* (circa 1958) in the Studio Museum show. Also in the show is Bob Thompson's *The Gambol*, a forest scene of figures on horseback, or dancing alone, and dark for someone remembered as a colorist. One couple, mere shapes, appears to be copulating astride a horse. Thompson said he wanted Old Masters to meet a jazz-inflected Abstract Expressionism in his work. He died at twenty-eight, in 1966, before anyone could criticize him for Eurocentrism.

Among the historical forces that artists of the post-black generation have declared themselves unafraid of is the European aesthetic tradition, just as there is no more talk of who isn't black enough in his or her work. Some of the artists in the Studio Museum exhibition can be seen in the major museums of the city, but it makes a difference to see them as part of a history that goes from work made in a society where so many took it for granted that a black artist would never be as good as—fill in a great white name—to objects that are just not worried about that kind of thing anymore. The Harlem exhibition goes from one arresting piece to another. There is *Lawdy Mama* (1969), Barkley L. Hendricks's life-size portrait of his cousin, beige Kathy Williams, with a big, round, brown afro, posed against a background arch of gold leaf. (This calls out to an intense Pre-Raphaelite-like portrait with much gold leaf, Elizabeth Colomba's *Daphne* (2015), on display in the "Uptown" exhibition at the new Columbia University School of the Arts Lenfest Center.)

In the Studio Museum show, Njideka Akunyili Crosby depicts a couple in a room, *Nwantinti* (2012), a large work of acrylic, pastel, charcoal, and colored pencil on unframed paper. The newsprint plastered on the walls of the meticulously neat room is a Xerox transfer of graduation and family photographs. Repeated often in the transfers is the cover of the record "Love Nwantinti," by the Igbo singer Nelly Uchendu. ("My journey with love/It will begin in a short time.") The transfers bleed into the man's trousers, arm, torso, chin, the bedspread, the floor. The pink walls are bathed in light. It's impossible to tell whether the few clothes in the open closet behind the bed are a man's or a woman's, though the lovely young brown woman with short hair is barefoot and those must be her flip-flops beside the bed. She sits toward the edge of the tidy bed, a tender expression on her face as she looks down at the young man on his back, his head in her tight lap. A light source from a door and window grill strikes his quiet face and it can't be said for sure if he is white or mixed-race.

A sharp black-and-white photograph by Zanele Muholi, *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015), has a nude dark black woman on her back on a bed, shoulders to the viewer, the back of her head and knees up. She holds on her stomach a large round mirror, reflecting only her face. Lyle Ashton Harris's double self-portrait (2000), *Untitled (Face #155 Lyle)* and *Untitled (Back #155 Lyle)*, shows him and his braids close-up, in black-and-white. Part of his Chocolate Portraits series, the photographs' size (twenty by twenty-four inches) only seems to increase the vulnerability of the subject. Lorna Simpson's *9 Props* (1995) is exquisite. Its nine black-and-white waterless lithographs on felt panels show gleaming black glass vases or bowls that Simpson commissioned. They are stand-ins for the figures in Van Der Zee photographs: the artist Benny Andrews, for instance, taken in 1976. The captions under the glassware describe the figures and the interiors of the original photographs. "Wearing a trench coat, he is seated with the right leg crossed and holds it with his right hand. To his left is a small table with a circular top and a vase with Chrysanthemums…"

An acrylic-painted plaster wall relief of a woman laughing, *Maria* (1981), is from a series of South Bronx portraits by John Ahearn. Freestanding in the gallery is a six-foot sculpture of a dapper black man of a certain age, made from urethane foam, plaster, hair, and clothes: Isaac Julien's *Incognito* (2003), a portrait of Melvin Van Peebles with his signature cigar in the corner of his mouth. No, he's not real, a white mother explained to her child as she pulled his hand back. The piece is a surprise, because Julien is known chiefly for his films, video works, and photography.

Nearby is a small bust, *St. Francis of Adelaide* (2006), by Kehinde Wiley's studio. The sculpture is under glass, because—made from cast marble dust and resin, and the color of a once-lit candle—it invites caress. The figure of the saint is a muscular, shaven-headed black youth in a basketball jersey or wife beater, with his right arm cut off. He is posed in quarter profile, with his left hand hugging an orb, book, and scepter to his body. (It was made around the same time that Wiley produced two other busts—not in this exhibition—in editions of 250: one after Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *La Negresse*, but instead of a thick-haired black woman with her left breast exposed, Wiley uses a male figure, the same model as for his Saint Francis. The second piece is after Bernini's bust of Louis XIV, but Wiley's Sun King is a goateed black youth in a hoodie, not armor.)

Wiley's work in portraiture is mostly on a monumental scale. Born in Los Angeles in 1977, his oil paintings seize on the European tradition, replacing the august or prominent personage in a famous portrait with a young black person. Wiley has also portrayed young black people in the place of the figure of a saint in stained glass or oil paintings. He chooses a highly processed realism for his black subjects, male and female, usually hip-hop in their fashion sense but sometimes haute couture, and very post-black in their hairstyles. The subject alone makes a cultural contrast with Wiley's usual backgrounds of elaborate decorative motifs.

He bestows a different kind of visibility on black urban youth, and in his free use of the history of Western art it is hip to say that he demystifies it, makes up for that tradition of aristocratic portraiture in which blacks are depicted as adoring servants, almost pets. But actually he ends up doing something else, which is to make the viewer interested in his sources. For the most part black artists have aligned themselves with artistic movements that sought liberation from the past. Wiley is different; the past is not only an influence, it's also a presence, a stage character.

In a recent exhibition at the Sean Kelly Gallery, "Trickster," Wiley's subjects weren't black youths he spotted on the street who remain anonymous, but eleven fellow black artists: Derrick Adams, Hank Willis Thomas, Nick Cave, Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Yinka Shonibare, Wangechi Mutu, Glenn Ligon, Rashid Johnson with Sanford Biggers, and Mickalene Thomas. The title, "Trickster," refers to the cultural hero in black

folklore who survives or triumphs through cunning and skill. A trickster is ambiguous and can also change shapes, take on new identities.

Wiley is not coy and has always identified the Old Master—and sometimes later—models for his paintings. For instance, in this show he tells us that his painting of Yiadom-Boakye is after George Romney's portrait of Jacob Morland of Capplethwaite (1763). Her hunting clothes and boots are not like Morland's, but she is showing off the same rifle, and the background of pasture and family seat in the distance is also the same. Morland is posed with a hound, but she stands at her edge of the wood with five dead brown rabbits at her black boots. The rabbit is a trickster figure in both African-American and American Indian folklore. Then, too, the bold expression Wiley gives Yiadom-Boakye behind thick black-framed glasses fits the trickster character.

Jason Wyche/Sean Kelly Gallery, New York/Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley: Portrait of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jacob Morland of Capplethwaite, *2017*

The portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers is subtitled *The Ambassadors*, after Holbein. Wiley has changed his figures' postures: here, one of the artists is standing, his hand on the shoulder of the other, who is seated (in Holbein's painting, the pair is leaning against a display of objects that speak of learning). But the green brocade curtain behind Holbein's guys is behind Wiley's as well, and the carpet draped over the shelf in Holbein is the one that Wiley's barefoot, black-trousered figures are standing on. The clothing in Holbein is sumptuously painted and the same could be said of the loose, salmon-colored shirts that Wiley's subjects are wearing.

References to the trickster in other cultures, like Reynard the fox, also appear in these paintings. Each canvas contains clues that point to the originals, and not necessarily to the works of the artist-subjects. Some are not as easily read as others, such as the portrait of an inscrutable Glenn Ligon as Hermes. Those are loafers, not winged sandals, so what is the frog he's holding down on his knee? A terrific amount of painting is going on in these works, especially so, for example, in the details of the dress Carrie Mae Weems is wearing, posed with her back to the viewer, looking over her left shoulder. It is a virtuoso performance. Wiley has a great deal of humor and easy command. His subjects are rendered *con amore*, as Italians used to say of the best portraits.

Wiley depicts Kerry James Marshall as Lectura, in a triple portrait reminiscent of Van Dyck's of Charles I. But is Marshall not much darker in skin tone than Wiley has painted him? And taking all the David-sized paintings together, isn't every subject the identical high-affect brown color? Wiley's revisions of what is called the canonical are a trickster's art. Conversation with the past is for him essential. Neoclassical and Romantic painting were both about manipulating reality, Wiley said in an interview, as if to say, why shouldn't his be?

It almost feels as though an Occupy High Art movement is happening. Black people changed the image of the black in Western art through what they were doing in the other arts and in the outside world. Perhaps instead of removing a statue of Robert E. Lee from a square in New Orleans, instead of appeasing justified feelings of anger at Confederate history, a black artist of Kehinde Wiley's stature should be commissioned to do a public work in reply to that history.

These cultural sensitivities are not frivolous. How black people have been seen in history continues to influence how they are seen today. Yet the high visibility of blacks in the art world hasn't done away with the critical defensiveness that made the controversy at this year's Whitney Biennial over Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till such an

embarrassing turf war among the second-rate. Till, age fourteen, was beaten to death in 1955 in Mississippi for supposedly having whistled at a white woman. The painting has no power unless, or until, you think of the horrific image of Till in his open casket on which it was based. Till's mother gave *Jet* permission to photograph him so that everyone could see what he had suffered. Some people protested that Schutz, a white artist, had appropriated or was exploiting the pain of the black experience. But James Baldwin defended William Styron's freedom to write *The Confessions of Nat Turner (*1967), a very misguided novel about slave rebellion.

The most dramatic element in what is going on culturally may be that the image of the black is undergoing yet another change as a symbol. Put a black body up there on the canvas—not a light-skinned body but a dark one—and the work has immediate meaning, or seems profound, or to be a protest of some kind, an example of what Wiley has called the "weaponized aesthetic." Maybe it has to do with what Black Lives Matter has revealed about black bodies: that they are still subject to racist violence. Even as vessels of desire they earn respect because of what they have been through historically, these young bodies.

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* The Image of the Black in Western Art Project was conceived in the 1960s by John and Dominique de Menil. David Bindman joined Henry Louis Gates Jr. as general editors for the completion of the series by Harvard University Press. The earlier volumes have been republished and now ten books of informative essays and beautiful illustrations move through the history of the representation of blacks in the art of the West, from the pharoahs and the fall of Rome to the present. ↩

The Washington Post

Museums • Review

An artist who summons black faces and bodies at ease in the world

By Philip Kennicott August 3

NEW YORK — One can't call Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings of people portraits, because the young men and women in these images don't actually exist. They are composite figures, worked up from her imagination and from files of images — photographs, clippings, drawings — that she has gathered. They are, perhaps, invented characters, but she doesn't tell us of what kind, what motivates them or what they are about. The titles of her paintings are poetic and suggestive — "Ropes for a Clairvoyant" and "Of All the Seasons," for example — but they bear no identifying traces, no clues to the people she has summoned. Stand in a room full of her work, and you have the sense that you have been dropped into the middle of something, *in media res*. It isn't like being in the middle of a crowd, teeming with energy — rather, you feel yourself surrounded by a collection of quietly thoughtful and thoroughly self-contained individuals who are taking a moment from the stream of life to do nothing at all.

The work of Yiadom-Boakye, a London-based artist born in 1977 and a finalist for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2013, is on view at the New Museum, filling the midsize fourth-floor gallery, which has been painted a deep burgundy. The rich color of the background walls contrasts sharply with the standard institutional white favored by most contemporary art galleries, and it flatters the generally earthy tones and deep shadows of the artist's oil-on-linen medium. The lights are also kept lower than is often the case in contemporary galleries, and everything seems to have a warm glow. An effort has been made to banish the bustle of New York and allow visitors to exist in a space that is backward-looking, to indulge nostalgic fantasies of the hushed art museums of the 19th century, which were also richly painted and architecturally removed from the everyday world.

Yiadom-Boakye paints most of her works in one day, and this exhibition includes 17 new ones. Several of the figures appear to be dancers (one young woman is seen in a ballet pose wearing a white leotard), and all of them have a casual, lean, athletic grace. The speed with which she paints yields broad, almost sketchy brushwork, paint that is drawn quickly and proximately over the surface of the linen, with streaks and rough edges rather than fine lines and polish. The virtuosity of her work, as well as the physicality of her mostly young subjects, gives a sense that there is something precipitous about the people she has imagined, as though they are about to tip out of the picture space and into the room.

The artist, born in London to Ghanaian parents, focuses on subjects who are of African descent, and her work is often seen as part of a larger project of restitution, shared among other artists who are seemingly working outside the mostly white, Western tradition of figure painting, to people the world of art with new faces, new figures and new subjects who aren't uniformly white and European. Western painters only occasionally painted non-Western faces and bodies over the past half-millennium, and often when they did, it was to underscore the supposed exoticism or otherness of African or Asian subjects. They were represented as servants, objects of sexual desire or emissaries of far-flung and deeply foreign worlds that only occasionally encroached on European lands, as in the depiction of Balthazar, one of the three Magi, who was often depicted as a Moor in Renaissance paintings.

But compare Yiadom-Boakye with another artist, Kehinde Wiley, who deliberately inserts black faces and bodies into some of the most mannered tropes of Western art, and it's clear something very different is going on. Wiley's highly finished images use not just the medium of painting but often the poses and trappings of European elites to create a satire on the exclusion and whiteness of the art world. He inserts a young African American into a heroic and imperial context borrowed from the Napoleonic-era works of Jacques-Louis David or renders the rapper Ice-T as Napoleon, and the resulting work is as bombastically colorful and richly finished as Yiadom-Boakye's work is earthy and improvised. Wiley is creating an ironic indictment of exclusion, whereas Yiadom-Boakye is quietly and steadily remedying the problem. There is something endearingly pragmatic about her work and her method, as if to say: The way one deals with exclusion is to open the doors and let people in.

But the more you look at it, the more you realize this isn't just a matter of increasing the sum total of people with dark skin represented in art galleries or museums. Bodies and faces aren't sufficient to get at the idea of race or identity; one also needs poses, gestures and expressions, characteristic ways of standing and leaning and lounging, that have also been excluded from the way people of color have been represented in Western art.

So at least as important as the skin color of these imagined people is the fact that they are so profoundly, even extravagantly, at ease. Perhaps more important than the simple fact that people of color are represented in a traditionally white or European space is that they are entirely comfortable being there.

One might do this with snapshots of people at ease, reproduced, framed and introduced into the art space. Photographic representation captures ease and grace and the lounging frame of mind, but it also introduces real people into the equation and so sends the mind down different paths. Who are they? What do they do?

By painting people who don't, in fact, have real existence, Yiadom-Boakye keeps the focus on their physicality and on the paint and the process whereby they have been created. Sometimes, these things intersect in delightful ways. "In Lieu of Keen Virtue," for example, shows a man casually dressed in an orange turtleneck while a cat lounges on his left shoulder. But the left arm isn't quite right and doesn't seem to meet his torso in a natural way. It's tempting to think the cat may have been a painterly inspiration, to divert attention from the slightly awkward arm with the introduction of a draping feline. In summoning the man in a quick and provisional way, the painter has by necessity also summoned the cat, who does indeed help fix the problem.

The kitty isn't the only interloper in these works. Sometimes birds appear, as well, and often, there is a dark, assertive shadow cast by the human figures, a shadow that takes on more personality and presence than a mere play of light. In creating a character, or painting an imaginary being, the artist may well ask a question we often ask ourselves: What completes us? What makes us whole? When are we ever pulled together as a being? Almost certainly, we experience this coming together as a real being in moments of reflection, inwardness and ease and not when we do our best (as in a grand oil painting) to project a sense of ourselves to the outside world. But does it ever happen? Only the shadow knows.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher *is on view at the New Museum in New York through Sept. 3. For information, visit NewMuseum.org.*

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THE NEW YORKER

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

JUNE 19, 2017 ISSUE

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE'S IMAGINARY PORTRAITS

The British-Ghanaian artist creates compelling character studies of people who don't exist, reflecting her twin talents as a writer and a painter.

By Zadie Smith

"Light Of The Lit Wick" (2017). Yiadom-Boakye's figures push themselves into the imagination, as literary characters do.
Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The exhibition space on the fourth floor of the New Museum, in New York, is a long room with a high ceiling. You might expect towering video screens in here, or something bulky and three-dimensional, requiring circling—entering, even. But on a recent day the room was filled with oils. The show has a melancholy, literary title, "Under-Song For A Cipher," and consists of seventeen paintings hung low, depicting a set of striking individuals, all slightly larger than human scale, though not imposingly so. Most are on herringbone linen; one is on canvas. It's impossible to avoid noticing that they are all—every man and each woman—physically beautiful. Mostly they are alone. They sit, stretch, lounge, stand, and are often lost in contemplation, their eyes averted. If they are with others, the company is never mixed, as if too much heat might be generated by introducing that half-naked man over there to this sharp-eyed dancing girl.

In the œuvre of the British-Ghanaian painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, there are quite a few dancers, lithe in their leotards, but all of her people look as though they might well belong to that profession. They are uniformly elegant. One young man puts his hands on his knees and laughs, with his legs apart and his feet turned out; he is dressed simply, like the rest, in blocks of swiftly laid paint, creating here a black vest, there some white trousers. No shoes. The artist dislikes attaching her figures to a particular historical moment, and there's no way around the historicity of shoes. Sometimes the men hold animals like familiars—an owl, a songbird, a cat. The colors are generally muted: greens and grays and blacks and an extraordinary variety of browns. Amid this sober coloration splashes of yellow and pink abound, and vivid blues and emerald greens, all tempered by the many snowdrop gaps of unpainted canvas, like floral accents in an English garden.

The surrounding walls are painted a dark heritage red, bringing to mind national galleries and private libraries, but also, for this viewer, the books you might find in such places, specifically the calico covers of nineteenth-century novels. This red has the effect of bringing a diverse selection of souls together, framing and containing them, much like a novel contains its people, which is to say, only partially. For Yiadom-Boakye's people push themselves forward, into the imagination—as literary characters do—surely, in part, because these are not really portraits. They have no models, no sitters. They are character studies of people who don't exist.

In many of Yiadom-Boakye's interviews, she is asked about the source of her images, and she tends to answer as a novelist would, citing a potent mix of found images, memory, sheer imagination, and spontaneous painterly improvisation (most of her canvases are, famously, completed in a single day). From a novelist's point of view, both the speed and the clarity are humbling. Subtleties of human personality it might take thousands of words to establish are here articulated by way of a few condent brushstrokes. But the deeper beguilement is how she manages to create the effect of wholly realized gures while simultaneously confounding so many of our assumptions about the gurative. The type of questions prompted by, say, Holbein (What kind of a man was Sir Thomas More?) or Gainsborough (What was the social status of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews?), or when considering a Lucian Freud (What is the relation between painter and model?), are all short-circuited here, replaced by an existential query not much heard in contemporary art: Who is this? The answer is both literal and liberating: No one. Nor will the titles of these paintings identify them.

A dancing girl in the midst of an arabesque bears the caption "Light Of The Lit Wick." A gentleman in an orange turtleneck with a cat on his shoulder: "In Lieu Of Keen Virtue." That antic fellow with his hands on his knees: "A Cage For The Love." We have become used to titles that ironize or undercut what we are looking at, providing conceptual scaffolding for feeble visual ideas, or weak punch lines to duller jokes. For Yiadom-Boakye, titles are allusive; they should be considered, she has said, simply "an extra mark in the paintings." For an artist, she is unusual in describing herself as a writer as much as a painter—her short stories and prosy poems frequently appear in her catalogues. In a recent interview in *Time Out*, she reflected on the relation between these twin roles. "I don't paint about the writing or write about the painting," she said. "It's just the opposite, in fact: I write about the things I can't paint and paint the things I can't write about." Her titles run parallel to the images, and—like the human figures they have chosen not to describe or explain—radiate an uncanny self-containment and serenity. The canvas is the text.

Given the self-confidence of this work, it's strange to note the anxiety that Yiadom-Boakye provokes in some critics. In the catalogue that accompanies the New Museum show, there is an essay by the academic art critic Robert Storr in which he deems it necessary to defend the work against the perceived retrogression of figurative painting: "If you accept Greenbergian premises and methodologies, representation was definitively eclipsed by abstraction sometime in the early 1950s"—a line of argument that might lead you to believe Clement Greenberg is still busy over at *Commentary* instead of being dead for more than two decades. The mid-century debate over the figurative and the abstract—which Greenberg's coining of the term "post-painterly abstraction" did much to further—aligned the figurative with illusion: the illusion of depth in a canvas, and the pretense of three-dimensional human life on what was, in truth, an inert, two-dimensional surface. The figurative was fundamentally nostalgic; its subject matter was kitsch; it was too easily manipulated for the purposes of propaganda, both political and commercial. Sentimental scenes of human life were, after all, what the Nazis and the Stalinists had championed. They were what the admen of Madison Avenue utilized every day. Meanwhile, the abstract sought to continue, in the realm of the visual, the modernist critique of the self. But, even when a critic allows for the somewhat antique formulation of these arguments (as Storr goes on to do), there is still something about the vicarious emotion provoked by the figurative that must be explained away or excused.

And so, in the same essay, Yiadom-Boakye is cautiously framed as the kind of artist who depicts an extreme otherness: "The impact of her pictures is of encountering people 'we'—the general North American art audience—have never met, coming from a world with which 'we' are unfamiliar. One that we have no basis for generalizing about or projecting our fantasies onto." Yet the subjects of these paintings are not members of a recently discovered indigenous tribe in Papua New Guinea but, rather, many handsome black men and women in unremarkable domestic settings.

Yiadom-Boakye calls herself a writer as much as a painter. Photograph by Nadine Ijewere for The New Yorker

There is a respectful caution in this kind of critique which, though undoubtedly well intended in theory, in practice throws a patronizing chill over such work. Yiadom-Boakye is doing more than exploring the supposedly uncharted territory of black selfhood, or making—in that hackneyed phrase—the invisible visible. (Black selfhood

has always existed and is not invisible to black people.) Nor are these paintings solely concerned with inserting the black figure into an overwhelmingly white canon. Such pat truisms have a limited utility, especially when we find them applied without alteration to artists as diverse as Chris Ofili, Kerry James Marshall, and Kehinde Wiley. Ofili, in a delicate written response to Yiadom-Boakye's work, passes over the familiar rusty argument of figuration versus abstraction, and attends instead to the intimate visual details: "The tightness of her bun. The size of his ear. She knew so much about so little of him. She said so little he heard so much." Exactly. Here are some paintings of he and she, him and her. They say little, explicitly, but you hear much.

There are a few moments when the paintings also seem to respond more or less directly to a generalized notion of the "white canon." An overly literal triptych, "Vigil For A Horseman," features three handsome men laid out—in three different art-historical poses—on a candy-striped divan, calling to mind a riot of similar loungers: the Rokeby Venus, the picnickers of "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe," Adam meeting the finger of God, a Modigliani nude. But these are the weaker moments in the show. The strongest paintings pursue an entirely different relation: not the narrow point-for-point argument between artist and art history but the essential, living communication between art work and viewer, a relationship that Yiadom-Boakye reminds us is indeed vicarious, voyeuristic, ambivalent, and fundamentally uncontrollable.

For even if you are intimately familiar with the various shades of brown on offer here—even if you've always known these particular broad noses, the specific kink of Afro hair, the blue and orange tints that rise up through very dark skin—you are still, as a viewer, entirely engaged in the practice of fantastical projection. The figures themselves are the basis for your fantasy, with their teasing, ambiguous titles, women dancing to unheard music, or peering through binoculars at objects unseen. They seem to have souls—that ultimate retrogressive term!—though by "soul" we need imply nothing more metaphysical here than the sum total of one person's affect in the mind of another. Having this experience of other people (or of fictional simulacra of people) is an annoyingly persistent habit of actual humans, no matter how many convincing theoretical arguments attempt to bracket and contain the impulse, to carefully unhook it from transcendental ideas, or simply to curse it by one of its many names: realism, humanism, naturalism, figuration. People will continue to look at people—to listen to them, read about them, or reach out and touch them—and on such flimsy sensory

foundations spin their private fantasias. Art has many more complex pleasures and problems, to be sure, but still this consideration of "souls" should be counted among them.

And when I asked myself, inevitably, who these souls in the gallery were, I thought of a group of intensely creative people in a small community, living simply in poky garrets, watchful and sensitive, determined and focussed. Sometimes when they were flush—having sold a painting or a story—they'd do something purely for aesthetic pleasure, like buy a candy-striped divan or an owl or travel to Cadiz. Early New York beatniks, maybe, or some forgotten, South London chapter of the Bloomsbury Group. Poets, writers, painters, dancers, dreamers, philosophers—and lovers of same.

"A Cage For The Love" (2017). Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

This fantasy was certainly my own projection, but I could find its narrative roots in the muted, modernist color palette and the "timeless" clothes, which turn out to be not so timeless: during the early decades of the twentieth century, Vanessa Bell wore these simple shifts (and no shoes) and Duncan Grant painted both his daughter and his Jamaican lover, Patrick Nelson, in similar swift blocks of color, where shirt or blouse meets trousers or skirt in a single mussed line, without recourse to belts or buttons. Yiadom-Boakye often cites the unfashionable British painter Walter Sickert as an influence, and it is perhaps here that the congruence occurs: Virginia Woolf was also an admirer of Sickert, and published a monograph about him; Vanessa, her sister, illustrated the cover.

Born in 1860, and a member of the Camden Town Group, Sickert, like Yiadom-Boakye, was gifted at painting wet-on-wet (completing canvases quickly, to avoid having to break the "skin" of paint that had dried overnight), disliked painting from nature, and specialized in ambivalently posed figures in domestic settings, about whom one longs to tell stories. Certainly from Sickert (and Degas before him) Yiadom-Boakye has inherited a narrative compulsion, which has less to do with capturing the real than with provoking, in her audience, a desire to impose a story upon an image. Central to this novelistic practice is learning how to leave sufficient space, so as to give your audience room to elaborate. (Sickert, with his spooky and suggestive tableaux of Camden prostitutes, was so successful in doing this that he unwittingly planted the seeds of an outrageous fiction—that he was Jack the Ripper, a theory still alive today.)

Yet the keenness to ascribe to black artists some generalized aim—such as the insertion of the black figure into the white canon—renders banal their struggles with a particular canvas, and with the unique problem each art work poses. (For Yiadom-Boakye, the problem of a painting, she has said, begins with "a color, a composition, a gesture, a particular direction of the light. My starting points are usually formal ones.") It also risks flattening out individual conversations with tradition. Kerry James Marshall, for his recent show "Mastry," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, included a marvellously eclectic and unexpected selection of pieces from the Met's permanent collection, a supplementary "show within a show," which had the effect of positioning Marshall's own "mastry" as both a confrontation with and a continuation of the familiar Western European mastery of such figures as Holbein and Ingres. But Marshall also took us on a journey down side roads more obscure and intimate, deep into the thickets of an artist's individual passions. Why, out of all the masterpieces in the Met, does a man pick out a certain Japanese woodblock print, or a bull-shaped boli from West Africa? These are the mysteries of personal sensibility, often obscure to critics but never less than essential to artists themselves.

One part of a triptych, "Vigil For A Horseman" (2017).

Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Sometimes the process of making art is a conversation not so much with tradition as with the present moment. Born in 1977, Yiadom-Boakye was nineteen when an exhibition of works from the collection of Charles Saatchi, "Sensation," opened in London, at the Royal Academy. The show presented, among other excitements, Damien Hirst's shark, the Chapman brothers' polymorphously perverse child mannequins, and Sarah Lucas's mordant mattress with its cucumber penis. "Sensation" and its Young British Artists dominated the art conversation, enraptured the tabloids, and relegated British portraiture to the debased realm of one-note arguments and conceptual gimmicks. (The most famous portrait in "Sensation"—Marcus Harvey's "Myra," a re-creation of a notorious photo of the British child-murderer Myra Hindley, rendered in a child's handprints—sparked so much controversy that the show was almost shut down.) Even the good work was ill served by the central conceit of the

show, which encouraged visitors to look "past" the paint to the supposed sensation of the manifest content (Chris Ofili's Madonna with elephant dung, Jenny Saville's "fat" female nudes). At the time, Yiadom-Boakye had just finished a dispiriting one-year foundation course at Central Saint Martins, the prestigious art school in London, where she'd discovered, as she explained in a 2013 interview with Naomi Beckwith, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, that the conversations about her chosen form revolved around "what painters should or shouldn't be doing, linked to what the art world was or wasn't doing/saying." Some relief came when she left London, to pursue a B.A. at Falmouth College of Arts, in Cornwall, where the discussion was broader, though no less stringent: "If you were going to paint, you had to have a bloody good reason to do it. There was shame involved."

By the time Yiadom-Boakye returned to London, to do an M.F.A. at the Royal Academy, she had endured many lectures on the death and/or the irrelevance of painting, and her own practice came to reflect some of these debates. Some of her earlier work, by her own admission, uses narrative literally, with both image and title supporting each other tautologically. From the Beckwith interview: "Four black girls standing with headphones on plugged into the floor, basically taking instructions from the devil, and its title was: 'The Devil Made me do it.'. . . I hadn't really defined a style yet. Because I hadn't got to grips with painting yet, I ignored the actual power that painting could have; I didn't trust that paint could do anything."

In the early aughts, her work began to feature rather cartoonish figures, which perhaps owe something to George Condo's grotesques, and carry with them the strong sense of a young artist giving herself a deliberate handicap, or, to put it another way, a series of exploratory formal constraints. In these works, blackness seems to be depicted from the outside and therefore appears—as blackness is often seen, by others—under the sign of monstrosity. (A parallel example is Kerry James Marshall's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980), in which the artist appears as a grinning, minstrelesque mask.) Asked, in an e-mail, about this earlier style, Yiadom-Boakye replied, "It must have been a reaction to a lot of what was said to me. Humour and horror made sense because that was how I felt. Often-times it really worked, other times it was hugely dissatisfying. I think that's why I got rid of so much of it as I went along. Over time I realised I needed to think less about the subject and more about the painting. So I began to think very seriously about colour, light and composition. The

"Ever The Women Watchful" (2017). Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

more I worked, the more I came to realise that the power was in the painting itself. My 'colour politics' took on a whole new meaning."

One of the most persistent misapprehensions that exists between artists and viewers—and writers and readers—concerns the relative weight of content and form. Just as, in the mind of a writer, individual novels will tend, privately, to be considered not "the one in which John kills Jane" or "the one in which Kwame gets married" but, rather, "the one with the semicolons" or "the one in which I realized the possibility of commas," so that which looks like figuration to a layman like me ("Isn't that a beautiful fellow with his owl?") is, for the artist, as much about paint itself—its various possibilities, moods and effects, limits and freedoms. In nonfigurative work, these technical preoccupations are perhaps easier to spot, but, whether a human figure can be discerned in the work or no, the same battles with color, light, composition, and tone apply. One way to track intellectual movements in the arts is to follow the rise and fall of content versus form (as Susan Sontag, in her essay "On Style," pointed out not long after Greenberg effected his great separation of the abstract from the figurative). Falsely separating the two—and then insisting on the elevation of one over the other—happens periodically, and often has the useful side effect of revitalizing the art practice of the time, repressing what has become overly familiar or championing the new or the previously ignored.

"Sensation" marked Britain's parochial, delayed response to thirty years of complex aesthetic theory (mostly French and American) that had privileged content (in the form of "the concept") over form, but it also fatally and impurely mixed these ideas with the careerism of the Y.B.A.s themselves, who contributed their own professional anxieties, dressed up in contempt. Portraiture came to be considered "content," and therefore a subject that could be exhausted, despite (or maybe because of) its long, exalted history. And, once it was deemed to be exhausted, the consensus was that only the most hubristic (or nostalgic) young British artist would dare attempt it. *What is she trying to prove*? *Who does she think she is—an Old Master*? If you were a student in art school at the time, these debates could sound as much personal as theoretical. Over the years, Yiadom-Boakye has responded in paint, but also in writing, though always obliquely, as she seems to respond to everything. Some of her stories and poems involve

people, and many more involve animals, but all of them have the sly, wise tone of fable. In a typically Kafkaesque short prose poem, "Plans of the Night," she gives to an owl and a "Deeply Skeptical Pigeon" the role of artist and antagonist:

> It was possible to perform the feats
> for which he was famed
>
> During the Day.
>
> But for the Owl there was
> something Infinitely Preferable
>
> About the Night.
>
> The Owl had difficulty explaining
> this to other birds.

The same difficulty, I imagine, that a young, talented painter at Saint Martins in the late nineties might have had explaining her preference for portraiture:

> The Pigeon argued that the Owl's
> insistence on a Nocturnal Routine
>
> Had more to do with Self-
> Mythologizing and
>
> By extension, Self-
> Aggrandisement
>
> Than any Practical Need.

But in fact the Owl has "his mind on other things." He is an owl obsessed with practice itself, which, in his case, involves the hunting of a mouse in the grass. But the Skeptical Pigeon won't let it go:

> "This Mystery, it's not real you
> know.
>
> You're as dull and predictable as
> the Rest of Us."

The Owl, silent, focusses on his prey. Meanwhile, the Pigeon continues to upbraid him for his unseemly ambition:

> "How appropriate! Always sat a
> Bough or two higher than the Rest
> of Us, looking down on everyone
> as usual.". . .
>
> "You think you're Special, that you
> have some Authority over the
> Night."

The Owl, no longer listening, readies himself to swoop and catch that mouse, but, when he finally does so, his wing smacks the Pigeon in his head, breaking his neck and killing him. Cold comfort—the mouse, who has witnessed it all, escapes:

> The Owl, a Bird of Few Words,
> cursed the Pigeon for depriving
> him of a meal . . .
>
> The Owl decided to go in search
> of something substantial
>
> Like a rabbit or a mole or a skunk.

"Under-Song For A Cipher" is substantial. There is an owl-like virtuosity to it, silent, unassuming—but deadly. Not yet forty, Yiadom-Boakye is a long way down the path to "mastry," and you do not doubt she will reach her destination. But the past two decades of art criticism have not been kind to formal mastery: it has been considered something inherently suspicious, a message sometimes too swiftly absorbed by artists themselves. From an essay on Yiadom-Boakye, "The Meaning of Restraint," by the French cultural critic Donatien Grau: "We can sense virtuosity in every inch of the artist's paintings, but it is always rather subdued, and never blatantly exposed. She makes the decision to not abandon herself in representational extravagance, to rather be discreet in the demonstration of her painterly capacity."

"Mercy Over Matter" (2017). The paintings say little, explicitly, but you hear much.

Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Those days are done: here is blatant virtuosity, hiding in plain sight, and the restraint has shifted to the narrative itself, which now offers us only as much as we might need to prompt our own creative projections—no more, no less. Many critics have noted that this return to "painterly capacity" is particularly notable in black artists, and, strange indeed, that they should be the gateway—the permission needed—to return to the figurative, to the possibility of virtuosity! Why this might be the case is a fraught question, and Yiadom-Boakye, in her interview with Beckwith, proves herself slyly aware of its implications: "How many times have I heard from someone saying, 'You're lucky. You were born with a subject.' Well, isn't everyone?"

It's a familiar, backhanded compliment. *Blackness is in fashion—lucky you!* Implicit is the querulous ressentiment of the Skeptical Pigeon, who would be the type to come right out and say it: if these paintings were all of white people, would they have garnered the same attention, the same success? (In 2013, Yiadom-Boakye was short-listed for the Turner Prize, and in the past few years her paintings have begun to sell at auction for prices approaching seven hundred thousand dollars.) Well, the new has an aesthetic value, of this there is no doubt, and it's one that any smart artist is wise to exploit. But what Yiadom-Boakye does with brown paint and brown people is indivisible. Everyone is born with a subject, but it is fully expressed only through a commitment to form, and Yiadom-Boakye is as committed to her kaleidoscope of browns as Lucian Freud was to the veiny blues and the bruised, sickly yellows that it was his life's work to reveal, lurking under all that pink flesh. In his case, no one thought to separate form from content, and Yiadom-Boakye's work is, among other things, an attempt to insist on the same aesthetic unities that white artists take for granted.

"The Matters" (2016). Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shaiman Gallery, New York.

"Under-Song For A Cipher." If it were a novel's title, we would submit it to textual analysis. *Undersong:* 1. A subordinate or subdued song or strain, esp. one serving as an accompaniment or burden to another. 2. An underlying meaning; an undertone. *Cipher:* 1. A person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a "mere nothing." 2. A secret or disguised manner of writing, whether by characters arbitrarily invented, or by an arbitrary use of letters or characters in other than their ordinary sense. To these definitions, taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, I'd add the significance of "cipher" in hip-hop: a circle of rappers taking turns to freestyle over a beat. Then, with this knowledge in hand, I might turn to one Yiadom-Boakye painting in particular, "Mercy Over Matter," in which a man holds a bird on his finger. The undersong here is underplumage: those jewel-like greens and purples and reds you can spot beneath the oil-slick surface of certain black-feathered birds. The man's jacket magically displays this same underplumage; so does his skin; so does his bird. He is a black man. He is often thought of as a nothing, a cipher. But he has layers upon layers upon layers. ♦

This article appears in other versions of the June 19, 2017, issue, with the headline "A Bird of Few Words."

Viveros-Faune, Christian. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Paints It Black At The New Museum." *The Village Voice*. 20 June 2017. Online.

village VOICE

ART

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Paints It Black At The New Museum

by CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNE

JUNE 20, 2017

"Vigil For A Horseman" (2017) by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST/CORVI-MORA, LONDON/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

To walk in to British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's current exhibition at the New Museum is to leave the downtown institution and enter an impressively elegant party. The reveal happens as soon as you exit the museum's twin elevators: The loft-like gallery is painted burgundy; the lighting inside the space is nightclub-moody; beyond the visitors' heads more than a dozen painted figures are visible — hung so low that they directly meet the viewer's gaze. Though these are portraits of entirely fictional people, they remain the folks in the room you most want to meet.

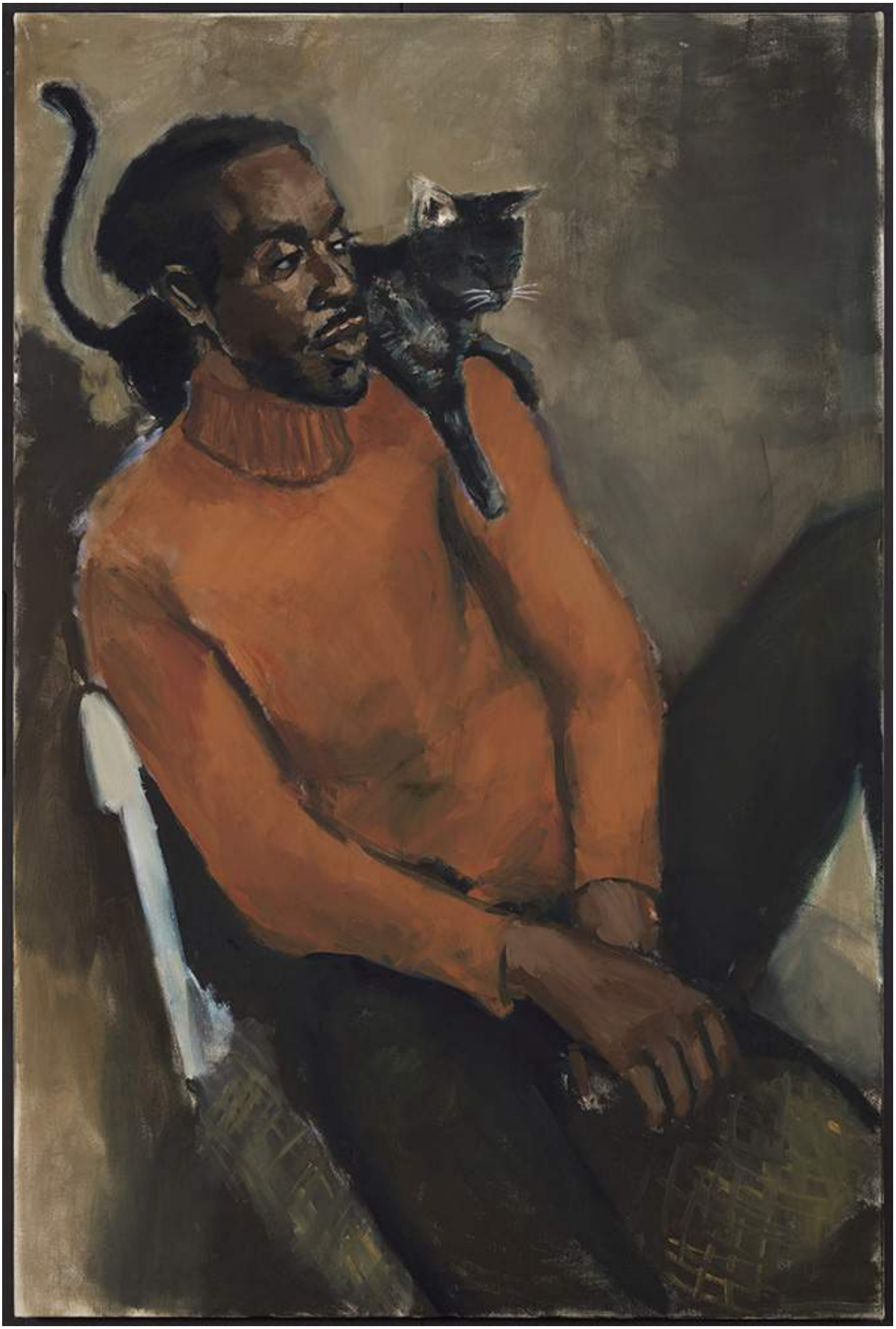
Standing, sitting, or lying down, Yiadom-Boakye's figures look back at the viewer with uncommon self-assurance. They are the contemporary kin of the popes, kings, and queens painted by Old Masters and proto-Modernists from Velázquez to Joshua Reynolds to Édouard Manet. Up-to-date portraits that recall the stoicism of Renaissance martyrs, they also channel the secular saints of the African diaspora. There's the self-possession of a James Baldwin–like figure seated at a café table, the steely mettle of Shirley Chisholm in an unidentified woman's set jaw, the youthful worldliness of Lorraine Hansberry in a strapping ballerina's arabesque.

Not so much looking back in anger as encountering the world confidently, Yiadom-Boakye's mysterious yet familiar figures exude that one thing all convincing human representations throughout history possess — formal presence. Their elegant bearing grows significantly in stature when contrasted starkly with the historical absence of black faces and bodies during some five centuries of European painting.

The first solo U.S. museum show for Britain's 2013 Turner Prize contender in seven years (the last was at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010), Yiadom-Boakye's current outing is a mini-blockbuster that is major in every way except for the number of works on view. Made especially for the New Museum, the seventeen paintings included in the exhibition (one is a triptych) come together like a plotless yarn, or what the French call *nouveau roman* (think Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie*). Pictures of imaginary people the artist composites from drawings, magazine clippings, and her own memories, her likenesses rely on the viewer to complete their storylines. The exhibition's title, "Under-Song for a Cipher," underscores Yiadom-Boakye's oblique vision: Like all portraits, hers are grounded in history, yet they ultimately function as a magnet for the viewer's associative filings.

The daughter of Ghanaian parents who moved to London in the Sixties to work as nurses for the National Health Service, the now 39-year-old Yiadom-Boakye underwent the routinely alienating experience of being both black and a child of immigrants in the U.K. After discarding a childhood interest in optometry — "the science got in the way," she told one interviewer — she took up art, eventually finding her way to painting: a different but related study of visual phenomena. On receiving a graduate degree from London's Royal Academy, the artist was tapped for her career-firing debut at the Studio Museum. Numerous presentations in biennials, institutions, and galleries (as well as prizes) followed. On the evidence, few match the concision and coherence of the artist's current display at the New Museum.

Arranged around the wine-colored walls of the museum's large fourth-floor gallery, Yiadom-Boakye's work offers an encyclopedic sweep of historical portraiture, but with a pantheon of sensuous black figures depicted against neutral backdrops instead of the usual Caucasian suspects. Her habit of posing her imaginary subjects in isolation against monochrome grounds summons the standing portraits of James McNeill Whistler; the half-dozen pictures of dancers in leotards, though mostly male, strongly evoke the ballerinas of Edgar Degas; and the Brit artist's loose brushwork, simplification of details, and penchant for leaving key parts of her paintings unresolved recall the no-frills canvases of Manet — the nineteenth century's "painter of modern life." Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are so pared-down, in fact, they resemble a remark ascribed to Manet: "There are no lines in nature, only areas of color, one against the other."



"In Lieu of Keen Virtue" (2017)

IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST/CORVI-MORA, LONDON/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Completed mostly in a day and without the benefit (or hindrance) of *disegno* — the substrate of drawing that undergirds traditional portrait paintings — Yiadom-Boakye's pictures combine spare but bravura brushwork and a restrained palette full of various shades of brown into a style that has been described by supporters as "improvised and effortless, even virtuoso." Additionally, the artist actively uses her Old Master–ish manner, which critic Robert Storr refers to in the exhibition catalog as "the warm amber-to-sepia glow of aged pictures about which many commentators wax poetic," as cover for further racial ghostbusting. The representation of skin in Yiadom-Boakye's portraits notably runs from light to dark brown. This "mixed race" palette encourages viewers of all hues to see not just the oppositions associated with Otherness, but difference within difference.

Yet it's certain first-rate painterly passages in Yiadom-Boakye's simple-seeming, unfinished-looking canvases that best materialize her work's powerful ambiguity. If, in the artist's own words, her titles function less as an explanation than "an extra mark in the paintings," then key portions of thinly painted canvases like *An Amber Cluster* and *8am Cadiz* court enigma, shadowed by the history of representation, with an expert hand. The first painting, for instance, features a black dancer whose wide-collared orange shirt incorporates the chevrons of the canvas's weave, while the second reprises a barefoot, forward-facing, brotherman take on Andrew Wyeth's 1948 painting *Christina's World*. In Yiadom-Boakye's coolly ironic version, the eyes, nose, and mouth of the picture's male subject are strangely illuminated by white flashes of exposed canvas.

A third work, *Vigil for a Horseman*, consists of three paintings that feature two black males attired in black tops and red tights lounging atop a red-and-white-striped bed and a black-and-blue diamond-patterned cushion. A tour de force of patterned color and painterly restraint, the triptych and its absurd title propose a uniquely timely rationale

for making finely calibrated pictures of black figures. Painted without the usual visual markers that might indicate a historical signature or social and cultural origins (which we know to be fictional), the figures exist in an allegorically retroactive space — a present where work like this, and that of other leading black artists, can aspire to self-invent a visual canon.

To paraphrase Baldwin, the story of the black figure in art is the story of what's missing in art — it is not a pretty story. In this lushly vibrant exhibition, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye updates art's oldest medium with an expert hand and a bracingly new message.

D'Souza, Aruna. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: The painter's lush oil portraits explore the work of empathy." *4Columns.org.* 24 May 2017. Online.

Visual Art 05.24.17

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Aruna D'Souza

The painter's lush oil portraits explore the work of empathy.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher, installation view. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Image courtesy New Museum.

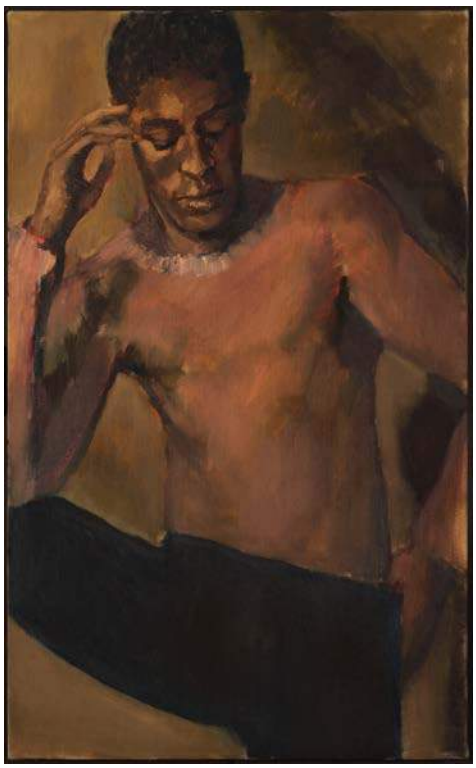
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher, *the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York City, through September 3, 2017*

His early twentieth-century admirers used to praise Cézanne for being able to paint his wife like he painted an apple—for turning her into a pure pretext for his formal and optical investigations. What underpinned this assessment was the idea that for less radical artists, portraiture (at least in its Western, post-Renaissance incarnations) is an act of empathy—that the sitter's humanity is an essential component of the depiction, as essential as the canvas and paint that give it physical presence. Cézanne's monstrous genius, as described by his most ardent fans, was that he rejected this convention of the genre: his devotion to questions of form (color, shape, line, composition—purely pictorial things) was such that he was willing to empty out his sitter's very being, and turn existence into mere thingness.

British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's brilliance—and I use that word advisedly, for this show is indeed brilliant—is that she is able to do exactly the reverse: to draw the viewer into an emotional connection with a someone who isn't a someone at all, to coax us to feel empathy for a non-being, an illusion, a mere representation produced by a few strokes of goop on cloth. To take those purely pictorial things and conjure humanity out of them.

The seventeen canvases that make up *Under-Song for a Cipher*, the 2013 Turner Prize finalist's installation at the New Museum, are unmistakably portraits. All but one created in the first months of 2017, these lush oils on linen, the most traditional of media, are painted in bravura brushstrokes and stick to a relatively somber palette. They

mine the history of their genre in myriad ways, and evoke intense, affective reactions, at least for this viewer. This is painting that leaves a lump in your throat.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *An Amber Cluster*, 2017. Oil on linen, 51 ⅛ × 31 ½ inches. Image courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Each of them recalls—glancingly, allusively—some of the most iconic images in art history. *An Amber Cluster*—the image of a man, cropped close, one leg on a chair and arms angled out from his side, his shirt stretched so tight across his torso as to be mistaken, almost, for flesh, save its pink tone and a vague indication of a neckline—channels a Picasso rose-period acrobat; the herringbone-weave canvas on which it is painted hearkens back to Titian. The pair of women in *Ever the*

Women Watchful—one seated in an ornate, wrought-iron chair and the other standing, peering through a looking glass, has a whiff of Édouard Manet, of Gustave Caillebotte, of Mary Cassatt—an impressionist mélange. *Vigil for a Horseman*, a work made up of three canvases showing a man posed languorously on a couch from three different points of view, has an air of a deconstructed Harlequin, his commedia dell'arte ancestry called forth not in his spandex costume but in the diamond-patterned upholstery and striped drapery that surround him. I could go on. That her subjects are dark-skinned underlines the whiteness of the Western canon, yes, but what could be more natural than a black artist painting bodies that reflect her own? ("They're all black because . . . I'm not white," she said in a recent interview.)

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Ever the Women Watchful*, 2017. Oil on linen, 78 ¾ × 51 ⅜ inches. Image courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, and Jack Shainman Gallery.

These subtle art historical intimations result in characters who seem oddly familiar despite their anonymity. In this sense, they remind me of Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*, in which the signifiers of classic Hollywood cinema—lighting, composition, costume, pose, hairstyles, makeup, settings—are so cannily deployed that it's hard to believe there's no actual film to which the photos correspond. But unlike Sherman's heroines, which are silver-screen "types," Yiadom-Boakye's figures, who all seem to hold themselves, even in repose, with the taut readiness of dancers, have an almost preternatural specificity about them. The touch of fingers to a forehead, the splay of feet, the arch of a back, the furrow of a brow: these are not generic gestures, but ones that bespeak a distinctive being-in-the-body that seems, for lack of a better word, real.

And yet, they are emphatically not real—there is no one, living or dead, that they are meant to reference or call to mind. (The point is made clearly in the wall text that opens the installation.) What should we say instead? "Imaginary" doesn't quite get at the complexity of their genesis, as they are not invented purely in the mind but rather via magazine cuttings that Yiadom-Boakye gathers in notebooks to use as source materials, grouped in a rough taxonomy of "nudes, different body parts, different sorts of gazes," per Elena Filipovic, writing in the slim catalogue for the exhibition. Perhaps "fictional" comes closest—not least because the artist has a parallel practice as a writer of short stories, but also because of the pregnancy of each image, the sense that

all of these figures hanging on the walls have a biography, an entire life to account for.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher, installation view. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Image courtesy New Museum.

Yiadom-Boakye hangs her canvases low to the ground, so that we can more easily project ourselves into her subjects' spaces, as bare and undefined as they are. But there are other ways in which our approach—and, as a consequence, our imagined connection with these figures—is impeded. Their faces—the feature that we most associate with a person's individuality—are, to put it plainly, hard to see. The gallery is quite dark, and the wine-red paint that covers the walls absorbs what

light there is. Add to this the fact that the visages are heavily worked in a patchy, impastoed, and scumbled way that lends them a sheen not apparent over the rest of the surface. At first I blamed the lighting, and then my eyes, until I realized—I think—that this effect is wholly deliberate. An encounter with these figures requires work—the viewer must adjust herself, move slightly this way and that, to accommodate them. To grasp them completely, that is to say. Which is what empathy, too, forces us to do: to transform ourselves, in big and small ways, in order to understand other beings in the world—to treat them as fully human, no matter how abstract they might first seem.

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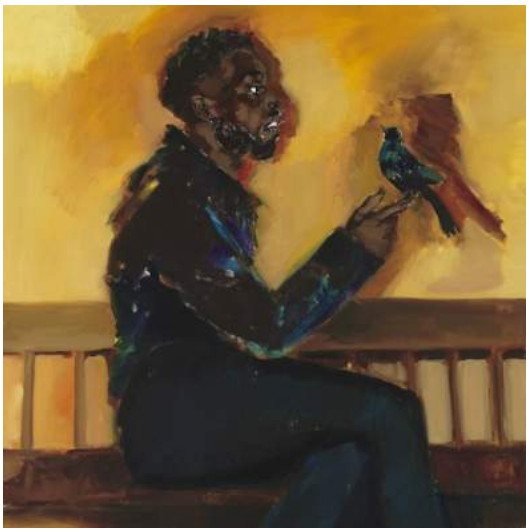
Interview

ART

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE'S FICTIVE FIGURES

By ANTWAUN SARGENT

Published 05/15/17



British-Ghanaian painter and writer Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's recently opened solo exhibition, "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song For A Cipher," at the New Museum in New York features 17 large-scale, low-hanging canvases of fictional black figures. They are engaged in moments of absolute abandon, repose, and contemplation. *Mercy Over Matter* (2017) brings to life a scene of a barefoot male, sitting on a wooden bench, legs crossed with an emerald bird resting on his sable index finger. The man and bird gaze at each other admiringly. Hues of blue, green, yellow, and red flicker through his body. Wiped away is the current weary state of the world. It is replaced with a highly emotive, earthy, orange-yellow background that feels domestic and perennial. "When I think of the figure, I think of immortality or an otherness that is just out of this world, representing an endless

possibility," says Yiadom-Boakye, who was the first black woman shortlisted for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2013. "For me, the act of painting reflects blending in or standing out, being ignored or prominent. It's a psychological space, a rumination." The way Yiadom-Boakye moves paint across linen canvases recalls the 19th-century portraiture of John Singer Sargent and Édouard Manet. It is as if her figures are in private states of salvation, presenting a version of themselves that the popular imagination refuses to admit is achievable for the black body. That's the power of her fictions: they are pure reflections of real life, yet somehow hard to see.

The fantasy and rhythmic nature of a Yiadom-Boakye painting can be glimpsed in artist's written works of fiction, too. In an excerpt of her poem "Problems With the Moon" she writes:

The Clearest Of Problems With
    The Moon
Came when the dogs, wolves, foxes
    and other
Canine derivatives, lost their howls,
    barks
And nocturnal ecstasies to silence,
Shrugging and Eyeing each other
    in Mists
Of Cold and Total Incredulity
Under trees, in kennels, dens,
    car-parks and
Out-houses. In blackness of night,
    low-lit
By lamp and that Problematic Moon.

The day before Yiadom-Boakye's exhibition opened, we shared a slice of chocolate cake at a bakery a block away from the New Museum, and mused over building black characters on the page and canvas.

ANTWAUN SARGENT: The most fascinating thing about your paintings to me is that the figures are complete works of fiction.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE: Everything's a composite. I work from sources. I make scrapbooks, I make drawings, and collect things that I might use later, so they are all very literal compositions in the way that I pull things together. A lot of that decision-making happens on the painting itself. In each case it's a negotiation of how I want each figure to fill the space. In the show, there are recurring things like a seated male, but how they are placed on the seat—what they are doing, where they are looking—changes. Across all of the works it was about thinking through what the gesture was; it affects how you read across it. I always wanted a show to be a kind of dialogue between works, even though I don't necessarily compose them strictly in that way. As I am working in the studio, there a lot of things are around me that I am thinking about. I normally keep one painting up during the whole duration of working on a body of work, so there is that one painting that anchors everything else.

SARGENT: For this show what was that one painting?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: There's a man with a bird, *Mercy Over Matter*, with a yellow background that was on the studio wall for the first half of me making the body of work. Then that came off the wall and was put in storage. After that it was a large painting of a woman dancer, *Light Of The Lit Wick*, with two large circles behind her.

SARGENT: One signature aspect of your painting is that the figure almost blends into its surroundings, because the earth tones of your backdrops are reflective of the character's dark brown skin tones. There are a lot of things that are being signified but particularly there's a critique of the hypervisibility, which Ralph Ellison talked about, that renders blackness completely seen and unseen. Is that part of the negotiation between the figure and its surroundings in your work?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: Maybe I think more about black thought than black bodies. When people ask about the aspect of race in the work, they are looking for very simple or easy answers. Part of it is when you think other people are so different

than yourself, you imagine that their thoughts aren't the same. When I think about thought, I think about how much there is that is common.

SARGENT: You write fiction. Has that informed the work at all?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: Not directly, but there is something common. The same thread of logic runs through my writing and painting. It's something to do with having a particular way of thinking creatively. The things I can't paint, I write, and the things I can't write, I paint. There are many ways that I try to write but I don't consider myself a very accomplished writer. [*laughs*] I really enjoy building characters and making them nuanced in a way that I am not sure the paintings are. I've been really toiling over this detective story.

SARGENT: [*laughs*] That's very British of you.

YIADOM-BOAKYE: It is quite British! I love Miss Marple [from Agatha Christie's novels and short stories]. I am trying to write one about a black policeman and I keep changing the way I am trying to do it. It's taking me ages because it exhausts me in a different way. If I could paint it, in a way, it would be easier than trying to get all of this information out in words. So as much as there is something common, I do keep the two quite separate. I feel the painting has a certain type of narrative in mind that stops short of an end of a sentence.

SARGENT: Are there similarities or differences in the way that, say, you think about building the black male character sitting in the chair in a painting like *Medicine At Playtime*, and the black policeman you are trying to currently write?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: In the painting I would allow one gesture that would maybe be a paragraph of description; it's making a mark on a canvas and allowing that to do what maybe three paragraphs would do. You could infer as much from the gestures as you might from the description on paper, but in the written form my process is somehow slower. I think with painting there is as much as a language as there is with writing, so for me, a very quick washy mark reads as the same as the shortness of a particular sentence. I like short sentences maybe because I like short marks. I don't know! [*laughs*]

SARGENT: There has also been an evolution in your use of color from your earlier work to present.

YIADOM-BOAKYE: In most of my early work, I struggled with color as an aspect of painting. I always struggled to introduce it because I felt like I hadn't had the satisfaction [of it]. It requires a certain type of care that I needed to develop. My process was different as well; there were a lot these earthy dark tones from which I'd try to drag the figure out. I think now I am bolder about color. But I think a lot of that play has to do with what are the colors within a color? What are the colors within a black skin tone? Whether it's underlaid with blue, orange, or locating the yellow in it, how do you push that forward or pull it back? What does a figure in the landscape with dark skin actually look like? What does green do next to brown? And what goes around the green and brown, in order for the two to make sense? There's something about the figure looking superimposed that I always felt, certainly in relationship to my own painting, was a failure. It has always been a painterly challenge to qualify a figure by its surroundings so that it represents a real harmony of color.

SARGENT: That's interesting because in a lot of your work there is only a vague worldly context. As the figure emerges out of the background, I have often wondered, where are they? Is it a place I know? Because they seem totally free, and I wonder, have I ever been in a space where that is possible in real life or psychologically? It all seems completely timeless.

YIADOM-BOAKYE: The timelessness is completely important. It's partly about removing things that would become in some way nostalgic. There aren't really any markers of time, like furniture or a particular style of shoe that denote a particular period or place. I think that's why I like the outdoors, because it removes a sense of time and I want the painting to feel timeless, because it increases that sense of omnipotence. Part of it is, I do think of the work as political, and we think we know what political art is supposed to look like, but I think there are many ways to make it.

SARGENT: Right, we demand an explicitness when we think of political art. If it's

a protest sign, all the better. In what ways is the work political for you?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: Largely by dent of the fact that I am here and I am doing it. Nothing has felt easy or straightforward. It's hard to pin down what the politics would be, in a way. For me [the politics are] very visual and felt, thought, seen, but not necessarily put into words. The confusions and conditions within the work are the politics. The fact that a lot of the time the first thing people want to talk to me about is the racial angle, which is a part of the work and I am happy to talk about it, but it's not necessarily the first thing on my mind when I am making something.

SARGENT: I think part of the questioning of the racial markers of the work comes from the way people, both black and white, have been conditioned to look at art. When a black figure lands on a canvas it is believed to be automatically political. In your pictures you seem to say they don't have to be more than human and they don't have to signify some kind of moral language; they can simply signify their own personhood.

YIADOM-BOAKYE: That's totally it. I think that might be a manifesto, in and of itself: let people be. [*laughs*] I always say the work is not a celebration as such, because that's sometimes just as weird and excluding and perverse.

SARGENT: When Solange reached out and said your work served as an inspiration for her songwriting process for her really wonderful album, *A Seat at the Table,* was that in line with the possibilities of what you thought your paintings could do?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: Actually, I thought that was so wonderful. It weirdly felt in keeping with a lot of things I think about, so it was actually quite beautiful. I never would've dreamt of anyone doing that, so it was a lovely surprise. I love the idea of people being able to inspire each other. In the way that Prince's entire repertoire made me want to be an artist, not necessarily a musician, but an artist because I saw him as an artist. His work ethic was such a huge inspiration to me. This idea of making work every single day as if you are going to die the next, I think is really important for any artist. Prince was a real artist, he got up and worked fucking hard, and that's what it is about: the art meaning so much and you wanting to get it right. I see that in him, I see that in Solange—that rigor of making. I mean, I wanted to be Prince or Sheila E. when I was a child. I learned to play the drums! Music put pictures in my head.

SARGENT: That makes sense because your paintings rhyme. The way the colors bounce off each other and the light plays on the canvas is not unlike the way we experience sound. Have you painted musicians?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: No. There's a painting of a man with a guitar bopping around the studio somewhere, but I don't think it ever saw the light of day. Dancers, yes. Musicians, no.

SARGENT: This show features several paintings of dancers. What is it about dancers that draw you in?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: The very kind of visceral physical power and grace of dancers, and their occasional closeness to losing control. There's one particular wonderful woman in the show where you can't tell if she is dancing or about to fall over. She is sort of laughing.

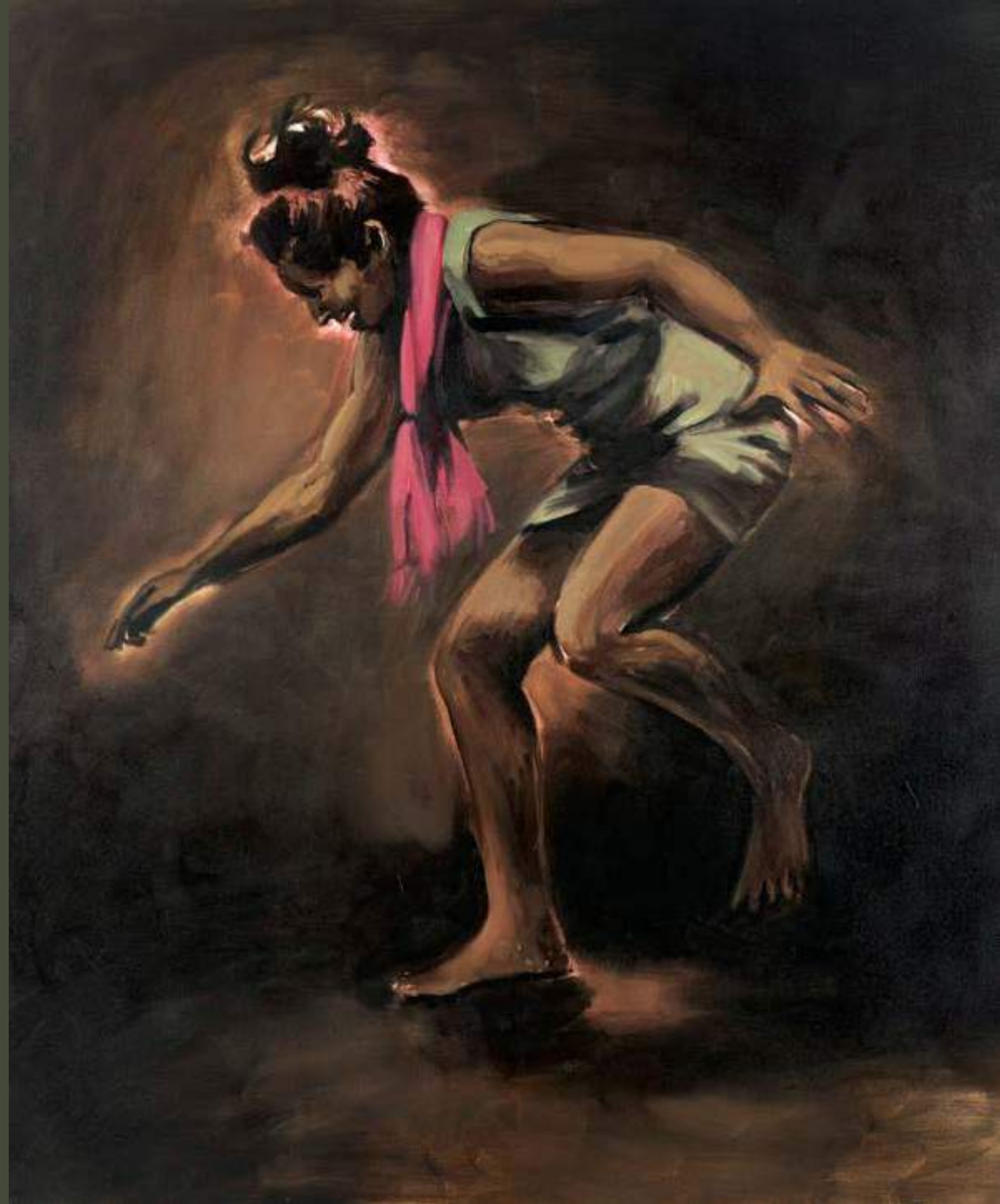
SARGENT: You recently sat for portraitists Kehinde Wiley and Toyin Ojih Odutola. Do you ever think about painting real life figures?

YIADOM-BOAKYE: Most of my training was painting from life. It was incredibly important for me because it allowed me to train my eyes to see everything that is there. But I realized early on that painting from life wasn't something that I was all that invested in. I was always more interested in the painting than I was the people. For me, removing that as a compulsion offered me a lot more freedom to actually paint and think about color, form, movement, and light. There is something very particular to the figures I do have that lifts them away from reality and offers them the kind of power that I am interested in exploring.

"LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE: UNDER-SONG FOR A CIPHER" IS ON VIEW AT THE NEW MUSEUM IN NEW YORK THROUGH SEPTEMBER 3, 2017.

Bradley, Rizvana. "The Quiet Bohemia of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Paintings." *Parkett*. No. 99, 2017: pp. 58-65

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, THE DEVIL HAVING SAID SO, 2012, oil on canvas, 71 x 63 $^{1}/_{8}$" /
WIE DER TEUFEL SAGT, Öl auf Leinwand, 180,3 x 160,3 cm.
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND CORVI-MORA, LONDON)

RIZVANA BRADLEY

The Quiet Bohemia of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Paintings

A recent painting by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye depicts three young black women who appear to be dancers staring out over a misty horizon. Two stand rather intently with their hands on their hips, while the third breaks from the choreography of her two companions; turned slightly toward us, her pose seems to invite external speculation. All three sketchily occupy a foreground as hazy as the distance that commands their attention. Although the background vista is barely visible to us, it compels our gaze as well. The subdued quality of the scene, modulated by undertones of greens, browns, blues, and grays that vibrate across the canvas, presents a stark contrast to the violence of the work's title: BLOOD SOAKED SOUTH (2015) immediately brings to mind the American South, and the history and ongoing legacy of slavery, or the Global South, and Africa's brutal colonial inheritance. But the "South" of the painting is without territory, a metonym for displacement and diasporic yearning that cannot be rendered pictorially.

Avoiding the usual optics of light and shade to create pictorial presence, Yiadom-Boakye's dreamlike vignettes explore what José Muñoz has described as "a visuality that is not organized around the normative glare of a harsh daylight."[1] But if place is indefinite in her paintings, the figures who people them are distinct. Even when their forms recede into darkness, we can recognize an eclectic range of personalities, from solitary characters in sprouting feathered collars (such as GREENFINCH, 2012, and BLUEBIRD, 2014) to small social groups that congregate or pose together in bohemian artistic circles, strolling, sprinting, or swaying together (as in HARD WET EPIC, 2010; FIREFLY, 2011). There is a productive tension between Yiadom-Boakye's obscured landscapes as they point to the "anticipatory illumination" of art, which captures "that-which-is-not-yet-here," while her figures illustrate the emotional span of black life in the here and now.[2]

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In Yiadom-Boakye's skillful hands, portraiture becomes a medium for navigating the intricacies and complexities of black subjectivity. This is accomplished via an aesthetic of quiet, a mood that subtends all of her paintings—whether they portray the calm of looking and waiting or the emotional release of running and dancing. In his 2012 book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie considers this concept "as a frame for reading black culture, [to] expose life that is not already determined by narratives of the social world." Whereas the politics of representation demand that "black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black," Quashie points to quiet as an under-recognized fundamental that structures the emotional life of black culture.[3] Quiet might be understood as

a metaphor for the full range of one's inner life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears . . . [T]

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, BLOOD SOAKED SOUTH, 2015, oil on linen, 98 7/16 x 78 3/4" / BLUTGETRÄNKTER SÜDEN, Öl auf Leinen, 250 x 200 cm.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, GREENFINCH, 2012, oil on canvas, 55 1/8 x 39 3/8" / GRÜNFINK, Öl auf Leinwand, 140 x 100 cm.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, BLUEBIRD, 2014, oil on canvas, 78 15/16 x 51 7/16" / HÜTTENSÄNGER, Öl auf Leinwand, 200,5 x 130,6 cm.

o notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way.[4)]

Paying attention to Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, both intellectually and emotionally, we sense that her figures' enigmatic poses signify something beyond the immediacy of their gestures—they suggest subjects lost in thought and contemplation. Take REPOSE I (2015), for example, in which a bearded man leans over the back of a chair or couch. The sheer affectivity that radiates from his face—eyebrows raised, eyes lit up—seduces and draws us in; we not only want to see what he sees but to experience the world with the same private excitement.

While Yiadom-Boakye's technique has often been compared to that of Manet, Cézanne, or Sargent, among other painters in the nineteenth-century canon, to my mind, her work recalls the portraits of Beauford Delaney (1901–1979), one of the best-known African-American painters of the Harlem Renaissance. Delaney's portrayals of his social circle of artists and writers, as well as of himself, attempt, in their textured renderings of the visage, to access and convey the inner workings of the psyche. Like Yiadom-Boakye, he paints the details of the face in slight exaggeration: In Delaney's numerous portraits of James Baldwin, the writer's bulging eyes are almost caricatured; but he also makes us feel thought as it

moves through his subject. Similarly, in Delaney's PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MUSICIAN (1970), we encounter a figure gazing off into the distance, alone with his drifting thoughts.

Yiadom-Boakye does not paint real people, but her imaginary sitters epitomize the rich vocabularies of movement and gesture that have saturated black avant-gardism's artistic and literary traditions. These avant-gardist vocabularies can be teased out of the tensions lived in the diaspora, in the shared sense of the fractured and layered temporalities of the past and the present, of history and memory, and vernacular and cosmopolitan imaginaries, which her work builds upon. These abstract tensions are held in the

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, REPOSE II, 2015, oil on canvas, 35 3/4 x 21 7/8" / RUHE II, Öl auf Leinwand, 90,8 x 55,5 cm.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, A BIRD IN THE HAND, 2015, oil on linen, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8" / EIN SPATZ IN DER HAND, Öl auf Leinen, 80 x 60 cm.

poses of the figure she paints, as in A BIRD IN THE HAND, ALL OTHER FINDINGS, and A PIXIE AND A PRIEST (all 2015). Their bodily attunements appear to be suspended between the serenity of inaction and a fleeting anticipation of movement. I immediately recall how these themes play out in the fictional worlds of writers as disparate as Nella Larsen and the poet Bob Kaufman, and even more prominent poets and writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Amiri Baraka, up through the present in works by Colson Whitehead, Teju Cole, Zadie Smith, and others. In Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, we again discern the slightly eccentric, troubled bohemian whose singular experience unfolds from the fabric of black collective life.

Indulging the action of the brush as it traces the body, Yiadom-Boakye renders the physicality of her figures through shimmering tracks of tawny, brown,

and black hues; she uses paint to emphasize the material forms of blackness and the material life of black skin and flesh. If, as previous writers have commented, her paintings are in part about the materiality of paint, this is not detached from representations of blackness and sexuality, which inflect the pictorial space and the painted surface; the composition of the works further reveals the significance of their interanimation. Blackness and sexuality are here treated not as identity categories but as forms, in a radical transposition and translation of the measure and feel of black corporeality from the embodied world of the pose to the canvas. The beauty of her work can be found in how these ideas illuminate paint and enable light and color to take on richly textured accents. Consider SOLITAIRE (2015), which depicts a male figure dressed in a simple all-black ensemble, as if in mid-rehearsal, with a fox stole casually thrown over one shoulder. He stands with one foot gently turned out, away from the viewer, pointing in the opposite direction as his forward gaze, a position that tilts the portrait and throws its composition slightly off-center. The solitaire's imminent performance reverses the source of light in the image: Light bounces off him, but is nowhere to be seen around him; in effect, he becomes his own spotlight.

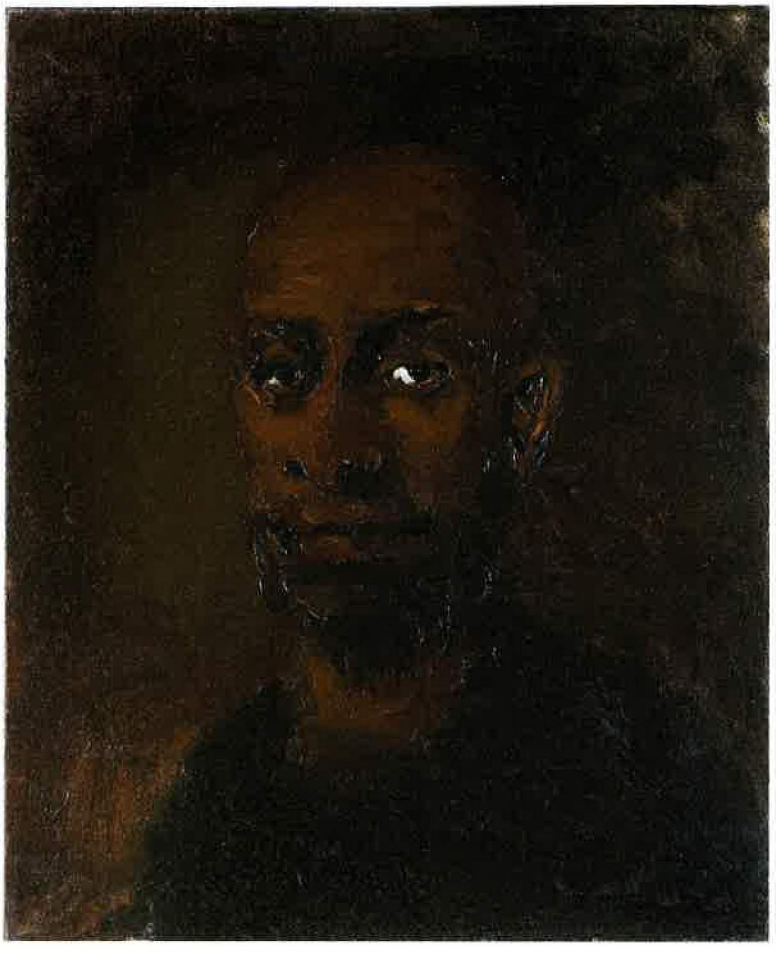
Quiet, as Quashie reminds us, is not the same as *silence* or *stillness*. "Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed," he writes, "and is an interiority that is about withholding, absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence . . . and can encompass fantastic motion." Later, Quashie refers to an image of a 115-year-old woman born into slavery: "What looks like stillness in the photograph is . . . a whole world of agitation."[5] Fred Moten thinks about the subdued qualities of motion specifically with respect to black objecthood within the visual context of an 1882 photograph by Thomas Eakins, AFRICAN-AMERICAN GIRL NUDE, RECLINING ON A COUCH. Moten states that the young girl, posed like an odalisque, "quickens against being stilled"; echoing Ralph Ellison, he describes her as "moving without moving," seizing upon the little girl's "illicit display" not just simply of herself but of herself in relation to a larger history of people posed as things and commodities. At stake is the "undisciplined image" of the girl's stillness, which Moten explains is "always partial," precisely because of its internally resistant motion against that history. Here the pose is a performative iteration of what Moten calls the "object in resistance," and an expression of "blackness-as-fugitivity."[6]

Perhaps this is why Yiadom-Boakye chooses to paint so many dancers, whose very métier is movement. This restless fugitivity is echoed in the irreducibility of their poses. In PROFIT FROM A PROLOGUE (2015), for instance, three figures are dressed identically in black leggings and a white sleeveless top, but each takes up a unique physical stance. While it is unclear whether the work depicts multiple views of a single person or different individuals, the tripled figure signifies the links between subjectivity, temporality, and finitude, of implied encounters with the self at different moments in time, potentially split across geographical spaces, territories, and histories. The work points to the way consciousness is shaped at the nexus of these disjunctions, which have enriched the cultural imaginaries that constitute a quintessentially diasporic experience. Just as in BLOOD SOAKED SOUTH, the gaze that perhaps emanates from a single self splits off from an encounter with multiple selves scattered across the nondescript, hazy horizon. At stake is the desire that comes together in that gaze, and what might be found at that horizon's nebulous vanishing point. These visions of diaspora, which move through the speculative poses of lovers and friends, lone travelers and solitary thinkers, and bohemian circles, trace the rich histories of black life and artistry that have rendered blackness visceral, spontaneous, and spiritual.

1) José Muñoz, "The Sense of Watching Tony Sleep," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106:3 (2007), 547.
2) Ibid.
3) Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 8, 4.
4) Ibid, 6.
5) Ibid, 30, 134.
6) Fred Moten, "Taste Flavor Dissonance Escape," in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 17, no. 2 (July 2007), 217–46.

Edwards, Adrienne. "Levitating Blackness: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Right to Opacity." *Parkett*. No. 99, pp. 74-86.

Levitating Blackness:



ADRIENNE EDWARDS

The paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye always depict black figures, frequently suspending them in enveloping darkness. From CASEIN and CHORD (both 2007) to PEACH TREE (2015), the artist has continually returned to the visual motif of black flesh slipping into spans of nearly monochromatic color. Wavering between lush realism and abstraction, these canvases illuminate Yiadom-Boakye's poetic ambivalence toward representation in visual art, in particular, the representation of black subjects. Her "black paintings" use subtlety and seduction to challenge the expectations of blackness in art and question the clichés of its representations.

Debates over black representation have proliferated in the interlinked discourses of Western art history and black studies for more than a hundred

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Left page / Linke Seite:
LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, CASEIN, 2007,
oil on linen, 21 5/8 x 18 1/8" /
KASEIN, Öl auf Leinen, 55 x 46 cm.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, CHORD, 2007,
oil on linen, 19 3/4 x 18 1/8" /
AKKORD, Öl auf Leinen, 50,1 x 46 cm.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Right to Opacity

years. Important early twentieth-century black American figures insisted on defining black art as part of a multi-front political, social, economic, and cultural effort to demonstrate the humanity of black people. Scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, believed art's sole purpose was to promote a civil rights agenda; in 1926, he wrote, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda."[1] Alain Locke, another architect of black racial advancement, argued for the creation of a particular black aesthetic that grew out of African formalism and technical mastery, combined with expressions unique to the black American experience. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement, founded by poet and activist Amiri Baraka, promoted a similar agenda, instigated by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Art of this period emphasized a turn to Africa for inspiration, the dramatization of black life, the portrayal of so-called black features and characteristics, and the depiction of suffering for strategic purposes.

The United Kingdom saw its own Black Arts Movement emerge in the 1980s, inspired in part by its American predecessor. However, the British movement sought to include all minority communities. As Stuart Hall later recalled, the term *black* was employed "without the careful discrimination of ethnic, racial, regional, national and religious distinctions which has since emerged." He continued:

It is used here not as the sign of an ineradicable genetic imprint but as a signifier of difference: a difference which, being historical, is therefore always changing, always located, always articulated with other signifying elements: but which, nevertheless, continues—persistently—to register its disturbing effects.[2)]

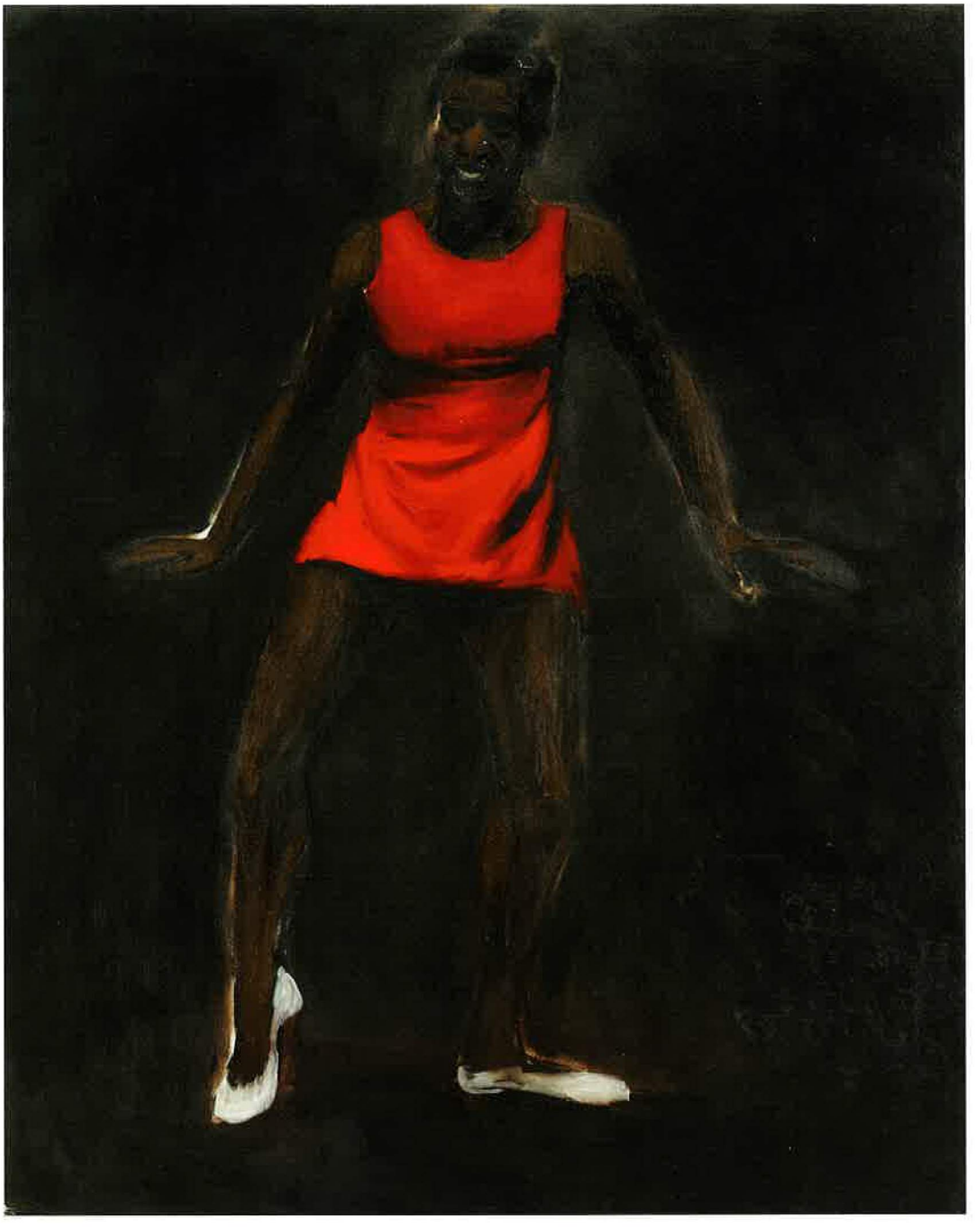
The idealistic coalescing of multi-ethnic people under the banner of blackness was the result of the specific historical fashioning of colonialism, the commonality established through the migrant experience, and the very real challenges of staking out a life in the metropole. All of these factors played a seminal role in the Black Arts Movement in the United Kingdom, leading to distinct characteristics in British visual art: themes such as exile and alienation from ethnic and national identity; an aesthetics of fragmentation, as seen in collage and montage, to speak to the sense of destabilization and precarity of everyday life; the inclusion of black popular culture through signifiers such as Rastafarianism, self-styling in dress and hair, and urban life and music; the intersectionality of blackness and gender and sexuality; and the use of graphics and text to underline a central message.

This newly focused artistic production occurred in the context of the Thatcher administration, whose conservative policies brought the further marginalization of minorities, excessive policing, and persistent race riots, from Brixton to Handsworth and beyond. Black artists responded accordingly, as Hall has explained: "The black body—stretched, threatened, distorted, degraded, imprisoned, beaten, and resisting—became an iconic recurring motif."[3)] Although well meaning, this proscriptive penchant for immediacy, authenticity, and authority through figuration and realism ultimately reinforced the reductive notion of an essence locatable in art by black artists.

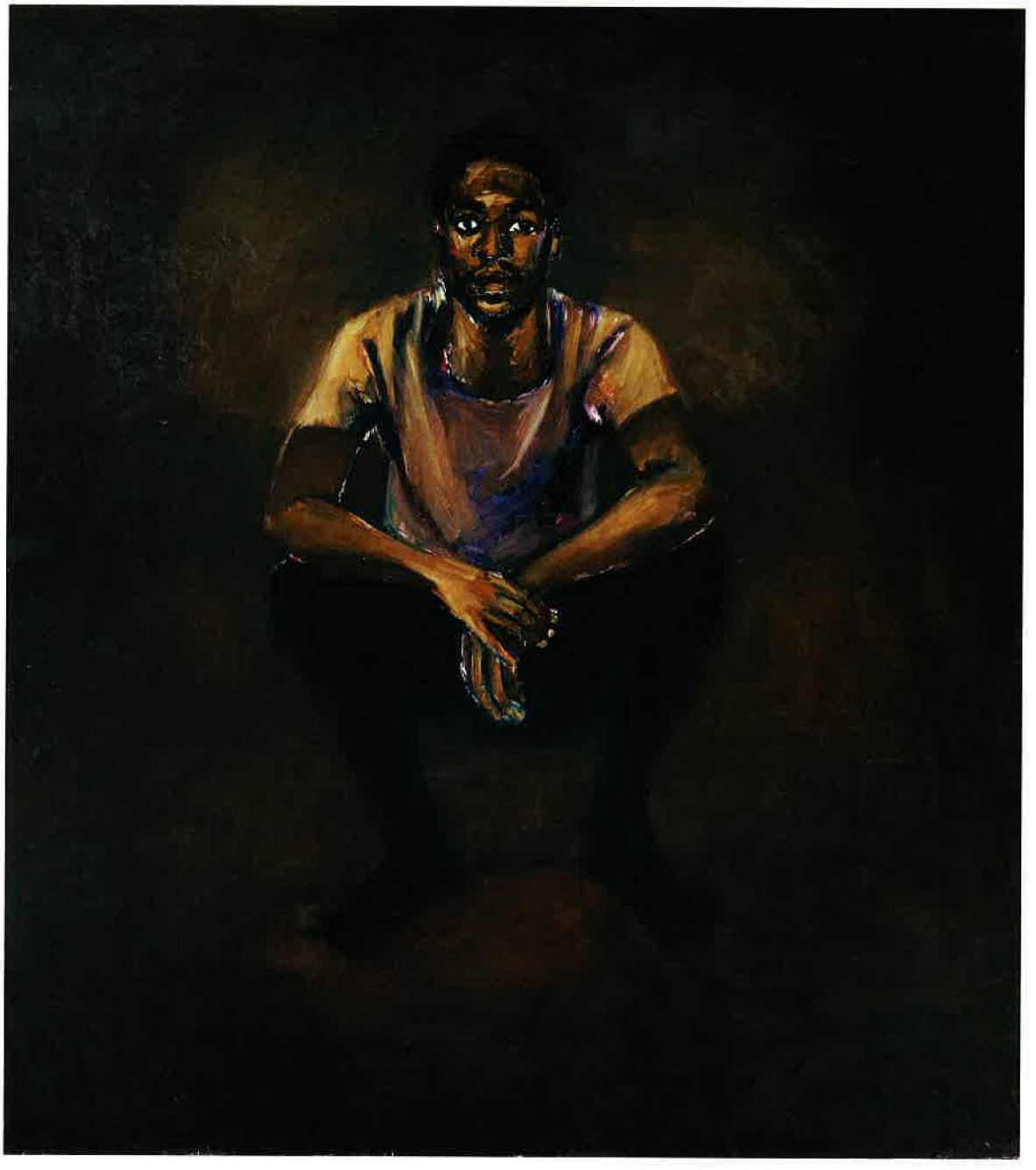
The same decade, however, witnessed pioneering work by black British filmmakers that offered another approach, presaging a shift to hybrid, experimental, avant-garde aesthetics in the context of black representation. Combining archival and documentary footage, conceptualist tactics, and the emotive power of symbolism, groups such as Black Audio Film Collective (formed in 1982) and Sankofa Film and Video Collective (formed in 1983) sought a more complex consideration of the black experience.[4)] In works such as BAFC's *Signs of Empire* (1982) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986), as well as Sankofa's films *Territories* (1985) and *Passion of Remembrance* (1986), overdetermined images are intermingled with more abstractly poetic scenes, not to eliminate political, social, and economic critique but to foster contemplation and, ultimately, illuminate the inherent multiplicity of blackness. Here blackness teasingly slips outside visuality, accessibility, and knowability, exercising what the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant described as "the right to opacity"[5)]—an insistence on difference in the face of the imposition of transparency, resisting easy comprehension and thus limitations.

Yiadom-Boakye grew up in London during the period of the Black Arts Movement, and despite their obvious material differences, the films of BAFC and Sankofa are an important conceptual and formal precedent for her work. Pressing upon the limits of form as a tactical, if not ethical, aesthetic imperative, her black paintings similarly express the right to opacity. Her figures offer an affective presence in place of a delineated form, flesh in place of a body, sensation in place of structure. Yiadom-Boakye withholds corporeal or scenic details to better allow us to sense the forces that a singularity of color can unleash, honing our attention to the small distinctions in hues and shades, revealing their complexities in plays of light and dark. In the context of foundational issues concerning black representation, such aesthetic decisions illuminate the ways in which, to quote the artist, "the act of mark-making and the materials themselves *become* the meaning, or *hold up* the meaning. How can one read the smudging or the blurring of a line into another line, or a color into another color?"[6)]

These material choices—a myriad of dense tones and heavy hues of browns, sullied with blues and yellows—gain a physical and conceptual complexity and



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, ALIVE TO BE GLAD, 2013, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 62" /
LEBEN, UM GLÜCKLICH ZU SEIN, Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 160 cm.



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, A MIND FOR MOTIVE, 2013, oil on canvas, 70 3/4 x 63" /
EIN SINN FÜRS MOTIV, Öl auf Leinwand, 180 x 160 cm.

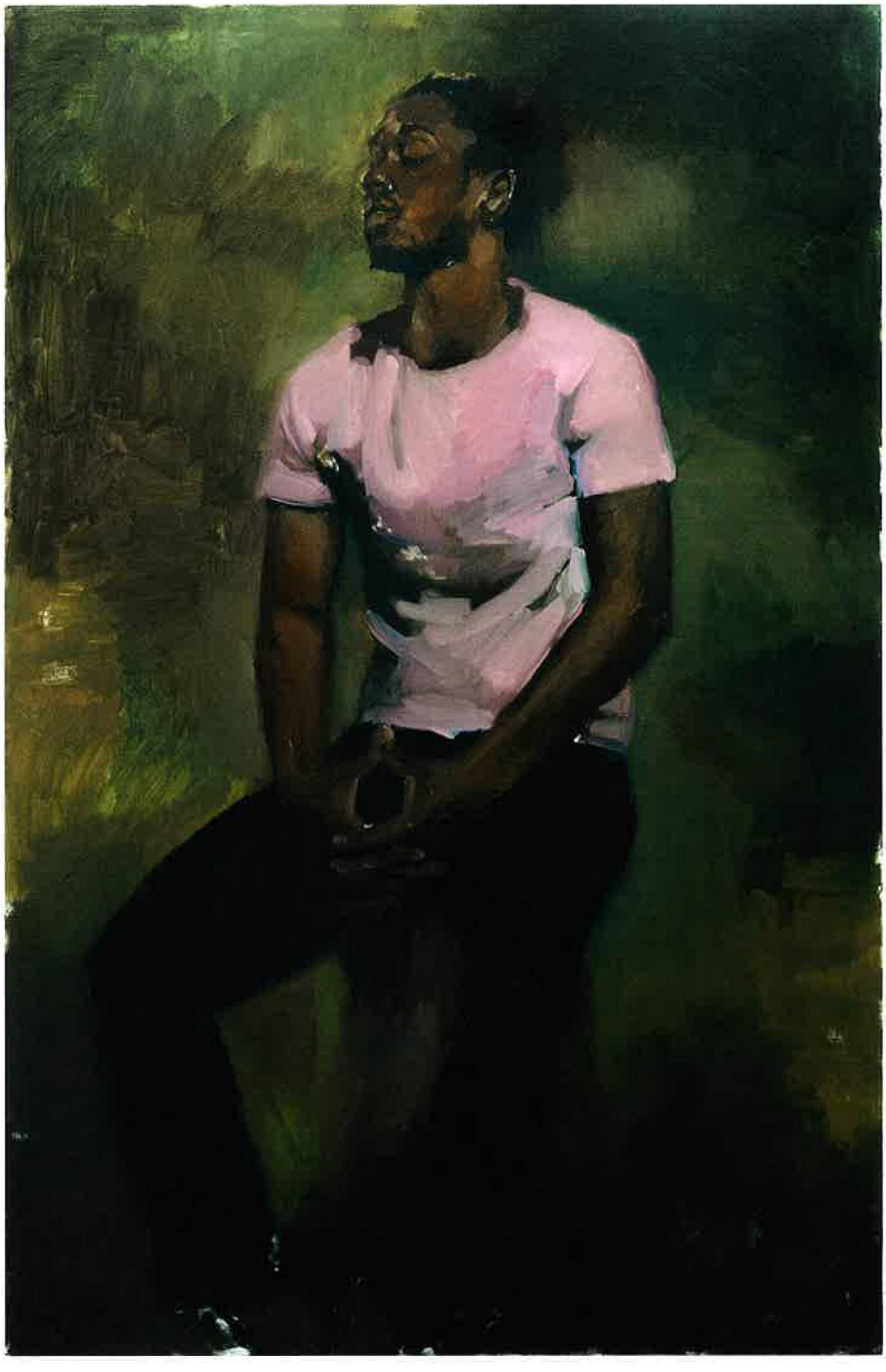
sophistication as unique to oil paint as to blackness. The resulting figures, weightless in vast darkness, resist easy legibility, replacing the signifying, knowable, hyper-visual subject/object. In this regard, the black paintings bring to mind fellow British artist Chris Ofili's series of "blue paintings," which Glenn Ligon has poetically described as having "this 'feeling for a color' beyond a concern for representation."[7] In all of Yiadom-Boakye's work, but perhaps most resonantly in her black paintings, we see the body as the radical force of flesh that has passed into color, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari.[8]

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, SKYLARK, 2010,
oil on canvas, 41 $^{3}/_{8}$ x 29 $^{1}/_{2}$" /
LERCHE, Öl auf Leinwand, 105 x 74,9 cm.

For Yiadom-Boakye's figures are not "real"—they are not portraits of actual people; she does not work from models. Rather, she borrows elements from drawings, found photographs, and other images, wresting them from their originary contexts and sources to construct composite forms, carving out a space from which to observe, contemplate, and truly imagine matters such as being human, blackness as a given, and what exactly "otherness" and the "other" are, and to whom. In so doing, Yiadom-Boakye expands the parameters of black representation beyond individuals to conjure figures of blackness itself, reflecting on how the concept of race, too, is a construct—she reinvents the invented, so to speak.

Today, we find ourselves beset with a persistent, anachronistic return to conservative populism in politics and society, and with it, the imagined threat of the other. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings deconstruct clichés in form and concept and redirect our expectations. Undermining our visual comprehension, the black paintings are an open field of encounter: The white flourishes of an eye, the flash of a smile, or the pink collar of a shirt offer a modicum of structure as we wade in absolute darkness. Insisting on meaningful ambiguity in her art, Yiadom-Boakye reveals a sensibility akin to the capaciousness of blackness itself.

1) W. E. B. Dubois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, vol. 32, October 1926: 296.
2) Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-War History," in *History Workshop Journal*, issue 61 (2006): 2.
3) Ibid, 17.
4) The members of Black Audio Film Collective were John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, David Lawson, and Trevor Mathison, while Sankofa included Isaac Julien, Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, and Robert Crusz.
5) See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), and Manthia Diawara, "Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II," August 2009, www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/csis-2/blackatlantic/research/Diawara_text_defined.pdf.
6) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, in conversation with Naomic Beckwith, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 103. (Emphasis by the author.)
7) Glenn Ligon, "Blue Black," in *Chris Ofili: Night and Day* (New York: New Museum, 2014), 87.
8) See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, COTERIE OF QUESTIONS, 2015, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 51 1/8" / KLÜNGEL VON FRAGEN, Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 130 cm.

Als, Hilton. "The Kiss," *Parkett*, Issue No. 99, 2017: pp. 87-91.

HILTON ALS

The Kiss

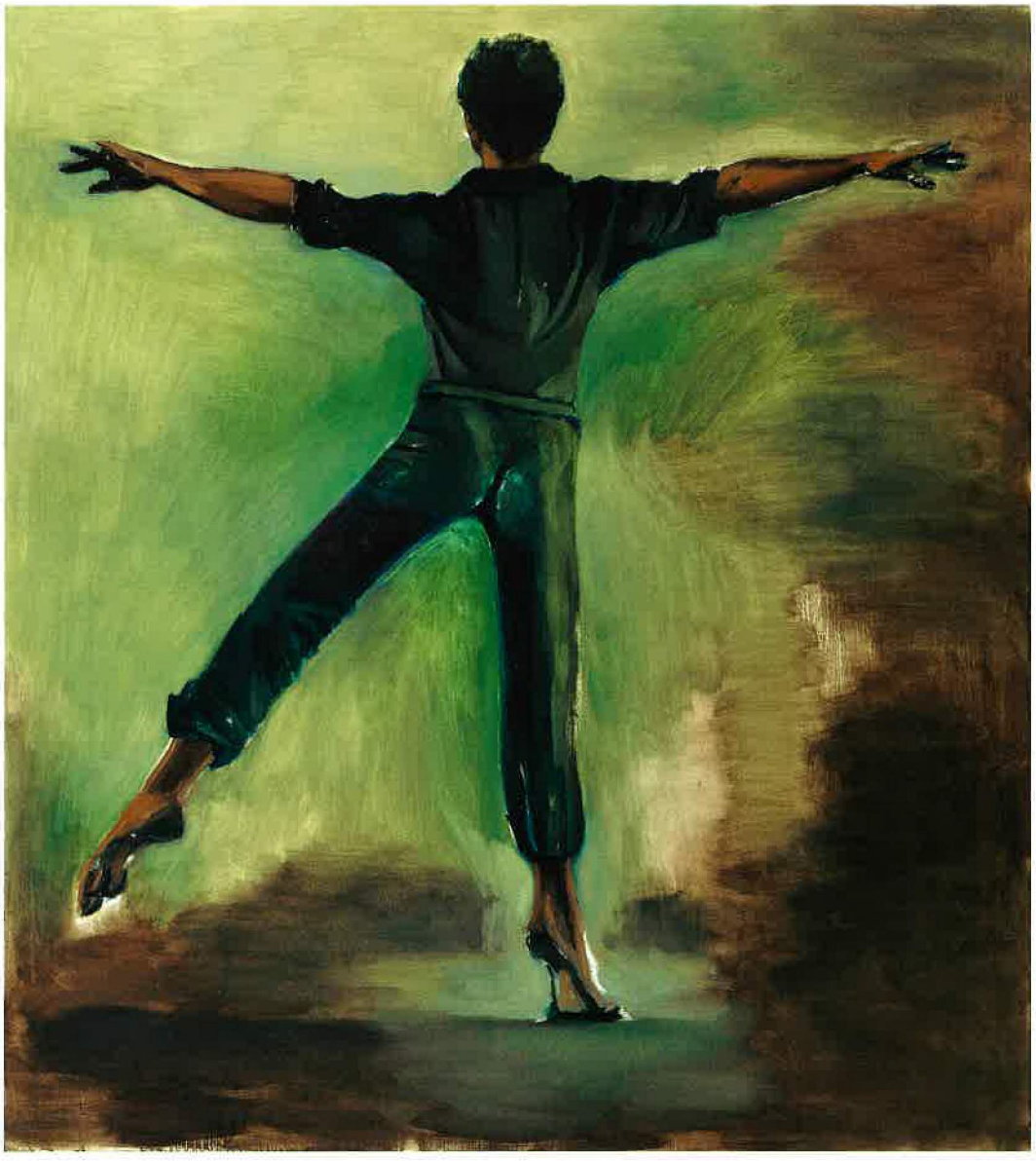
For a time I always had male companionship. Growing up, I had a little brother. Then time passed, and I went out into the world of mentors, lovers, friends, and other contemporaries who made a difference. Whether that difference was good or bad is not the point. The point is that those relationships changed my internal atmosphere and sometimes the atmosphere outside it, too. Trees. Mountains. Streets. I loved seeing things through someone else's eyes, and then seeing it through my eyes, and then seeing what happened when I put those two things together in my heart, and in my head. Other streets, more trees.

Time passed again, and I had substantially less male companionship. Life's intensity focused its gaze elsewhere, and I began to travel for work—to teach—sometimes living in a town for three years, or one year, all the while collecting furniture for my Platonic home. Where that home would be, I'd be the last to know. But I knew it was there, somewhere, like a Dionne Warwick reality and abstraction—"A chair is still a chair/Even when there's no one sitting there"—and the fire was lit, and there, there was my pile of pillows and, looking up, a kiss. I did not know who planted that kiss on my Platonic brow in my Platonic home, nor what my friend's lips looked like, but I knew he was there because I was there, plumping the pillows, lighting the fire, making the soup: home.

It didn't occur to me until recently that some of the movies I loved the most while I was on the road had to do with male comradeship, fraternity, and trust. I longed for each at once, and all together, too, since each is rarer than you'll ever know, let alone having them all together. But I don't want you to know that. I don't want you to know that, for some, life's various brutalities are the only kind of kiss—and kiss-off—that makes any kind of emotional sense. For me, life on the road and elsewhere was brutal without the memory of this or that kiss of trust I kept tucked, like a memory or a cause, in my heart's desire. It's so warm.

And among the movies that further warmed that dream of love was a film I never remembered until I happened across it on television again and loved it again: Stanley Kubrick's 1975 epic, *Barry Lyndon*. Based on the 1844 novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, by William Makepeace Thackeray, it's the story of an Irish (read "different") adventurer who, through a series of

HILTON ALS is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. He also contributes to the *New York Review of Books*.



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, INTERSTELLAR, 2012, oil on canvas, 78 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 71" / Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 180,3 cm.

misfortunes and strokes of incredible luck, becomes a wealthy man, and eventually loses his fortune—and his leg. The scenes of Barry (Ryan O'Neal) loving women, or trying to, are relatively brief, and sometimes tender, and often cruel, but mostly at a remove from the real emotional action, which centers—typically—on male fraternity at the expense of female joy. But there are moments that are free of all that. In one very moving scene, Barry's military mentor, Captain Grogan, played gorgeously by Godfrey Quigley, asks his young charge to kiss him goodbye (the captain has fallen in the line of fire). And for what feels like an eternity, Barry, as he weeps, slowly leans in to kiss his true love, who lies dying against an atmosphere

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE,
THE TWICE DONE, 2012,
oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 21 7/8" /
DAS ZWEIMAL GETANE,
Öl auf Leinwand, 60,6 x 55,5 cm.

of clouds, grass, and life. And it's in that slow moment of love, of the kiss carefully and willingly asked for and given, that Barry becomes himself and stops becoming himself. His youth can't take his passions. So he retreats into a frozen, synthetic world of furbelows and fineries that another male mentor introduces him to, while you spend the rest of the movie knowing that, somewhere beneath his rich man's powdered face and then sadness and disgrace, it's Barry's tender goodbye kiss of love in the face of death that remains, everlastingly, the only home he ever really knew, and ever really wanted.

But that's just one kiss, a movie kiss, and movies are real and fake at the same time, aren't they? I mean, the actors are real, but the situations are fake, invented, a fictional world based on the real. Painting is an invented world, a world invented by the artist's hand and heart, and in the so-called modern world there is little fraternity in a painting. Mostly what contemporary artists focus on is representing their alienation, or their lust. I won't name any names just now, but I have entered many homes, happy to kiss, by way of greeting, the host or the hostess, and seen, in the room beyond, a painting by this or that artist that does not show love but tits, not fraternity or closeness, but some idea of masculinity feeding on itself.

When I first saw Lynette's pictures at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 2010, I was reminded of what I knew first, a kiss among men even if we were not kissing, or—and this is probably closer to the truth—my desire for a kiss among men. Perhaps it grew out of the fact that my father did not love me but admired me: I was the writer he wanted to be. In any case, what struck me, looking at those canvases the first time, was that, like Toni Morrison, Lynette was interested in black society, not as it was affected or shaped by the white world, but as it existed unto itself. There was no suffering in her pictures brought on by the crippling effects of a power structure that wanted to reshape blackness or make it a different color altogether.

rather, she went deep inside the deep surface of black style to excavate what makes blackness so different, so interesting.

I was of course drawn to her women—I was raised in a family of women, and Lynette's THE HOURS BEHIND YOU (2011) is not far from what I saw them do, together: celebrate their bodies, and thus one another, in a whirlwind of joy. But I also found myself drawn, as if for the first time, to her gallery of men of color who are often seen sitting by themselves, alert to the attention of the painter, and to their distinguishing style—sometimes just a pink glove, and a smile that looks like a threat. I wanted to kiss those men because of the love I saw in the pictures, a love that was so rare as to be considered a kind of weird and beautiful disease, that's how uncommon it is in the modern world, let alone in the world of painting.

In the gay world I grew up in, in the 1980s, one lived in segregated bars; black men hung with black men, and white men hung with white men. I didn't understand this. I wanted to wrap the world up in that rainbow flag. Looking back, I can see how that opportunity—for men of color to see not only themselves but each other—was not as forced as it seemed to me back then; there are so few opportunities to deal in a world of colored complications, and what those complications can yield, including the opportunity to hold one another, and to treat one another with a humanity that gets ruptured, often, the minute you step outside the door and are targeted as this thing that will victimize others, terrorize others.

In her paintings of colored men relating and not relating to one another, Lynette returns me to a world I knew so long ago: A world where men of color danced with one another, and told the kind of jokes that reduced the hurting world to a story that could be cast off—at least, for a time. That's what Lynette has given us: a world based not on alienation but a much rarer commodity—love that rises out of complexity, the wonder and surprise that comes with connecting, the pleasure to be found in being our lovesick, contented, and natural selves.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, HYACINTH TO ROSE, 2016,
oil on canvas, 31 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 17 $^{7}/_{8}$" / HYAZINTHE ZU ROSE,
Öl auf Leinwand, 80,6 x 45,4 cm.

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LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, CONFIDENCES, 2010,
oil on canvas, 78 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 74 $^{1}/_{4}$" / VERTRAUTHEITEN,
Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 188,5 cm.

Parham, Jason. “Considering Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s Borderless Bodies.” *Fader*. 10 May 2017. Online.

FADER

CULTURE / FEATURE

Considering Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s Borderless Bodies

The London-born Ghanaian artist subverts the sense of self in her moving New York solo show.

By **JASON PARHAM**

There is a strange feeling that overtakes you upon first seeing a painting by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye up close — one instantly wants to extract ownership over the body or bodies contained within her large-scale figurations. *Who is this*

“The Much-Vaunted Air,” 2017. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

person? How did she end up here? What does he want to tell me? For years, Yiadom-Boakye, a London-born Ghanaian artist, has rendered women and men with skillful command. Purposefully so, her subjects exist without borders, outside the crossroads of a particular history or set selfhood (each painting is created from a composite of people and ideas, and never one person). “There is no context for them,” curator and art historian Elena Filipovic recently wrote of Yiadom-Boakye’s portraits, “except their very selves.”

Such remains the case in *Under-Song For a Cipher*, the 40-year-old artist’s just-opened solo show at the New Museum on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Against cinnamon-colored walls on the gallery’s fourth floor, 17 new paintings by Yiadom-Boakye hang in harmonious unison, each nonconformist and originally august in stature, though all with a singular aim: to disrupt one’s sense of self. Together, the portraits extend Yiadom-Boakye’s decade-long chronicle into the present; she has set about to compose black beings unbound by perception or class or tyranny or death (the director of the 2015 Venice Biennale once described her work as “post-portraits”). By her own admission, her subjects occupy “neutral spaces” — or rather, the *in-between*. In “An Amber Cluster,” for example, an almond-skinned man in a peach-colored shirt is caught mid-movement. He could be anywhere, at any recent point in time, coming or going, Ghanaian, American black, or Guyanese. It is not so much fiction but instead a

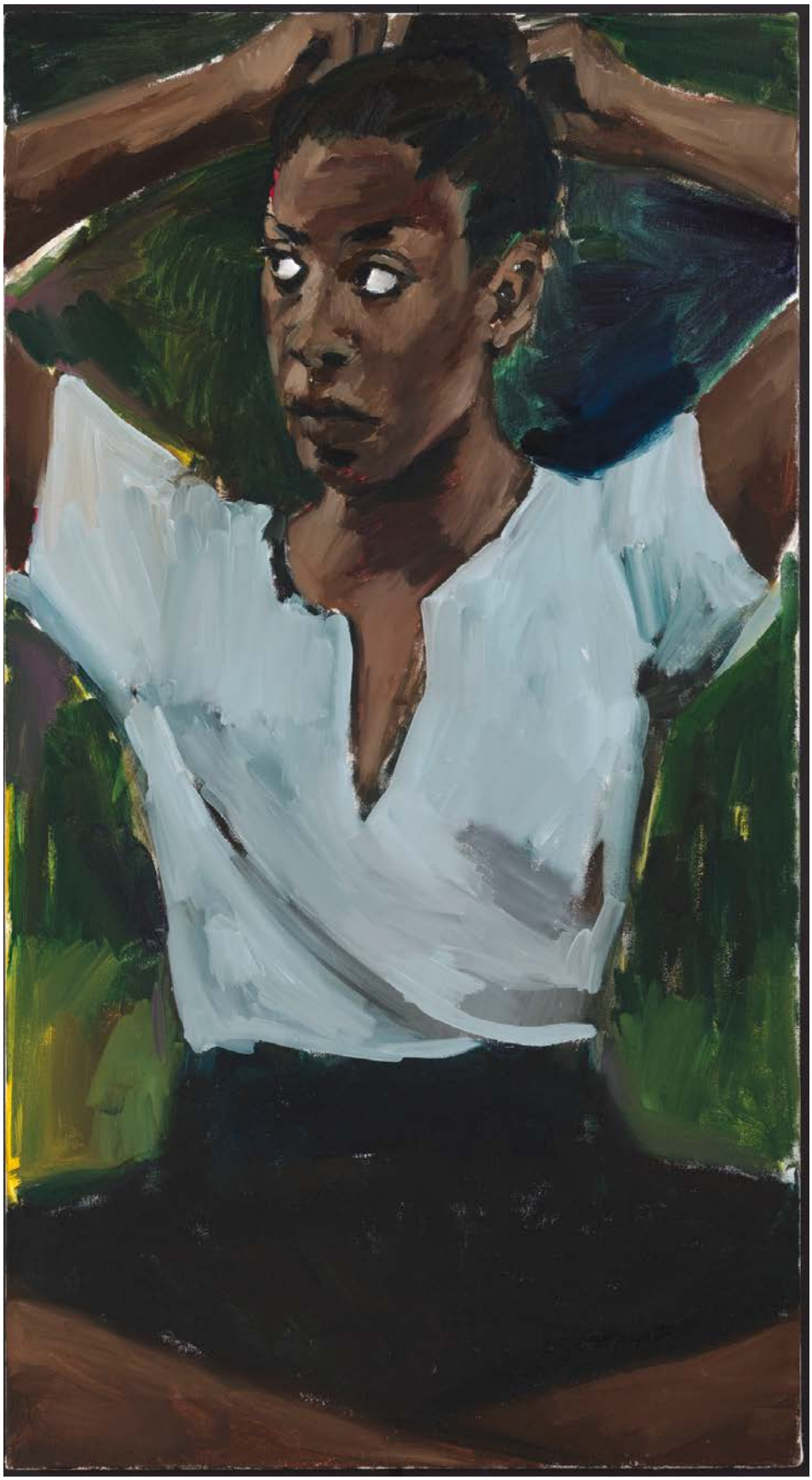
more human mode of storytelling. Yiadom-Boakye asks: *Who do you think this man is? And what was it that made you arrive at this certain end?*

"Vigil For A Horseman," 2017. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

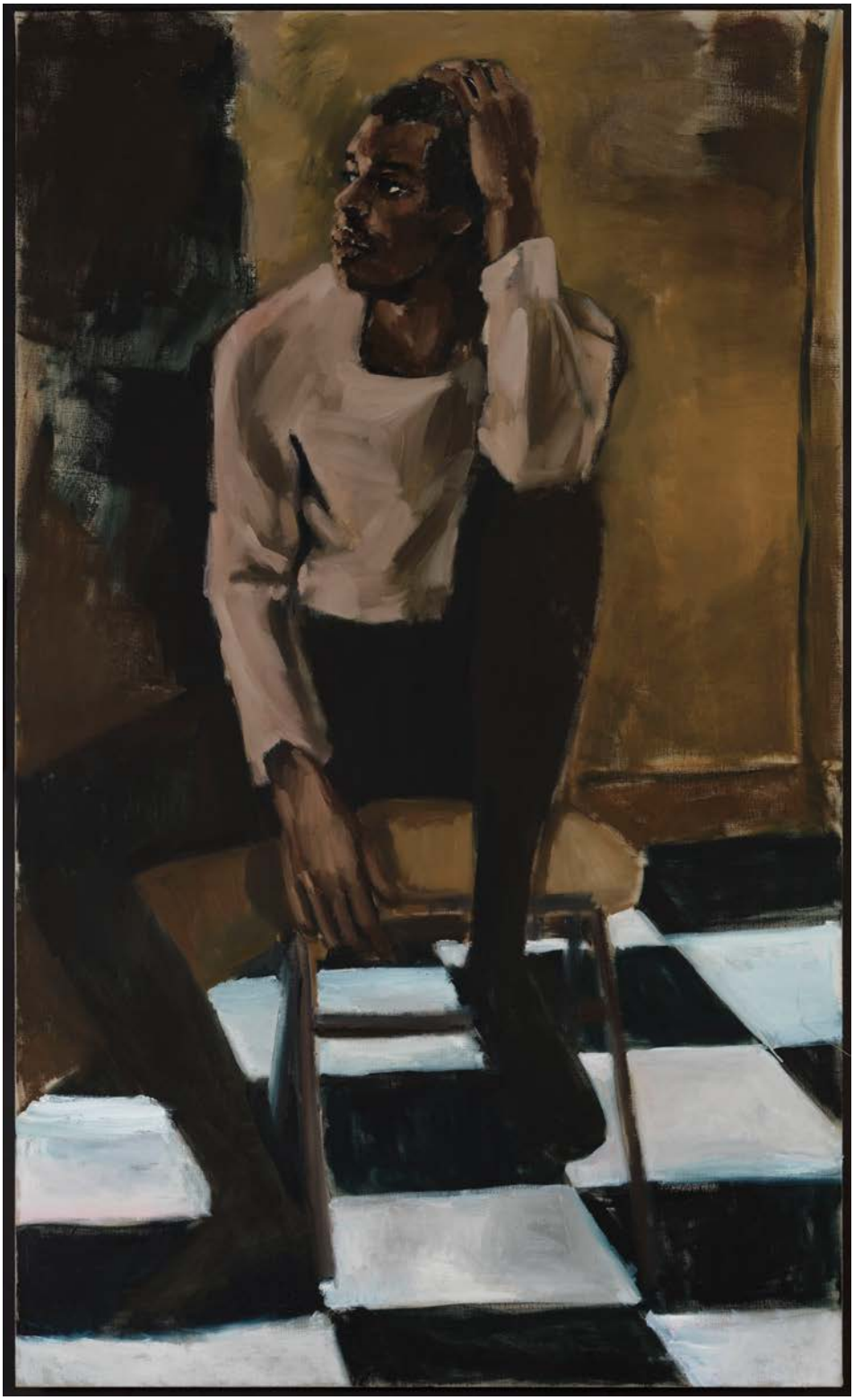
Having exhibited work in New York, London, Munich, and Geneva, much has been made of the subtle, near-quiet force each paintings exudes. But such sentiments aren't exactly accurate: her paintings are loud, ungovernable things — portrayed are people who defy linear narratives, wildly alive and stubbornly unoccupied by the constraints of identity. In that sense, Yiadom-Boakye has created an impressionistic hokum for the viewer to untangle. It may be true that every person brings their own politics and set of beliefs to a piece of artwork, but this negotiation is

especially true of Yiadom-Boakye's wondrous oil compositions, each its own uniquely contemporary riff on classic European portraiture. As a result, the 2013 Turner Prize finalist has created a kaleidoscope of identities and histories that morph not just one's understanding of the world, but of where one sits in the world, and just how that came to pass.

"An Amber Cluster," 2017 Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



“Of All The Seasons,” 2017 Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



“Medicine At Playtime,” 2017 Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

It is the negotiation — the expectations, insecurities, and biases exchanged in the space

between viewer and painting, and what is ultimately gained and lost in that quarrel — that Yiadom-Boakye seems most concerned with. It was for that very reason that I decided not to speak with the artist. At the onset of this assignment, I thought it would be helpful to chat with her about the art's intent. "What are your paintings trying to say?" I would have asked. But in doing so I would have missed Yiadom-Boakye's truer objective: to reveal the infinite exquisiteness found in pushing back against the ways in which the world constricts around us. It wasn't about what she herself wanted, but instead the destination that the viewer and painting arrived at in tandem.

"We're all together inside a system that scripts and constructs not just behavior but imagination," the poet Claudia Rankine told *The Paris Review* in 2016. The ways that social perceptions script and construct are quotidian manifestations of constriction. Ours is a reality where whole communities of people have been conditioned to go about their lives in this very noxious state. It is why Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits feel so deeply and humanly significant: she has allowed for infinite plurality in a society sick with its own immutability.

Two years ago, the artist noted of her creative practice, and her insistence in using oil paints: "It's just very dirty, it's very messy; it doesn't always do what you want it to do, it's alive, it doesn't dry very quickly," she said, perhaps hinting at the larger hope for her subjects. "It's fleshy and unpredictable."

“Light Of The Lit Wick,” 2017. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

O'Hagan, Sean. "Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Black Bodies Are More Powerful Because They're Not Real." *W Magazine.* 05 May 2017. Online.

W MAGAZINE

CULTURE

Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Black Bodies Are More Powerful Because They're Not Real

by Sean O'Hagan

May 5, 2017 10:30 am

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *A Culmination*, 2016.

The mesmeric power of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits resides, in part, in the fictitious nature of her subjects, who look like real people but are entirely inventions of her imagination. portraiture untold variations on mood, from the coolly nonchalant to the languorously sensual.

Yiadom-Boakye was born in London in 1977 to Ghanaian parents. Her imagined sitters are almost always black and often seem comfortably lost in private reverie. The show's co-curator Massimiliano Gioni sees her work "as a dialogue with an older generation of artists that includes Chris Ofili and Peter Doig, whose paintings reflect on the connection between race, representation, and painting."

Gioni acknowledges that exhibiting her portraits in New York at this moment "may invest them with more of a metaphorical aspect than they actually have, given that a black body in America today is not just a black body. Her work is not political in a rhetorical way, but through representation and form. That, too, is what makes it exceptional."

Laster, Paul. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye talks about creating fictional characters through portraiture." *Time Out New York*. 02 May 2017. Online.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye talks about creating fictional characters through portraiture

By **Paul Laster**
Posted: Tuesday May 2 2017, 3:41pm

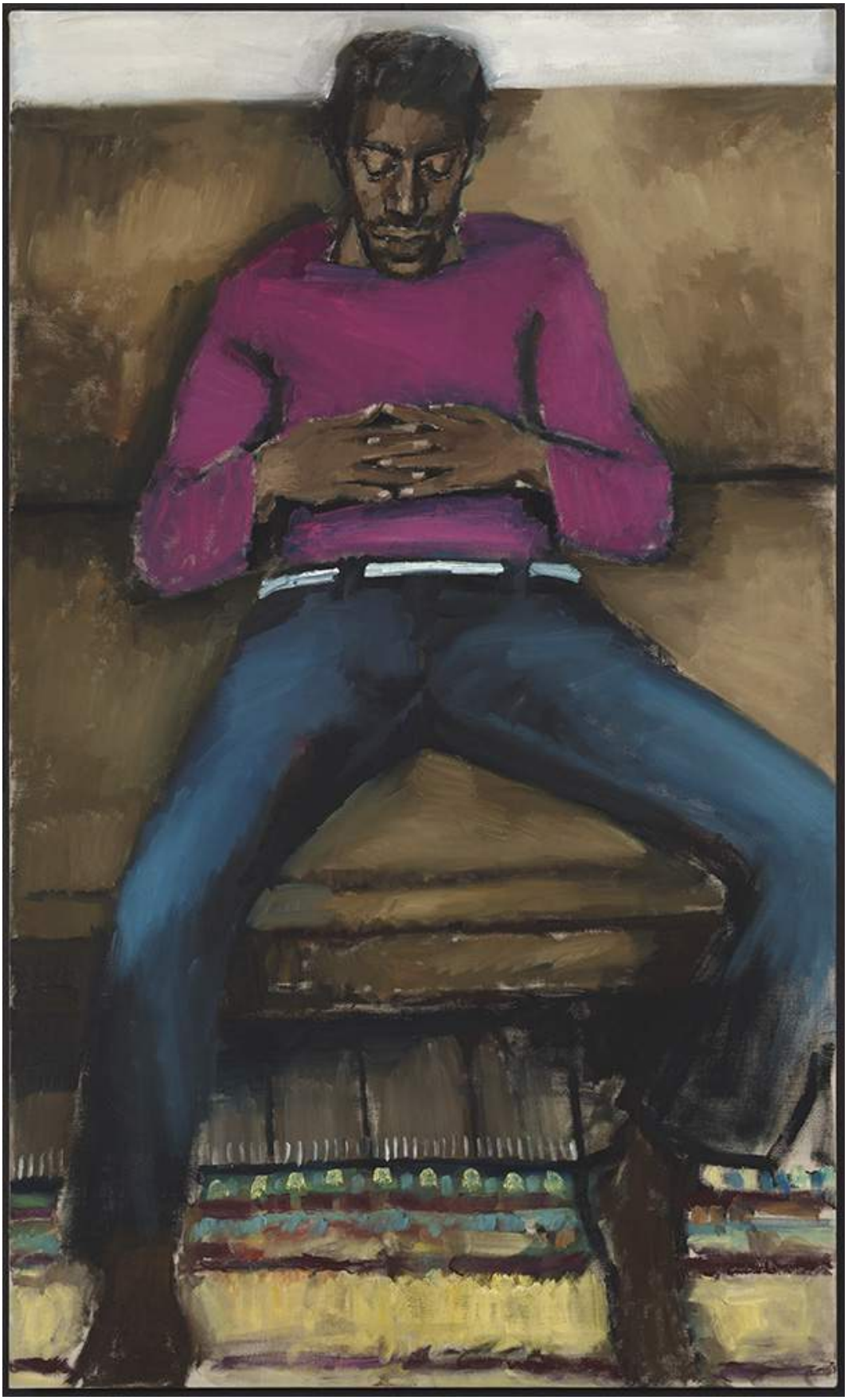
A British figurative painter of Ghanaian descent, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is known for portraits of imaginary black men and women based on multiple sources rather than on an individual model or sitter. A writer as well as an artist, the Turner Prize short-lister works quickly and usually completes one of her eye-catching compositions in a single day. With a survey of new paintings about to open at New Museum, she discusses her process and her parallel career as an author of short stories.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, A Conflagration, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi- Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

How important is improvisation to your work?
It's very important. Most of my decision-making happens through the course of painting. While I do plan things out in advance to some degree, [the plans] generally fall by the wayside once I get going.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Vigil For A Horseman, 2017, detail
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

So how do you begin a painting?
Normally with something very simple that poses some kind of a problem or challenge: a color, a composition, a gesture, a particular direction of the light. My starting points are usually formal ones. There is always something in particular that I think about, and the piece grows out of that.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Repose III, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

What made you decide to become a painter when you were starting out in the 1990s?
I'm not entirely sure. It wasn't a firm decision. Painting was one of many things that I loved doing, even though I've never found it easy. Perhaps that's why I kept trying to do it.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 8am Cadiz, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

You don't just paint, though; you paint in a very traditional manner using very traditional materials. What's their appeal for you?
Things like oil paint, canvas, linen and rabbit-skin glue have something of a life of their own. There's something visceral and inherently alive about using them to create a painting. Also, while paintings may have a long life span, they age just like people: Over the centuries, [paintings change, fade and often crumble.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Mercy Over Matter, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Who are the subjects of your work?
They're composites constructed from found images, life drawings and my imagination. I realized early on that I didn't want to depict people I knew; it never worked out the way I wanted it to. My method allows me to think freely about a person, a life, a place or a feeling through the act of painting itself.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Willow Strip, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

You're also a writer as well as a painter. Do those roles overlap?
No, not at all. My writing parallels my painting, but I don't paint about the writing or write about the painting. It's just the opposite, in fact: I write about the things I can't paint and paint the things I can't write about.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Ever The Women Watchful, 2017
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

But you use such literate titles for your paintings.
The titles emanate from the associations I make while working on or looking at a painting, but they're never meant to explain it. They're more like an extra brush mark.

"Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher" is at New Museum through Sept 3 (newmuseum.org).

Kazanjian, Dodie. "How British-Ghanaian Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Portrays Black Lives in Her Paintings." *VOGUE*. 27 March 2017. Online.

VOGUE

MAGAZINE

How British-Ghanaian Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Portrays Black Lives in Her Paintings

MARCH 27, 2017 9:00 AM
by DODIE KAZANJIAN

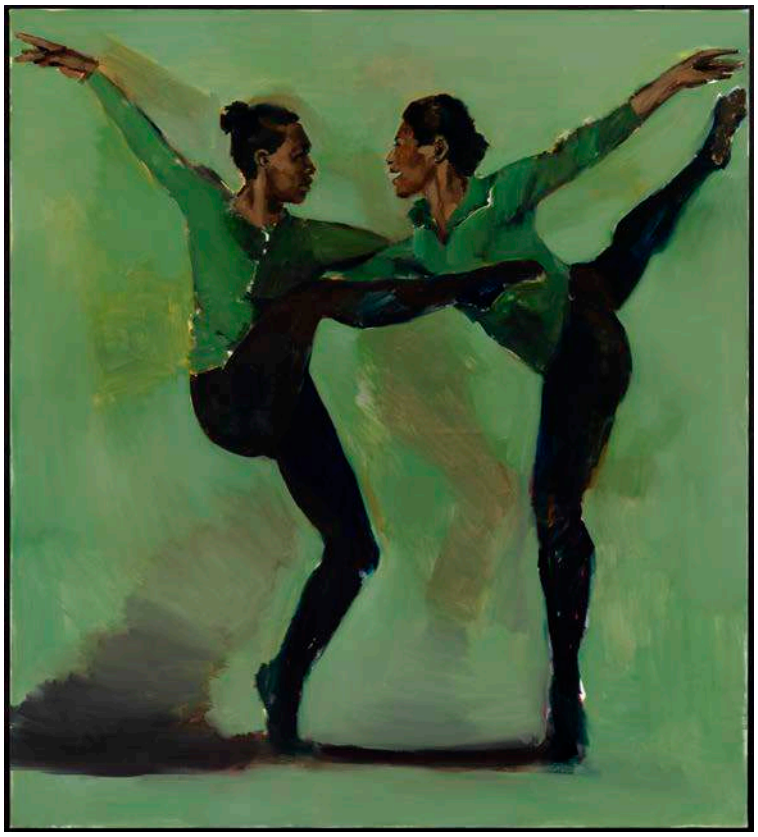
Making a Splash
The artist, photographed in her London studio, paints fast, timeless portraits in oils. Her solo show at the New Museum in New York opens this May.
Photographed by Anton Corbijn, *Vogue*, April 2017

It's a cold, rainy morning in South London, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, wearing jeans and fluffy slippers, is stirring a pot of homemade porridge. There's an easy confidence about her, a welcoming warmth and humor. Her duplex garden flat is a cozy mix of elements that don't belong together but get along just fine—bold patterns, busy wallpapers (lots of flowers and birds), strange old pieces of furniture. The house is not far from where she grew up. "I always thought I'd end up living somewhere else," she tells me, "but I really love it here."

There's a photographic print on the sitting-room wall by her friend Lorna Simpson. "I didn't understand the joy of owning artworks until I put Lorna's piece up," she says. But I don't see any other art in the house, and not a trace of Lynette's own work. Her hauntingly powerful paintings of black men and women, every one of them fictional, have been attracting more and more attention in the last few years. She was shortlisted for the 2013 Turner Prize and has recently had solo exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery in London, the Haus der Kunst in Munich, and the Kunsthalle in Basel. Next month, a show of her work will open at New York's New Museum.

"If you walked into a room with a thousand people in it, and one of the people in her paintings was there, that's who you'd want to meet," says her friend the designer Duro Olowu. Most are large-scale, single-figure studies whose faces, set against loosely brushed dark backgrounds, look directly at the viewer. In some, only the whiteness of eyes and teeth pulls them back from near invisibility, but the effort of looking makes them seem all the more real. They have the gravitas and authority of nineteenth-century portraits, shorn of domestic detail—nothing to distract you from the invented yet intensely alive subject. John Currin uses old-master techniques to enrich his contemporary figures. Lynette's seem to exist outside time.

For the New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, who featured her in his 2013 Venice Biennale, the work has a particular urgency. "In a moment of racial tension like the one America has been living through, Lynette's characters take on a completely different weight and presence," he says. "It's hard not to feel implicated as a viewer—I can't help thinking that her imagined characters are engaging with me."

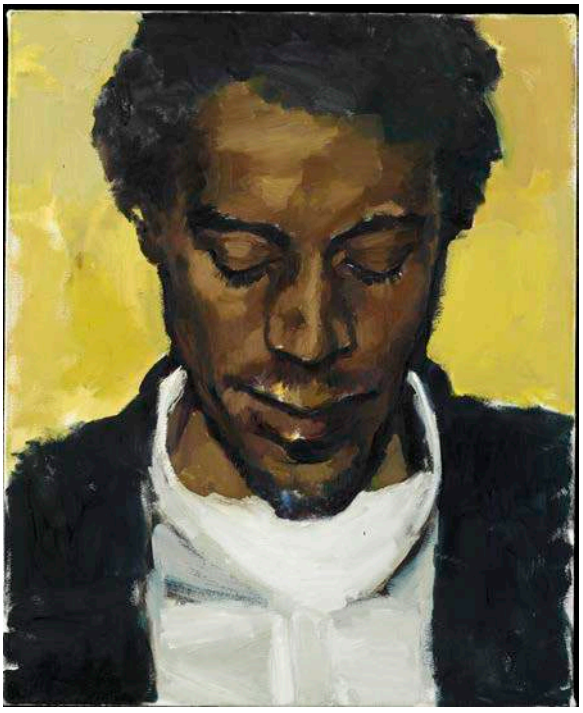


To Douse the Devil for a Ducat, 2015, oil on canvas
Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

The daughter of Ghanaian parents who moved to London in the sixties to work as nurses for the National Health Service, Lynette says, "I was a boring child—good grades, no mischief—but also quite good at living in my head, using my imagination as an escape." The idea of being an artist didn't occur to her until her final year of high school. She applied for a one-year art-foundation course at Central Saint Martins, more or less on a whim. "I didn't think it was serious; I just thought, I'll do it and see what happens, and then I'd get back to something more sensible."

Central Saint Martins in the late 1990s was packed with ambitious students eager to ride to fame on the wave generated by Damien Hirst and the Young British Artists. Lynette recoiled from their blatant careerism. “You don’t think of a career before you have the work,” she says. But she refused to quit art school. “Somehow I knew I should carry on. I was not going to be defeated by this, but I needed to be somewhere else.”

Somewhere else turned out to be the Falmouth School of Art, on the southwest tip of England in Cornwall, where Lynette found “space to think.” In her three years there, she came closer to identifying something she had felt since she was a little girl: a sense of what it means to grow up black in a white society. “My experience at school was largely positive,” she tells me, “but there were a lot of instances where you came to understand that people saw you differently. I didn’t see color in that way. You would go bounding up like a puppy, completely not thinking about these things, and then you realized that someone had judged you already, and that was that. Sometimes I was singled out by other black girls because I was darker-skinned than a lot of them. My parents were quite unsentimental about this. They would say, ‘This is why you have to excel.’”



Citrine by the Ounce, 2014, oil on canvas

Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

Lynette knew that she wanted to make figurative paintings; she wanted to make black people visible and to make that seem normal, not celebratory. This was her breakthrough, but she wasn't there yet. She had to learn a lot more about how to paint, and this happened in her last year at the Royal Academy Schools, where she got her M.F.A. in 2003. "Instead of trying to put complicated narratives into my work," she explains, "I decided to simplify, and focus on just the figure and how it was painted. That in itself would carry the narrative."

She was given an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010. Okwui Enwezor, who now runs Munich's Haus der Kunst, had brought her to the Studio Museum's attention. He had visited her studio five years earlier and followed the work ever since. "There was a kind of wickedness to her portraits, in a good way," he tells me. "There was wit and literary as well as artistic sophistication in her loose brushwork. I just loved it."

Porridge in hand and wrapped in a blanket, Lynette speaks in a calm, cultivated British voice, with frequent eruptions of spontaneous laughter.

She's 39 years old, has never been married, and has what she calls a "gentleman friend" who lives in the U.S.—a recent development that she's clearly not going to discuss. (She guards her privacy with a firm but gentle touch. "We Brits don't air our dirty linen in public," she says, laughing.) Every other week, she hops on a train to Oxford, where she teaches at the Ruskin School of Art. She also writes fiction—lean and satiric poems and short stories, several of which she has published in her museum catalogs. Swimming keeps her fit. Her London friends tend to be writers, doctors, and teachers—very few artists. "Her conversation is never heavy with insecurity," says Olowu.

Right now she is deep into putting together her New York show. “It’s forming,” she says. “I need to feel my way through it, but there’s a lot more to figure out.” She works alone and stretches and primes her own canvases. Sometimes she listens to music (everything from Miles Davis to Prince to classical), but more often to radio plays. “I have an addiction to John le Carré adaptations, and I listen to them on rotation like a mad person. I really love theater.” At one time she wanted to be an actress, but realized she didn’t have the competitive nature it required. “My problem has always been that I’m not ambitious in the career sense or the financial sense. The drive is only this internal fight with myself. Every show and every body of work is a terror for me—an enjoyable terror. Every time I go into the studio, I’m just praying it’s going to work out that day.”

Her studio, a large rectangular room with a row of high windows, is in East London’s Bethnal Green, an hour’s Uber ride from her home. (Sometimes she will stay in a hotel nearby so as to have more time there.) It has two horizontal canvases, ten feet wide or more, hanging on the wall and dozens more propped together across the room. Scrapbooks are strewn around the floor, filled with images cut from magazines and elsewhere to provide source material for her invented faces.

Any Number of Preoccupations, 2010, oil on canvas

Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

Lynette works fast. She doesn't make preliminary sketches but improvises on the canvas, usually completing a painting in one day. She may go back into it the next day, or decide it doesn't work and destroy it. On the entry wall is a bearded man, seated and in profile, holding a bird in his right hand. (Birds are a familiar motif in her paintings: a parrot, a peacock, an owl.) Man and bird regard each other with intensity. A brushy yellow, red, and orange background accentuates the man's dark skin. "I don't use black pigment," she says. "It completely deadens things. I use a mixture of brown and blue instead." His feet are bare. None of her subjects wear shoes (slippers are OK), because shoes would place them in a particular time. There's something supernatural about the image. It's not a portrait but a work of fiction. It's masterful, yet appears effortless.

"I'm a bit scared of New York," she says, but her fear is probably misplaced. "The painted image carries so much more weight than the ephemeral, digital image," says the independent curator Alison Gingeras. "The permanence that painting has, especially oil painting, and the kind of skill it takes to create makes Lynette's work seem magnified right now." As for its political resonance in this time of worldwide dysfunction, Lynette says, "the wonderful thing about painting is that it's separate. I think there is something in small gestures that can be quite powerful."

She tells me about an Instagram post that Kimberly Drew, the Met Museum's social-media manager, put up just after the Trump election. It was a selfie, and the message was PORTRAIT OF A QUEER, BLACK WOMAN IN AMERICA WHO DID THE BEST WITH WHAT SHE HAD TODAY. "That's all any of us can do," Lynette says. "It really moved me."

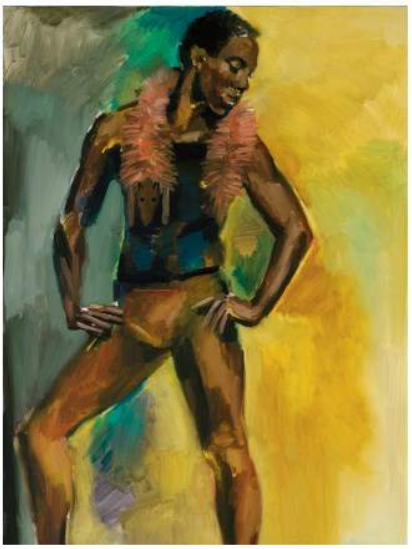
Rosenmeyer, Aoife: *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye*, in: Art in America, 27.2.17, online: http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lynette-yiadom-boakye/ (28.2.17)

REVIEWS FEB. 27, 2017

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

BASEL,
at the Kunsthalle Basel

by Aoife Rosenmeyer



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: *Daydreaming of Devils*, 2016, oil on canvas, 78¾ by 47¼ inches; at the Kunsthalle Basel.

Since the British-Ghanaian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (b. 1977) completed her studies at the Royal Academy Schools in London in 2003, her reputation as a talented painter of fictional portraits (she does not use models) has steadily grown. This exhibition of twenty-four new canvases (all 2016) follows major shows in London and Munich and centers on the theme of performance, with many of the paintings portraying singers and dancers.

Yiadom-Boakye's works, like those of American painters Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, help correct the historic underrepresentation of black people in painting. Her canvases range from nearly life-size depictions of three or four figures to close-ups less than two feet tall. Her paint handling is decidedly turbid, and her compositions slightly unstable, their parts not entirely in equilibrium. Her palette seems indebted to that of previous generations of British painters, such as Frank Auerbach and Lucian Freud, with chalky browns and blacks punctuated with warmer reddish tones and minimal highlights.

A number of the new paintings show adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, evoking the time just before people settle into the roles they will play in life. The diptych *A Fever of Lilies* features a boy and girl in school uniforms. She smothers a grin, while he is pensive. In *Magenta in the Ravages*, three young women dressed in black tights and leotards stand on a reedy bank, looking across the reflective surface of a river stretching into the distance. Yiadom-Boakye usually employs monochromatic grounds defined only by heavy shadows but in this image offers a detailed background composed of the luminous water and a gloomy forest.

Even when the figures in the works face the viewer, they are contemplative rather than confrontational. Often they wear basic figure-hugging clothing, but here and there they don striped sweaters or ruffs on their necks. In *Daydreaming of Devils*, a man sports a pink boa and points the toes of one foot as if preparing to dance. If some figures seem like they are waiting to move, others are captured in full motion. A diptych called *Harp-Strum* (one of many evocative titles by Yiadom-Boakye, who is also a writer) presents two views of a woman in mid-arabesque against a jade background.

Although Yiadom-Boakye's work helps address the omission of black subjects in art history, to limit it to such an interpretation would do it a great disservice, as it would obscure the artist's subtle statements. Her paintings present a nuanced exploration of how fiction operates: Who are all these characters she paints if they are not specific people? How do we read fictional characters when they are painted in the mode of a portrait? And are portraits of performers in truth a reflection of their audience?

Viveros-Fauné, Christian: *These 11 Artists Will Transform the Art World in 2017*, in: artnet news, 2.1.17, online: https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/11-contemporary-artists-for-2017-800375 (11.1.17)

On View

These 11 Artists Will Transform the Art World in 2017

Their contributions can promote fresh ideals in the new year.

Christian Viveros-Fauné January 2, 2017

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in 2016. Photo by John Phillips/Getty Images.

More than any year in recent memory, 2017 promises to be a spectacularly messy and uncertain year. Brexit, terrorism, and the immigration crisis threaten the existence of the European Union, as German chancellor Angela Merkel faces tough opposition as she runs for a fourth term. Meanwhile, the United States will see what a misogynistic real estate kingpin does to the White House.

While observers continue to forecast bullish days for the art market—seemingly only a 1920s-style crash can quash expensive art's growth as an alternative currency—2017 looks to be the year when art and artists encounter politics and cultural commentary head on.

With this in mind, here's a second prediction for the year ahead: cultural polarization will force a rereading of much art of the past and present, which of course includes work by, among others, dead white males.

Below are just some of some of the artists and art collectives whose work one expects will gain in traction and influence in the new year. The more prominent of these figures operate (or once operated) independently from the network of blue-chip galleries.

Consequently, their contributions—along with those of younger creators—can help set new standards for artistic value that may, one hopes, be more suited to the world today.

A gallery staffer poses beside Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *The Matches* at the Serpentine Gallery. Photo by Rob Stothard/Getty Images.

6. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

A 2013 Turner Prize finalist and one of best painters of her generation, Yiadom-Boakye's oil paintings embrace many of the conventions of European portraiture, yet they expand on that tradition by depicting subjects who are both fictional and black. Post-Obama-era updates of classic pictures by Velázquez, Manet, and Degas, Yiadom-Boakye's canvases have been described as portraits of the idea of portraiture.

Like Kerry James Marshall before her, the artist is committed to creating a global black canon of painting where none previously existed. An up-to-date survey of her work goes on view at the New Museum on April 24.

Making & Unmaking

Camden Arts Centre, London 19 June – 18 September

Among the 70 artists whose works are included in fashion designer Duro Olowu's *Making & Unmaking* is Anni Albers. In 1938 the pioneering Bauhaus artist published a text titled 'Work with Material', in which she wrote: 'Life today is very bewildering. We have no picture of it which is all-inclusive... We have to make a choice between concepts of great diversity. And as a common ground is wanting, we are baffled by them.' Almost 80 years later, those words and the anxieties they describe ring startlingly true in Britain's current political climate, as does the premise of Olowu's exhibition, which, through the diversity of its inclusions, both examines and celebrates individuation and difference with an all-embracing self-assurance.

Bringing together artists who have a multi-faceted and rich affiliation to fabric and textiles, the exhibition includes works that originate from around the world and over a period of time that spans from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. While, for Olowu, the exhibition's title refers to the physical processes involved in artmaking – described as 'the personal ritual of the artist' – its repetitive back and forth could also evoke the mechanical operation of a weaving loom, as well as the continual evolution of identity that clothing and fashion can facilitate.

Executed in myriad media (textiles, painting, sculpture, photography, ceramics, jewellery), the works are arranged in a number of sometimes surprising but consistently compelling groupings, addressing subjects such as cultural identity, sexuality and the representation of the body. The rhythmic repetition in the work by the aforementioned Albers, whose revolutionary practice repurposed textiles as an abstract artform, is both complemented and countered by artists working in the wake of her legacy today – for instance, Brent Wadden, whose wavelike tapestry DREAMIN' *(diptych)* (2016) sits strikingly above Polly Apfelbaum's *Compulsory Figures* (1996), an expanse of floor-based pairs of coloured velvet sheets whose two-dimensional simplicity belies the poollike depth they appear to possess and offsets the intricacy of the above weaves.

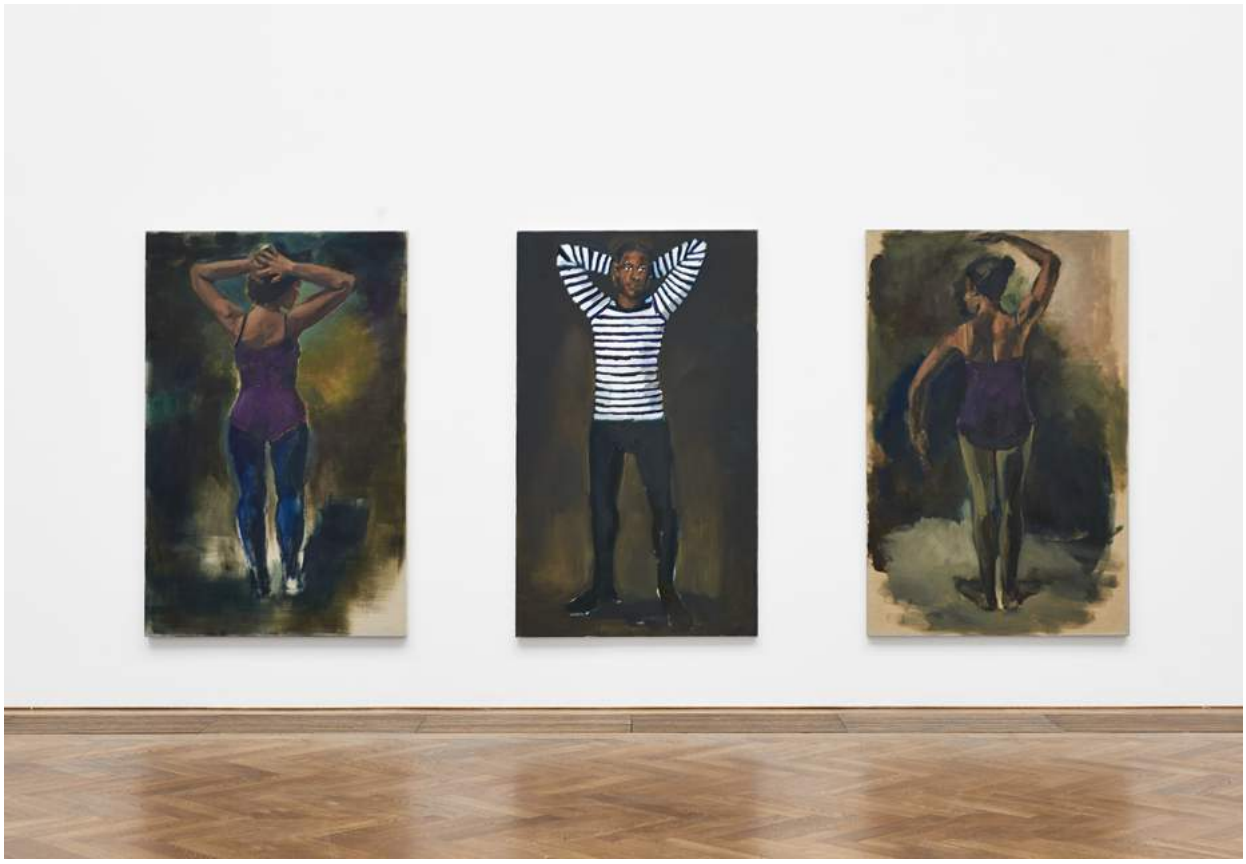
Ideas of camouflage and masquerade are also in abundance. Lorna Simpson's recent, acerbic collages – which combine photographs of African-American women taken from *Ebony* magazine with documentary images of (mainly Westernised) world history, ruthlessly examining the impact of culture and memory upon multiracial identity – feel more dangerous beside Dorothea Tanning's nightmarish painting *Glad Nude with Paws* (1978), or the photographs of Surrealist (and Second World War resistance-fighter) Claude Cahun. Cahun produced a series of self-portraits examining the performance of gender by the body, its clothing and its context, and famously declared 'under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces.' Elsewhere, a selection of Neil Kenlock's photographic portraits of the domestic life of African-Caribbean communities during the 1960s and 70s are accompanied, disconcertingly, by a 1949 drawing of some furred abstracted limbs by Louise Bourgeois, a pair of Chris Ofili's *Afro-Muses* (2005–6) and a beautifully ascetic portrait by Meredith Frampton. A number of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's reclining males nonchalantly join this unexpected selection, hung, salon-style, over a series of densely patterned wallpapers.

Olowu's exhibition unpicks the function and position, within numerous socioeconomic circumstances, that clothing and textiles have had on the construction of history and identity (be that individual, national or international). The diversity and inclusivity of his choices engenders a powerful and eclectic collage with exuberant abundance. The exhibition invites a complicated but joyous journey of encounters, creating exchanges between the national and the international and between the past and the present. By emphasising connections across borders and histories, with equal reverence for artists regardless of their nationality, gender or sexuality, the exhibition feels, in times such as these, like a hopeful and redemptive step forward. *Laura Smith*

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Tie The Temptress To The Trojan*, 2016, oil on linen, 120 × 160 × 4 cm. Courtesy Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

artdaily.org 20th anniversary

Kunsthalle Basel opens exhibition of paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Installationsansicht A Passion To A Principle, Kunsthalle Basel, 2016, Blick auf (v.l.n.r.) Pressure From A Didact, Witching Hour, Militant Pressures (alle 2016). Foto: Philipp Hänger / Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Installation view A Passion To A Principle, Kunsthalle Basel, 2016, view on (f.l.t.r.) Pressure From A Didact, Witching Hour, Militant Pressures (all 2016). Photo: Philipp Hänger.

BASEL.- The exhibition is filled with figures that gaze directly, almost defiantly, at you. Others stand with arms akimbo, averting their eyes, or look pensive as they lounge in the soft embrace of a couch or hammock. Still others hold extravagant birds (an owl in one, a peacock in another) as if the acts were as usual as holding the daily news- paper, or they tense their arms and legs with the poise of a well-trained dancer. They are all beautiful without being model-like, serious without seeming stern, and well dressed without appearing to have tried too hard. There are rarely any identifiers of an exact time or place in which they stand or lie or lean or sit. There is no context for them, you could say, except their very selves. And in those selves there is nonchalance, refinement, calm intelligence. Also intensity, human depth, and a justness (someone wearing those threads would lie back and gaze at you just like that) that makes them seem familiar. And what you suspect you don't already "know" about them, you try to conjure up. You almost cannot look at Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings and not wonder about the people pictured in them—what they do, whom they love, how they think, what they desire. And yet the show is not an exhibition of portraits per se.

A Passion To A Principle contains nothing but figurative images, yet none portray an actual person, either historical or contemporary. And this is important. In Yiadom-Boakye's hands, color is structural and brushwork comes in vivid rushes—a reflection on painting as a medium drives her work, but fiction is its other propelling force. She builds her cast of figures from the haze of memory and a collage of sources, borrowing a sweater from a shop window and a pose from a nudist magazine. And through paint she writes her characters, as a novelist might. The quality of that "writing" keeps them from appearing as stereotypes or one-dimensional fantasies. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that in addition to being a painter, the artist—born in London and of Ghanaian descent—is also a poet and a writer, even if her favored mode for materializing her depictions is art history's most traditional of mediums.

Yiadom-Boakye studied painting at that bastion of the medium, the Royal Academy of Arts in London. But her real education came in museums, where Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Walter Sickert, and others were her teachers. She learned any number of techniques from them, she says, including lessons about the layering of color and economy of means (why use four brushstrokes when one will do?). It was with them, too, that she learned to find her own style, indebted to the past but operating wholly on her own.

Her paintings are in equal measures dark and luminous, painted with palpable brushstrokes that give her figures vivid presence, even when they stand in inky darkness, and even when the painter has left areas deliberately unresolved. There is something unabashedly classical about them, borrowing from traditional portrait compositions (the three-quarter bust, the head shot, the grouping of figures), but she also deliberately deploys modernist cropping (the tips of a dancer's fingers in Tell The Air, the edge of a foot in A Focus For The Cavalry).

Here and there patches of bare canvas show through, and Yiadom-Boakye's mark- making is sometimes so loose, so will- fully imperfect, that her paintings act as an apt pendant to the utter humanity of her (nevertheless unreal) figures—for what is human if not the fact of being flawed? Her titles, full of casual but enigmatic poetry (Daydreaming Of Devils, Sermons For Heathens, To Hell For Leather On A Hound) suggest as much: they allude to temptation, damnation, defiance. Even when they point in another direction, as in A Culmination or Militant Pressures, they still act as a layer, like an underpainting of deep vermillion that seeps through everything on top of it and subtly but inevitably imbues the whole with a mood or tone.

Yiadom-Boakye originally considered becoming an optician. But science was a problem, she admits, so she became instead another kind of observer of visual perception. And although her figures sit in a no-man's-land of place and time, few figurative painters diagnose their present as percussively as she does. A Passion To A Principle, Yiadom-Boakye's first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, comprised of all newly painted works, uses one of art history's oldest and most venerated genres to make portraits in another sense, ones in which the true subject is both the medium of painting as such, and our own selves—right here and right now—as beings in the world.

This happens—paradoxically, powerfully— through her particular deployment of fiction. Speaking about the writing of James Baldwin, a critic once asked, "How do people come to know themselves? One way is by reading fiction. The profound act of empathy de- manded by a novel, forcing the reader to suspend disbelief and embody a stranger's skin, prompts reflection and self-questioning." This is what Yiadom-Boakye asks of us.

And what better moment to be so prompted? Her paintings make clear: our museums and our histories of art, like power structures of all sorts, are full of representations of and by white people. Depictions of black people by black artists are astoundingly few. Hers, then, is a social portraiture, picturing a whole segment of the population—a reality— that remains still so little accounted for in either art history or politics. Yiadom-Boakye's insertions of (fictive) black figures into the canon, into discourse, into our exhibition spaces, are quietly subversive, not combatively arguing for anything, but simply rendering black lives visible—literally giving them matter and thus showing that they matter— always with quiet grace. She could have presented them otherwise, the burden of their history weighing on their shoulders. But, as she has explained, "They are recognizably human, but they are not real. They do not share our anxieties or woes. Nor do they need to be celebratory. In the painting is where they exist, and that makes them omnipotent. Painting gives them power."

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye was born 1977 in London; she lives and works in London.

Jasper, Adam: *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: A Passion To A Principle*,
in: Mousse Magazine, Issue No. 56, December 2016 - January 2017,
p. / S.414-416, 16.12.16

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6 LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE: A PASSION TO A PRINCIPLE

Text by Adam Jasper

Kunsthalle Basel
Steinenberg 7, CH-4051 Basel, Switzerland
Through February 12, 2017
kunsthallebasel.ch

Claude Lévi-Strauss had a thing about birds. He thought that we were innately likely to give wild birds proper names, like "Angela" or "Timothy," rather than the demeaning pet names we give dogs, like "Fido" or "Spot," or the intentionally unique names we give racehorses, like "Lord Cardigan" or "Belle-de-Nuit." Lévi-Strauss's explanation was that unlike dogs, which are part of human families but not afforded the full status of people, birds inhabit a more or less parallel civilization that doesn't intersect with our own. You can catch a bird and put it in a cage, but you can never really own its loyalties.

Birds are given human Christian names in accordance with the species to which they belong more easily then are other zoological classes, because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live. (Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 204)

Whether or not Lévi-Strauss was actually empirically correct is debatable. He wasn't really that into empirical research. But even if he's factually wrong, he's still right in principle—there's something strange, or rather estranged, about birds. It's something that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye also seems to have observed. Birds are the only animal that regularly appears in her paintings, and this seems to be because they can be co-present with people without implying relationships with them. In one painting in her current show at Kunsthalle Basel, *Pander To A Prodigy* (2016), a boy carries a peacock with its gorgeous tail politely tucked to one side. In another, *The Matters* (2016), a hunting owl sits on a youth's leather glove, its head swiveled around to look to the right of the viewer.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye paints pictures that look *like* portraits, but are not. The people she paints are composite fictions rather than individual subjects. In this regard, and in another way that will be mentioned later, her painting is close to historical paintings composed to illustrate collectively known stories. They don't look like them, though. They look much more like the painters that Yiadom-Boakye has exhaustively studied, like Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, and Walter Sickert. A lot of the backgrounds feature a harlequin pattern, an allusion to *commedia dell'arte* that is reinforced by the costumes that some of the figures wear, including a sad Pierrot ruff, and more than a few ballerinas. Commedia dell'arte provided stock motifs for painting that have barely been seen since the Great Depression, and their use here underscores the conscious anachronism of the images. They look like post-Impressionist works from the first Harlem Renaissance, in which men and women gaze out from the canvas with a certain polite indifference to the people passing by. Men and women—or, better, men *or* women. There are no paintings that show women and men together on the same canvas. The closest to being an exception is the final diptych, *A Fever Of Lilies* (2016), in which the two figures began as a couple on a single canvas before being repainted on two canvases, decorously separated. Whenever she paints groups, they are always small, homosocial groups.

The canvas is usually left unprimed, its raw texture showing through the paint. Parts of the canvas are even left blank to provide highlights. The figures themselves seem to be constructed from a spiral coming out from the face, almost like a mosaic, with a dark background that is added after the figure is roughed out. The painting is done without *disegno*, without prior drawing, so that it looks both improvised and effortless, even virtuoso. Yiadom-Boakye works quickly, completing each canvas in a single day or discarding it. The speed of the work recalls fresco techniques, and has something of the same immediacy. There's some modeling of shadow, but relatively little blending, contributing to the paintings' characteristically post-Impressionist look. Painted in seemingly at the very end are the overly bright whites of the eyes, as in the rituals of icon painting, where the eyes are added last because they are the most dangerous part of the image, the part that enables the picture to see the viewer. It's part of Yiadom-Boakye's seriousness as a painter that she respects this.

The other way in which Yiadom-Boakye's paintings resemble images of religious scenes is this: Claudio Vogt, who works at the Kunsthalle, observed that none of the people in the paintings are ever shown wearing shoes. This matters, because shoes are a part of costume that can always be dated. Shoes ground a work in a specific historical moment. In Renaissance painting, for instance, the patrons who commissioned the painting might be depicted in the foreground wearing slippers, but the most holy figures—like John the Baptist, or Jesus for that matter—are almost invariably shown barefoot. Leaving her characters without shoes leaves them outside any clear historical time. They can't step into our world. Conversely, the large-format paintings are all hung so low that you can almost step into them. The almost life-size figures are roughly at eye height. It seems odd, when in the gallery, that we have been

6.1/6.2 Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *A Passion To A Principle*, exhibition view, Kunsthalle Basel, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Philipp Hänger

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7 MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES: MAINTENANCE ART

Text by Elena Tavecchia

Queens Museum
New York City Building, Flushing Meadows
Corona Park, Queens, NY 11368, United States
Through February 19, 2017
queensmuseum.org

Maintenance Art is the first institutional retrospective focusing on the practice of the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who has committed fifty years of her career to bringing to light what lies behind the scenes. Following her early engagement with thematics of the urban and ecological environment in the early 1960s, which gave shape to the series of the inflatable sculptures "Air Art," Ukeles's practice took a radical shift following her 1969 "Manifesto for Maintenance Art." This bold feminist statement, issued after she had her first child, addressed the apparently irreconcilable dualism she perceived in society between being an artist and being a mother. With her revolutionary manifesto, Ukeles reversed that point of view and broke this forced separation. She delineated a distinction between development and maintenance, in which the former stands for the creation of the new, progress, and excitement, while the latter is about preservation, care, and sustenance. This empowering way of reconsidering social dynamics upends the discriminatory gender bias that ascribes higher value to a working practice identified as masculine while the "feminine" practice of care and maintenance is demoted to a lower status and wage. As Andrea Liss points out in her 2009 book *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Ukeles's pronouncement consisted of treating her maternal work as material for art and cultural commentary. Her manifesto was a groundbreaking statement that continues to resound in the twenty-first century.

Following a series of maintenance performances in the early 1970s included in the traveling exhibition *c. 7500*, curated by Lucy Lippard—an overview of feminist Conceptual art—Ukeles took an important leap in 1976. For her work *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, she invited three hundred maintenance workers at the Whitney Museum of American Art to conceive of their work as "maintenance art" for one hour every day during their eight-hour work shift. At that time, New York was in a deep financial crisis and about to declare bankruptcy. Following a cheeky review of the show in which a journalist suggested that the Department of Sanitation might apply for art funds, given the economic situation, Ukeles decided to take this suggestion literally and initiated a long-term commitment as the official unsalaried artist in residence of the Department of Sanitation. Challenging social expectations once again, Ukeles identified her work as a mother with concerns for the labor of the others, and forged a deep connection with male and female maintenance workers.

Her first related performance, *Touch Sanitation* (1979–80), lasted eleven months, during which she met with each of the 8,500 sanitation employees of New York's fifty-nine districts. Pictures taken during this extensive performance show Ukeles shaking hands with the employees, listening to their stories, and thanking them for their efforts in keeping the city alive. She would also imitate their movements, which was the most explicit way to acknowledge their effort. Telefax messages were sent out every morning from Sanitation headquarters to all the city districts, so that the workers could keep track of her daily reach in the surrounding areas. Much documentation and numerous works related to the project ended up in *Touch Sanitation Show*, a massive exhibition displayed at two locations in 1984, which is now re-presented for the first time at the Queens Museum retrospective. Included in both shows is *One Year's Worktime II* (1984/2016), a full year of work shifts in the form of clock faces silkscreened over a gradient of colors representing the seasons. The work fully occupies the main wall of the Queens Museum and functions as a celebration of the daily effort of the sanitation workers.

From the mid-1980s through 2013 Ukeles staged several *Work Ballets* in different cities across the United States, Europe, and the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale in Japan. She worked with the skilled drivers of trucks for trash collection and snowplowing and choreographed graceful and intricate performances specifically developed for each setting. Staging the aesthetic potential of heavy-duty tools generally associated with dirt and removal was once again a way for Ukeles to shed an artistic light on what usually stays behind the scenes.

At the heart of Ukeles's commitment to art, the environment, and her engagement with the lives of workers is her deep Jewish faith. *Repair Room*, made across many decades, is organized around the theme of *tikkun olam*, or the healing actions of individuals and communities. Past projects involving participatory installations and unrealized proposals are presented in an intimate setting, attempting to address peace and healing torn societies.

The center of the exhibition is occupied by the final and most visionary effort of the artist to date: the *Landing* project on the site of the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island. Since the beginning of her experience as an artist in residence at the Department of Sanitation in 1977, Ukeles was interested in landfills

7.1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside*, July 23, 1973.
Courtesy: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

EXHIBITION

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye : A Passion To A Principle

Kunsthalle Basel, ., Switzerland
18 Nov 2016 - 12 Feb 2017

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Complication, 2013 Oil on canvas 200 x 250 cm, 78.7 x 98.4 inches, Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Kunsthalle Basel presents *A Passion To A Principle* , the first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (b. 1977).

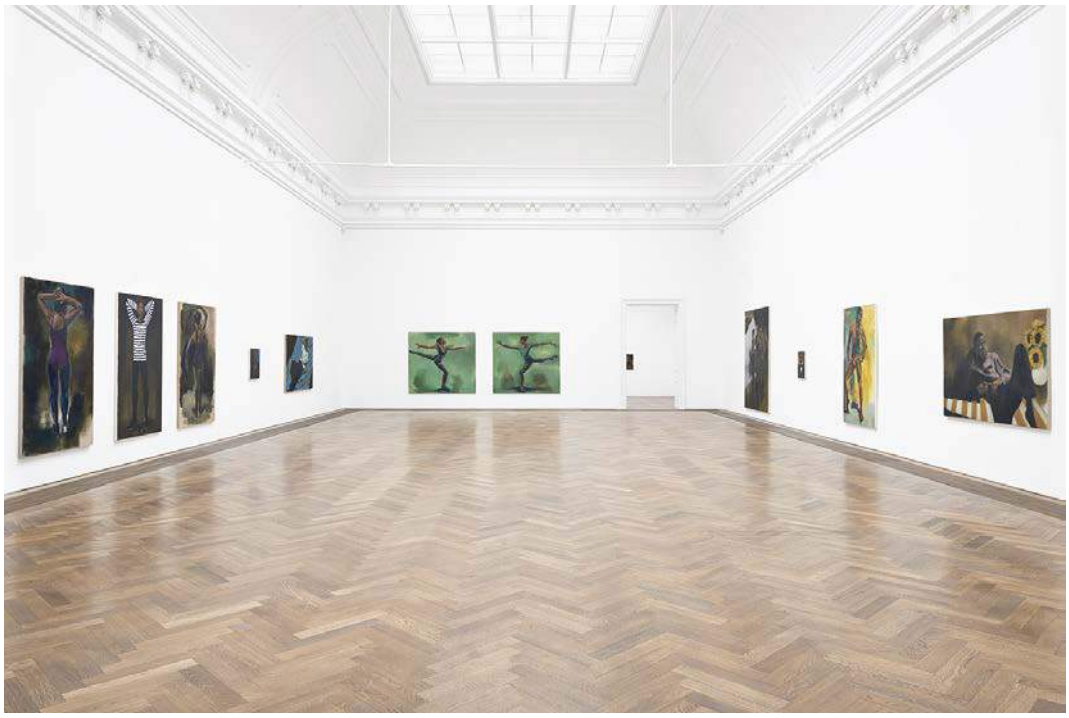
The exhibition shows more than a dozen new paintings from her prolific practice. At once traditional in her approach to form, line, and color, and decidedly contemporary in her self-reflexivity about her medium, the British-Ghanaian writer, poet, and painter regularly represents a predominantly black cast of figures culled from a mix of memory, projection, and fiction. Here, Yiadom-Boakye fills the majestic upstairs skylit galleries of Kunsthalle Basel with her lush and vibrant reflections on perception and painting as a practice.

The exhibition is generously supported by Peter Handschin and Jackson Tang.

www.kunsthallebasel.ch (http://www.kunsthallebasel.ch/en/exhibition/lynette_yiadom-boakye/#text)

REVIEWS

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye “A Passion To a Principle” at Kunsthalle Basel



by Adam Jasper

Claude Lévi-Strauss had a thing about birds. He thought that we were innately likely to give wild birds proper names, like “Angela” or “Timothy,” rather than the demeaning pet names we give dogs, like “Fido” or “Spot,” or the intentionally unique names we give racehorses, like “Lord Cardigan” or “Belle-de-Nuit.” Lévi-Strauss’s explanation was that unlike dogs, which are part of human families but not afforded the full status of people, birds inhabit a more or less parallel civilization that doesn’t intersect with our own. You can catch a bird and put it in a cage, but you can never really own its loyalties.

Birds are given human Christian names in accordance with the species to which they belong more easily then are other zoological classes, because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live. (Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 204)

Whether or not Lévi-Strauss was actually empirically correct is debatable. He wasn't really that into empirical research. But even if he's factually wrong, he's still right in principle—there's something strange, or rather estranged, about birds. It's something that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye also seems to have observed. Birds are the only animal that regularly appears in her paintings, and this seems to be because they can be co-present with people without implying relationships with them. In one painting in her current show at Kunsthalle Basel, Pander To A Prodigy (2016), a boy carries a peacock with its gorgeous tail politely tucked to one side. In another, The Matters (2016), a hunting owl sits on a youth's leather glove, its head swiveled around to look to the right of the viewer.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye paints pictures that look like portraits, but are not. The people she paints are composite fictions rather than individual subjects. In this regard, and in another way that will be mentioned later, her painting is close to historical paintings composed to illustrate collectively known stories. They don't look like them, though. They look much more like the painters that Yiadom-Boakye has exhaustively studied, like Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, and Walter Sickert. A lot of the backgrounds feature a harlequin pattern, an allusion to commedia dell'arte that is reinforced by the costumes that some of the figures wear, including a sad Pierrot ruff, and more than a few ballerinas. Commedia dell'arte provided stock motifs for painting that have barely been seen since the Great Depression, and their use here underscores the conscious anachronism of the images. They look like post-Impressionist works from the first Harlem Renaissance, in which men and women gaze out from the canvas with a certain polite indifference to the people passing by. Men and women—or, better, men or women. There are no paintings that show women and men together on the same canvas. The closest to being an exception is the final diptych, A Fever Of Lilies (2016), in which the two figures began as a couple on a single canvas before being repainted on two canvases, decorously separated. Whenever she paints groups, they are always small, homosocial groups.

The canvas is usually left unprimed, its raw texture showing through the paint. Parts of the canvas are even left blank to provide highlights. The figures themselves seem to be constructed from a spiral coming out from the face, almost like a mosaic, with a dark background that is added after the figure is roughed out. The painting is done without disegno, without prior drawing, so that it looks both improvised and effortless, even virtuoso. Yiadom-Boakye works quickly, completing each canvas in a single day or discarding it. The speed of the work recalls fresco techniques, and has something of the same immediacy. There's some modeling of shadow, but relatively little blending, contributing to the paintings' characteristically post-Impressionist look. Painted in seemingly at the very end are the overly bright whites of the eyes, as in the rituals of icon painting, where the eyes are added last because they are the most dangerous part of the image, the part that enables the picture to see the viewer. It's part of Yiadom-Boakye's seriousness as a painter that she respects this.

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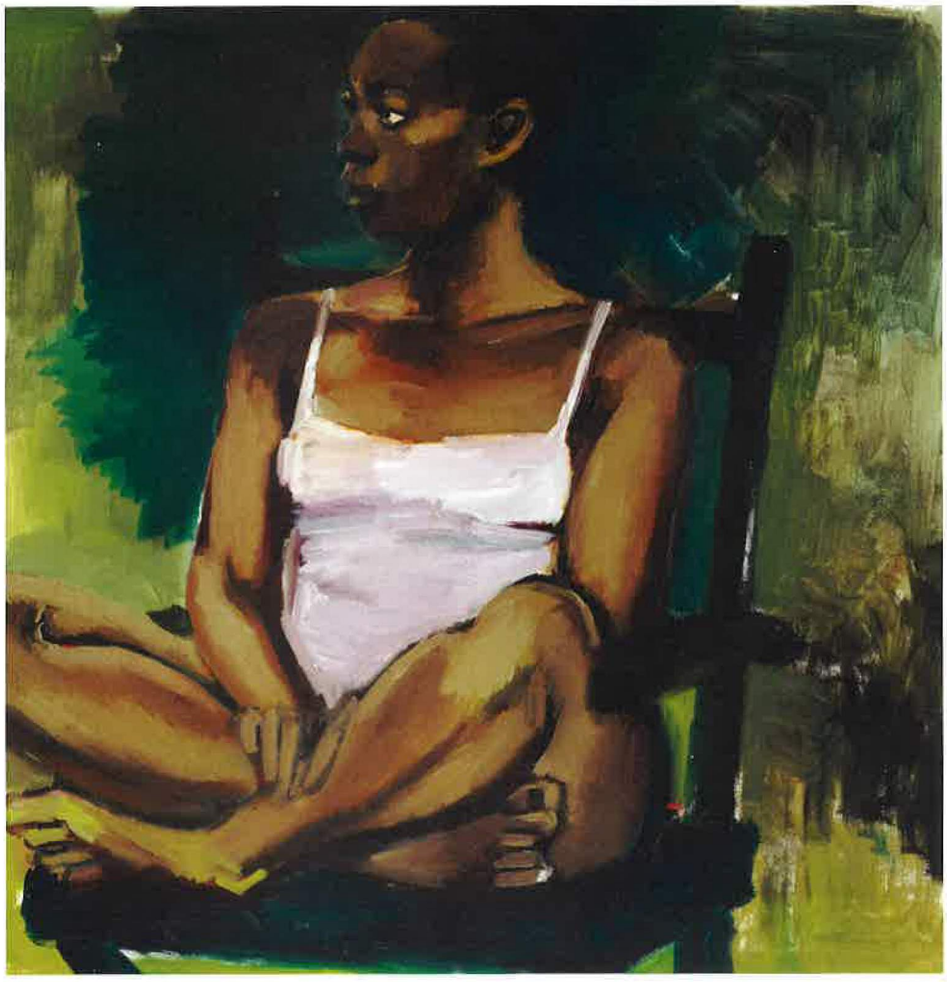
at Kunsthalle Basel (http://kunsthallebasel.ch)
until 12 February 2017

British Art Show 8

LEEDS ART GALLERY, UK



1

The 36 years between the first British Art Show and the eighth are bookended by Margaret Thatcher's introduction of neoliberalism to the UK and London's current status as a rich person's playground, one increasingly unaffordable for young artists. Notably, the current edition of this five-yearly survey – which tours to Edinburgh, Norwich and Southampton, and runs until January 2017 – features contributors based in Kent, Suffolk, Norfolk, Birmingham and Caernarfon, making the 'British' part of its title uncommonly appropriate. It also includes several UK-born artists who've moved abroad. These, in turn, are offset by 17 of the 42 artists hailing from outside the UK, and one, Ahmet Öğüt, being Turkish-born and living between Istanbul, Amsterdam and Berlin.

'We extended our invitation to artists who are neither British nor UK-based, but are meaningfully associated with the UK art scene and have contributed to its vitality,' writes Anna Colin (co-curator with Lydia Yee) in the catalogue. This might read as curatorial novelty à la the Turner Prize's recent welcoming of architects (as might the inclusion here of art world-embraced designers like Åbäke and Martino Gamper), a celebration of British art's internationalist outlook, or both. Then again, as UK art education angles into the mire, a future BAS might necessarily look abroad, and outside of visual art, to make up the numbers. Colin is a co-founder of the London-based free art school Open School East and, pointedly, Öğüt's work here – a collaboration with Liam Gillick, Susan Hiller and Goshka Macuga – is *Day After Debt* (2015), a UK-centric version of an ongoing project: a series of moneyboxes collecting for student debt.

Öğüt, a Delfina Foundation residency-holder in London a few years ago, is, we might also note, among a half-dozen artists here who've been shown at Chisenhale Gallery in recent years: on occasion, as with Patrick Staff's film *The Foundation* (2015), Colin and Yee even show the same work. But this show, whose 16-month tour excludes London, isn't aimed at churlish tabulators or glimpsers of invisible webs of influence. It's an accessible, cream-skimming recap and round-up of tendencies, and if the previous edition's themes of historical recurrence and fictional narratives felt on point in 2010, so does this one's attention to the shifting status of objects. We might have wished for Colin and Yee to strike a more idiosyncratic note than that sounded widely in biennales and institutions since 2012, but ignoring this subject would, in 2015, have left an elephant in the room; plus it does feel as if their choice of artists determined the theme, not vice versa.

So, prepare for many things outwardly concerned with thingness – and, of course, for many people viewing them through screens while they photograph them. Where the incontrovertible counter-context of the online empire appears, it's in terms of obscured physicality – as in *The Ideal* (2015), Yuri Pattison's fitful outsourced video footage of an energy-sucking Bitcoin data centre in Kangding, China. In tune with renewed interest in manual production, we also get sociable waves of retooled craft aesthetics and revivals of the handmade, from Aaron Angell's quirky ceramic motleys of quotation to Jesse Wine's similarly piecemeal 'paintings' in gridded ceramic tiles – Giorgio Morandi-like collections of bottles invaded by Sports Direct mugs. We find sporadically chattering objects courtesy of Laure Prouvost; listening objects (or 'visual microphones') fabricated by Lawrence Abu Hamdan as part of his wider investigation into the politics underlying speech, listening and understanding; and Cally Spooner physicalizing online forum bitching via LED message display boards and intermittent performances.

Many of the artists' films – half a day's worth in total – locate new ways to address the familiar disquiet about accumulating archives and what they can communicate, as in John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison's grave, purposefully garbled time-travelling, mixing black and white archival imagery from the 1960s onward with newly shot footage (*All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 2015), or Bedwyr Williams's *Century Egg* (2015), convivially housed in a cracked-open sculptural shell. Here scenes of a cockeyed cocktail party – which Williams, who appears as a blackened fossil himself, imagines as the future scene of an archaeological dig – intersect with digitally wrought documentation of holdings in Cambridge University's museums. The result accretes into a waggish yet sobering genuflection on historical remains and epistemology as they relate, dizzyingly, to the fundamental potential for idiosyncrasy within every human being.

One takeaway from Williams's film is that a single social event can offer too much to take in. So does this exhibition. Partly, it's the close-quartered hang, but entering – passing Alan Kane's incongruously domestic 'Welcome' doormat (*The But*, 2015) – delivers the instant impression of a ton of things going on, or about to. The aforementioned Gamper's intermittently-manned looms and shoe-cobbling stands highlight faded artisanal traditions; elsewhere, kids make art in the workshop area next to Mikhail Karikis's superb film *Children of Unquiet* (2013–14), in which schoolchildren perform onomatopoeic singing and dancing on the site of the world's first geothermal power station, in Italy, as if to reawaken it. Eileen Simpson and Ben White's sound work peals out a fragmentary patchwork of chart hits from 1962, the year before copyright restrictions come into effect. Ciara Phillips appears to have set up a short-term printing workshop in the entrance hall, results pasted up. Will Holder is rifling through each exhibiting institution's collection and presenting the work of a female artist (here, Marlow Moss's *Spatial Collection in Steel*, 1956–57). Upstairs, Anthea Hamilton's sculptures swarm with ants.

A Story Within a Story: Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art

Various venues, Göteborg 12 September – 22 November

Entering curator Elvira Dyangani Ose's densely layered, multivocal exhibition through a Kader Attia installation – a narrow corridor – I was struck by how, over the years, the biennial (now in its seventh edition) has already formed an identity. Attia's work, *Los de arriba y los de abajo (The ones above and the ones below)* (2015), a replica of a street in Hebron and its spatial segregation of Jewish and Muslim inhabitants, articulates the biennial's recurring interest in contemporary history, and in artists using documentary and archival methods with a political edge.

As one of the previous curators, I might be a bit biased towards this event per se, but in my opinion *A Story Within a Story* is one of the strongest Göteborg Biennials so far. It builds on the documentary legacy of the earlier shows with a concentrated curatorial concept and theoretical thoughtfulness. Dyangani Ose elegantly recycles Umberto Eco's definition of the 'open' artwork as a way of writing history. Past time is viewed as a growing archive of stories that can always be rewritten from a different perspective or in another voice. History becomes a collective cultural endeavour, in which this exhibition gives the artist a narrator's role as important as that of the academic historian.

As a consequence, a recurring gesture is the use of archival fragments, photographs, films or documents. It is notable that, even today with digitalisation and the critique of the photograph as a bearer of truth, the indexical image still carries an aura of evidence. In the wide-ranging anthology that accompanies the exhibition, Achille Mbembe writes beautifully on archiving being a symbolic burial, done to ensure that the dead are separated from the living. Quite a few of the works in the show, too, could be described as archaeological rescues of forgotten historical moments from the archival tombs. Sara Jordenö's thrilling excavation of the industrial history of the northern Swedish town of Robertsfors, *The Diamond People Project* (2005–15), with its unexpected links to the diamond mines of South Africa, is just one example. Even if the documentary, in its extended form, is the preferred mode of expression in the show, it is the works that take other routes that stay with me. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's fictional portraits have me remembering faces that never existed. Simon Starling's evocation of a lost artwork, *El Eco* (2014), speaks about corporeal memory through the reenactment of a dance performance. The layered storytelling of Phoebe Boswell's multisensory, multimedia installation *The Matter of Memory* (2014) takes me to Kenya's colonial past.

A pivotal point in the exhibition is the notion of decisive moments in history – instants when the order of things was questioned – and how this struggle for change was carried on over time by certain ideas that were transformed into collective energy. Especially in focus in this show is the African continent in the process of liberation, and the way that the political activities of this epoch were connected with similar movements elsewhere in the Southern Hemisphere. Maryam Jafri's archive of the first Independence Day ceremonies in various African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries depicts the first rituals celebrating independence, and the way that the departing colonial powers still influence the chosen protocol. Jafri's assemblage of old photographs from very different geographical and political contexts seems to seek to decipher the narratives hidden within major historical currents: stories within stories that can tell us what really happened at these crucial moments, and whether another world was ever possible.

Sara Arrhenius

Phoebe Boswell, *The Matter of Memory*, 2014 (installation view, Hasselblad Centre, Göteborg, 2015). Photo: Hendrik Zeitler

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 146 April 2012

The fictitious portraits of **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**

by Jennifer Higgie

Opposite page:
11pm Sunday
2011
Oil on canvas
2×1.3 m

This page:
Hour in The Life of II
2009
Oil on canvas
2×1.2 m

A Life in a Day

All images courtesy: Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

If the 20th century has taught us anything, perhaps it is this: surfaces are unstable, and appearances are not, on the whole, to be trusted. The deceptively amiable paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye are no exception. They may look like rather straightforward representations of people doing quite ordinary things – running along a beach, reading a book, taking a nap, or, more recently, dancing – but they're not portraits, they're pictures of people who don't exist. They're so full of personality that their fiction is initially a little unsettling. This is compounded by their technical proficiency: without the aid of photographs, models or preliminary sketches, Yiadom-Boakye wields her paintbrush with an old-fashioned ease and fluency, conjuring nuanced characters from her imagination. When I first saw her paintings, I assumed that they took a long time to make, but each one is, in fact, made in a day. This self-imposed constraint is enforced by the artist not only because, as Yiadom-Boakye told me, she has 'a short attention span', but because she doesn't want the surface 'to look too laboured'.[1] Peer closely at their rich, gestural surfaces and the speed and urgency of the brushstrokes becomes apparent in the occasionally wonky anatomical detail or inconsistent light source. What I first took to be images that, both in their making and in their subject matter, embody a mood of weekend-like serenity morphed into something more urgent and indeterminate, less polished and more interesting. Flaws, being human, are so much more endearing than perfection.

As much as they mine the appearance of a kind of generic ordinariness, the longer you look at Yiadom-Boakye's paintings the odder and richer they become. The people in them are often detached from anything that could link them to an actual time, location or even, on occasion, gender; their clothes usually are as neutral as their settings, and so blandly functional it would seem they exist simply to protect the modesty of their imaginary wearers. (An exception is a new work, *Greenfinch*, 2012, a 'portrait' of an androgynous dancer in a velvety leotard, who gazes out from a ruffle of deep green-blue feathers.) Yet, despite the fact that there is something determinedly average about these people – who, apart from the children, tend to be neither very young nor very old, seemingly neither rich nor poor – they exist in atmospheres touched by a compellingly faint *frisson* of something not quite explained. Their enigmatic titles – *The Edifying Oracle's Cheque*, say, or *Noble Aggressives* (both 2012) – hint at undercurrents of something more complicated than leisure and daydreams.

Not much happens in these pictures – a furtive glance is a big event.

Below left:
Clarity in Waiting
2012
Oil on canvas
2×1.2 m

Below:
Fiscal Sweatsuit
2012
Oil on canvas
2×1.3 m

Opposite page:
Lavender for Thistle
2011
Oil on canvas
65×50 cm

Not much happens in these pictures – a furtive glance is a big event. A woman, dressed in a short pink dress, smiles warmly, almost flirtatiously (*Clarity in Waiting*, 2012); a melancholy woman places her hand on her chest (*No Place for Nature*, 2011). She is absorbed in her thoughts, immersed in a soft-twilight blue; two girls, framed by a cold white sky and sitting in a tree, glance up as if we've interrupted their secret conversation (*A Life to Die For*, 2012). Variations on doing very little are seemingly endless in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, but it's an idleness tempered by the expressions she elicits from her cast, which range from deep self-absorption to genial comradeship, to kindness, to a vaguely malevolent hilarity. Often her characters are smiling – whether to themselves or at someone else, we'll never know – although perhaps smiling is the wrong word: Yiadom-Boakye told me that she 'prefers grins or leers to smiles' as they're more loaded with complicated potential.

What does link the subjects of Yiadom-Boakye's paintings is that almost every one of her imaginary characters is black. Considering the history of portrait painting – walk through London's National Gallery, say, and you won't find one painting by a black artist, while almost every study of a

Opposite page:
Bound Over to Keep the Peace
2012
Oil on canvas
2.5×2 m

This page clockwise from left:
Greenfinch
2012
Oil on canvas
1.4×1 m

Interstellar
2012
Oil on canvas
2×1.8 m

Any Number of Preoccupations
2010
Oil on canvas
1.6×2 m

black subject by a white painter is a representation of a servant, a slave or a 'noble savage' – this lends her seemingly benign subject-matter a radicality that springs not from images of rebelliousness but from the repeated representations of normality. Yiadom-Boakye, whose parents emigrated to England from Ghana, told me: 'When the issue of colour comes up, I think it would be a lot stranger if they were white; after all, I was raised by black people [...] for me this sense of a kind of normality isn't necessarily celebratory, it's more a general *idea* of normality. This is a political gesture for me. We're used to looking at portraits of white people in painting.'

The politics of black portraiture, however, is both fuelled and tempered by Yiadom-Boakye's genuine love of, and engagement with, the history of western portrait painting. Her points of reference are decidedly non-contemporary; her studio is filled with books on Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet and Walter Sickert – artists who employed the innate artifice of representation in order, conversely, to express the humanity of their subjects and whom Yiadom-Boakye likes because they 'weren't formally perfect but there was a kind of violence around them that they made clear'. (Her recent paintings of dancers nod especially to Degas; Sickert's recollection of him declaring that 'in painting you must give the idea of the true by means of the false'[2] is particularly apt here.) In Sickert's paintings of music halls, for example, the noise might be intimated but his characters appear to exist in a deeply silent place – one with which the characters who populate Yiadom-Boakye's work are not unfamiliar.

One obvious difference in approach isolates Yiadom-Boakye from her influences. Whereas they all employed portraiture in order to reflect upon the world at large, Yiadom-Boakye realized quite early on that she was less interested in capturing the idiosyncrasies of a particular person than in concentrating on painting itself, without the distractions and responsibilities a relationship to a living, breathing subject involves. She told me: 'I always loved figurative painting and I've always wondered what that power was that I kept coming back to and I realized it was less about individuals than about how they had been pictorially constructed. What was it about their eyes? How was that achieved through this painting?'

Two characters recur again and again in her works – the only ones to do so and who, Yiadom-Boakye told me, she is 'getting to know better'. One is a man in a striped top, the other a handsome man in a white, long-sleeved T-shirt who she has most recently painted wearing a silver chain and a red pendant (*Bound Over to Keep the Peace*, 2012). Both have appeared in different incarnations and signal the beginning of a new series of works. The artist begins a picture knowing roughly what it will include – a woman in a row boat, say – and then the personality grows from her experiments with the paint. Similarly, her titles often evolve organically from word or image associations, or from random trains of thought. A painting is finished, in her words, when it has a 'potency and presence' that 'isn't too theatrical'.

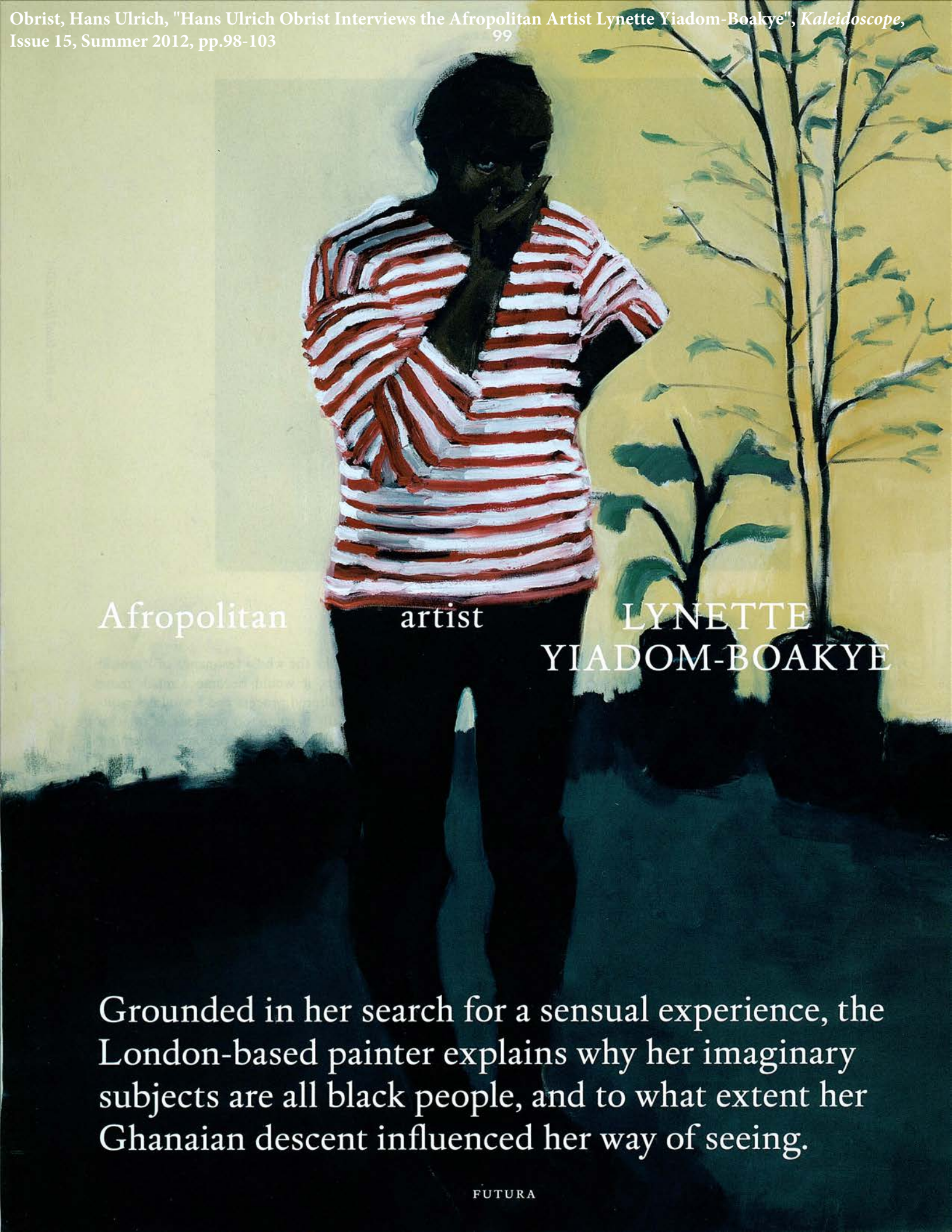
Yiadom-Boakye also writes short stories. I recently read one that, like her paintings, privileges mood and atmosphere over detail. It focuses on a family of 'indeterminate nationality' who are served by a waiter who is 'clean-shaven, dark, possibly Italian, Israeli or Greek by extraction but with an Anglo-American accent'. They are at 'a beach resort somewhere in the United States (possibly Florida or California) or the United Kingdom (Cornwall or Brighton)'. By the end of the story, the family, who are universally cruel, have been killed by the clever machinations of a depressed squirrel and a wise crab. After having spent time with her pictures, the tale made a strange kind of sense. If there is one quality that unites all of Yiadom-Boakye's characters, either in written form or a painting, is their sense of empowerment and possibility. 'I don't', she told me, 'like to paint victims.' ●

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye lives in London, UK. Her exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, London, runs until 13 May 2012. Recent solo shows include Corvi-Mora, London, in 2011; Studio Museum Harlem, New York, USA, and Stevenson, Cape Town, South Africa, in 2010. Her solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, opens in November. Her work is included in 'The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial', New York, until 22 April 2012.

Jennifer Higgie is co-editor of frieze *and is based in London, UK.*

1 All quotes from author's visit to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's studio, 12 February, 2012
2 Walter Sickert, 'The Royal Academy', *English Review*, June 1912

Obrist, Hans Ulrich, "Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews the Afropolitan Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye", *Kaleidoscope*, Issue 15, Summer 2012, pp.98-103



Afropolitan artist LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

Grounded in her search for a sensual experience, the London-based painter explains why her imaginary subjects are all black people, and to what extent her Ghanaian descent influenced her way of seeing.

FUTURA

(previous) *Six AM Wednesday*, detail, 2009

From Here Until Never, 2011

HANS ULRICH OBRIST In your paintings you have a very clear methodology, which is actually quite conceptual. It sounds like, in a sort of On Kawara way, a painting a day. Can you talk about this? It seems that with a painting, no matter what, you finish it.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE Yes, exactly. That started off as being a practical consideration: the way I was initially painting, if I didn't finish in a day the surface wouldn't work, it would dry at different times, so it was completely a structural thing. Then I started to realize that the way I was working was as important to the work itself as the finished product, it was about reading between works rather than becoming very precious about one. It's to do with the way I think: I say it's a short attention span, but what I mean by that is that it's one thought and it's fresh in my mind. It's about a certain kind of urgency and capturing that time frame. Because if it were dragged out over days I feel like the whole resonance of it would go, it would become a much more labored process and I would personally become too precious. If I get to the end of the day and something hasn't worked I don't sleep well. I'd rather destroy it than think about it over night just to come back and try and force myself to like it.

HUO It's interesting also because you say that you don't fix the particular narrative behind it. The paintings are like snippets or part of something, it's almost like the viewer writes the stories. Duchamp said the viewer is half of the work, Dominique Gonzales Foerster says the viewer does at least half of the work. It seems to be the case with you as well.

LYP I give all I can, as I think seduction is very important. I love painting. I love the surface of it. I know how it makes me feel when I see certain works or when I'm in the presence of works that I really admire, and I think

Biography

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE (b. 1977, London) has had solo shows at Chisenhale Gallery, London; Corvi-Mora, London; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Stevenson, Cape Town; and Gasworks, London. Group exhibitions include New Museum Triennial, New York; CAPC, Bordeaux; 2011 Biennale de Lyon; The Saatchi Gallery, London; 7th Gwangju Biennial.

Current & Forthcoming

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE will be included in the group exhibition "A World Away" at Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire, through October 28. A solo exhibition of her work will be presented at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York later in 2012.

Author

HANS ULRICH OBRIST is co-director of the Serpentine Gallery in London. Obrist has co-curated over 250 exhibitions and has contributed to over 200 book projects. His recent publications include *A Brief History of Curating*, *Project Japan: Metabolism*, *Ai Wei Wei Speaks*, along with two volumes of his selected interviews. In 2011, Obrist was awarded the Bard College Award for Curatorial Excellence.

the pleasure for the viewer comes out of that kind of feeling, rather than me trying to tell a story. It's a sensual thing—it's about a sense of touch and a sensibility. I want it to be that kind of experience as well, which is why I don't like the idea of giving too much of a story and trying to control that response too much.

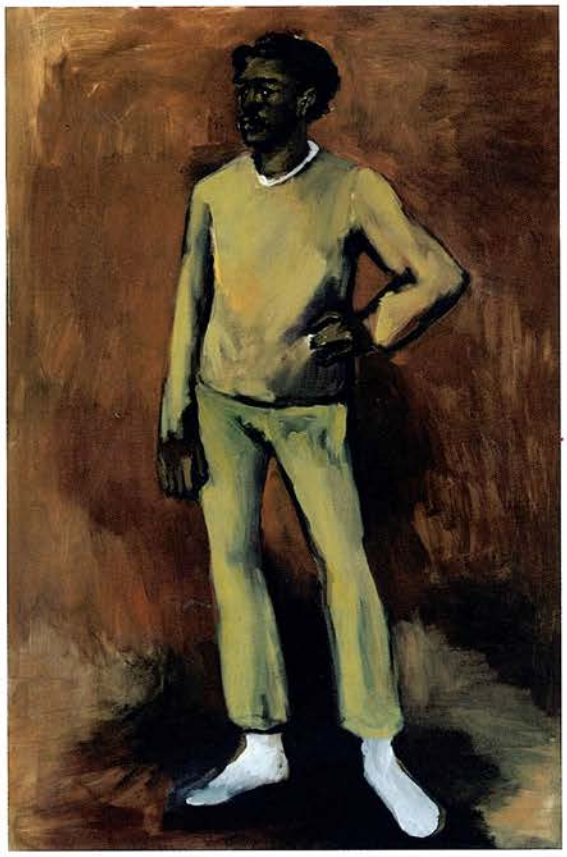
HUO You say in all your texts and interviews that you conceive the paintings as groups, and think of how they could work together. Can you tell me a little bit about the main groups in your work?

LYP They develop over a period of time, and relate more or less directly to what I'm thinking about at the time. I try to put as many different things into a group as possible and often things that relate to each other. There are paintings that come in pairs. But I don't necessarily show them together. There's a recurring pair that goes into every body of work. When I start a body of work I will do these two paintings and each time there will be a slight variation but essentially it's the same man. He's always wearing basically the same thing, always facing in opposite directions, the pose changes and the facial expression changes slightly, so he'll always come into that group and there's always a man in a stripy top. In a way they are like an anchorage. Somehow they start the body of work and then from there everything kind of builds around them. It changes each time. More recently I've been trying to paint a lot of landscape, and I'm not very good at it. (Laughs.)

HUO I wanted to ask you about these two characters. They are larger portraits filling the canvas completely and almost coming out of the wall. You say that they are always there, these figures, one has a stripy top and the other one not. So how did they enter? You have often mentioned that this is a recurring element but I didn't find any literature on how they entered into your work. How did you have the epiphany? How did these two guys pop up?

LYP They happened quite separately. The really big ones of the man with the white top, the massive ones that always come as a pair, they started of as a very small work. It was a triptych of three of that man and there was something in the facial expression that really captured everything for me, everything that I was trying to do somehow. Really, if I had to choose two pieces that encapsulate the spirit of what I'm trying to do, it'd be him and the stripy man. When I say capture everything I'm trying to do, or the spirit of what I do, I mean the way that I think, the way my sense of humor works. When I start a body of work they are a good reminder, if you like, an anchoring of how I think generally and the reminder of where I am. It is also the sense of getting to know

Hard Wet Epic, 2010



Fiscal Sweatsuit, 2012
Photography by Marcus Leith

someone better. They have changed a lot since their first incarnations.

HUO And what about the stripy one?
LYP Again it's like they are opposite poles of the same thing. So there are two emotions there. There's this calm, sense of something level and almost elegant in the stripy man, and then the white shirt is far more like a sphinx I suppose.

HUO I'd like to talk about the characters that you invent for each of your portraits. Your fictitious characters are all black people, and you have said that that it produces a kind of normality. I wanted to ask you about this, and to what extent you view this as a political gesture.
LYP I think it's always in some way going to be political. But for me the political is as much in the making of it, in the painting of it, in the fact of doing it, rather than anything very specific about race or even about celebration. I don't see what I do as at all celebratory, because to me it just is. The fact that they are all black is double edged as well. They're all black, or what I should say is they are all tinted black or brown—some of them actually have black features, others have completely Caucasian features—but they are still sort of black. For me, that is the normalizing aspect. It's not normal, because they're not real people, but at the same time that means also that race is something that I can completely manipulate, or reinvent, or use as I want to. Also, they're all black because, in my view, if I was painting white people that would be very strange, because I'm not white. This seems to make more sense in terms of a sense of normality. I suppose with anyone doing anything you set yourself certain parameters, it's not about making a rainbow celebration of all of us being different. It's never seemed necessary to alter the color of people just for the sake of making that point.

HUO You also say in a statement that you don't like to paint victims. Jennifer Higgie says it's a kind of empowerment, kind of power to the people.
LYP Absolutely. I said that many years ago in relation to how I like to think about how I finish a person, how a person should look in a painting, and what I want their expressions to be. One of the things I always destroy in the work is anyone that I think looks passive. In part, this is because they're black, and in part because I don't want them to like anyone has taken anything from them. I don't want them to be victimized basically, or to look that way. It's as much about avoiding certain tropes in the work as anything else.

HUO I would like to ask you about Ghana, as your family comes from there. I was wondering if you have any connections to Ghana or to Africa?
LYP Not very strong ones. I mean, my strongest connection is my parents.

HUO Who live there?
LYP No, they live here in London, and they have for forty years. But just the fact of them having raised me the way that they did, they are my connection. I kind of have an idea of Ghana from them, but I wouldn't say I have a strong personal connection with it, in that I haven't been there that much and I certainly never lived there. I wasn't born there—I was born here, and I was raised here. Really my connection is through my relatives, the people who raised me, and their way of thinking, which to me is very much Ghanaian, and that has obviously effected how I think and what I think about. But it would be disingenuous of me to claim some strong connection with Ghana as a place because I don't really know it and I wasn't raised there.

HUO But it's there through the transmissions of your parents.
LYP Definitely. The way I always put it was that Ghana is present as a way of thinking and a way of seeing, which has influenced me.

All images courtesy of Corvi-Mora, London

Bound Over To Keep The Peace, 2012
Photography by Marcus Leith

Gad, Amira. "Reading Paintings: The Work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye." *Verses After Dusk: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* (exhibition catalogue). Serpentine Art Gallery, London, 2015: pp. 21-31.

Reading Paintings:
The Work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Amira Gad

> *When we see, we are not just looking—we are reading the language of images.*
> John Berger

A Tradition of Painting

For Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, painting is her tool and portraiture her medium. Her works call for an exercise in looking and in unravelling the many layers and dimensions—drawing from art, history, literature and society—that lie at the heart of her practice.

In her wide repertoire of portrait paintings, Yiadom-Boakye demonstrates a particular relationship with the depiction of human form. The characters that come to life through her brushstrokes are an agglomerate of memories, sketches and collected photographic material. She depicts black subjects against a monochrome background, an abstracted landscape or an interior. They are usually portrayed—sometimes caught in the moment—performing banal activities, from walking, dancing, sitting or standing, to perhaps even waiting. At each instance, an art-historical reference is revealed, which in turn unveils a critical discourse. Not only does she make use of the vocabulary of figurative painting to formulate her art-historical references, but her use of oil paint demonstrates her knowledge of the tradition and history of the medium—her skills are evidenced in the unblended contours and bold strokes.

The term 'oil painting' refers to more than a technique and defines an art form beyond the process of mixing pigments with oil, a process that has existed since ancient times. Oil painting as an art form, according to John Berger, was not born until there was a need to develop this technique, which emerged in Northern Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century—though it did not fully establish its own norms until the sixteenth century—for painting pictures of a new character: the depiction of figures in society.[1]

In this sense, Yiadom-Boakye's choice to use oil painting in her portraits is more than fitting to the origins of a tradition that emerged with the need to depict characters.

While the tradition of oil painting is understood to have emerged to answer a social need—the activities of capitalism—landscape oil paintings (the first painted in Holland in the seventeenth century) seemed to be the exception to the rule, since nature defied the idea of material possession.[2] From the seventeenth century onwards, the techniques of painters such as Salomon van Ruysdael (1602–1670), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) and J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), but also Claude Monet (1840–1926) and the Impressionists, progressively turned away from the substantial towards the indeterminate and intangible. In Yiadom-Boakye's repertoire there are traces and perhaps also a continuation of this evolution, particularly visible in paintings such as *A Toast To The Health Of* (2011) page 128 and *Curses* (2011) page 134. Both paintings depict an abstract landscape with a pair of figures in movement. Neither the landscape nor the clothing of the figures hints at their geographical location or background. Wearing simple, generic clothing and inhabiting indistinct environments devoid of objects, her subjects are detached from anything that could link them to an actual era or location. The evocation of the indeterminate is, as such, a recurring thread in the artist's practice: the painterly style is referential yet ambiguous, her characters do not seem to belong to a specific time or context and glimpses of their spatial surroundings are limited. This indeterminate quality of her paintings leaves a literal space for the viewer to construct narratives around them.

With *The Counter* (2010), Yiadom-Boakye touches upon the artistic and literary trend of eighteenth-century Romanticism, which emphasised emotions as an authentic source of aesthetic experience. The painting is somewhat reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a reference made visible through the motifs she utilises—a man sitting on top of a mountain or cliff against a foggy background—and the overall pinkish tone in Yiadom-Boakye's colour palette. However, a discrepancy emerges in the posture of the subject: while Friedrich's figure stands confidently with accoutrements suggestive of the noble classes, Yiadom-Boakye's character is sitting casually, suggesting a nonchalant yet pensive posture. In other words, her character is an everyday, quotidian man.

Perhaps the most referenced painting in Yiadom-Boakye's work is Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), which she has revisited in many of her canvases most clearly in *Yes Officer, No Officer* (2008). In this triptych, each section depicts a man half-naked and lying on a bed. Yiadom-Boakye mimics Manet's pictorial representation of the reclining female nude on a bed with a servant by her side, a black figure rendered almost invisible against the darker background. But here, on the one hand she erases the character of the lowly subject, and, on the other, she swaps the gender of the main subject to a man. In doing so, she confronts outdated racial perceptions and the politics of desire.

There are a number of these cross references in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, through which she pushes us to refresh our knowledge of a profoundly dominant visual culture and revisit our cultural and art-historical heritage. The influences from earlier artistic styles can be seen as a means of positioning herself within a lineage of canonical Western painting. As Okwui Enwezor so eloquently writes in relation to her work:

> Yiadom-Boakye's shadowy background and apt use of contrasting colour to attract the eye seem indebted to Francisco Goya (1746–1828), particularly his *Black Paintings* (1819–23). Her monochromatic backgrounds, indelicate brushstrokes and even the postures of many of her figures recall portrait of paintings of the mid-nineteenth century French and American Realists. Her attention to the materiality of paint and her two-dimensional treatment of figures pay homage to the work of Édouard Manet's (1832–1883) handling of paint and subject matter. And her depiction of psychological complexity and movement calls to mind the masterpieces of Edgar Degas (1834–1917).[3]

Like the artists Enwezor mentions, Yiadom-Boakye is less concerned with perfect anatomical representation than she is interested in making the esoteric qualities of life tangible through paint. She intentionally eschews realism in favour of drawing attention to painting's representational difficulties. The indeterminate feel of her works in their reference to earlier artistic styles emphasises the rejection of realism as a tenet of modernism.

Despite her use of formal techniques and references, Yiadom-Boakye's primary concern is the history of representation. The singularity of her work does not reside in any bland continuation of portraiture, but in a position taken in relation to its inheritance. She is comfortable using art history's visual language, and by repurposing familiar tropes, particularly those of portraiture, she subverts traditional signifiers of representation and perception and formulates a new historicism in art.

Before the work of modern painters such as Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), who depicted workers and ordinary people, portraiture seemed to lack objectivity.[4] Historically, portraits have conveyed the wealth and authority of their subjects through poses projecting confidence and strength and through clothing, accoutrements and surroundings used strategically to indicate social hierarchy. Commissioning portraiture was a symbol of status, and only the elite were entitled to be immortalised within the ranks of historical painting. With Yiadom-Boakye's layering of references, her paintings draw attention to the flawed perception of race in historical paintings. In depicting black subjects doing everyday things, she advocates both the normalcy and intricacy of blackness.

Portraits of Society

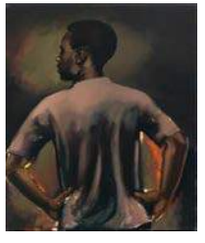
In further exploring the idea of portraiture as Yiadom-Boakye's *true* genre, it is helpful to think of her paintings as 'portraits of society' (as Orlando Reade suggested),[5] rather than portraits of individuals, since they do not offer any specificity. Their indeterminate feel and their fiction shift our attention to the bigger picture, functioning as a window onto a conceptual view of society. By strategically preventing her viewers from considering her portraits as representative of individual people, she encodes her work with clues to be pulled apart, and asks us to unravel the multiple art-historical and linguistic appropriations in order to appreciate their 'conceptual thrust'.[6] To follow this line of thought, it is necessary to question the function or role of portraiture today and where Yiadom-Boakye's practice stands within it.

David Brett, in his essay 'The Possibility of Portraiture' (1991), points to the importance of the social process as an attribute of authentic portraiture:

> We are not blank recorders, pieces of paper waiting to be developed; the act of seeing is an act of searching. Hence the act of painting or drawing a likeness remains a serious activity, in principle, because it requires such a minute attention to the processes of experience. […] An authentic process has to embody the knowledge of social process through the process of scrutiny. In the nature of the problem it cannot be done without using the visual languages of the past, because those visual languages are the traces of forms of scrutiny, theories of knowledge and concepts of social process which are now defunct. The integration of the social process into the artistic method is the first and necessary condition of authentic formal portraiture.[7]

Yiadom-Boakye's portraits could be understood as entailing forms of scrutiny whereby social processes are inherent to her methodology. Beyond the conceptual framework of her paintings, and the exercise of reading the underlying socio-historical dimension, the idea of 'seeing' also transpires in a formal way in her work. In art history, the gaze has long been a subject of concern and analysis, from the idea of the eyes as the windows to the soul, to the direct gaze as a mirroring effect that includes the viewer in the framework of the painting. A number of the figures in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings directly engage the viewer with their gaze. This is evident in paintings such as *A Passion Like No Other* (2012) and *Bluebird* (2014) page 136, in which the white teeth and eyes boldly stand out against the brown skin tones and subdued backgrounds.

Within the context of an exhibition space, Yiadom-Boakye's paintings can be further staged in a way that positions viewers as voyeuristically intruding on the figures' private space. They can be playfully choreographed, appearing to be looking at each other, looking away or looking down, glancing at you out of the corner of their eyes, or even looking beyond you. At the Serpentine Gallery the artist brings together a series from 2013 depicting half-length portraits of men, including the works *The Knowledge of the East* page 131, *The Quartz*, *The Quickness* and *Some Distance From Now*. The viewers' position in the middle of the square-shaped gallery, framed within the stare of the depicted black subjects, uncannily inverts the roles of subject and object, transforming the viewers into the subject matter.



These forms of portrayal, the strategies of mirroring and the staging of spectatorship and the power of the gaze, are fundamental to the discourse of portraiture and, in Yiadom-Boakye's case, riddled with stereotypes of social-racial representation. They also point to the advent of modern and contemporary art. Boris Groys argues that prior to modernism, the relationship between the artist and the spectator was one in which the artist created and the spectator evaluated. With the desire to be delivered from the judgement of the spectator, modern art struggled against this aesthetic regime. Contemporary art's strategy—as the heir of this struggle—'was to destroy the secure position of the spectator, to abolish the aesthetic distance—to put the spectator inside the artwork'.[8]

It is also tempting to consider the notion of the Cartesian gaze in relation to Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, a gaze that is ruled by reason alone. According to Descartes, the senses and the body cannot be sources of reliable knowledge. The Cartesian gaze is an 'arrested gaze' that controls the sensory experience and goes beyond it. Genuine knowledge is achieved by disconnecting from the debris of the sensory.[9] The discourse of portraiture as portrayed within Yiadom-Boakye's works in fact commands a critical discourse, repositions our perceptions of representation and appears to gauge our understanding of culture and society. In this sense, her paintings invite a Cartesian gaze where reason is at the core of reading her paintings. Nevertheless, sensory experience—not limited to the pure exercise of sight—through her direction of our mood or the ambiance of her painting is still at play, as she continuously maintains multiple and ambiguous standpoints from which every potential reading could also be a red herring. This is evidenced by her lyrical titles, which often seem disconnected from the depicted characters.

Narrativity and Literary References

Yiadom-Boakye's portraiture has as much in common with language and literature as it does with academic figurative painting. Her practice appears to be a conversation between visual art and literature that takes a twofold approach: on the one hand, the paintings' enigmatic—and at times misleading—titles, and, on the other, the series of literary references incorporated within her work that unravel with a closer reading of the image. As we oscillate between reading and looking, and, more specifically, attempt to make sense of what is offered to us in terms of visual and literal cues, Yiadom-Boakye appears to situate us in the midst of an irreconcilable tension as well as in the position of attempting to reconstruct her evasive narratives.

The titles contain puns and word play, which are also a glimpse into the artist's parallel writing practice. They are lyrical and allude to poetry, but persist as fragments. This play with language, extended to looking at the paintings, highlights the dissonance between the visual and the literal, between texts and images. Some of her titles focus on the phonetic combinations of words; others direct our mood and our experience of looking. The narrative links foreground an atmosphere or feeling that at times feel disconnected from the depicted characters. This disconnect is a precise tool that creates an open-endedness inviting our imagination and speculation, and revealing a variety of dimensions to her paintings.

A Passion Like No Other (2012) is a half-length portrait of a man facing outwards and looking directly at us. His seemingly sceptical expression is contrasted against a bright blue background. The title, although not particularly informative, nevertheless directs the viewers' perception and feeling towards what had appeared to be a disinterested pose and gaze, inviting us to believe that the passion referred to might reveal itself in the subject's eyes. *Citrine by the Ounce* (2014) page 9, a close-up portrait of a man's face looking down against an intense yellow background, is another example of such play: we are drawn in to imagine the yellow paint as a reincarnation of citrine gemstones—symbols of success or abundance. This is not to say that the artist is leading us to these specific references, but that she plays with visual and literary tools to command our imagination and to let it run its course.

A closer examination of Yiadom-Boakye's works reveals further literary references—to representations of people of African descent in literature and art history. Through these, a new layer of critical discourse is unravelled, enabling another possibility for the positioning of the artist's practice. Such representations of black subjects have often been treated as spectacle—a matter she both explores and deploys in her work. It should be pointed that such associations are speculative and only offer a potential and subjective reading of the artist's work.

Perhaps literal examples of this, are the paintings that include 'Friday' in their titles, such as *11pm Friday* (2010) [page 106], which conjures a character from Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the story of a castaway who lives for twenty-eight years on a remote tropical island near Trinidad, where he encounters cannibals before being rescued. Crusoe is shipwrecked while on an expedition to bring slaves from Africa. Friday, one of the novel's main characters, is an escaped prisoner, whom Crusoe names after befriending him on that day. As is prevalent in the colonial literary genre, Friday is depicted as a *sauvage*, a primitive being whom Crusoe needs to educate. Most often, to accentuate this 'primitive' or 'animalistic' identity, depictions of the sauvage (like the description of Friday) feature clothing that is associated with nature such as feathers. This representation is echoed in a number of Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, namely *Bluebird* (2014) [page 136] and *A Passion Like No Other* (2012); both present portraits of a man staring straight at us with a penetrating gaze. Both men are dressed in garments that are difficult to associate with a specific period, but they have in common a flouncy, collar that is reminiscent of feathers. Though we might be quick to make a literal association with representations of the *sauvage*, the subjects' allure and posture quickly shifts our attention to the contrary: they seem confident, and their heads are held high.

To consider Yiadom-Boakye's paintings against the literary discourses of *Robinson Crusoe* adds to the perception of her practice as one that comments on such representations. If Crusoe represents the first colonial mind in fiction, then Friday represents not just a Caribbean tribesperson but also all the peoples of America, Asia and Africa who would later be oppressed in the age of European imperialism. Contemporary rewritings of the Crusoe story, like J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and Michel Tournier's *Friday* (1967), emphasise the sad consequences of Crusoe's failure to understand Friday and suggest how the tale might be told very differently from the indigenous person's perspective.

Interestingly enough, there is no one painting in Yiadom-Boakye's repertoire that uses 'Friday' in its title *and* includes a portrait of a man with a feather-like collar. It is also important to draw attention to the fact that other days of the week (Wednesday, Tuesday) appear in some of the titles. Even though, Yiadom-Boakye may not have these particular references in mind with her paintings, by including these other days of the week, she breaks any narrative

thread that we might have spun. This exercise in looking and reading her paintings, building on a narrative that is eventually torn down, reveals the artist's desire to keep us on our toes and not assume that we have reached a complete picture or a full story. In a way, this mirrors the fallacies that come with historical narratives, a historicism that is in constant need of being revisited, rewritten and never taken for granted.

Realistic Fiction

In literary academic circles, *Robinson Crusoe* is credited with launching realistic fiction as a literary genre, and one could argue that Yiadom-Boakye's paintings should also be attributed to realistic fiction. Her subjects might be fictional, set in fictional spatial contexts, but they are reminiscent of realistic portrayals. To understand Yiadom-Boakye's paintings within the framework of realistic fiction further emphasises the notion that these are portraits of society, whereby the realism of the depictions is one that points to the societal realities that are evoked in her works.

Another seminal reference in reading Yiadom-Boakye's paintings is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), written nearly two centuries after *Robinson Crusoe* and also belonging to the colonial literary tradition. Conrad's novel is a fictional autobiography that collates the author's travels and experiences in the (Belgian) Congo. The separation between the author and the fictional narrator Marlow is ambiguous, so that the reader is never quite sure whose point of view is being described. This indecisiveness mirrors a perception of Africa that is also reflected in the reference to 'darkness'. Darkness in Conrad's novel is both a literal and symbolic rendering of an outsider's view of Africa and Africans: Marlow cannot help but notice the blackness of their skin colour, an observation that emphasises a binary opposition between the Africans and the colonialists. His first experience of exploring the territory is depicted as 'penetrat[ing] deeper and deeper in to the heart of darkness'.[10] The opposition between lightness and darkness parallels that of civilised and dehumanised. It allows for a definition of the Other through Marlow, delineating the Other as embodying contrary values to his. By identifying and characterising Africa from the colonialists' point of view and underlining the reader's distance from the setting, a social and cultural criticism is implied. This link was made by Enwezor in his essay 'The Subversion of Realism: Likeness, Resemblance and Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's

Post-Portrait Paintings', drawing attention to the late Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* in which he notes that Africa is only understood in comparison with Europe: '*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe, therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality'.[11]

A sense of a 'heart of darkness' seems to permeate Yiadom-Boakye's portraits of black subjects against dark backgrounds. Her use of heavy shading and tonalities mean that the palette pushes the limits of darkness, pressing the figures towards abstraction or partial invisibility (black hair, black skin, dark background). Paintings such as *Some Distance From Now* (2013) and *The Quickness* (2013) appear to direct one's focus between the heart of the dark background and the subject, who looks at an imaginary other or even directs his gaze directly towards us. The darkness of the background, however, is penetrated with strokes of brightly coloured paint, that look like rays of sunlight.

One might also describe this use of chiaroscuro as emblematic of the idea of the aura (as developed by Walter Benjamin) in an art-historical sense. In doing so, the interpretation of a possible colonial discourse is shaken. Similar to Conrad's play on narrative and point of view, Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are ambiguous. They can be perceived as contemporary iterations of such discourses that point to a more globalised status quo whereby binaries in identity representations are potentially irrelevant.

While the history of portraiture has situated the black figure as a vexed subject of representation, Yiadom-Boakye's ambiguous depictions accentuate the continued relevance of black portraiture. She makes use of visual and literary language to give contemporary depictions of black subjects in art a sense of what art-historian Huey Copeland describes—in a discussion of Barkley L. Hendricks' (born 1945) paintings of black figures—as a form of 'liberatory self-fashioning' in the context of the 'crisis of blackness within representation'.[12]

Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are assemblages of history that point to the shortcomings of (art) history in relation to the presence of portraits of black figures. Using the formal language of a tradition of painting, as well as

literary references, she presents a contemporary iteration of the ongoing discussions of art, representation and identity. In her depictions and strategies, both lyrical and visual, she mirrors the fallacies in the construction of historical narratives. Moreover, she situates the viewer at the core of her strategy, laying a certain responsibility (both social and critical) on us. Her work forms part of the lineage of figurative painting and, most significantly, propels it into contemporary discourse, raising urgent questions regarding its relevance today.

Endnotes

1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1972), p. 78.
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5 Orlando Reade, 'Life outside the Manet Paradise Resort: On the Paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye', *The White Review*, Online Issue: November 2012. Last accessed: April 2015.
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8 Boris Groys, *Art Beyond Spectatorship* (Brussels: BOZAR, 2014).
9 Janne Seppänen, *The Power of the Gaze: An Introduction to Visual Literacy* (Peter Lang Publishing Inc: 2006), p. 26.
10 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 185.
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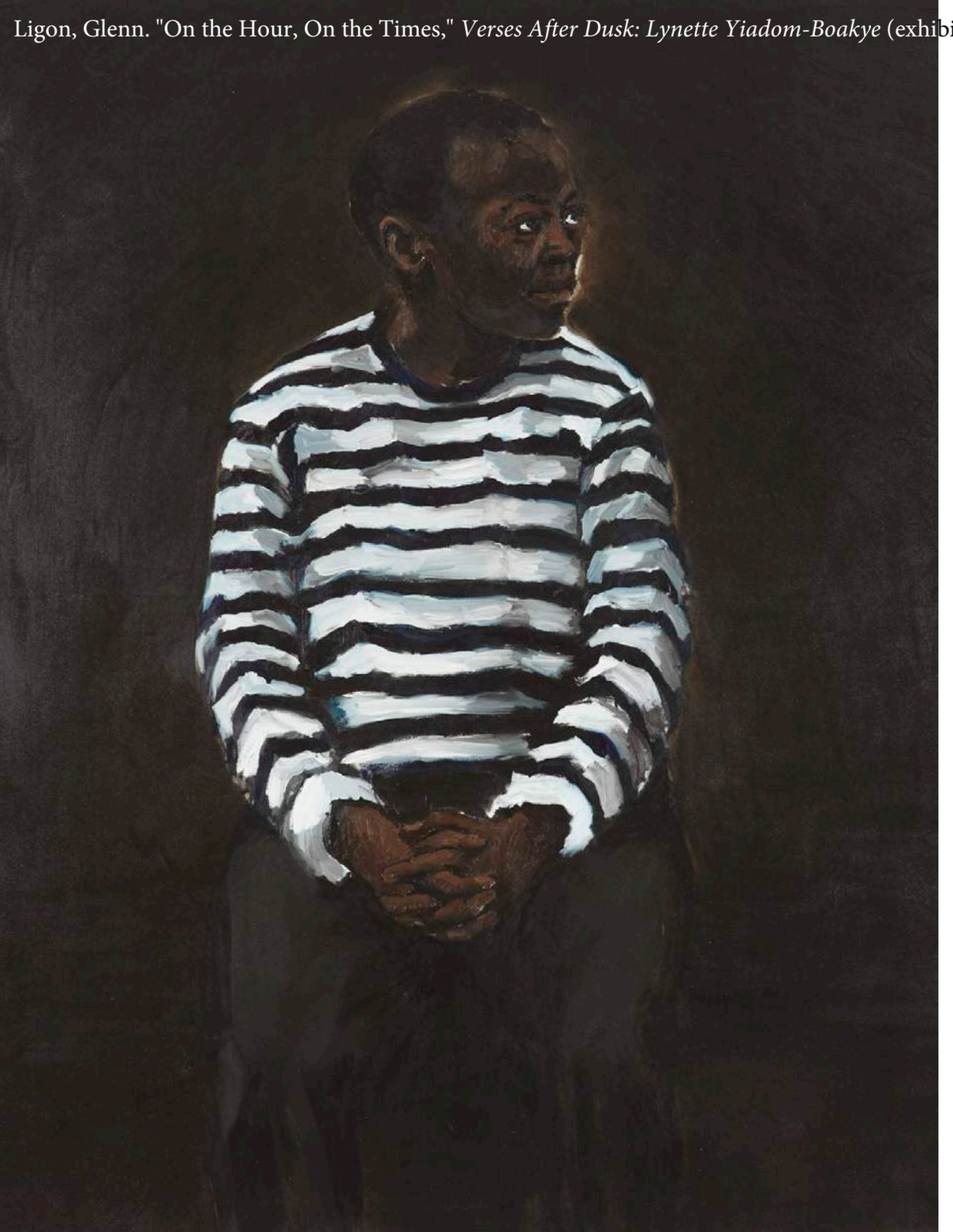
Ligon, Glenn. "On the Hour, On the Times," *Verses After Dusk: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* (exhibition catalogue). Serpentine Art Gallery, London, 2015: pp. 105-111.



On the Hour, On the Times

Glenn Ligon

An Afternoon on Wednesday, 2011

On the edge of his seat, or the edge of a bed or a bench, hands clasped and resting in his lap, he awaits someone just beyond our gaze (a man, I presume, but that's just me). He wears a black and white striped crew-neck shirt and pants of an indeterminate cut, an outfit reminiscent of James Baldwin, who wore similar attire in a photo taken circa 1965 while he awaited the Muses at his desk with a typewriter in a rented villa on the Bosporus. And if a striped shirt doesn't conjure an image of Baldwin, perhaps it reminds you of James Dean or Jean Seberg or Edie Sedgwick or prisoners in early movies, sledge-hammers swinging in unison at the edge of a country road, or sailors, who, if they have fallen overboard, are more easily spotted in stripes than navy solids. This one is not overboard, in that dark brown sea, but he is awaiting rescue.

11pm Friday, 2010

The figure in the striped top is warming up for tonight's performance, which, given the hour, is a late show. We are happy for him, finally at centre stage after being made to wait off to the side for so long, but he seems a bit tentative, as if now in the spotlight, he is unsure what show he is supposed to be starring in.

He has lost a little weight. More exercise, less sitting around. He has shed his trousers and donned skin-tight colour. He has shapely calves.

Sometimes he stands like his mother, one hand cradling his neck, one arm akimbo. And, having met the artist, this painting feels like a self-portrait, although I've never seen her in stripes, but to invent a figure you have to start somewhere, so she must have started with herself, from there building a scaffold on which to hang things like blackness or masculinity, things that are fugitive and subject to revision.

11pm Saturday, 2011

'What you looking at?'

I couldn't imagine that a black figure staring straight ahead wouldn't
be staring hard. But he ain't staring hard. In fact, he ain't hard at all.
But he ain't beat down, or under siege, or an endangered species either.
No dignity, uplift, celebration, or positivity in this painting.
No keeping it real or representing. He's just a black figure and that's that.

11pm Tuesday, 2010

Regrets? A dark brown taste. Hand covering the mouth to prevent bile from spewing out. Or maybe that gesture is about something just now remembered, some missed opportunity? Too late to start dwelling on the past. Go on. Get on with it.

He is up and dressed, as usual, in his striped top, although it's really more the idea of a top, a little something to cover his nakedness. Indeed, he is the idea of a black man. He is life-sized and anatomically correct, yes, but when we stare into the whites of his painted eyes or at the skin-tight colour of his thighs, what we see is an illustration accompanying many, many ideas about black men, bits and pieces of things, a mood board, brought together at this late hour, 11pm, which, although the day is nearly done, in fact feels like the beginning of something new.

Als, Hilton. "Face to Face," *Verses After Dusk: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* (exhibition catalogue). Serpentine Art Gallery, London, 2015: pp. 101-102.

Face to Face

Hilton Als

At present I am reading Julian Bell's fascinating, genial and inspired 1999 book *What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art*, and in this slim volume the erudite critic and painter advances a number of ideas about visual art—the connection between nature and an artist's rendering of it, that kind of thing—but what is most moving is Bell's feeling about the tremendous gift that painters, sculptors, photographers and the like bestow on curious and searching viewers when they enter into, or rather commune with, those markings seen in a museum or gallery, placed on a wall just so. Bell writes that for a thing—a rose, whatever—to make sense as a thing that's being represented, society as a whole must agree, first, on what it is, and how it is defined. Is a rose a rose a rose? I found Bell's statement striking in light of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work because has the world ever agreed on or had one definition of blackness? When I first saw the artist's work at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010, what impressed me at once was this: the undefined space her characters lived in. By not painting them in rooms or halls one could define as such, Yiadom-Boakye did away with any potentially Marxist or Barthesian reading of her "texts"—you know, her figures are poor or rich because they live in this way, etc.—while divesting her subjects of some of the weight of Western figurative painting, with its reliance on context, the room and furniture treated as another aspect of character and thus destiny. Still, Yiadom-Boakye was telling some kind of story in all that textured work, and it was related to that which is rarely expressed in contemporary painting: joy, reflection, movement, and the astonishment that comes with being alive. The figures in the Yiadom-Boakye paintings I saw that afternoon at the Studio Museum were coloured, and their colouredness was part of the atmosphere of the paintings as a whole. If I sound a little defensive about Yiadom-Boakye's right to paint what she likes, it's because when spectators see coloured figures they see politics and not art: dark markings are associated with sociology, the same old story of black oppression writ large, obscuring the power of aesthetics at the heart of Yiadom-Boakye's expressionist style. When, in 1965, after the assassination of Malcolm X, the poet Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones) left his white wife and their two children to move uptown, to Harlem, to start

the Black Arts Repertory/School, his intention was to encourage art by black artists that reflected black life. (It is difficult to imagine where David Hammons would be without the movement.) But there was a downside to Baraka's radicalism, his aesthetics born out of segregation. Not long after instituting his cause, blackness became a commodity or different kind of commodity, since black bodies have been bought and sold for centuries. In order to get any play within the Black Arts Movement, and outside it, one had to be authentic, 'real', street. Indeed, *Vogue* magazine produced a feature during that time about black revolutionary wives, their costuming, along with a recipe for cornbread. Much about this period feels archaic now, but, sadly, black artists are expected to look at the world in a 'black' way. What way is that? A world of black figures that amount to nothing more than agitprop? The great American actor Morgan Freeman said: "I don't play black, I am black". This liberating matter-of-fact statement was like a breath of beautiful air in a dry, dogma-riddled region. The truth is, black artists have rarely slipped out of the casing in which Baraka shoved their predecessors, and the present generation's art continues to suffer because of that limitation. I can count on the fingers of one hand those artists of colour describing race in their work who don't play into a white audience's idea of what that race is, or should be. And it's depressing. So, you can imagine how I felt when I walked into the Studio Museum of Harlem in 2010 and there on the wall was a series of roses, as natural and florid as that, by Yiadom-Boakye. The pictures were free of the narrative of oppression; they were in themselves—meaning they were complete worlds within themselves. They looked nothing like the glitzed-out or empirical-to-counteract-my-oppression portraits of black men and women that were then and now in fashion. Instead, Yiadom-Boakye's paintings had the appearance of being made from a new kind of beginning; it seemed her hand was messing around her soul and thus the souls of her imagined beings, all those subjects who danced, or sat still, or wore clothing that flashed a smile around their thighs or neck. There's a moment in Milan Kundera's 1988 novel *Immortality*, when Kundera sits near a pool, and as he watches a woman make a gesture, she becomes a woman he names Agnes and Agnes becomes the subject of the book. Agnes exists because of a gesture made in the author's line of vision. What if she hadn't? To say that I fell in love with Kundera's sleight of hand when I read that novel is an understatement—I learned so much from his ability to collapse time in a

single gesture, all that thought as he piled up beautiful sentence—phrases that added up to a lovely house filled with freedom of thought. Standing before Yiadom-Boakye's work at the Studio Museum in Harlem all those years ago, I became one of her subjects just as Kundera's male narrator becomes a storyteller and then the woman he's telling the story about: the observer becomes the observed. There's a lovely freedom in that: giving oneself over to a work that not only speaks to you but makes you think of your own body in a different way as you look at the bodies Yiadom-Boakye treats like roses. Standing in front of the images included in this catalogue I am no longer myself but the subject in *The Knowledge of the East* (2013) page 131. My hands are on my hips, and I am on the stage of Yiadom-Boakye's world of bodies where the male form is interesting because of what interests her: backs and their muscularity, hands and their strength, feet leaping, and, as in *Citrine and the Ounce* (2014) page 9, the beauty of introspection, reflection as it declares itself in a sentence, which is not unlike the brushstroke that makes me up.

NEW YORK THE CUT

April 22, 2016 8:00 a.m.

11 Artists Poised to Have a Breakout Year

By **The Cut**

Watch out for these artists. Photo: Bobby Doherty/New York Magazine

11 Artists
Poised to have breakout years in 2016, and wearing some mix of their clothes and ours.
Photographs by Bobby Doherty

For our Art and Design issue, *New York* has been examining the art world's recent past — tracing the identity-politics revolution; catching up with Richard Prince, the Warhol of the Instagram age —and it's present, as we sit down with James Franco to let him make a case for his art and get a crash course in today's market from a Sotheby's advisor. And now we look to the future: ahead, 11 artists, selected by senior art critic Jerry Saltz, who are poised to have breakout years, along with a sampling of their work.

Text by Jerry Saltz. Photographs by Bobby Doherty. Styling by Rebecca Ramsey.

**A version of this article appears in the April 18, 2016 issue of* New York *Magazine.*

ARTISTS TO WATCH
Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Painter, 38
Yiadom-Boakye is a great portraitist of the flesh whose every flickering thick mark and opulent stroke asserts the traditional language of figure painting (going back to Sargent and Manet) and reminds us that the very word flesh is charged with many meanings. Sexy, clay-y wet-on-wet surfaces.
Denim overalls, Yiadom-Boakye's own, by Stella McCartney, $845 at netaporter.comMax Mara shoes, $775 at 813 Madison Ave.; 212-879-6100 Duro Olowu kimono, Yiadom-Boakye's own.

Photo: Bobby Doherty

The Telegraph

LUXURY

Any Number of Preoccupations, 2010

ART

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's powerful crowd

The enigmatic characters in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits are all the more remarkable for being fictitious, says Louisa Buck

BY LOUISA BUCK
JULY 03, 2015 16:26

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's current exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery is her largest to date and brings together recent paintings – many of which have never been seen in the UK before – along with a series of etchings made especially for the show and a number of canvases fresh from her Hackney studio. Born in London to Ghanaian parents in 1977, Yiadom-Boakye only graduated from the Royal Academy Schools just over a decade ago, but her intense oil paintings, lushly executed in a rich dark palette and peopled with enigmatic and predominantly black characters, have already won wide

international acclaim. Shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2012, she has had major solo exhibitions at London's Chisenhale Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem and collectors across the world clamour for her work.

9am Jerez de la Frontera, 2010

Walking amongst the array of arresting individuals that line the walls of the Serpentine is an unforgettable experience. Even when they are turning their backs on you, these often larger-than-life sized men and women emerge out of darkly monochrome backgrounds or the most generalised of landscapes to exert a powerful and immediate presence. Immersed in a world of their own, they also reach out irresistibly to ours. "I'm always looking for a strong line, a strong curve, or a strong look," Yiadom-Boakye declares. "They should never appear to shrink away – they are never victims, never passive."

The immediate, arresting impact of Yiadom-Boakye's psychologically complex subjects is all the more remarkable given the fact that none of them are real people: they are all fictitious creations, conjured out her imagination and drawn from what she describes as "a composite of drawings, scrapbooks, found images, photographs – anything."

Okwui Enwezor, über-curator of the current Venice Biennale, who is putting on a another show of her work in the Haus der Kunst in Munich in October this year, describes these arresting works as "post portraits," while the artist herself simply defines what she does as "figurative paintings". "I realised quite early on that I was not so interested in painting people whom I knew or doing the classic portrait from life," she says. "I wasn't as interested in trying to capture the person who was actually there as I was in letting the painting itself decide what a person's facial expression does, where a hand sits or what a gesture is."

The Verses After Dusk installation at the Serpentine Gallery

Famously all these canvases are made in a single one-day sitting, with a great many junked if they don't work out. "Sometimes your first decision is the right one and you need to go with that ...the more I pontificate on a canvas the more it goes wrong." But although swiftly painted, every piece is underpinned by a deep and wide immersion in art, history, literature and society. Yiadom-Boakye is a prolific writer of poetry and short stories (there are several in the Serpentine catalogue) and she is also steeped in the history of art – and especially portraiture. Her shadowy, simple backgrounds and flashes of lushly contrasting colour tap into the sombrely evocative powers of Manet, Sickert and Velazquez – and among her other favourite artists are Degas and Sargent. "I've been influenced by historic painters who share a certain devil-may-care mode of working, who were not so concerned with formal perfection or academic rules but with the physicality of paint, the act of painting."

Another key concern is the representation of hitherto absent or marginalised black subjects within grand painted portraiture, a place almost entirely occupied by white faces only. But Yiadom-Boakye is wary of her work being read exclusively in racial terms. So while she states that “race is something that I can completely manipulate or reinvent or use as I want to ….the complexity of this is an essential part of my work,” she also points out that “I’ve never found black people exotic because I grew up with them and that’s just normal to me”.

Overall, she is adamant that everything begins and ends with the paint itself and what it can be made to say and do. “My starting point is always the language of painting and how that relates to the subject matter,” she says. “It stuns and worries me when people say, ‘Oh you’re not political’, because I am. It’s just that there are many ways to skin a cat.”

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses After Dusk is at the Serpentine Gallery until September 13

SERPENTINE GALLERY
Kensington Gardens
London
W2 3XA
serpentinegalleries.org
Map

The New York Times

THE PORTRAITIST

By Faye Hirsch

"Complication," 2013, by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; oil on canvas.

THE FIGURES WHO inhabit Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings reveal little of themselves. Seen mostly alone, sometimes interacting in pairs or small groups, they pose in bare grounds composed of loose brush strokes that turn emptiness into imminence. Her work taps a deep well in Western painting, recalling expressive devices in classic portraits by Velázquez, Manet and Degas, with one big difference: Nearly every one of Yiadom-Boakye's characters is black. They are also entirely fictional, inventions of a British artist whose canny deployment of the genre of portraiture summons both its triumphs and its omissions.

When rendered as whole figures, Yiadom-Boakye's subjects gesture, stride, recline or sit; as heads they stare intently at us or at something off frame. Sometimes they grimace or leer. Their skin is executed in quick strokes; they emerge quietly, sometimes punched out by brightly colored, if otherwise nondescript, clothing. Despite the shadows in which they are often immersed, their demeanor is light. They relax, read, think, dream; they walk on the beach. Here, in the first monograph on Yiadom-Boakye, they inhabit numerous crisp, full-page illustrations that do full justice to their subtleties.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE
Illustrated. 135 pp. Prestel. $39.95.

As opposed to the black sitters cast by old and modern "master" painters as noble savages and enlightened exceptions, Yiadom-Boakye's characters exemplify a condition more ordinary and multifaceted — call it human, as many observers do. She offers a wide range of personages, including two that recur: a man in a white shirt, another in stripes. Familiar in their demeanor and attitude, all her characters nonetheless feel mysterious, nonspecific. She works prolifically, in series, executing each of her paintings in a day's time. Her shows feel, therefore, both fresh and replete; there is the sense that she is making up for lost time, racing against centuries of erasure.

Yiadom-Boakye, who was born to Ghanaian parents in London in 1977, has received increasing attention in recent years from an art world that seems more open than it used to be to the embrace of historical styles. A major exhibition of her work opened at London's Serpentine Gallery this month. She was a finalist for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2013. There isn't much concrete information on the artist in the monograph's texts, however, which include two slim interpretive essays by the Frieze editor Jennifer Higgie and the French critic Donatien Grau, and a more substantive interview with Naomi Beckwith, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. (In 2010, as a curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Beckwith, along with the current Venice Biennale curator Okwui Enwezor, put together a catalog for Yiadom-Boakye's solo show at the uptown museum.) Grau characterizes Yiadom-Boakye's practice as one of "restraint," which he sees as an effective strategy to renew painting. I find it odd, however, that an essay on this most dedicated painter opens with a rehash of an old argument on the viability of painting post-Marcel Duchamp. Still, Grau offers some insight into the work, following others in noting that Yiadom-Boakye renders "the portrait of a portrait, to engage with the humanness of humanity."

Yiadom-Boakye's own words are the most valuable in the volume. In the interview, she speaks of contemporary influences — the British artists Chris Ofili and Isaac Julien, and the American painter Lisa Yuskavage, whose own invented characters are as high-keyed in color as Yiadom-Boakye's are subdued. She also speaks of her love for the oil medium: "It moves like a skin when you paint." She happens to be a writer too — of short fiction, poetry and art criticism — and the volume includes three of her brief, fable-like tales, revealingly entitled "Plans of the Night." Animals nag and steal; people seduce and cheat. "Patti G West wore clothes made out of nighttime fabrics in nighttime colors: velvet, lace, leather and satin in black, burgundy, brown and crimson." Patti G West, made of words, could easily migrate into one of Yiadom-Boakye's painted portraits, equally lush, equally vivid. □

FAYE HIRSCH, *who writes regularly on contemporary art, is a professor in art and design at Purchase College, SUNY.*

Campbell-Johnston, Rachel. "Art: One of Damien Hirst's favorite new artists, London-born Ghanaian Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is being courted by museums and galleries globally thanks to the quiet power of her paintings." Porter Summer Escape, 08 June 2015: pp. 78-79, illustrated.

ART

One of Damien Hirst's favorite new artists, London-born Ghanaian LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE is being courted by museums and galleries globally thanks to the quiet power of her paintings

Two years ago, the Tate's Turner Prize introduced us to an unexpected newcomer. Of the four contenders, she was the one whom the critics most hoped to see win. It had nothing to do with the novelty: with the fact that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye was that nowadays rarest of Turner Prize phenomena, a traditional painter, or the first black female ever to appear on the shortlist. It was her mysterious pictures that captured the imagination. They were possessed of a quietly unsettling power.

Yiadom-Boakye paints willfully reticent portrait-style paintings of imaginary people: composite figures drawn from scrapbook clippings and photographs, personal memories and historical images. They materialize, as if by magic, from dusky backgrounds. Occasionally they are dancing or drinking coffee or rowing a boat. But mostly they are doing something completely unremarkable: standing, lying or sitting or pulling off a sock. Their clothes and accoutrements betray no sense of time or identity. But the sense of their psychological presence is disturbing. A flashing eye or a grin, an awkward posture or turned head, snags at the onlooker's imagination. And long after you have moved away from the picture, you will find yourself wondering what their images are about.

So did she mind not winning the Turner? She looks up from the cake that she is just pulling out of the oven, as we chat in her south London home, and laughs. "I really had to think about whether I wanted to accept the Turner nomination in the first place," she says, now pouring a cup of strawberry tea. "I wasn't sure that I wanted the attention. So no, I didn't mind at all. I was happy to go with the flow."

It would appear that Yiadom-Boakye, now 37, has been prepared to go with the flow all her life. Born and brought up in south London, not far from where she now lives in Streatham, she is the daughter of two nurses of Ghanaian descent. "I don't think I ever made a decision to be an artist,"

ARTISTIC LICENSE Clockwise from top: *1pm, Masons Yard,* oil on canvas, 2014; *9.30pm Friday,* oil on canvas, 2013; Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, photographed in London, wears dress by Philosophy, $1,655; *The Courtesy of a Saint,* oil on canvas, 2012

she says. As a girl she loved drama and reading – "when I think of my childhood it's mostly with my nose in a book" – as well as art, though her early attempts at painting were disastrous. "I was following Tony Hart's art show for children on the TV and never had all the stuff that I needed to do it right," she laughs.

Still, she went on to do a foundation course at Central Saint Martins in London, followed by a degree at Falmouth University, Cornwall – "It was wonderful: it felt remote and that sense of being away in your head is very important to my work." She went on to study for an MA at the Royal Academy, but even then she didn't see art as a career. "There was always a plan B," she says. "I thought I might be an optician" – which could explain her dramatic spectacles. It was at the RA that she discovered how she "wanted to think about painting". But it still took another seven years for things to properly fall into place.

Yiadom-Boakye also writes short stories and poetry. The catalog for her upcoming Serpentine Gallery show will feature her writing. "I came across Lynette's powerful paintings a few years ago at the Future Generation Art prize in Venice," Damien Hirst tells me. "I loved her portraits. She said she paints what she can't write and writes what she can't paint, and I love that." Both the disciplines she practices share an interest in narrative – "I see painting as a non-linear narrative," Yiadom-Boakye explains – but she doesn't consider them to be interrelated. And her writing emphatically does not explain her work.

She mentions a Miles Davis song that asks "Can an ocean be explained?", which resonates with her work. She says her paintings aren't there to be interpreted, rather they are about "the wider possibility of anything and everything. They are about a feeling that you can't quite place. It's the feeling I'm going for: the sense of a place or a person."

"She paints what she can't write and writes what she can't paint, and I love that" DAMIEN HIRST

But is there something else in her work too. All her figures are black. Why, I wonder. "Why not?" she laughs. So there's no message? "Oh yes, there's a message," comes her strong affirmative. "But not one I would write down. It's ingrained in the work. It doesn't matter if you don't see it. But I always bring it back to the painting itself. That's how I want it to be."

And that, indeed, is how it is. I leave Yiadom-Boakye with memories of her paintings playing through my imagination – as well as a tin of strawberry tea and a slice of her delicious orange cake. *Words by Rachel Campbell-Johnston*
'Lynette Yiadom-Boakye' is at the Serpentine Gallery, from June 2 to September 13; serpentinegalleries.org

A collector's view: Duro Olowu, fashion designer

Nigerian-born designer Duro Olowu fell in love with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's art after her first show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, where his wife Thelma Golden is director and chief curator. He explains why her work is so relevant.

What draws you to Yiadom-Boakye's work?
Looking at Lynette's paintings is like staring beauty in the face, and it staring back at you with confidence and grace. To compare her work to the paintings of Goya or Velásquez is only useful when trying to describe their potency and depth, or their cultural and social relevance. Otherwise, she is in a class of her own.

In what way is Yiadom-Boakye forging new ground?
After a few years of emphasis on abstract and installation-based work in the contemporary art world, Lynette's figurative painting is a supremely accomplished breath of fresh air. Thanks to her skill, technique, eye for color and artistic maturity beyond her years, she has produced a body of work that deals with issues of race, gender, beauty, politics and sexuality in a new, powerful way. Her unique position as a black British female artist of Ghanaian heritage, producing internationally praised work that is free of racial stereotypes, yet historically and currently relevant, is a true testament to her talent.

Yiadom-Boakye uses clothes in her paintings to striking effect. Are you inspired by that aspect of her work?
Absolutely; as a designer with an eye for fabrics and costume, Lynette's pictures and her depiction of clothes inspire me. They reflect my love for fashion and costume in art, from old masters to contemporary paintings like hers. The shapes and gestures of her subjects add an element of movement and luminescence to the clothing in her paintings that I find extremely moving.

Photography Jen Carey. Styling Helen Broadfoot. Makeup Laurey Simmons. Photography © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London. Illustrator Ryan McMenamy

PORTER reads with... CARRIE FISHER

The bestselling author, stage performer and screenwriter, who is soon to reprise her role as Princess Leia in *Star Wars Episode VII*, reveals which books she'll be taking to the beach

WHICH AUTHORS ARE YOU PLANNING TO ESCAPE WITH THIS SUMMER? Reading was my first drug. I would get so lost in a book that I felt I belonged more in the book – not to be dramatic. Lately, I don't read for escapism – it's part of my work. But reading sets up a rhythm. I'm currently reading a biography of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, by Bernard-Henri Levy, and now I want to read biographies of all the big guns like Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky and Flaubert.

IF YOU LOST YOUR LUGGAGE, WHAT BOOK WOULD YOU WANT IN YOUR HANDBAG? Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, because it would take so long to read and help me forget that my luggage is lost.

WHAT'S YOUR DESERT ISLAND BOOK? It would have to be the epic *Tropic of Capricorn* by Henry Miller.

VACATIONS ARE GREAT FOR CATCHING UP. WHAT'S ON YOUR TO-READ LIST? I've got quite a few hefty tomes on that list. There are some Dickens I haven't read yet, like *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

WHAT WAS THE LAST BOOK YOU RECOMMENDED TO FRIENDS? *The Journal of Jules Renard*. He's a French author and a member of the French literary organization L'Académie Goncourt. I found out about him after reading Julian Barnes' *Nothing to be Frightened Of* – an homage to the great thinker.

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Priscilla Frank (/priscilla-frank/)

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Enigmatic Portraits Show Black Figures That Never Were

Posted: 06/09/2015 8:28 am EDT | Updated: 5 hours ago

"Any Number of Preoccupations," 2010

Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/lynette-yiadom-boakye/) paints, almost exclusively, portraits of black figures. More often than not, the person is juxtaposed against a black background, or at least one mired in darkness, allowing the features of the foreground to camouflage with their surroundings, creeping towards invisibility.

"Where painters including Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley and Mickalene Thomas have taken a celebratory, triumphant and sometimes showy approach to the black subject (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/17/arts/design/17boakye.html), Ms. Yiadom-Boakye makes it nearly invisible," Karen Rosenberg wrote in 2010. "She favors a dark, near-monochromatic palette and loose, even sloppy brushwork. Faces are inchoate, bodies phantomlike. Her figures don't really inhabit their clothes, or the spaces around them."

The artist's enigmatic works are now on view in "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses After Dusk," at London's Serpentine Gallery. (http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/)

"Highriser," 2009

Yiadom-Boakye was born in London in 1977, the daughter of two nurses born in Ghana. She attended Falmouth College of Art and received her MA at the Royal Academy Schools. She began working full time as an artist in 2006, after winning an Arts Foundation award, and in 2013, received a new rush of widespread attention after being shortlisted for the Turner prize.

The artist's portraits, in a strange way, communicate they're not to be trusted. And for good reason. The images, rather than highlighting specific individuals in time and space, conjure fictitious presences, people that never were, outside of the realm of canvas and paint. The artist uses no photographs or preliminary sketches to create her startlingly realistic portraits. The detailed depictions are concocted entirely in the imagination, and executed in paint during the course of a single day.

"Yes Officer, No Officer," 2008

The longer you look into the eyes of Yiadom-Boakye's mythical subjects, the more their impossibilities float to the surface. Particularities place each subject in multiple eras, locations, even genders. As Jennifer Higgie wrote in Frieze: "Despite the fact that there is something determinedly average about these people (http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/a-life-in-a-day/)-- who, apart from the children, tend to be neither very young nor very old, seemingly neither rich nor poor -- they exist in atmospheres touched by a compellingly faint frisson of something not quite explained."

As the artist explained to New York Times Magazine in 2010, she does not paint her subjects. Rather, the subject is paint itself. "Painting for me is the subject (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Ftmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com%2F2010%yiadom-boakeyes-fashionable-eye%2F&ei=4hRyVfGADoT8oASZroPoCQ&usg=AFQjCNEKSP_gvIR64qmcXC5aRyo4iHB-tA&sig2=2IxrcXzIDwKqqZkeNkmBLA). The figures exist only through paint, through color, line, tone and mark-making."

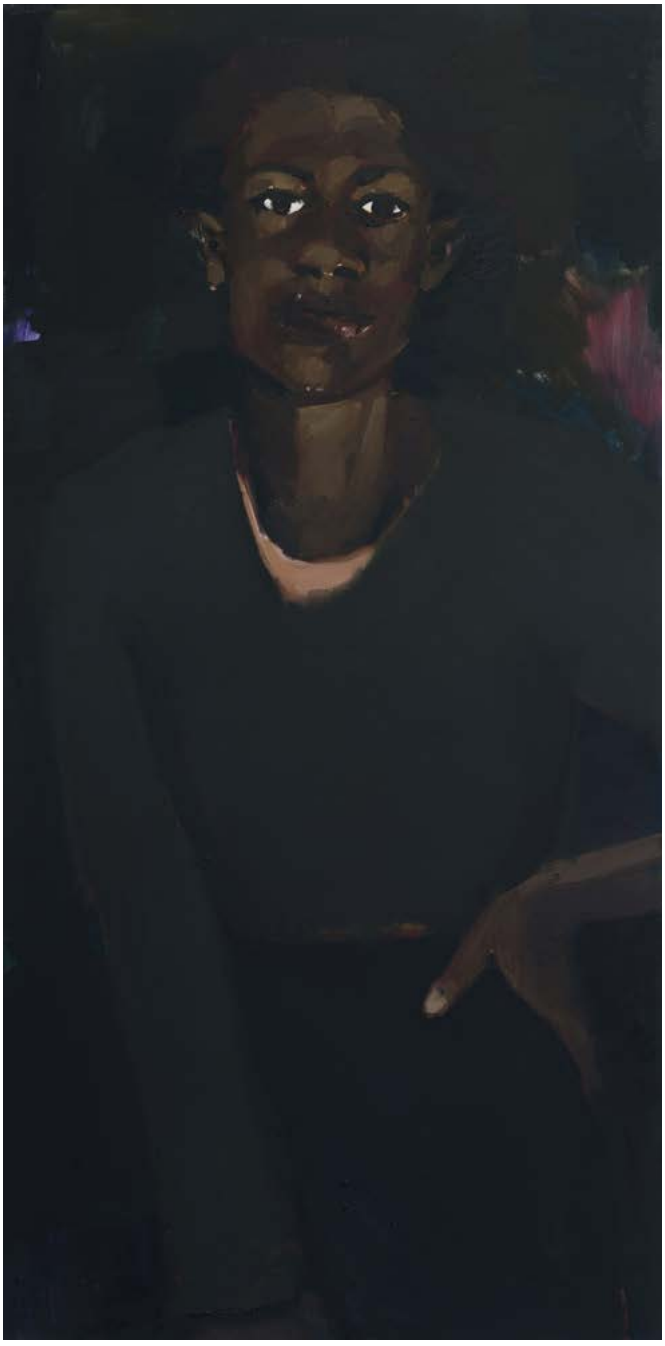
"A Passion Like No Other," 2012

Although her characters defy any singular origin, Yiadom-Boakye's style has clear roots in the trajectory of Western art history. Her works contain the darkness of Francisco de Goya, the flurrying movement of Edgar Degas, the slow leisure of John Singer Sargent, the rough handling of Édouard Manet. Of her influences, Yiadom-Boakye told The Guardian: "I wasn't intimidated by those painters. It made it easier: there was so much I could look at and learn from

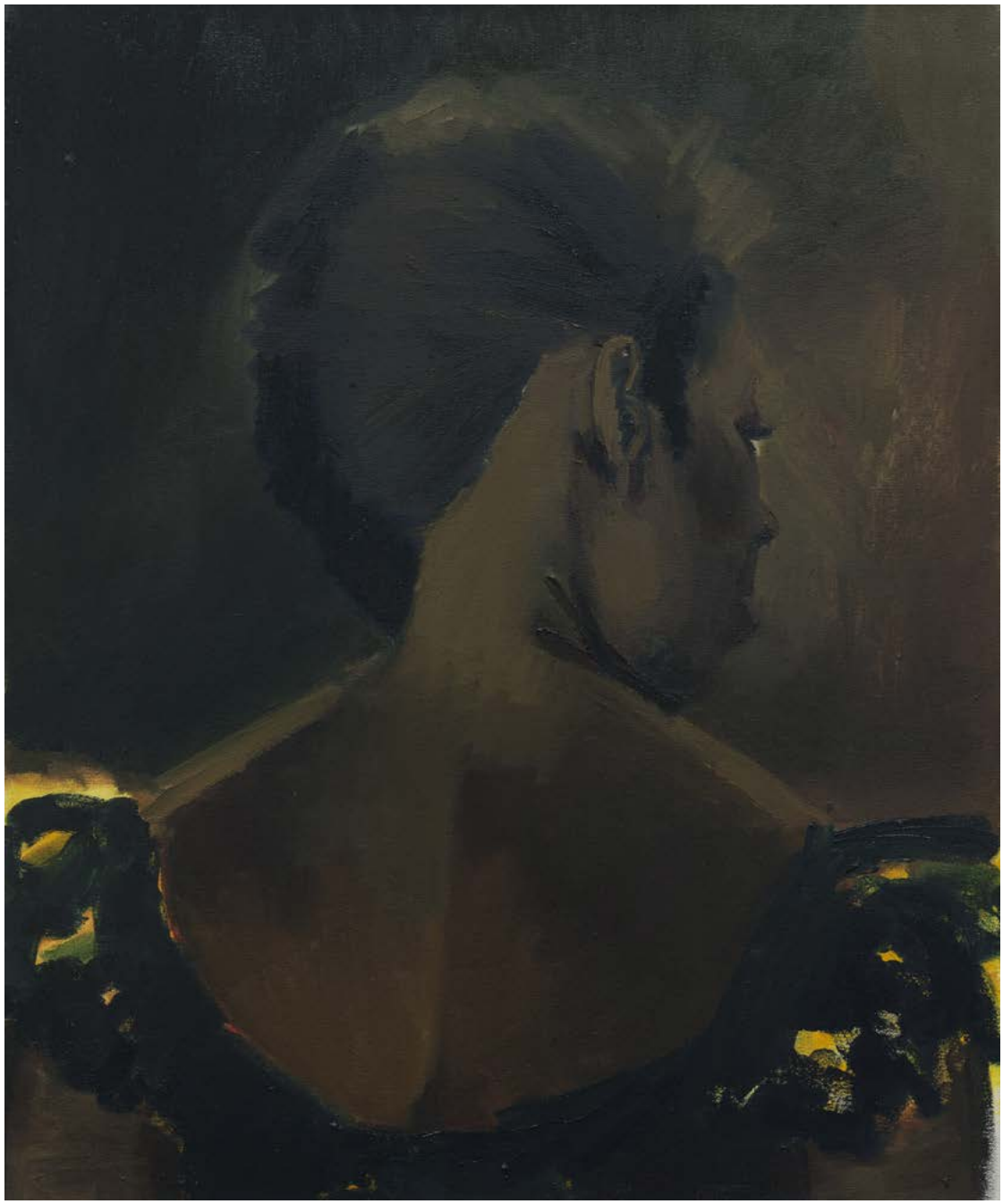
(http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/31/lynette-yiadom-boakye-painter-out-of-time-and-space)." Through channeling these historical giants, Yiadom-Boakye raises awareness of the lack of black representation throughout the history of art.

"Historically, portraits have conveyed the wealth and authority of their subjects through poses projecting confidence and strength and through clothing, accoutrements and surroundings used strategically to indicate social hierarchy," Amira Gad writes in an essay accompanying the exhibition. "Commissioning portraiture was a symbol of status, and only the elite were entitled to be immortalized within the ranks of historical painting. With Yiadom-Boakye's layering of references, her paintings draw attention to the flawed perception of race in historical paintings. In depicting black subjects doing everyday things, she advocates both the normalcy and intricacy of blackness."

"Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses After Dusk," will be on view at Serpentine Gallery (http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/lynette-yiadom-boakye-verses-after-dusk) until September 13, 2015.



Peach Tree, 2015 Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



The Matches, 2015 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

9 am Jerez de la Frontera, 2010

4am Friday, 2015 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view

Installation view

Interstellar, 2012 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Bluebird, 2014 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Coterie of Questions, 2015 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hightower, 2008 Oil on linen, Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Any Number of Preoccupations, 2010 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

theguardian

Dual Serpentine exhibitions celebrate explorers of the human form

Astonishingly lifelike sculptures of ordinary people by American Duane Hanson and the beautiful black figures painted by UK-based Lynette Yiadom-Boakye given summer shows

Hannah Ellis-Petersen Culture reporter

Tuesday 2 June 2015 03.00 EDT

Two artists whose fascination with the human form has taken them down opposite paths have been brought together by the Serpentine Gallery for their summer exhibition.

A retrospective of works by American sculptor Duane Hanson – lifelike replicas of working-class figures often on the periphery of society – is to occupy the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, while the largest scale show to date by the Turner-nominated painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye will be exhibited in the main Serpentine Gallery.

While the work of Hanson and Yiadom-Boakye occupies the opposing realms of sculpture and painting and has been created in entirely different eras, the two are united by an exploration of the human portrait and the narrative possibilities it presents the viewer.

The Serpentine retrospective will be the first exhibition of Hanson's work in the UK since 1997, a year after he died aged 70. The figures in the exhibition – all life-size and moulded from either bronze, resin or polyvinyl and painted in soft oils – span Hanson's work from the late 60s to when he began on his final works in 1995, continually confronting viewers with uncomfortable scenes of poverty, brutality and isolation.

"Hanson has been overlooked in the UK for many years and has suffered from a snobbery and an embarrassment about realism in contemporary art," said Rebecca Lewin, a curator for the exhibition. "I don't think that attitude changed much throughout his career so hopefully this will give him the recognition he deserves.

"People want to be challenged and I think the fear is that works like this don't challenge enough, when actually in a conceptual way these works teach us something about ourselves. You come away wondering more about the person sitting next to you on the bus, or the person that you pass on the street or even someone you see everyday that you don't engage with."

Hanson's exceptionally lifelike figures caused much controversy in their time, having been first thrust into the limelight in 1965 with a work called Abortion, depicting a young pregnant woman on a table covered with a sheet. The sculptor's preoccupation with making the invisible labourer visible again is referenced throughout the Serpentine exhibition, featuring works such as his piece Homeless Person 1991, depicting a dishevelled figure sitting on a wooden box holding the sign Will Work for Food, and his 1984 sculpture of a decorator in the midst of a job, simply titled House Painter.

It is also captured powerfully in Queenie II, a sculpture of a cleaner pushing a trolley and pausing in a moment of downbeat and fatigued contemplation. “For me this is one of the most engaging of the works,” said Lewin. “There is something more confrontational about her gaze and here, with some of the other works, we see Hanson playing with the viewer, making us feel as though we are walking into an unfinished exhibition and seeing a side that would usually be hidden in a gallery.”

Hanson’s desire for the figures to occupy the same space as his viewers, giving them a dignity often denied to the cleaners and manual labourers he sculpted, also means none of his works are displayed on a plinth. The sense of humour that often imbued the sculptor’s work is also evident in pieces such as his 1979 piece, Self Portrait with Model, where an overweight woman reads an article about losing weight in her left hand, while clutching an ice-cream sundae in her right.

Speaking about the motivation behind the retrospective, the co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, said: “There were so many roads leading us to Duane Hanson. There are so many working today who talk about Duane Hanson and with 3D printing, all of a sudden a new form of a realism is made possible in portraiture, so to revisit Duane Hanson in a digital age seemed very apt.”

Obrist also emphasised his belief that it was an important time to showcase the works of Yiadom-Boakye, particularly as she expanded her practice from painting into etching and even fiction writing.

The exhibition in the Serpentine Gallery, titled Verses After Dusk, shows a selection of the figurative oil paintings produced by the London-born painter between 2008 and 2015, with several pieces created specifically for the Serpentine show.

While Yiadom-Boakye’s pieces make subtle reference to works by Manet, Degas and Cezanne throughout the exhibition, they also feature exclusively black figures, a pointed reference to the absence of the representation of black history in the canon of western art.

The curator, Amira Gad, said the focus of the works was as much on posture and bodily positions, creating a sense of movement as her confident subjects dance, run and turn their heads with their backs obstinately to the viewer.

Gad added: “Each painting comes with its own enigmatic title,which encourages us to make up our own narratives about the characters that she paints. The people in her works are actually all fictitious and drawn from memory or scrapbooks - she never does any live painting - so by keeping both the landscapes and the titles evasive it is another way of her directing us to project our own imagination on to her work.”

Duane Hanson and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses after Dusk will be at the Serpentine Galleries from 2 June- 13 September

theguardian

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: artist in search of the mystery figure

The British artist's work is increasingly sought after, and this week marks her first major London show. But who are the people in her paintings?

Rachel Cooke

Sunday 31 May 2015 05.30 EDT

When I ask if I might meet the young British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at her studio in Hackney, east London, the message comes back from the Serpentine Gallery, where she will shortly have a one-woman show, that this won't be possible.

"There's only one chair," I'm told. "There's nowhere to sit down."

But I won't give up. Yiadom-Boakye's portraits resist easy definition; her subjects exist only in her imagination, and once on canvas might belong to any number of times and places. In interviews, moreover, she is ever reticent, as reluctant to explain her enigmatic titles (*Citrine by the Ounce*, *The Courtesy of a Saint*, *The Cream and the Taste*… they read to me like the index of a modish short story collection) as she is to describe her methodology. Her studio, then, seems like a solid thing in a floating world, and I am determined to see it.

And so it happens that one sunny weekday afternoon, I come to press the buzzer at what I take for an old garment factory, outside of which two men are loitering apparently without intent, mobiles in hand ("Are you Becca?" one of them yells, at no one in particular). This part of east London has changed beyond all recognition in recent years: I passed a branch of Aesop, purveyor of preposterously expensive hand creams and shower gels, on my way. But this nook is still recognisably gritty, marooned as it is between canal, railway line, and a quartet of looming Victorian gasometers. It smells of petrol, fried chicken, good hipster coffee and, under that arch over there, warm dustbins. I'm glad it's spring. I wouldn't want to be here at dusk on a winter night.

Yiadom-Boakye's voice, soft and light, comes over the intercom. "Hello?" She sounds uncertain, as though she is not expecting me. Once I'm through the door, though, she is all smiles, her upturned mouth mirroring the cartoony circles of her magnificently huge black-framed glasses. The studio is small, and heaped with what looks to the outsider to be rubbish, great piles of it in every corner; in the middle is a small rectangle of space in which we stand awkwardly. She laughs. She has worked here for years. It just piles up. What will she do when she eventually finds somewhere else? (She lives in south London, so the commute is not as easy as it might be.) Will she clear it out? Or will she just lock the door and leave everything behind? "I don't know," she says. "Perhaps." She grabs my coat, which

I've slung over the famously lonely chair: "Be careful. You'll get paint on it." Her overalls, I notice, are so splattered it's almost silly: it's as if she's appearing in the role of "artist" in a stage play. But then she picks up her bag - it's by Mulberry, I think, and pristine - and suddenly everything seems, paradoxically, a bit more real. The bag perhaps tells its own story, one of hard work and success.

Yiadom-Boakye was born in London in 1977, the daughter of two nurses who came to Britain from Ghana. After a foundation course at Central St Martins, she studied for her degree at Falmouth College of Art, and for her MA at the Royal Academy Schools. In her 20s she continued to paint, but she also held down a variety of jobs, including one testing mobiles in a phone-recycling plant ("a job to drive anyone insane," as she puts it). It wasn't until 2006, when she won an Arts Foundation award for painting, that she was able to work as an artist full time, and it wasn't until 2013, when she was shortlisted for the Turner prize, that she arrived in the public consciousness - though even now she isn't what you'd call well known (her show at the Serpentine Gallery will come as an introduction to many).

All the same, there's no doubting that her reputation is growing. Sought after by collectors, her portraits are in several public galleries, the Tate and the V&A among them, and now they are to fill the Serpentine. How did she feel when she got the email? "I thought: oh no." She laughs. "No, it's great, of course. But it's terrifying, too. It's a strange thing to say, but I've never dreamt of certain kinds of exposure. You want attention for your work, but you don't necessarily want it for yourself. It's so public. It's like walking down the street with no clothes on. You can't help but get nervous."

Yiadom-Boakye's work stands out, but quietly so, at a polite angle from just about everything else. First of all, she is a painter, and a figurative one at that, at a time when contemporary art remains bewilderingly in thrall to installations, to film and conceptual work. For another, she paints mostly - though not exclusively - black faces while working, broadly speaking, in a European tradition that has always favoured white skin. Not that either of these things are much up for discussion. "I keep saying it," she tells me, when we finally sit down together in a cafe along the road. "It [painting black faces] just seemed normal to me. It wasn't my intention to put black faces back in the picture. It wasn't political like that at all." What about painting? Has it been hard to stay true to it down the years? Did she feel, starting out, ludicrously unfashionable, as if she was wearing tweed when everyone else was in combats? "I didn't think about it. I suppose I didn't feel like I was working against the tide. People were talking about paint in dismissive ways [at art school], but I thought they were making a silly argument. It's like everything else: there is good painting, and there is bad painting. At college, I tried everything. I think I just enjoyed painting the most. The other things didn't work for me particularly."

Among her influences are Manet, Degas (she often paints people who are dancing) and Sickert. "I wasn't intimidated by those painters. It made it easier: there was so much I could look at, and learn from."

When did she realise she wanted to be an artist? "I never made a decision about it. I didn't plan any of this. I didn't think a career in art was possible, so I always had a plan B. I've

always been resourceful, I've always worked, I was always ready to retrain if necessary. My parents are nurses. We're pragmatic people." What did they say when she told them she wanted to go to art school?

"They were realistic. That's why they're wonderful. I would have been worried if they'd said: 'Brilliant, you're going to be an artist.' But they didn't. They said: 'That's fine, but what's your backup?' They were neither jumping up and down, nor angry, which was exactly what I needed. Because, back then, you couldn't necessarily see any of this working out."

She didn't enjoy her time at St Martin's, and the experience convinced her she would have to leave London to do her degree. "So I went to Falmouth, where I was able to think, and I loved it. At Falmouth, they had a deal whereby you could get your work photographed for free if you applied to do an MA, so I decided to go ahead with that. It cost £30 to apply to the Royal College of Art, and £20 each for the Slade and the Royal Academy, so I went for the two cheaper ones; I couldn't afford to apply to all three. I didn't know I'd get in, but it turned out to be the best thing when I did. My fees were taken care of, and the tuition at the RA was really good." She sounds amazed at her good fortune, even now. "Jesus, I've been lucky. But there was never a moment when I felt sorted. I still don't. I'm ready to do what I need to get by."

She paints quickly, completing the bulk of each canvas in a single day, something she attributes both to her impatience, and to the fact that she finds it more difficult to return to work when it has begun to dry. She doesn't use models. The people in her paintings are composites, their faces made up from "different sources" (in her studio, I spotted a scrapbook fat with pictures from magazines). "I worked with models when I was training," she says. "But that was to do with getting things right, with figuring things out. The thing is that if you use a model, the painting becomes about capturing that particular person, and it's disappointing if you can't.

"I once tried to paint a friend, an incredible character, and it just wasn't him. So moving away from that was to do with freedom." Does she give her characters a back story? "No." But what about her titles? They seem so careful, so deliberate.

How much should we take them into account? "Well, they never relate to a specific narrative that would make sense to anyone else. The logic is entirely mine. I wouldn't discount them. I would think of them as an extension of the work, another mark, but not as an explanation. I love Miles Davis. He puts titles to things, even though his music is instrumental. You see the title, and you feel it in the sound of the music."

Together, we look at some reproductions of pictures that are to appear at the Serpentine (the show will comprise old work, much of it from private collections in the US, where she has shown more often, and some new pieces, too). *A Passion Like No Other* (2012) is of a boy in a navy ruff, his stare unfathomable. *Any Number of Preoccupations* (2010) stars a man in white slippers and a voluminous red robe, a half-smile playing on his face. *Citrine By the Ounce* (2014) is a man, his gaze cast down, in a white sweater – or is it a vestment? – set against a plane of bright yellow.

Together, they illustrate a recurring motif in Yiadom-Boakye's work, which is that her characters seem not really to inhabit their clothes; often, it's as if they're wearing fancy dress.

What is this about? (*Any Number of Preoccupations* looks like a firm nod in the direction of Sargent's *Dr Pozzi at Home*, but the others only seem to me to make reference to a certain sense of displacement.) "I don't know," she says. "Long things: robes, dresses... it's all quite ambiguous. The expressions are important. That's what takes the longest to work out, getting those to work the way they should. In the last few years, I've become obsessed with colour, too. My pictures used to be very dark, but now I'm putting in vivid reds and greens." No objects, though. In fact, no context at all. Her characters might as well be on the moon for all that we know of their whereabouts; nor is their social class or relative wealth so much as hinted at. Does this have to do with issues of visibility/invisibility? She isn't saying, but her approach seems to me to be unavoidably political. These are half-people - "suggestions of people" as she once put it - and that's why her paintings are, in their own quiet way, troubling. Outwardly jaunty, they ask us, I think, to consider how we view others.

I wonder how she sees her career in the future, and how she will deal with the pressures of the art world, which is at permanent fever pitch just now, an incessant festival of vulgarity and capriciousness, as she becomes better known. "Well, I don't think ahead," she says. "After all, I might not be here tomorrow. I might be run down by someone with a beard and a bicycle [we've been moaning, over our hot chocolate, about the local hipsters]. But with the art world, you just have to switch off. If you want to be pressured, you will be. I don't. I'm lucky to have had galleries who are very supportive, and if I don't want to do something, I just say no, and it has got easier to do that. And I've never had money, so I don't care about it." She tells me quietly that she has no interest in becoming an art world personality - a Tracey Emin, or a Grayson Perry - and I believe her, not least because I can sense (it takes one to know one) that she is already itching to get back to work.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses After Dusk is at the Serpentine Gallery, London W2 from Tuesday until 13 September

More interviews

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THE TIMES

Visual art

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye/ Duane Hanson

Serpentine Gallery, W2

★★★★☆

Duane Hanson's Man on Mower

This is an intriguing pairing of two figurative artists who on the face of it could hardly be more different. In the main Serpentine Gallery is a compact survey show of the portrait-style paintings of the British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye whose wilfully reticent images of imaginary people — composite figures drawn from scrapbook clippings and photographs, personal memories and historical images — are possessed of an aura that feels mysteriously unknowable. Her figures materialise, as if by magic, from their mostly dusky and ill-defined backgrounds. Some are dancing or reading, one balances a scarlet macaw on his finger, but for the most part they are occupied with something utterly unremarkable.

In the Serpentine Sackler Gallery are the sculptures of the American artist Duane Hanson: startlingly realistic life-sized replicas of ordinary people created through a complex process of casting from live models in bronze or fibreglass resin. The house painter with his roller, the cleaner pushing her wheelie-bin, the builder perched on his scaffolding, the groundsman slumped on his mower: all are trapped for posterity in their precisely observed mundanity. Hanson, who died aged 70 in 1996, records every detail of commonplace life from the hairstyles to the footwear.

This verisimilitude feels a long way from the vagueness of Yiadom-Boakye. Yet at the same time there is a haunting resonance of mood. Step closer and peer into the face of one of Hanson's people. You will be amazed at the detail, yet beyond simple astonishment lies a deeper humanitarian message. Hanson asks us to recognise the individuality of each person, to acknowledge the dignity of those whom we so easily overlook. The longer you peer the more unsettling the experience.

You feel the utter unknowability of these "ordinary" people. You sense that same aura of mystery that Yiadom-Boakye conjures. The techniques may be different but a disturbing awareness of a psychological presence is shared.

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Exhibition runs to Sept 13

Artist × Artist

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Jennifer Packer

One of the best parts of working at the Studio Museum is the opportunity to have amazing conversations with artists. I became familiar with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work during her 2010–11 exhibition Any Number of Preoccupations *and had the chance to learn even more when she was the inaugural participant in our program* Studio Lab. *Jennifer Packer came to the Museum as a 2012–13 artist in residence, and became a regular visitor to the Communications office, stopping by to chat on her way to refill her coffee mug. As I got to know Packer, I couldn't help but notice the similarities between her and Yiadom-Boakye, not just in the most immediately obvious way—they are both women artists of African descent painting the body—but also because they share a truly deep engagement with the complex and complicated history of people painting people. And they both really, really love painting. I was honored to introduce them to each other and sit in on a lively conversation, which is excerpted here. Thanks to both Yiadom-Boakye and Packer for participating, and to Packer for preparing this excerpt.*

—Elizabeth Gwinn, Communications Manager

Jennifer Packer: I've had many conversations about your work, and people always express the similarities they have found between our paintings—first and foremost the idea of making a portrait. How do you talk about your relationship to portraiture?

Jennifer Packer
Ivan, 2013
Courtesy the artist

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: For a long time I haven't thought of my work as portraiture, and I don't think of yours as portraiture either. I tend to think a portrait is something very formal and specific, somehow, to a time and a purpose—done for some practical reason. There are people who confounded that somehow, like the portraits that Francisco Goya did for the Spanish royal family. They weren't portraits. They were versions.

JP: I see the act of painting as being in the forefront, so portraiture becomes an arbitrary label. When I think of your work, I think of John Singer Sargent's paintings from Venice or even Willem de Kooning—the sort of unidentified bodies, with a sense of personhood that is attached to location.

LYB: I spent a lot of time looking at work that made sense to me on a purely painterly level, not really looking at the subjects. I looked at everything from Mark Rothko to Walter Sickert, their use of colors, light and composition. That was part of the reason it didn't make that much sense to me to work with portraiture and have people sit for me, because then it would become more about that and not the act of painting. I think about the Sargent painting *Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi at Home* [1881]. To me that painting is about how you make the color red work.

JP: Some people don't like to hear painters talk about working in such a practical and formal way, seemingly outside of a conceptual framework.

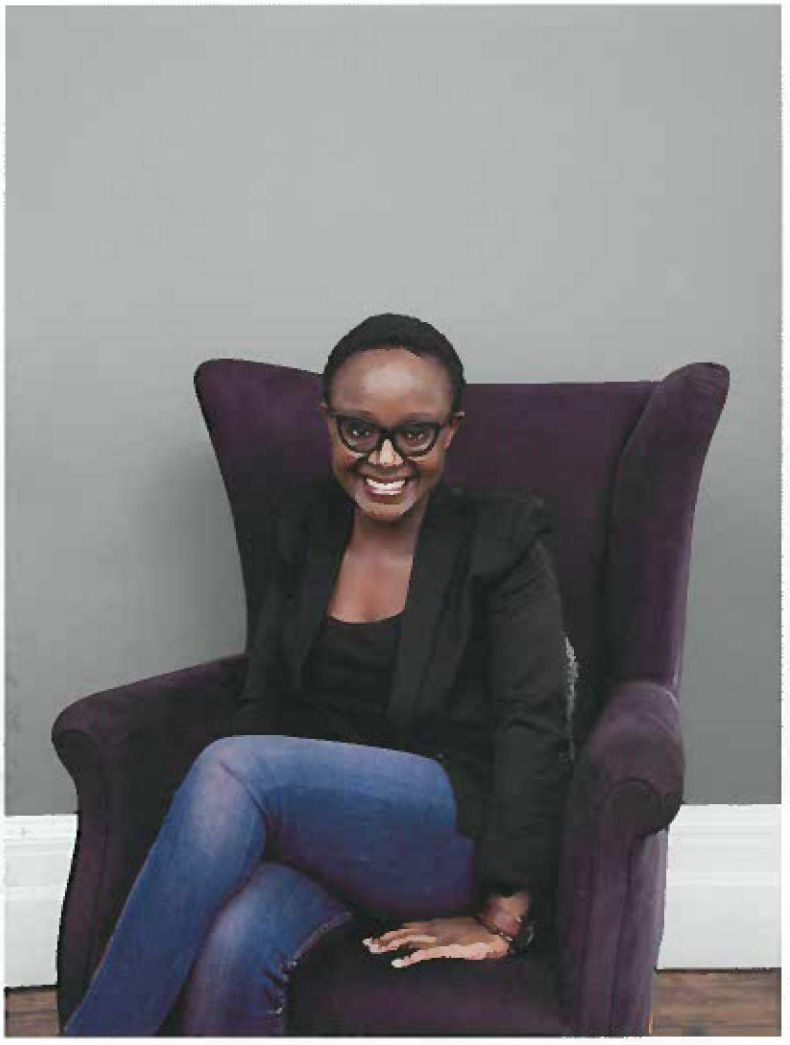
LYB: I generally finish the work very quickly. So, in a way, I often end up setting myself a kind of task of sorts, a problem to solve for the day. It's often something that's really simple and practical and formal. Nobody wants to hear that, but that's what drives me. I talk about it in that way because those *are* concepts. What sets the paintings apart, somehow, are these touches. There is this sense of what you should be talking about, that you have to attach very unnatural explanations to painting in order to make it more. There are things I want to happen conceptually that wouldn't happen without the painting know-how.

JP: Thinking about Goya, do you see yourself as being part of painting lineage? I'm thinking about the idea of a painting inheritance or a family portrait, that you might be part of that legacy?

LYB: I'm fascinated by history, but I never really think in terms of placing myself in that. For me, painters are as much of an influence as all the kind of insane conversations I had with my parents and my brothers as I was growing up. There's a way of thinking I had developed by the age of nine that is still with me now in terms of how I see my world, how I think or how I place things. Like nightmares I had as a child—if I look at some of my paintings I can see images of those nightmares as if they've never left me. I still go to the studio and make the same mistake in a painting that I made in a drawing when I was eleven. When I think about training as an artist, I think it never really ends—there's still a sense that just because a course ends doesn't mean you're ready.

Jennifer Packer
Photo: Paul Mpagi Sepuya

JP: There's something like an idea of ripening that I think is a lifelong endeavor. Painting isn't always in the forefront of how we imagine or experience the work. I like the idea that your figures don't have identities, but they're not impossible beings. There is a definite tenderness in how the faces are painted at times. It has the appearance of being a really intimate and personal thing.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye
Courtesy the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
Photo: Marcus Leith

LYB: Often that's very deliberate. These are identities, but I think it really goes beyond that. That's why I've used the term "super human." There is a place for the personal and some of the resonance in the work is the not-knowing. One of the reasons I made a conscious decision not to work from people I know is to get around this idea of objectifying.

JP: Perhaps the body would be a stand-in for just another being, not simply "blackness." I like considering your color as relating to internal value, particularly some of the dark paintings where the background feels to be of the figure. It's as if the body has the potential to emerge from the space of flesh itself.

LYB: The abstraction is always there. For me, and definitely for you, the process of painting is building something out of colors and marks. Often the figure doesn't arrive until the end, until I've put in all this history, groundwork and mapping. There's something about oil paint, a slight fetish to it. But I never say *fetish*. I always say *sensuality*. I get from your painting the sensuality of it, seeing that purple melt, he's melting into the surroundings and then there's this defined foot—there's almost a wrinkle over the face that's purely painterly and you don't read him as being wrinkled but you read it as the language of paint. We usually get drawn into interesting but one-sided conversations about identity and placing us in the work. But what I want to know is the thing that makes you want to look at paintings, disappear into them. You remember the materiality of paint, and that to me is so much what this is about. In a way, I feel like I saw my subject matter a long time ago, and I thought "damned if I do, damned if I don't." You make peace with certain readings of the work, questions and being pigeonholed. More recently there's this question, "Why is everyone black?" The very simple answer is "Well, what else would they be—black isn't 'other.'" It isn't an odd detail.

JP: I feel those questions come regardless of how we represent bodies, those questions of a black experience articulated in the work. I'm interested in a shared psychological experience in your work, but not necessarily in a racialized manner. I feel an emotional solidarity between the works, how you perhaps free yourself to be repetitious and make paintings that look similar.

LYB: That partly has something to do with purpose, signature and practicality. Certain works encapsulate my practice quite well, so they tend to recur. Works have been revisited many times and have a different kind of punctuation. There was something about that repetition that took me to another way

of thinking—thinking through the senses or thinking out feelings, and allowing that to govern the work.

JP: I think a lot about the privilege of the gaze, the eye that looks upon the work with license to see every corner, to know all within a painting. I'm invested in the failure to connect the gaze, as if to say, "this life is not of your life." What is the removal of the direct gaze in some of your work?

LYB: It was about intimacy within the painting. I was trying to see how imperative that gaze is and what happens when you remove it altogether. I felt that it made them much more introspective, an inward-looking environment. It took a long time for me to feel comfortable having the figure looking forward because I felt like somehow it wasn't enough.

JP: I feel like painting is a really meditative process, and the value of that can't necessarily be assessed immediately. It's sometimes difficult to say, "Okay, how has it changed me? How have I changed through the process of making?" Our social structure is so much about justifying your energy, what productivity and purpose are. So I think a lot about mastery. I don't draw so I can become just slightly better at drawing. I'm invested in the idea of making something extraordinary and using mastery as a way to break through to that, potentially. I'm interested if you think of your practice in that way.

LYB: I'm ambitious within my work, but that ambition is not one where I'm setting myself up for a fall. I've never looked at another artist's work and thought, "I want to get to that, or I want to be as good." I never believe in looking sideways, and when I talk about ambition, I'm talking about making any sense of feeling like you're moving forward. I think that's why I love to look at work that is generous in some way because I feel like I'm always going to find it difficult. I think that's all you can ever really hope for—that there is a certain resonance. And then tomorrow perhaps that resonance will shift.

JP: We've both talked about throwing paintings away. So we could discuss those discarded works as potential failures. I don't like to talk about failure as a real possibility without talking about success in the same way. A painting can have resonance—not on a scale of one to ten—this is an eight and hopefully the next one will be a nine, and then when you're fifty years old, it'll be a ten. But looking forward to the moments when you've made something that you are astounded by.

LYB: I think that is a very personal thing and it's never about massive success. It becomes incredibly liberating to accept that the whole point of the act of making art is striving for something. If I ever felt like I'd gotten there, I'd stop because there's nowhere else to go because I've done the painting of my life. Thinking about a lifetime of painting and work, there will be peaks and troughs, and you never really get there anyway. So I don't like to think in terms of masterpieces or mastery in that way. The mastery you've been developing will take shape in whatever way it needs to. I suppose that's part of the good thing for me about letting things go.

JP: I like thinking of mastery as a moving target—I think there's a window of time for paintings, and a painting finished one day couldn't have been made the day before or after. I think of mastery as being time-specific.

LYB: Yes, it is a moving target, but I suppose I've never been that interested in other artists' masterpieces. I'm often more interested in the whole, the whole body of work, the whole journey. Recently there was an Édouard Manet show in London and the work was just very human, and very full of flaws. I think those flaws are masterly. Sickert spoke very disparagingly about that whole genre of what he called "drawing room painting." All his subjects were hookers and pimps and drunks. That's why I think he really shifted my understanding of what painting was for. He was so much about a vision, and what's so visionary about this work is that you look around and understand the world or the life around you. You interpret it in the artwork, and whatever it has to be, it will be. It's not about becoming mannered or elegant. It's about doing something that only you can do, frankly; regardless of how people might read it or compare it to other things, it's a very clear filtering or very clear rendering of the world that you know and the world that you inhabit and the life that you lead, the thing that you are.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye
No Pleasure for Machinery (detail), 2013
Courtesy Corvi-Mora, London and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

THE WHITE REVIEW

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Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

MODERN PHILOSOPHY IS THREATENED BY LOVE, whose objects are never only objects. Philosophers have discovered in love a lived geometry that positively demands their professional attentions; they swoop down like angels to deliver their sacred messages. But love, which was not invited to the symposium before it had stolen in, remains troublesome. Its power to disrupt is strategically deployed in the eternal cock-fight of philosophy.

In an essay 'The Intentionality of Love: In homage to Emmanuel Lévinas', the Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion offers a gracious account of love's significance for philosophy (and perhaps also philosophy's insignificance for love). Marion describes a love that transgresses empirical knowledge, rationality and intentions; love offers the definitive answer to the philosophy of consciousness (the straw man of Western philosophy since Descartes's dubious cogito). Falling in love, as everyone knows, is not intentional. Marion's love also refutes an existentialist philosophy that holds existence to be my own. Love, as any good Franciscan will say, does not live under any logic of possession; it is never apprehended alone but in the presence of others. Marion describes the faces of two lovers approaching one another: they make a quadrant of gazes, four black suns radiating and absorbing the invisible light of two gazes at their respective points, making a cross of their unbending trajectories. For Marion there are two in love, no more. The scene recalls a Gothic Annunciation scene where lines of sacred light describe the path of the divine message towards its target. Finally, in Marion's philosophy it is faith that makes love possible, faith acts as a guarantee in the surrender of your self to another. (Faith, love might answer, or inconsolable terror.) Love in this elegant diagram is an immediate knowledge for its Two. In the world where a multitude of bodies and images intervene, love's knowledge is accomplished with less geometrical certainty. It is often as a problem for knowledge that love is manifest. In this state of confusion, the paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye offer new material to the philosophy of love.

What has painting got to do with love? *The Love Within*, a recent exhibition of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings at the Jack Shainman gallery in New York, presents a peculiar answer to this question. The press release offered a poem as a gloss on the show's curious title: two paragraphs of prose poetry concluded with a verse of four lines. The first paragraph announces in authoritative capitals that there will be 'No Talk of the Love Without' and proceeds to list its attributes: it is 'The Backhand Slap' and 'The Almost Total Abdication of Responsibility to Another'. Now, the poem promises, there will be 'No Love Gone Awry'. The second paragraph describes the 'Love Without' as a love of the senses: it is 'a Burning in the Southern Region' and 'A Sweet Song Sung by The Owl in the Eaves'. In its concluding four lines the poem turns towards 'What The Owl Knows'. And what does the owl know? 'The Love Within'.

The paintings of *The Love Within* do not represent real persons but bodies drawn from composite images and painted in dialogue with the artist's private imaginary. Entering the gallery from the impersonality of Manhattan streets, the swathes of rich browns and blacks on these canvases absorb the cold light of the gallery and radiate warmth. Documents of a day's work, brushstrokes applied with evidence of regret and revision; other, faster brushstrokes appear somehow both crude and eloquent. The viewer approaches these faces with a growing awareness of their lack. Each painting evokes a different gaze but every face appears private, diffident, almost entirely withdrawn. When a gaze has been granted to the place where the viewer stands, the bodies are outsized, larger than life, in their scale denying a relation of identity. The artist has refused in interviews to explain her work or to offer context that might resolve its challenges, but she has often been drawn out on questions of interpretation, speaking to readings of her work that feel wrong. If in love a body becomes the bearer of signification and at the same time remains unknown enough to be indefinitely promising, then perhaps the artist's refusals are a means to conserve their sufficiency in meeting this demand. Is sufficiency, for these paintings, a principle of love?

The interview took place at the artist's home in South London, in a room whose wooden shutters let a thin rectangle of December sunlight fall across a white plaster wall behind her. At the invitation of her poem, to turn from the 'Sweet Song of the Owl' to the question of 'What the Owl Knows', I wanted to learn how these paintings could teach us the philosophy of 'The Love Within'.

glass

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye selects pieces for Whitechapel Gallery's new show

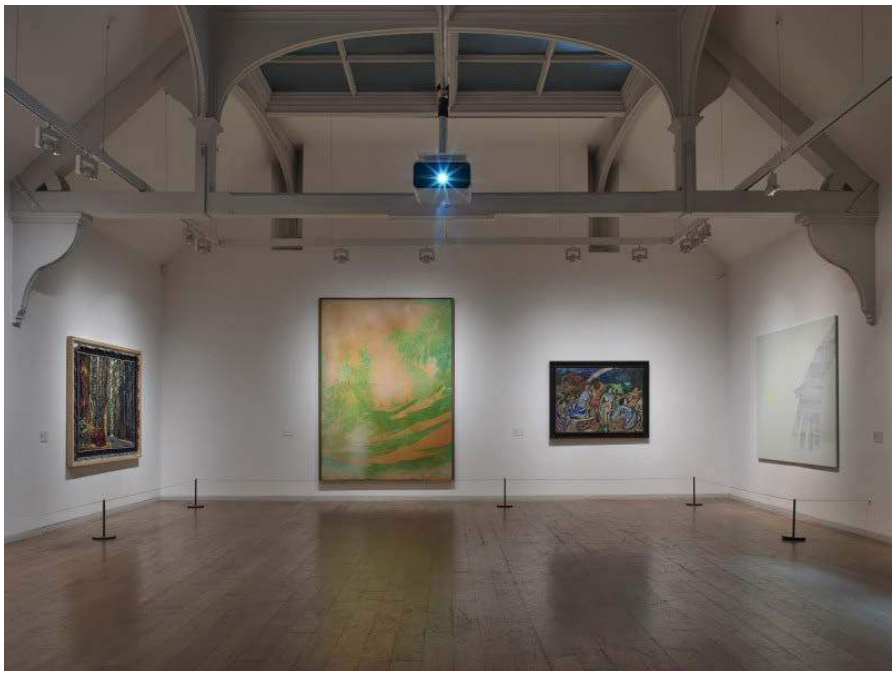
Posted March 25, 2015 by Emily Rae Pellerin

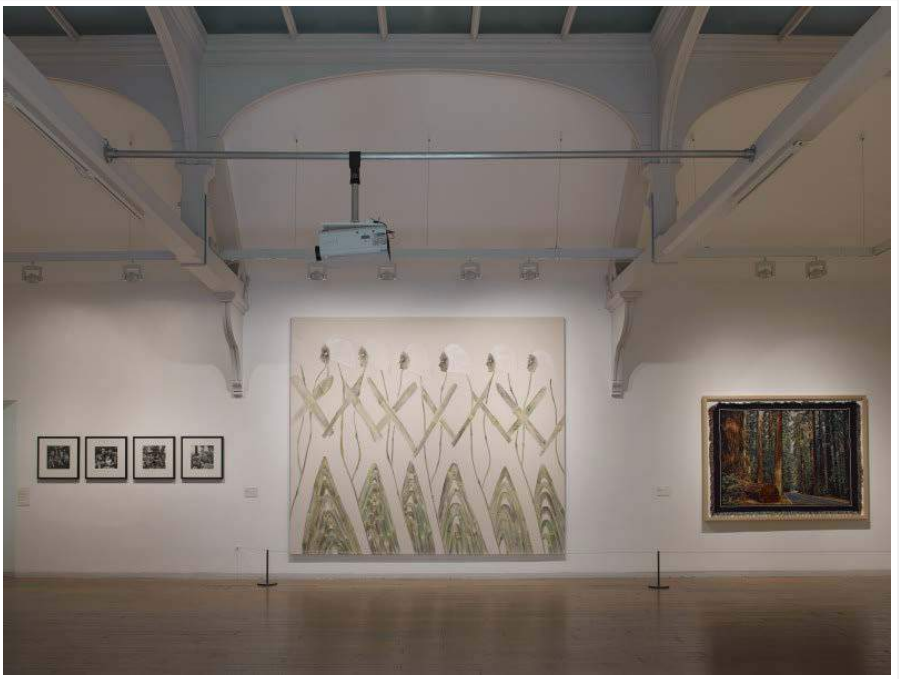
Turner Prize-nominated Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is assistant curating an exhibition this spring at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Running now through mid-June, the presentation, titled Natures, Natural and Unnatural, is a carefully selected group of contemporary multi-media artworks from both some of the world's best-known and some of its lesser appreciated artists.

"The works that I was drawn to … all had a link to nature or still life or a combination of the two," says Yiadom-Boakye. "The title of the display refers to the idea of nature, and the different types of nature – the nature you walk out into in the wilderness, nature that you bring into the house, human nature, people interacting with nature and also the nature within a person. I wanted to think about all of those things in the selection."

Entirely drawn from the V-A-C collection, Moscow, the exhibition includes pieces from the oeuvres of Peter Doig, David Hockney, Gary Hume, Andy Warhol, Russian photographer Nikolay Bakharev, Estonian artist Jan Toomik, and more.

The presentation is one of a series of four displays through the Whitechapel Gallery, which make up a programme dedicated to opening up rarely seen collections from around the world.





by Emily Rae Pellerin

Images courtesy Whitechapel Gallery

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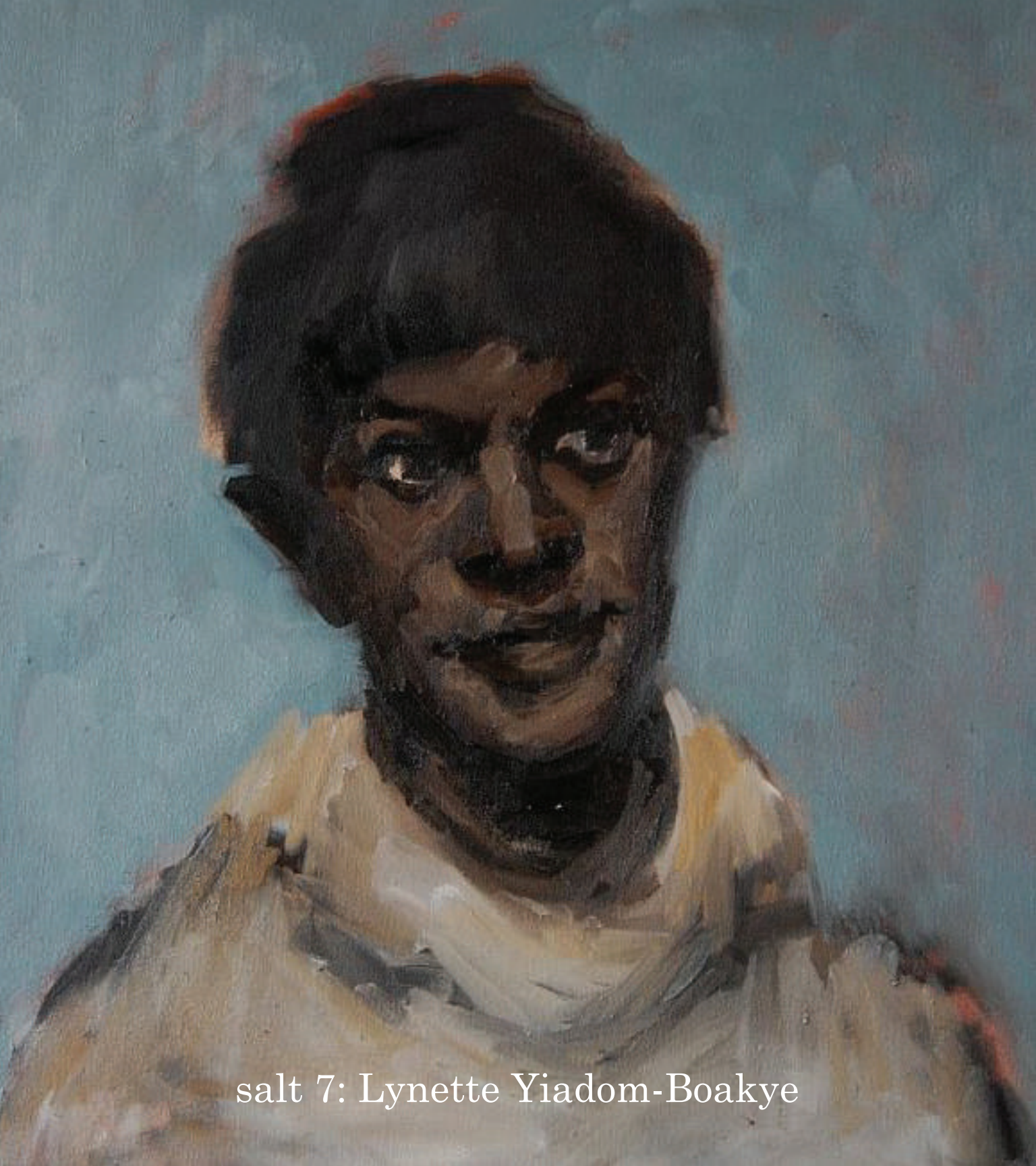

salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

February 21 through June 23, 2013

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye paints people, but not real ones. Instead of focusing on the needs of a living subject, she partners with paint, respecting and responding to its formal qualities to elicit a rendering of the world she sees and experiences. Her subjects, almost always black figures, are invented, inspired by various source material including memories, the history of art, found images, literature, and whatever is on her mind that day. In her words, "it might be something as simple as the position of a woman's wrist as she turns a book page on the Underground that I try to remember and re-draw later or an image of a seascape in a magazine that I want to cut out and keep."

Yiadom-Boakye's style shows her deep understanding of, and engagement with, the Western history of painting. In a sense, her work is a pastiche of earlier artistic styles. Her shadowy backgrounds and apt use of contrasting color to attract the eye seem indebted to Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828), particularly his *Black Paintings* (1819-1823). Her attention to the materiality of paint and her two-dimensional treatment of figures is reminiscent of Édouard Manet's (French, 1832–1883) handling of paint and subject matter. Her depiction of psychological complexity and movement call to mind the masterpieces of Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917), while her simplified backgrounds and swaths of color, which loosely define space, pay homage to the work of Paul Cézanne (French, 1839–1906). Like these artists, Yiadom-Boakye is less concerned with perfect anatomical representation or the rules of the academy and is more interested in making the esoteric qualities of life tangible through paint. This incompleteness—this rejection of realism—is a tenet of modernism that ultimately led to abstraction. But, in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, this subtle digression from realism seems anachronistic. Her new subject matter alters the mood and connotations of the early modernist techniques, highlighting modernism's flawed perceptions of race.

In addition to borrowing from the history of art, Yiadom-Boakye appropriates poses and compositions from documentary photographs of the civil rights movement and from regal African portraiture as well as from images culled from today's glossy magazines. She has no interest in reproducing these source images directly, however, and maintains they are "not meant as an explanation of the paintings." Her invented subjects are actually amalgamations of various faces, body parts, and settings that the artist synthesizes into composite figures, building her characters as she paints. "I often have a vague idea of what I want the face to do, but it's so hard to identify because I don't want it to get too firm," she explains.[1] This general lack of firmness leaves very little to suggest a potential narrative, aside from the artist's formal considerations of color and composition. Her figures exist in a timeless, placeless space. Wearing simple, generic clothing and inhabiting indistinct environments devoid of objects, they are detached from anything that could link them to an actual era or location. Yiadom-Boakye intentionally omits visual cues that might hint at the age, economic status, or even the gender of her characters. Many are posed statically, but even the activities of those in motion are ill defined. Are the figures in *A Toast to the Health Of*, 2011 (fig. 1) holding hands? Or is one trying to pull away from the other?

[1] Bollen, Christopher. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye." *Interview Magazine*. Dec 2012.

fig. 1. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. *A Toast to the Health Of*, 2011, oil on canvas, 78 7/8 x 98 1/2 inches. Collection of Noel Kirnon. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

With such minimal detail, what does appear on the canvas resonates intensely. The white of teeth and furtive eyes pops against her subdued palette. Strong brushstrokes further direct attention to details—a rippling back muscle, a misshapen hand, a tense smile—that inspire the imagination and spark a narrative thread.

Yiadom-Boakye also writes short fiction, and while she considers the practices separate, her stories paint vivid images and her paintings unfold like stories. Stylistically, her words and paint share certain offbeat and dark qualities. In *Treatment for a Low-Budget Television Horror with the Working Title: "Dinner with Jeffrey,"* her short story published in conjunction with her 2010 exhibition *Any Number of Preoccupations* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Yiadom-Boakye sets an eerie scene in a shadowy old mansion in the English countryside. As the story develops, it becomes apparent that the public personas of the characters belies their inner wickedness. Yiadom-Boakye seems to play in the subtlety of that tension, in both her stories and her paintings.

In earlier paintings, she evoked a disturbed psychology by painting ghoulish figures with exaggerated teeth and disfigured, mask-like faces. More recently, and in this exhibition, her figures are elusive yet potentially more unsettling. By sliding away from academic realism, she opens up the psychological side of her characters and is able to suggest non-representable states like vulnerability, superficiality, or contempt. Whether looking away, smiling, or dancing, these figures—comprised of slightly disjointed parts and unblended brushstrokes—appear unbalanced. Their murky, undefined backgrounds set a peculiar atmosphere, yet no malady is easily detected—until the title of the painting is revealed. Here, the artist asserts her control of language to direct the mood and open possible backstories for her fictional characters. However, much like her paintings, her enigmatic titles lack all of the details needed to complete a narrative. Why, for instance, would the title *Further Pressure From Cannibals*, 2010 (front cover) be paired with a seemingly benign portrait of a woman? Her closed-mouth smile, furrowed brow, and distant gaze conceal the rest of her story. The dissonance between the image and the text gives the work an irreconcilable tension that captures our imagination. Yiadom-Boakye is skilled at planting just the hint of a narrative, strategically inviting a story fueled by our own creativity.

* * *

Prior to the 1980s, contemporary artists of African descent had almost no presence in the mainstream art world. And, as art critic Holland Cotter puts it, "on the rare occasions they were admitted to its precincts, they were required to show clear evidence of Africanness—Africanness as gauged by Western standards, that is—in their work, like a visa prominently displayed."[2] In 2001, Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, wrote about the concept of "post-black" in the catalogue for the exhibition *Freestyle*. Acknowledging the diversity of artists of African descent and the complexities of an individual's investigation of identity, "post-black" identified a generation of black artists who, having come of age after the civil rights movement, felt free to "wrap themselves in evidence of their origins, or wear that evidence lightly, or not at all."[3] Though the term "post-black" has received criticism for being paradoxical (it utilizes an ethnic label in an attempt to refuse racial categorization), it does mark a shift in consciousness in the contemporary art world.

[2] Cotter, Holland. "Out of Africa, Whatever Africa May Mean." *The New York Times*, 4 April 2008.
[3] Ibid.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is British and has never lived in Africa. Her parents have not lived in Ghana for the past forty years, and she does not claim a close relationship to the country. However, she does acknowledge a connection to a Ghanaian way of thinking and seeing that influenced her upbringing.[4] "When the issue of colour comes up," the artist says, "I think it would be a lot stranger if they [her painted figures] were white; after all, I was raised by black people."[5] In this sense, her depiction of black figures is a representation of normalcy rather than defiance or celebration. However, when considering the history of portrait painting and black representation, which Yiadom-Boakye's work clearly references, her ordinary subject matter assumes an additional, subversive role. "This is a political gesture for me," she says. "We're used to looking at portraits of white people in painting."[6]

Yiadom-Boakye recognizes painting's ability to investigate subject- and object-hood, visibility and invisibility. She is comfortable using art history's visual language, and by repurposing familiar tropes, particularly those of portraiture, she subverts traditional signifiers of power. Historically, portraits have conveyed the wealth and authority of their subjects through poses projecting confidence and strength and through clothing, accouterments, and surroundings strategically indicating social status and superiority. However, representations of people of African descent in literature and art history often have been examples of inferiority or spectacle, depicted as possessions, symbols of hypersexuality, or the antithesis of European civilization—the romanticized "noble savage."

Conceptually, Yiadom-Boakye's black figures reclaim the strategies of portraiture and interrogate the politics of representation while her use of paint and color gives a literal representation to the question of visibility. In the mid-nineteenth century, Manet's *Olympia*, 1863 (fig. 2) caused quite a stir. A naked

Fig. 2. Édouard Manet. *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 103.5 x 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Image courtesy Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.

white prostitute stares out of the painting, directly engaging the viewer with her gaze while a black, female servant presents flowers from a client. As art historian Sander L. Gilman explains, the nineteenth century's misinformed theories of racial evolution situated the black servant as a symbol of hypersexuality and illness[7], both moral and physical. Yiadom-Boakye has revisited this seminal painting at least twice—each time removing the servant figure entirely—by painting a darkly dressed but equally confrontational black woman (fig. 3) and then a semi-clothed black man (fig. 4) in the prostitute's reclining pose. Although this race/gender swap certainly confronts outdated racial perceptions and the politics of desire, Yiadom-Boakye's consideration of the servant is perhaps a more compelling commentary on subject-hood. Though she has completely omitted the servant from this particular revisionist work, she continually mimics Manet's

[4] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews the Afropolitan Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye." *Kaleidoscope*, Summer 2012, Issue 15, pp.102.

[5] Higgie, Jennifer. "The fictitious portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye." *Frieze Magazine*, April 2012, Issue 146, pp. 91.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Gilman, Sander. "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality." *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. pp. 101.

fig. 3. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. *Truck Stop*, 2010, oil on linen, 19 5/8 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

fig. 4. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. *The Officer of the Law*, 2010, oil on canvas, 19 5/8 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

fig. 5. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. *Kestrel*, 2011, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 X 27 1/2 inches. Collection of Pippa Cohen. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

fig. 6. Barkley L. Hendricks. *Steve*, 1976, oil, acrylic, and magna on linen canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

pictorial representation of the servant by making her figures almost indistinguishable from their dark backgrounds (fig. 5). Their brown skin, barely delineated, on a muddy background requires the viewer to examine her paintings from multiple angles in raking light to make out a subject. Signaled at first by the whites of their eyes or some other pop of color, these elusive figures gradually materialize as if they were stepping into light.

This blending of the figure into the background is a technique that painter Barkley Hendricks (American, born 1945) mastered in the 1970s and continues to use today. However, Hendricks, who is also renowned for his treatment of the black figure, more commonly reverses the color scheme to make the skin of his subjects stand out. In *Steve*, 1976 (fig. 6) a black man's white suit fades into a white background. Like Yiadom-Boakye's figures, his contour slips into an undefined "no place," but his dark brown face jumps out from the painting's whiteness. Hendricks's paintings, with their fashionable, proud subjects, seem to celebrate blackness, much like the colorful paintings of Mickalene Thomas (American, born 1971) and Kehinde Wiley (American, born 1977), whose triumphant black subjects reclaim masterpieces of Western art history. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, on the other hand, revel in subtlety and avoid overly defiant, revisionist, or celebratory imagery while still drawing attention to the historical inequities of representation.

In fact, Yiadom-Boakye paints her subjects doing quite regular things. Whether they are walking to work, having a cup of coffee, going for a swim, or just thinking, their stances and everyday activities are leisurely rather than bold. Even when the artist wants to depict movement, as in *Shoot the Desperate, Hug the Needy*, 2010 (fig. 7), her title tempers any joyous or festive connotations one might associate with dance. Her work may consider the normalcy of blackness, but it deeply explores the intricacies of the human condition. Beneath her luscious surfaces and behind her smiling faces is a violent current, an emotional distress that is at the same time mysterious and uncomfortably familiar.

Whitney Tassie
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

fig. 7. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. *Shoot the Desperate, Hug the Needy,* 2010, oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 78 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches. Collection of Ninah and Michael Lynne. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye was born in 1977 in London, where she currently lives and works. She studied at Central St Martins School of Art and Design and Falmouth College of Art before she completed her graduate work at the Royal Academy Schools in 2003. In 2012, she had solo exhibitions at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York and Chisenhale Gallery in London and was included in group exhibitions at the New Museum in New York, the Miami Art Museum, the Menil Collection in Houston, and other institutions. Her work is in many public collections including the Tate, London; the British Council, London; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Miami Art Museum, Florida; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Arts Council Collection, London; the CCA Andratx Collection, Mallorca; and the Nasher Museum of Art, North Carolina. She was recently awarded the prestigious 2012 Future Generation Art Prize by the Victor Pinchuk Foundation.

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salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is sponsored in part by Nancy and Dave Gill with additional support from Noel Kirnon.

Many thanks to Tamsen Greene and the staff at Jack Shainman Gallery for their assistance in organizing this exhibition, which would not have been possible without the generosity of the lenders: Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, Corey and Racquel Chevremont Baylor, Pippa Cohen, Noel Kirnon, Ninah and Michael Lynne, and Amedeo Pace. Thank you!

Front cover: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Further Pressure From Cannibals*, 2010, oil on canvas, 21 5/8 x 17 3/4 inches. Collection of Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels. Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is the seventh installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' ongoing series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global, and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

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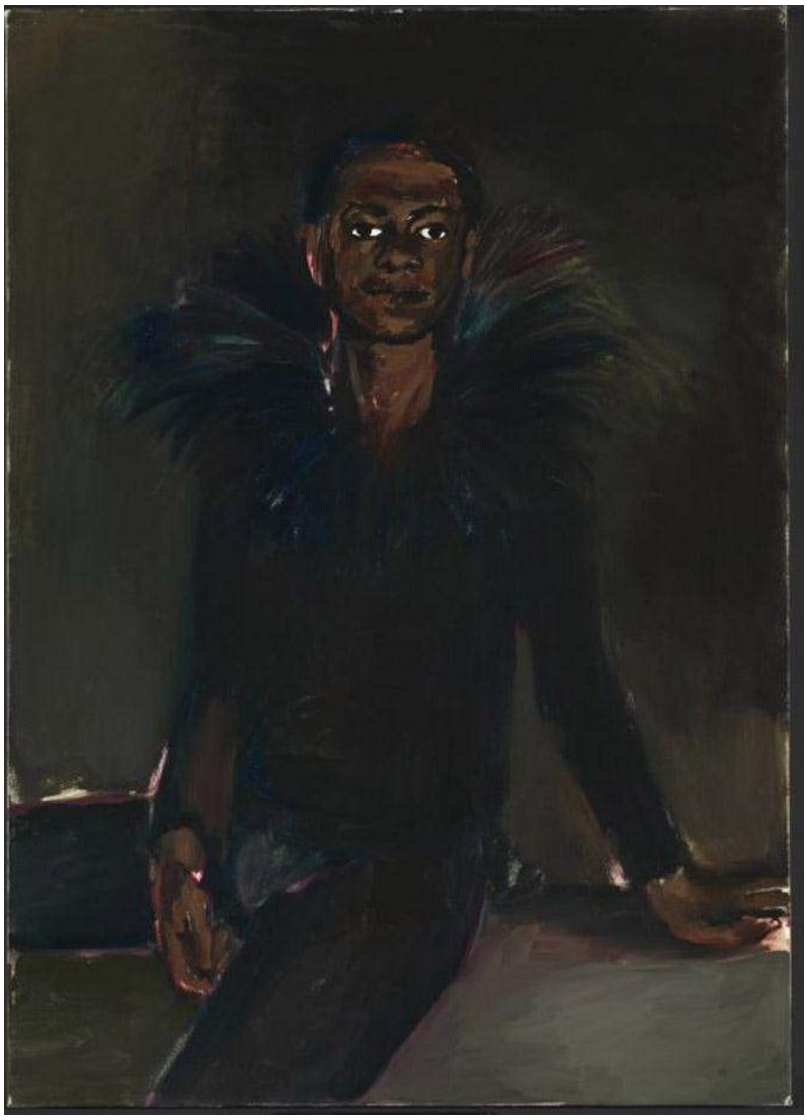
theguardian

Artist of the week 186: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Everyday actions are made poetic by Yiadom-Boakye's paint-coaxed figures, emerging from her canvases with secrets intact

Skye Sherwin
Thursday 19 April 2012 09.39 EDT



'Delicate mystery' … detail of Greenfinch by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is one of life's great manipulators – at least when it comes to paint. She nudges the gooey stuff into shape, coaxing figures from gestural strokes. The people she depicts are often doing some unremarkable everyday act, like lying down or removing a sock. Some recall old-fashioned portraiture, painted full length, or from the waist up against plain backdrops lively with brushwork. But their psychological complexity hits deep. The delicate mystery of an unreadable lip curl, a curiously game smile or an awkward stance has a subtle, if insistent, pull on our imagination.

They're so compelling it's hard to believe Yiadom-Boakye's subjects aren't portrayals of real people: they're fictions born from scrapbooks, drawings and intuition. These characters are also mostly dark-skinned, something that seems to matter both very much and very little. A British artist of Ghanaian descent, Yiadom-Boakye is putting black subjects at the heart of a European painting tradition from which they have largely been left out. Yet there are no capital "C" cultural references and features often aren't racially distinct. The most you can say is that hair, wardrobe and body language are gently bourgeois. The neutrality is striking.

Connections are hinted at between many of her works, though she never makes clear what the underlying story might be, preferring to leave things teasingly open. Within her latest paintings, men in jumpsuits with stocking feet or a lithe manner recall the dancer's studio. In Greenfinch, a teenager in a black catsuit and a feathery ruff about the neck sits casually, as if taking a break from rehearsals. With his dark silhouette set against a shadowy ground, there's a sense that his form is literally emerging from the paint. You can see what Yiadom-Boakye is getting at when she says she wants "to drag people out of the canvas".

Meanwhile the moustachioed guy with a ballerina's slight frame, in Bound Over to Keep the Peace, plays with his necklace and gives us a riveting smile, full of the promise of secrets about to be spilled. Then again, that's just one way of looking at it. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings refuse to be pinned down to a single story; her characters keep their options open.

Why we like her: For the dreamy 6pm Cadiz, where a man in a faded blue denim two-piece reclines languidly on a sand dunes.

Rip it up and start again: Yiadom-Boakye works at a prolific rate – a painting a day. Yet much of it is never shown. If something isn't working, she destroys it and moves on.

Where can I see her? At Chisenhale Gallery, London E3, to 13 May.

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

January 2011

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

by ara h. merjian

NEW YORK Almost all of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's sitters confront the viewer. The few that turn away, as in the oil-on-canvas *Bird of Reason* (2009), still read as portraits. Of course, "sitter" and "portraiture" are not quite the right words, since none of these persons has ever existed. Described in the exhibition's wall text as "conceptual portraiture," Yiadom-Boakye's work is just as easily deemed a kind of embodied unreality. In his catalogue essay accompanying the show, Okwui Enwezor incisively addresses this practice as "para-portraiture."

This is not to say that Yiadom-Boakye's subjects do not come alive. Each appears, in fact, redolent of real experience and eccentricity. Nearly every one of the 25 paintings on display bears a richly allusive and vaguely literary title, brimming with ambiguous locales or half-aphorisms. Her figures emerge from a somber half-light reminiscent of Velázquez and Zurbarán, or Manet's reworkings of those same shadowy 17th-century backgrounds. That nearly all of Yiadom-Boakye's subjects are of African descent raises questions regarding the relative absence of black bodies from the canon of figure painting, the maid in Manet's Olympia notwithstanding (in fact, that figure's secondary role underscores the issue).

Still, the work of Yiadom-Boakye, a Ghanaian-born British artist, is by no means over-earnest or polemical in feeling (compare to Kehinde Wiley's defiantly revisionist imagery). The paintings' incisiveness lies, in fact, in a certain disarming insouciance. *Victory Sweat Suit* (2008) exemplifies an almost perfect synergy between subject and surface. A man in a snug pair of sweats turns toward the viewer with a cavalier look, his arms slackly crossed behind his back. His offhand affect matches the painting's loose, devil-may-care strokes. Taking that brushwork to an arresting extreme is the elliptically titled *The Signifying Donkey's Feat* (2003). Here the brushwork renders the figure's face so casually as to evoke a mere mask, slightly grotesque in its toothy smile.

One of the exhibition's strongest pieces, *Wrist Action* (2010) seems relatively straightforward in its title. The female figure bears an electric pink hand or glove, her eerie face and awkward carriage even more unnerving than her neon extremity. Similarly large in scale, *Vespers* (2008) is exceptional not only for the gossamer cloud of a bed on which a young girl sits but also for the figure's subtle pose of song or recitation. With closed eyes, pursed lips and a meditative cock of her head, she reveals a rare and unselfconscious absorption.

The exhibition's smaller canvases often appear suspended in a kind of purgatory between half-hearted impasto and mere gracelessness, the characters deprived of breathing room. Yiadom-Boakye is most successful when her brush enjoys larger dimensions, the broader swaths of the surrounding space imbuing the figures with a more forceful presence.

Photo: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Wrist Action, 2010, oil on canvas, 98⅜ by 78¾ inches; at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Merjian, Ara. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye" (Studio Museum Harlem exhibition review). *Art in America* (January 2011): 113, illustrated.

THE Nation.

BIN LADEN IS DEAD: NOW, LET'S GET OUT OF AFGHANISTAN AND END THE WAR ON TERROR

THE EDITORS

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EGYPT AFTER MUBARAK

PAUL AMAR

THE DECLINE OF THE TWO-INCOME FAMILY

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HIGHER-ED BLUES

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

Yet of course it is precisely China—and Singapore, another great democracy—that the Obama administration holds up as the model to emulate in our new Sputnik moment. It's funny; after the original Sputnik, we didn't decide to become more like the Soviet Union. But we don't possess that kind of confidence anymore.

There is a large, public debate right now about primary and secondary education. There is a smaller, less public debate about higher education. What I fail to understand is why they aren't the same debate. We all know that students in elementary and high school learn best in small classrooms with the individualized attention of motivated teachers. It is the same in college. Education, it is said, is lighting a fire, not filling a bucket. The word comes from the Latin for "educe," lead forth. Learning isn't about downloading a certain quantity of information into your brain, as the proponents of online instruction seem to think. It is about the kind of interchange and incitement—the leading forth of new ideas and powers—that can happen only in a seminar. ("Seminar" being a fancy name for what every class already is from K–12.) It is labor-intensive; it is face-to-face; it is one-at-a-time.

The key finding of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift* (2011), that a lot of kids aren't learning much in college, comes as no surprise to me. The system is no longer set up to challenge them. If we're going to make college an intellectually rigorous experience for the students who already go—still more, for all the ones we want to go if we're going to reach the oft-repeated goal of universal postsecondary education, an objective that would double enrollments—we're going to need a lot more teachers: well paid, institutionally supported, socially valued. As of 2003 there were about 400,000 tenure-track professors in the United States (as compared with about 6 million primary- and secondary-school teachers). Between reducing class sizes, reversing the shift to contingent labor and beefing up our college-completion rates, we're going to need at least five times as many.

So where's the money supposed to come from? It's the same question we ask about the federal budget, and the answer is the same. We're still a very wealthy country. There's plenty of money, if we spend it on the right things. Just as we need to wrestle with the $700 billion gorilla of defense, so do universities need to take on administrative edema and extracurricular spending. We can start with presidential salaries. Universities, like corporations, claim they need to pay the going rate for top talent. The argument is not only dubious—whom exactly are they competing with for the services of these managerial titans, aside from one another?—it is beside the point. Academia is not supposed to be a place to get rich. If your ego can't survive on less than $200,000 a year (on top of the prestige of a university presidency), you need to find another line of work. Once, there were academic leaders who put themselves forward as champions of social progress: people like Woodrow Wilson at Princeton in the 1900s; James Conant at Harvard in the 1940s; and Kingman Brewster at Yale, Clark Kerr at the University of California and Theodore Hesburgh at Notre Dame in the 1960s. What a statement it would make if the Ivy League presidents got together and announced that they were going to take an immediate 75 percent pay cut. What a way to restore academia's moral prestige and demonstrate some leadership again.

But leadership will have to come from somewhere else, as well. Just as in society as a whole, the academic upper middle class needs to rethink its alliances. Its dignity will not survive forever if it doesn't fight for that of everyone below it in the academic hierarchy. ("First they came for the graduate students, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a graduate student…") For all its pretensions to public importance (every professor secretly thinks he's a public intellectual), the professoriate is awfully quiet, essentially nonexistent as a collective voice. If academia is going to once again become a decent place to work, if our best young minds are going to be attracted back to the profession, if higher education is going to be reclaimed as part of the American promise, if teaching and research are going to make the country strong again, then professors need to get off their backsides and organize: department by department, institution to institution, state by state and across the nation as a whole. Tenured professors enjoy the strongest speech protections in society. It's time they started using them. ■

Margins of Modernism

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

Modernism, if we need a quick and dirty encapsulation of it, can be summed up in Ezra Pound's declaration "Make it new!" At its most extreme this imperative leads, insofar as visual art is concerned, to the feeling that one could only begin, "so to speak, from scratch, as if painting were not only dead but had never existed," which is how Barnett Newman described his ambitions in 1967. Postmodernism, on the other hand, as we came to know it, and love or hate it, in the 1980s, seemed to say that nothing of the sort was possible, or even all that interesting—and to prove it, artists began to devote themselves to appropriation and pastiche. These practices are still very much with us. The recent court battle over Richard Prince's reuse of imagery taken from a book by photographer Patrick Cariou testifies to the persistence of appropriation (and the legal risks it may invite), whereas the resurgence of George Condo, widely lauded for his slick, jokey twists on familiar Modernist styles, is a reminder of the endurance of pastiche. And there are plenty of younger artists following in their footsteps.

But there are other possibilities in the air. Just as the idea that art could make a fresh start, unencumbered by the conventions of the past, came to seem paradoxically tired and conventional, so too did the idea of the end of history, and of the artist being condemned to what Fredric Jameson, in his celebrated 1984 essay on postmodernism, described as "the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture." In retrospect, both the Modernist and postmodernist positions, at least at their most doctrinaire, seem like evasions of the historicity of the present. There are no absolute beginnings or endings, just a continuing entanglement, and dialogue, between the present and the past. More persistent than appropriation is the truth of William Faulkner's famous admonition, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner was suggesting that unacknowledged histories are always latent in the present, that things may not be what they seem. His remark can also be taken to suggest that for new art, art that we hope will tell us something about our present and, perhaps more to the point, show us something of its look, things may be more complicated, more ambiguous, than they used to appear. It has gotten harder to distinguish an art that's truly of the present from one that is more backward-looking. And when art delves into

its past, it can be difficult to tell whether it's doing so in the spirit of postmodernist pastiche or with a genuine historical sense, by which I mean a sense of the sense of the past, of a spirit that however deeply rooted has not yet been named and is still emerging in the present. Somewhat reluctantly, I'll borrow a phrase from literary studies and call this a new historicism in art.

That such a thing exists—not a movement but a tendency of the time—has become clear to me only gradually, and my understanding of it crystallized after seeing recent exhibitions in London by two of my favorite younger painters, Silke Otto-Knapp and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. It helped that their shows happened to be in the same building, at the galleries greengrassi and Corvi-Mora, respectively; perhaps it was their proximity that allowed me to sense the curious inner congruence between the two bodies of work, despite the lack of any striking visual resemblance. The two artists' backgrounds are certainly different. Otto-Knapp was born in Osnabrück, Germany, in 1970. She went to London in 1995 to study at the Chelsea College of Art, and has been living and working there ever since. Yiadom-Boakye is a native Londoner, born in 1977, but of Ghanaian heritage. That both artists work in London doesn't seem crucial: the roots of their art lie elsewhere. I'd be surprised if Otto-Knapp hadn't been crucially influenced by Karen Kilimnik, for example, though she hasn't emulated Kilimnik's fannishness and whimsy; and Yiadom-Boakye has clearly been marked by John Currin, though Currin is still a pasticheur in a way that she's not. But their work has ulterior sources. And that both artists are painters may not even be that important. I could point out similar qualities in artists working in other media—such as the sculptor Daniel Silver or the American-born filmmaker Daria Martin, to name a couple of other London-based artists who've made a strong impression on me in recent years.

The first piece on view in Otto-Knapp's exhibition, "Voyage Out," was *Tableau 1 (braiding)*, from 2011, a large, near-square painting in richly toned grisaille depicting a group of dancers clad in white robes like dervishes and performing in front of a large openwork construction that is somewhat taller than the dancers and of indeterminate use or significance. Behind it are the dancers' accompanists, playing four grand pianos and a range of percussion. The scene is represented in a highly stylized manner that might have originated in some no man's land between the Modernism of Georgia O'Keeffe and Art Deco. Detail is reduced to a minimum—the figures are faceless, for instance—and the space tipped forward so that the background figures appear to be above those in the foreground rather than behind them. The musicians look stiff, doll-like; the dancers appear not to have been captured in mid-movement but to be holding their extravagant poses indefinitely.

In contrast to the painting's austere palette and composition, its smoky half-tones of seemingly infinite gradation are incredibly seductive (I'm thinking of the intangible flickering lights and shadows with which the scene has been rendered), as is its delicate texture, at once sheer and velvetlike. This is all thanks to Otto-Knapp's use of watercolor and gouache (rather than, say, oil or acrylic) on canvas. Writing about a 2008 exhibition of Otto-Knapp's in Cologne, the German critic Catrin Lorch shrewdly attributed her restricted palette to the influence of "the dusty-grey medium of photocopy reproductions of old images from ballets." No doubt, but who would have imagined that the afterimage of the grainy detritus of the library could tug at one's emotions? Otto-Knapp's paintings are permeated by nostalgia, but for what: the lost artistry of dances we will never be able to see or the archive that beguiles us with the incommunicative traces of what was or might have been?

Presumably *Tableau 1* represents an actual performance. In the past, Otto-Knapp has derived paintings from documents of productions by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Ninette de Valois; at Sadler's Wells, she has been exhibiting a series of etchings based on the ballet *Lilac Garden*, performed there in 1936 and choreographed by Antony Tudor. There is no written clue to the source of *Tableau 1*, but the unusual instrumentation depicted in the painting is that of Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (1923), which was originally choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska. So maybe those dancers are meant to be not Sufi mystics but Russian peasants.

COURTESY CORVI-MORA, LONDON

Curses (2011), by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

In any case, some of the other paintings in "Voyage Out" return to a subject that occupied Otto-Knapp a few years ago, before she began focusing on dance performance: landscape—or rather, more specifically, gardens, by which I mean not wild nature but the artifice of a cultivated theater of nature. In *Garden (moonlit)*, from 2011, the luminous disc hardly seems the source of the pale radiance that permeates everything, for the areas of deepest foliage are somehow the least hidden in shadow. And despite the muzzy atmosphere, the painting is richly detailed. Perhaps this is what it's like to see a garden through the shining eye of a cat prowling at night.

But is a painted landscape really the likeness of a terrain through which animals might roam, or is it merely the image of an

image? As Otto-Knapp reminds us, it's hard to know. The darkest and most mysterious of the paintings at greengrassi was another one featuring lunar light—or so one might have thought. Its title tells us otherwise. *Stage (moonlit)*, from 2011, with its bare, scattered trees, depicts not a real forest but a theatrical backdrop. Its painted moon has only this in common with the real one: it gives reflected light, not its own.

The idea may be that painting detaches an image from any definite connection to its source. Reference to nature and reference to art become indistinguishable. And yet art is not entirely removed from reality; there is a connection, however attenuated, that Otto-Knapp seems to want to retain.

Maybe we should think of Yiadom-Boakye's paintings as portraits of portraiture.

Perhaps the most affecting work in her exhibition was an image of another artist, *Painter (Marianne North)*, from 2011. It shows a woman sitting at an easel in a clearing before a dense wood. As usual, details have been reduced to a minimum, and the woman's costume seems vaguely nineteenth century. Who is she? The name Marianne North meant nothing to me, but thanks to Google I now know that she was an English naturalist and botanical artist who lived between 1830 and 1890. The Royal Gardens at Kew maintains a gallery devoted solely to her paintings that is said to be "the only permanent solo exhibition by a female artist in Britain." Nothing could be further from Otto-Knapp's dreamy, aesthetically and conceptually distanced mode of painting than the hardheaded realism practiced by this doughty Victorian maverick, who traveled the world to document its flora in minute detail and intense color. North wanted to show things in the most direct manner possible; Otto-Knapp reminds us obliquely of what may be beyond our grasp. Otto-Knapp's empathy for her subject has not tempted her to imitate North's manner of painting. And even if Otto-Knapp wanted to, she couldn't, at least not without changing everything, right down to her very materials: North painted in oils at a time when ladies were expected to use watercolor; Otto-Knapp uses watercolor, perhaps in solidarity with the generations of female amateurs who might have had gifts worthy of further cultivation if only the times had permitted it. What North wanted to paint was nature; Otto-Knapp wants to paint North's aspiration.

Otto-Knapp's paintings often probe around the edges of Modernism, both in their subjects—dance performances familiar only to specialists because they can only be reconstructed from documents; an artist who ignored the burgeoning innovations of contemporaries like Manet and Whistler to pursue her own (perhaps inadvertently) visionary take on the vegetable realm—and in their style, which often evokes provincial variants of metropolitan ways of seeing, usually imbued with symbolist overtones. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, portraits of imaginary people, awaken an even longer historical memory but are also concerned with art history's margins. Commentators on her work invariably cite a very specific pictorial heritage—Velázquez, Goya, Manet, Sargent—and rightly so, though we'd do well to remember the less renowned figures who share some of the same artistic DNA, such as Robert Henri and William Nicholson. But think again about Velázquez and Manet: what if Juan de Pareja were not the only black man the Spaniard had painted, and what if not just Olympia's maid but her mistress had had dark skin? The people Yiadom-Boakye paints are almost always black—people who were marginal to the European tradition of portraiture until the advent of Modernism made the portrait itself a marginal pursuit.

Not that these imaginary figures ever look like they've been marginalized. "I don't like to paint victims," the artist insists in the press release for her recent exhibition at Corvi-Mora, "Notes and Letters." For all their vulnerability, her people are proud; they have nothing to prove. Okwui Enwezor, in an essay for the catalog of Yiadom-Boakye's recent show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, discussed the notion of "cutting a figure" as a way of understanding her imaginary portraits. Enwezor borrowed the phrase from the art historian Richard Powell, the reigning expert on the representation of blacks in Western painting, who used it to describe "an incisive, slashing action or a spectacle created by an all-too-visible person." But this kind of compensatory self-representation strikes me as exactly what Yiadom-Boakye's subjects rarely if ever resort to. It's as if they've never been made to feel that their race could count against them, that they are too visible or invisible; one could call them "postblack," to use the term coined a decade ago by Thelma Golden, the Studio Museum's director.

There's something else to be noticed about these figures: the absence of markers of class in their depiction. Most portraits show their subjects in the midst of their possessions—props that define their station in life: sometimes their profession, more often their wealth and status. And even in the absence of other such accessories, clothing is usually enough to show whom you're dealing with. Think of the sumptuous gowns worn by the women painted by Sargent or Ingres. You'd be hard put to say if Yiadom-Boakye's people are rich or poor; it might be tempting to split the difference and say they're middle class, but even that would be unwarranted. Their costume, often close to styleless (consider for contrast the flamboyantly mannerist attire sported by the portrait subjects of Barkley Hendricks) is strictly unidentifiable as anything but vaguely modern: plain brown sweaters, casual slacks, at best a little black dress. Nothing flashy.

There's more to be said about this plainness. It has to do with Yiadom-Boakye's extreme reservations about the use of color. There's a strong use of red for the figures' garments in one work in "Notes and Letters"; green provides the background for two others. But otherwise, the paintings are mostly brown with a bit of white: brown skin, brown clothing, brown backgrounds, the whites of their eyes. In the most literal sense, most of these figures are at one with their world, which is nothing other than that of painting, or rather—because the substance of paint is everywhere in evidence here—of paint: its physicality, its uncanny life. Their faces are nothing other than paint having taken on legible features.

At the same time, there is something knowingly generic about these imaginary portraits. Not that each subject doesn't have his or her own quirks of pose or expression; even knowing that these subjects are invented, it's easy to imagine that they represent people we might have seen or met. They elicit empathy. But the paintings also always present themselves as examples of portraiture, as "tokens" (to use Charles Sanders Peirce's nomenclature) of a type of representation. We see the people they represent as individuals, but the people do not bother to exteriorize or dramatize their individuality, and something similar could be said of the paintings. Maybe we should think of them as portraits of portraiture—which they probably

could not be if they depicted real people.

A few of Yiadom-Boakye's recent paintings, however, seem to represent a retreat from the notion of portraiture. "Notes and Letters" included a pair of full-length figures in which the subject's face is turned away—a young man in *Aftersong* (2011) and a middle-aged woman in *11 am Monday* (2011). They are figures with "lost profiles." Yet these characters seem hardly less knowable than those who face us directly in some of the other paintings. The woman is seen amid the nebulous light-grayish atmosphere of what could well be an overcast morning; however the day might turn out, her wide-brimmed hat would provide protection from either sun or rain. Little more than a few darker horizontal brush strokes at the bottom of the canvas establish a reflection: she seems to be standing in shallow water, one foot resting on a rock, perhaps gazing out at the ocean. Though we barely see her face, her contemplative mood establishes itself vividly enough. Whatever we can know about the subjects of these paintings is to be known indirectly, yet we feel we do know something, and in relation to this something, everything we don't know contributes a sense of untold depth.

Of course, that depth is in the eye of the beholder. Contemporary painting is "conceptual" in just this sense: the effects it aims to create take place in the viewer's mind and not on the canvas. That's not to say that some curious and difficult things don't have to happen on the canvas to produce the desired effect. The viewer completes the work, as Marcel Duchamp famously said—but he or she doesn't complete it in just any old way. The artist cannily, inexplicitly shows you how. The painters Yiadom-Boakye evokes, the likes of Velázquez and Manet, were masters of the unfinished who knew how to coax the eye and mind of the viewer to animate the raw physicality of paint by breathing life into it through gaps left for just that purpose. She's been going to the right school.

At the same time, Yiadom-Boakye is learning how to give the viewer more information while still keeping things open-ended, and how to remind the viewer, as well, that the way one completes a picture through perception is always open to revision. The largest painting in "Notes and Letters," strangely titled *Curses* (2011), is, unusually for her, more of a genre painting than a portrait. Two girls, robed in red, are seen striding from stone to stone across a river. The background is not depicted in any great detail, but it is nonetheless much more concrete than her usual nebulous fields of colorless color. The careful energy invested in the girls' steps is beautifully drawn out. So is the concentration on their faces. And this despite the fact that, in the midst of all the seemingly effortless lyrical painting by which she has adumbrated the girls' environment, she has rendered their faces with blunt, awkward, at times almost harsh gestures. These features that read so naturally from a certain distance come to seem masklike, arbitrary, even grotesque if you get too close—and yet gorgeously so.

Yiadom-Boakye's art, like Otto-Knapp's, is pervaded by an exquisite historical consciousness, yet their work avoids the academic and histrionic. I suppose it's the wise incompletion of their paintings that makes this possible. Go back to Otto-Knapp's portrait of Marianne North: notice how the painting she's shown making is nothing but a rectangle filled with a few liquid strokes of watercolor. Everything around it tells us what the picture might be. But we have to fill it in for ourselves, now and always in the present, knowing whatever we might of the past—and not only that of art. ■

ORGANIZATIONS

INDIANAPOLIS NATION ASSOCIATES DISCUSSION GROUP. Contact (317) 919-4622 or lortonb@netscape.net.

CHAPEL HILL, N.C., DISCUSSION GROUP starting up. Contact (919) 370-4114 or mthompson015@nc.rr.com.

HANOVER, N.H., AND UPPER VALLEY DISCUSSION GROUP now meeting. For info, contact Susanne at (603) 643-2560 or dovetree1830@yahoo.com.

HILO, HAWAII. Bob and Nan Sumner-Mack exploring possible *Nation* discussion group. Contact (808) 315-7031 or rsm4@earthlink.net.

GIG HARBOR, WASH., DISCUSSION GROUP. Contact Bill Nerin at (253) 851-8888 or nerins@earthlink.net.

GRAND LEDGE, MICH., DISCUSSION GROUP. Richard Currier, (517) 627-4591 or richardc@michcom.net.

NORTH JERSEY DISCUSSION GROUP. Contact Trudy Anschuetz at (973) 981-1003 or tgoblue1@comcast.net.

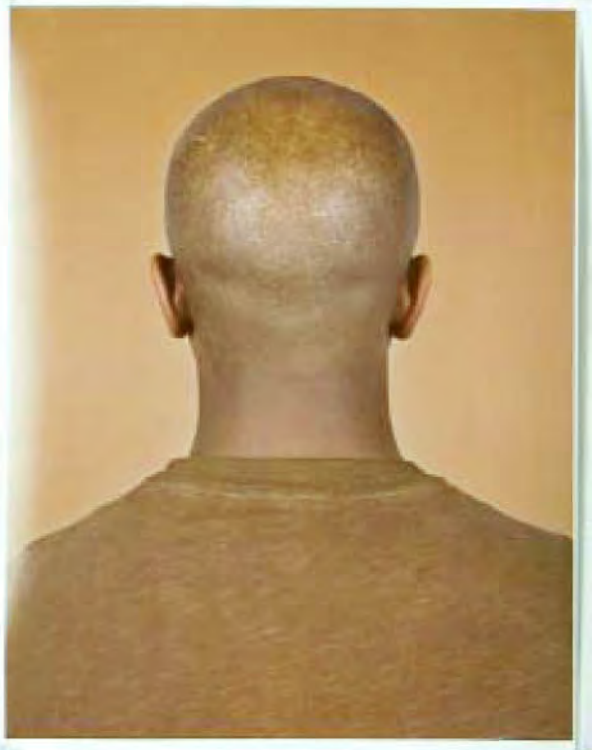
SAN FRANCISCO *Nation* discussion group. For information, e-mail evithess@gmail.com.

NASHVILLE, TENN., *Nation* discussion group. Howard Romaine, hromaine@gmail.com.

NEW ORDER

THE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORLD OF AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY ART. A NEW GENERATION OF INNOVATIVE, POLITICALLY AND ETHICALLY AWARE ARTISTS IS – FINALLY – GETTING RECOGNITION FOR ITS WORK

WORDS **CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU**



In the not-too-distant past, African contemporary art was underexposed and undervalued. Nigeria's Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Sokari Douglas bucked the trend, as did Mali's Abdoulaye Konate and Sudan's Ibrahim El Salahi, but largely speaking, artists from the continent weren't taken as seriously by the global art establishment as their European and American counterparts.

The turn of the millennium heralded a long-overdue change. Specialist US title ARTnews declared art from the continent "the newest avant-garde" and a slew of new galleries and agents, such as Michael Stevenson in South Africa and Arthouse Contemporary in Nigeria, popped up, giving African artists more kudos, a wider critical audience, greater global leverage and higher price tags.

At the same time, artists such as Nigeria's Yinka Shonibare, Kenya's Wangechi Mutu, Ghana's El Anatsui and South Africa's William Kentridge, Kendell Geers and Zwelethu Mthethwa received critical acclaim, with high-profile exhibitions, auctions and commissions, not only from Africa but the rest of the world, too.

As the decade draws to a close, a new generation of artists looks set to achieve even greater feats. Working in a variety of media reflecting an abundance of multi-layered identities, narratives and opinions, these young talents are the art stars of tomorrow.

DAWIT L PETROS
ERITREA

A true Afropolitan, Dawit L Petros and his family left his native Eritrea when he was two years old and travelled through four countries before settling in Canada seven years later. This early displacement motivates much of Petros' work as a conceptual artist. In his photographs, video works and installations, he places unrelated objects (or photos of objects) in close proximity to raise difficult questions about place, location and the cohabitation of diverse cultures and ideas in contemporary societies.

In one of Petros' better-known works, Proposition I: Mountain (2007), a photograph shows a close-up view of a black hand holding a pile of ice (evoking a snow-capped mountain) set against a white background that turns out to be the arid salt flats of California.

In another, Proposition I: Sign (2007), he relocates a blank signpost, similar to the one at the summit of Kenya's Mount Kilimanjaro, to a featureless arctic landscape. Both make the viewer aware of how displacement can open up possibilities of misrecognition, alienation and fantasy.

Not all of Petros' work is so abstract. Reinscriptions (2004) includes photographs of Eritreans resident in Canada and the US. The carefully composed images contrast the typically North American homes – white picket fences, vegetable patches – with the Eritreans' physical identity, and show the changing face of the suburban middle classes. The artist says he sets out to "highlight the problems of representing historical and cultural positions from a position that is itself under reassessment."

An MFA graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Petros' first solo exhibition at the Alexander Gray Associates in New York received favourable reviews. As well as participating in Flow, the 2008 exhibition of contemporary African artists at Harlem's Studio Museum, he was invited to join its prestigious artist-in-residence programme, which is running until October. cont

PHOTOGRAPHY **DENNIS KLEIMAN**

Okeke-Agulu, Chika. "New Order." Arise Magazine (March 2011): 114–115, illustrated.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE
GHANA/UK

If the viability of portrait painting as a contemporary art form was ever in doubt, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's canvases of fictional characters put that suspicion to rest once and for all. As well as demonstrating her mastery of the techniques of European classical painting, she applies that classical knowledge in a way that gives her work a distinctive edge and resonant freshness.

The British-Ghanaian artist, who trained at Central St Martins College of Art and Design, uses characteristically dark colour palettes to create emotionally distant, unknown figures that, because of their facial expressions or body gestures, have an air of undeniable familiarity.

Although her paintings might appear to be simply portraits, they depict ideas rather than living individuals. "I am driven," explains the 32 year old, "by a sense of trying to get to something. I do not actually know what it is, but I feel that it is to do with power."

In other words, the five-feet-tall paintings aren't intended to capture the essence of a human being, but the embodiment of an idea, concept or theme. That explains why the canvases bear unusual titles such as Ambassador, Politics, Heaven Help Us All, Pleased to Meet You, or The Signifying Donkey's Feat. They are painted, as the critic Adrian Searle of The Guardian notes, "with a loose and disbelieving swagger that seems to comment on both the characters of her subjects and what we might want from portraiture in the first place".

In addition to three solo exhibitions in London and Geneva, Yiadom-Boakye was invited to exhibit at the 2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Art, Seville (2006), and Gwangju Biennale (2008), both organised by the Nigerian-born Power-100 curator Okwui Enwezor. She was also included in Flow, the important survey of emerging African diaspora artists by New York's Studio Museum. As well as more conventional spaces, she has exhibited at the Platform For Art show, a group exhibition that was held at London's Gloucester Road Tube station.

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> LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Until Wed Apr 27 *Corvi-Mora, 1A Kempsford Rd, London, SE11 4NU*

By Rosalie Doubal Posted: Tue Mar 29 2011

Using loose, broad brushstrokes and opulent inky tones, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's new collection of oil-on-canvases continues to paw at the portrait-painting genre. From her beginnings, this London painter's depictions of imaginary black sitters have delivered a swift and silent violence to the European tradition, complicating the decadent medium from within, while seizing its eccentric self-congratulatory bent for painterly make-merry.

Ranging from playful, knowing and resolute, to peering, alert and coy, the bright polyphony of expressions that dart across these coal, sable and ebony-hued canvases animate this body of work, gifting it rhythm and unity. As with previous paintings, there remains an emphasis on pose and gesture, with minimal settings for each portrait rendering youthful and mature subjects both placeless and timeless. In doing this, Yiadom-Boakye elegantly diverts emphasis away from the subject's surround, allowing for self-presentation to take to the fore.

This collection represents a move away from the more theatrical works for which Yiadom-Boakye has become known, swapping sparse inclusions of metropolitan props - a white ball gown or gaudy red robe - for the subtle use of Arcadian effects. The most challenging works on show, 'Womanology 2', 'Curses', and '11am Monday', present children and women at leisure in idyllic waters and grasses. Widening her repertoire of influences from the obvious precedents of Velázquez, Goya and Sargent, these new paintings toy with far-reaching pastoral styles from the Renaissance to Gauguin's portraits of Tahitian women.

Although this taxing selection of works continues to conceptually tear at the historical boundaries of her medium, Yiadom-Boakye is first and last a painter. Her works lay little claim to anything more than pigment and cloth, attending only to notions of visibility and invisibility - what is included on the canvas, and tellingly, what is not.

Doubal, Rosalie. “Lynette Yiadom-Boakye” (Corvi-Mora exhibition review). *Time Out London*, 29 March 2011.

The New York Times

Portraits of Phantoms, Struggling to Stand Out

Art Review by KAREN ROSENBERG
Published: December 16, 2010

The man in the red robe looks familiar. It takes a minute to place some of the details — ah, yes, that louche cover-up, cocked elbow and rakish eye belong to Sargent's Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi. But this stranger doesn't have a beard, and he sits rather than stands. At some point — it's hard to say exactly when —you realize that he is also black.

Wedge Collection

Michael Paley & Noel Kirnon

Like the other subjects in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which are done mostly from imagination, the man in the red robe doesn't exist. Or, you might say, he exists as much as any portrait subject can be said to exist: as an amalgamation of many different faces and poses and other things rattling around inside the artist's head.

"Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations" is the first museum solo for this 33-year-old Londoner of Ghanaian heritage. Though uneven, it's refreshing, in part because Ms. Yiadom-Boakye isn't very well known in New York and in part because her art, though in keeping with the mission of the museum, looks so different from the work by young artists in other shows there.

Where painters including Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley and Mickalene Thomas have taken a celebratory, triumphant and sometimes showy approach to the black subject, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye makes it nearly invisible. She favors a dark, near-monochromatic palette and loose, even sloppy brushwork. Faces are inchoate, bodies phantomlike. Her figures don't really inhabit their clothes, or the spaces around them.

Rosenberg, Karen. "Portraits of Phantoms, Struggling to Stand Out" (Studio Museum in Harlmen exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 16 December 2010.

Mr. Hendricks, Mr. Wiley and Ms. Thomas are name-checked in the show's slim but erudite catalog, as are John Currin and Dana Schutz. The essays — a pedantic one by the show's curator, Naomi Beckwith, and an inspired one by the scholar Okwui Enwezor — also unpack some of the subtler references to Sargent, Manet and Velázquez in Ms. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings. (It's not always as obvious as a red bathrobe.)

In the same volume is a short story by Ms. Yiadom-Boakye, who also writes "prose, poetry, manifestoes, lists and essays" (as she reveals in the museum's members' magazine). This particular piece of fiction, "Treatment for a Low-Budget Television Horror With the Working Title: 'Dinner With Jeffrey,' " lives up (or down) to its tawdry billing.

The titles of the paintings also indulge Ms. Yiadom-Boakye's literary inclinations. Often they don't seem to have much to do with the images, as is the case with "Half a Dozen Dead," a picture of two dancing women in evening wear, or "The Signifying Donkey's Feat," a grinning, androgynous figure with a leonine mane.

That painting, which dates from 2003 (the year Ms. Yiadom-Boakye completed her postgraduate work at the Royal College of Art in London), is the oldest work in the show. The rest of the 25 paintings on view go back only as far as 2007, growing markedly bigger and bolder as they approach the present.

Scale is a problem in "Wrist Action" (2010), a larger-than-life-size, crudely executed woman in a white turtleneck and single pink glove. The smaller paintings of heads that line the side gallery are much more appealing. Here the artist paints in brown on brown, forcing you to look closely and from multiple angles to make out a face.

She doesn't often indulge in strong color, but perhaps she should. "Any Number of Preoccupations" (2010), a k a the man in the red robe, is the show's pulse-quickening standout. He has a counterpoint in "Vespers," hanging across the room — an ethereal female figure in a long white dress, praying with head upturned and eyes closed.

Ms. Yiadom-Boakye repeats gestures from canvas to canvas, and across the sexes, which may be another way of undermining the veracity and individuality of her characters. So the forward-striding, blue-jeans-wearing man in "Highriser" shares his pose, and his wardrobe, with the woman in "Debut."

Elsewhere two "Olympia"-like odalisques face off. One is male and wearing white harem pants; the other is female, as far as we can tell from the indistinct wedge of a torso. In both works the essential dichotomy of the Manet — the white prostitute and her black servant — collapses.

Painting figures from imagination isn't new, and other contemporary artists (notably Ms. Schutz) have done it with more panache. Similar things might be said about the projects of restoring the black subject to its rightful place in art history (Mr. Wiley) and working the masters into modern figuration (Mr. Currin).

But because Ms. Yiadom-Boakye does all of these things at once, the weaknesses in her art tend to cancel one another out. The characters in her paintings are like that too: just when you think you recognize them, they disappear on you. As Mr. Enwezor puts it, "Is this a gallery of somebodies or nobodies?"

"Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations" continues through March 13 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; (212) 864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

Rosenberg, Karen. "Portraits of Phantoms, Struggling to Stand Out" (Studio Museum in Harlmen exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 16 December 2010.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at the Studio Museum

Any Number of Preoccupations (2010)

By Ariella Budick - Published: November 26, 2010

Their eyes glint like marbles dangling in the dark, while dim features fade into inky surroundings. We can barely see them, these elusive men and women conjured by the brush of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Anonymous, unknowable, they star in her first solo museum show, even as they all but vanish into the painted background. This intelligent, enigmatic and intensely talented artist challenges us to trace intuitively her subjects' outlines and search beneath her viscous daubs for personas that remain mysterious.

The vexingly blurred figures aren't actually portraits at all, but depictions of people who never existed, inventions sprung from the author's memory, dreams and meditations. Some are literary characters, others the residue of photographs the artist once saw. A good many are her glosses on Manet, Sargent, Velázquez and Goya. None of her subjects sat

A British artist of Ghanaian ancestry, Yiadom-Boakye is absorbed by the multitudinous possibilities of black. With a palette of ebony, coal, sable, pitch, and jet, she delves into the complexities of tactile darkness and pairs tenebrous skin with the velvety gleam of a dyed peacock feather.

Manet painted his wife in a suburban living room, expertly juxtaposing every tinge of white, from whipped cream lace around her neck to the silken foam of her cascading dress. Yiadom-Boakye works similar magic in darker ranges, and treats Manet's subject matter as a tossed gauntlet, which she picks up.

She even takes on "Olympia". In Manet's masterpiece, a black servant appears behind the nude prostitute, bearing a bouquet of flowers from an admiring client. Olympia lounges tensely on a daybed, a pasty figure lodged against a tangle of white linens. Yiadom-Boakye reproduces the scene – only now a shirtless black man stretches out provocatively, and a harsh emptiness takes the place of the dark-skinned servant, making her absence palpable.

Yiadom-Boakye also strides fearlessly into a confrontation with Sargent's celebrated depiction of "Dr Pozzi at Home", from 1881, recasting it as a portrait of a lively but generic person of colour who has borrowed the good doctor's crimson robe, white collar, and hand-on-hip attitude.

You might choose to see this twist on society portraiture as nothing more than a postmodern smirk. How blind the masters were, even with their supercharged powers of observation! The world they lived in was multicoloured, yet in their depictions of it blacks make only cameo appearances as domestics or exotics. For a black artist to paint is already a challenge to an exclusive legacy; to paint black subjects is doubly defiant. Yiadom-Boakye does more. She creates luxuriant tableaux populated by black protagonists and offers an alternate story in which the old masters applied their magical hands to a more accurate vision of the world. The show's curator, Naomi Beckwith, makes so much of all these knowing invocations of the past that she labels her a conceptual artist.

The term does her a disservice. Yiadom-Boakye's lush, seductive textures and nocturnal hues, and the imposing presence of her imaginary subjects give these huge canvases a potency that goes beyond mere polemic. For decades, the painter Barkley Hendricks has endowed friends and acquaintances with the monumental dignity of Holbein potentates. Like him, Yiadom-Boakye not only deconstructs and criticises the tradition of portraiture; she celebrates, reclaims, and adds to it.

Budick, Ariella. "Lynette Yiadon-Boakye at the Studio Museum." *Financial Times*, 26 November 2010.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Fashionable Eye

New York Times Style Magazine - Culture

By NADINE RUBIN NATHAN November 15, 2010

Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, NY "9am Jerez de la Frontera," 2010.

At the opening of her solo show at the Jack Shainman Gallery last April, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye wore a strapless, ruffled minidress in an of-the-moment Liberty print. The British artist could easily have been mistaken for one of the fashionable-looking characters in her large-scale, oil-on-canvas portraits, except for the fact that her subjects exist only in her imagination.

"They are suggestions of people," said Yiadom-Boakye, 33, who was in New York last week for the opening of "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations," her first solo museum show at the Studio Museum in Harlem on Nov. 11. "They don't share our concerns or anxieties. They are somewhere else altogether."

Where that is, is anyone's guess. The 25 fictional portraits on view give few clues. Broad brushstrokes and subdued tones draw on formal aspects of traditional portraiture, but her subjects are of African descent. The backgrounds, devoid of the possessions that would denote social standing, time or place, swirl into murky nothingness drawing the eye to their seemingly contemporary ensembles.

Yiadom-Boakye insists that clothes are not her focus, and that the painted accouterments are arbitrary.

Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, NY “Any Number of Preoccupations, 2010.”

“Lynette works in modes of appropriation, all her paintings are a collage,” said Naomi Beckwith, the show’s curator, pointing out that in “Any Number of Preoccupations, 2010,” for which the show is named, Yiadom-Boakye is referencing John Singer Sargent’s 1881 portrait, “Dr. Pozzi at Home.” “In this case, she is quoting social portraits of stylish and fashionable people.”

In both portraits the subjects wear identical blood-red robes, but while Dr. Pozzi is almost overpowered by his — some critics think of his portrait as “red with a face” — the seated man in Ms. Yiadom-Boakye’s work is incredibly imposing. “[Many of] the poses and the gestures suggest self-presentation or an exhibitionist dimension,” said the critic and curator Okwui Enwezor. “But clothing is not really the primary thing. It’s about visibility and invisibility. She has really figured out conceptually how to insert a black figure into the discourse.”

Yiadom-Boakye’s star has been on the rise since her work appeared in Flow, a critically acclaimed survey of emerging African diaspora artists (her parents are Ghanain) hosted by the Studio Museum in 2008. At the Armory Show in March this year, a month before the show at Jack Shainman, her European gallery, Faye Fleming & Partner, dedicated its entire stand to her work.

In “Wrist Action, 2010,” a young black woman with a wide smile wears a white turtleneck and dark trousers. One hand is enrobed in a salmon-pink glove that is threatening to melt into a blob. It’s as if Yiadom-Boakye is throwing down the gauntlet (literally), using the accessory as an excuse for what she wants to do with form.

She says: “Painting for me is the subject. The figures exist only through paint, through color, line, tone and mark-making.”

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, age 4, with a stuffed bear named George, December 1981. Courtesy the artist.

The World and Everything in It

by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW how to live inside your own head. Not all of the time, for that would be unhealthy. But it is an invaluable skill. I learned how to live in my head at a very young age. Make-believe was about making my own fun. It was also about gaining an understanding of the world and everything in it. Whether it was a true understanding or a complete fantasy didn't really matter. When I was a child, make-believe offered a bottomless well of entertainment.

I was born in London in 1977, before technology supplanted imagination as the primary source of childhood entertainment. There was a greater imperative then to create one's own fun, since we had little else to do. When I speak of make-believe, I'm not referring to daydreams, night dreams or nightmares. Those visions occur all the time; they're the occupational hazard of the life lived in our lucid hours. Neither did my make-believe have much to do with escapism. To the best of my recollection, I was never trying to get away from anything.

My family's youngest child and only girl, I was lucky enough to have two older brothers who, in spite of their reasoned, scientific and logical bent, would spin the most fantastical yarns. They fed my love of bizarre intrigues and tall tales. They were both very clever and infinitely convincing, so I believed everything they told me. It never occurred to me that they could be joking or simply wrong in any of their speculations about the many wonders of the world. They had detailed explanations for just about every earthly or supernatural phenomenon I happened to inquire about. Their invented analyses, narratives and characters made the world more exciting. I once sat and waited patiently at the window for the solar eclipse that

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Verses After Dusk," at the Serpentine Galleries, London, through Sept. 13.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE is a painter based in London. See Contributors page.

my brother assured me was coming. It never came. He laughed hard.

My brothers' explanations of everything from human reproduction to the origins of World War II, though highly fascinating, left me completely baffled. I didn't really have their vocabulary yet, but I enjoyed the words and stored them for future use. The accounts they provided regarding the specific benefits of different vitamins and minerals were largely accurate, I've since learned. They had chemistry and electricity sets, "toys" that are not so popular as they once were. My brothers would conduct experiments that I would watch with the deepest admiration and awe. I imagined that we were close to some groundbreaking discovery, despite the obvious limitations of the sets and their accompanying instructions. I felt that anything was possible.

Every time I had a birthday, my brothers would pool their pocket money and buy me a small cuddly animal, which they would name. Each came with a fully developed personality: Kenneth, a hippopotamus and intellectual leader; Spencer, a tall knitted rabbit with lecherous tendencies; Randall, a wretched and much ridiculed mouse; Adrian and Graeme, twin rabbits with very different personalities—the former a hardened psychopath, the latter a born-again Christian. The toys would act out stories, with dialogue improvised and voiced by my brothers. The animals fought crime and injustice together. All things were possible in their world. Everything that could possibly happen happened.

My brothers' room overlooked the recreational grounds behind our house in South London. The previous owners of the house had left behind a pair of binoculars, and the bedroom window provided an ideal vantage point for world-watching. I was small and at a safe distance to watch. Besides which, as I learned, people rarely look up. My "watchings" aided my inventions. I liked to imagine who people were and what they might be doing. Everything looks questionable and sinister when viewed through binoculars. Everyone was a spy, a fugitive on the run, an adulterous wife. Every glimpse of activity or inactivity acted as a catalyst to some narrative.

Yiadom-Boakye: *Speaker for the Right*, 2013, oil on canvas, 70⅞ by 63 inches.

Images this page courtesy Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

I often find myself doing something similar now with snippets of conversation caught in passing. Like the words of the sunburned man in pink shorts who sits near me talking to his friend as I write this essay. He is in an advanced state of agitation, apparently over the behavior of his intended at their engagement party. His friend appears content and is smiling a lot, probably because he is already happily married. He, too, is sunburned, but he wears a wedding ring and the air of smug sympathy that happily married people have when counseling less fortunate friends. I wonder whether he may be somehow implicated. But if I look too closely, they become perfectly ordinary, even dull.

Similarly, the park itself was, and still is, unremarkable. Bisected by a long pathway it is a large, open green space surrounded by towering oaks. In truth, I spent more time watching it from my brothers' window than I ever spent actually playing in it. It was always a massive disappointment when I arrived at the park. It was so much more thrilling in my window-side imaginings.

I always wanted to travel the world, and I'm lucky that my work has allowed me to see a bit of it. But I feel like I started traveling long before I left. My mind went to incredible, impossible places, and my brothers had a lot to do with that. They taught me how to imagine. ○

Oral Chapters, 2010, oil on canvas, 70⅞ by 78¾ inches.

ARTFORUM

CRITIC'S PICKS

New York

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY
513 West 20th Street
April 22–May 22

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Any Number of Preoccupations*, 2010, oil on canvas, 63 x 78 3/4".

The larger-than-life portraits comprising the London-born Ghanaian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's exhibition "Essays and Documents" confront the viewer with strong gazes and bold brushstrokes. In contrast to what the show's title suggests, the works here eschew any sense of conventional narrative, as most figures are painted against gestural planes of color. In style and sheer luxury of paint, these pieces speak consciously to a dominant continental European tradition, including Velázquez and especially Manet, rather than to the more immediate heritage of expressionist figuration in twentieth-century Britain. The effect of this is particularly intriguing given that the vast majority of people in Yiadom-Boakye's works are black, and the artist has isolated their race by eliminating nearly all identifying social context around these fictitious figures.

Take the bust *Further Pressure from Cannibals* (all work 2010): Its subject's gender is not readily discernible, and the title calls attention ironically to the way we as viewers consume the body. While each of the works is a fascinating case study in psychological complexity, this is particularly true of *Any Number of Preoccupations*, wherein a man depicted in a bright red bathrobe takes hold over the viewer with his stare, posture, and concentration. By imbuing her portraits with such raw appeal and potent physicality, while also problematizing histories and modes that refer to once-strongly racialized representations of bourgeois life, Yiadom-Boakye's show offers a statement to match each character's considerable depth and power.

— Beth Citron

Citron, Beth. "Critic's Pick's New York." *Artforum* (April 2010).

Jane Neal
Modern Painters
September 2007
page 98

art history the faces that stared out at the viewer were almost exclusively white, her sitters are black (and predominantly female). Yiadom-Boakye pays careful attention to their physical situation, exploiting the standard three-quarter-turned bust format and painting the gallery walls in muted complementary tones to offset her subjects in a sympathetic light. But she seems more interested in communicating her subjects' psychological profiles. Each sitter appears to evoke or embody a particular mood. For example, the goateed man in *Nous étions* (all works 2007) is brooding—menacing, even. His right eye is wreathed in shadow, his left is wide and wild—the viewer is drawn to wonder what dark thoughts are running through his mind.

Sometimes when an artist paints from imagination or memory, the work can take on a distant, even leaden quality. Not so with Yiadom-Boakye's

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, *MANUAL*, 2007. OIL ON CANVAS, 22 X 18 IN. PHOTO: MAX ATTENBOROUGH, COURTESY GASWORKS, LONDON.

paintings. The faces she describes are as carefully and vividly translated into paint as if the subjects had sat for her; the work resonates with an edgy liveliness. This is partly because of Yiadom-Boakye's loose, sketchy paint handling, evident in *Erector*, in which the subject's face and hair appear more drawn than painted, lending it an animated quality. But it is also because of her use of color: for example, the licks of vivid orange and yellow that illuminate the edges of some of her figures, like those surrounding the sitter in *Manual*—a reference, perhaps, to some kind of inner fire that cannot be completely contained. —JANE NEAL

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE
GASWORKS

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's compelling portraits—showcased in this, her first UK solo show—draw in part on established traditions of European portrait painting. Yet while throughout

Sally O'Reilly, 'Lynette Yiadom-Boakye', *Time Out*, June 26 2007

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Until Jul 22 Gasworks, 155 Vauxhall Street, London, SE11 5RH

Two separate portraits, perhaps of brothers or the same man on different days, are entitled 'Settler' and 'Settlement'. The proximity of the titles and their insinuation of interconnection urge us to identify visual counterparts in the paintings themselves: one man, the settler, has a closed mouth and hair swept back; the other has more erratic hair and is smiling serenely. There is, of course, no literal meaning to be inferred from the comparison, but Lynette Yiadom-Boakye seems to be manipulating our drive for logical closure as if it too were paint. Another pair of related heads, this time in profile, called 'Holder' and 'Erector', are hung opposite one another to strike up an enigmatic conversation, while elsewhere the title 'Diagrammatical' almost commands that we read the impasto black lines that delineate the eyebrows, nose and mouth as a geometric formula and the neckline of the t-shirt as a mathematically significant boundary.

The influence of European portraiture on Yiadom-Boakye is obvious, although she doesn't necessarily draw from life and often invents characters or paints them in series. The tactility of the brushstrokes predominate over such defunct ideas as true likeness, and backdrops are left unspecified, like atmospheric vacuums. Such neutrality quells the politics of representation somewhat, with the all-black sitters seeming less a case of cultural reclamation than simply matter of fact, and pulls focus towards the almost rhythmic glances and stares that pass between them.

Sally O'Reilly, Tue Jun 26