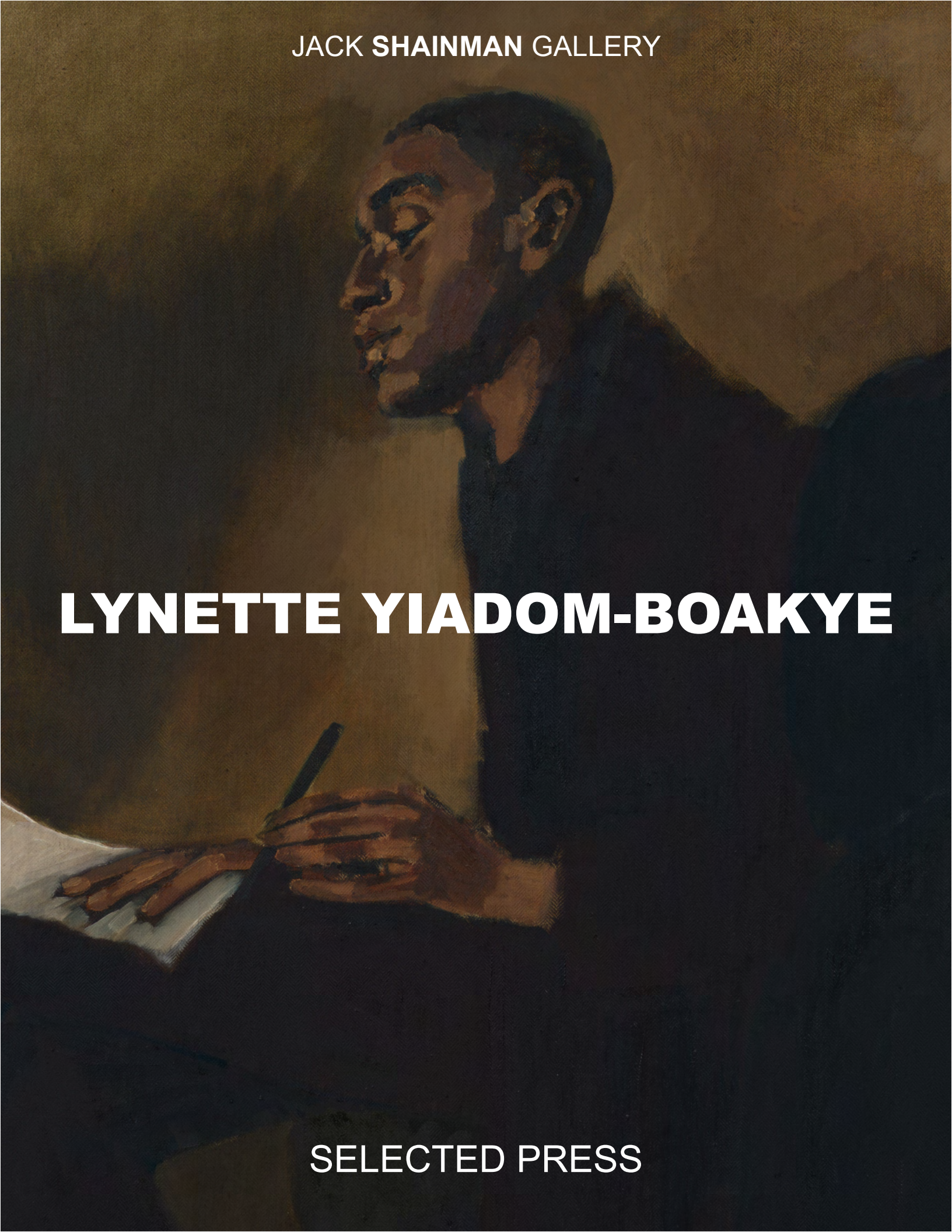
JACK **SHAINMAN** GALLERY



LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

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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 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 *ommentary* 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 riter 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.

" age or 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, " igil or orseman" (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

" *ver 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 aster*? 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."

“ ercy Over atter” (2017). The paintings say little, e plicitly, ut 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.

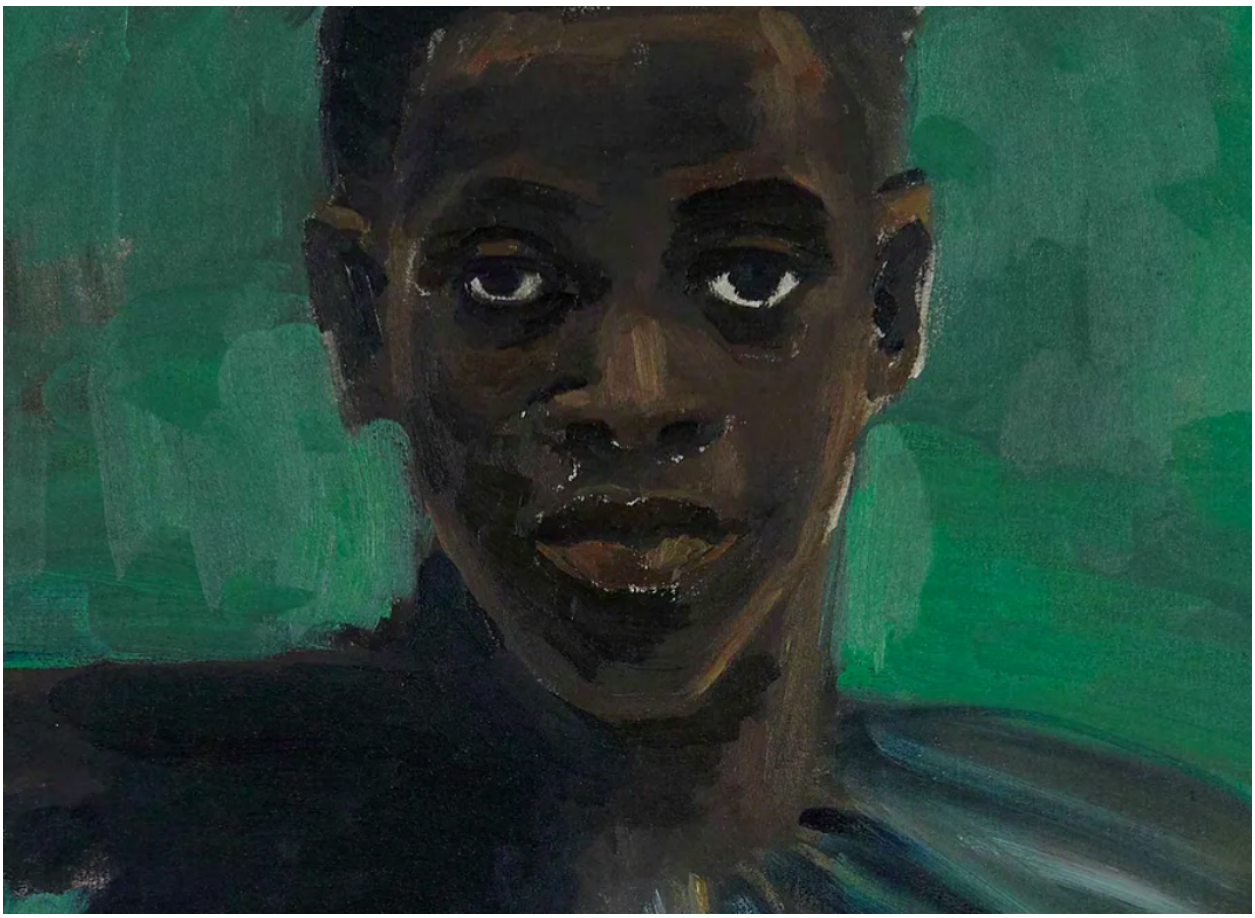
"Under-Song For A Cipher." If it were a novel's title, we would submit it to textual analysis. *ndersong* 1. A subordinate or subdued song or strain, esp. one serving as an accompaniment or burden to another. 2. An underlying meaning; an undertone. *ipher* 1. A person who fills a place, but is of no 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 une 1 , 2017, issue, ith the headline " Bird of e Words."

BBC

ART | IDENTITIES

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits that question history



By Kelly Grovier 17th January 2023

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's mysterious paintings of people who never existed are "outside of history and beyond geography", writes Kelly Grovier, as a major new exhibition of her work opens in London.

Some portraits offer snapshots of their era – faces frozen in time and place, petrified in their perishability. A rare few feel torn from eternity. Rembrandt could do it. Set against smouldering gloom, his serial selfies seem less a ledger of his slipping flesh than a glimpse into another realm – an elsewhere unlocked by the insertion of disjointed details that detach his countenance from its transitory nowness: a flouncy frock from a bygone century; an anachronistic hat; a plume plucked from antiquity.

Endangered but not extinct, that visionary flair has survived to our own age in the canvases of British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose arresting portraits, if portraits they might be called, are the subject of a major mid-career survey at Tate Britain enticingly entitled **Fly in League with the Night** (an exhibition whose initial run in December 2020 was cut short because of the pandemic). One might be surprised to discover that the 17th-Century Dutch Golden Age master is birds of a feather with a 21st-Century black female artist of Ghanaian descent. But the soul selects its own society, and genius has its own genealogy. Consider, for instance, Yiadom-Boakye's painting A Passion Like No Other, a misty mirage of a mysterious young man – half in shadow, half in deeper shadow – that the London-born artist created in 2012, the year before she was shortlisted for the prestigious Turner Prize.

A Passion Like No Other (2012) (Credit: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye/Photo: Marcus Leith)

Clad in inky black clothes, with a flamboyant, feathery ruff radiating iridescently from his neck, the transfixing figure is silhouetted by a green gloam that shudders behind him. Soulmate of Rembrandt's smoky simulacra, he seems to have flown to us, not from another time or place, but from no time and no place. His is a vaporous otherwhere that looms outside of history and beyond geography. And yet the weight of his interloping presence in the here-and-now – the heft of his obsidian eyes – is irrefutable and anchors the suspended moment, as if our very existence depends on his. Either we are dreaming him or he is dreaming us.

Blink and they might disappear, dissolve into darkness – fly in league with the night

A Passion Like No Other is emblematic of Yiadom-Boakye's enigmatic magic – of her ability to conjure on canvas an uncanniness of spirit – a "presence that disturbs", to invoke a phrase from the Romantic poet William Wordsworth – whose depth of character is as indisputable as its depiction is evanescent. What makes Yiadom-Boakye's subjects so emphatically affecting is that their attachment to the world they inhabit, not unlike our attachment to ours, is tenebrously tenuous. Blink and they might disappear, dissolve into darkness – fly in league with the night.

In fact, they were never here in the first place. However alluring we may find the aura of the personas presented in paintings such as The Cream and The Taste (2013) or Citrine By The Ounce (2014), luminous meditations on meditation, they have no actual correspondence to real people who live or have ever lived in our world. A supreme fiction wrought in the foundry of the artist's mind, they are mere pigments of the artist's imagination.

The Cream and The Taste (2013) (Credit: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye/ Courtesy: Duro Olowu)

"Lynette creates the characters that populate her paintings like a writer builds a character in a novel," Tate's director of exhibitions, Andrea Schlieker, tells BBC Culture. "They're invented characters. And she gives them a space in her paintings that is quite unusual in that it is so timeless. She avoids anything in the clothing, in accessories, in the interiors or exteriors they inhabit, that relates or that could associate the particular portrait with a particular period. So I think that the timelessness that she very, very deliberately creates aids the exploration of the inner life. Everything is really guided for the viewer to this exploration of the inner life. The states of the soul, the sort of deep humanity that is expressed by each of these figures, which seem so real. It is hard, I think, for viewers to believe that they are all invented."

A painter of the invisible

Born in London in 1977 to parents who had emigrated in the 1960s from Ghana, not long after the former British colony had gained its independence in 1957, Yiadom-Boakye has spent the past two decades mapping the inner lives of her poetic constructs. Consisting of some 70 oil paintings and charcoal drawings created by the artist since 2003, when she graduated with an MA from the Royal Academy Schools, the exhibition invites visitors into an imaginary world that is at once profoundly familiar and unsettlingly strange. We recognise the mute language of furtive glances and latent gestures with which the characters in her narratives communicate with each other – in works such as Pale for the Rapture (2016), a diptych of deep introversion – from our own secret lexicon of unspoken expressions that we thought no one had ever noticed.

Citrine by The Ounce (2014) (Credit: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

But Yiadom-Boakye notices everything. "She constructs her characters from scrapbooks that she has accumulated over the years," explains Schlieker. "These visual ledgers of obsessive observation, we're told, are filled with photographs of friends and family but also postcards of famous paintings she admires, or something ripped out of a magazine – a glance, a light, a gesture. All of this is fed into the creation of these extraordinary characters, this extraordinary mystery."

It is tempting to infer from Schlieker's evocative description – "a glance, a light, a gesture" – that the imagination of the artist is most attentively attuned to the French Impressionists' fascination with the fleeting. In truth, the teasing texture of her riddling narratives aligns them more closely with the indecipherable shadows of Walter Sickert, say, or John Singer Sargent – sources the artist herself has cited. Light and colour in Yiadom-Boakye's work is rarely the subject itself, and more often an inscrutable dimension of her subject's consciousness. "She constructs these narratives that are for us to unravel and they are all so mysterious," says Schlieker. "At first glance, you look at the painting and you think 'oh yeah, I recognise this; it's a portrait of somebody unknown to me'. But the more you look at it, the more mysterious it becomes, especially with the very few carefully inserted details."

Yes, the details. Though Yiadom-Boakye's paintings may seem ruthlessly stripped of ephemeral particularities, whittled to a poignancy and a rawness of intimate vibe, frequently she interrupts the sprawling spareness with an intriguing prop, on loan from elsewhere, that complicates our reading. That frilly ruff, for instance, in A Passion Like No Other – a carnivalesque flourish that calls to mind an outmoded accessory of the 16th Century or the comedic costume of a pantomime Pierrot.

Once spotted, these curious accoutrements are everywhere, and often take the animated shape of displaced animals: a guffawing fox at the foot of the smiling figure in Black Allegiance to the Cunning (2018), the lemony passerine that perches on the finger of a bespectacled man in All Manner of Comforts (2016), or the piqued owl contemplating prey in The Matters (2016). "She unsettles the viewer," observes Schlieker, "in a very gentle and interesting way. And you realise that you're looking at puzzles and mysterious constructions that you have to unravel yourself. It's not as easy as it might look at first glance."

Enriching our effort to crack the code of her retinal riddles is Yiadom-Boakye's profound knowledge of the past masters that her canvases quote. Much has been made of how the crimson robe of Singer-Sargent's Dr Pozzi at Home (1881) is conflated with the spectral scarlet of the coat that vibrates from Sickert's 1892 portrait of Minnie Cunningham to establish a vibrant bloodline that pulses in the gaping gown of Yiadom-Boakye's seminal painting First (2003) – the earliest work in the exhibition – only to recur in later works such as A Number of Preoccupations (2010).

To Improvise a Mountain (2018) (Credit: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye/Photo: Marcus Leith)

More subtle, perhaps, is the reinvention of the chessboard tiles on which Vermeer has staged his archetypal tableaux, The Music Lesson (1662-65) and The Art of Painting (1666-68). In Yiadom-Boakye's hands, the geometry relaxes into something less rigidly choreographed; something more real. In her recent painting To Improvise a Mountain (2018), for instance, which repurposes the orthogonal tiles from Vermeer's works, an ambiguous drama glimpsed in the clenched fist of the recumbent figure transforms the scene as the urgency of passion supersedes cerebral allegory.

Amid all this intense teasing, I can't help wondering if what is really being unravelled and put back together again in Yiadom-Boakye's work is the history of art itself. It is no secret that portraiture in Western art is a facebook of white power and male privilege. For centuries, the genre knew itself as a luxury of Empire. In many ways, Yiadom-Boakye's heads turn the conventions on theirs. The dearth of black likenesses in European visual culture has given the artist a yawning void to fill, and a blank slate.

Would Yiadom-Boakye, who participated in the acclaimed Ghana Freedom pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2019, ever characterise herself as playing such a role? "Lynette doesn't really like to comment too much on this," says Schlieker, "but she has talked about what she calls 'the infinite possibility of blackness' and of black life, and how she wants to move beyond stereotypes and expectations to a different reality." Still just in her forties, she already has. What more can anyone ask from art than that?

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly in League with the Night *is at Tate Britain until 26 February 2023.*

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Many Infinities: The Vital Canvases of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Poppy Richler , March 4th, 2023 10:16

To get a handle on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, turn off the audio guide and turn up the music, finds Poppy Richler

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Condor and the Mole (2011), Arts Council Collection [London, UK] © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

A stranger sits across from you cross-legged, leaning in to hear you speak, a smile on his face, his eyelids half-closed to signal he's relaxed in your presence. You're not just intrigued by him: he seems interested in you too. This is the first figure that we are greeted with upon entering Fly In League With The Night, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's seminal exhibition at the Tate Britain. *Black Allegiance To The Cunning* (2018) sets up the connection between viewer and painted subject that runs through the seventy-painting retrospective of the artist's career so far. Be prepared for a handful of conversations you desperately want to be involved in, backstories you want to dive into. Who are these people? What year is it and where are we? Such questions are futile; these figures come from Yiadom-Boakye's mind – they do not exist in the real world, and thus call upon viewers to use their imagination to realise them as such.

Yiadom-Boakye's studies at both the Falmouth School of Art and the Royal Academy of Arts gave her a background in classical forms of portraiture. The figures she's created in her imagination are borne out of a variety of different movements, postures, photographs and memories. Look at *Six Birds In The Bush* (2015): the sitter faces us, his shoulders turned away, a plumed hat on his head. This perspective resembles dignified sitters throughout the ages: Godfried Schalcken's portrait of Rachel Ruysch (c. 1690-1700) or Rembrandt's *Old Man With a Gold Chain* (1631). Though this head may reference sixteenth-century Dutch Golden Age personae, each canvas remains remarkably timeless. Note the lack of shoes running through the exhibition. Many of the sitters are either cut off at the waist, barefoot, or at most in socks. The four dancers huddling in *A Transformation* (2022) may be performing today or seventy years ago. Similarly, the enviously trendy woman in *No Objection To Noises* (2019) dons a pair of thin sunglasses, bohemian clothing and a silver crucifix: she may have just walked out of a charity shop, or actually owned these clothes herself in the 90s. Combined with the nondescript, plainly coloured backdrops, we have no choice but to create backstories for the people standing across from us at eye level.

However, not all the figures share the same demeanour as *Black Allegiance To The Cunning*. Many hold an air of mystery – the ballet dancers in *A Transformation* are deep in conversation with one another, the front figure even turns his head and looks us in the eye, asking why we're eavesdropping. Is that better or worse than the woman in *No Objection To Noises* who faces away from us with total disinterest? At least the gesticulating speaker in *An Education* (2010) holds his arms open to welcome us into the speech gripping his fellow suited colleagues. Or are they friends? Family? The decision is ours – a prospect that captivates some, terrifies others. Perhaps the paintings' potential to perplex is the key to the entrance figure's smile – we will never know.

Yiadom-Boakye has a skill in relaying emotion. The figures' psychological impact on us is profound – we treat and respond to each character as if they aren't two-dimensional. We are ushered into a theatre of dancers and actors – some literal, others encapsulating the elegance of Degas' young ballerinas. However, what makes you so sure this performance is for us? It is for the figures in the paintings who live a life separate to ours.

Importantly, the exhibition is not chronological. Yiadom-Boakye creates conversations between paintings – she wanted to "think about a dialogue between the works, much the way [she does] when they're in the studio, and also to consider the sequence or rhythm as you move through the galleries." This rhythm and movement underline the theatricality that sits at the heart of the exhibition. The far-right figure practices his choreography in *Transformation*, whilst the performer in *Dangle the Keys to a Kingdom* (2022) holds his ankle to his contorted back with his right hand, while his left vogues. Even when musicality isn't overtly present, it hangs in the air.

> "I always think of my painting influences as really going hand in hand with musical influences. That has to do with what I listened to in my formative years – that's why Prince always comes up. But then, when I started to listen to jazz, it marked my thinking about rhythm. Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Bill Evans. Passages in sound that move unexpectedly. Or the tones in the voice of Nick Drake."

The Tate has handily created a playlist for the exhibition, comprising sixty-six songs that inspire the artist in her studio. This should be emphasised more than it currently is, especially before visitors enter the exhibition. Throw away your audio guide and plug in your headphones. Let Miles Davis' dense jazz fusion rhythms from *Live – Evil* (1971) soundtrack the performance about to take place in *No Need Of Speech* (2018). Recline on the beach next to the man in *6pm Cadiz* (2012) and listen to *Sketches of Spain* (1960) play out of your phone. Or maybe outstretch your arms and groove along with the figure in *The Ventricular* (2018), whose red shirt and ruby velvet sofa only add to the lush and undeniably sexy *Voodoo* by D'Angelo (2000). See how freeing it is to not be burdened by art speak!

Yiadom-Boakye's colour schemes are flooded with shadows and dramatic lighting harking back to Caravaggio's chiaroscuro. By spotlighting specific elements of the painting, the artist inadvertently asks the viewer to reflect on why they've done this. In *Wrist Action* (2010), the sitter turns their head towards us with a seemingly sinister grin. It could be friendly, but there is something about their bright-pink gloved right hand

that is unsettling. Have they been caught red (or pink) handed? These colour choices establish a visual hierarchy, and draw attention to props which should be focused on, for some reason or other…

Though imagination is encouraged, Yiadom-Boakye's curatorial spirit subtly guides our mind. She has hung all the paintings herself – each has been put into conversation with each other based on the artist's preference. The final painting is the one she considers most special. *The Stygian Silk* (2020) "encapsulates all the feelings" of the exhibition and represents her experiments in exploring colour on linen as opposed to canvas: the former used for its "much coarser and unbending depth" as opposed to the smooth ease of drawing a brush across a canvas. This painting embraces a finality – the sitter is surrounded by jet black hounds and leans on the table behind him, bidding farewell. This painting represents just one element of the artist's presence. We also know that she attended Falmouth School of Art. Returning to *6pm Cadiz*, it seems likely that living by the English Channel aided her creation of coastal landscapes.

> "My way of thinking is informed by who, where I was raised … it's a life lived."

This quote from the artist is vital in understanding why all the figures in this exhibition are Black. To ignore this fact, especially in the whitewashed context of the Tate Britain, would be naïve. However, there is a fine line between acknowledging this and reading too much into the racial identity of each character.

> "Blackness has never been other to me. Therefore, I've never felt the need to explain its presence in the work anymore than I've felt the need to explain my presence in the world, however often I'm asked … it isn't so much about placing Black people in the canon as it is about saying that we've always been here, we've always existed."

Yiadom-Boakye is British-Ghanian and has noted that this cultural heritage has undoubtedly influenced her life-experience. Each figures' abstract identity celebrates the "infinite possibilities of blackness" as expressed by the artist herself.

Fly In League With The Night harnesses many infinities. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is the creator *and* curator. But she allows us our own imagination. With the arrival of each viewer, a different story is born. The image captions would serve better use as placards for the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, and the figures themselves are so real in our minds that it's almost bittersweet when we leave. This exhibition is so important in pushing

curatorial practice forwards, especially at the Tate Britain – an institution that hangs so many traces of colonialism on its walls. But Lynette Yiadom-Boakye does not dismiss these traditional modes of art – she embraces them, and in doing so demonstrates the endless potential of creative practice to create a more inclusive art world.

> "Following my own nose and doing as I damned well pleased always seemed to me to be the most radical thing I could do."

The Shape of Poetry

La forma de la poesía

Lekha Hileman Waitoller

Painting and poetry share the transformative capacity to describe what is absent, nameless, and faceless. One through the transmutation of pigment into the pictorial realm; the other through stanzas to be read from a page or recited aloud. The harmony, rhythm, balance, and composition which are inherent to each discipline can evoke a new way of experiencing the familiar, giving name to that which is felt but does not exist in the physical sense. The feminist scholar, poet, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde referred to poetry not as literary verse but as a revelation or distillation of experiences so private and guarded that they go unrecognised. Poetry as an expression of creativity and power, of the unexamined emotion and feeling which we hold inside, that resonates and echoes, enriching our lived experience. “For it is through poetry,” wrote Lorde, “that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.” Poetry, she concluded, is a necessity rather than a luxury.[1]

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings conjure this notion of distilled experience. Expressions of memories, feelings, and the intangible made visible. Her oeuvre is a collection of paintings of people depicted in ordinary moments doing unremarkable things with accompanying suggesting titles. The artist paints from her imagination, not from life models, subverting the genre of figurative painting and forming a striking body of work. The figures are composites drawn from different sources, including scrapbooks, drawings, and memories. Rebecca Solnit wrote, “To tell a story is always to translate the raw material into a specific shape. To select out of the boundless potential facts, those that seem salient.”[2] How does the painter go about creating an image of an imagined world and the figures which inhabit it? Imbuing the picture with the notion of a narrative, yet distilling the information so that only the most necessary details are present. Without the burden of faithfully representing specific people, the artist can freely immerse herself in painting, exploring colour, composition, and, importantly, the emotional content which determines the picture. “Thinking through feeling is how they’re composed,” the artist said.[3]

Two Or Three Suggestions (p. 77) presents us with a peculiar scene of two men and a black bird—a crow or a raven. The central figure, a muscular, shirtless man reclines on a purple couch and appears to be in a state of mental anguish. He holds his hand over his face, blocking our view of his left eye—perhaps he is weeping, or about to massage his aching head. To his left, another man leans over the couch to speak to him. The proximity of the two figures reveals a familiarity which allows for physical closeness in this difficult moment. The leaning man’s lips are slightly upturned; his expression appears vaguely sinister. Is he reassuring his friend, or relishing in the moment? On the opposite shoulder of the central figure sits the bird, whose beak is opened and directed towards the man’s ear. The bird is also speaking to the suffering man.

This picture is emblematic of one of the stylistic trends that run through Yiadom-Boakye’s oeuvre, which includes animals, the strongest link to the artist’s literary practice; her writings tend towards the allegorical, at times recalling magical realism. Animals—usually wild, though sometimes domesticated—make frequent cameos in the paintings, accompanying male characters. Their presence thwarts a reading of the paintings which seeks to place the figures at a specific time or place. The realness of the pictures can cause us to slip into the notion that we are looking at portraits of real people. Yet, the incongruous animals are a stark reminder that the paintings split the stylistic difference between realism and abstraction.

What then of the talking black bird in *Two Or Three Suggestions*? The composition recalls allegorical paintings in which a central

1. Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Penguin Random House, London, 2018, p. 1.
2. Rebecca Sonit, *The Faraway Nearby*, Penguin Group, New York, 2013, p. 209.
3. Andrea Schlieker, “Quiet Fires: The Paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye,” in *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly In League With The Night*, Tate Publishing, London, 2020, p. 14.

La pintura y la poesía comparten la capacidad transformadora de describir lo ausente, lo que no tiene nombre ni rostro. La primera, a través de la transmutación del pigmento en ámbito de lo pictórico; la segunda, por medio de versos que se leen en una página o son recitados. La armonía y el ritmo, el equilibrio y la composición inherentes a cada disciplina, son capaces de sugerir un modo nuevo de experimentar lo familiar, otorgando un nombre a aquello que se puede sentir aunque no exista de manera física. La académica feminista, poeta y activista de los derechos civiles Audre Lorde consideraba la poesía no como un género literario, sino como una revelación o síntesis de experiencias tan íntimas y resguardadas que pasan desapercibidas; como expresión de la creatividad y el poder, de la emoción y el sentimiento incuestionables que llevamos en nuestro interior, que resuenan y reverberan, enriqueciendo nuestras vivencias. Porque es a través de la poesía, escribió Lorde, “como damos nombre a esas ideas que, hasta que devienen poema, no tienen nombre ni forma; están por nacer, aunque ya se perciben”. La poesía, concluía, es más una necesidad que un lujo[1].

Los cuadros de Lynette Yiadom-Boakye encarnan esa idea de experiencia condensada. Son expresiones de recuerdos, de sentimientos; lo intangible hecho visible. Su obra es una colección de pinturas que llevan sugerentes títulos y muestran a personas en momentos cotidianos haciendo cosas ordinarias. La artista pinta a partir de su imaginación, sin acudir a modelos reales, subvirtiendo así el género de la pintura figurativa y conformando un corpus sorprendente. Las figuras han sido compuestas a partir de diferentes fuentes, como álbumes de recortes, dibujos y recuerdos. Rebecca Solnit escribió que “contar una historia es siempre traducir la materia prima a una forma específica. Escoger de entre los hechos potenciales ilimitados aquellos que parezcan sobresalientes”[2]. ¿Cómo logra la pintora crear una imagen de un mundo soñado y de las figuras que lo habitan? Impregnándola con la noción de una narrativa, pero destilando la información de modo que solo estén presentes los detalles más necesarios. Sin la obligación de representar con fidelidad a personas específicas, la artista puede sumergirse libremente en la pintura y explorar el color, la composición y, lo más importante, el contenido emocional que define la obra: “Pensando a través del sentimiento es como se componen [mis obras]”, ha dicho Yiadom-Boakye[3].

***Dos o tres sugerencias* (*Two Or Three Suggestions*, pág. 77) nos presenta una escena peculiar con dos hombres y un ave negra: una corneja o un cuervo. La figura central, un hombre musculoso y sin camisa, se reclina sobre un sofá morado y parece hallarse en un estado de angustia. Se lleva la mano a la cara, impidiendo que veamos su ojo izquierdo; tal vez esté llorando o se disponga a masajearse la dolorida cabeza. A su izquierda, otro hombre se inclina sobre el sofá para hablarle. La proximidad entre las dos figuras revela una familiaridad que les permite la cercanía física en ese difícil momento. Al hombre inclinado se le curvan los labios ligeramente hacia arriba y su expresión resulta vagamente siniestra. ¿Está tranquilizando a su amigo o disfrutando del momento? Sobre el hombro opuesto de la figura central se posa el pájaro, cuyo pico abierto apunta hacia la oreja masculina. El ave también habla al hombre que sufre.**

Este lienzo es representativo de una de las tendencias estilísticas que atraviesan el trabajo de Yiadom-Boakye, que está definida por la inclusión de animales y constituye el nexo más importante con su práctica literaria; sus escritos tienden a lo alegórico y en ocasiones recuerdan al realismo mágico. Los animales, generalmente salvajes, aunque también a veces domésticos, hacen frecuentes apariciones en las pinturas, acompañando a los personajes masculinos. Su presencia impide una lectura de las obras que permita ubicar a las figuras en un

1. **Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”, en *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Penguin Random House, Londres, 2018, pág. 1.**
2. **Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby,* Penguin Group, Nueva York, 2013, pág. 209.**
3. **Andrea Schlieker, “Quiet Fires: The Paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye”, en *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly In League With The Night*, Tate Publishing, Londres, 2020, pág. 14.**

character undergoes psychological turmoil, perhaps wrestling with a difficult decision. In Native American mythology and folktales, as well as those with Christian roots, the raven is considered an illomen and a diabolical character whose presence could connote some nefarious intention or unfavourable outcome. Conversely, crows, ravens, and other birds in the corvid family are known to be highly intelligent problem solvers. It is said that a crow can remember a human face for years. The painting and its title, untethered to a single narrative, are left open to the different readings the spectators will construct through their own cultural and historical lenses. Much of the artwork exhibited in museums is ascribed with meaning through titles, texts, and other didactic resources. These pictures, on the other hand, are positioned differently, allowing multivalent encounters with the work. Yiadom-Boakye has said that the logic of her thinking is poetry. That the art making has more to do with the making of poetry, one which need not be explained but rather felt: "Truth alongside the imagined."[4]

The success of storytelling in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings lies in the union of the written word and the visual image. As seen in *Two Or Three Suggestions*, her titles are not descriptions of the paintings; rather, the two languages—pictorial and written—form a single, complex artwork. The titles, which would normally serve as guides to the works, refrain from explaining the paintings. Some compel the viewer to look more slowly, providing a poetic thread which propels us on a mental voyage. For instance, the painting of two women contentedly sipping glasses of wine called *Ecstatic Streams* (p. 44); a man in profile resting in a chair, his back against one arm and legs draped over the other in *Divine Repose* (p. 67); or the two men reclining in an unmade bed, one shirtless and smoking, the other propped up on one arm, his rumpled shirt closed by one button, called *Mumble It Twice* (p. 63). These evocative titles, while poetic and somewhat oblique, propel us into imaging unseen narratives. Other picture/title relationships are perplexing, raising barriers to interpretation. In *Barnacle Goose* (p. 51), a man dressed in dark clothing and a dramatic feathered collar leans on one arm as he gazes at the viewer. Another painting of a man with his back to a plate of two fish, caught but not yet filleted or cooked, with two others strung up and hanging behind him, is called *Under The Lungs And Over The Loins* (p. 80). The image/text duality furthers the notion that a narrative is embedded in the artwork, yet does so without delivering answers to the questions raised by the image. Poorly done, this could have a frustrating effect on the viewer. Yiadom-Boakye, however, offers just enough information to encourage the captivating exercise of elaborating on unresolved questions.

One of the distinctive visual markers of Yiadom-Boakye's paintings is the warm palette which dominates the works. Individual pictures incorporate other hues—azure, crimson, indigo, and even chartreuse—providing tonal punctuations that create contrast, volume, and texture, imbuing the paintings with emotion. Even with these notable inclusions, the paintings overwhelmingly encompass a range of earth tones—umber, sienna, yellow and orange ochres, deep greens, and sepia. My first memories of the artist's work are of the warmth they evoke through their predominantly earthy palette. The paintings in that exhibition were hung characteristically low for Yiadom-Boakye's work, inviting a relationship between spectator and art, as some of the painted figures stood at human height to meet the viewer's gaze. The physical relationship to the paintings heightened my feelings of intrigue as I surveyed the figures who fraternised, played, or stared intently at something just beyond me from the solitude of their private worlds. The nuanced, but primarily brown, palette is evidently where the soul of the paintings lies. Colour as a form of poetry and as political address.

4. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in conversation with Thelma Golden, Tate Talks. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHbTD9DYrqk. Accessed on October 25, 2022.

tiempo o lugar específicos. La autenticidad de estas pinturas puede transmitirnos la impresión de que estamos observando retratos de personas reales. Sin embargo, la incongruencia de estos animales es un riguroso recordatorio de que estas obras quebrantan la diferencia estilística entre realismo y abstracción.

¿Qué se puede decir entonces acerca del pájaro negro que habla en *Dos o tres sugerencias*? La composición lleva a pensar en las pinturas alegóricas en las que un personaje central pasa por un estado de alteración psicológica, al lidiar tal vez con una decisión difícil. En la mitología y en los cuentos tradicionales de los nativos norteamericanos, así como en aquellos de raíces cristianas, el cuervo se considera un símbolo de mal agüero y un personaje diabólico cuya presencia podría connotar alguna intención nefasta o un desenlace desfavorable. No obstante, es sabido que los grajos, los cuervos y otras aves de la familia de los córvidos están dotados de gran inteligencia para resolver problemas. Se dice que un cuervo es capaz de recordar un rostro humano durante años. El cuadro y su título, liberados de una única narrativa, se abren a las diferentes lecturas que podemos construir a través de nuestra propia perspectiva cultural e histórica. A gran parte de las obras de arte expuestas en los museos se les otorga significado a través de títulos, textos y otros recursos didácticos. En cambio, estos cuadros se presentan de manera diferente, permitiendo aproximaciones multidimensionales hacia la obra. Yiadom-Boakye ha dicho que la lógica de su pensamiento es la poesía, y que hacer arte tiene más que ver con escribir poesía, pues esta no necesita ser explicada, sino sentida: "La verdad junto a lo imaginado"[4].

El éxito de la narración en las pinturas de Yiadom-Boakye radica en la unión de la palabra escrita y la imagen visual. Tal como se aprecia en *Dos o tres sugerencias*, sus títulos no son descripciones de los cuadros, sino que los dos lenguajes –pictórico y escrito– conforman una obra de arte única y compleja. Los títulos, que normalmente servirían como guía de las obras, se abstienen de explicar las pinturas. Algunos nos incitan a observar más detenidamente, añadiendo una dimensión poética que nos impulsa a hacer un viaje mental. Por ejemplo, en el caso del cuadro de dos mujeres bebiendo animadamente una copa de vino, titulado *Corrientes del éxtasis* (*Ecstatic Streams*, pág. 44); en el del hombre de perfil que descansa en una butaca, con la espalda apoyada en un brazo y las piernas sobre el otro, *Divino reposo* (*Divine Repose*, pág. 67); o en el que muestra a dos hombres recostados en una cama deshecha —uno descamisado y fumando, el otro apoyado sobre el brazo, con una camisa arrugada que tiene un solo botón abrochado—, llamado *Piénsalo dos veces* (*Mumble It Twice*, pág. 63). Estos títulos evocadores, a la vez poéticos y algo sesgados, nos impulsan a imaginar narrativas inéditas. La relación entre obra y título en otros casos es desconcertante y dificulta la interpretación. En *Barnacla cariblanca* (*Barnacle Goose*, pág. 51) aparece un hombre ataviado con ropa oscura y un espectacular collar de plumas, apoyado sobre un brazo, con la mirada dirigida al espectador. En la obra *Bajo los pulmones y sobre el vientre* (*Under The Lungs And Over The Loins*, pág. 80), un hombre figura de espaldas a un plato con dos pescados, aún sin filetear ni cocinar, mientras que otros dos están ensartados y colgados detrás de él. La dualidad entre imagen y texto alimenta la idea de que existe una narrativa integrada en la obra de arte, si bien no ofrece respuestas a las preguntas que la imagen plantea. Se trata de algo que, mal planteado, podría resultar frustrante para quien contempla la obra; sin embargo, Yiadom-Boakye brinda información suficiente para alentarnos a hacer el fascinante ejercicio de profundizar en las cuestiones no resueltas.

Una de las características distintivas de las pinturas de Yiadom-Boakye es la cálida paleta que las domina. Ciertas obras incorporan otros colores

4. **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye en conversación con Thelma Golden, Tate Talks. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHbTD9DYrqk. Fecha de acceso: 25 de octubre, 2022.**

fig. 1 **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**
***King For An Hour* | *Rey por una hora*, 2011**

Oil on canvas | Óleo sobre lienzo
230 × 200 cm | 90.5 × 78.7 inches
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York | Cortesía de la artista, Corvi-Mora, Londres, y Jack Shainman Gallery, Nueva York

fig. 2 **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**
***Barnacle Goose* | *Barnacla cariblanca*, 2021**

Oil on linen | Óleo sobre lino
90 × 70 × 3,6 cm | 35.4 × 27.5 × 1.4 inches
Courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York | Cortesía de la artista, Corvi-Mora, Londres, y Jack Shainman Gallery, Nueva York

Colour serves an important structural role in the canvases as a spare physical backdrop for the figures, again recalling Solnit's description of the process of shaping a story by creating its contours through the most salient information. The backgrounds of the early paintings tend towards featureless brushy fields, often monochromatic and free of ornamentation; their purpose is to create a calculated emphasis on the subjects. In more recent paintings, the figures are also placed in other contexts, such as natural landscapes and domestic interiors. The foregrounding of the subject often appears through a chromatic contrast, causing the figure to snap into focus. The opposite also occurs, as in *King For An Hour* (fig. 1), wherein the figure is set against a dark colour frustrating the task of deciphering the contours of the man from the background of the painting. In these tonally rich pictures, the figure's eyes take on agency, the shock of white standing in contrast to the overall darkness of the canvas. This approach to depicting people of colour is not only visually poignant but strategic with respect to the politics of representation with which these pictures engage. Okwui Enwezor wrote of Yiadom-Boakye's work that "rather than being purely about portraiture, her work is more about painting as a discourse in which visibility and invisibility are shaped".[5] The historic absence of people of colour in portraiture, or in painting of any genre, makes projects like Yiadom-Boakye's significant in its critique of this historical gap. The paintings are as much chromatic vehicles for a discourse on representation as they are studies on the nuances in which a range of dark skin tones can be depicted through paint.

As previously noted, the visual rhythm created by the dominant brown palette in Yiadom-Boakye's disciplined sallies is often broken by a contrasting colour. Intense blues abound, recalling the sky and water, the immaterial, the colour of distance. This symbolically laden colour evokes connections to both the physical and emotional realms, endowing the paintings with a deeply emotional layer. A colour that stands out in this

5. Okwui Enwezor, "The Subversion of Realism: Likeness, Resemblance and Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Post-Portrait Paintings", in Naomi Beckwith, Okwui Enwezor, and Thelma Golden, *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations,* Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2010, p. 27.

–azul, carmesí, índigo e incluso verde amarillento–, proporcionando matices tonales que crean contraste, volumen y textura, y tiñen los lienzos de emoción. Pero incluso con estas notables inclusiones, en la abrumadora mayoría de sus creaciones despliega una gama de tonos tierra: ocre, siena, amarillo y naranja, verdes oscuros y sepia. Mis primeros recuerdos de la obra de la artista remiten a la calidez que despierta por medio de su cromatismo predominantemente terroso. En aquella exposición, los cuadros estaban colgados a poca altura, algo representativo del trabajo de Yiadom-Boakye, que nos invita a establecer una interacción directa con la obra, pues algunas de las figuras se sitúan justo frente a los ojos de quien las contempla, buscando su mirada. La relación física con las pinturas incrementó mi sensación de intriga al observar cómo las figuras intimaban, jugaban o miraban fijamente algo situado más allá de mí desde la soledad de su mundo privado. Es en su paleta, fundamentalmente marrón pero llena de matices, donde reside el alma de estas pinturas: el color como forma de poesía y como discurso político.

El color cumple un importante papel estructural en los lienzos como telón de fondo físico de las figuras, llevándonos de nuevo a la descripción que hace Solnit del proceso mediante el que se da forma a una historia perfilándola a partir de la información más destacada. Los fondos de sus primeras pinturas suelen ser campos despojados que conservan las huellas de pinceladas, a menudo monocromáticos y sin rasgos decorativos; su propósito es poner deliberadamente el acento en los temas tratados. En pinturas más recientes, las figuras también se ubican en otros contextos, como paisajes naturales e interiores domésticos. A menudo, el contraste cromático permite realzar y enfocar la silueta de los personajes. También puede ocurrir lo contrario, como en *Rey por una hora* (*King For An Hour*, fig. 1), donde la figura se sitúa ante un color oscuro, frustrando cualquier intento de distinguir la silueta del hombre del fondo del cuadro. En estas pinturas de gran riqueza tonal, adquieren protagonismo los ojos de la figura; el blanco impresiona en contraste con la oscuridad general del lienzo. Esta aproximación a las personas de color no solo resulta plásticamente conmovedora, sino también estratégica en relación con la política de representación con la que se vinculan estas imágenes. Okwui Enwezor afirmó acerca de la obra de Yiadom-Boakye que "en lugar de centrarse estrictamente en el retrato, su trabajo versa más bien sobre la pintura, como un discurso en el que se moldean la visibilidad y la invisibilidad"[5]. La ausencia histórica de personas que no son blancas en los retratos, y en cualquier otro género de pintura, convierten proyectos como el de Yiadom-Boakye en significativos por su crítica a esta laguna histórica. Los cuadros son tanto vehículos cromáticos para un discurso sobre la representación como estudios sobre los matices con los que se puede pintar una gama de tonos de piel oscura.

Tal como he mencionado antes, el ritmo visual que crea la paleta marrón dominante en las disciplinadas creaciones de Yiadom-Boakye es interrumpido con frecuencia por un color en contraste. Abundan los azules intensos que aluden al cielo y al agua, a lo inmaterial, al color de la distancia. Este color cargado de simbolismo evoca conexiones tanto con el ámbito físico como con el psicológico, dotando a las obras de un estrato profundamente emocional. Un color que destaca en este nuevo corpus artístico es el púrpura. En las culturas occidentales, el púrpura posee una conexión histórica con la nobleza, el poder, el lujo y la transformación. Su uso destaca particularmente en *Una ciudad para un santo* (*A City For A Saint*, pág. 102), donde figura una imponente mujer de pie con una mano en la cadera y la otra en la solapa de una chaqueta de color púrpura oscuro. El contacto visual, rasgo distintivo de la obra de Yiadom-Boakye, contribuye poderosamente al aura de seguridad en sí mismos que poseen

5. **Okwui Enwezor, "The Subversion of Realism: Likeness, Resemblance and Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Post-Portrait Paintings", en Naomi Beckwith, Okwui Enwezor y Thelma Golden, *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations*, Studio Museum in Harlem, Nueva York, 2010, pág. 27.**

new body of work is purple. In Western cultures, purple has a historic connection with nobility, power, luxury, and transformation. Purple is particularly dominant in *A City For A Saint* (p. 102), a picture of a commanding woman standing with one hand on her hip, the other holding the lapel of a deep purple blazer. Eye contact, a hallmark in Yiadom-Boakye's oeuvre, lends powerfully to the aura of self-assurance embodied by many of her characters, as in this woman who gazes at the viewer with aplomb. The daring shade of purple is the chromatic equivalent to the woman's spirit of tenacity. *A City For A Saint* demonstrates the distillation of many decisions—colour choice, the barren background, pose, gesture, and title—which crystallise in what appears to be a crucial moment for this woman, the denouement of a narrative, inviting the viewer to imagine what is not shown. To consider this particular woman's story, bringing her to life in a way that portraiture denies.

Space, as a compositional element, has poetic resonance in Yiadom-Boakye's hands. Compositions are carefully arranged as in *A City For A Saint*, where the woman in purple is centred against a light, brushy background. The negative space around her, where the artist has chosen not to supply any information, creates balance while grounding the content and emphasising the woman's powerful pose. White space in poetry similarly serves as a respite for the eye while foregrounding text. The poet makes exacting word choices, selecting each one for its precise ability to deliver meaning (or to complicate it), its sound, or even its visual impact on the page. This work is maximised through a series of formal decisions, such as where to break a line, the shapes of the stanza, and the creation of words and silences. Text and sound communicate meaning, yes. And so does shape.

Yiadom-Boakye's mastery of the technical aspects of painting, including the use of space, comes together in the elusively titled *Barnacle Goose* (fig. 2, p. 51). Over a brushy sepia field, a man reclines on one elbow; his mood is sombre as he regards the viewer. Might he be challenging our voyeuristic gaze? His dark clothing is rendered loosely and without detail, but for a feathered collar—a curious anachronism which recurs in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, always on male figures and usually bearing titles of birds (e.g., *Aquatic Warbler*, *Goshawk*, *Greenfinch*). It was once thought that barnacle geese hatched out of goose barnacles attached to ships at sea, their shells washing up on Scottish coastlines in autumn. An animal with such a marvellous etymology adds another layer of richness to the picture. Barnacle geese have silvery grey wings and backs and distinctive black and white stripes; they are said to look as though they are shining when the light reflects on them.

The man's ruff summons art historical references of European portraiture, where such accessories—costly to have made and to maintain—would have been an indication of the sitter's status. Yet this ruff is simple, feathery, perhaps part of a costume rather than the man's Sunday best. It is reminiscent of Picasso's harlequins and acrobats from his circus paintings (1904–05). The melancholy *Family of Saltimbanques* (1905, fig. 3) comes to mind wherein characters normally associated with comedy are portrayed with a haunting sense of loneliness—they are at once together and alone. The mood and desolate background resonate with *Barnacle Goose*, and both present an ambivalent image upon which the spectator is invited to muse. The departure between the paintings is in the eye contact with the man in *Barnacle Goose*. This crucial detail ushers the viewer into a relationship with the man, a fantastical one which will not be governed by a fixed narrative, which will take different forms, and which will doubtless remain with the viewer. That single look is the catalyst that impels us to give name to the emotions and ideas that it stimulates within us. That is poetry in action. ●

fig. 3 **Pablo Picasso**
***Family of Saltimbanques* | *Familia de saltimbanquis*, 1905**

Oil on canvas | Óleo sobre lienzo
212,8 × 229,6 cm | 83¾ × 90⅜ inches
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection
1963.10.190

muchos de sus personajes, como esta mujer que mira al espectador con aplomo. El audaz tono púrpura es el equivalente cromático de la determinación de la mujer. *Una ciudad para un santo* ilustra bien cómo la síntesis de muchas decisiones —la elección del color, el austero fondo, la pose, el gesto y el título— cristaliza en lo que parece ser un momento crucial para esta mujer, el desenlace de una narrativa que invita a imaginar lo que no se muestra, a tener en cuenta la historia de esta mujer en particular, dándole vida de una manera que el arte del retrato ha negado.

El espacio como elemento compositivo posee resonancias poéticas cuando lo emplea Yiadom-Boakye. Las composiciones están cuidadosamente dispuestas, como ejemplifica *Una ciudad para un santo*, donde la mujer vestida de púrpura aparece en el centro, sobre un fondo claro que refleja el trazo pictórico. El espacio en negativo que la rodea, en el que la artista decide no incorporar información, crea un equilibrio al mismo tiempo que enmarca el contenido y enfatiza la pose enérgica de la mujer. El espacio en blanco en la poesía, de modo similar, sirve para que la mirada respire además de realzar el texto. Quien escribe poesía elige las palabras con exactitud, seleccionando cada una por su capacidad precisa para transmitir significado (o para complicarlo), por su sonido o incluso por su impacto visual en la página. Esta labor se explota al máximo través de una serie de decisiones formales, como aquellas relativas a dónde cortar cada línea, las formas de la estrofa y la creación de palabras y silencios. Sí, texto y sonido comunican significado. Y la forma también lo hace.

El dominio que posee Yiadom-Boakye de los aspectos técnicos de la pintura, incluido el uso del espacio, confluyen en la obra de esquivo título *Barnacla cariblanca*, fig. 2, pág. 51). Ante un fondo de marcadas pinceladas color sepia, un hombre se reclina sobre un codo y mira al espectador con gesto sombrío. ¿Quizá está desafiando nuestra mirada voyeurista? Su vestimenta oscura es holgada y carece de ornamentos, a excepción de un collar de plumas, curioso anacronismo recurrente en las pinturas de Yiadom-Boakye, que aparece siempre en figuras masculinas y por lo general en obras cuyos títulos contienen nombres de aves (carricerín cejudo, azor, verderón…). Alguna vez se creyó que las barnaclas cariblancas nacían de los percebes adheridos a los barcos en el mar[6], cuyos caparazones eran arrastrados a las costas escocesas en otoño. Un animal con una etimología tan maravillosa añade otra capa de riqueza a la imagen. Las barnaclas cariblancas tienen las alas y el lomo de color gris plateado y unas franjas blanquinegras características; se dice que brillan cuando la luz se refleja en ellas.

La gorguera del hombre evoca referencias históricas del arte del retrato europeo donde tales accesorios, costosos de fabricar y mantener, actuarían como símbolo del estatus del retratado. Sin embargo, esta gorguera es sencilla y lleva plumas; tal vez forma parte de un disfraz y no del mejor traje de domingo del hombre. Recuerda a los arlequines y acróbatas de las pinturas circenses de Picasso (1904–05). Nos trae a la mente la melancólica *Familia de saltimbanquis* (1905, fig. 3), en la que personajes normalmente asociados a la comedia son retratados de forma que destilan una inquietante sensación de soledad: están juntos y solos al mismo tiempo. El estado anímico y el fondo desolado son afines a *Barnacla cariblanca*. Las dos obras presentan una imagen ambivalente sobre la cual se invita al espectador a reflexionar. El punto de divergencia entre ambas se halla en el contacto visual que se establece con el hombre en *Barnacla cariblanca*. Este detalle crucial lleva a quien la contempla a entablar relación con él, una relación fantasiosa que no se regirá por una narrativa fijada, que tomará diferentes formas y que, sin duda, perdurará en la persona que observa. Esa simple mirada es el catalizador que nos impulsa a poner nombre a las emociones e ideas que despierta en nuestro interior. Eso es poesía en acción. ●

6. N. de la T. En inglés, la *barnacla cariblanca* se denomina *barnacle goose* y, a su vez, *barnacle* significa *percebe*.

To Be Hoist by Your Own Petard: Studying the Study of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

El tiro por la culata: estudiando el estudio de Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Kodwo Eshun

The Otolith Group
What the Owl Knows | *Lo que sabe el Búho*, 2022
Installation view | Vista de la instalación
Courtesy Secession, Vienna, and the artist
Cortesía de Secesión, Viena, y de la artista

El color me calentó, me emocionó, me irritó, me quemó, me tranquilizó, me nutrió y, al final, me agotó. Porque, aunque la vida de color sea una vida gloriosa, es una vida muy breve.

Virginia Woolf[1]

1.

Al ver por primera vez *Lo que sabe el Búho* (*What the Owl Knows*), uno se encuentra cara a cara con un vídeo digital que parece estar documentando a una pintora que trabaja en varios cuadros durante el verano de 2022, en lo que podría ser su estudio en algún lugar de Londres. Esta aparente obviedad —en un vídeo centrado en estudiar a una pintora mientras estudia su pintura, un estudio visual de los modos en que el trabajo de pintar es inseparable del de estudiar, en el que la pintura no es otra cosa que la práctica y la teoría del estudio— comienza gradualmente a perder su apariencia de obviedad. Lo que se evidencia es que, al prestar atención a las formas en que la pintora estudia cada aspecto de su trabajo —la expresión de los dedos que se ciernen, brevemente, sopesando, tomando o dejando caer pinceles de un montón apilado sobre el escritorio; los ángulos precisos en los que el pincel se acerca, desciende, apunta y toma contacto con la superficie de la pintura dentro de la pintura en el lienzo—, el vídeo está intentando distanciarse de la pretensión de trazar el progreso de la pintura hasta su acabado. El vídeo no solamente prescinde de proporcionar un arco narrativo que muestre las transformaciones de la pintura, sino que se concentra en la espalda de la pintora, una espalda que, cubierta con una camiseta de trabajo blanca, va retrocediendo lentamente hasta que el tejido sobrepasa la profundidad de campo y nos tapa la vista. En esos momentos en que la pintora se enfrenta a su cuadro, caminando hacia atrás a un paso calculado por su pensamiento, con su lienzo en perspectiva, lo que queda claro es hasta qué punto la pintora no pinta *para*, sino *a pesar de* la cámara. A medida que la pintora retrocede hacia la cámara se dan una proximidad y una presencia que sobrepasan la legibilidad del vídeo. La pintora ha evitado la exposición pública de su yo y su expresión; el acceso de la cámara a su rostro se ha visto frustrado. Quizá el vídeo invite a imaginar sus movimientos oculares sacádicos, a deducir su concentración por el esfuerzo que se aprecia en su cuello o en sus hombros. Por otra parte, su espalda lleva aparejado su propio medio de expresión; habla en su propio idioma dorsal; se dirige a nosotros. Si te concentras, llegas a escuchar su discurso en el comportamiento de la pintora. Llegas a escuchar su discurso a través de los modos en que la pintora se sitúa frente al lienzo.

Lo que quiere *Lo que sabe el Búho* en estas escenas es alinearse con la pintora en el esfuerzo por frustrar el deseo del público de contemplar su rostro, por interrumpir la expectativa de disponer del rostro de la pintora para gusto del espectador. No se trata tanto de sustraer del fotograma la vista del rostro; se trata más bien de hacer que la expectativa automática de disponibilidad sea intermitente, poco fiable, insoportable. Lo que busca *Lo que sabe el Búho* son todas esas formas en que podría anular las expectativas de divulgación propias del documental. Pretende frustrar la revelación de desvelamiento facial que promete el género documental, entendido en su sentido más amplio, cuando se encuentra con la artista, personificada en la figura de la pintora, en el escenario de lo que retrata como su estudio.

1. Virginia Woolf, *Oh, to Be a Painter!*, David Zwirner Books, Nueva York, 2021. Ed. esp: *Escritos sobre arte,* Olivia de Miguel (trad.), La Micro, 2022, pág. 76.

> Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed and finally exhausted me. For though the life of colour is a glorious life it is a short one.
>
> Virginia Woolf [1]

1.

On first viewing *What the Owl Knows*, you find yourself face to face with a digital video that appears to be documenting a painter at work on a number of paintings during the summer of 2022 in what might be her studio somewhere in London. What seems to be self-evident, in a video that spends its time studying a painter as she studies her painting, watching a visual study of the ways in which the work of painting is inseparable from the work of study, in which painting is nothing other than the practice and theory of study, begins gradually to lose its appearance of self-evidence. What becomes apparent is that in attending to the ways in which the painter studies each aspect of her work—the expression of fingers that hover, briefly, hefting, lifting, dropping brushes from a heap piled on the desk, the precise angles at which her brush approaches, descends, targets, and makes contact with the surface of painting within the painting within the canvas—the video is working to detach itself from the ambition to chart the progress of painting towards completion. Not only is the video not concerned with providing a narrative arc for what the painting is becoming, it is preoccupied with the back of the painter, a back clad in a white work vest that reverses slowly until its fabric overwhelms the depth of field and obscures your view. In those moments when the painter faces her painting, walking backwards with a measured pace of thought, keeping her canvas in perspective, what becomes clear is the extent to which the painter is not painting for, but in spite of, the camera. As the painter backs into the camera, there is a proximity and a presence that overwhelms the legibility of video. The painter has preserved her self, her expression, from exposure; the access of the camera to her face has been frustrated. Perhaps the video is inviting you to imagine her saccade, to deduce her concentration from the effort discernible in her neck or shoulders. Then again, her back carries its own means of expression; it speaks in its own dorsal language; it addresses you. If you concentrate, you can hear its speech in the comportment of the painter. You can listen to its speech in the ways in which she holds herself in the presence of the canvas.

What *What the Owl Knows* wants, in these scenes, is to join forces with the painter in an effort to thwart the desire of the spectator to contemplate the face of the painter. It would like to interrupt the expectation of the availability of the face of the painter for the pleasure of the spectator. It is not so much a matter of withdrawing the sight of the face from the frame; it is more a matter of rendering the automatic expectation of availability intermittent, unreliable, insupportable. What *What the Owl Knows* seeks are all the ways in which it might suspend documentary's expectations of disclosure. It aims at frustrating the revelation of facial disclosure promised by documentary, understood in its widest sense, when it encounters the artist, epitomised in the figure of the painter, in the setting of what it pictures as her studio. Whenever documentary encounters the painter *qua* painter in the studio, it offers spectators the prospect and the pleasure of insight into the interior of the artist where her artistic intention is presumed to reside. It is this yearning for access to the psyche of the artist, to her innermost motivation, that

1. Virginia Woolf, "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" in Claudia Tobin (ed.), *Oh, to Be a Painter!,* David Zwirner Books, New York, 2021, p. 68.

Cada vez que un documental se encuentra con la pintora *en cuanto que* pintora en el estudio, ofrece al público la perspectiva y el placer de penetrar en el interior de la artista, donde supuestamente reside su intención artística. Es este anhelo de acceder a la psique de la artista, a su motivación más íntima, lo que anima la fantasía epistémica del género documental. La fantasía de la revelación se intensifica cuando la pintora en acción es Lynette Yiadom-Boakye y los artistas audiovisuales son Anjalika Sagar y Kodwo Eshun, de The Otolith Group. La avidez divulgativa del documental cobra mayor expectación cuando se cierne sobre la figura pública de una artista de color, categoría que debe entenderse aquí en su sentido más amplio. Representa la figura pública de la artista negra, entendida de la manera más extensa posible, en términos que nunca dejan de ser hipervisibles, hiperliterales, hiperexplicables e hiperbólicos. Al desplazar la atención de la pintora como objetivo hacia la calidad de la atención que ella misma otorga a la pintura, *Lo que sabe el Búho* pretende desplazar la fantasía documental de querer saber hacia un estudio del estudio.

Prestar atención a las maneras en las que el vídeo presta atención a las maneras en que una pintora presta atención a lo que pinta es comenzar a comprender los modos en que Yiadom-Boakye piensa *en*, *con* y *a través de* la pintura. Es acercarse a la pintora como pensadora cuya práctica proclama sus teorías acerca de lo que la pintura, en sus detalles, implicaciones y repercusiones, podría, puede y debería ser. Lo que surge es una especie de coreografía en la que el pensamiento de la cámara y el pensamiento de la grabadora de sonido desplegados por The Otolith Group dialogan con el pensamiento en marcha y el pensamiento en pausa de lo que Yiadom-Boakye piensa sobre su pintura. Desplazar la atención del vídeo desde el objetivo de la accesibilidad hacia la textura de la atención que la pintora confiere a su pintura es empujar al público a imaginar la escala que opera en la obra pictórica de Yiadom-Boakye. A lo que aspira y apunta *Lo que sabe el Búho* es a la magnificación sensorial del pasaje temporal entre movimiento y movimiento, a la intensificación fenomenológica de la teoría llevada a la práctica y mantenida en las transiciones entre pose, pausa y postura; entre mirada fija, actitud y oscilaciones oculares. Lo que el vídeo ofrece a nuestro pensamiento es el pensamiento de la pintora expresado en los trazos específicos que hace, contemplado desde ángulos concretos y expuesto a través de perspectivas específicas.

Lo que sabe el Búho no impone esos ángulos sobre el trabajo pictórico que emprende Yiadom-Boakye. Esas perspectivas surgen de una preocupación compartida entre los artistas: una preocupación por desterrar la promesa de revelación para así dar rienda suelta al placer de centrarse en el estudio. Lo que comparten los artistas es el deseo de estudiar el estilo en el que el estudio tiene lugar. Este gusto por la cualidad específica de atender a la atención evidencia en su textura, su timbre y su tono una de las formas de comprender la afinidad que genera la conexión en que se sustenta la larga amistad entre Yiadom-Boakye, Eshun y Sagar. Desprovista de tal afinidad facultativa, es difícil imaginar la existencia de *Lo que sabe el Búho*. Estas simpatías compartidas por lo recurrente y lo reflexivo muestran las razones del estilo, el enfoque y la sensibilidad que operan a lo largo de *Lo que sabe el Búho*; igualmente, hacen patentes las causas de la condición de su existencia; son su *a priori*; evidencian los principios rectores profundamente arraigados y firmemente articulados de los artistas dentro de sí mismos, *en, a través* y *entre* los medios.

animates the epistemic fantasy of documentary. The fantasy of disclosure is heightened when the painter at work is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and the moving image artists at work are Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun of The Otolith Group. Documentary's appetite for disclosure takes on a heightened degree of expectation when it bears down upon the public figure of the artist of colour, a category to be understood here in its widest possible sense. It renders the public figure of the black artist, understood as expansively as possible, in terms that are never less than hypervisible, hyperliteral, hyperexplicable, and hyperbolic.

By shifting attention from the painter as the object of attention towards the quality of attention bestowed upon the paint by the painter, *What the Owl Knows* aims to displace documentary's fantasy of wanting to know towards a study of study. To pay attention to the ways in which video pays attention to the ways in which a painter pays attention to what she paints is to begin to apprehend the ways in which Yiadom-Boakye thinks in and with and by way of paint. It is to approach her as a thinker whose practice enacts her theories of what painting, in its details, its implications, its repercussions, might, can, and should be. What emerges is a kind of choreography in which the thought of the camera lens and the thought of the sound recorder deployed by The Otolith Group enters into a dialogue with the walking-thought and the pausing-thought of Yiadom-Boakye's thought of painting. To move the attention of video from the goal of accessibility towards the texture of attention bestowed by the painter upon her painting is to bring viewers face to face with the imagination of scale at work within the work of Yiadom-Boakye's painting. What *What the Owl Knows* aims for and aims at is the sensorial magnification of the temporal passage between motion and movement, the phenomenological intensification of the theory carried in the practice held in the transitions between pose, pause, and posture; stare, stance, and saccade. What video makes available for thought is the thought of the painter carried in the specific marks she makes, seen from specific angles, witnessed according to specific perspectives.

What the Owl Knows does not impose those angles upon the work of painting undertaken by Yiadom-Boakye. Those perspectives emerge from a preoccupation shared between the artists: a concern to displace the promise of disclosure in order to liberate the pleasure of the work of study. What the artists share is a desire to study the style in which study happens. This appreciation for the specific quality of attending to attention—its texture, its timbre, its tone—indicates one of the ways of comprehending the affinity that provides the like-mindedness that sustains the longstanding friendship between Yiadom-Boakye, Eshun, and Sagar. Shorn of such elective affinity, it is difficult to imagine the existence of *What the Owl Knows*. These shared sympathies for recursion and for reflexivity indicate the reasons for the style, the approach, and the sensibility operative throughout *What the Owl Knows*; equally, they indicate its reasons for its condition of existence; they are its a priori; they indicate the deeply held, consistently articulated guiding principles of the artists within themselves, within, across, between media.

Encerrada en cada bucle, en cada rizo de adorno, justamente como el bucle y el rizo de tu cabello, y de mi cabello, querida —cabello afro, como lo llamamos—, se encuentra la salvación secreta de todas nosotras.

Shola von Reinhold[2]

2.

En las entrevistas, Yiadom-Boakye a menudo se esfuerza por esclarecer su obra centrándose en la pintura en sí misma, en las demandas formales que la pintura, como material dotado de su propia fuerza, tendencias y disposiciones, le plantea a su obra pictórica. Sus interlocutores, en cambio, suelen interesarse por cuestiones relacionadas con el realismo, la figuración, la negritud, la figuración negra y la figuración del cuerpo negro tras el llamado ajuste de cuentas racial generado a partir de las protestas mundiales que siguieron al asesinato de George Floyd a manos de Derek Chauvin el 25 de mayo de 2020. El interés de Yiadom-Boakye en los problemas formales planteados por su trabajo *en* y *con* la pintura alienta a sus interlocutores a alterar la escala de sus indagaciones, pasando de centrarse en la figuración, la negritud, la figuración negra o la figuración de la negritud a hacerlo en la propia pintura. No se trata tanto de evitar estas preguntas cuanto de ajustar la escala en la que se plantean. Se trata de abordar estas cuestiones desde dentro de un mundo cuyas fuerzas la artista domina, sobre el cual ejerce poder, sobre cuya autoridad tiene derechos. Se trata de conocer a una pintora en el campo de la pintura. Se trata de descender al nivel *al que* y *en que* ella se muestra más íntima. Un nivel en el que la pintura se impone a la autoridad de la cronología o a la primacía de la historia sobre el presente. Un nivel en el que la pintura entra en la dimensión de lo transhistórico. Una dimensión en la que vive cada artista y en la que ella se sustenta. En la pintura, como en la poesía, en palabras de Derek Walcott, "lo que se reconoce no es un intercambio de influencias ni una imitación, sino el avance de la corriente del lenguaje metropolitano, de su imperio, si se quiere, que arrastra simultáneamente, alimentada por afluentes tan fuertes, a poetas de creencias tan diversas como Rimbaud, Char, Claudel, Perse y Cesaire. Es la lengua la que es el imperio, y los grandes poetas no son sus vasallos, sino sus príncipes"[3]. Yiadom-Boakye emplaza su obra en el imperio de la pintura: es allí, en sus olas, sobre sus afluentes, donde deberíamos encontrarla.

Reparar en el poder de la pintura es reparar en la fuerza y la fragmentación del trazo. Es pensar en la elaboración de los trazos según su lógica multiplicativa. Es comprender el acto de hacer trazos como una forma de estudio. El poder de ampliación del vídeo hace posible el estudio del trabajo de la pintura a partir del trazo. Al convertir la preocupación de Yiadom-Boakye por la fuerza de fisión contenida en la pintura en un estudio de las maneras en que el vídeo se dispone a estudiar las maneras en que una pintora estudia su pintura, *Lo que sabe el Búho* sugiere una forma de representar el ajuste de escala. El vídeo permite el estudio del trazo, hace que su contacto y su superficie se puedan escrutar según ángulos precisos que hablan de las obligadas limitaciones del estudio. Adopta sobre la pintura un enfoque interescalar, esto es, se mueve entre las escalas del trazo para hacer perceptible la dimensión intracromática que abre la dimensión de lo cromático dentro del trazo[4]. *Lo que sabe el Búho* podría caracterizarse

2. Shola von Reinhold, *LOTE*, Jacaranda Books, Londres, 2020, pág. 312.
3. Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History, What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Nueva York, 1998, pág. 51.
4. Véase Gabrielle Hecht, "Interscalar Vehicles for and African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality and Violence", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 33, n.º 1, págs. 109–41.

> Locked into each coil, each curl of ornament, just like the coil and curl of your hair, and my hair, darling,—Afro hair, as we call it—is the secret salvation of us all.
>
> Shola von Reinhold[2]

2.

In interviews, Yiadom-Boakye often takes pain to elucidate her work by focusing upon painting in itself, on the formal demands that paint, as a material with its own force, tendencies, and dispositions, makes upon her painting. Her interlocutors, by contrast, tend to concern themselves with questions regarding realism, figuration, blackness, black figuration, the figuration of the black body after the so-called racial reckoning engendered after the global protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020. Yiadom-Boakye's focus on the formal problems posed by her work in and with paint is encouraging her interlocutors to alter the scale of their enquiry from that of figuration, blackness, black figuration, or the figuration of blackness towards that of paint. It is not so much a matter of avoiding these enquiries as it is a matter of adjusting the scale at which they are posed. A matter of approaching these questions from within a world whose forces she commands, whose power she wields, whose authority she holds rights in. It is a matter of meeting a painter on the field of paint. A question of descending to the level at which and in which she is most intimate. A level in which painting surpasses the authority of chronology or the precedence of history upon the present. A level at which painting enters into the dimension of the transhistorical. A dimension in which each painter lives and on which she sustains herself. In painting, as in poetry, in the words of Derek Walcott, "one acknowledges not an exchange of influences, not imitation, but the tidal advance of the metropolitan language, of its empire, if you like, which carries simultaneously, fed by such strong colonial tributaries, poets of such different beliefs as Rimbaud, Char, Claudel, Perse, and Cesaire. It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes."[3] Yiadom-Boakye positions her work within the empire of painting: it is there, in its waves, on its tributaries, that you should meet.

To attend to the power of paint is to attend towards the force and the fissiparousness of the mark. It is to think of the making of marks according to their multiplicative logic. It is to comprehend the act of the making of marks as a form of study. Video's power of magnification renders the work of paint within the mark available for study. By transposing Yiadom-Boakye's preoccupation with the fissile force within paint into a study of the ways in which video decides to study the ways in which a painter studies her painting, *What the Owl Knows* suggests one way of enacting the adjustment in scale. Video makes the mark available for study, renders its contact and its surface available for a scrutiny according to precise angles that speak of the necessary constraints within the studio. It adopts an interscalar approach towards painting. It moves between the scales of the mark in order to make perceptible the intrachromatic dimension that opens the dimension of the chromatic within the mark. *What the Owl Knows* could be characterised as a kind of interscalar vehicle designed to navigate the intrachromatic.[4] Within, across, and between each mark, one can glimpse chromatic oxbows, isthmuses, lagoons, mangroves, islands, junctures, junctions, borders, and archipelagos whose gravity, weight, mass, and force are subject to the painter's saccadic critique, judgement, appraisal, assessment, and adjudication. *What the Owl Knows* seeks to make visible

2. Shola von Reinhold, *LOTE*, Jacaranda Books, 2020, p. 312.
3. Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History" in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1998, p. 51.
4. See Gabrielle Hecht, "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality and Violence", *Cultural Anthropology* 33, No. 1, pp. 109–41.

como una especie de vehículo interescalar diseñado para navegar en lo intracromático. Dentro, a través y entre cada trazo se vislumbran meandros cromáticos, istmos, lagunas, manglares, islas, uniones, cruces, fronteras y archipiélagos cuya gravedad, peso, masa y fuerza están sujetas a los guiños críticos, al juicio, a la valoración, estimación, evaluación y sentencia de la pintora. *Lo que sabe el Búho* busca hacer visible la fuerza de abstracción que existe dentro de la forma de la figuración. Se propone descomponer los trazos que se agrupan hacia la legibilidad, que se anuncian en la forma reconocible de los dedos, que convergen hacia lo que debe ser una palma que comienza a definirse como lo que consideraríamos una muñeca. Más que perturbar, busca retrasar o dilatar el placer espectador que fluye al reconocer la silueta de la joven en la forma de su espalda que se vuelve hacia el lienzo, legible en el aire curvo contenido dentro de la figura que forman los brazos al juntarse sobre lo que ha de ser un cuello que sostiene lo que solo puede ser una cabeza. El vídeo se demora, juega dentro del campo de lo intercromático que se conserva y mantiene en el interior de morfologías negras[5]; explora sus pendientes, sus intervalos, sus contigüidades, sus saltos, no tanto improvisados o intuitivos cuanto inventivistas[6].

El inventivismo de Yiadom-Boakye somete una gama finita de colores a procedimientos que los vuelven infinitos. El inventivismo engendra infinitud. Cuando Yiadom-Boakye habla de la negritud en su pintura, a menudo se refiere a su "infinitud". Esta formulación estético-política, que es a la vez una cuestión relacionada con la forma de la política y un asunto relacionado con la política de la forma, debe ser considerada en relación y en articulación con un principio estético que Yiadom-Boakye practica rigurosamente: la prohibición de usar pintura negra. Comprender la infinitud de la negritud dentro de la pintura requiere prohibir la pintura negra por la insuficiencia de su monocromatismo. Excluir la obviedad de la pintura negra es la llave que abre la puerta al reino de lo intracromático, que abre el camino al trabajo de inventar los colores que componen la negritud en la infinitud de su irrealidad, en su capacidad de existir de forma condicional, subjuntiva e hipotética. En la fotografía contemporánea publicitaria y de moda —presente en los anuncios *online* que invaden nuestras páginas web, los panoramas acristalados de los escaparates de las tiendas de moda, los reportajes de las revistas, las escaleras mecánicas que ascienden desde el metro, los laterales de los autobuses—, los lenguajes plásticos de los modelos negros femeninos, masculinos y de género no binario adoptan un cromatismo hipersaturado cuyo objetivo es proporcionar a los espectadores una forma de certeza. En lugar de brindar formas de certeza a quienes dudan de los límites raciales de lo representable[7], Yiadom-Boakye inventa una infinitud que insiste en lo incompleto de lo representable con el fin de abrir los límites ilimitados *de* y *en* lo racial. En esta apertura, la pintura desciende a la indefinición definitiva.

5. Véase Keith Hudson, *The Black Morphologist of Reggae*, Vista Sounds, 1983.
6. El término se adopta y adapta de Brian Massumi, quien afirma: "Para que el pensamiento de Simondon resuene, el constructivismo tiene que dar paso a un inventivismo integral (si tal pensamiento existe). Un inventivismo que no le tema a la naturaleza, ni a *su* creatividad". Véase "'Technical Mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon", con Arne de Boever, Alex Murray y Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia,* n.º 7, 2009, pág. 38.
7. David Marriot, "The X of Representation: Rereading Stuart Hall", *New Formations*, Vol. 2019, n.º 96–97, pág. 178.

the force of abstraction which exists within the form of figuration. It sets out to decompose the marks which assemble themselves towards legibility, which announce themselves in the recognisable form of fingers, which converge towards what must be a palm, which begins to resolve itself in what can be said to be a wrist. It does not disrupt as much as it seeks to delay or dilate the spectatorial pleasure that flows from recognising the outline of the young woman in the shape of her back that turns itself towards the canvas, readable in the curved air held within the shape that arms make as they hold themselves above what must be a neck, which supports what can only be a head. Video tarries, it plays within the field of the interchromatic, which is held and carried within black morphologies;[5] it explores its gradients, its intervals, its adjacencies, its leaps, which are not so much improvisational nor intuitive as much as they are inventivist.[6]

Yiadom-Boakye's inventivism subjects a finite range of colours to procedures which render them infinite. Inventivism engenders infinitude. When Yiadom-Boakye speaks of blackness in her painting, she refers, often, to its "infinity". This aesthetico-political formulation, which is simultaneously a question of the form of politics and a matter of the politics of form, should be thought of in relation to and in articulation with an aesthetic principle rigorously practiced by Yiadom-Boakye, a prohibition on the use of black paint. To comprehend the infinity of blackness within paint requires an interdiction on black paint for the insufficiency of its monochromaticism. Excluding the self-evidence of black paint is the key that opens the door to the intrachromatic kingdom; that opens the path to the work of inventing the colours that compose blackness in the infinitude of its irreality, its conditional, subjunctive, hypothetical force of existence. In contemporary fashion and advertising photography evident in the online ads that intrude on your webpage, in the glass landscapes of fashion store windows, in the double page spreads in magazines, in escalators ascending the tube, on the side of buses, the visual languages of black female, male, and gender nonconforming models assume a hypersaturated chromaticism which aims to provide viewers with a form of certainty. Instead of supplying forms of certainty for those unsure of the racial limits of the representable,[7] Yiadom-Boakye invents an infinitude that insists upon the incompletion of the representable in order to open up the unlimited limits of and in the racial. In this opening, this overture, paint descends into definitive indefinition.

5. See Keith Hudson, *The Black Morphologist of Reggae*, Vista Sounds, 1983.
6. The term is adopted and adapted from Brian Massumi who states "For Simondon's thought to resonate, constructivism has to make way for an integral inventivism (if such a thought exists). An inventivism that is not afraid of nature, and *its* creativity." See Brian Massumi, Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, and Jon Roffe, "'Technical Mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon", *Parrhesia* 7, 2009, p. 38.
7. David Marriott, "The X of Representation: Rereading Stuart Hall", *New Formations* 2019, No. 96–97, p. 178.

En mi soledad
me provocas
con recuerdos
que nunca mueren.

Billie Holiday[8]

3.

A medida que *Lo que sabe el Búho* amplía su foco hacia el estudio de mujeres y hombres pintados, a solas o en grupos, lo que resulta manifiesto al pensamiento son esos encuentros que nos sitúan cara a cara con la figuración de una sociabilidad entre el mismo sexo que no apela tanto a la semejanza como a las formas de su soledad y los rostros de su afecto. Lo que resulta palpable es la atención que Yiadom-Boakye presta a las formas específicas en que cada persona, cada figura, se muestra a sí misma; es decir, las formas en que la pintura las retiene o las formas en que la pintura alberga significados. Al prestar atención a la presencia de estas entidades parcialmente manifestadas, lo que llama nuestra atención es la atención de Yiadom-Boakye sobre los modos de comportamiento, conducta y postura; las particularidades de pose, ademán y actitud, y ciertos tipos de disposición, maneras y modales. En conjunto, estas reflexiones sobre los estados de ánimo, modos y modalidades nos atraen hasta sorprendernos en el acto de atribuirle una intención a la insinuación. Tras avanzar por el camino de rosas de las deducciones, sin haber sido conscientes, nos encontramos conjeturando sobre sus caracteres, infiriendo su temperamento y extrapolando un *ethos* de sus vidas, sus amores, sus deseos y su sociabilidad.

Estos jóvenes se guardan sus secretos sobre sí mismos y sobre los otros. Su conducta ni se ajusta ni se desvía de una presunción heterosexual de normatividad de género, y sus códigos hablan de una autosuficiencia que se contiene, se orquesta y conspira en su propio misterio; una conspiración que no es otra cosa que los modos en que respiran juntos; un misterio que tú, al contemplarlo, te encuentras en pleno acto de narrar. Lo que están protegiendo es su propio misterio, no tanto de cada uno de ellos cuanto de la mirada de cada persona del público. Albergan el misterio de sí mismos, de lo que estaban haciendo, de lo que podrían estar haciendo, de sus propias condiciones, de su irrealidad subjuntiva que opera según sus propias reglas, que son las suyas y que se escabullen de los espectadores no acostumbrados a hacer frente a un estudio sostenido de la "sin-blancura", que no es contingente, sino categórica, estructural, imperativa.

Una forma en la que surge esta "sin-blancura" es *en* y *a través de* su preocupación por sí mismos y por cada uno de ellos. Plantean su existencia como una pregunta cuyas respuestas hay que encontrar en el otro. Esta sensación de obtener el sustento de ellos mismos, de su amistad indeterminada, incondicional, nos anima a acercarnos, a descubrirnos en pleno acto de acercamiento a un pensamiento lleno del silencio de la complicidad. A querer compartir su tiempo, su compañía; a estar con ellos, junto a ellos: cada cuadro parece participar del proceso que describe Virginia Woolf en las pinturas de Walter Sickert: "Las figuras están inmóviles, por supuesto, pero cada una de ellas ha sido plasmada en un momento de crisis",

8. **Billie Holiday, *Solitude*, Clef Records, 1956.**

In my solitude
you taunt me
with memories
that never die.

Billie Holiday[8]

3.

As *What the Owl Knows* scales up towards the study of painted women, painted men, by themselves, in groups, what becomes available for thought are encounters that bring you face to face with the figuration of a same-sex sociality that does not entail similarity as much as the forms of its solitude and the faces of its solicitude. What becomes apparent is the attention Yiadom-Boakye pays to the specific ways in which each person, each figure, holds themselves, which is nothing other than the ways in which paint holds them or the ways in which paint bears meanings. In attending to the bearing of these partially predicated entities, what draws your attention is Yiadom-Boakye's attention to modes of comportment, deportment, and posture, particularities of pose, stance, and attitude, certain kinds of demeanour, mannerism, and manner. Taken together, these meditations on moods, modes, and modalities lure the spectator until you catch yourself in the act of attributing intention to intimation. Having proceeded along a primrose path of inference, without ever having consciously decided upon doing so, you find yourself conjecturing their characters, inferring temperament, extrapolating an ethos of their lives, their loves, their desires, their sociality.

These young women and young men, whose conduct neither conforms nor deviates from a heterosexual presumption of gender normativity, whose codes speak of a self-sufficiency that contains itself, orchestrates itself, conspire in their own mystery, a conspiracy which is nothing other than the ways in which they breathe together, a mystery that you, the spectator, find yourself in the act of narrating, as they hold their own counsel, in themselves, with each other. What they are protecting is the mystery of themselves, not so much from each other as from the spectatorial gaze. They harbour the mystery of themselves, of what they were doing, of what they might be doing, of their own conditionality, their subjunctive irreality, which operates according to its own rules, which are their rules, which slide away from spectators unused to coming face to face with a sustained study of whitelessness. A whitelessness which is not contingent but categorical, structural, imperative.

One way in which this whitelessness emerges is in and through their preoccupation with themselves and with each other. They pose their existence as a question whose answers are to be found in each other. This sense of drawing sustenance from themselves, from their unspecified, unqualified friendship, encourages you to draw closer, to catch yourself in the act of drawing closer to a thought that is full of the silence of camaraderie. Wanting to share their time, their company, to be with them, beside them, each painting seems to partake in a process described by Virginia Woolf in the paintings of Walter Sickert. "The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis", observed Virginia Woolf. "It is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying."[9] Yiadom-Boakye's paintings liberate themselves from the crisis of emergency and emergence that overprescribes the image of the black in painting of modern life. Her figures do not struggle.

8. Billie Holiday, *Solitude,* Clef Records, 1956.
9. Virginia Woolf, *Oh, to Be a Painter*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

observa Virginia Woolf. "Es difícil mirarlas y no inventarse una historia, no escuchar lo que están diciendo"[9]. Los cuadros de Yiadom-Boakye se liberan de la crisis de emergencia y de emersión que perfila en exceso la imagen del negro en la pintura en la vida moderna. Sus figuras no luchan.

Estos personajes, estas personas, salvan con elegancia y sin esfuerzo la línea que separa el ámbito interior de las chicas y el mundo exterior de los chicos[10]. Estos hombres y mujeres jóvenes se sienten tan cómodos con la erudición como con el ballet, y con la negritud de su erudición como con el ballet de la negritud. Su devoción por la danza les proporciona una mayor conciencia de la postura, en la que la condición física converge con la introspección. Un mundo en el que el inconformismo de género es un medio *para* y *de* la desalienación dentro de la feminidad y la masculinidad. Es una cuestión de designación que no hace falta ni mencionar. Estos chicos son mariquitas en un mundo en el que la sobriedad actúa como un refugio que les permite proteger su seriedad. Estas mujeres están entregadas a una sororidad que ni reconoce ni exige nada a quien las contempla. Tal vez por eso te descubres continuamente, como en un acto de sonambulismo vigilante, uniendo los elementos que emergen del lenguaje de su comportamiento, para obtener una anatomía de homofilia negra. Esta homosocialidad homofílica se siente cómoda en entornos cuidadosamente atemporales e intencionalmente deslocalizados; pertenece a estos paisajes de no pertenencia. En cada mundo, que está más infradeterminado desde dentro que sobredeterminado desde fuera, los atributos y las cualidades de cada mujer u hombre se agrandan hasta volverse no cualificados, libres de fuerzas externas. Es la divergencia de estas características lo que se vuelve perceptible *dentro* y *a través* de cada cuadro de Yiadom-Boakye. Es el empeño en atribuir significado a estas cualidades no cualificadas lo que pone a prueba la capacidad que tiene el público para leer las propiedades de la persona. Se trata de afrontar cara a cara un mundo en el que los lenguajes pictóricos que abordan el reconocimiento, la comprensibilidad y la legibilidad se alejan persistentemente de las leyes de galerías y museos; un mundo que opera según sus propias reglas, que son asintóticas a la condición de espectador.

9. Virginia Woolf, *Oh, to Be a Painter, op. cit.*, pág. 82.
10. Marlon B. Ross, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*, Duke University Press, Durham y Londres, 2022, págs. 1–49.

These characters, these people gracefully, effortlessly, negotiate the line between the girlish indoors and the boyish outdoors.[10] These young men and women are as at ease with bookishness as they are with ballet as they are with the blackness of bookishness and the ballet of blackness. Their devotion to dance gives them a heightened awareness of deportment, in which athleticism meets introspection. A world in which gender nonconformity is a medium for and of disalienation within femininity and masculinity. A matter of appointment that goes without saying. These boys are sissies from a world in which sobriety acts as a safe harbour for their seriousness. These women are concerned with a sorority which neither acknowledges nor requires anything from spectatorship. Perhaps that is why you continually discover yourself, as if in an act of vigilant somnambulism, assembling elements from the language of their comportment into an anatomy of black homophily. This homophiliac homosociality finds itself at home in carefully atemporal and precisely delocalised settings; it belongs in and to these landscapes of unbelonging. In each world, which is underdetermined from within rather than overdetermined from without, the attributes and the qualities of each woman or man is magnified until they become unqualified, unchecked by external forces. It is the unbinding of these predicates that becomes discernible within and across each Yiadom-Boakye painting. It is the effort to attribute significance to these unqualified qualities that puts pressure upon the spectator's capacity to read the properties of personhood. It is a matter of coming face to face with a world in which the painterly idioms of recognisability, legibility, and readability exist at a persistent remove from the norms of the gallery or the museum, a world that operates according to its own rules that are asymptotic to the institution of spectatorship.

The Garnet cast out demons, and the Hydropicus deprived the Moon of her colour.

Oscar Wilde[11]

4.

Suspending documentary's demand for explanation opens a space for the poetic language of a painter that writes. Stripping out the interview favoured by documentary enables poetry to take the place of biography. In the titles, the poems, and the fables of Yiadom-Boakye, you may begin to discern figures of thought that generate allegories of reading capable of operating at a variety of degrees of distance from that of painting. *What the Owl Knows* uses video to perform the writing of Yiadom-Boakye by setting its text in motion. It seeks to host a series of convocations between poetry, prose, and painting in which the asymptotic and the appositional presence of her parallel poetics becomes auricular allegory. Poetry creates aberrations in meaning that generate moments of blindness and insight whose effects can be enacted, performed, and distributed by video. What strikes the reading eye is the capitalisation of terms which imbues each term with a specific power of symbolism, a Symbolist power of archaism which draws them towards a deliberately untimely poetics of nominative entification. Each poem contains capitalised words that become understandable as nominated Entities, nominal Personifications that interact on the idea and the stage of the imagination of their world. These Entities populate her writing, which is nothing but the sentences

10. Marlon. B. Ross, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, pp. 1–49.
11. Oscar Wilde, Nicholas Frankel (ed.), *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge & London, p. 167.

El granate expulsaba los demonios y la hidrófana privaba a la luna de su color.

Oscar Wilde[11]

4.

Anular la voluntad de explicar propia del documental abre un espacio para el lenguaje poético de una pintora que escribe. La eliminación de la habitual entrevista que ofrece el género documental permite que la poesía ocupe el lugar de la biografía. En los títulos, los poemas y las fábulas de Yiadom-Boakye comienzan a distinguirse figuras del pensamiento que generan alegorías de lectura capaces de operar en diversos grados de distancia respecto a la pintura. *Lo que sabe el Búho* emplea el vídeo para interpretar la escritura de Yiadom-Boakye poniendo en movimiento los textos. Pretende convocar una serie de ceremonias a caballo entre la poesía, la prosa y la pintura en las que la presencia asintótica y aposicional de sus poéticas paralelas se convierta en una alegoría auditiva. La poesía crea aberraciones de sentido que generan momentos de ceguera y de perspicacia cuyos efectos pueden ser representados, interpretados y compartidos a través del vídeo.

Lo que llama la atención al ojo lector es el uso de mayúsculas en los términos, que infunden en ellos un poder simbólico específico, un poder simbólico propio de tiempos arcaicos que los sitúa en una poética que les da entidad nominal y que está deliberadamente fuera del tiempo. Cada poema contiene palabras en mayúsculas que resultan comprensibles como Entidades designadas, Personificaciones nominales que interactúan sobre la idea y el escenario imaginado de su propio mundo. Estas Entidades pueblan su escritura, que no es otra cosa que las frases pronunciadas por estas criaturas entre sí. Estas se comportan según sus propias lógicas de aliteración y sus particulares leyes primitivas, que nada deben a lo que Zadie Smith llama "los misterios narrativos" de las figuras que pueblan sus cuadros[12]. Tampoco obedecen a las reglas del mundo de cada persona del público. Como alegorías de la lectura, son, sin embargo, insistente e inmediatamente comprensibles y legibles para ambos.

Yiadom-Boakye puebla su fabulosa poética con criaturas: Búhos, Palomas, Cuervos, Zorros y Ratones de Campo. El sagaz civismo, la astuta cautela y la morbosa amoralidad de estas criaturas les faculta para hablar de los engaños, las dobleces y las crueldades relatadas en los cuartos de estar, comedores y dormitorios durante las cenas; de los *affairs* y los asesinatos cometidos por ricos que no son ni tan listos ni tan sofisticados como creen. En los escritos de Yiadom-Boakye, aristócratas de medio pelo y burgueses ruines sucumben a los enredos inesperados de su propia mentalidad criminal. Esta estructura de la trama en la que a los personajes les sale el tiro por la culata posee una lógica de fatalidad que atrae a Yiadom-Boakye. Es apropiado entonces que sea su propia voz la que se escuche a lo largo de *Lo que sabe el Búho* recitando la inextricable malevolencia de los mecanismos *por*, *en* y *a través* de los cuales sus personajes maquinan su propia desgracia. En *Lo que sabe el Búho* es la Paloma, en manos —o, más bien, en las alas— del Búho la que se descubre a sí misma como objeto de su propia muerte autoinfligida. *Lo que sabe el Búho*, a diferencia de la Paloma, es que el apetito es su propia recompensa, su propio sustento, su propio motor.

11. Oscar Wilde, *El retrato de Dorian Gray*. Alejandro Palomas (trad.), Literatura Random House, Barcelona, 2016.
12. Zadie Smith, "Lynette Yiadom's Imaginary Portraits", *The New Yorker*, 12 de junio, 2017.

pronounced by these creatures upon each other. They behave according to their own logics of alliteration and laws of archaism that owe nothing to what Zadie Smith calls the "narrative mysteries" of the figures that populate her paintings.[12] Nor do they obey the rules of the world of the spectator. As allegories of reading, however, they are, insistently, immediately legible and readable to both.

Yiadom-Boakye populates her fabular poetic with creatures: Owls, Pigeons, Crows, Foxes, and Field Mice. Their sly civility, cunning calculation and morbid amorality provide them with a vantage point from which to comment upon the deceptions, the duplicities, and the cruelties enacted in the front rooms, dining rooms, and bedrooms of the dinner parties, the affairs, and the murders committed by capitalists who are neither as clever nor as sophisticated as they believe themselves to be. In Yiadom-Boakye's writings, down at heel aristocrats and sleazy bourgeoisie fall prey to the unforeseen plot twists of their own criminal-mindedness. This structure of emplotment, in which characters hoist themselves by their own petard, has a logic of fatality that draws the attention of Yiadom-Boakye. It is fitting, then, that it is her voice that you hear throughout *What the Owl Knows* reciting the recondite malevolence of the mechanisms by and in and through which her characters engineer their own misfortune. In *What the Owl Knows*, it is the Pigeon, at the hands or, rather, the wings of the Owl, that discovers itself the object of its own self-inflicted demise. What the Owl knows, in contrast to the Pigeon, is that appetite is its own reward, its own sustenance, its own motor.

In staging its diurnal encounters between painting, prose, poetry, and video, *What the Owl Knows* moves from the studio interior to the urban parks of South London, carrying the night-thoughts of Yiadom-Boakye from light to dark and back again. As she reads from her poems organised for and according to the temporal structure of editing, an introspective expressionism takes hold of the time of watching. The figure of the painter appears in the form of a silhouette under sodium light, a solitary walker whose reverie circumnavigates an urban pastoral whose undisclosed settings speak of the significance of their intimation. Her voice, which alludes to images of thought beyond the camera, freights what happens in the frame with a sense of implication. Video orchestrates meanings within audible reach. It invokes a convocation between the irreality of painting, the abyss of poetry, and the invocation of vocality. To listen to the light of night is to hear the night of day. Each passage undertaken by the painter alludes to a specific geography of recollection. Each walk traces a specific line of desire that holds within its path an itinerary of becoming.

For Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is, after all, a South Londoner. The withdrawal of overt references to South London within her work leaves a void that enables her North American interlocutors to account for her work with criteria shaped by their preoccupations. In situating the painter as a walker within a city voiced by her words, *What the Owl Knows* does not aim to fill this void with meaning as much as it seeks to redirect poetry's abyss of meaning towards London itself. What forms, it asks, would a notion of Black Britishness, in the differential specificity of its Ghanaian-Britishness, in its precise South Londonness, take when it was, and is, subject to and the subject of an aesthetic of intentional underdetermination and intrachromatic infinitude? For those who can hear, this specific style of South Londonness, this precise form of Ghanaian-Britishness, can be heard in the reading voice of Yiadom-Boakye, in the exactitude of its educated enunciation, in its accentuated consonance and assonance. In the affective tonality of her reading voice can be heard the potency of the poetic, its capacity for generating a drama of defamiliarisation that distances spectatorship from the nature and the content of racialisation that you find yourself reaching for when you find yourself wanting to describe the identities in and of her paintings.[13] ●

12. Zadie Smith, "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Imaginary Portraits", *The New Yorker*, June 12, 2017.
13. David Marriott, "Bastard Allegories: Black British Independent Cinema", *Black Camera* 7, No. 1 (Fall 2015), p. 181.

Al mostrar los encuentros diurnos entre la pintura, la prosa, la poesía y el vídeo, *Lo que sabe el Búho* se traslada del interior del estudio a los parques urbanos del sur de Londres, desplazando los pensamientos nocturnos de Yiadom-Boakye de la luz a la oscuridad y viceversa. A medida que lee sus poemas, organizados *para* y *según* la estructura temporal del proceso de edición, un expresionismo introspectivo se apodera del tiempo de observación. La figura de la pintora aparece como una silueta bajo la luz de sodio, como una caminante solitaria cuya ensoñación circunnavega un paisaje urbano cuyos escenarios ocultos hablan de la importancia de su intimidad. Su voz, que alude a imágenes que surgen del pensamiento y están más allá de la cámara, muestra la implicación de la artista a la hora de relatar lo que sucede en el encuadre. El vídeo orquesta significados al alcance del oído; evoca una ceremonia entre la irrealidad de la pintura, el abismo de la poesía y la evocación de la vocalidad. Escuchar la luz de la noche es oír la noche del día. Cada camino que emprende la pintora alude a una geografía específica del recuerdo. Cada paseo traza una línea específica de deseo que contiene en su sendero un itinerario del devenir.

Porque Lynette Yiadom-Boakye es, después de todo, una londinense del sur. La supresión de las referencias evidentes al sur de Londres en su obra deja un vacío que permite a sus interlocutores norteamericanos interpretar su obra con criterios basados en sus preocupaciones. Al ubicar a la pintora como una caminante dentro de una ciudad descrita por las palabras de la artista, *Lo que sabe el Búho* no pretende llenar de significado este vacío, sino redirigir el abismo de significado de la poesía hacia el mismo Londres. ¿Qué formas, se pregunta, adoptaría un concepto de identidad británica negra —en la especificidad diferencial de su identidad británico-ghanesa, en su identidad precisa del sur de Londres— cuando estaba y está sujeto a una estética de deliberada infradeterminación e infinitud intracromática? Para quienes pueden distinguirlo, este tipo específico de identidad del sur de Londres, esta forma precisa de identidad británico-ghanesa, se puede escuchar en la voz de Yiadom-Boakye leyendo, en la exactitud de su pronunciación culta, en su consonancia y su asonancia acentuadas. En la tonalidad afectiva de su voz leyendo se percibe la potencia de lo poético, su capacidad para generar un drama de desfamiliarización que aleja a las personas que componen el público de la naturaleza y el contenido de la racialización al que recurrimos cuando queremos describir las identidades *en* y *de* sus pinturas[13]. ●

13. David Marriott, "Bastard Allegories: Black British Independent Cinema", *Black Camera*, vol. 7, n.º 1, otoño de 2015, pág. 181.

ARTFORUM

TOP TEN

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD

After graduating from Yale University's School of Architecture and Design, Barbara Chase-Riboud moved to Europe and spent decades traveling the world, living at the center of numerous artistic, literary, and political circles. Her innovative sculptures—which are characterized by the interplay of cast bronze, aluminum, wool, and silk—appear in museum collections across the globe. In 1974, she published her first book of poetry, *From Memphis & Peking* (Random House), and in 1979, her debut novel, *Sally Hemings* (Viking), was released to critical acclaim. Her new book, *I Always Knew: A Memoir* (Princeton University Press), comes out this month.

4

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE As a former dancer, I am drawn to the artist's paintings of them. *The Hours Behind You*, 2011, is emblematic of Yiadom-Boakye's unique oeuvre. In its motion, the figurative elements metamorphose into a nearly abstract composition. I look forward to her conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Serpentine Galleries during Frieze London this month and to seeing her exhibition "Fly in League with the Night" at Tate Britain in November.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *The Hours Behind You*, 2011, oil on canvas, 90 3/4 × 98 3/4".

APOLLO
THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

The tender fictions of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Diana Evans

13 MAY 2021

Complication (detail; 2013), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Private collection. © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

This review of 'Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly In League With The Night' at Tate Britain, London, was published in the February 2021 issue of Apollo. The exhibition reopens on 17 May and will run until 31 May.

This sentence glitters on a wall at the entrance to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's show at Tate Britain: 'But the idea of infinity, of a life and a world of infinite possibilities, where anything is possible for you, unconstrained by the nightmare fantasies of others, to have the presence of mind to walk as wildly as you will, that's what I think about most, that is the direction I've always wanted to move in.' These are her own words, and they bear an extra shine given the literary branch of her art (poems, occasional prose, animal fables), and which, in their aspiration towards an existential liberty, convey the atmosphere of her paintings, their auras of cryptic distance yet bold, living presence, as if the act of creating them were the wish itself.

No Need of Speech (2018), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Carnie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Photo: Bryan Conley; © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

The figures in these paintings walk wildly, in their loose dark lines and muted landscapes, their casual gesture and gentle staring. Their thoughts are entirely their own as they look off into a dappled sepia with a touch of gold in it, such as the woman caught in contemplation in Penny For Them (2014), or sit troubled and fatigued in the diptych Pale For The Rapture (2016) with its contrasting stripe-check sofas. They hold council with birds, an owl perched in hand or a shockingly bright parrot glowing from the grip of a man's enveloping gloom. Sometimes they are dancing, like the young men at the ballet barre in A Concentration (2018), or laughing or inwardly smiling, or looking directly at one another as the two boys in No Need of Speech (2018). This painting in particular evokes an emotional charge, given the routine negative reduction of black boys in mainstream representation, but Yiadom-Boakye wants to capture the subject beyond all that, in the freer, almost possible, infinite space. Her men, women and children, conjured from her imagination, have an air of something heavy having been thrown off. They are unconstrained by those 'nightmare fantasies' and allowed simply to live, to be; strident yet languid, close to joy. 'I don't like to paint victims,' the artist has said.

A Concentration (2018), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Carter Collection. © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

'Fly In League With The Night' is the first major survey of Yiadom-Boakye's work, featuring some 80 oil paintings spanning nearly two decades, from her training at the Royal Academy Schools to recent pieces created in her east London studio and, in smaller scale, at her south London home during lockdown. The paintings, some on canvas, some on herringbone linen, are hung low for closer impact and unchronologically, instead arranged in communication with one another. There are the sharp, spectacular reds of the opening room where a brash, carnal early work, First (2003), is positioned next to the refined, yet no less imposing, subject of Any Number Of Preoccupations (2010) in his draping vermilion gown and white slippers (a direct nod to John Singer Sargent's Dr Pozzi at Home); while adjacent lies a crimson-tongued fox beneath a stool on which a man sits, carefree and leaning forward, both welcoming and enclosed in darkness. Further on, a gathering of gentler, shadowy outdoor scenes with figures walking and talking, lounging on sand or silently looking out, give a calmer, more luminous effect; a highlight here is Condor and The Mole (2011), one of Yiadom-Boakye's comparatively rare depictions of children, two black girls playing on a beach, the kind of rural image we have scarcely seen before in this style of painting.

Condor and The Mole (2011), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

It is the absence of black subjects in traditional Western portraiture, from which Yiadom-Boakye draws much of her influence, that makes these paintings intrinsically revolutionary, but her approach to paint, her relationship to it, the way she makes it speak, is more the point. Her many darknesses are rich and hued, never hollow, faintly misted by a suggestion of green, within the green the yellow, the brown, or there is the dim stretch of night purple behind the bright hat feather of Six Birds In The Bush (2015), making the soft brown of the face and the beige of the eyes almost move towards you. With a flash of white she makes laughter come, or smoke drift. White dances monochrome circles on a T-shirt against the dark of 11pm Tuesday (2010), making fabric fly and lift around the slightly radiating figure, thereby making breeze, light, air. These endless adventures in colour play and signal and decide for themselves, the artist acting as a conduit. There are the pink and mustard ties in what I think of as the avuncular paintings – tenderly rendered depictions of ageing men clinking glasses or linking arms – and then the jubilant, never-ending greens of the four young men in Complication (2013), my personal favourite for its quiet humour and brotherly love.

The titles of Yiadom-Boakye's portraits are 'an extra brush-mark', she says, and can be thought of as bridges between her painting and her writing. There are no explanatory captions accompanying the images, only the possibilities mostly conjured by their names. Likewise the paintings are devoid of temporal specificities of attire or object or defined locales, and the subjects themselves are imagined beings rather than real, characters arrived at through a process of composition, begun without preliminary sketching or outline. These arrivals are made possible by the clearing of space; reality is stripped back so that the human figure might be captured in its immediate lucidity, unmarred by the dampening associations of societal identification and circumstance. Toni Morrison once wrote of the work of James Baldwin, 'You gave us ourselves to think about', and Baldwin being held dear by Yiadom-Boakye, this seems a fitting observation. She gives us ourselves to think about by drawing what has been held in shadow – misunderstood, ignored, unwitnessed – into the light of near transcendence. And she does not deny the shadow, but makes it part of the story, a site of permanent yet quietened resistance.

Yiadom-Boakye's work is a triumphant demonstration of the power of the artist to recreate, reclaim and restore the world for the time of looking. I found it difficult to leave the kindness of this show, but the voice of the paint went with me.

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

NIGHT WATCH

May 17, 2021 • A conversation with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, ***The Stygian Silk***, **2019**, oil on linen, 70 x 59 1/2".

A BELATED BREAKTHROUGH, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's mid-career survey "Fly in League with the Night" is the first solo exhibition devoted to a Black British woman artist in the Tate's history. It's an appropriate backdrop for the painter's body of work, whose entrancing portraits of imagined characters, painted from memory, meditate deeply on how history is made and unmade. Below, Yiadom-Boakye discusses her path as an artist and writer, the need to build new places of belonging, and the divine powers of watchfulness.

— *Rianna Jade Parker*

Rianna Jade Parker: I've told everybody that visiting your exhibition was the most relaxed and at peace I've felt over the past three-hundred-something days of forced isolation. Even though Tate was emptier than usual—because of social distancing, of course—it felt inhabited thanks to your artistry. I know what a curatorial effort that must have been, and the catalogue is beautiful. I didn't know you had a writing practice.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: It's something I never like to admit without clarifying. I never say that I'm a writer to writers. When people ask, "So you're a writer?" I'll say: [*In a funny voice*] "Yeah, you know . . . I'm not a writer but I write."

[*Laughter*]

RJP: No, I'm going to call it: It's a writing practice. Some short stories for us, please—soon! How did you choose to include the fiction that is in your catalogue? Five extracts from a detective novel?

LYB: I love detective shows. I love *Law & Order*. The original ones, and then *Criminal Intent* is a favorite. I was really interested in setting the scene of the Black detective who was somehow . . . detached, kind of floating above everything. Aloof and an authority. And, so far, I've presented it as extracts because it's not a complete story. I want it to be a longer thing, twisting and turning and arriving at a conclusion of sorts. It is such a different process than painting. I'm used to painting at a fast pace, making decisions more quickly, thinking about texture, color, tone, and composition in relation to the subject of the painting. And if something doesn't work, it's normally because the translation is off

and I can spot it immediately and either fix it or trash it. I try to do something similar with writing, but I'm a lot slower at it.

RJP: I've been thinking about art school—"art school"—and the fact that I learned absolutely nothing there, but also about the ways in which my peers today rely on their creative malleability, with or without valued qualifications. What was art school like for you?

LYB: I am so glad for my time at art school, as much for what I learned about art as for what I learned about people. The focus was really different back then. Because everything was so low-tech, the emphasis was very much on these physical things, these objects, these drawings, these demonstrations of a certain type of ability, of mastery. Which had to do with following a type of training and gaining a technical skill. That was a good thing for me: It was important as a painter to understand the bare bones, the color, the drawing, the composition, etc. But there were other things you had to teach yourself. And it's a strange and strained environment, often with a lot of dysfunctional systems and structures and people in place. Looking back on certain experiences at Central St. Martins and just how pronounced the racism, sexism, and classism were at times, the insane kinds of interactions I had with certain people—looking back, I just think, *God, it barely even occurred to me to question any of it!*

Falmouth was a relief—that was the art-school experience I wanted. Being by the sea, free to make and do and be as you pleased. Tutors who quietly encouraged you, quietly challenged you, and had a way of quietly kicking you up the bum if you slacked where they knew you could do better. I mean, it was a crazy place, too. And a crazy time. Again, just that kind of low-tech-living thing; nobody had a phone, the internet was . . . At Falmouth, I could really focus. Getting out of London really helped me to focus in ways that I just couldn't here.

When I came to the Royal Academy, it was almost like a continuation of Falmouth because although I was back in London, the RA was a tiny community, like a village—full of peculiar practices and notions that also made you feel like you were in *The Twilight Zone*.

The madness of the place was quite wonderful, for the most part. There was some nonsense, but I met some brilliant people too.

RJP: Generally speaking, the highest attainment expected of me is to be a civil servant or clerical help. I'm working on the margins of an industry from which I can be pushed out at any moment, just as Priti Patel would find a way to revoke my British citizenship if she could. What makes a legacy then? A couple of art books? There's something very particular about the kind of coloniality we're dealing with in the UK. We're a bit too grateful for things that are very much owed to us.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Quorum, 2020, oil on linen, 33 1/2 x 39".

LYB: That's a really important point: this sense of gratitude for things that are actually owed and earned. I think back twenty years and how different it was then. I mean, I look at your generation and the generation after yours as so much more vocal, so much stronger,

and there are so many more of you in the space; there's more activity, and that creates possibility. I think there is only so much you can do within institutions. They're a part of something much bigger and more powerful, which we actually do have some agency in. And it's not always about waiting to be invited. I have a seat at the table to a certain degree—it came relatively late, but, luckily, at a point when I'm equipped to handle it. But I'm not as interested in having a seat at the table as I am in having my own restaurant. (I prefer the culinary version of the metaphor to the corporate one!) That's the energy I want to go forward with. I've never cared for this idea of tolerance—when people speak of this country as "tolerant," I get so mad.

RJP: Mm, same.

LYB: I'm not to be tolerated. Problems are tolerated. I'm not a problem. These issues are not my—our—personal problem. They're very much the racist's personal problem, and I'm not qualified to fix it because I don't have the expertise in being a racist. Are we to channel all of this energy into trying to convince people that we're human beings? Or do we get on and do what we came here to do? It's like what Toni Morrison said about the function of racism being distraction, to stop you from doing your work, to keep you explaining. I literally don't have time. Surely, I think, there's something magical in what you were saying about having a legacy. I think your legacy is already greater than you know; your work and presence as a critic and thinker have already made a massive impact in spite of the obstacles and the aforementioned "distraction." I think the fact that we're here, that I am having this conversation with you, for *Artforum*—that means a lot to me.

RJP: Thank you, Lynette.

LYB: Because I didn't have this option twenty years ago. I didn't have this option ten years ago. I mean, no one was asking me, anyway—least of all *Artforum*, but still!

[*Laughter*]

LYB: But to be sat here now, having a conversation with a Black female thinker is—it's really quite emotional. My heart is full because this hasn't always happened. In this way. A conversation like this, amongst ourselves.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Ever the Women Watchful*, 2017, oil on linen, 78 3/4 × 51 3/8".

RJP: Could you speak to *Ever the Women Watchful*, 2017? It serves as my screensaver at least a few times a year.

LYB: It is a recurring theme: The Watching. Women Watching. A Watchfulness. It is a Blacker Watch than most, and there are two Watchers, in contrast to earlier paintings, where there is only one. One Watches with a naked eye; one intensifies the Watch through binoculars for closer scrutiny of the same object/place/person/occurrence/catastrophe/miracle/outrage. Black women Watching, without necessarily intervening, possibly out of detachment, possibly with judgment—keeping their own counsel, as is their right. To be all-seeing and all-knowing and yet elsewhere altogether. Much like the divine.

RJP: I can only be excited by the fact that we have a burgeoning new generation of painters. But it feels like every few months there's a new Black graduate being pegged by a

blue-chip gallery or praised by a proud collector on Instagram. What I'm most concerned with now is how this new valuation is sustained, right? In a similar vein though—and in particular as Black British people—we need to be more discerning and learn how to disagree.

LYB: That's important to bear in mind. There is room to be all things. But fundamentally it is much richer and deeper than appearances. There is the issue of respect and, going back to what I said earlier, of not being treated as less or different. It really isn't a big ask, nor a great stretch of the imagination. It's common sense. If hiring a single Black member of staff and then perpetuating the same dysfunctional, patronizing, and passive-aggressive work environment that drove away the last single Black member of staff is the strategy, we'll continue to get nowhere! Equality is not an act of charity; it's for your own damn good, and that of your institution or business. And until people embrace that, they and their galleries, institutions, or companies will keep screwing up and getting called out and then screwing up again. But we've been saying this for decades, and we're tired, aren't we? And I need to channel my energy away from the crazy and toward the magical. I think that's where the real changes happen. I've got paintings to paint, writing to do, and plenty of people to love.

ALL IMAGES

HYPERALLERGIC

The Silence of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Looking at Yiadom-Boakye's portraits is an act of slow discovery, the unveiling of a mystery.

by Michael Glover
January 2, 2021

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Tie the Temptress to the Trojan" (2018), Collection of Michael Bertrand, Toronto (©Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

LONDON — Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a painter of portraits. These are not portraits of identifiable sitters. They are a melding, a merging, and an imaginative refashioning of a multiplicity of images found and seen. They cleave close to the human form as we habitually know and see it — so close, in fact, that it can be

difficult to accept that these particular sitters do not exist in the world. Yet they do not.

The portraits on display in ***Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly in League with the Night*** at Tate Britain are not celebrations of individuals, but rather composite human creations that emerged as part of the process of painting. Images from a multiplicity of sources have rushed into the vortex of making.

In many, Yiadom-Boakye pays concentrated attention to the head and upper torso; in others, whole bodies are depicted in movement: walking, dancing, or lounging in groups. Dark tones often emerge from dark grounds, which means that, for the viewer, the looking is an act of slow discovery, the unveiling of a mystery. Many portrait painters wrench the human form about — and the facial features in particular — to forge a vision that often sails close to despair, or to bleakness at the very least. Think of Bacon or Auerbach. Yiadom-Boakye does no such thing.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Condor and the Mole" (2011), Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London (© Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

Rather, there is an enveloping warmth, and even a gentle humor, about her portraiture, and more than a touch of nobility, too, as if viewers are being nudged to see the majesty in her subject's faces. Her paintings are not heavily textured. There

is no evidence of violent workings and re-workings, no surface agitation of the kind that you might find in the portraiture of, say, Leon Kossoff.

She is not in the business of displaying anguish. She keeps her own counsel. These paintings often have an air of serenity, and a quiet assurance, about them. The energies all emerge from the forms themselves: the particular leap of a dancer or the furious, purposive stride of a walker in profile. As onlookers, we witness those energies in a motion now frozen, not in a replication of the ongoing facture of the work itself. Her subjects exude an extraordinary dignity, if not a kind of indefinable wholeness.

The show itself feels calm and well-paced, too. Why? One reason is that the paintings are not at war with an incessant, distracting chatter of words. Inside the gallery spaces, they are unencumbered by text of any kind. There is no interpretation whatsoever, neither tucked in beside individual works nor on panels at the gallery entrances. There is nothing to be read about the artist's life. No themes are proposed by words on a wall — nothing comes between us and the image. The paintings are allowed to speak for themselves, and they do so with a wordless eloquence.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Citrine by the Ounce" (2014), Private Collection (© Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

And all this feels right. What the painter offers, in her wholeness of looking, is narrative promise, together with a certain appetite-whetting ambiguity. And all this is of a human size and on a human scale. The paintings feel entirely self-sufficient human proposals, speaking to us directly, without any need for the mediation of language.

There is no rigid trajectory of any kind, either; no progress report. Chronologically, the paintings are mixed and matched. And there is just the right amount of breathing space between them. They don't seem to be breathlessly queuing up to assail viewers. They are patient. They take their time.

They also seem to share a common mood. How to describe it? Generosity of spirit? Combined with a certain joy — or even a brazen optimism about what it is to be human? Or is it a restrained spirit of tenderness — even quiet celebration? These qualities are unusual to see in these harum-scarum days. The truth's in there somewhere.

Lynette Yiadom-Boayke, "A Concentration" (2018), Carter Collection (© Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye)

Oh dear, I find that I have lied a little. There are some words on these walls after all, just a few, and these are the titles that the painter has given to her works. Some

painters avoid them altogether, and of those who do them, few give great titles to their works.

Few of us have the imaginative sensitivity of, say, the poet Wallace Stevens. But Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, being a poet as well as a painter, gives her works wonderful titles, titles that enrich our looking: “Any Number of Preoccupations”; “Fiscal Playsuit”; “To Improvise a Mountain”; “A Toast to the Health of a Heathen”; “Repurposed for Songs.”

There is a lift-off about such a title as “To Improvise a Mountain.” A young woman, standing, with her back to us, plays with her hair, somewhat self-consciously, as an older woman, head propped on her arm, stares back up at her.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “To Improvise a Mountain” (2018), Private Collection (© Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, photo: Marcus Leith)

How significant is this conversation? What is its nature? The title has the suggestive puzzle of the play of poetry about it, a certain quality of imaginative free-floatingness. The hugeness of a mountain is coming into being, it seems to propose, as if by some miracle, as if it might even be conjured by the nonchalance of a human gesture.

Will this young woman, a touch hesitant, a touch fragile, on this checker-board floor, grow into such a mountain? Could life prove to be quite that magnificent? This kind of delicate, dancing interplay between title and image happens again and again in this show.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: *Fly in League With the Night*

By Bartolomeo Sala

It would be quite difficult to find another artistic tradition so scorned, so often considered regressive and old-fashioned, as the tradition of European portraiture and oil painting commonly is by most contemporary art discourse. As individual onlookers, we might still be moved by single artworks, but even this form of private appreciation often comes with a tinge of guilt—as if by marveling at an individual masterpiece we were indulging a childish habit we have long outgrown. This is because oil portraits, as the dominant art form during centuries of bourgeois ascendance and capitalist expansion, come with a sort of stigma—embedded in values which the avant-garde and critics such as Clement Greenberg have conditioned us to detest and be suspicious of.

As "advertisement[s] of the patron's good fortune, prestige, and wealth", as John Berger puts it in his groundbreaking series on European oil painting "Ways of Seeing"—portraits are first and foremost commodities which, celebrate their owner's right to own and accrue property—be it in the form of precious objects and curios, voluptuous women, or exotically attired servants. To deny this would be denying the obvious. At the same time, it is undeniable that there was a time when portraiture—to borrow from Audre Lorde's famous essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"—was valued also all as a "revelation or distillation of experience"; and it is in this primal, perhaps "naïve," sense that it's celebrated in Fly In League With the Night, on view at Tate Britain until early May.

Bringing together 70 paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (b. 1977) and spanning a career covering two decades, the retrospective is the most comprehensive to date to grace the British artist of Ghanaian descent. As a painter, Yiadom-Boakye works “in spontaneous and instinctive bursts”—applying short and expressive brushstrokes to the canvas and completing most of her paintings in a single day. Much like a poet or a novelist, to paint her “character studies” of imaginary Black subjects, she returns to the same set of obsessions and motifs. Single figures rapt in thought or staring at the viewer, undecipherable; groups caught in friendly, intimate scenes—even when painted at long intervals, most paintings are variations on a handful of recurring themes.

Upon entering the second room, the spectator is met by a series of portraits capturing fleeting moments of repose and introspection. There is the diptych Pale For The Rapture (2016), which portrays two elegantly-dressed, pensive young men on two patterned sofas, their faces partially hidden by their hands. There is No Such Luxury (2012), which shows a Black woman sitting at a white table with a cup of tea in front of her, her impression made all the more intense by her hand propping up her chin and partly covering her mouth. Juxtaposed to “quotidian” works—in a pattern repeating throughout—are more colourful and carnivalesque pieces like Daydreaming of Devils (2016), which shows a prancing male dancer reminiscent of Picasso’s harlequins.

On occasion, Yiadom-Boakye draws from the canon to subvert it subtly, almost imperceptibly. For example, she reverses the usual game of who gets to look and who is looked at. Many of the works on view showcase young, attractive men bare-chested or in intimate homosocial bonding, like alluring nymphs of old. On the contrary, women are often caught in the act of looking and, on at least two occasions, are shown with a pair of binoculars gazing out of the canvas. This inversion of male gaze aside, the artist seems, however, to be purposefully oblivious to many questions at the heart of most art theory and practice. She doesn’t “interrogate,” much less “deconstruct” the contentious legacy of European oil painting. Rather, she treats it as a reservoir.

To highlight this, at the entrance, the curators welcome the viewer with First (2003) and Any Number of Preoccupations (2010)—two paintings which, by portraying a male figure in a flashy red robe, are both a direct homage to John Singer Sergent's portrait Dr. Pozzi at Home (1881). References of this kind abound in the following rooms, too. Bound Over To Keep the Faith (2012), for example, features a man posing as the naked prostitute of Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe (1862–63). Manet and Degas again return in Geranium Love Sonnet (2010)—a portrait of a woman in a white tank top whose posture and red hair against a red background allude to both Un bar aux Folies-Bergère (1882) and La Coiffure (c. 1896).

Rather than isolated winks and nods, these references are part of a larger and coherent poetics. In traditional oil painting, patrons liked to be pictured surrounded by their belongings. Sometimes, these items—be they objects or garments—do not merely flaunt the subject's wealth and status but tell us something about their character—their personality. Yiadom-Boakye similarly crowds her spare compositions with elements that invite the viewer to fill in the blanks and make up a story. Quite a few paintings, for example, include exotic and highly symbolic animals such as foxes, owls, parrots, and other birds. Several others feature people wearing bizarre feathered ruffs—quaint items of clothing one would normally associate with a stuffy Baroque gallery.

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The New York Times

A Portraitist Whose Subjects Are All in Her Head

A major new exhibition at Tate Britain in London puts the spotlight on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, an artist who paints enigmatic Black characters of her own invention.

By Siddhartha Mitter

Dec. 16, 2020

The British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a committed painter of people. Every piece she shows is, on first impression, a portrait — a careful study of one person, or, at most, a small group, with little to distract from their presence and force.

Yet whenever she starts work, in her East London studio, she is alone. Her subjects are not living individuals, but characters sprung from her mind.

For several years, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye said in a recent video call, one recurring figure in particular appeared to her when she began a new set of paintings, as if demanding to be put on canvas.

It was a young man, seated, wearing a white top, with a kind of sardonic air. His identity was unimportant, she said: The point was his attitude, as if he were expressing back to the painter an energy essential to her creative process.

“It helped me to have that figure on the wall as a reminder,” she said. “There was a defiance, a very particular look that was almost like a guiding light.”

Fictions are freeing for Ms. Yiadom-Boakye, 43, whose first career-spanning survey, “Fly in League With the Night,” runs through May 9, 2021, at Tate Britain (though the museum is currently closed because of the pandemic). The exhibition features over 80 works going back to 2003, the year she graduated with an M.F.A. from the Royal Academy Schools in London. Since then, she has worked in a steadfast genre that she mapped and continues to deepen.

The artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye photographed in London. The first career-spanning exhibition of her paintings are at Tate Britain. Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

“Geranium Love Sonnet” (2010) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, via Tate

“A Passion Like No Other” (2012) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, via Tate

Though inspired by her memories and the sketches, photographs and magazine cuttings in her scrapbook, her characters are not composites, but rather creations in the moment. She does not draw them in advance, and their traits become clear as she works.

All of them are Black. It is tempting to read them as Black British, like the artist, whose parents arrived from Ghana in the 1960s, but that would be presuming. The costumes she gives them — a flared collar, a dress with a ruff — elude locations or precise time periods; the background is usually neutral, often dark. At most there is the hint of an interior, such as a sofa’s upholstery, or a suggested landscape.

There may be some clues: three young men, wearing leggings, conversing, as a fourth stretches, apparently in a dance studio; two gentlemen in suits, clinking flutes of champagne. But Ms. Yiadom-Boakye leaves her characters open to the viewer’s interpretation. (Her titles — like “Tie the Temptress to the Trojan” or “In Lieu of Keen Virtue” — are enigmatic, as well.)

The figures are moods manifested. Sometimes, they communicate conviviality, sometimes repose — but most often, the tone is of contemplation, in many fine nuances.

”A Concentration” (2018) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, via Tate

“They’re kind of just who they are,” she said. “They exist in the paint.”

When Ms. Yiadom-Boakye was forging her practice, in the early 2000s, figuration — indeed painting in general — was not particularly in style. Two decades later, it’s back: Market and museum interest in Black contemporary artists has expanded vastly, and Black portraiture, both from the present and in art history, is a major international research topic and curatorial focus.

Ms. Yiadom-Boakye’s own recognition has grown along the way. She was a finalist for the Turner Prize, in 2013. Her United States introduction came with “Flow,” a noted 2008 group exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and a solo show there in 2010. She had an exhibition at the New Museum in 2017, and she won the 2018 Carnegie Prize.

Yet she has kept a remove from trends, blending her own personal mix. Her seemingly traditional approach — her commitment to oil; her comfort with engaging the European lineage, from Goya to Degas to the British Post-Impressionist Walter Sickert — is itself a kind of trompe l’oeil, serving the liberating purpose of painting Black subjects according purely to her own imagination.

“She is highly regarded but not part of a clique or group at all,” said Andrea Schlieker, Tate Britain’s director of exhibitions and curator of the survey show. “She’s always done her own thing.”

"In so many ways, I was an anomaly," Ms. Yiadom-Boakye said of her arrival in the London art world, in the early 2000s. Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

Ms. Yiadom-Boakye grew up in South London, the daughter of two nurses. Her commitment to art formed early; she credits high-school art teachers who were passionate and rigorous. Still, she said, she would likely have chosen a different path had Britain's introduction of fees for public universities, in 1998, come earlier: Hers was the last year of free tuition.

"I couldn't have gone to art school if I'd had to pay," she said. "It would have felt like too much of a crazy risk, and I'd have been financially too anxious to embark on that."

At college, she spent one year at the storied Central St. Martins school, where the anti-painting climate proved annoying, she said. "I didn't like being told that something was invalid before I'd even tried it," she explained. "That goes for anything, not just painting."

She left to enroll at the Falmouth School of Art, 300 miles away, in Cornwall, and was refreshed, she said, by its distance from London and a more open, practical academic atmosphere.

She returned to the capital after graduation, with growing confidence in setting her own path — and sensing, she said, that her background as a Black, middle-class daughter of immigrants would make her an outlier in London art circles, regardless of her aesthetic choices.

"I wasn't doing perhaps what they would have liked me to do, or saying what they would have liked me to say, and it didn't really matter," she said. "Because, in so many ways, I was an anomaly."

Though she established her method early, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye's style has progressed through stages, whose full scope is apparent for the first time in the Tate exhibition and its catalog.

"Nous Etions" (2004) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and The Studio Museum in Harlem, via Tate

"In Lieu Of Keen Virtue" (2017) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, via Tate

Early pieces, from 2003 to roughly 2008, demonstrate some of her signature touches: figures in three-quarter length in shades of a single color, some seeming to emerge ethereally from the night, or others whose energy concentrates in the glint in their eyes.

Missing, however, is the elegant calm that inhabits her later paintings. Those early works, she said, carried "something frantic and anxious."

"Going from the sense of trying to illustrate an idea, to allowing the paint to bring something to life, or thinking about painting as a language in itself — that was the major shift," she said.

That inflection came around 2009, she said, thanks, in part, to a residency in Marseille, France. There, her studio window overlooked train tracks and walls festooned with graffiti that shone in the Mediterranean light. She had so little money then, she recalled, that she couldn't afford painting materials, and instead spent the period drawing in oil stick, methodically.

"Having to slow down like that was really liberating," she said. "When I came back, the paintings were thinking about light and color much more effectively."

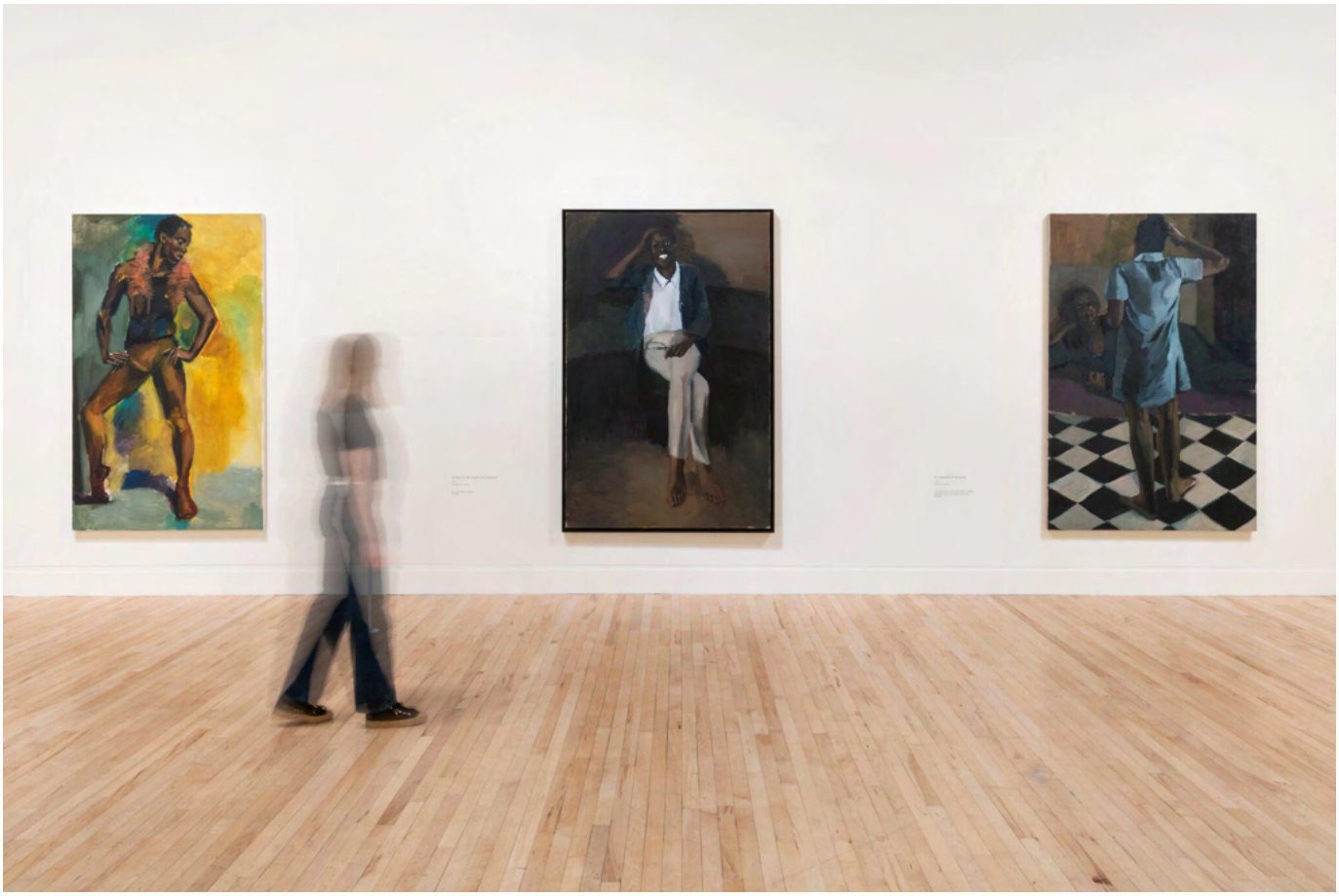
Ms. Yiadom-Boakye's star was rising at the time. In 2008, the influential curator Okwui Enwezor included her in the Gwangju Biennale; in New York City, Mr. Enwezor spoke highly of her to the gallerist Jack Shainman, who had fallen for her work at the Studio Museum.

"It wasn't a question: I wanted to work with her," said Mr. Shainman, who presented her first New York gallery show in 2010. Of Mr. Enwezor, who died last year, he said, "Okwui always talked so much about the humanity in her paintings."

Like her characters, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye errs on the side of discretion. She works alone, keeping her studio space sacred. In the interview, she spoke of a taste for mystery novels, and she is a writer herself, of poetry and short stories with oblique, fable-like touches. And while her firm focus on Black figures could be seen as political at a time when racial representation in art is undergoing a major reassessment, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye tends to refrain from announcements about identity and belonging.

In 2019, however, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye participated in the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the Venice Biennale — a blockbuster production including works by the artist Ibrahim Mahama, the Ghanaian-British filmmaker John Akomfrah and more, in a structure designed by the architect David Adjaye.

“It was a very beautiful thing to do,” she said. Her roots, she said, transmitted by her parents’ ethos, “have always been in the work, even though there aren’t Ghanaian flags or monuments in the back.” Last Christmas, she was thrilled to make her first trip back in years, noting wryly that she might have stayed to wait out the pandemic there, had she anticipated it.



From left, “Daydreaming Of Devils" (2016), “A Toast to the Health of a Heathen” (2014) and “To Improvise a Mountain” (2018) on display at Tate Britain. Seraphina Neville/Tate

She demurred from placing herself in a specifically British artistic lineage, but Ms. Schlieker, the curator, said the Tate Britain survey makes a statement. “It’s particularly important to see Lynette’s work in the context of a collection,” Ms. Schlieker said. “And our collection stretches across 500 years of British art” — with few Black figures, or artists, in the canon.

In Ms. Yiadom-Boakye’s ensemble of characters, however, there reigns a serenity, too self-composed to be ruffled by representation battles.

Being of her own creation, they are like a host of arm’s-length alter egos, each unique, but some linked by expression, by a color or composition detail.

FT FINANCIAL TIMES

Visual Arts

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at Tate Britain: a vaccine for the soul

As the work in this retrospective shows, the British artist is arguably the finest figurative painter of her generation

'Razorbill' (2020) © Courtesy of the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Rachel Spence Dec. 3, 2020

The man is chilled, mirthful, his smile provocative and carefree. He sits sideways, his hands flopped across each other on his knee, his grin a dental triumph that chimes with the gleam in his eye, white sweater and improbable lobster-pink glove. Those flashes of brightness intensify an infantry of darks: the clotted black background; the figure's oaky complexion; the ashen creases lapping his sweater.

Here, he stars in a painting called "Wrist Action" (2010); next to him, placed back to back so that he grins over shoulder as if the pair are sharing a joke, his double occupies "Bound Over To Keep the Faith" (2012).

This laconic fellow often alights on the fertile, mysterious planet that is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's imagination. Indeed, she has said that he "encapsulate[s] the spirit of what I'm trying to do".¤

> **Essentially hers is an art not of concept or story but of sensation and experience**

With another painter, such a remark would be less significant. But, as underscored by her new retrospective *Fly In League With The Night* at newly reopened Tate Britain, not only is Yiadom-Boakye one of the UK's most gifted painters, she is also one of the most enigmatic. Born in London in 1977 to Ghanaian parents, she has, since graduating from the Royal Academy Schools in 2003, peopled her oeuvre with men and women whose detached poise whispers of lives pursued for private passions rather than public glory.

At Tate, the pink-gloved gent makes his entrance in room 3. By then his persona has been foreshadowed by a host of similar conundrums, including "Any Number of Preoccupations" (2010), in which a man sits on a chair wearing a wraparound robe in papal scarlet, with hotel slippers on his feet and an illegible expression in his eyes. Equally irreducible is the young woman in "No Such Luxury" (2012). Sitting at a table in front of a cup of tea, the tide of blacks and browns that flood her figure and background are tenor notes to the high-keyed greys and whites of table, crockery and a single evanescent rivulet that maps her shoulder.¤

'Wrist Action' (2010) © Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

"Is it a poem? Is it a story? Is it a novella?" Those words, uttered by Indian artist-photographer Dayanita Singh as she leafed through her image sequences many years ago, haunted me as I roamed each chapter of Yiadom-Boakye's elusive world.

With more layers than a millefeuille and more locks than a Swiss bank, Yiadom-Boakye's paintings could only be the work of an artist who is also a writer. She has said: "I write about the things I can't paint and paint the things I can't write." So wedded is she to literary inspiration that she has included a list of her favourite books in the catalogue. (James Baldwin, Shakespeare, Zora Neale Hurston and Ted Hughes all make the cut.)

Rather than painting from life, Yiadom-Boakye charms her subjects out of her own imagination, building them, as writers build fictional protagonists, out of an internal scrapbook in which she has squirrelled away images found everywhere from Old Master paintings to family snapshots alongside gestures, looks and light effects observed in real life. The result, like all the best novels, is that her paintings are inhabited by characters more authentic than any real personage yet *a priori* unavailable.

'Condor and the Mole' (2011) © Courtesy of the artist

Those covert narratives are further enriched by her custom of hanging her paintings so that there is a dialogue between the works. At Tate, for example, "Any Number of Preoccupations" is presented as the more mature, less melodramatic sibling of "First". On the same wall as the more recent painting, the latter, painted in Yiadom-Boakye's graduation year 2003, also shows a figure in a red bathrobe. But with his smudged gash of a mouth and bulging jockstrap-style pants, this figure is grotesque, tantalising but a little repellent.

In the years that follow "First", Yiadom-Boakye realised, as she puts it, that she needed to "think less about the subject and more about the painting . . . about colour, light and composition".

A quartet of small paintings in Room 3 are a window on her evolution. The earliest, “Cage” (2006), shows a woman in profile assembled from Goyaesque blacks whose subtle balance reveals a painter developing the monochromatic sophistication that will become a cornerstone of her practice.

By 2008, when she makes the seated figure who occupies “Fourth Magic”, she’s pushing darkness to the limits of figurative possibility. Next to it, “Further Pressure from Cannibals” (2010) shows her mixing it up again, with her female figure’s face and hair illuminated by delicate dawn grey, china blue and rose highlights. Ten years later, the young woman laughing straight at us in “Razorbill” (2020) is summoned out of an orchestra of browns with touches of white on teeth, eyes and brows that transmit her joie-de-vivre with deft economy.

‘Tie the Temptress to the Trojan’ (2018) © Collection of Michael Bertrand, Toronto. Courtesy of the artist

Although it’s not clear which month she painted “Razorbill”, it’s tempting to read Yiadom-Boakye’s decision to go “back to black” this year as a reflection on the killing of George Floyd and the events that followed. But her art is too subtle for superficial readings. Certainly, she leaves us in no doubt of her politics. Hung opposite the exhibition’s entrance so that it’s the first image visitors see is “Black Allegiance to the Cunning” (2018), a painting of a man with a fox at his feet. This trope announces Yiadom-Boakye’s position on racism, her faith in black people’s resilience and hints that those ideas will slink into her paintings in a thousand wily disguises.

At times, she is candid. In the final room, for example, the 2020 work “A Hatred in May” shows a Delphic-eyed young woman with sculpted cheekbones pointing her finger skywards as if calling on a Fury to avenge her murdered brothers.

But Yiadom-Boakye has said she doesn’t like to paint victims and admires her characters for their “strength . . . and moral fibre”. Their air of independence is nourished by a supporting cast of birds and animals which, aside from several foxes, also includes a glorious parrot in “Accompanied to the Kindness” (2012), and a pert black cat in “In Lieu of Keen Virtue” (2017). Perched on wrists and draped over shoulders, these creatures possess a languid, uncanny intimacy, as if they alone are privy to secrets of their humans’ souls.

Yet it would be a shame to spend so long unravelling Yiadom-Boakye’s fictional knots that we fail to appreciate the skill at putting pigment on canvas that has made her arguably the finest figurative painter of her generation.

Whether she is indulging in an ecstasy of fruity, sanguineous reds (“The Ventricular”, 2018), dazzling us with a quickstep of silvery greys across a man’s jacket (“For the Sake of Angels”, 2018); or scribbling an exhalation of smoke so seductively viscous the viewer almost coughs (“A Whistle in a Wish”, 2018), Yiadom-Boakye’s devotion to her material is as palpable as her painstaking study of forerunners including Goya, Manet, John Singer Sargent and, crucially, Walter Sickert, an often underrated painter who was another virtuoso with murky colours.

'A Hatred in May' (2020) © Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

In the drenched pigments of that parrot, you glimpse the lush ancestors that brightened Veronese's banquet scene, "The Feast in the House of Levi"; the faceted woody browns that elevate the girl to prophetess in "Hatred in May" are distant offspring of Cézanne's meticulous frictions of shape and tone. Those operatic scales of feeling — high, low, sharp, flat — conducted out of minimal shades recall Rothko's pyramids of colour, one strata bleeding through another as if the painter is peeling away our emotions even as she reveals her own.

Yiadom-Boakye has synthesised those influences to create a vision as self-sufficient as that of her characters. Essentially, hers is an art not of concept or story but of sensation and experience; a magnificent testimony to her desire to "allow these paintings to be paintings in the most physical sense . . . to let the paint to do the talking".

After the year we've had, work of this beauty and complexity glows like light at the end of the tunnel. It reminds us that art matters. It is paint as vaccine for the soul.

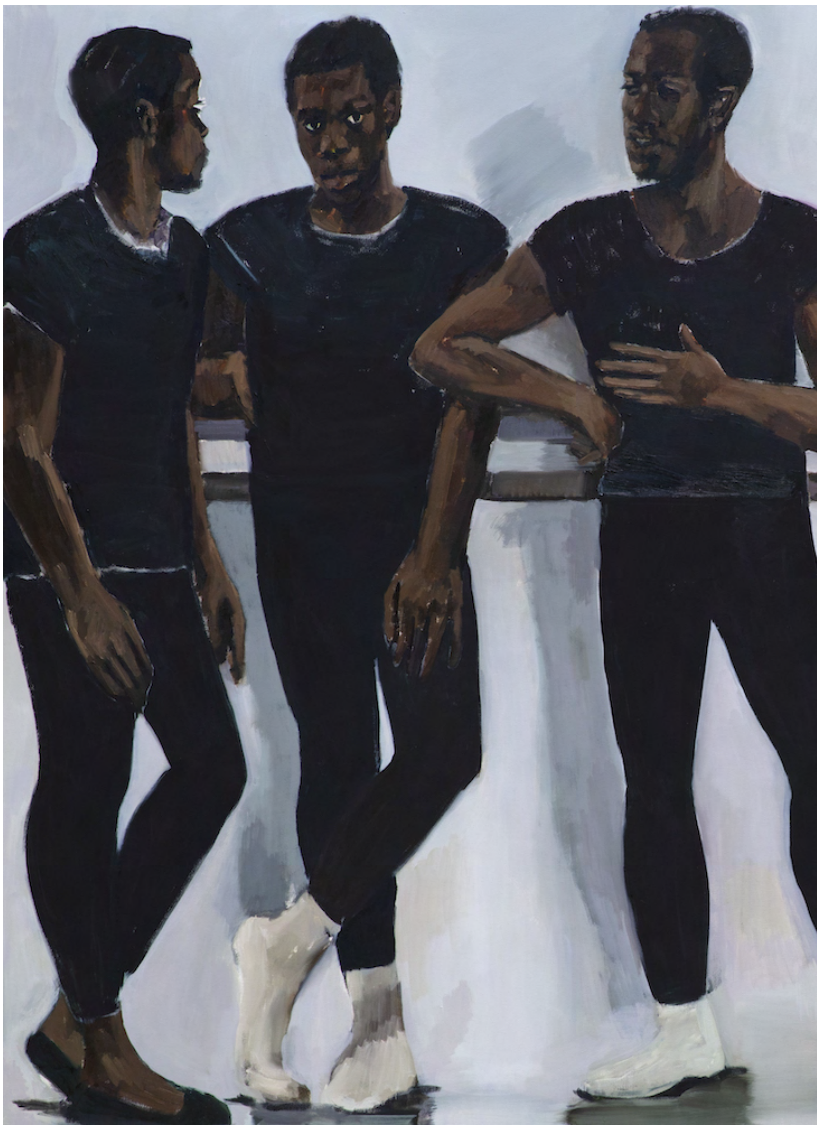
FLASH ART

331 SUMMER 2020, FEATURES

Rest as Revolution: The Speculative Nature of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Figurations

by JaBrea Patterson-West

August 3, 2020



Lynette Yiadom Boakye, A Concentration, 2018. Oil on linen. 79 × 98 1/2 × 1 1/2 in.

Race, resistance, rage, rebellion — words that are presently etched into the forefronts of everyone's mind. As cities burn, glistening with the fire of destruction that is almost always a result of endured pain and catastrophic silence, hashtags trend, funds are redistributed, and statements of virtue are published. We march, cry, yell out for our mothers, we repeat the words that we have expressed so many times before: "I can't breathe." And it is true both literally and figuratively. George Floyd, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland, quite literally, could not breathe. But the rest of us are also breathless. Always struggling to be heard, or to survive. Existing in a limbo that depends on our theoretical knowledge of what it means to be free and our simultaneous lack of freedom in any proximate reality. Thus, revolution is the logical response.

Our world is in a period of awakening to collective struggles and to oppression that disproportionately and systemically steals the joy and the lives of black, indigenous, and trans people. To exist as a black person when blackness of the body, mind, and soul has been made a crime carries a heaviness, a weight that no amount of solidarity can relieve. A pressure that many cannot find the words to describe, therefore internalizing that which the world is only just beginning to realize. When black death and suffering turn profits and a black person is at equal risk of being killed on Black Lives Matter Plaza as on any other street, where does blackness lie down to rest?

Submerged in thought, or perhaps focused on something invisible to us, a painted black figure rests his head in one hand, propping up his knee to relieve the solid weight of his upper body. The collapse forces the figure forward and into our conscious imagination. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's painting *Medicine at Playtime* (2017) evokes the portrait of a man we once knew. A brother, friend, cousin, teacher, and, depending on our own age, a father. Yet the title of the work obscures this reality from our interpretation. His casual yet confident posture tells us no more of his life, his work, his family than the subtle familiarity of black-and-white-checkered tile or brown washed walls that frame his seated body. Meeting this work wholly requires us to combat our collective desire to define a life around a specific set of actions — positive and negative. It requires us to embrace stillness as central and fundamental to our being. To release our expectations of that thing which is so feared and often misrepresented in our society: our blackness.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Medicine At Playtime, 2017. Oil on linen. 78.7 × 47.2 in. Courtesy of the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

With acuity and simplicity, Yiadom-Boakye reveals the multifaceted reality of blackness. Her subjects make visible the invisible reality of *being* in a black body: the reality that is often shielded in portrayals of blackness in the news, films, music, and broader pop culture; and in the worst cases, it is stripped away. Leisure and life are denied broadly and systemically. A world that makes it its goal to disappear black lives requires art that affirms black lives. Yiadom- Boakye's work removes itself from the brutality of our physical reality and asserts another dimension in which blackness is not crime, nor discomfort. Neither struggle, nor statement. Instead, blackness is a state of being punctuated by thoughtfulness, reflection, intimacy, community, and repose. In a world where countless images of black bodies exist as brutal evidence of pain and suffering and are circulated without regard, Yiadom-Boakye's conscious decision to create images of black bodies in moments of atemporal pleasure and tranquility is cathartic.

There is a necessity for new and different representation of the black body grounded in futurity, which Lynette Yiadom-Boakye fulfills through her timeless scenes of black life. Her work visualizes an alternate space where black bodies can exist undisturbed and undefined by contemporary or historical sociopolitical landscapes. Perhaps the figures that Yiadom-Boakye constructs from the annals of her mind, and our reality, could once be considered fictive. But today, their striking dimensionality and foresight rings *generative*, or even *speculative*. Although sometimes bordering on fantastic, the works that resonate strongest here — those like *Medicine at Playtime* (2018), *Repose 1* (2015), *Sister to a Solstice* (2018), and *To Reason with Heathen at Harvest* (2017) —

feel too close to our world to exist solely as evidence of another. In them, there always lingers a glance unmet; one too confident to be fortuitous; a head turned away with body front facing still; an ear poised to listen; an arm hoping to embrace; an image of a black man lying, leaning on his elbows, eyes cast down in thoughtful contemplation or re ection. A woman smiling certainly at her companion, another anticipating arrival. A revolution waiting to happen. And yet, the image appears so distant from our reality as to produce a startling effect. For me, viewing this work for the rst time and thereafter felt like a wakeup call — or better, a call to action.

But futurity is frequently complicated by political nuance, bound by a collective imagination that acts like a multi-headed beast of the same body. The freedom we desire is distorted by semantics, identity, and by the presence of oppressive systems in our everyday lives. Yiadom-Boakye's composite figures remind us of the simplicity and truth of our end goal — liberation — and more pertinently, how intrinsic our humanity is to the struggle. Her eidetic paintings, in this sense, embody the powerful employment of the black radical imagination in the visual arts, to enlighten viewers to a black queer feminist futurity by drawing attention to our own chaotic state of unrest and preoccupation. Contrasting, and thus challenging our present reality, Yiadom-Boakye reassures us that revolution is possible. But most saliently, her work asserts that revolution will be pleasure-centered.

Adrienne Maree Brown, a celebrated scholar whom I deeply admire, compared organizing to science fiction because by organizing our communities "we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced."[1] In her recent book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, Brown teaches that a revolutionary politics that centers pleasure positions us closer to freedom. When considered through a black queer feminist lens, contemporary artists play a significant role in the fight for justice. Visual artists are capable of imagining and communicating a future that does not currently exist for all people. A world in which rest and joy are possible and essential for all people, but especially for marginalized people. Yiadom-Boakye projects a world where gathering is encouraged and leisure is expected of black people — as opposed to a world in which we are subjected to violence for doing so. The world that she depicts in her paintings is absent of racist, capitalist, patriarchal structures, and institutions that rely on the oppression of black people. Her subjects do not have to fight, protest, or march for the right to be. The blackness with which she imbues her subjects warrants no explanation, no justification, and no defense. They simply exist in the abstracted utopia of the canvas, washed in vibrant color and quiet poeticism, mirroring a future to which we are entitled but have not yet achieved.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, To Reason With Heathen At Harvest, 2017Oil on canvas. 78.7 × 51.1 in.

The works of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye are assertions that black joy exists in rest, in dance, in leisure, in re ection, in solitude, and in comradery. When the world can only see sadness and despair, Yiadom-Boakye's speculative gurations demand an acknowledgment of black joy as resistance. If the role of the artist is to imagine a world that is on the precipice of existence, then our role as viewers, scholars, critics, collectors, curators, and patrons of the arts is to fan the re of resistance, which moves us closer and closer toward justice. The great intersectional lesbian feminist Audre Lorde declared that the personal is political. When anger demands too much of our bodies, we must remember her life and words as epitomized by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's idyllic paintings, and we must rest.

Today I rest, and in my re ection, I remember the countless brothers and sisters whose lives were taken from them. Gone too soon, I pray their souls have reached the eternal peace denied to them in life. I remember their names as I rest, and as I ght. Breonna Taylor, Oluwatoyin Salau, Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells, Riah Milton, Tony McDade, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks — I write this for you in hopes that I can honor your memory in the only way I know how.

Jabrea Patterson-West is an interdisciplinary writer, scholar, and curator. She is now pursuing graduate study in Art History at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York City. She will continue to center Black Diaspora, queer, and women artists in both her academic and professional praxis. Patterson-West curates and manages the platform *Modern Black Contemporary* that features the work of esteemed modern and contemporary artists alongside early career, student artists.

1 Adrienne Marie Brown, "Introduction," in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, ed. (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), p. 10.

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES
APRIL 2020

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Brothers to a Garden,* 2017, oil on linen, 59 × 47 1/2".

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

THE HUNTINGTON

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye knows how to capture decisive moments. In her show at the Huntington Art Gallery, which was curated by Hilton Als and traveled from the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, a group of six paintings document her black sitters, who are often deep in thought or on the verge of connection. Yiadom-Boakye limns her subjects with energetic brushstrokes, usually finishing her canvases in a single day.

In *The Needs Beyond*, 2013, a bearded man looks out at the viewer with shining eyes, his mouth neither smiling nor frowning, as if he is awaiting a response. His face emerges from a darkened room, in a cloud of browns and ebonies, and is touched with yellow and pink paint. With a few spare lines and deft tonal control, Yiadom-Boakye offers an image that gives the viewer the sense of actually being seen by another human being. The effect is similar to that of Mary Cassatt's *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1880, with its pale haze of yellows, pinks, and greens, punctuated by glaringly blue eyes.

The Huntington, recognizing Yiadom-Boakye's historical references, has placed her show next to galleries filled with "highly formal eighteenth-century British portraits." But Yiadom-Boakye's rapid method and skill at documenting evanescent moods bring her closer to the nineteenth-century Impressionists, not only Cassatt but also Gustave Caillebotte and Claude Monet. A crucial difference is that those painters were invested in centering whiteness, something Yiadom-Boakye offsets with her use of the same form to portray black subjects.

In *Brothers to a Garden*, 2017, a man in an indigo blazer rests his chin in his hand, his mouth slightly agape as he looks into the middle distance, seemingly at an unseen speaker whose tale is transporting him. Yiadom-Boakye has worked so swiftly here that parts of the canvas are nude. In these works, an inverse relationship might exist between the depth of the thought expressed and the volume of paint on the canvas.

Rendered in this flash of daubs, the subject's expression of deep concentration hearkens back to Berthe Morisot's *Jeune femme en toilette de bal* (Young Girl in a Ball Gown), 1879, whose unfettered strokes reveal a white-shouldered woman riveted by an off-screen presence. Yiadom-Boakye's *Brothers* somehow captures the sensation of having one's world narrow to a point of fascination: The subject's eyes are soft and deeply receptive; his left hand hangs down in physical surrender.

Yiadom-Boakye's portraits are all the more remarkable given that none were made in the presence of a flesh-and-blood subject; they were occasionally based on found images but are otherwise entirely products of the artist's mind. Her methods build upon the Impressionists' efforts to render "accurate" representations that were also deeply subjective and imaginative (as in Monet's hyperreal visions of haystacks). And her efforts shine in *Medicine at Playtime*, 2017, where a man sits on a chair in front of an ocher wall, resting his hand on his head and his elbow on his raised knee. He lifts his chin slightly, and his eyes—rendered only in a stroke or two of white—appear unfocused, as they do when someone is dreaming or grieving. In a way, the pose and scene evoke John Singer Sargent's pictures of contemplative nabobs, such as *Charles Martin Loeffler*, 1903, which shows a broody, beautifully lit violinist. Yet there is a suggestion of emotional access in Medicine: The subject's round shoulders and calm presence communicate a less defended state.

Joie de vivre arrives with *Harp-Strum*, 2016, a diptych of two dancers, each occupying one canvas. They leap toward each other, their faces alight with the sympathy reached during an apex of artistic collaboration. The scene is set against a mint-green background, and the dancers wear emerald leotards and tights as they vault through the air. One figure's face blazes with delight while the other's verges on rapture. The piece clearly alludes to Edgar Degas's *Two Dancers on a Stage*, 187 , in which young, flower-crowned ballerinas exchange timid glances. But the intense communication between *Harp-Strum*'s two women conveys a sense of sisterhood that was never truly explored in Degas's study. Yiadom-Boakye brings these rich gifts of empathy and attention to her necessary translations of the Impressionists' tradition.

— *Yxta Maya Murray*

ARTFORUM

April 2019

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

"In Lieu of a Louder Love," Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's exhibition of twenty-six paintings—including two diptychs and a quadriptych—occupied both of Jack Shainman Gallery's Chelsea spaces. These imaginary portraits conveyed a timelessness, a sense that they might have been made either a hundred years ago or just the other day. Yiadom-Boakye's work does not elicit mere nostalgia; it evokes a sense of inward reflection, less affected by immediate sensations than by what's been brooding in the soul. Although the artist relies on imagination rather than observation, she still uses photographs and other references, freely combining them in the act of composition. Yiadom-Boakye renders such details as posture and facial expression in an utterly convincing manner, as if drawing from life. She inhabits each figure the way an actor would a role, weaving together her own experiences with small gestures scrupulously observed in others.

An actor usually wants to give an audience the illusion of knowing his or her character. Yiadom-Boakye, however, makes her people vivid precisely by giving us a sense of how little we know them. Her subjects, usually alone or in pairs, appear in somewhat nebulous spaces. The predominantly brownish tonalities in some of her backgrounds closely match the figures' skin tones—*3PM Blackheath*, *The Ever Exacting*, and *A Monday Midnight* (all works 2018) are three examples. Her figures may not be at one with their environments, but they are not pushing against them, either. These men and women often seem absorbed in their own thoughts, but even when a subject's pose appears to acknowledge the viewer, he or she gives nothing away. Take *Closer to a Comfort*, in which a young man, stretched out on a couch, holds his forearm across his forehead, suggesting that he's just been using it to cover his eyes, or is about to do so, while the other hand approaches the viewer ambiguously, not quite inviting or defensive. I couldn't help but think of John Ashbery's lines about the hand in Parmigianino's 1524 oil-on-panel tondo, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, "thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect / What it advertises."

The enigmatic identities of her subjects made it tempting to see them as occasions for Yiadom-Boakye to exercise her painterly prowess. And the works' sometimes inscrutable titles (for instance, *Blood Next to Walls*, *From a Foghorn to a Siren*, and *Southbound Catechism*) emphasize their unfathomable interiority. The artist could be an outstanding abstract painter if she desired, as her touch combines sensitivity with assertiveness. And don't let that subfusc palette fool you: She is a brilliant colorist, all the more so for her skill in adumbrating her rich hues under a seemingly monochromatic veil. Consider the gorgeously smoldering reds that surround the seated, spread-armed man in *The Ventricular*. A wonderful sense of the medium's materiality, and even that of the canvas itself, was evident everywhere in this show. Particularly admirable was how, in a few of the pieces, she used supports with an unusual herringbone weave to lend the surfaces a deeper tactility, causing her colors to shimmer ever so subtly. And yet it would be a mistake to downplay the fact that she is, first and foremost, a painter of people, a humanist who manages to make the problem of how a figure subsists in paint a telling metaphor for the question of how a person subsists in a body.

—Barry Schwabsky

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Closer to a Comfort*, 2018, oil on linen, 51½ × 78¾".

frieze

April 2019

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, USA

On the heels of her Carnegie Prize win last year comes Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's fourth show at Jack Shainman. 'In Lieu of a Louder Love' presents 26 new oil paintings from 2018; a stunning annual output for any artist, but Yiadom-Boakye typically finishes each painting in the span of one day, as Zadie Smith reported in a profile of the artist in *The New Yorker* in 2017. More of Yiadom-Boakye's myth: she paints fictional figures from her imagination, not portraits, and writes in fiction that which she feels she cannot paint. An unpublished short story from several years ago features a family killed off by a 'depressed squirrel and a wise crab', as *frieze* editorial director Jennifer Higgie noted when she wrote about the artist for *Frieze Masters* in 2012. Some of the paintings in this show subdue the dreamier elements of Yiadom-Boakye's imaginary animals: placing a falconry glove on an arm for a white owl to perch on, for instance, in a painting called *The Ever Exacting*. Nearby, *Black Allegiance to the Cunning* unleashes the dreamlike, showing a fox underfoot lounging on the black and white checkered floor of a handsome interior.

There's the shock of a pink pillow on a red couch in *The Ventricular*.

This particular work recalls Yiadom-Boakye's study of Edgar Degas's c.1896 painting *La Coiffure* (Combing the Hair), which she wrote about for this magazine: '*La Coiffure* teaches an important lesson about economy: don't use ten marks where three will do. I've also learnt about red from this painting: how to make it work. And that it is possible to lay scarlet next to orange, next to deep cadmium red, next to pink, next to black and bring the whole thing to life with a few patches of bare canvas and white.'

Yiadom-Boakye has also evoked Degas as a balletomane herself. Whereas Degas shadowed dancers at the Palais Garnier, requiring long-held poses to make his portraits, Yiadom-Boakye's dancers at the barre are fictive. Her painting *A Concentration* focuses on four ballerinos, three in repose, one in a stretch. Painting a number of both male and female dancers in her work, Yiadom-Boakye transcends Degas's fixation with women, summed up in his own confession to painter Pierre-Georges Jeanniot: 'I have perhaps too often considered woman as an animal.' No body looks like a curio in 'In Lieu'.

'In Lieu' arranges dancers mid-arabesque; athletes in repose, their feet arched or their core engaged; uniforms throughout (one dancer wears plumage in a painting called *Les Corbeaux*). Horizontal bodies with downcast eyes seem to keep private the heat between them. Solitary figures break away from their book to look back at the viewer. There are those, too, who keep reading. Two men share an armrest while they people-watch, the blur of colours behind them the verdure of London's Blackheath. In another painting of another park, *4PM Hampstead*, nature makes strangers of a man and a woman using the same tree as support while they stare in different directions. Elsewhere, there's a sense of celebration, cigarettes being lit, smoked, glasses raised in toast. And, in perhaps the strangest innovation of these paintings, nobody seems lonely here.

Thora Siemsen

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: At the Huntington Library, ‘Blue Boy’ and ‘Pinkie’ get new neighbors

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Greenhouse Fantasies,” 2014, oil on canvas (Huntington Library, Art Museum and Gardens)

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
ART CRITIC

MARCH 5, 2020
7 AM

Portraiture and theater are two of the most imposing artistic traditions that emerged during the rise and ripening of the old British Empire. Both practices are smartly engaged in the paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, an artist who uses the adroit flexibility of one to upend the persistent pomposity of the other.

Born in London in 1977, shortlisted for the 2013 Turner Prize, winner of the 2018 Carnegie Prize in Pittsburgh and subject of a Tate Britain survey coming in May, she's having her Los Angeles solo debut at the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Gardens. There couldn't be a better location for this modest if engaging show.

The Huntington is the place where Grand Manner British portraiture stands out in all its theatrical pomp and histrionic circumstance. Five paintings by Yiadom-Boakye are installed in the room just outside the Thornton Portrait Gallery, the museum's smashing installation where Thomas Gainsborough's "Blue Boy" and Thomas Lawrence's "Pinkie" hold court. "Blue Boy" is off-view for conservation treatment — it will be back March 26, according to the Huntington — but 13 more full-length grandees by Gainsborough, Lawrence, Joshua Reynolds and George Romney ring the room.

Across the way from Yiadom-Boakye's work in the antechamber is Anthony van Dyck's portrait of Anne Killigrew Kirke, circa 1637. His lavish rendering of the formidable courtier — draped in yards of copper-gold satin, dripping with pearls and loaded with fey symbols of faithfulness (a dog) and royal service (a rosebush) — anticipates the 18th century efflorescence of Grand Manner style so resplendent in the next room. The inherent corruption in the very idea of aristocracy never looked so good.

Yiadom-Boakye goes straight to the heart of the matter in choosing her portrait subjects. Four portraits of men and one large, two-panel painting of female dancers, all made within the last five years, are not what they seem.

None depicts an actual person. Each is rendered with exactitude and visual weight, but they're not really portraits. All the apparent "sitters" are fictitious, fabricated people wholly invented by the artist.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Brothers to a Garden,” 2017, oil on linen (Marcus J. Leith)

They’re masquerades. Not unlike Blue Boy, Pinkie and Killigrew Kirke, whose identity as flesh-and-blood humans is swathed within extravagant costumes, accompanied by ostentatious props and embellished with other elaborate artistic devices.

Yiadom-Boakye constructs her figures with firm, declarative brushwork on linen or heavy canvas, rather than the more genteel, decorous bravura often undertaken by a Romney or a Reynolds. Her brusque spontaneity is more contemporary, in keeping with the paintings’ present-day subjects, and thus more convincing. Look into the eyes of the intimate head filling the frame in “The Needs Beyond,” and a representation of a flesh-and-blood person seems to stare back.

The head is composed almost like a photograph, enhancing immediacy. Just a bit of dark green shirt is glimpsed below a bearded chin, while the composition is tightly cropped across the hair at the top. Red under-painting flickers beneath warm brown skin. It’s “up close and personal,” even though a fiction.

The settings for the paintings’ subjects are uniformly indistinct. You’re never quite certain where these people are.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Harp Strum,” 2016, oil on canvas (Marcus J. Leith)

The dancers are anchored to the floor through the weight of graceful and muscular balance, but the space in which they stretch out their arabesques is an ambiguous atmosphere of green and brown brushwork. One young man is seated before just the barest suggestion of foliage — the title is “Greenhouse Fantasies” — while another is in what could be the wings of a stage (he’s dressed in black tights and a white blouse) or even a kitchen (the floor is composed of black-and-white checked tile).

Settings in Grand Manner portraits are designed to amplify an idealized narrative. With Blue Boy and Pinkie posed on windswept hilltops, for example, the youthful lord and lady surmount an eternity that unfurls in the landscape behind them. Their glossy privilege has always been, the unending countryside implies, and thus it will always be.

Yiadom-Boakye is of Ghanaian descent. The fictional black men and women so acutely represented in her pictures are shown to occupy a generalized kind of no-place. Unlike their white 18th century forebears, their settings offer no authoritative claim to history — a bedeviling condition that resonates with the stories of countless black people descended from ancestors torn from Africa.

Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings are installed in the foyer to the Huntington’s gallery for British Grand Manner portraits. (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

Instead, the context her paintings emphasize is a context of artfulness. There are the pair of dancers, the photograph-style head and the figure sitting within the artifice of a greenhouse. The full-length figure in white blouse and black tights, seated in a side chair with his elbow resting on a raised knee, is himself a dancer, or perhaps a Shakespearean actor at rest.

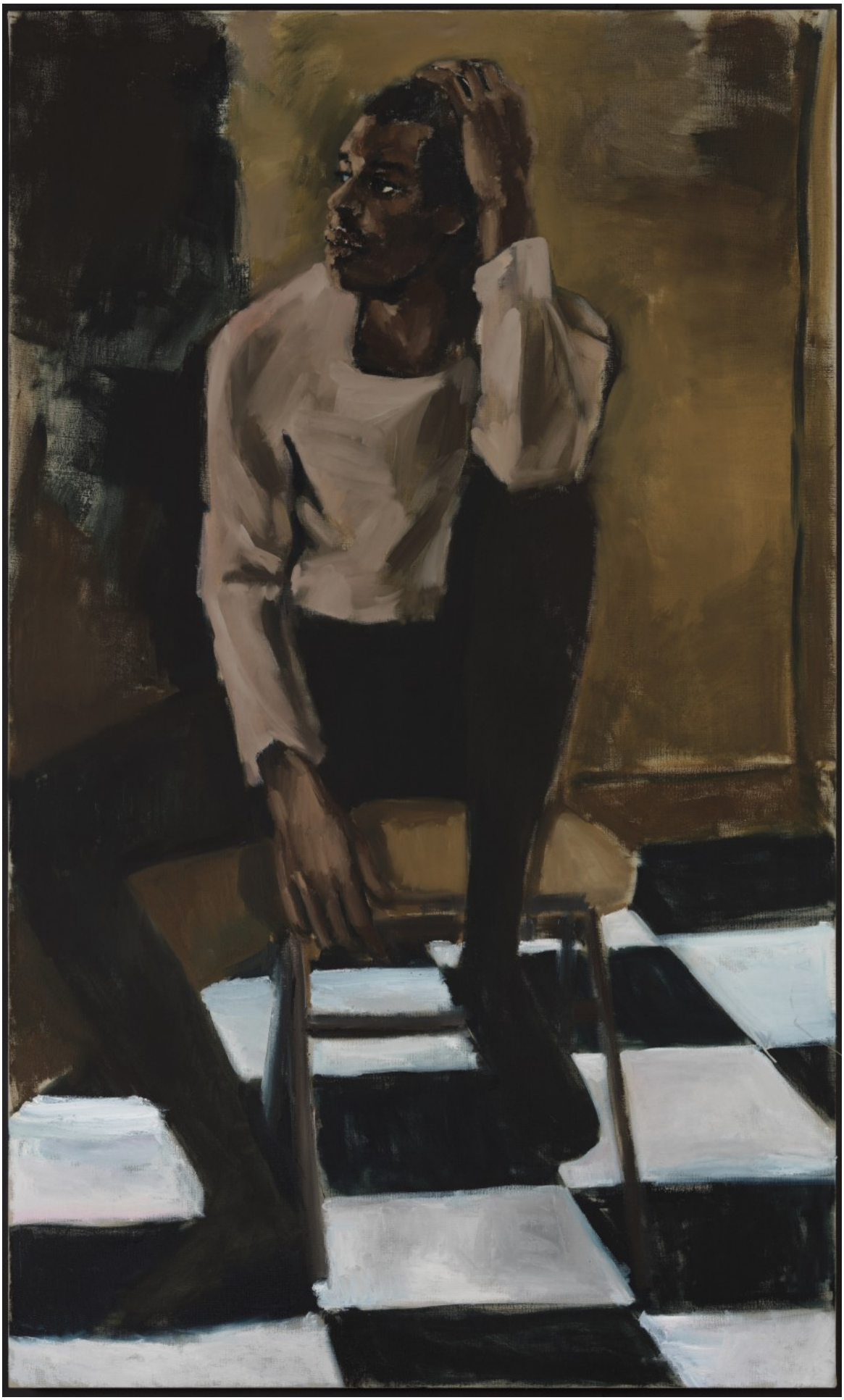
As artists or just folks in artful environments, these invented people can create their own place. Just as Yiadom-Boakye does. British herself, she claims Grand Manner for her own history.

Juxtaposing these savvy fictions with the Huntington's extraordinary portraits goes beyond a sly unmasking of the Grand Manner's social and political theatrics. Much of the vast wealth accumulated in 18th century Britain was launched on the back of a slave economy. The roaring textile mills of England's Industrial Revolution eventually left wool behind for cotton, much of it harvested on the brutal plantations of the American South.

Aristocratic power relied on many things, including a colony's cruelty. In one room of the Huntington, stately aristocrats engage in a majestic masquerade. In the next room, Yiadom-Boakye's non-portraits remove the mask.

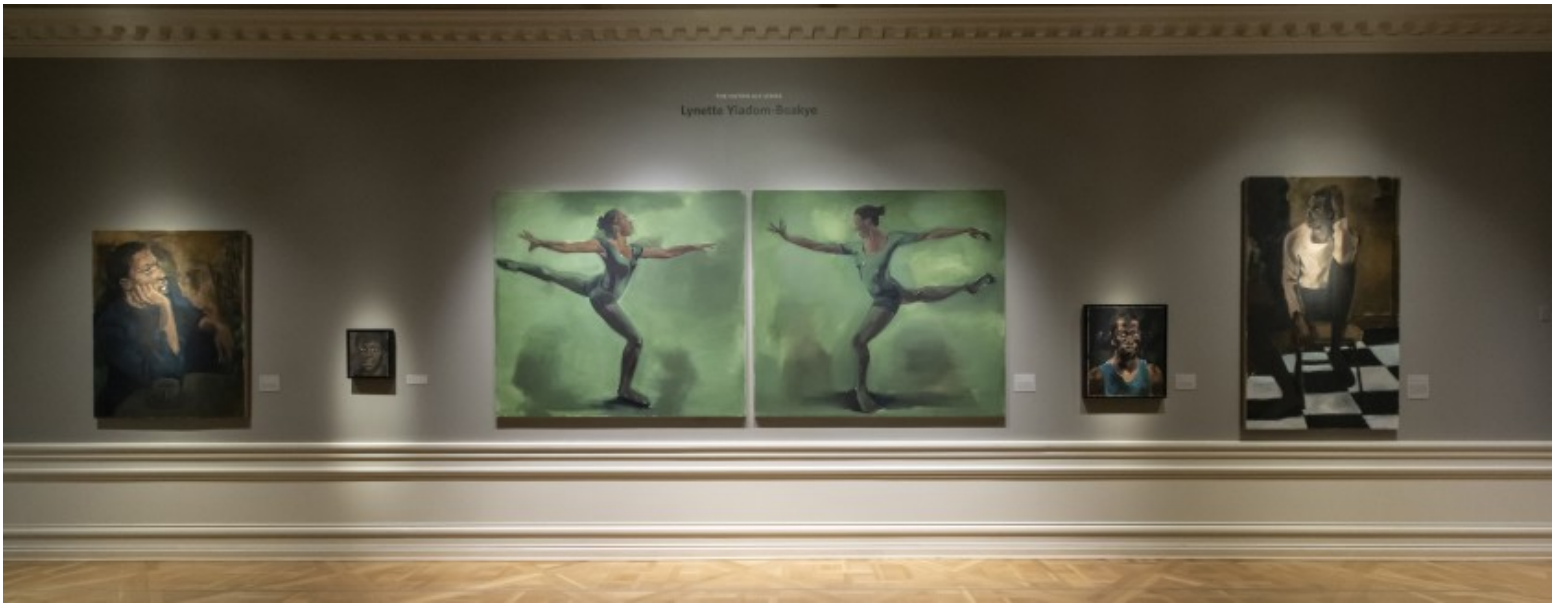
The show was organized at the Yale Center for British Art by guest curator Hilton Als, theater critic for the New Yorker — appropriately enough, given these particular paintings. His selection also has a cinematic quality. Together the four assembled paintings of men perform a camera's zoom: headshot, bust length, half-length, full-length. Then comes "Action " in the two dancers' nearly mirrored arabesques.

The show's one considerable issue is its terrible lighting. Curved hot spots from ceiling light-cans burn bright visual holes in several pictures. In one case, the subject's face is almost entirely obscured; in the large square and rectangular canvases, the corners get shaved off in pale shadow.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, “Medicine at Playtime,” 2017, oil on linen (Marcus J. Leith)

A similar problem has plagued the great Grand Manner room for years — if not quite so severely, because the room is larger. Especially if the Thornton foyer will continue to be used for compelling exhibitions like this one, the Huntington really needs to fix it.



Poor lighting is a problem for an otherwise compelling show of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings (Huntington Library, Art Museum and Gardens)

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Where: Huntington Library, Art Museum and Gardens, 11 1 Oxford Road, San Marino

When: Through May 11; closed Tuesdays

Admission: 13- 29

Info: (626) 0 -2100, *huntington.org*

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 ICTO IA L. ALENTINE on Nov 19, 2018 • 7 8 am

"Amaranthine' (2018) y Lynette Yiadom Boakeye

A SE IES O A ESTING O T AITS is on view at the Carne ie Museum of Art in itts ur h. Sin le and dou le ortraits are exhi ited alon with a aintin of four lack males standin to ether, seemin ly in conversation. Lithe ures, all are-chested wearin only dark ants, any num er of narratives could e assi ned to the ima e y British ainter **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 o enin festivities included a variety of ro rammin artist ro ects, erformances, talks, screenin s, and a cele ratory ala on Oct. 12, where the ine ri e was awarded to ostcommodity and Yiadom-Boakye received the Carne ie ri e.

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, " adical 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 aintin s earned her the International s to award. The Carne ie ri e includes 10,000 and the Medal of onor, which is desi ned y Tiffany Co., and was rst issued to Winslow omer at the inau ural International in 1896.

The museum descri es the International ri es as " resti ious' and the winnin artists as "exce tional,' without further ex lanation a out their candidacy. I wanted to etter understand the criteria y which the artists were chosen and reached out to the museum to learn what a out Yiadom-Boakye s work stood out amon the other artists included in the exhi ition.

To e in with, the artists included in the International were selected y a team of all-female curators and researchers assem led y Schaffner (Ma al Arriola, Doryun Chon , u a Katri , Carin Kuoni, and Bisi Silva) that traveled the lo e in airs visitin with artists and viewin 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 Im rovise a Mountain,' 2018 (oil on linen). | © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

eco ni ed for her ortraits of timeless su ects, Yiadom-Boakye made 13 new ones for the Carne ie International. er dreamy and dramatic ortraits feature ctional ures, eo le she s ima ined and reali ed on canvas. The characters mi ht e mullin family matters or ex eriencin relationshi challen es, immi ration issues, rief, trium h, satisfaction or wanderlust. erha s they are wei hin what to serve for tea. The s eci cs are left to inter retation.

A ainter who also writes and has enned essays for the catalo s of fellow artists, Yiadom-Boakye ives her aintin s oetic titles such "A Whistle in a Wish,' "Solar Wisdom,' "The Black Watchful,' and "No Need of S eech.'

er latest series de icts individual ures in contem lative oses. "Marvels for a Soothsayer' shows a male su ect, rendered in ro le, with his head cast downward. e is wearin lasses with his dreaded or raided hair ulled ack in a un. The instance may e the rst time such cultural details have een re resented in her oeuvre.

Yiadom-Boakye s su ects often look away from the viewer and a ear aloof or erha s dee in thou ht. Even when there are two ures on a canvas, they usually don t a ear emotionally connected.

In some of the new aintin s, however, Yiadom-Boakye s characters are relatively animated and dee ly en a ed with each other a new develo ment. She de icts them facin one another, esturin , smokin , and ex ressin emotion with wide eyes. In the Guide u lished to accom any the International, Schaffner said, from the outset, she was really drawn to her aintin ”the rushwork, the ersonas, the intimacies, the owls, the sta in , 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-mem er ury chose the ri e winners. The urors included three of Schaffner s travel/research artners (Kuoni, Katri , and Arriola), two re resentatives from the museum s advisory oard, and two mem ers of Carne ie s curatorial staff Catherine Evans, co-director and head curator, and Eric Cros y, curator of modern and contem orary art.

”Criteria for awardin the ri es are intentionally road,‘ Evans said. She continued in an email statement ”In selectin the winners this year, urors started with their to ve to ten artists, then after much discussion ran in from the im act of artworks to their resonance with the context of the exhi ition to the relevance of their artistic ractice in today s world, reached a nal consensus.‘

Evans said the Carne ie ri e ”is awarded to an artist for their outstandin contri ution to the exhi ition.‘ Given this standard, eyond the allure of her aintin s of fascinatin characters, the ury a reciated Yiadom-Boakye s dedication to the o ortunity to artici ate in the International.

”The ury felt stron ly that Lynnette Yiadom-Boake s aintin s demonstrated a com ellin new develo ment in her work and is a hi hli ht in a rich and exhi ition,‘ Evans said. ”In addition, the ury took into account that the artist had created these 13 aintin s s eci cally for the Carne ie International, 7th Edition, 2018.‘ **CT**

TO 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, 7th Carne ie International. | hoto y Bryan Conley. Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

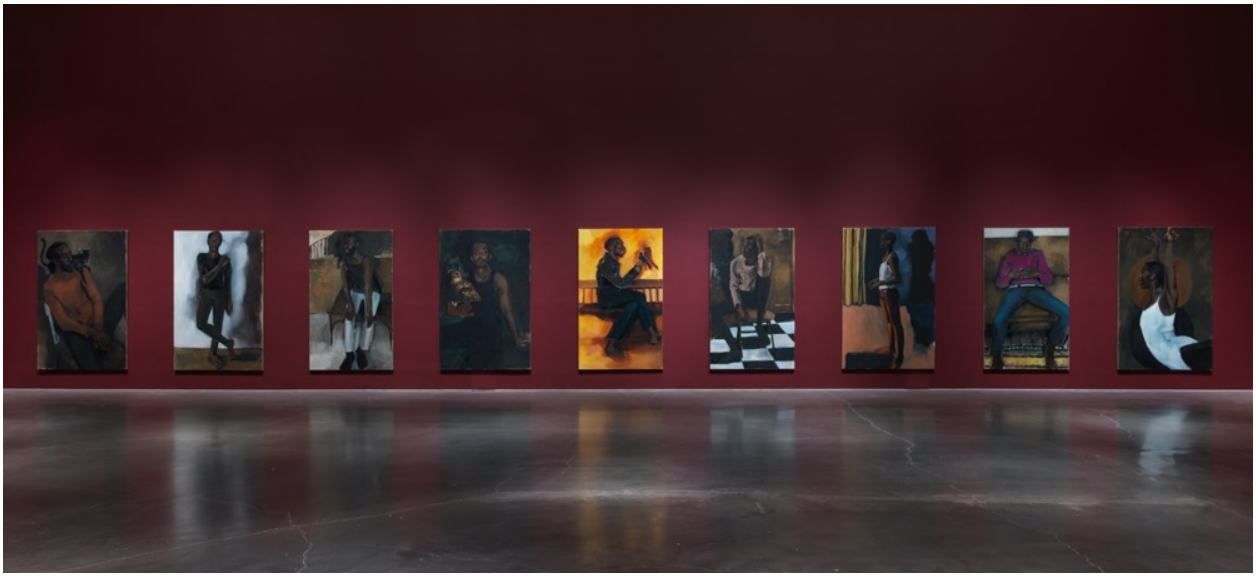
D'Souza, Aruna. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: The painter's lush oil portraits explore the work of empathy." *4Columns.org.* 24 May 2017. Online.

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.

Aruna D'Souza is a writer based in Western Massachusetts. Her writings on art, feminism, culture, diaspora, and food have appeared in Bookforum, Art in America, Time Out New York, *and* The Wall Street Journal. *She is currently working on a volume of Linda Nochlin's collected essays to be published by Thames & Hudson, and is a member of the advisory board of* 4Columns.

Sargent, Antwaun. “Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s Fictive Figures.” *Interview Magazine*. 15 May 2017. Online.

Interview

ART

LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE'S FICTIVE FIGURES

By ANTWAUN SARGENT

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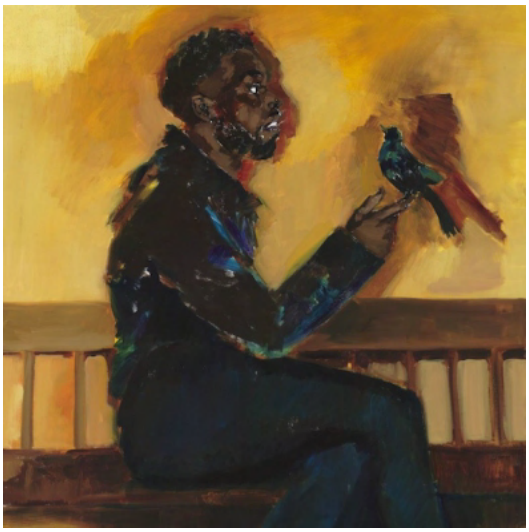
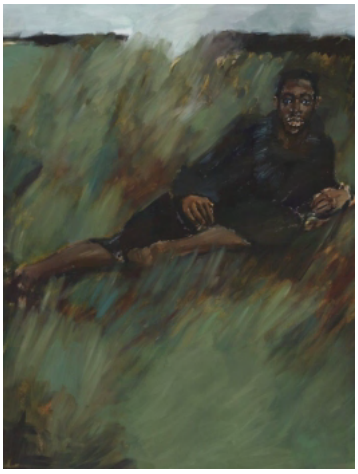
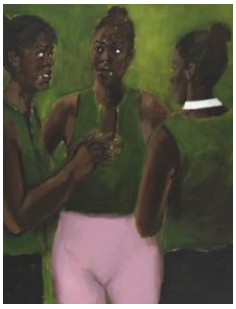






British-Ghanaian painter and writer Lynette Yiadom-Boakye s recently opened solo exhibition, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song For A Cipher, at the New Museum in New York features 17 large-scale, low-hanging canvases of fictional black figures. They are engaged in moments of absolute abandon, repose, 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 douard 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?

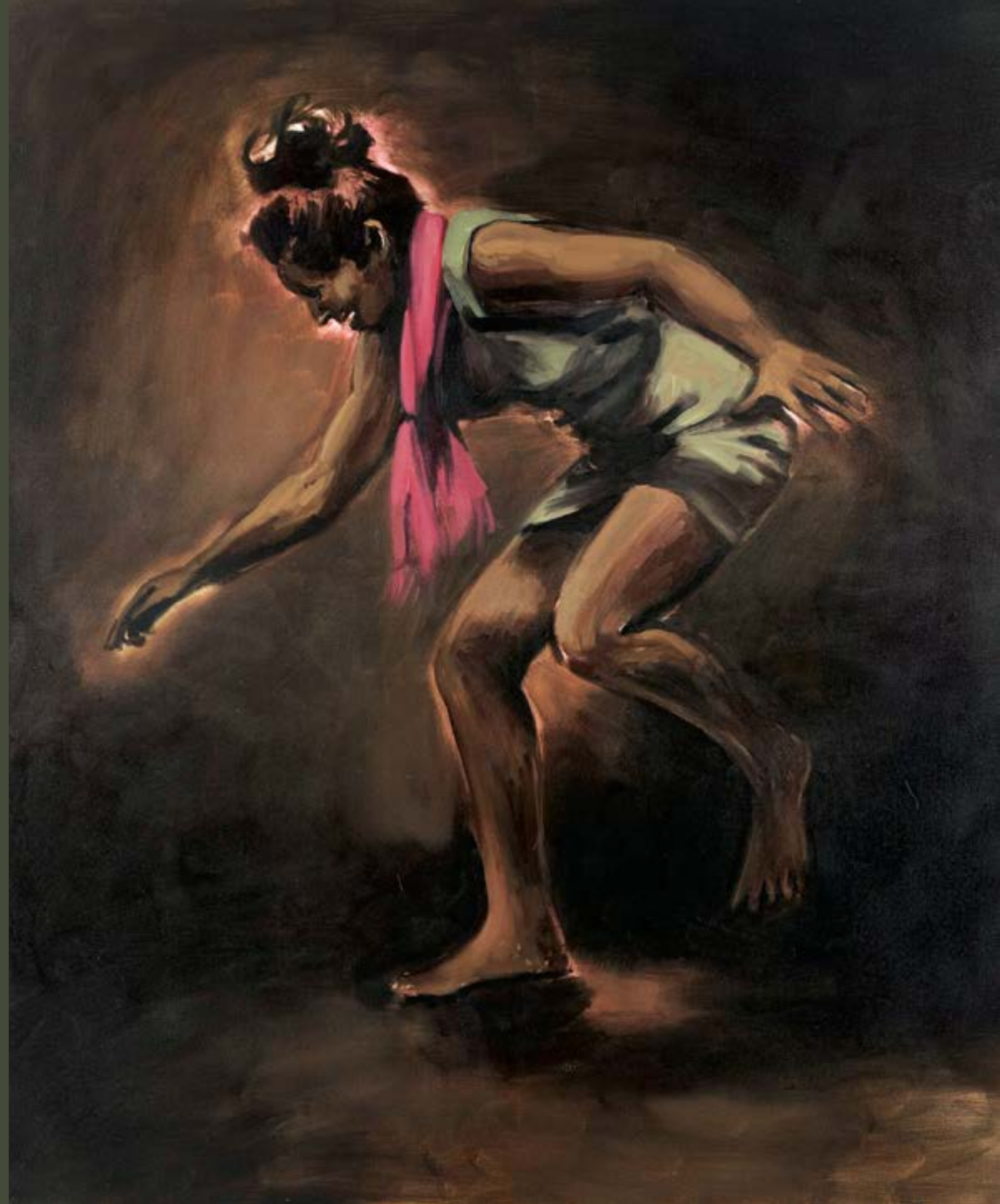
YIADOM-BOAKYE: Most of my training was painting from life. It was incredibly important for me because it allowed me to train my eyes to see everything that is there. But I realized early on that painting from life wasn t something that I was all that invested in. I was always more interested in the painting 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 dream-like 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]

RIZVANA BRADLEY is assistant professor of Film and Media Studies and African-American Studies at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

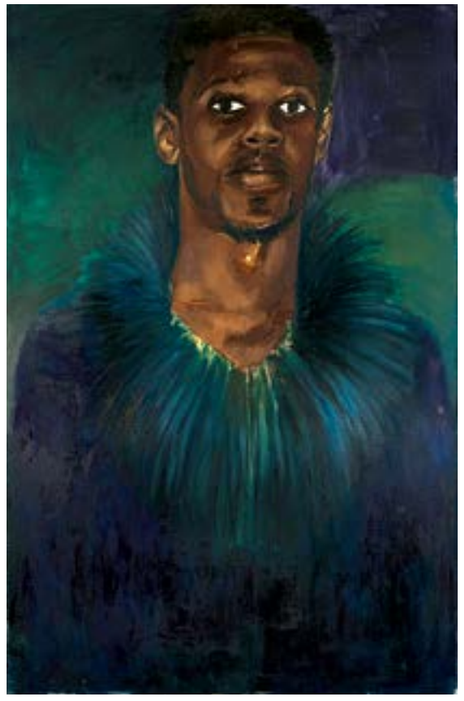
In Yiadom-Boakye's skillful hands, portraiture becomes a medium for navigating the intricacies and complexities of black subjectivity. This is accomplished via an aesthetic of quiet, a mood that subtends all of her paintings—whether they portray the calm of looking and waiting or the emotional release 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.

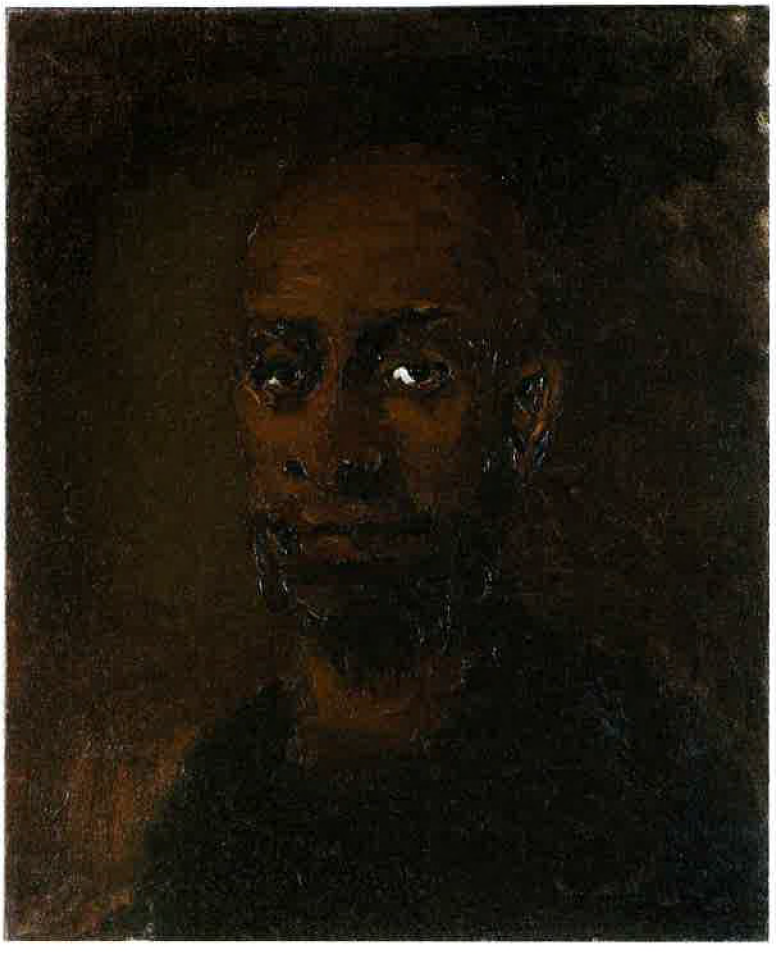
Quiet, as Quashie reminds us, is not the same as *silence* or *stillness*. "Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed," he writes, "and is an interiority that is about withholding, absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence . . . and can encompass fantastic motion." 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)]

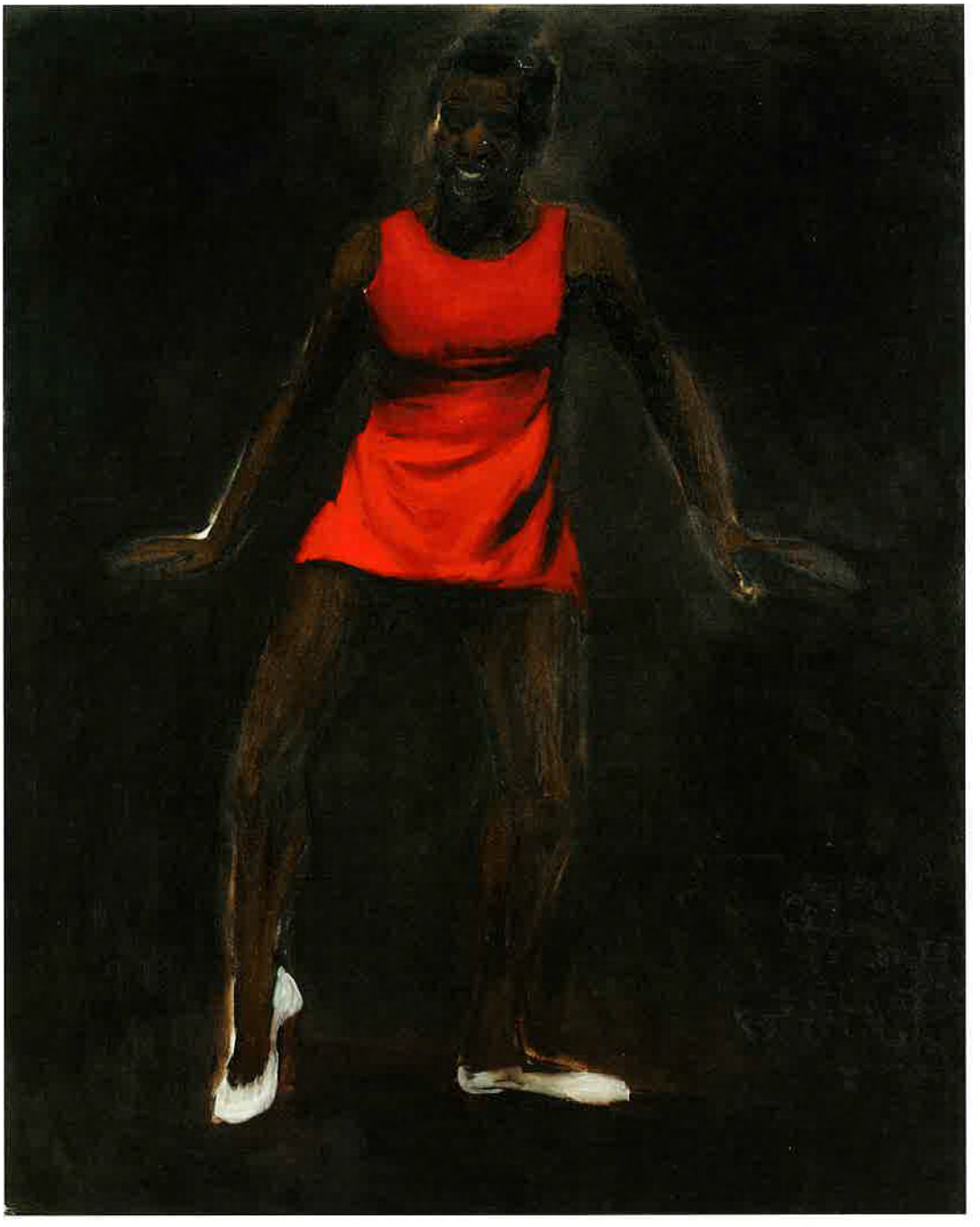
The idealistic coalescing of multi-ethnic people under the banner of blackness was the result of the specific historical fashioning of colonialism, the commonality established through the migrant experience, and the very real challenges of staking out a life in the metropole. All of these factors played 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.

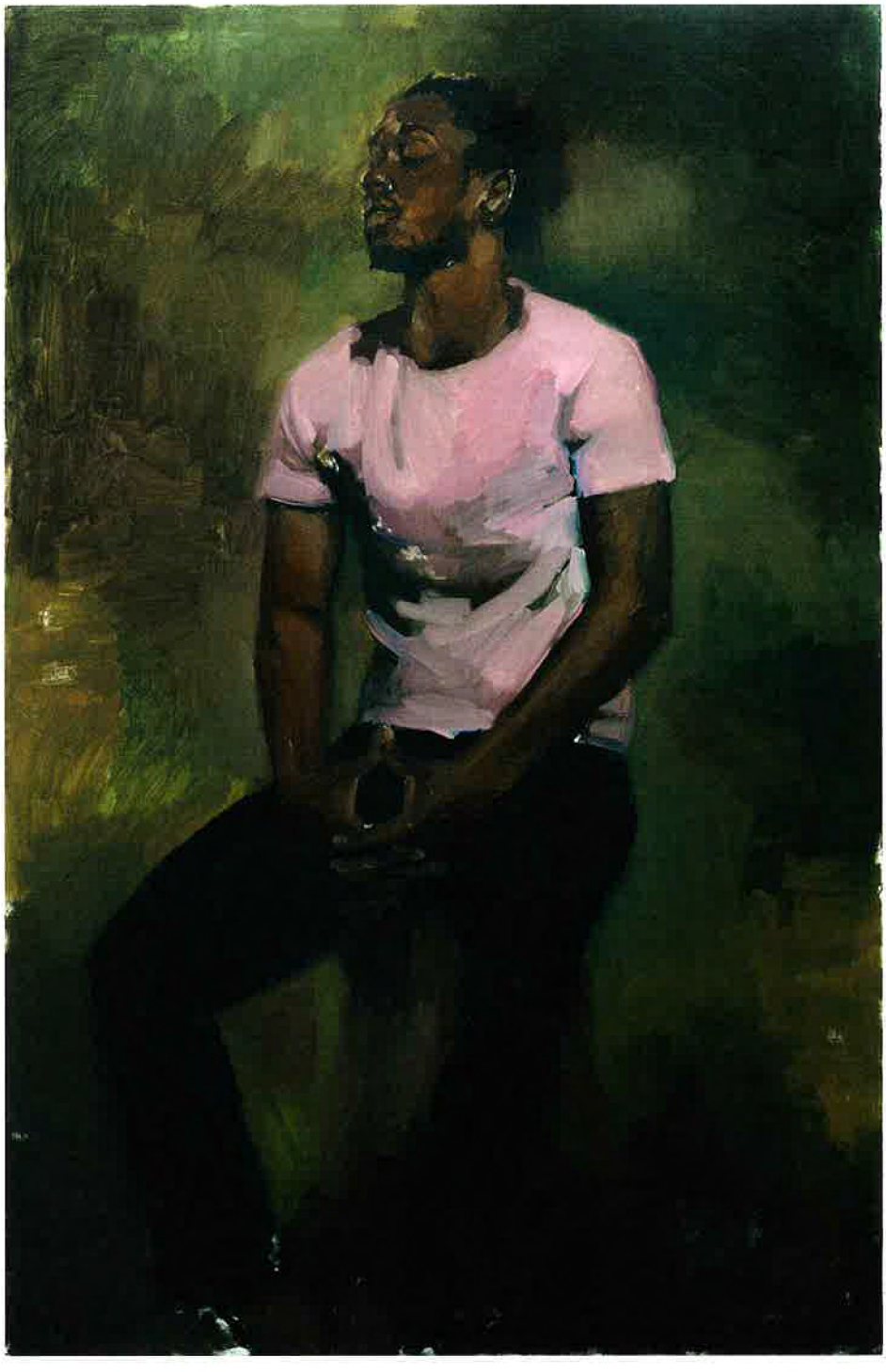
sophistication as unique to oil paint as to blackness. The resulting figures, weightless in vast darkness, resist easy legibility, replacing the signifying, knowable, hyper-visual subject/object. In this regard, the black paintings bring to mind fellow British artist Chris Ofili's series of "blue paintings," 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

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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.

Right page / Rechte Seite:
LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE, CONFIDENCES, 2010,
oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 74 1/4" / VERTRAUTHEITEN,
Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 188,5 cm.

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

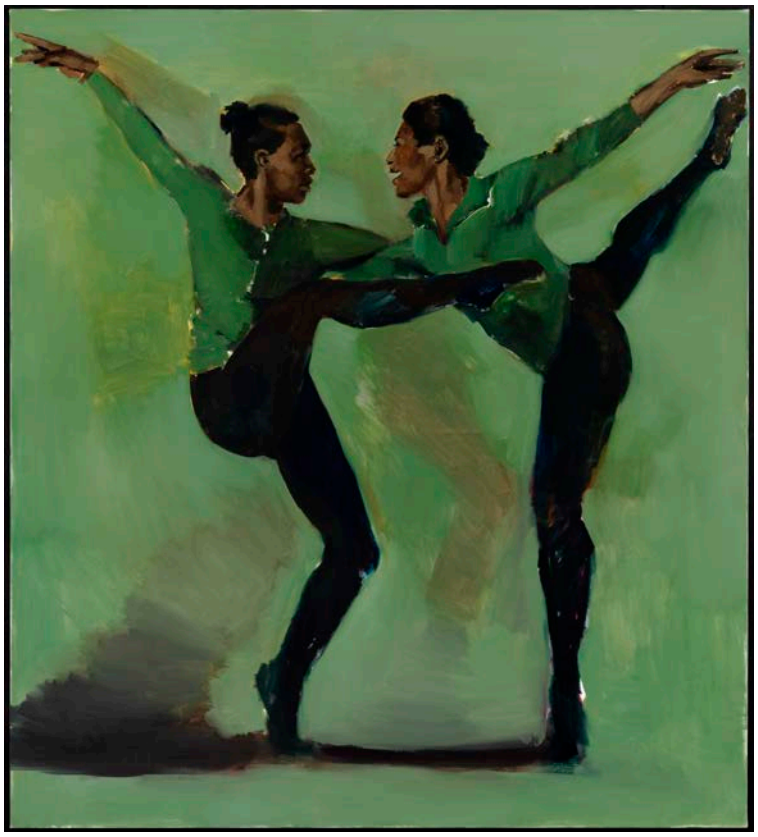
Making a Splash
The artist, photographed in her London studio, paints fast, timeless portraits in oils. Her solo show at the New Museum in New York opens this May.
Photographed by Anton Corbijn, *Vogue*, April 2017

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."

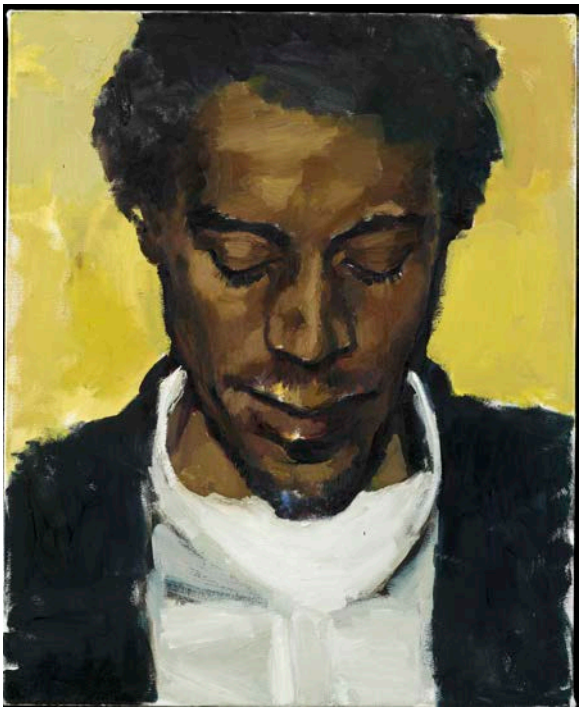


To Douse the Devil for a Ducat, 2015, oil on canvas
Courtesy of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London

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 UEER, 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."

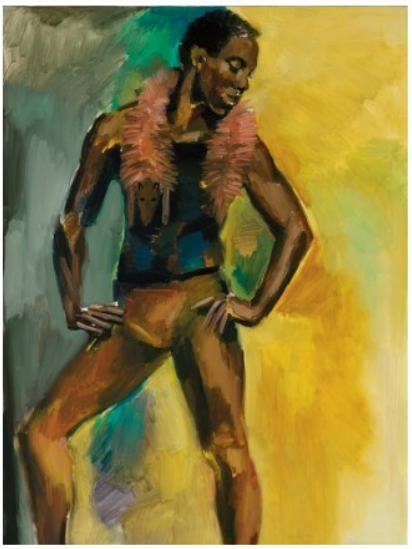
Rosenmeyer, Aoife: *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye*, in: Art in America, 27.2.17, online: http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lynette-yiadom-boakye/ (28.2.17)

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?

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

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

6.1
6.2

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

so accustomed to looking *up* at works of art. This should make us feel closer to the people in the paintings, but it does not. It makes their distance more curious, and more unbridgeable.

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.

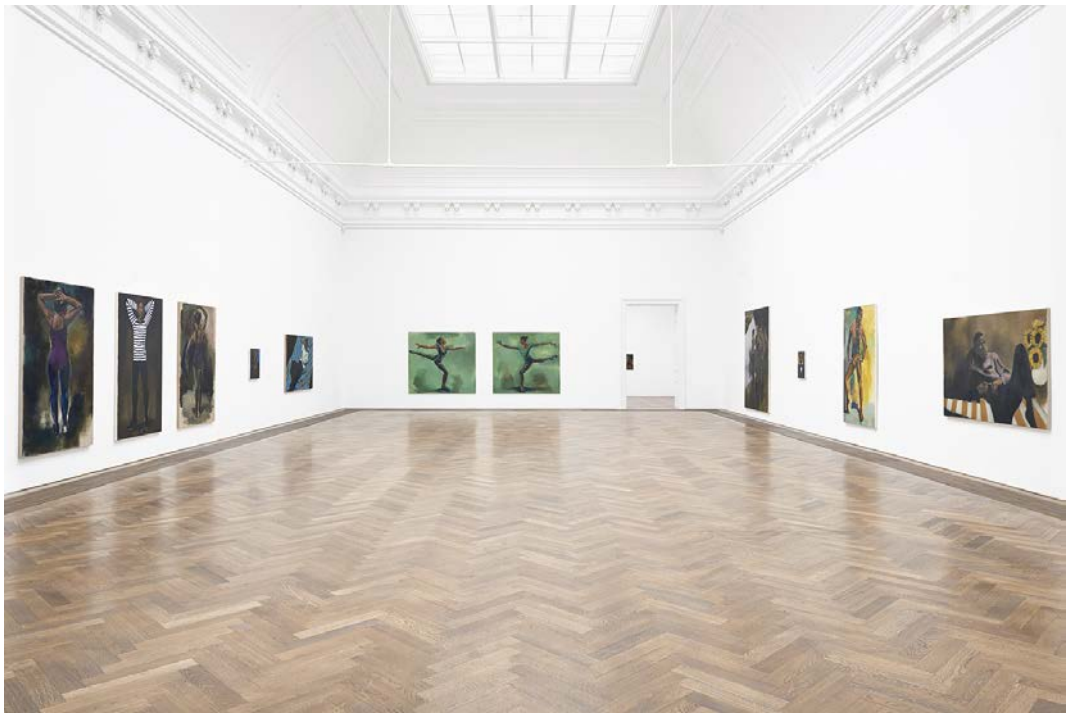
At the heart of Ukeles's commitment to art, the environment, and her engagement with the lives of workers is her deep Jewish faith. *Repair Room*, made across many decades, is organized around the theme of *tikkun olam*, or the healing actions of individuals and communities. Past projects involving participatory 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

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.

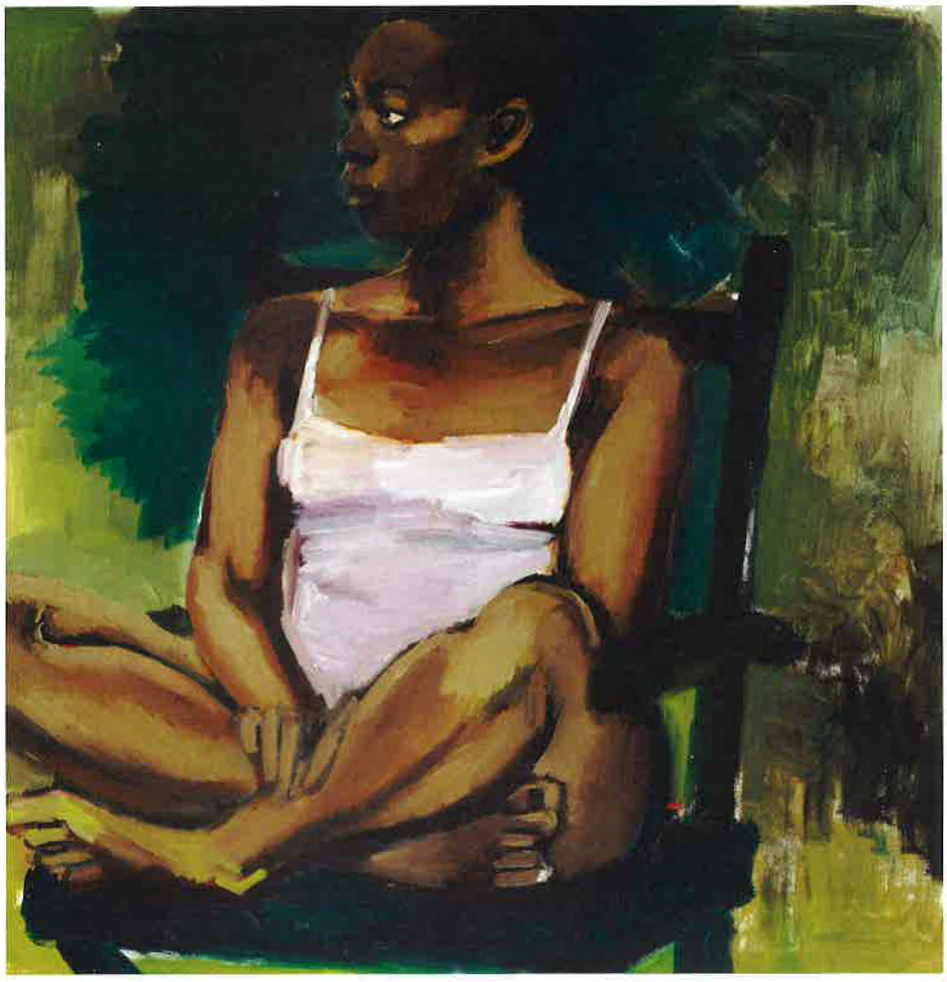
The canvas is usually left unprimed, its raw texture showing through the paint. Parts of the canvas are even left blank to provide highlights. The figures themselves seem to be constructed from a spiral coming out from the face, almost like a mosaic, with a dark background that is added after the figure 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.

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 so accustomed to looking up at works of art. This should make us feel closer to the people in the paintings, but it does not. It makes their distance more curious, and more unbridgeable.

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.

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.

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

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

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'.

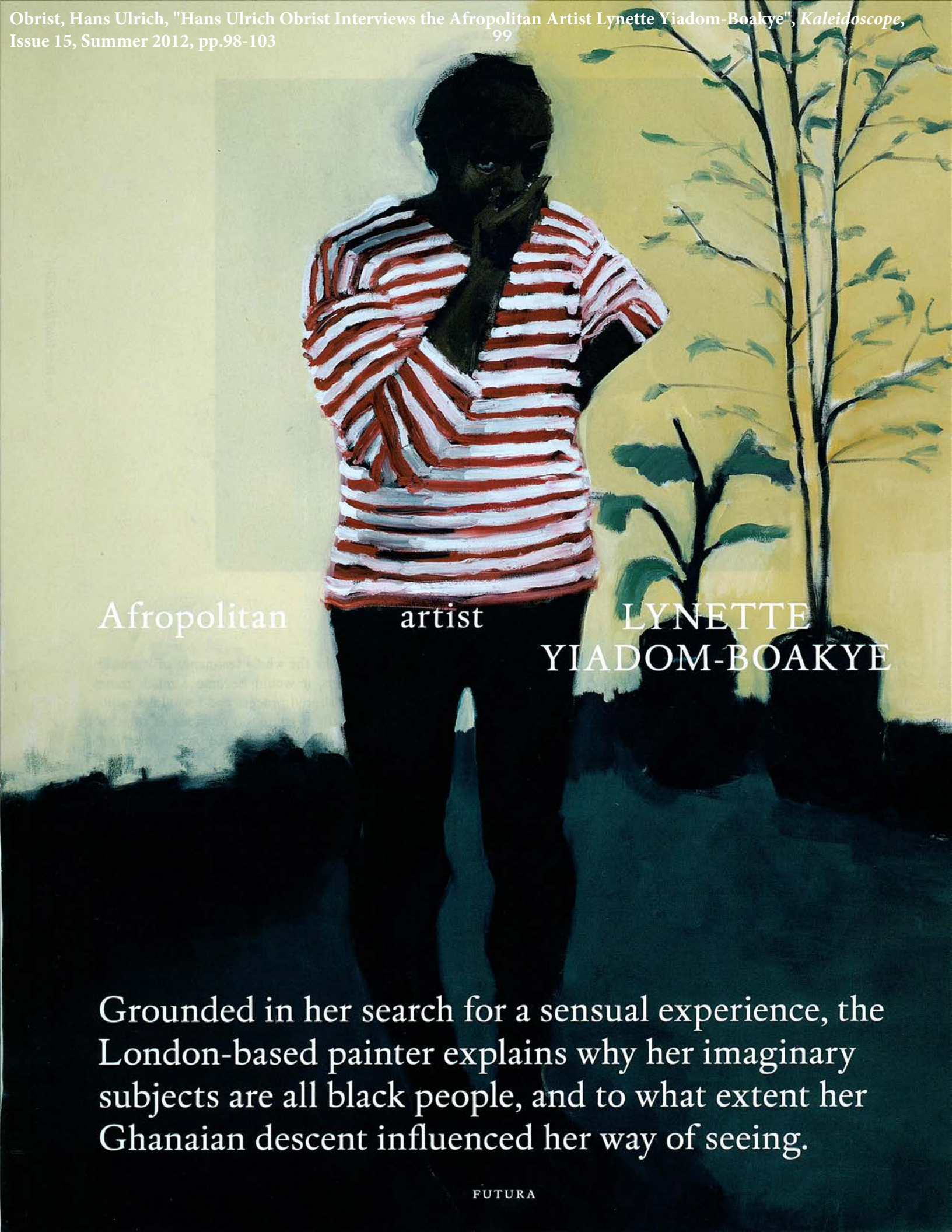
Yiadom-Boakye also writes short stories. I recently read one that, like her paintings, privileges mood and atmosphere over detail. It focuses on a family of 'indeterminate nationality' who are served by a waiter who is 'clean-shaven, dark, possibly Italian, Israeli or Greek by extraction but with an 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.

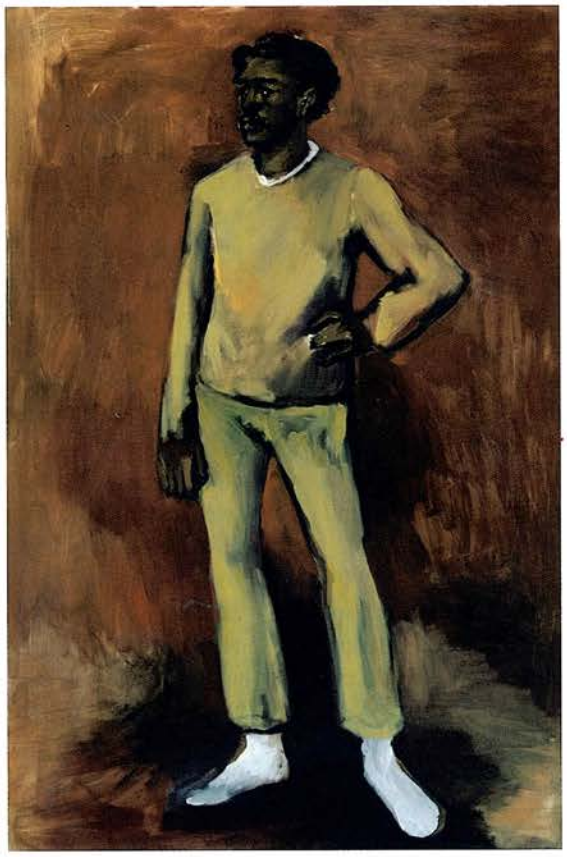
HUO You say in all your texts and interviews that you conceive the paintings as groups, and think of how they could work together. Can you tell me a little bit about the main groups in your work?

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

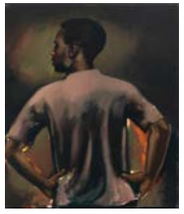
Post-Portrait Paintings', drawing attention to the late Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* in which he notes that Africa is only understood in comparison with Europe: '*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe, therefore 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.
2 Ibid., p. 99.
3 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Subversion of Realism: Likeness, Resemblance and Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Post-Portrait Paintings', *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2010), p. 20.
4 Whitney Tassie, *Salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* (Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 2013).
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.
6 Naomi Beckwith, *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2010), pp. 6–16.
7 David Brett, 'The Possibility of Portraiture', *Circa Art Magazine*, Circa, No. 57 (Ireland: May–June, 1991), pp. 32–35.
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.
11 Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa in Conrad's Heart of Darkness', *Massachusetts Review* 18, 1977, reprinted in: *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988, 3rd edition), pp. 251–252.
12 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Subversion of Realism', p. 19.

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.

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, ber 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.

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=0CBcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Ftmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com%2F2010%2Fyiadom-boakeyes-fashionable-eye%2F&ei=hRyVfGADoT8oASZroPoCQ&usg=AFQjCNEKSP_gvIR6_qmcCaRyo_iHBtA&sig2=2Ixrc_zIDwKqqZkeNkmBLA)." The figures exist only through paint, through color, line, tone and mark making.

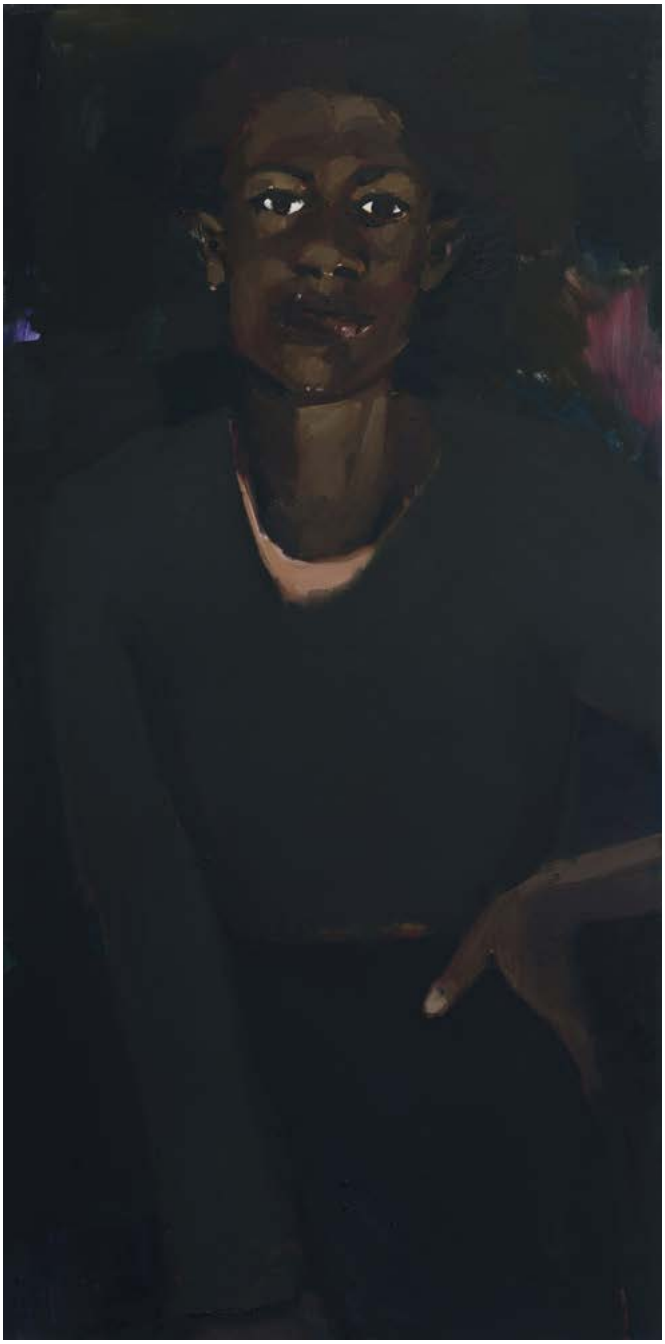
A Passion Like No Other, 2012

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

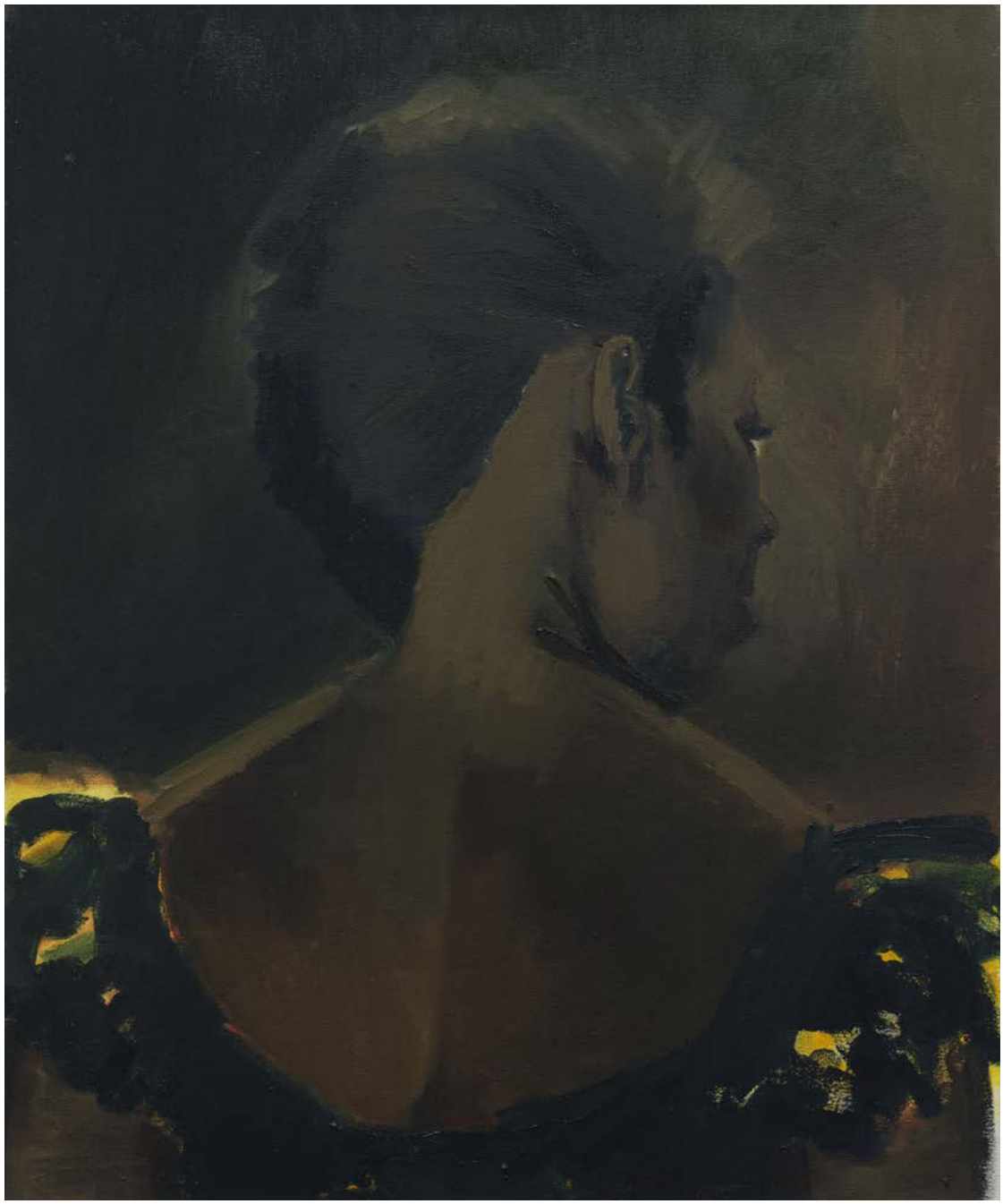
(http: www.theguardian.com artanddesign 201 may 31 lynette yiadom boakye painter out of time and space). Through channeling these historical giants, Yiadom Boakye raises awareness of the lack of black representation throughout the history of art.

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 exh ibitions events lynette yiadom boakye verses after dusk) until September 13, 201 .



Peach Tree, 201 Courtesy of the artist, Corvi Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



The Matches, 201 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

9 am Jerez de la Frontera, 2010

am Friday, 201 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, 201 Oil on canvas Courtesy of the artist, Corvi Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Coterie of uestions, 201 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

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

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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

M DERN PHIL S PHY IS THREATENED BY L VE, whose ob ects are never only ob ects. 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

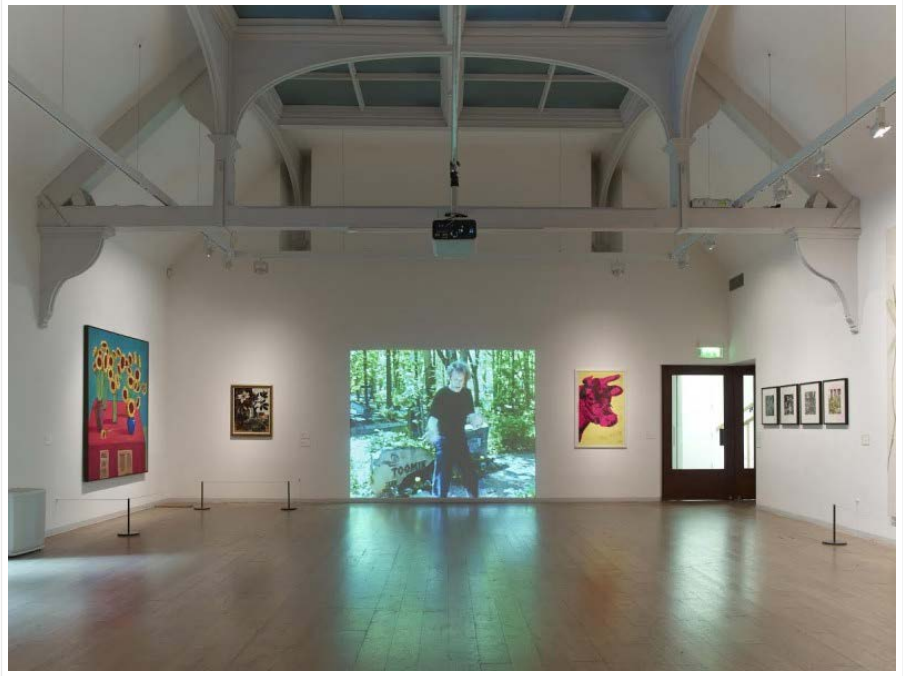
Posted March 25, 2015 by Emily Rae Pellerin

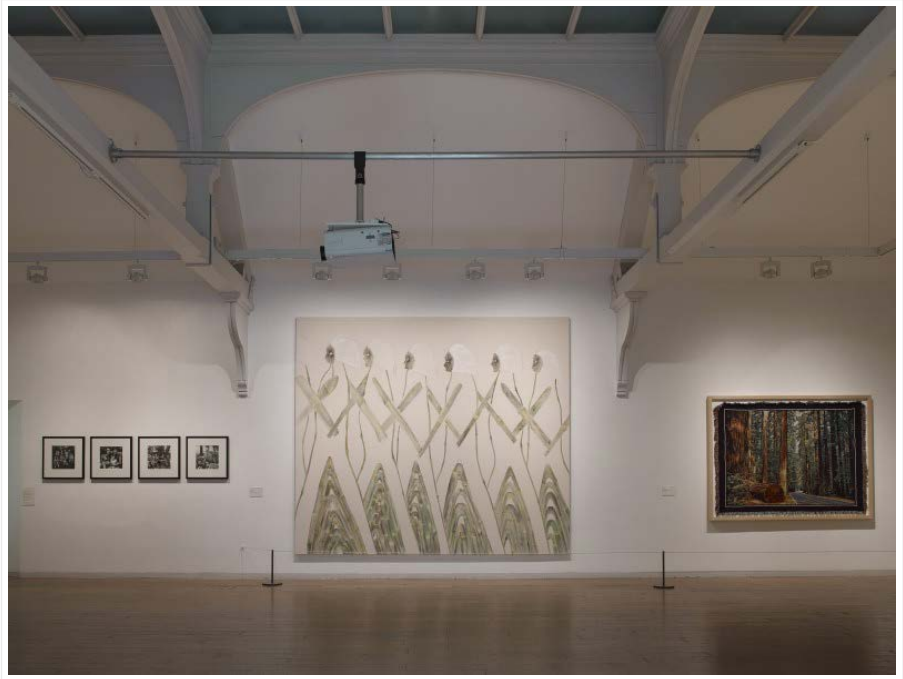
Turner Prize-nominated Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is assistant curating an exhibition this spring at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Running now through mid-June, the presentation, titled Natures, Natural and Unnatural, is a carefully selected group of contemporary multi-media artworks from both some of the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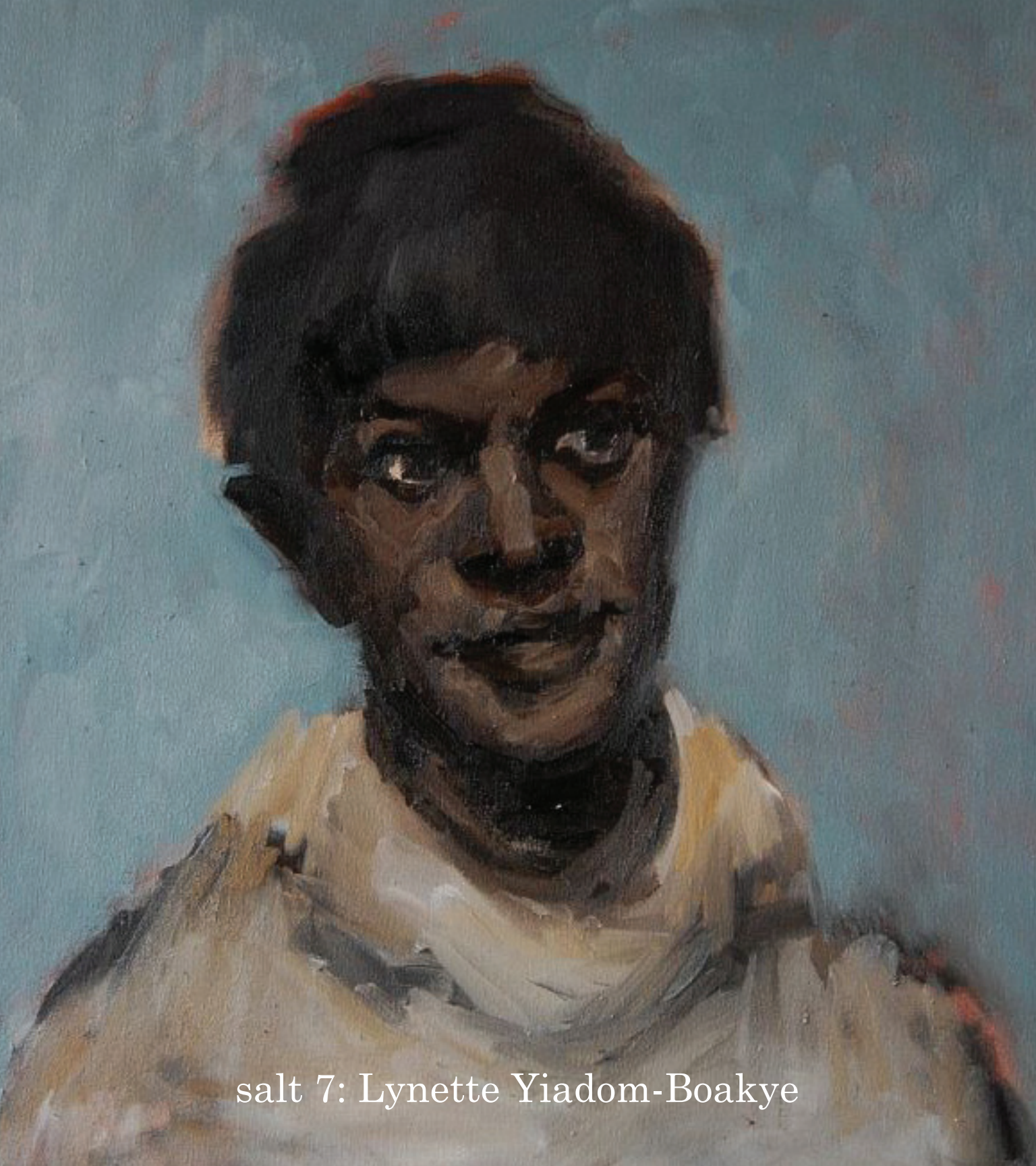

salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

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

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.

CULTURE / BOOKS & THE ARTS / MAY 4, 2011

Margins of Modernism: A New Historicism in Art

In the paintings of Silke Otto-Knapp and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, there's an unending entanglement, and dialogue, between the present and the past.

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.

Curses (2011), by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

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.

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. 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. N

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.

> "I am driven by a sense of trying to get to something. I do not know what it is, but I feel it is to do with power"
>
> 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

By Ariella Budick - Published: November 26, 2010

Any Number of Preoccupations (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, 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

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 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

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