

Kwaku Yaro

Look at What You've Seen

Curated by Nuna Adisenu-Doe

9th November – 14th December 2023, Gallery I, Accra



Kwaku Yaro, Yellow Lamp, 2023, Acrylic, woven nylon and burlap on polymer, 232cm x 152cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is proud to present 'Look at What You've Seen', a new solo exhibition by Kwaku Yaro. In the heart of Labadi, a coastal fishing community nestled along Ghana's Atlantic Ocean's edge, lies the inspiration for this extraordinary exhibition. Within this predominantly tranquil and unassuming environment, an artist of singular vision has emerged, reshaping the boundaries of perception and provoking questions about the very act of seeing itself.

This exhibition is an exploration of agency, about how you, the viewer, are required to move beyond the passive role of looking to actively participate in the act of seeing. The democracy of materials within Yaro's work invites us to reconsider our notions of the many possibilities in art. It challenges the hierarchy of materials in the art world, where traditional canvases and paints have often taken precedence and reigned. It provokes an intuition to embrace our role in this agency, as well as a testament to contemporary art's ability to transform the unnoticed, mundane, and every day into critical discourse and visibility.

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Gallery 1957, I, II and III Accra
Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast
& Galleria Mall
PMB 66 – Ministries
Gamel Abdul Nasser Avenue
Ridge – Accra
Ghana

info@gallery1957.com

Gallery 1957, London
1 Hyde Park Gate
London, SW7 5EW
UK

london@gallery1957.com

Instagram: [@gallery1957](https://www.instagram.com/gallery1957)
gallery1957.com

Yaro shares a personal story of his mother's migration from Northern Ghana to the capital city, Accra, in search of a brighter future. Among the scant possessions she brought along, the polypropylene mat held a special symbolic meaning. As one of the few items she took with her, it carried a deep significance for Yaro. This has played a pivotal role in Yaro's choice to incorporate these mats into his artistic practice.

This also echoes in the story and history of the “Ghana Must Go” bag which was originally introduced in Ghana as a sturdy and versatile bag for various uses, including transporting goods and personal belongings. However, its name and iconic status are tied to a historical event where in the 1980s, Ghanaian immigrants living in Nigeria were expelled from the country due to the fear that they were taking over Nigerian jobs. During that move, they often carried their belongings in these bags. This mass migration and the association with the bag led to it being colloquially named "Ghana Must Go." The bag, with its distinctive checkered pattern, became a symbol of migration, resilience, and the complex relationship between Ghana and Nigeria. Over time, it has evolved from being a functional item to a cultural icon.

The narratives and stories that Yaro paints are a stark reflection of similar instances. Using his signature lush green pointillism style, he makes fictional inferences to an opulent lifestyle through elegantly dressed muses and carefully crafted setups of wealthy household settings in his paintings. His mixed-media style merges the commonality of upcycled woven polypropylene mats, carrier bags and jute sacks with the timeless medium of acrylic paint. He also introduces a very intricate handmade embroidery-like style contrasting industrial and mechanical production with traditional manual weaving techniques often associated with local craftsmen.

What emerges are portraits that evoke both a sense of place and the very souls of his subjects. These portraits breathe life into what might otherwise be considered waste. Yaro repurposes these materials, infusing them with new narratives, purpose, and significance. Yaro intentionally highlights this imagery in the centre of his compositions. An affirmation of the soft influence of cultural exchange into the social fabric of his society. In Ghana, these bags find a second life in local markets, serving various purposes such as packaging, storage, and transportation. Having carried multiple layers of trade, commerce and labour, the economic and commercial implications of an object like the jute sack also; in its journey from being made in India to its use in Ghana, initially transporting cocoa beans, to onions, and finally charcoal. This profound multiuse reflects the intricate dynamics of global trade, local economies, and the life cycle of commodities. They metaphorically represent the dreams, aspirations, and resilience these figures carry on their shoulders forging a visual language that resonates with both past and present.

These materials, much like how Stephen Johnstone's exploration of “The Everyday” challenged traditional art forms, Yaro redefines our expectations of materials in art. He transforms polypropylene mats, carrier bags, and jute sacks into an engaging and thought-provoking dialogue with his audience, materials once disregarded, are now celebrated as vibrant agents of expression. Yaro's exploration of waste, materiality, and consumption finds a counterpart in his use of upcycled materials. These transformed materials not only tell a story of resourcefulness and environmental consciousness but also challenge the notion of waste. In a world where waste is a growing concern, he offers a vision of reclamation and reimagining.

- Excerpt from curatorial text by Nuna Adisenu-Doe

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About the Artist

Kwaku Yaro

(b. 1995, Labadi, Ghana. Lives and works in Accra, Ghana.)

Born and raised in Labadi, Kwaku Yaro has cultivated a fresh and compelling artistic practice that reveals the everyday, the ordinary, and the mundane and transforms them into a space of social, religious and economic contemplation. Through his medium, Yaro advocates for resourcefulness and innovation. Polypropylene, a type of synthetic thermoplastic polymer that is processed into monofilament or multifilament and derived from petroleum, becomes the raw material in the production of the mats and shopping bags predominantly featured in Yaro's work. The artist uses a pointillism technique in his works and each spot represents the people of the town of Labadi, where he resides. His research and development practices go beyond the limitation of his five senses, and his works are a testament to his passion for detail. He is a member of the Artemartis collective in Accra.

Yaro's solo exhibitions include: 'A Night Out with Lariba And Friends', Septieme Gallery, Cotonou, Benin (2023).

Group exhibitions by the artist include: 'Filling In The Pieces In Black', Saatchi Gallery & Maruani Mercier, London, UK & Brussels, Belgium (2023); 1-54 Art Fair, Septieme Gallery, London, UK (2023); 1-54 Art Fair, Septieme Gallery, New York, USA (2023); 'When The Birds Fly Home', Artemartis x Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2023); 'Poetics Of Material' Rele Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria & Los Angeles, USA (2022); 'Handwritten', Chilli Art Projects, London, UK (2022); 'The Sown Seeds', Efie Gallery, Dubai, UAE (2022); 'In(de)finite Selfhoods' Citronne Gallery–Athens, Greece (2022); 'Ties That Bind Us', The Cowrie Culture, Accra, Ghana (2022); 'Birds Of A Feather', Phillips Auction House & Artemartis, London, UK (2022); Oneric Art Gallery, Accra, Ghana (2020); Untamed Empire, Accra, Ghana (2020).

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

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publication of books and catalogues – continuously supporting cultural initiatives in Ghana, Africa and beyond.

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Opening Reception: - 9th November 6pm-9pm
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