

NEW YORK



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Closer to a Comfort*, 2018, oil on linen, 51 1/2 × 78 3/4".

## Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 20TH STREET

“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