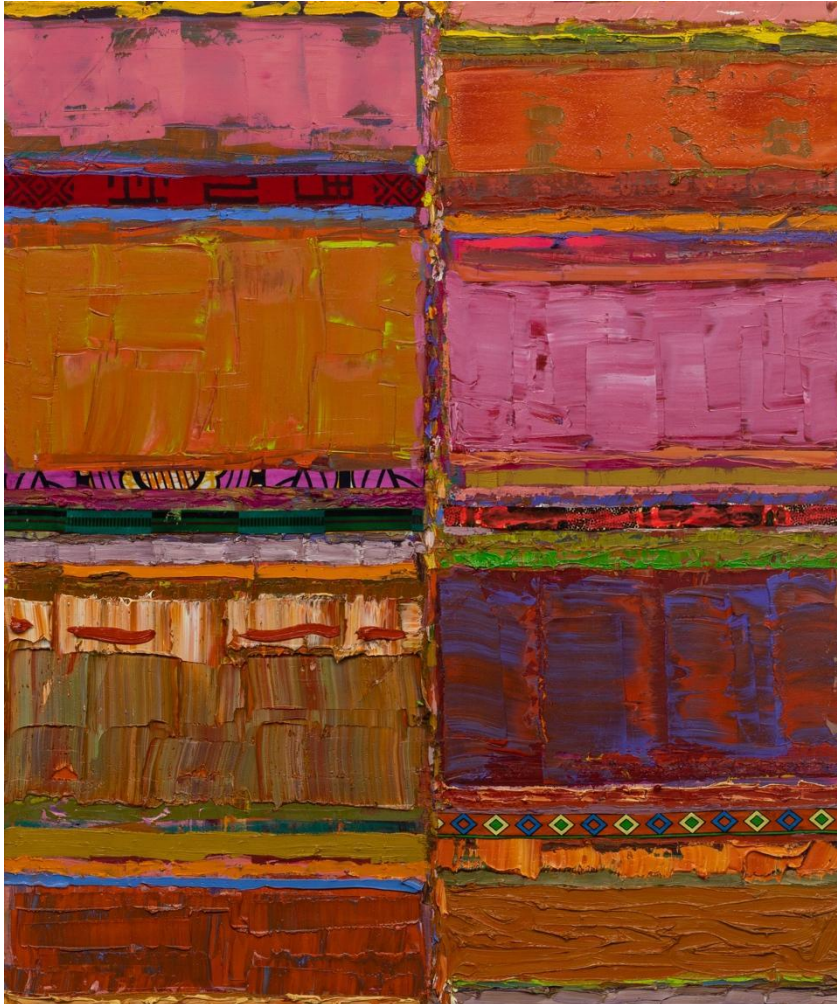


Tegene Kunbi

Meeting Points and Holding On

29th June – 12th August 2023, Gallery I Accra



'Living Poems' 2023, 120cm x 100cm, Oil on Canvas with Textile,
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is delighted to present 'Meeting Points and Holding On', a new solo exhibition by mixed-media Tegene Kunbi following his recent residency with the Gallery in Accra.

"Art is a reflection on life. Life isn't something we can cut and fix. It's always in a state of flux." - El Anatsui

Tegene Kunbi's works produced at the recent Gallery 1957 residency are visual sensation statements of idiosyncratic polychromatic painterly patterns sharpened with remarkable voice. Born in Addis Ababa in 1980 and based in Berlin, the artist's distinctively saturated and refreshingly bold series moulded at the contemporary art gallery's Accra space is an array of large and small canvases thickly layered with

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oil stick, acrylic, pastel and oil paint applied generously with palette knives, paint brushes and by hand. Even-sized rectangular grid forms are bonded within some of the interstices with thin linings of wax prints and hand woven kente cloth sourced locally from Ghana's markets.

The 2022 Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor winning artist becomes some sort of spiritual conduit - a channel of free energies and the pigmentation that floods the canvasses are regular and irregular aggregates, with porosity ranging from fluffy to compact, dishevelled to clean geomorphologic forms. Tone, material, line, colour, composition and texture find weight in the insufflating processes that lead to the final pieces burgeoning with lucid aesthetic life.

Ghana has been a viable crucible for Kunbi's alchemy tapped from everyday outlets of life in inspirational waves of flux, leading to works birthed from a keen sense of social spiritedness, engagement and channelling of colour. "Colour is everything and everywhere. Colour is life. Colour is identity and in itself, conceptually ingrained," he explains. The tessellation of vividly mapped out worlds within Kunbi's work seemingly spills out with an impetus for new emotions of colour almost ungraspable by human senses.

"My art is not about politics. There is social and aesthetic transformation of ordinary objects into magnificence. The colours are vibrant. It is a more airy sort of vibrancy with youthfulness. Everyone can come and take what they want for themselves. Some of those colours would belong to folks."

- Atta Kwami

When Covid started, Kunbi was thinking about scale and illusion during social distancing. "When people die, they are covered or dressed in cloth, regardless of one's religion," he states. He therefore started collaging with textile prints to add on a new voice. In this series, the far ends of wax prints are introduced where the embedded text in the material communicates quirky meanings into the paintings. Adinkra in the kente prints, which connote philosophical and socio-political thought patterns are introduced into the lattices of a few pieces. Beyond the text and symbols, and inside the tints, the poetry writes itself.

A rhythmic juxtaposition of hues with meeting points where frames overlap with a "dialogue leaning to the perfect contrast". To the artist, it is important to experience the changes through layers of painting day after day. As such, a previous day's hues are different from the present day's and the subsequent days will vary also. While tie-dye typically consists of folding, twisting, pleating, or crumpling then binding of fabric; Kunbi's work is intensive layering of paint and fabric via multiple sequential processes of sculptural collage. "It takes negotiations between the variety of colours and considerations through their engagements," Kunbi explains while passing a thick wad of green oil stick into the oceanic sinews of a tall canvas dominated by varying wavelengths of blues.

The artist would take long walks daily in Makola market to select textiles while making random photos of the vernacular architecture that avowedly enunciate Accra's intended or extemporaneous abstraction. Kunbi believes the intricately graphic shades of kiosks, residential walls or makeshift shop façades that constitute the inherent street design culture sprinkled all over Africa are "local wisdom" portals which imply that "abstraction has always been with us." A journey of constant reflection on life influenced by filtered absorption of the reverberating outside world to propel diverse assemblages layered as honest hues. Kunbi's compositions play with illusions and reflections, shadows and light "open for everyone to connect with."

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The artist loves to work during the nights, but can be found sometimes during the daytime navigating between the standing and hanging canvases meticulously lined within the studio space with textile pieces on the floor like a visit to Kantamanto where diverse colour frames of clothes are stacked on walls, the ground and unto bodies with narrow paths between them.

“In the past several decades, it has become an impetus for many artistic practices to consider not only the limits of the art object or space, but the parameters of production itself.”

- Robin Riskin; Ghosts, decoys and dusts of Savannah: the possibilities of an artistic community.

While the libraries of thought in art define abstraction as a complete departure from reality, Kunbi is positioned in reality itself as a starting point for production. While carving poetic gestures complimenting the non-figurativeness and non-objectiveness of the genre’s wish list, an inquisition into art making and presentation is engendered in the artist’s practice. The art is not “over-conceptualised” but accedes to unlatched space for spectators to find their own truths, meanings and their very selves in the bigger picture. To liberate the oeuvre for “potential hidden voices to find life,” the artist becomes an exoteric visual essayist who understands the underlying, unspoken and implicit assumptions that come with making and presenting art while deconstructing taut frameworks.

Kunbi would amble along Accra’s coast line littered with historic patterns and vibrant youthful energy where Jamestown is concatenated to Accra Art Centre with Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum as a memorial bridge. I am reminded of the spirit of accumulated graffiti in Berlin while experiencing Kunbi’s work process. The result looks like a range between gaudy and subtle extra-terrestrial tone samples from interplanetary surface deposits.

“I’m excited to be in Ghana in this era,” Kunbi indicates in one of our conversations. He goes on to narrate how he believes Ablade Glover and Atta Kwami’s visual storytelling are essentially relatable through the windows of a moving trotro or brisk human traffic tides. The “vivid power of colours that make up our cities” urges Kunbi to work with a mind set inspired by a society of communally hinged family systems by way of his nuclear home that he carries in his magnanimous heart, galvanising him to create impressive art that look like they were dipped in tie-dye potions.

“I must identify myself with Africa. Then I will have an identity”. - Fela Kuti

The belief in an African future where ancient philosophical ideologies are instilled in identity, values, architecture and reasoning brings the artist to his own unique style of expressionism in the midst of sprightly community and animated life. Kunbi creates an alternate world away from victimisation by the complicated digestion of mainstream media and exploitation. Moreover, his residency period happens synchronously with the one-month ritual ban on noise-making and funeral rites in Ga towns to commemorate the annual Ga harvest festival known as Hɔ̃mɔ̃wɔ̃. The artist maintains that “our cosmos of natural awareness and spiritual connection resonates within us” and as such is anchored with confidence in his work through respect and African rootedness.

Every preceding paint layer is not totally covered but leaks delicately from the sides. The past stays with us. “Who is behind this or that?” is a constant question I keep asking myself and viewers while navigating this journey as an artist,” Kunbi reiterates. Polychromatic frequencies usher Kunbi into an artistic outreach to question obscure narratives. “I was in Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, Madagascar, and now Ghana. We are not always the war, but knowledge beyond football and danceable music,” Kunbi quips.

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“Music that speaks about social life and history are my go-to sounds,” Kunbi proclaims, before citing Fela Kuti as one of his inspirations. Jazz music also propels the artist and the essence of Afrobeat settles in his mind and stirs sounds into inventive moments of colour.

“A radical is he who has no sense...fights without reason...I have a reason. I am authentic. Yes, that’s what I am”. - Fela Kuti

Born in the capital of Ethiopia, a Harari street philosopher emerges with a keen connection with the adage; “who knows tomorrow?” Kunbi inherited from his mother a consistent attachment to hope, but carves his own interpretation of this hope with authenticity and reason, through dedication to pioneering a clear voice in the arts. Though he could not show his mother an example of an artist who had made it in life in his younger days, he could probably currently cite himself as a point of success. That reality is what this hope is grounded in.

Furthermore, in the creative process, the artist’s touch resounds with emotional dissemination by working on 3 to 4 paintings at a time, like a mother feeding her kids, and making sure each has the right touch of ingredients. He sees the group of paintings as a connected body of work where the whole package is not finished if even one of them is not finalised. “I simplify the dialogue, otherwise there is dominance when some hues are opposing others. Neighbours have to keep the dialogue going,” he explains.

Tegene Kunbi’s art stands for the depth of proverbs, the lightness of waving hearts, the diversity of tones, the harmony in faith of overcoming shared struggles, the cruciality of emotion in creative stance and the freedoms in processes of making. This series from his Gallery 1957 residency are basically pianos standing on their shorter ends where each key plays a different note but altogether make breath taking music, allowing freedom of interpretation and reason for connection.

- Curatorial text by Kwame Aidoo

About the Artist

Tegene Kunbi (b. 1980, Ethiopia. Lives and works in Berlin)

Tegene Kunbi completed a Painting and Art Education degree at the Fine Arts School, University of Addis Ababa, in 2004. With the help of the prestigious DAAD scholarship, he left Ethiopia in 2008 to study at the Universität der Künste Berlin, where he obtained a Master of Fine Arts Degree in 2011. The artist considers colour as a vocabulary to give voice to aspects of his heritage. Kunbi creates compositions of different geometric shapes, colours, landscape and fabrics to create surfaces of vibrant textures and layers. Each hue is a conversation with the next, producing a sense of harmony and tension. Tonality, density and the rectilinear grid are also an integral part of the work. Through this language he conveys the dynamism and complexities within personal experience and that of his community.

Selected solo exhibitions include Don't Talk, Bode Project, Berlin, Germany (2023); Tegene Kunbi, Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, Germany (2023); Warp and Weft, Primo Marella Gallery (2022); Danjerus Cable, Galerie Gerken, Berlin, Germany (2015); Melting Pot, Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York, NY, USA (2014) and Tegene Kunbi, Galerie Gerken, Berlin, Germany (2014).

Selected group exhibitions include Unlimited, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2022); Dissonance, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany (2022); From Modern to Contemporary: Artists from the Horn of Africa and Diaspora, CFHILL Art Space, Stockholm, Sweden (2021); Here History Began Tracing the Re/Verberations of Halim El-Dabh, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, Germany

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(2021);Matièressensibles 'Of materials and things', La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France (2021);Tegene Kunbi and Saleh Lô: Abstract // Figures, ArtGallé Amy Sow, Nouakchott, Mauritania (2021);Summer Exhibition, Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York, NY, USA (2020);Planet B, BMW Foundation Herbert Quandt, Berlin, Germany (2020);Material Color, Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York, NY, USA (2019);RE:PUBLIC, with Robel Temesgen, Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya (2019);Light Years: Celebrating20Years of Margaret Thatcher Projects, Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York, NY, USA (2018) and Best of Galerie Gerken, Galerie Gerken, Berlin, Germany (2018).

The artist has participated in the following fairs: Artgenève, 1-54, Dak'Art Biennale, Planet Art Festival and PULSE Miami Beach. In 2022, the artist was named the Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor at Dak'Art Biennale 2022 winner.

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

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Title: Meeting Points and Holding On

Dates: 29th June – 12th August 2023

Opening Reception: 29th June 2023 - 6pm-9pm

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