

PRESS RELEASE

Aplerh-Doku Borlabi

Shia Hiε Nyam Woo: Honouring Home

3rd June – 11th July, 2022 Accra, Ghana, Gallery II



Aplerh-Doku Borlabi *Maama Servaa I*, 2022. Coconut sheath and acrylic on canvas
220 x 180 cm / 78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in. Copyright the artist, image courtesy of Gallery 1957

For his first solo show *Shia Hiε Nyam Woo: Honouring Home*, Borlabi presents resplendent re-imaginings of his reflections of home: an enchanting collection of proud portraits celebrating the effulgence of existence that will enrapture the viewer as their eyes glide over them. Inspired by the Ga proverb *Gbõ hiymεii dara waa, shi enaaa maŋ le mligbe ke mli nibii* (*the eyes of a stranger may be very large, but he does not see the inner things of the town*), he invites the viewer to his hometown Nungua^[1] to see as eye see. Emboldened on canvases, whimsically washed with pastel tones and brilliant brights, are homages to his homefolk.

Skin crafted from carefully selected coconut sheath, precisely cut and assembled in a perfect puzzle-like manner, each expertly executed figure stands out against a lucid backdrop. A

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backdrop fashioned from a palette of sun-nourished and carefully picked lavenders, periwinkles, cornflowers, hibiscuses and Tuscan golds. Dressed in highly patterned clothes, which complement and illuminate their skin, each person he renders harmoniously hums a sweet melody of self-love over a strong beat of self-determination. Soft and gentle, yet striking with the redolence of Nungua, they are unrelenting and alive like the pulse of African pride and embody the very nature of *Nu (Water)*: the capacity to cultivate calmness; cleanse the soul; wash with wisdom, and evoke a proclamation of gratitude' *wɔ ye wala!* (We have life!)

The collection's centrepiece is a striking portrait of his wife, *Maame Serwaa I*. Poised and composed, she sits on a royal azure throne, the cushions patterned with the ripples of the ocean mimicking the melodic movement of the cleansing expanse of water. Like the sea, her presence, although expansive, is not engulfing. Her stance, whilst strong, evokes stillness. The Queen of his life, she is his supporter, his anchor, that who roots him- a place where he finds home. His life force: a personification of *Nu* (water). This portrait, *Maame Serwaa I*, is one of three tributes to his wife in the collection and the largest of them all. It prominently shows the thematic symbols of *Nu*, which can be found throughout the collection but most obviously in *Maame Serwaa III*, whose earrings resemble a droplet of cool refreshing water and *Azure Dreams*. In *Maame Serwaa II*, where she can be found lounging on a yellow sofa body comforted by home attire, which enfolds her skin the way her support does him, she is an embodiment of home comfort. Through these portrays, he expresses the duality of her nature which is strong enough to support whilst gentle enough to comfort.

Extract from text by Chantel Akwarkor Thompson

About the Artist

A graduate of Ghanatta College of Art and Design, Aplerh-Doku Borlabi (b.1987, Ghana) early works applied his foundational learning in academic painting, creating naturalistic compositions. In 2020, after years of grappling to find a visual language that felt authentic, he turned to his natural environment. It was in the Cocobeach area, where he grew up, that his artistic relationship with the coconut began. 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 is 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 color complexities of black people's skin, and visually narrate the physical organic connections of humanity, and plant life. Metaphorically, the coconut sheath contemplates the tension between what is disregarded, discarded, and deemed ugly, and what is natural, strong, complex, multidimensional, and beautiful. Echoing prideful statements, such a Black is Beautiful, Borlabi captures the joy of the human experience lived in Black people globally, Ghana, and the continent at large.

About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra, with a London outpost opened in 2020, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. Presenting a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists, 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. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. The gallery now hosts three

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spaces in Accra – one in the Kempinski Hotel and two in the Galleria Mall – and a London outpost in Hyde Park Gate.

Artist: Aplerh-Doku Borlabi

Title: Shia Hiε Nyam Woo: Honouring Home

Dates: 3rd June – 11th July 2022

Opening Reception: 3rd June, 2022 - 6pm-9pm

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