

# Gallery 1957

**Kwesi Botchway**

## ***Dark Purple is Everything Black***



*Speaking Eyes*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 33 x 33 in.



*Pepper Earrings*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 33 x 33 in.

In Kwesi Botchway's vibrant paintings, colour is everything. Colour is language, character, culture, community. In particular, purple is the new black – the new *everything black*. Botchway's world of monochromatic backgrounds and sensuous ombrés are grounded in a deep dark purple, as subtle as it is strong. His characteristically impressionist brushstrokes, glimmers of light, and pops of colour draw viewers in close. As we stare into bright, tinted eyes – looking into new souls reflecting our own – we see purple. Light purple, dark purple, blue purple, purple purple: black purple. Botchway's Dark Purple is Everything Black.

This new body of work establishes the artist's practice of talking with colour. In his newest series of portraits, Botchway brings to life a community of subjects full of deep melanin skin tones. By using purple to ground his depiction of skin tone, the artist is seeking a new way to communicate colour-consciousness, identity representation, and perceptions of beauty. Botchway reflects upon the colourist microaggressions that he and members from his community have experienced, even in a predominately black social environment, and seeks to challenge negative associations with darkness by equating it with royalty, luxury, beauty, and strength. In this new visual language, purple means power. Given the rare and precious history of the purple dye trade, this colour indeed connotes a global association with status: from precious murex purple in North Africa to contemporary West African associations of prosperity. With reference to this rich cultural history, Botchway offers a cognation through colour: a blood kinship where blackness is elevated as much as a source of aesthetic beauty as a source of protection from the sun. Purple black is armour. Purple black is sensuous. Purple black is everything.

With further reference to the past, Botchway's nuanced knowledge of global art history greatly informs his technical practice, as well its psychological agency. Combining 19<sup>th</sup> century French Impressionism and contemporary African social realism, Botchway forms a new visual language

whereby a layering of brushstrokes represents a multiplicity of characters, lifestyles, and perspectives. His new spin on impressionist movement meditates upon light that is dark, revealing a spectrum of colour, energy, and character. Multi-colours translate into multi-cultures, where contrasting identity constructions can co-exist: local meets global, indigenous meets diaspora, traditional meets contemporary. 'I aim to capture the spirit, essence and heritage of my subjects,' the artist proclaims, 'and use this as an opportunity to lend the world a glance into the lives and struggles of people whose stories are yet to be fully told. My paintings are meant to trigger emotions of pride or shame, honour or disgust and sometimes even humour. It's all about the story of my subjects, which words cannot fully explain.'

Botchway contributes to an evolving genre of portraiture painting, seeking to document contemporary black – and distinctly African – identity, from everyday life to romanticised day dreams. He addresses the rich yet often myopic canon of art history by pulling from past references alongside his own completely new language, semantics, and slang of identity representation. Accessories show off commercial brand icons alongside Asante adinkra symbols representing pithy indigenous aphorisms – trendy Happy Socks conjure the patterns of colourful West African textiles. Furthermore, Botchway is inspired by the mix of cultural expressions he experiences everyday from growing up in Nima (Accra, Ghana), where life revolves around a pulsing market full of contrast and contradiction. Striving to capture this energetic milieu, Botchway imagines a girl selling cabbages in canary yellow, and a farm boy decked out in hot pink. These styles create a new colour story: a version of the artist, his family, friends, and imaginations that challenges representations of black identity, and presents psychologically complex conceptions of self and connections to culture. Whether these are indigenously nostalgic or internationally cutting-edge, they are a representation that the artist, alongside his local and global community, can relate to.

At this pivotal point in the artist's personal and professional trajectory, Botchway is currently embarking upon a deeper exploration of what individuality means within collective representation. From intimate family portraits to bustling market, scenes of gathering will set the stage for the artist's enduring pursuit to redefine colour and community. This evolving focus is introduced by Botchway's monumental self-portrait triptych, *Metamorphose in July*, depicting the artist in three different sequences, states of recline, and spectrums of colour. At ease amidst a surreal sunset, 'The Botchway Triplets' gaze out at us with a cool, inviting confidence – signature watches and tree rings beckoning us closer. Time ceases to exist in this dream-like landscape, a space where self-beauty and a spiritual sensibility is embraced. Bright yellow butterflies flutter amongst the warm colour ombré, activating the inner soul and astrological sphere. Botchway shares with us: 'This work depicts my stage of transforming as a young artist growing to be the artist I'm destined to be, with elements such as a jaguar cub which signifies strength and curiosity, and butterflies as a sign of hope, creativity, and transformation.'

This new group of paintings sees Botchway conjuring the technical virtuoso and art historical grounding of American artist Kerry James Marshall; the sensibility of subversive colour coding and portraiture of painter Amy Sherald; and the energetic abstraction celebrating urban African life of Ghanaian artist and educator Professor Ablade Glover – all whom suggest an alternative narrative of identity politics and constructs of beauty. Botchway contributes to this leading visual language by creating a multitude of portraits as fiercely individual as they are intimately collective. Even when stripped of a context, his subjects – inspired by dear friends or anonymous people from the internet alike – ooze character. They are cool, confident, and above all full of colour. Their colour is what makes them all stand out, yet blend in. They are individuals, yet together. 'Their hot eyes,' Botchway muses, 'come with a force of intensity and untold stories, witnessed and experienced, which I want my viewers to have a feel of and get connected to.' And as we peer into these piercing, bright eyes, we indeed may perceive windows into other souls, pools of radiant energy, individual struggles, and collective hopes.

For what makes each of these portraits so special and singular, is also what makes them so universal. They are a community, a family, a crew, an army. As one colour pulsing in the background recedes and gives shape to the figure, we watch as negative becomes positive – purple becomes black becomes rainbow. And within this spectrum, is everyone. The darkness of Botchway's Purple is Everything Black.

Text by **Katherine Finerty**

### **About Gallery 1957**

Based in Accra and working internationally, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. The gallery presents a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists currently bridging the gap between local and international practices. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. Opened in 2017, Gallery 1957 II is the gallery's second space, situated in Accra's Galleria Mall. The gallery serves as a vital platform, promoting West Africa's presence within the art scene by hosting ambitious exhibitions, providing resources for residencies and participating in international art fairs.

### **About Kwesi Botchway**

Kwesi Botchway, born in Accra, Ghana (1994) is an artist and founder of worldfaze art studio. Botchway studied at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design graduating in 2011 with a diploma in painting. His practice focuses on portraiture painting combining realism and impressionism to form a new visual language about colour, identity, and representation. Botchway is also a self-taught photographer and works in graphic design. Recent exhibitions include Cgunu / Nkambom (Cape Town, South Africa, 2020), Pidgin Imaginarium (Chalewote Street Art Festival, Accra, Ghana, 2019), James Town Café Exhibition (Prince Charles Official visit to Ghana, 2018), Age of No Return (Hos Oona Galleri & Sundhed, Vejle, Denmark 2017), and Qaba (Alliance Française d'Accra, Ghana, 2017), amongst others. Botchway was nominated for The GUBA Awards Influential artist (2019) and is currently an artist in residence at Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana.

### **About Katherine Finerty**

Finerty was born in New York City and practices as an independent art curator and writer in London. She focuses on socially engaged practices, translocal identity politics, and contemporary African art. Finerty holds an MA in Curating from the Royal College of Art, studied History of Art at the University of Cambridge, and received her BA in Art History and Africana Studies from Cornell University. She was the Curatorial Assistant for the Göteborg International Biennale for Contemporary Art 2015 and Rencontres Picha: Biennale de Lubumbashi 2013, and has interned in the curatorial departments of The Met and Studio Museum in Harlem. Finerty is currently Assistant Curator and Communications & Development Manager at The Showroom, London.

### **Notes to editors:**

**Exhibition:** Kwesi Botchway: Dark Purple Is Everything Black

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