



THE HILTON ALS SERIES | **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**

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This is the second in a series of three exhibitions at the Yale Center for British Art, authored and curated by Hilton Als, highlighting contemporary women artists from Britain and the Commonwealth. Als worked in collaboration with Yiadom-Boakye and Matthew Hargraves, Chief Curator of Art Collections at the Center. A staff writer and theater critic for the *New Yorker* and Associate Professor of Writing at Columbia University, Als was awarded the Windham-Campbell Literature prize in 2016 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2017.

Organized by the Center, *The Hilton Als Series: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* will be on view from September 12 to December 15, 2019. The exhibition will also appear at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, from January 25 to May 11, 2020.

Works in the exhibition

Fly, I–XX, 2012, portfolio of twenty etchings, Yale Center for British Art, Laura and James Duncan, Yale BA 1975, and Friends of British Art Fund, in honor of Gillian Forrester, B2017.6.6, 11, 12, 14, and 16

The Needs Beyond, 2013, oil on canvas, Lent by Henry Thaggert

Greenhouse Fantasies, 2014, oil on canvas, Hudgins Family Collection

1 pm, Mason's Yard, 2014, oil on canvas, Private Collection

Harp-Strum, 2016, oil on canvas, The Rachofsky Collection

Brothers to a Garden, 2017, oil on linen, Lent by Lonti Ebers

Amber and Jasmine, 2018, oil on linen, Lent by the Nerman Family Collection

right: *Fly* vi, xi, xvi, 2012, etchings

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Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Completed between 2012 and 2018, this selection of works by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye represents the artist's interest in making "portraits" of imaginary people of color living in worlds where they have complete sovereignty. Born in London in 1977 to Ghanaian parents, Yiadom-Boakye is also a writer of poetry and prose—two literary forms that no doubt influence the painter's unique take on narrative.

An inveterate reader as a child, Yiadom-Boakye did not consider becoming a visual artist until her final year of high school. Her first year of college was at Central St. Martin's, where she completed a foundation course before finishing her undergraduate studies at Falmouth School of Art, in Cornwall, an experience that, she says, gave her "the space to think" outside of London's busy artistic hub. In 2003, Yiadom-Boakye received an MFA from the Royal Academy Schools, and it was during that time that the painter began to hone her style and ethos.

For the most part, she wanted to create a universe where black people could live as human beings subject to the exigencies of life without being considered symbols of pain, suffering, or triumph. To that end, Yiadom-Boakye stripped her work of complicated narratives in favor of what the body expresses in stillness, or in action, while simultaneously conveying the artist's deep interest and commitment to color and form as it makes up the world of the canvas.



1 pm, Mason's Yard

Yiadom-Boakye presents a female figure in repose in a patterned chair, which is banked on the right side by a potted plant. As with many of Yiadom-Boakye's pieces, the subject exists in a minimal space—a field of color. Indeed, the artist has said that she purposefully sets her subjects in environments that are “somewhere else.” By that, Yiadom-Boakye does not mean a fantastical space but a landscape that is germane to her subjects.

At the same time, she emphasizes her ongoing dialogue with the differences between reality and the imagination. Here, Yiadom-Boakye's subject coexists with the real and the artificial. The woman's naked feet and the spiky flowers to her right represent nature, while the chair's fabric, with its splashes of plant-like green, and the toe polish decorating the subject's toes suggest the artificial. This piece is not only a portrait of a presence, it is a picture about the artist's interest in how the natural impacts the unnatural.



1 pm, *Mason's Yard*, 2014, oil on canvas



Harp-Strum

In this lovely evocation of movement and the differences to be found in doubling, Yiadom-Boakye has created a diptych where green is the dominate color. The two figures are costumed as modern dancers might be; they do not wear the toe shoes common to ballet. While both women have a sharply defined muscularity, they also share a similar joy in achieving a given shape. Their double extension, so to speak, draws our attention to the subtle distinctions in their respective movements.

The figure on the left extends her left arm up and out, a forward moving motion, while the woman on the right turns her right hand upward, in a gesture one associates with openness. Unlike Degas, who often drew and painted dancers to convey a sense of the performer's interiority, Yiadom-Boakye is instead interested in spontaneity existing within a given form: the discipline of performance and the freedom to be found in painting itself.



Amber and Jasmine

Throughout her career, Yvonne Koma has examined what introspection looks like not only to the spectator but to the subject. In this recent work, a young woman pauses in mid-action. She is alone, with her eyes cast downward. Like Rodin's *Thinker*, her chin is cupped in her hand, a gesture indicating contemplation. Given her clothing, she may be partially kneeling on a rug she uses as an exercise mat. The vibrancy of the rug's patterns contrasts with the woman's stillness, her moment of reflection.

The subject is sandwiched between moments: the one she's just had, and the one she will have next. The physical stasis is the result of not wanting to disturb what may or may not be a passing thought and the transformative effect of thinking in general. Here and elsewhere, Yvonne Koma addresses the question of what privacy looks like when it is being seen. Does it remain private if it's being exhibited? And does looking at a painting engender similarly private thoughts in the viewer?



above: *Brothers to a Garden*, 2017, oil on linen
 right: *The Needs Beyond*, 2013, oil on canvas



cover: *Greenhouse Fantasies*, 2014, oil on canvas
 back cover: *Fly XII*, 2012, etching

The Western canon has often had a limited and problematical relationship to the black male figure. Rarely has his skin color and form, or the weight of what he means or might mean in a European context, been free of ideological concerns. Like the great American portraitist Alice Neel, Yiadom-Boakye highlights the humanness in men of color and focuses on how they sit or play in a visual field. As a burgeoning artist, Yiadom-Boakye was drawn to Whistler's moody surfaces and the social world Manet evoked in his strong use of color. (Whistler, like Yiadom-Boakye, was also a prolific writer.) The paintings seen here recall those artists in their use of darkness, not as a negation of light but as a source of a different kind of light. In *The Needs Beyond*, and *Greenhouse Fantasies*, Yiadom-Boakye pays particular attention to her subject's eyes: they are alive with presence and thought; they turn their gaze to us with the assurance of bodies and minds that are self-contained and exist on their own terms. The man in *Brothers to a Garden* sits in what may be an outdoor space, given the flowers and green that act as a partial backdrop. He may be in mid-conversation. Either way, what is especially striking in this nearly cinematic moment is his relaxed posture and his listening quality, which connote being interested in and open to his future.

—HILTON ALS, 2019



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