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FIGMENT OF THE IMAGINATION

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Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits are so full of life it is hard to believe their subjects exist only on canvas, says Rachel Spence

In an era when contemporary art is so often a dizzying circus of high-concept film, photography and installation, the art of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye reminds us that humanity and intimacy are still worthy of a place centre-stage. Her paintings, which are always of people, plug us back into a collective artery of private emotion and experience.

If you were unaware of her biography, you would assume the British-Ghanian's models were portraits of real people or, at the very least, derived from photographs. The truth is that Yiadom-Boakye paints from her imagination. Although she draws on photographs, she never copies what she sees. Instead, she channels these images into her interior dreamscape. As a student, she worked from live models. "But that was to do with getting things right, with figuring things out," she explained in a 2015 interview with *The Guardian*. "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." She continues, "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."

That freedom allows Yiadom-Boakye to create images that are profoundly direct yet dislocated from time and place. An artist who once observed that oil paint "moves like skin", she has summoned a pantheon of characters who are at once familiar – their intensity echoes our intensity, their pensiveness echoes our pensiveness – and inherently unknowable.

In this way, her art captures an existential paradox. However close we are to somebody, do we ever truly know them? Or are we always essentially alone? Such questions hover in the eyes of the subject of Yiadom-Boakye's *Sack* (2005), which is offered in March's Post-War & Contemporary sale at Bonhams New Bond Street.

A man in his late 20s or 30s, propped up on high pillows in a bed, gazes out at us with eyes radiant as headlights. But his bedridden pose enfeebles him. Those contrasts are echoed in the painting's palette: the sheets and pillows frame him in sumptuous snow-bright drifts of white, with splashes of gray, but his dressing gown, complexion, hair and the painting's backdrop are in chocolate browns and blacks. Is he a prince or an invalid? A dilettante or a genius? Could he, perhaps, be a little of each?

That enigma encapsulates the brilliance of Yiadom-Boakye. In painting no particular person, she paints all of us. By ditching the need to stay close to an external individual human reality, she frees herself to discover internal truths, which reveal the workings of our collective unconscious. Her paintings are urgent, fierce, compassionate reminders that, deep in the tumultuous, fecund lava of our private selves, most of us are contradictory, wayward, protean, layered and secretive as a Russian doll.

In the 13 years since she painted Sack, Yiadom-Boakye has marked herself out as one of the greatest figure painters of her generation, with solo shows at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2015 and New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017. She won the Pinchuk Foundation Future Generation Art Prize in 2012 and was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2013. Her work is in the Tate and MOMA collections. Yet back in 2005, her talent already shone out: Sack was one of seven of her paintings chosen for the prestigious annual exhibition 'Artist of the Day' at Flowers Gallery in east London.

Started by the gallery's founder Angela Flowers in 1983, 'Artist of the Day' is a beguiling pop-up exhibition held for ten days each July. The concept is simple but innovative: for each annual edition, ten established artists and curators are invited to choose one artist each for a single-day show. Over the years, the project has been a vitrine for hundreds of emerging artists, many of them still students or recent graduates.

Yiadom-Boakye's opportunity arrived when her name was put forward for the 2005 show by British painter and curator Martin Maloney. Then 27 years old, she had graduated with an MA from the Royal Academy Schools just two years previously. Remarkably, all seven of the paintings exhibited, including Sack, sold – one of them to Charles Saatchi.

"It was pretty extraordinary, because it's hard for an artist to have an impact in just one day," remembers Flowers director James Ulph, adding that 'Artist of the Day' exhibitors would often bring their own clients along to boost sales, but that Yiadom-Boakye did not employ this tactic. Instead, he puts her success down simply to the quality of her work. Her paintings are "immediate, beguiling, uncomfortable," he observes, continuing. "There's a hidden narrative within them, an ambiguity, which draws people in."

Since Yiadom-Boakye began to gain global prominence, she has been framed by critics as an artist whose primary intention is to make a space for blackness in figure painting. This is a misreading. As a woman of color, why wouldn't Yiadom-Boakye paint people of color? She has herself denied any such intention. "I keep saying it," she told The Guardian. "It 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."

In a riveting essay on her work in The New Yorker, novelist Zadie Smith puts it cogently when she writes: "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." To read Yiadom-Boakye through the lens of ethnicity is to diminish her real achievement, which is that of making figure painting thrilling, contemporary, meaningful and relevant in an era when it remains a far from fashionable genre.

What is interesting about Yiadom-Boakye's subjects is not that they are black but how their blackness – and every other element on the canvas – is painted. Although she works fast, finishing her canvases in a single day, Yiadom-Boakye achieves a complexity of color and light, often contrasted with a simplicity of structure and shape, that comes only when an artist has spent countless hours looking, mixing, experimenting, then looking again. She herself has said that her paintings begin with "a color, a composition, a gesture, a particular direction of the light. My starting points are usually formal ones."

Her commitment to these formal aspects places her paintings in a lineage made majestic by the likes of Goya – the face of the man in Sack powerfully recalls that of the victim being executed in his legendary painting, The Third of May, 1808 – as well as Manet, Degas and turn-of-the-century British painter Walter Sickert.

The latter was such a talented master of tone and mood that his paintings of women said to be Camden Town prostitutes – one of whom appeared like a corpse – left audiences so convinced of their realism he was accused of being Jack the Ripper.

As Zadie Smith points out astutely, Sickert – like Yiadom-Boakye, but unlike many other oil painters – did not allow one layer to dry before commencing another. As a result, their works share a gauzy fluidity as if they were being glimpsed through a thin nocturnal mist. Their lack of clarity prompts the viewer to ask those existential questions. Who? Where? Why? Answer comes there none. But the paintings remain: lush, rich, handsome – justifying their artist's faith in oil paint to express the unfathomable, fascinating mysteries of human feeling and experience. Surely that's more than enough.

Rachel Spence writes for the Financial Times.

Sale: Post-War & Contemporary Art
London
Wednesday 6 March at 5pm
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