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

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https://www.vogue.com/article/artist-lynette-yiadom-boakye-paintings-portray-black-lives

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

Photographed by Anton Corbijn, *Vogue*, April 2017

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

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

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

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

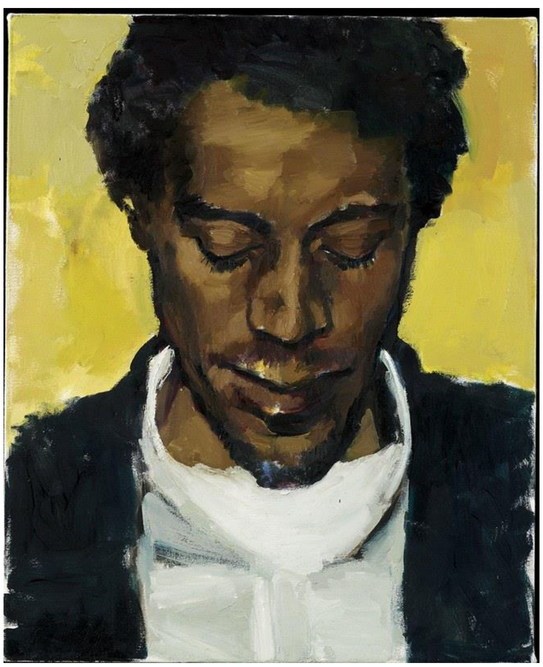
*To Douse the Devil for a Ducat*, 2015, oil on canvas

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

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

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

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



*Citrine by the Ounce*, 2014, oil on canvas

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

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

She was given an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010. Okwui Enwezor, who now runs Munich's Haus der Kunst, had brought her to the Studio Museum's attention. He had visited her studio five years earlier and followed the work ever since. "There was a kind of wickedness to her portraits, in a good way," he tells me. "There was wit and literary as well as artistic sophistication in her loose brushwork. I just loved it." Porridge in hand and wrapped in a blanket, Lynette speaks in a calm, cultivated British voice, with frequent eruptions of spontaneous laughter. She's 39 years old, has never been married, and has what she calls a "gentleman friend" who lives in the U.S.—a recent development that she's clearly not going to discuss. (She guards her privacy with a firm but gentle touch. "We Brits don't air our dirty linen in public," she says, laughing.) Every other week, she hops on a train to Oxford, where she teaches at the Ruskin School of Art. She also writes fiction—lean and satiric poems and short stories, several of which she has published in her museum catalogs. Swimming keeps her fit. Her London friends tend to be writers, doctors, and teachers—very few artists. "Her conversation is never heavy with insecurity," says Olowu.

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

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

*Any Number of Preoccupations*, 2010, oil on canvas

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

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

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

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

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sunrara That is it. That is enough.

franktellstudio ♥♥♥♥

faythelevine □□thank you for all you do □□

hilarycadigan ♥

ebaum57 I'm here♥

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# The New Yorker
*Onward and Upward with the Arts*
*June 19, 2017 Issue*
*Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Imaginary Portraits*
*The British-Ghanaian artist creates compelling character studies of people who don't exist, reflecting her twin talents as a writer and a painter.*
*By Zadie Smith*
[https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/lynette-yiadom-boakyes-imaginary-portraits](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/lynette-yiadom-boakyes-imaginary-portraits)

*"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 Lieu Of Keen Virtue" (2017). Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*

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

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 confident brushstrokes. But the deeper beguilement is how she manages to create the effect of wholly realized figures while simultaneously confounding so many of our assumptions about the figurative. The type of questions prompted by, say, Holbein (*What kind of a man was Sir Thomas More*?) or Gainsborough (*What was the social status of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*?), or when considering a Lucian Freud (*What is the relation between painter and model*?), are all short-circuited here, replaced by an existential query not much heard in contemporary art: Who *is* this? The answer is both literal and liberating: No one. Nor will the titles of these paintings identify them. A dancing girl in the midst of an arabesque bears the caption "Light Of The Lit Wick." A gentleman in an orange turtleneck with a cat on his shoulder: "In Lieu Of Keen Virtue." That antic fellow with his hands on his knees: "A Cage For The Love." We have become used to titles that ironize or undercut what we are looking at, providing conceptual scaffolding for feeble visual ideas, or weak punch lines to duller jokes. For Yiadom-Boakye, titles are allusive; they should be considered, she has said, simply "an extra mark in the paintings." For an artist, she is unusual in describing herself as a writer as much as a painter—her short stories and prosy poems frequently appear in her catalogues. In a recent interview in *Time Out*, she reflected on the relation between these twin roles. "I don't paint about the writing or write about the painting," she said. "It's just the opposite, in fact: I write about the things I can't paint and paint the things I can't write about." Her titles run parallel to the images, and—like the human figures they have chosen not to describe or explain—radiate an uncanny self-containment and serenity. The canvas is the text.

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

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

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

Photograph by Nadine Ljewere for The New Yorker

There is a respectful caution in this kind of critique which, though undoubtedly well intended in theory, in practice throws a patronizing chill over such work. Yiadom-Boakye is doing more than exploring the supposedly uncharted territory of black selfhood, or making—in that hackneyed phrase—the invisible visible. (Black selfhood has always existed and is not invisible to black people.) Nor are these paintings solely concerned with inserting the black figure into an overwhelmingly white canon. Such pat truisms have a limited utility, especially when we find them applied without alteration to artists as diverse as Chris Ofili, Kerry James Marshall, and Kehinde Wiley. Ofili, in a delicate written response to Yiadom-Boakye's work, passes over the familiar rusty argument of figuration versus abstraction, and attends instead to the intimate visual details: "The tightness of her bun. The size of his ear. She knew so much about so little of him. She said so little he heard so much." Exactly. Here are some paintings of he and she, him and her. They say little, explicitly, but you hear much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Born in 1860, and a member of the Camden Town Group, Sickert, like Yiadom-Boakye, was gifted at painting wet-on-wet (completing canvases quickly, to avoid having to break the "skin" of paint that had dried overnight), disliked painting from nature, and specialized in ambivalently posed figures in domestic settings, about whom one longs to tell stories.

Certainly from Sickert (and Degas before him) Yiadom-Boakye has inherited a narrative compulsion, which has less to do with capturing the real than with provoking, in her audience, a desire to impose a story upon an image. Central to this novelistic practice is learning how to leave sufficient space, so as to give your audience room to elaborate. (Sickert, with his spooky and suggestive tableaux of Camden prostitutes, was so successful in doing this that he unwittingly planted the seeds of an outrageous fiction—that he was Jack the Ripper, a theory still alive today.)

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

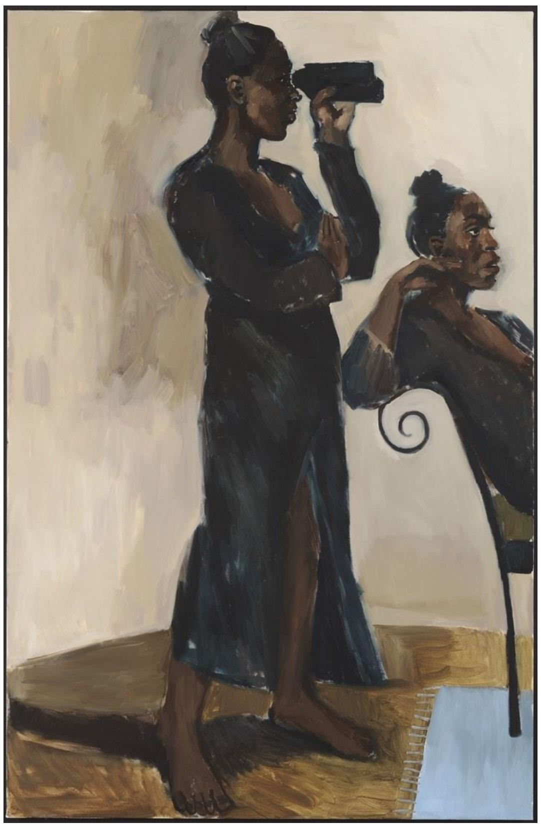
*One part of a triptych, "Vigil For A Horseman" (2017). Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*

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 email, 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 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.”



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

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

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

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

It was possible to perform the feats for which he was famed

During the Day.

But for the Owl there was something Infinitely Preferable

About the Night.

The Owl had difficulty explaining this to other birds.

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

The Pigeon argued that the Owl's insistence on a Nocturnal Routine

Had more to do with Self-Mythologizing and

By extension, Self-Aggrandisement

Than any Practical Need.

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

“This Mystery, it’s not real you know.

You’re as dull and predictable as the Rest of Us.”

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

“How appropriate! Always sat a Bough or two higher than the Rest of Us, looking down on everyone as usual.”. . .

“You think you’re Special, that you have some Authority over the Night.”

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

The Owl, a Bird of Few Words, cursed the Pigeon for depriving him of a meal . . .

The Owl decided to go in search of something substantial

Like a rabbit or a mole or a skunk.

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

*"Mercy Over Matter" (2017). The paintings say little, explicitly, but you hear much. Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*

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 Shainman Gallery, New York

*"The Much-Vaunted Air" (2017).*

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

*“Of All The Seasons” (2017).*
Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

*“Repose III” (2017).*
Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

*"An Amber Cluster" (2017).*

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

Full-screen

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

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