

ART PROBE

ISSUE #1

- Shristi Sainani

Exhibition : Fly in League With The Night (2020)

Artist : Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Venue : Tate Britain



Detail of Black Allegiance to The Cunning (2018)

Source : Arx, A., 2020

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is regarded as one of the most important visual artists of her generation. Born in 1977 in London¹ to Ghanaian, immigrant parents, her work was recognised by the late curator Okwui Enwezor, who launched her first show in Harlem. From then on, there was no stopping her. Boakye graduated from the Royal Academy School in 2003 and is known for her dark-muted figurative pieces with black fictitious sitters.² Her work is compared to 19th century masters, who used the art making technique of *Alla Prima* (wet-on-wet paint).³ This exhibit called '*Fly in League with the Night*' is running its private viewing now, while it is open to public as a ticketed event from 10th of December, 2020 till 9th of May 2021 at Tate Britain. It will be a one of its kind exhibit as it examines her work, in depth, ranging from paintings produced by Boakye in 2003 to her recent works of 2020 which were done during the pandemic.

¹ *The Art Newspaper, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye exhibition, Fly in League With The Night, 2020*

² *The Art Newspaper, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye exhibition, Fly in League With The Night, 2020*

³ *Arx, A., 2020*

Some of my favourite pieces from the show *'Fly in League with the Night'* were:

1) No Such Luxury, 2012



Source : Tate Britain

What is seen in front of us is a minimalistic portrait of an androgynous-looking black subject, most likely male with a dainty anatomical frame. The subject sits within the backdrop of a quintessential Boakye work which is recognised through its muted palette. His hair, following the tonality of his t-shirt, does not seem to showcase African features while his nose does. His arms seem fragile but cast in a posture that exert confidence; one resting on his silent lips while the other lays still behind a cup of tea. This piece in particular is warm-toned, except the ring which highlights the cup lying in front of hand. His eyes are assertive which glance back at its viewer with an expectation — perhaps an explanation.

There is nothing more British than a cup of tea. It is also a crop which holds dark history in the context of the British Empire, which once stretched across various continents. In the 1800s the mass-market for tea grew and therefore, there was a desperate need to grow the labour intensive crop. Furthermore, the consumers liked their tea sweet and it is this marriage of tea and sugar which turns into a murderous chapter in African slavery.

No Such Luxury is therefore to me, a strong political statement making it one of my top picks.

2) Complication, 2013



Source : *The New York Times*

With the recent END SARS movement of Nigeria in 2020, this is another one I found interesting. The END SARS movement was a decentralised social movement against police brutality in Nigeria.

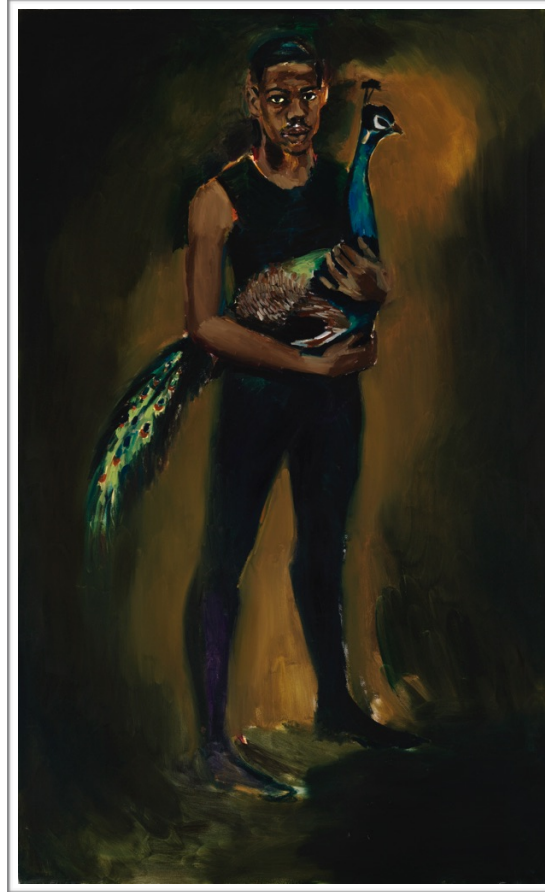
Although, *Complication* was made seven years before the movement occurred it is very relevant today making her work as contemporary as it can be. This is another one of her works that oozes activism while being a fine visual composition.

To first scrutinise this piece formally, broad and visible brush strokes make up this piece with four male black figures which highlight the idea of 'brotherhood' or unity. While three glance at one another, the last one looks down in sorrow. Apart from her usual palette of dark colours, she has chosen for this work, green and white which direct you to the Nigerian flag.

To further analyse, in 2012 prior to which this painting was produced (in 2013) Nigeria saw multiple social disruptions including terrorism by the militant Islamist group Boko Haram, inter communal and political violence, government corruption as well as lead poisoning from artisanal gold mining.⁴ This piece transport me to these (still prevalent) disturbances.

⁴ World Report 2013: Rights Trends in World Report 2013: Nigeria, 2013

3) Pander To A Prodigy, 2016



Source : Kunsthalle Basel

Finally, my last and favourite pick of the lot would be *Pander to Prodigy*, painted by Boakye in 2016. Another characteristic of a Boakye portrait is that it may be accompanied by an animal or bird. Her work has incorporated at instances a fox, an eagle, owls as well as more vibrant fauna such as a scarlet macaw. What is fascinating is that birds have a special place in her work, they are the only species that make an appearance, multiple times.

In this image, a boy is seen in a stance which is protective in nature. His legs resting on the ground suggest backward motion, while his hands gently clasp the delicate peacock. The peacock is calm, it holds its demeanour. What makes this artwork increasingly interesting to me is the place this bird holds in art history. Peacocks are motifs that have been used for millennia to represent royalty. They can be found in Christian tomb art, Indian Kalinghat paintings as well as Ottoman albums.

Pander to Prodigy makes you question — who is the indulgence (pander) is it him or the bird?

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