

# ADJEI TAWIAH

*I Miss Us*

15 March - 11 April 2023



OPERA GALLERY

## FOREWORD

Opera Gallery New York is pleased to present Adjei Tawiah: *I Miss Us*, the artist's first solo exhibition at Opera Gallery, curated by Chantel Akworkor Thompson. Tawiah's unique style blends traditional techniques with modern sensibilities, resulting in a body of work that is both culturally rooted and globally relevant.

Born and raised in Accra, Ghana, Tawiah's art reflects his deep connection to his homeland and its rich cultural heritage. Drawing inspiration from his community as well as the country's diverse landscapes and traditions, his paintings offer a compelling vision of contemporary Africa.

Through this new collection of portraits, Tawiah explores the enduring emotions that continue to linger after a relationship breaks down when *Us* becomes *I*. Focusing on memory's role in shaping the legacy of 'lost' Love, Tawiah's portraits capture melancholy moments. Using his signature nylon sponge material, popularly used in his home country of Ghana for bathing, Tawiah creates a metaphor for healing, the element of the grieving process he wants us to contemplate.

Tawiah began this series of twenty paintings upon his arrival in New York City in early January 2023. Opera Gallery offered the artist a studio space in Brooklyn which allowed him to have a dedicated space to focus on his art and to create new works without distraction. From his bold use of color to his innovative techniques, each painting captures the energy and dynamism of the city, while also reflecting his masterful use of form and texture to tell powerful stories about African life and identity.

Tawiah is known and revered for his unique approach of using nylon sponge for vibrant figurative representations. His unique technique which he has labeled "Sponge Martial" – is a practice inspired by the cleansing of his mother's corpse in the mortuary. Tawiah channels this idea of cleansing through his work, the bright, vibrant colors a representation of the bright moments that follow the darker times in life.

We hope that this exhibition will provide our viewers with a deeper understanding of Adjei Tawiah's art and his contribution to the contemporary African art scene. We invite you to explore his work, to engage with his ideas, and to appreciate the richness and complexity of contemporary Ghanaian culture through his eyes.

Gilles Dyan  
Founder and Chairman  
Opera Gallery Group

Laura Adams Miller  
Deputy Director  
Opera Gallery New York





Adjei Tawiah photographed in front of a work in progress, in his temporary Brooklyn studio, 2023  
© On White Wall

# ADJEI TAWIAH - *I MISS US*

CURATORIAL ESSAY BY CHANTEL AKWORKOR THOMPSON

Born and raised in Accra, Ghana, Adjei Tawiah studied at the prestigious Ghanatta College of art and design alongside contemporary art favorites; Amoako Boafo, Otis Kye Quaicoe, Kwesi Botchway and Cornelius Annor. Not long after the untimely passing of his mother, 20th January 2020, Tawiah began to discover an artist's voice of his own that would help to express this life-changing experience. The loss of his mother's physical presence caused a monumental shift in his life's trajectory, also becoming the catalyst of a pivotal moment in his art career.

The very visceral images evoked in his mind upon witnessing his mother's body cleansed with kotsa<sup>1</sup> before burial shook him. It induced a feeling like none other that he could only describe as a renewal, a revival, the start of a new era. From that experience, the use of kotsa as an integral part of his artistic practice was born.

Using kotsa now in his work as a metaphor for healing and renewal, Tawiah hopes to use his practice to inspire people to confront the darker emotions often suppressed into the abyss of one's consciousness. He believes that a state of true healing can only be achieved by doing this, bringing a lightness to life.

*I Miss Us* is thus a personal and intimate exploration of Tawiah's healing process projected through the many lenses of those around him. Sharing his story with sitters in his home country Ghana, he worked with them to use their gestures, postures and facial expressions to communicate the manifestations of his interior world.

Through a cathartic process of energy exchange, he believes he was able to invoke in others a real sense of empathy for the feelings and thoughts he could not otherwise express in words. Most importantly, though, the exchange went both ways, and to expand on his research, he also interviewed his sitters about their moments of loss to present a broader examination of the loss of Love.

His research unearthed stories of breakups where Love still lingered in the hope of being revived. Relationship breakdowns, where unspoken words continued to whirl in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to reach the ears of one lover or friend via the lips of their once close companion. And like his own experience, all spoke of the moment in which mourning became an unwanted friend, a shadow hanging over them, demarcating the end of a partnership, a former self or a life well lived on earth, leading to a loss of oneself, an ego death, and a lacking of one's sense of being. The lasting legacy, the constant questioning of who am I now we are no longer us?

The constant yearning and searching for what once was, creating a void, prompting the feeling synonymous with the phrase *I Miss Us*, which Tawiah contemplates is intensified by one's attachment to another human, sparking questions about the bonds of Love. Thinking more in-depth about attachment, one naturally thinks about the concept of 'detachment'; more popularity brought into society's consciousness through yogic practices and *The Bhagavad Gita*. The seminal text discusses in detail the importance of detachment to attain peace, happiness and gradually liberation. With this in mind, when viewing the works, contemplating on one's own experiences of loss and Love, there is an urge to consider how this way of living can be achieved and what liberty would feel or look like.

<sup>1</sup> *Kotsa is a nylon, net-like cleansing sponge used throughout West Africa for bathing and ceremonial cleansing.*

Thus, through this new collection of portraits, Tawiah explores the enduring emotions that continue to linger after loss when us becomes I. Focusing on memory's role in shaping the legacy of 'lost' Love, Tawiah's portraits capture melancholy moments. Moments induced by memories of a love once had. Those that meander in the mind and shoot arrows of anguish towards the heart. But also moments of shared comfort. Grief-stricken moments where comfort from another alleviates pain, cleansing the soul and replenishing one's zeal for life.

In an attempt to normalize these emotions and allow everyone to enter into the conversation, he has also included portraits of more notable social figures, alongside those that are friends and family, as well as those created from his imagination. This demonstrates that loss, grief, pain and everything that follows is a human encounter that everyone experiences.

Each delicately painted figure is a human with a story to share of Love once had and now lost. Each on a journey to what next. With skin rendered in an exquisite lucid cobalt hue with a pearl-like sheen, swirled and laced with ivory black, Tawiah's portraits exude opulence. Alone, hearts overwhelmed, time takes leave as the individuals stand frozen in time. Still, but not stagnant: surrounded only by their own company or in a silk-laden embrace with another, heart beating in sync, surrendering to Love, they all are swaddled by the knowledge that life continues. How they choose to continue on in life without their former Love is yet to be determined.

But, despite the discomfort, they stand before us, exposed and open. Their vulnerability, soft and non-abrasive, lures us into a state of reflection, offering us an opportunity to meditate on our own loss.

This is Tawiah urging us to consider how one heals if we allow pain to wipe out the memory of Love. Can Love remain when the relationship ceases to exist when Us is no more? What is left when the pain subsides and we let go of the attachment to the human who once was in our presence?

Comprising 20 new works; single figure portraits and also larger-scale compositions depicting shared moments, I Miss Us shows a natural maturation in Tawiah's practice, both technically and conceptually. The narrative explored is complex, but is done so with grace and a subtle sensuality. The interrogation is thorough and deeply personal, yet retains sensitivity for the integrity of the individual. The accuracy of the precisely painted faces: eyes boring through the soul; and plump lips pursed in pursuit of professing something profound; give the work a level of realism, which lifts the figures off the canvas. One would feel no shame in believing that the person themselves had stood right in front or beside of them and uttered their innermost feelings and thoughts directly into their ears. There is no denying the reverence with which Tawiah stroked these human emotions onto the canvas. These works embody his soul, which he has generously shared with us, so we could move on in life actively and intentionally healing and seeking a state of internal peace and liberation.

*The Traveller*, a self portrait of Tawiah, is symbolic of his healing journey; his search for new beginnings, new ways to heal, new ways to regain Love and his sense of self. In addition to the kotsa, which represents the cleansing of old wounds and hurt, the carefully painted autumnal leaves allude to the ripening of his spirit, ready for the abundance of peace and happiness that he is to be endowed with. He is self-assured, the yellow that surrounds him, like the Manipura Chakra, is a symbol of the sun's renewing energy which has ignited his consciousness motivating him to intentionally seek balance.

This collection also includes three large-scale paintings featuring two male figures comforting each other in their grief. For Tawiah, it was essential to highlight brotherhood and camaraderie in this series, for he believes it has been instrumental in his own healing process. Inspired by his own experience and upbringing, Tawiah chose to demonstrate through these paintings how a strong relationship between male peers is essential to the wellbeing of a male and platonic intimacy - whether it be the holding of hands, hugs, cuddles or head rubbing - strengthens the relationship. He believes they are ways for the 'brothers' to show their care and compassion towards each other.

Such depictions of brotherhood are common in his works, but he wanted them to take a particular focus for this exhibition. As he has become more familiar with the ways and views of the world outside of Ghana and Africa, he has become somewhat sympathetic to the difficulties that men are facing with their mental wellbeing in the UK and USA, particularly; suppressing their emotions out of fear of having expressions of them misconstrued by the myths of patriarchy. These images that he presents; genuine depictions of intimate moments he has experienced and witnessed, whilst an exploration of the journey one goes on in the absence of Love once had, also attempt to normalize amongst spectators the beauty in male friendships

In *Far from Home*, the two brothers, biological or spiritual, stand face to face, foreheads resting softly. Both swelling with grief, tear ducts reaching full capacity, their eyelids remain tightly shut. Eyes closed, they show their presence through touch and breath alone. Whilst there are no words, they are not deafened by silence, but instead, escaping with each breath is the healing hum of renewal which, like the leaves sprouting on the once lifeless tree, invokes in the memory that whilst there is breath, there is life. In this shared moment of intimacy, although far from home, the comfort that each man receives from the other helps smoothen the bumps on the journey back there or to a new one that they will make together.

In *Still got your back*, Tawiah further explores the strength of male relationships and their role in healing one's heartache. The two protagonists, comrades in arms, have shared many a celebratory moment, jumping on the back of the other after a scored goal in a soccer match, being paraded to the rest of the team as they are showered by cheers of jubilation. However, in this silent moment, weighed down by grief and witnessing a former self disappearing, this position, mimicked from the past, has lost its lightness and playfulness.

Playing with memory and time and how they shape and strengthen a bond, Tawiah juxtaposes the actions of the past with the emotional expression of the present to demonstrate the consistency of friendship. The male protagonists, ravaged by loss, wear this despair on their faces, yet, their bodies carry the narrative of their bond formed over time. A bond of enduring support for the other. Although a heavy load to bear, it is one done readily with integrity and resonance. *Still got your back* is an ode to the full expression of men and male relationships in their entire range.

One of the other larger works is *The city ain't the same without you*, taking inspiration from his time in residency in Brooklyn, New York. The painting features a lone woman looking somewhat lost in a city that no longer feels like home. In her hand, she holds the last remaining flame of what was once an intensely passionate love. Although her cocked head and raised nose attempt to fool us into believing that indignance consumes her, the softness with which she guards that flame - the last remaining remnant of her Love- speaks volumes. She still cannot let go. The lover, her companion, she remains there at the forefront of her thoughts.

Lastly, I will highlight two portraits he has painted of his mentor and long time friend Amoako Boafo: *The Helper I and II*. The paintings are deep reflections on Tawiah's observations of his friend as he has gained notoriety. Full of gratitude for his successes, Boafo has dedicated time and his resources to supporting his community. The recent erection of the compressed earth constructed edifice that is home to dot.ateliers, his artist residency space in Accra, designed by the acclaimed architect sir David Adjaye is a physical manifestation of this. However, Tawiah ponders on how Boafo's honorable and righteous actions -'sacrifices' -have affected him. Does he feel burdened by the constant pressure to support and help those less fortunate than him? Is he longing for the time when these responsibilities were not his to possess? What remains for himself, when so much of what he does now is for others? How does he maintain his equilibrium in life?

These ponderings I believe are in fact questions Tawiah seeks to answer from a place of apprehension, possibly predicting a shift in the future of his peaceful state as he continues to rise in prominence as an artist that is already well-sought after internationally. Will the success of his career cause him another momentous loss in life? This time a loss of himself, his peace, in order to satisfy others? Answers he proposes will surface in the studio where he continues to find solace. Until then, onwards on his journey, the traveler, armed with lessons from grief and mourning, now cleansed and renewed, will intentionally and actively live in the light of Love, present, shrouded by the words of Nii Ayikwei Parkes-

*In life,  
The happiest people  
Are those who know that the journey is the destination  
So they are always there  
So no matter the situation  
No trial no tribulation can hold them down  
So what struggle do we speak of  
What torture can we dream of*

Accompanying the paintings is a playlist of the same title '[I Miss Us](#)', compiled by Adjei Tawiah, Robert Otoo and Mr Djourna, mixed by Mr Djourna. Starting with an extract from Journeys by Ga Poet Nii Ayikwei Parkes, the mix of Ga and Twi highlife, Nigerian and Ghanaian Afrobeats, interspersed with African diaspora popular genres from The USA and The UK add another layer to the conversations Tawiah hopes to open up with this exhibition taking us on a musical journey of Love and those who lost it along the way.



I & I Surrender To Love  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
209.5 x 180.5 cm | 82.5 x 71 in

[Enquire](#)



## Far From Home

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
209.5 x 180.5 cm | 82.5 x 71 in

[Enquire](#)



Don't Let Go of Love  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
122 x 152.5 cm | 48 x 60 in

[Enquire](#)



## Still Got Your Back

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
220 x 210 cm | 86.5 x 82.7 in

[Enquire](#)



My Best Friend and I  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
180.5 x 209.5 cm | 71 x 82.5 in

[Enquire](#)



The City Ain't the Same Without You  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
209.5 x 180.5 cm | 82.5 x 71 in

[Enquire](#)





Traveler - Onwards I Go  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
121 x 100.5 cm | 47.5 x 39.5 in

[Enquire](#)



Now Us is I

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge

80 x 80 cm | 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)



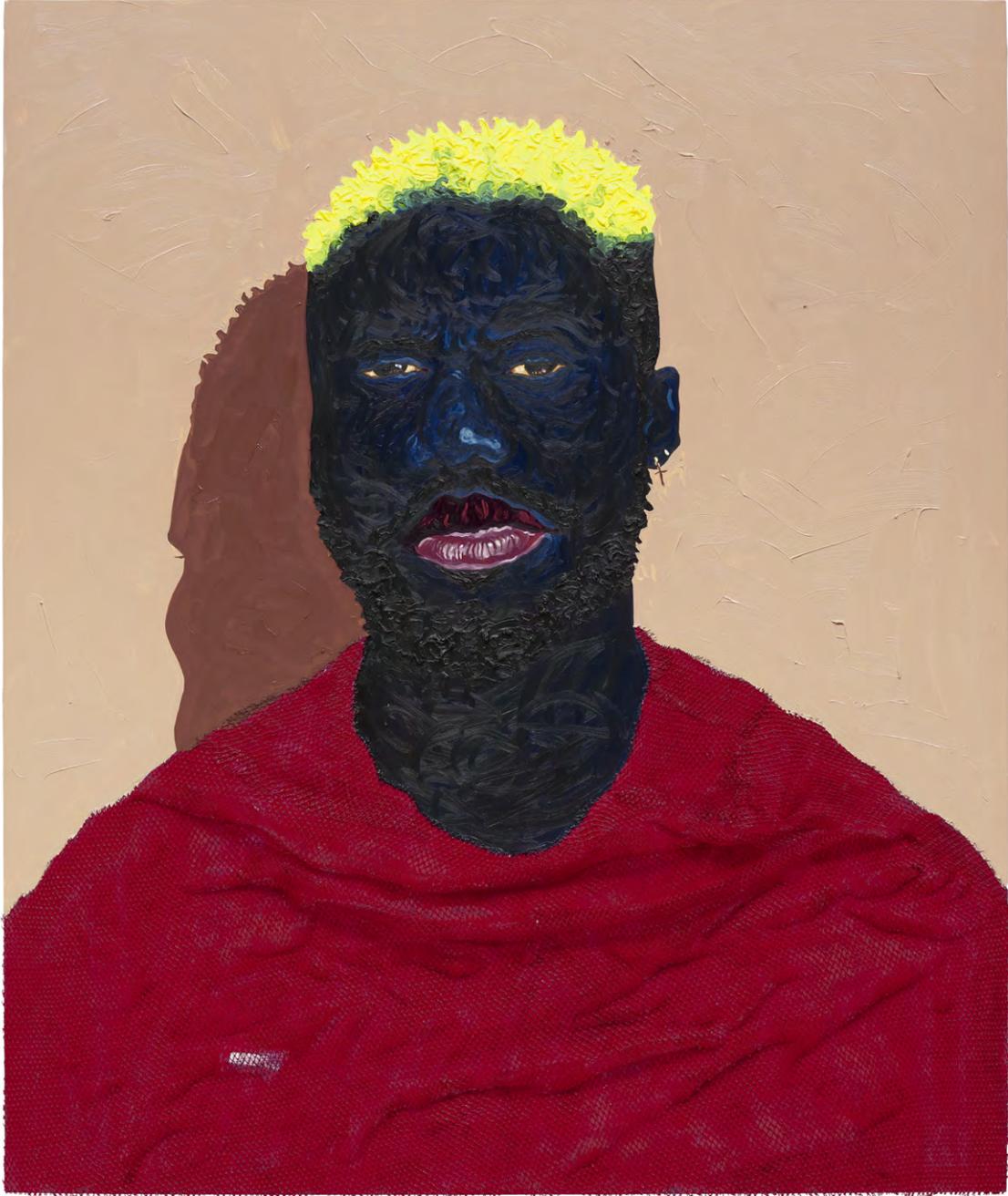
## I've Got This

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge

80 x 80 cm | 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)



## I Can't Look Back

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
121 x 100.5 cm | 47.5 x 39.5 in

[Enquire](#)

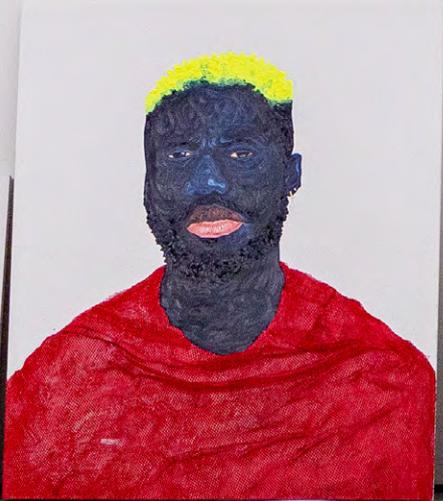
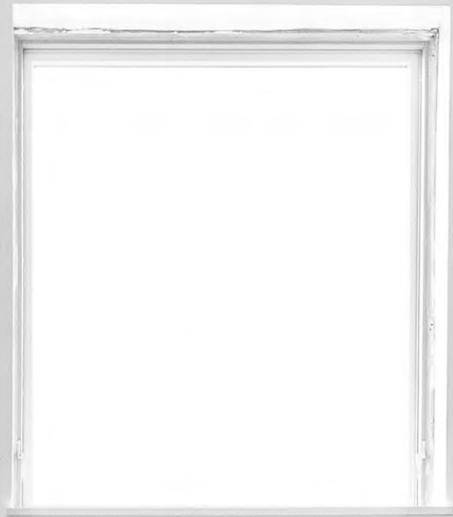
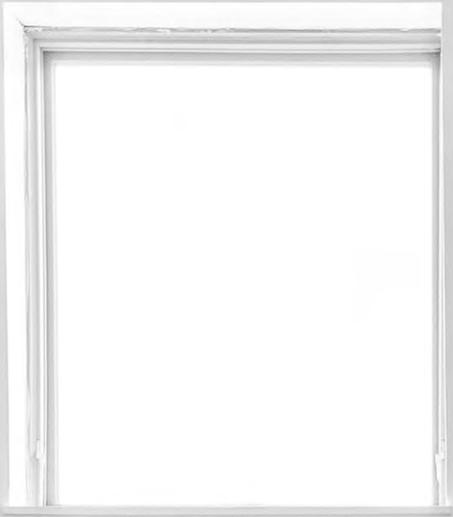


## I Still Need Us

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
80 x 80 cm | X 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)





I've Been Thinking Bout Us  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
152.5 x 122 cm | 60 x 48 in

[Enquire](#)



I Pray, Lord Hear Me  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
80 x 80 cm | 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)



The Helper I - How Can I Help  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
120 x 100.5 cm | 47.2 x 39.5 in

[Enquire](#)



I Live For the Promises

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge

152.5 x 122 cm | 60 x 48 in

[Enquire](#)



## I'm Still Here

2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
80 x 80 cm | 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)



I Can't Be Held Back  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
152.5 x 122 cm | 60 x 48 in

[Enquire](#)



The Helper II - I'm Here  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
121 x 100 cm | 47.5 x 39.5 in

[Enquire](#)



I'm Staying Strong For Me  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
120 x 100.5 cm | 47.2 x 39.5 in

[Enquire](#)



I Promise, I'm Okay  
2023

Oil on canvas with sponge  
80 x 80 cm | 31.5 x 31.5 in

[Enquire](#)



# BIOGRAPHY

Adjei Tawiah (b. 1987) is a Ghanaian artist living and working in Accra, after studying at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design. He is characterized by his unique painting technique, which involves the use of a nylon sponge, popularly used in his home country of Ghana for bathing. Named "Sponge Martial", this relentless method is reminiscent of the cleansing of his mother's body in the mortuary. The sponge reveals vibrant figurative representations, which conveys this idea of cleansing through art, where darkness is metamorphosed into color and brightness.

## SOLO EXHIBITONS

- 2023 Adjei Tawiah, I Miss Us, Opera Gallery, New York, United States
- 2022 Threads of Past and Present, Gallery 1957, London, UK

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Unlimited*, Gallery 1957, Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast, Accra, Ghana
- 2022 *Side by Side*, Dot.atelier, Accra, Ghana
- 2022 *18 (Rising Ghana)*, Pm/Am Gallery, London, UK
- 2022 *Winner Takes All*, Marianne Boesky gallery, New York, United States, curated by Amoako Boafo and curator Larry Ossei-Mensah
- 2021 *Self-Addressed*, Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, curated by Kehinde Wiley
- 2021 *Adjei Tawiah & Aplerh-Doku Borlabi: Could You Be Loved*, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana
- 2020 *Collective Reflections: Contemporary African and Diasporic Expressions of a New Vanguard*, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana

# OPERA GALLERY

## **Adjei Tawiah - I Miss Us**

15 March - 11 April 2023

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## **Opening hours**

Mon - Sat: 10 am - 7 pm

