

Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957, Accra

“Afro Memoirs” Solo Show Lord Ohene

14 April – 07 May 2021

Gallery I space, Accra



In a White Throne, Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 continues its fifth year anniversary with the first solo exhibition by Lord Ohene titled, “Afro Memoirs”.

Beads, like people, are individually textured, painstakingly created entities. Once strung together their meaning, value, beauty, and energy connects and expands – creating something new, a collective. These powerful sources play as culturally specific visual tools in the compositions imagined by artist Lord OHENE Okyere-Bour. From layered krobo necklaces and personalised pendants to traditional waist beads and trendy asymmetrical earrings – all but one painting in this new body of work features beadwork, like a treasure hunt hinting at the character, style, performance, and dreams of the sitter. The Afro Memoirs series is a deep look inward in order to see outwards. It is a space created for everyone to look back on their past to look forwards to their future. It is a memory, a mirror, a movie set, where one can imagine who they can be and what is possible, when we string our stories together.

Lord is an artist who has lived many lives and wears many hats, establishing unexpected connections with others at every stage of his journey. After pursuing an art degree at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design in his hometown of Accra, Lord pursued fashion illustration and prop building which led to relocating in the Netherlands where he has worked as a movie set designer, glitter art performer, art tutor, and more. His

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curiosity and resilience are always grounded in the people he meets along the way, the support they provide and the inspiration they incur. For his first solo exhibition, Afro Memoirs, Lord presents a collection of memories through a community of portraits, each one summoning a person grounded in reality (a birth relative or member of his ever-evolving found family, a recent acquaintance or stranger-cum-muse discovered on social media) brought to life through intimate conversation followed by the artist's imagination. "In this new body of work," he explains, "I incorporate elements from life which are inspired by people from my past and my hardships along the way. With each stroke of oil, pastels and acrylics, it slowly brings back the memories that piece represents – a very powerful combination in telling the story of an Afro memoir. From the colours and facial expressions to the structure of clothing, every element of my work is a small piece to the puzzle of my life." These colourful, characterful portraits all serve as conduits for Lord's multi-layered memories, shaping a communal possibility. It is a cinematography of self-reflection for social representation, a reimagination of kinship.

This summoning is heightened by Lord's unique technique to purposefully age his brushes: he takes new, soft tools and by submerging them in turpentine and scrubbing on a dry stone they become old – conduits of physical and spiritual energy. He has also developed a new methodology contouring facial texture and expressions with silver pastel to imbue his portraits with light and life. These aged brushes and linear surfaces galvanise not only the textures he desires on the canvas, but also the stories he seeks from his sitters. A cousin in a saturated yellow hoodie bears a bead reading Bour – stone in Asante Twi, and the artist's inherited paternal name. A fellow artist friend sports a pendant of a yellow gallon, symbolising both his trade and trademark as a creative community leader. With In a White Throne we find another friend, originally holding a large ceremonial cow horn now replaced with a full whiskey tumbler twisting symbols of freedom old and new. Afro Queenship celebrates a Ghanaian photographer born in Amsterdam currently based in London who the artist connected with on Instagram. Adorned in delicate pearls and a statement piece neck ruffle, she gazes out directly and confidently, wearing her traditional representations of royalty with a bold and iridescent contemporary flourish.

For his subjects he finds online, Lord is drawn to people who may look familiar, invoke a past relation, or summon an ancestral connection. By sharing stories and bringing people together he creates a hybrid community, grounding self-portraiture in kinship and fostering a rooted sense of convivial connection that many of us are yearning for more than even in these self-isolated times. The representations are also steeped in imaginative possibility, stemming from his experience in set design. Just like the movies, Lord's paintings communicate as surreal landscapes where he can test out different styles, discover past stories, and spark new conversations. Rather than depict exactly what he sees, the artist tries to see deep into someone's soul, capture their truth, and dream what it can become. He may change the pattern of their clothes, subtle gestures in their pose, a symbolic object in their midst, using a directorial agency to build new scenes and dialogues. Past memories are conjured through the use of black and grey, whereas future fantasies are brought to life by vivacious, intuitively clashed colours. Sometimes different people and environments are even collaged together, creating a new script entirely. In one of the few large-scale group compositions, Love You Regardless, Lord pairs a male vintage stylist friend with a female model he found on Instagram, now fancied as two lovers expressing unconditional love despite a comically undesirable spill and state. Waist beads, traditionally worn by women after their coming of age, are here embraced as an expression of beauty, maturity, intimacy and honesty – the stones always seduce us to come closer, look deeper, and dream.

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The other two group compositions in the artist' represent the ultimate culminations of the personal cross-pollinating with the collective: reflections of the self composited with connections to a community. Whilst in *More than a Conqueror (Self Portrait)* we see four Lords boxing in a sumptuous confrontation of body, spirit, and soul, *A Photo Before Departure* functions as a portrait purely in the guise of others. Three young children conjure distinct memories from Lord's past – love, loss, care, and what's left behind. The young boy – the artist – inherits beads from his Father, and with them, ancestral memoirs. By using different sources to visually represent himself and his loved ones, Lord hopes to create a universal and empathetic space for all to process their own stories, and communicate future ones. This aspiration was put into practice upon the paintings completion, when activated by drawings bestowed by the young children at the art foundation where the artist currently teaches. "What do you see in this painting?" Lord asked the young artists upon presenting them with his large canvas. "I see children fighting for their lives, I see emotion in their faces, I see thoughts in their minds about their future, I see them looking at someone, I see them in nice cloths, I see a hand leaving something to them, I see the boy wanting to say something but he can't talk." Space was made on the bed frame, now holding the interpretations, dreams, and hopes for the future by these children. Through an act of radical mark-making and familial generosity, the boy is now able to say something – they can talk, they can create a new world.

Text by Katherine Finerty

About Lord OHENE Okyere-Bour

Lord Ohene is an Amsterdam-based Ghanaian portraiture, figurative, and life painter born in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, West Africa. He lived in Accra and later moved to Amsterdam to pursue his art career. Like many other Ghanaian artists, Ohene is a product of the prestigious Ghanatta College of Art and Design.

Combining figurative and portraiture skills and techniques, Ohene has developed his own unique style of bold stunning portraits making use of beads and stones which has made his work easily identifiable.

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 Curator and Communications Manager at The Showroom, London.

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