



salt 7: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

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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 belie 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.

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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 illness⁷, 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.

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

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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.

Find more information on the *salt* series and previous *salt* artists
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