



ROOTS FROM GHANA AND TO DUBAI ROUTES

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OPERA GALLERY

Roots and Routes: From Ghana to Dubai

By Carine Claude

Stunning creativity animates the artists of the new Ghanaian scene. In just a few years, contemporary art from this small country on the Gulf of Guinea has gained worldwide recognition, from the most prestigious auction houses to the most demanding private collections. Undoubtedly, El Anatsui paved the way. An eminent and respected figure, the Golden Lion of the 2015 Venice Biennale placed a marker on his homeland by creating a bridge between Western and African contemporary art with his monumental and poetic tapestries made from recycled materials. Others have paved the road to institutional recognition, such as Ibrahim Mahama and Amoako Boafo. But these are not the only reasons for the international art market's enthusiasm for Ghanaian artists. In 2019, the opening of the very first Ghanaian pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale shone a spotlight on a whole new generation of Ghanaian painters, who are developing a common, powerful, and instantly recognizable pictorial language within the immense diversity of contemporary art expressions on the continent. Often graduates of the Ghanatta College of Art and Design — one of West Africa's oldest art schools, established in 1969 — these artists stand out for their singular modernity and breathtaking energy.

This path and journey are at the heart of the exhibition “Roots and Routes: From Ghana to Dubai”. The selected portraits impose their magnetic presence, playing with figurative registers, sometimes expressionist, imbued with both joy and nostalgia. Flat areas and bright colors serve a great stylistic richness. For Ghanaian artists share a love of technical and pictorial experimentation. Here, a nylon sponge blurs the contours of Adjei Tawiah's melancholic souls. There, coconut husk is mixed with oil paint to give an organic depth to the skin of Aplerh-Doku Borlabi's characters. A humble and fruitful virtuosity.

Adjei Tawiah, in particular, explores complex emotions, memory, and rupture. Faces are guessed and then erased. Only the feeling remains. Yet the palette is dazzling, but the spirit of his characters, whether tormented or appeased, exiles itself in the cast shadows, soft, retaken by the nylon sponge, a humble everyday object so common in his country. His unique technique, which he calls “Sponge Martial”, is itself driven by a powerful emotional charge, having been inspired by the sponge purification of his mother's body upon her death. A metaphor for mourning, affliction, and then healing.

A graduate of the Ghanatta College of Art and Design, Aplerh-Doku Borlabi has gradually broken away from academic painting. In his portraits, he restores the complexity and vast palette of black complexions, their depth and richness using the coconut husk. Omnipresent in the region where he grew up — Cocoa Beach — he explores all its facets and resources. He leaves nothing out. Mixed with oil paint, the husk of the fruit makes the skin textures vibrate in infinite brown shades, while its fibers cling to the hair. The discarded husks come back to life, sublimated in the portraits. The emblematic fruit merges with its models, both an organic link between humanity and plant life and a revealer of the cultural identity of the characters depicted.

Recycling waste is also at the heart of Rufai Zakari's (born 1990) work, who also graduated from the Ghanatta College of Art and Design in 2011. Denouncing consumerism, environmental pollution, and conflicts that paralyze Ghanaian society in his works, his work does not stop at assessing the damage. His portraits are those of future builders. To create them, he collects plastic waste dumped in the streets. Once collected, washed, and dried, he cuts, heat presses, and assembles them in a patient sewing process before applying them to a support. Carved from the mass, the plastic sheets play with their bright colors and advertising patterns. His characters pose in scenes that tell of everyday life, joy, and often humor. In these deceptively naive works, one can sense that they are regaining control of their lives and their environment.



Adjei Tawiah, *Pearl Necklace*, 2023
Sponge and oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 47.2 in



Lord Ohene Okyere-Bour, *Indecisive*, 2022
Oil pastels and actylics on canvas
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in

This unique Ghanaian portrait art is also practised by Cornelius Annor. In his work, family stories and childhood memories intertwine in group portraits captured in a snapshot of everyday life. “The idea behind my work is to flatten time, space and place,” says the artist. “I don’t just want to depict images of my own family, but also those of other families. I want everyone to see their family in my work.” Cornelius Annor also attended the highly regarded Ghanatta College of Art and Design, where fellow artists Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe and Amoako Boafo studied. The latter graduated in 2008, earning the accolade of best painter of the year. The powerful, thick brushwork of his scrutinising faces stands out against monochrome backgrounds. One might see the influence of the Expressionists and Viennese Secessionists, particularly Egon Schiele, as Amoako Boafo moved to Austria in 2014, where he continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna.

Echoing the exhibition title, Lord Ohene Okyere-Bour’s work is rooted in heritage and travel. His intensely expressive characters enter into conversation with the viewer, sharing their life stories and revealing their intimacy, as in the paintings *Indecisive* and *Religious Transition*. “I believe that facial expressions project the intensity of our emotions, our spirit, and our mind,” says the artist about the portraits. “In my practice, I use characters that I personally know or who may seem familiar to me [...]. By sharing stories and bringing people together, I create a hybrid community, a place where I draw inspiration.” Thus, the artist is not seeking a realistic representation of the characters he portrays but is striving to reveal something more universal and transcendent. “My portrait and figurative work is built on journeys, memories, routes, and migration that discuss African ancestry,” adds the artist about his artistic practice.

These questioning portraits are also found in the works of David Kofi Amoateng and Annan Affotey with his *Complexion* series. In the latter, the characters’ eyes scrutinize and follow the viewer in the manner of the portraits of the old masters of the Flemish school. This is not surprising since Annan Affotey has won the best still life and best abstract drawing prizes at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design. The balance of Ghanaian artists lies precisely here: not content with reproducing or applying academic techniques, they integrate objects, tools, and symbols specific to their environment into their practice, questioning the society in which they remain firmly rooted. From this, an astonishing coherence emerges despite the plurality of perspectives and techniques. It is in this way that this new pictorial language is being written with intelligence and humility.



Annan Affotey, *Blue Turtleneck*, 2021
Acrylic charcoal pencil and modeling paste on canvas
96 x 73 cm | 37.7 x 28.7 in

In fact, Rufai Zakari has created the Rujab Eco-Art Foundation in his hometown of Bawku to reinvent Ghanaian society by giving a voice to young people, women, and minorities. Collages that transform pollution into hope.

This practice is also found in the work of Raphael Adjetey Adjei Mayne (born 1983). A graduate of the Ghanatta College of Art and Design, his mixed media works combine old fabrics found on the streets of Accra with traditional mediums such as acrylic, charcoal, or chalk. Childhood memories form the raw material for his work, which also explores gender politics and social marginalization. He, too, has created a foundation, Afutumix, in support of disadvantaged women and children. Facial features completely fade away, leaving only the attitude. His characters, now silhouettes, stand out against solid backgrounds or colorful fabrics.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Aplerh-Doku Borlabi

Annan Affotey

Adjei Tawiah

Rufai Zakari

David Amoateng

Cornelius Annor

Lord Ohene Okyere-Bour

Raphael Ajetey Mayne





Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

Cane Chair
2021
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
210 x 165 cm | 82.7 x 65 in





Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

Gringo
2023
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
120 x 100 cm | 47.2 x 39.4 in



Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

Tea Cup
2021
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
210 x 180 cm | 82.6 x 70.8 in



Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

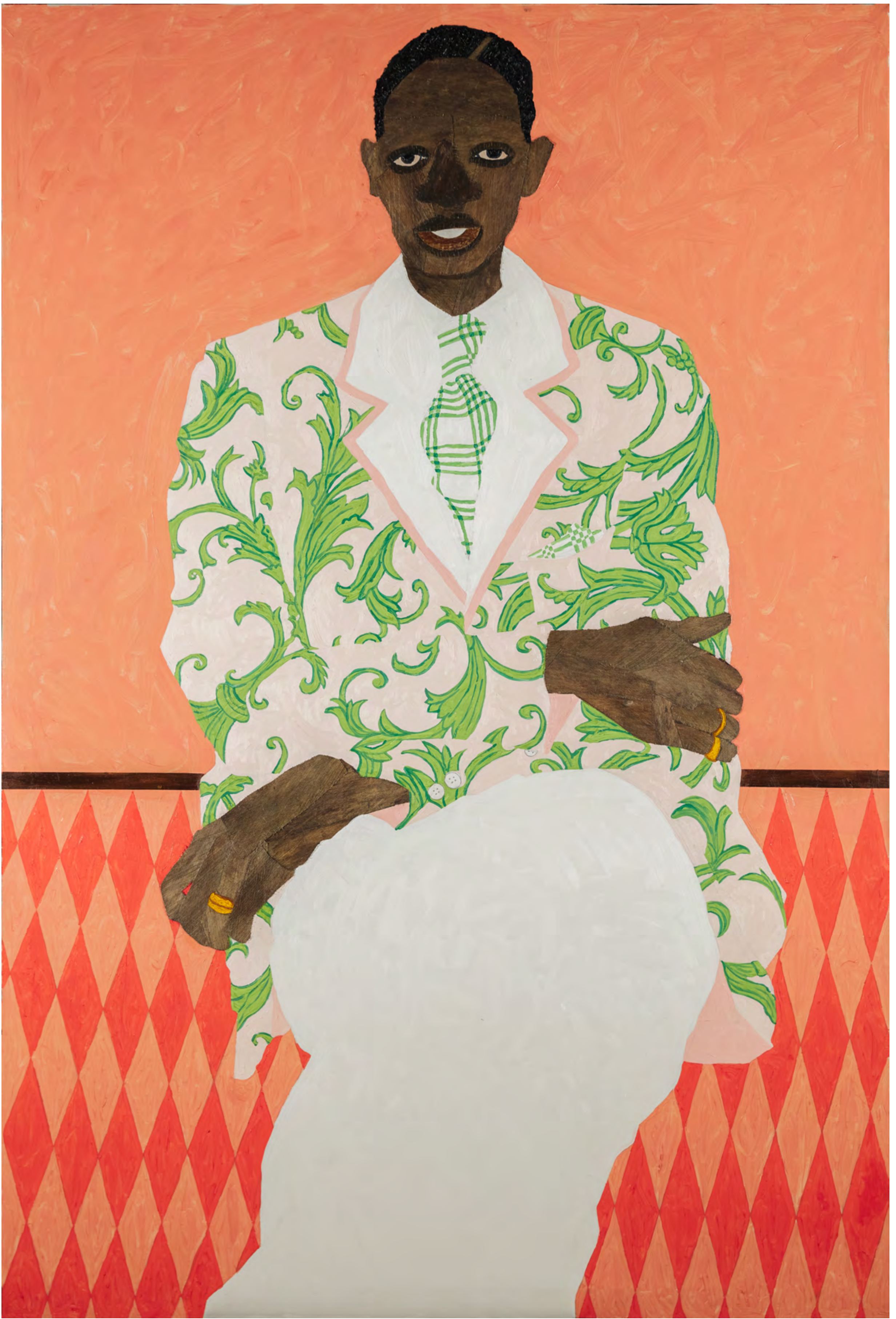
Twin Glaze
2023
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
120 x 100 cm | 47.2 x 39.4 in





Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

Supreme
2022
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
135 x 107 cm | 53.1 x 42.1 in



Aplerh-Doku Borlabi
b. 1987

Waiting for Love
2023
Coconut sheath and oil on canvas
220 x 150 cm | 86.6 x 59 in





Annan Affotey
b. 1985

Krystal Green Nose Ring
2021

Acrylic charcoal pencil and modeling paste on canvas
96 x 73 cm | 37.7 x 28.7 in



Annan Affotey
b. 1985

Blue Turtleneck
2021

Acrylic charcoal pencil and modeling paste on canvas
96 x 73 cm | 37.7 x 28.7 in





Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Untitled
2023
Sponge and oil on canvas
130 x 200 cm | 51.2 x 78.7 in





Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Yellow Cowboy
2022

Sponge and oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 47.2 in



Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Pearl Necklace
2023

Sponge and oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 47.2 in



Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Untitled
2023
Sponge and oil on canvas
140 x 100 cm | 55.1 x 39.4 in



Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Pineapple Shirt
2023

Sponge and oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 47.2 in





Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Yellow Pullover
2022
Sponge and oil on canvas
150 x 120 cm | 59 x 47.2 in



Adjei Tawiah
b. 1987

Untitled
2023
Sponge and oil on canvas
220 x 180 cm | 86.6 x 70.9 in



Rufai Zakari
b. 1990

Flower Girl 1
2022
Mixed media, plastic bags and food wraps
107 x 91 cm | 42.1 x 35.8 in



Rufai Zakari
b. 1990

Flower Girl 2
2021

Mixed media, plastic bags and food wraps
108 x 98 cm | 42.5 x 38.6 in



Rufai Zakari
b. 1990

Nkyira
2022

Mixed media, plastic bags and food wraps
106 x 90 cm | 41.7 x 35.4 in



Rufai Zakari
b. 1990

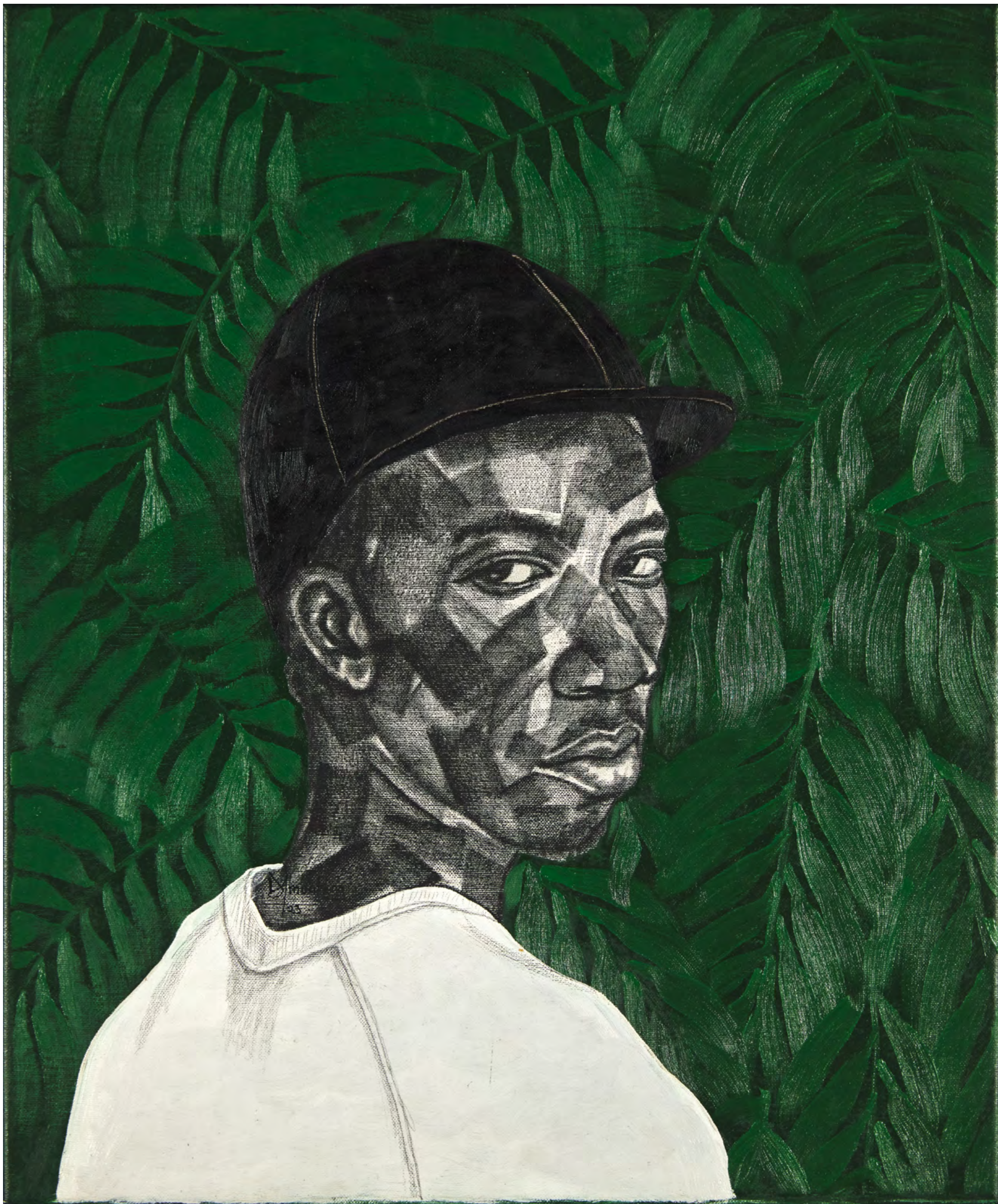
Gloria
2022
Mixed media, plastic bags and food wraps
166 x 184 cm | 65.4 x 72.4 in



Rufai Zakari
b. 1990

One Of My Own
2022

Mixed media, plastic bags and food wraps
122 x 99 cm | 48 x 39 in



David Amoateng

Polo Boy

2023

Oil paint and charcoal on canvas

60 x 50 cm | 23.6 x 19.7 in





David Amoateng

Vacation

2022

Oil paint and charcoal on canvas

200 x 200 cm | 78.7 x 78.7 in



Raphael Mayne
b. 1983

Kwabina
2023

Acrylic and African wax print sewn on canvas
205 x 160 cm | 80.7 x 63 in



Lord Ohene Okyere-Bour
b. 1990

Religious Transition
2022

Oil pastels and acrylics on canvas
200 x 160 cm | 78.7 x 63 in





Lord Ohene Okyere-Bour
b. 1990

Indecisive
2022

Oil pastels and acrylics on canvas
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in



Cornelius Annor
b. 1990

My Baby Doll
2023
Mixed media
182 x 152 cm | 72 x 59.8 in



OPERA GALLERY



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