

Aplerh-Doku Borlabi

Uncaged and Watered

8th December 2023 – 27th January 2024

Gallery 1957 is delighted to present *Uncaged and Watered*, a new solo exhibition by Ghanaian visual artist Aplerh-Doku Borlabi. The show features a new body of work created during the artist's recent residency with the gallery in London and draws on expressions of liberation from social restrictions. Through a process of collaging different elements of vegetation, plants, and furniture, Borlabi has produced figures who take the viewer on a journey towards self-acceptance and emancipation.

Borlabi continues along his trajectory of exploring the overlapping characteristics between Black skin and coconut sheaths, which he uses as a signifier of his Ghanaian identity. Transported from the shores of Coco Beach, Nungua, a beach town in Accra, Borlabi is drawn to the coconut sheaths for their tactile and energetic connection to his homeland and ancestors. Metaphorically, the coconut sheath contemplates the tension between what is disregarded, discarded, and deemed ugly, and what is natural, strong, complex, multidimensional, and beautiful.

Taking further inspiration from Maya Angelou's autobiographical text *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Borlabi uses his love of colour, texture, and composition to bring into existence his once-imagined liberty. This body of work demarcates a turning point in his career and was created in response to an indelible moment in his personal journey towards self-liberation. Having felt trapped in a mental cage - the kind strengthened by internalised social norms and pressures that prevent one from being their true self out of fear of disownment - he finally feels free to be his full self, with his full range of expression. Grateful for the lessons learnt along the way, Borlabi now feels like there is a path that he wants to journey alone, a garden that he wants to water at his leisure. His garden. Relishing in the delight of being able to freely do what moves him spiritually and make him feel full and whole, Borlabi also hopes that his new body of work will highlight the healing power of nature and be a further expansion of his previous ecological explorations, which have sought to interrogate the inextricable connection between nature and humanity.

Uncaged and Watered is a collection of portraits inspired by photographs that are both staged and candid, intimate and forthcoming. Taking inspiration from the rich and boundless space of his community, Borlabi seeks to resolve the ambivalence of common experiences and the shared impulse to be oneself in a world that demands otherwise. Using reference photos taken in Accra and producing these new works in London orchestrates a rewriting of the artist's history that is refreshing and rendered in bright hues. Lush greens, which resonate the original environment of the coconut sheaths, bring an abundant liveliness to the canvases, offering the African portrait tradition a naturalistic and ecological layer that is unique in its approach.

For Borlabi, the introspective journey isn't linear, and different experiences that come into your environment can aid in reflection and understanding. The radical softness of empathy towards the self must be rooted in a willingness to sit with discomfort to necessitate growth. Just as the coconut sheaths are meticulously and patiently assembled, the fractured journey of self-discovery requires a delicate touch.

The exhibition is accompanied by a critical text by Chantel Akworkor Thompson.

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About the Artist

Aplerh-Doku Borlabi (b. 1987, Ghana. Lives and works in Accra) was formally trained at Ghanatta College of Arts and Design, the alma mater of his mentor, acclaimed contemporary artist, Amaoko Boafo and his studio is today part of the Amoako Boafo Studio. Borlabi grew up in the CoCo Beach area of Accra, where he draws his inspiration for his current work. Borlabi's early works applied his foundational learning in academic painting, creating naturalistic compositions, and for years he grappled with finding a visual language that felt authentic. Using coconut sheath to create the skin of the figures in his portraits, he found a way to embody his own culture and ethnic identity into his practice. The coconut tree and fruit are now part of the artist's daily visual experience. From a distance, the mixed media works of oil paint and coconut husk on canvas, appear as richly toned brown skin. The intrinsic properties of the coconut sheath's multiple layers, longhairs, and varying shades of brown whimsically renders skin texture and bone structure, while emulating the way natural light surfaces on skin. With one medium, the artist was able to capture the physical colour complexities of black people's skin, and visually narrate the physical organic connections of humanity, and plant life.

Solo exhibitions include *In Our Nature*, Septieme Gallery, Paris, France (2023) and *Shia Hiε Nyam Woo: Honouring Home*, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2022). Group shows include *Unlimited*, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2022); *18 (Rising Ghana)*, PM/AM Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Winner Takes All*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, USA, curated by Amoako Boafo and Larry Ossei-Mensah (2022) and *Could You Be Loved*, Gallery 1957, Gallery III, Accra, Ghana (2021). Borlabi has participated in *Art X Lagos*, with Gallery 1957 in 2021.

About Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 is a contemporary art gallery with spaces across Accra, Ghana and London, UK.

It dedicates its programme to spearheading international exchanges between art practices from these communities and the rest of the world, presenting artists who interrogate concepts of belonging and identity, cultural exchange, and social history beyond Western narratives.

Launched by Marwan Zakhem in 2016 on Ghanaian Independence Day, Gallery 1957 has since expanded across three gallery spaces in Accra. Originally set up to promote Ghana and West Africa's presence in the arts scene, it now encompasses the Global South and its diaspora. Gallery 1957's London space opened in October 2020, providing a further platform for artists to build dialogues with its growing network of international collaborators.

Gallery 1957 presents exhibitions, installations, and performances by celebrated artists, fostering connections between local and international audiences. The Gallery's global gallery partnerships and ongoing artist residency program have attracted numerous international artists and arts professionals to Ghana. The Gallery's annual Cultural Week in September serves as a platform for encouraging deeper engagement with Ghana's vibrant contemporary art scene.

In 2021, Gallery 1957 launched the *Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize* for female Ghanaian artists, the first ever dedicated art prize of its kind. The prize aims to further strengthen the gallery's commitment to supporting and promoting emerging and established artists.

Gallery 1957's work expands beyond the gallery walls through a public programme that includes local and international art fairs, talks, off-site projects, and site-specific installations as well as the publication of books and catalogues - continuously supporting cultural initiatives in Ghana, Africa and beyond.

Aplerh-Doku Borlabi, *Uncaged and Watered*

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