

Frozen Fictions

This review, of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's solo exhibition *Verses after Dusk* (Serpentine Gallery, 2015) was the runner-up for the Frieze Writer's Prize 2015

White people have been looking at black people for most of art history, much as men have been looking at women for most of it too. This portrayal of black people has a 'dark history', and that phrase itself rehearses this history, connoting darkness as negative, lightness as normative. Pallid princes and popes are the celebrated subjects of portraiture, their faces and bodies potent, virile, active in the world, while blacks, much like women, have been the objects of artists' fantasy and fascination, cleanly reflected through the prism of the artist's consciousness, denied subjectivity.

In one of the portraits in *Verses after Dusk* (Serpentine Gallery), a black woman in a sun-hat peers through a dainty pair of binoculars. It's a witty self-portrait of the artist behind this exhibition, the British-Ghanaian painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. We know it's a self-portrait because Yiadom-Boakye's name is printed over this painting, entitled *The Woman Watchful*, on the catalogue cover. The title, like the painting itself, is a clue to what Yiadom-Boakye is up to with the all-black portraits comprising her first major exhibition: this time, *she's* doing the looking.

As the 'male gaze' was being deconstructed by feminism, its racial corollary – the 'pale gaze', if you will – persisted, indeed reinvented itself in strange ways. There are shades of yesterday's orientalism in today's avant-garde identity politics; Kerry James Marshall, for example, uses the black face as a radical political symbol, and this is no less 'other' than one of the black maidservants in Manet's paintings; subjectivity continues to be denied.

When Yiadom-Boakye's doing the looking, though, she's painting black faces not as symbols, but as forms, an aesthetic blackness, not a racial or political blackness. This also humanises her subjects as individuals, because forms differ, they individuate, while symbols—for symbols to work—stress uniformity rather than distinction. This attitude to blackness reminds me of Steve McQueen. These portraits do for the black face something similar to what *Bear*, McQueen's video-art dramatisation of a balletic bout between two wrestlers, did for the black body: dignifying blackness as an aesthetic subject, and returning to black people a force and agency as individuals.

Yiadom-Boakye is so keen to emphasise the aesthetic of blackness that not only are her subjects black, she also portrays them before sombre, monochrome backdrops – backdrops? – of nocturnal nature, playing on the affinity of blackness with the night-tide. Sometimes it's the temporal night, when her subjects lie in bed or go for midnight strolls. Elsewhere it's the figurative night, a mood of unbearable nightness, the 'after dusk' in the exhibition title, when her subjects muse and mull. In *Coterie of Questions*, a young man in a rose-tinted t-shirt, sits, pensive in pink, while in *Any Number of Preoccupations*, another ruminates in a red robe.

Her subjects' surroundings and accoutrements are often drawn from this pinkish pallet, to draw out by contrast the aesthetic evocations of darkness, much like she tends to let the whites of her subjects' eyes and teeth glare, like marbles in the night. From the heavy shading of chins and backs, emphasising black physicality and form, to her use of oil – which, she has said, "moves like skin" – Yiadom-Boakye proves her mastery at manipulating the crafts of the figurative painter to express something formally original, about blackness, in an age where artists have lost faith in form, in favour of concept.

Strict formalism doesn't make Yiadom-Boakye's work less radical. The tradition of portraiture in which she works allows her portraits to be rich in rum rejoinders to the canon. *Yes Officer, No Officer* is a glorious riff on *Olympia*, Manet's depiction of the demimonde as a nude reclining on a chaise-longue, attended by a Moorish maid. *Yes Officer, No Officer* mimics this precisely, only this time the subject is a naked black man (no maid by his side), a definitive turning of the tables (or chaises-longues). Manet's black maid is only a symbol of servitude; no-one could possibly wonder what she may be thinking. But this nameless black man is clearly a thinking, feeling person—sassy, expressive—whose skin we may be curious to get inside (and what skin, right down to the foreskin).

The inversion of notions of subject and object even play out, physically, in the Serpentine's exhibition space. The portraits tend to be from unusual angles, some of her subjects have their backs to each other, others facing one another, with the spectator in the middle: a subversive choreography that questions the artist's role.

There is something poetic about these *Verses After Dusk*. It doesn't surprise me that Yiadom-Boakye writes poetry and short fiction. Portraits are normally documentary in nature, but her subjects are fictitious, characters with motives and minds of their own, and these portraits are like frozen short stories. Little happens in them—the drama lies in gestures and gazes—so the result is an inky enigma, open to myriad interpretations, the paintings a coterie of questions that float with you through the atmosphere of the Serpentine. Figurative art is so often derided as wallpaper. But this is more like flypaper: it sticks to you.