

He Used to Work for FedEx. Now, Artist Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe Is at the Forefront of the Next Generation of West African Art Stars

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By Tom Seymour



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Portrait, 2020. Photo by Mario Gallucci, Courtesy of Gallery 1957.

The artist reflects on life in America and Ghana's failure to recognize its homegrown scene.

Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe never thought he'd leave Accra. But then life happened. He fell in love, eloped, and moved from his native Ghana to Portland, Oregon, in 2017.

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The artist is now part of a game-changing generation of West African artists whose profiles are quickly rising in the art world. Along with friends Amoako Bofo and Kwesi Botchway, Quaicoe is one of the most exciting contemporary painters from the region.

Together, the trio are about to open a new exhibition of African figurative art at Gallery 1957, a leading African gallery based close to Quaicoe's family home in Accra. The show, titled "Homecoming: The Aesthetic of the Cool," marks the first time all three artists have exhibited together in the country of their birth.

Until recently, Quaicoe was not working as an artist full time; he was working the floor in a FedEx in Portland, trying to get his head around the complexities of blue-collar America.

"Once I got here, I realized, you're not seen as an African," Quaicoe tells Artnet News. "You're seen as a Black person. It's not about where you've come from. It's about the color of your skin."



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, *Untitled* (2020). Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957.

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The artist recalls being confronted with racial justice and racial stereotyping for the first time in his life. “It wasn’t on my mind, ever, until I got here,” Quaiocoe says. “In my country, we’re all Black. No one goes around judging you by the color of your skin.”

Being unable to escape the problem of race in America is something the artist grapples with in his work. In each of Quaiocoe’s paintings of Black figures, the subject’s gaze is fixed on the viewer, demanding you meet them, eye to eye, person to person. “The eyes are the essence of the soul of people,” he says.

While the clothes and locales may be invented, the faces in Quaiocoe’s paintings are of people he knows; in Africa and, increasingly, in the US. This meeting of cultures—of an African man amongst African American communities—has become the main point of inquiry in his work.

“When someone like me comes from Africa and meets the African Americans living here, this is the thing—they somehow sometimes think we don’t understand much of the struggle they’re going through, because of where we come from,” Quaiocoe says. “It’s understandable. We don’t face this injustice back in Ghana.”

Quaiocoe has therefore had to learn how to, as he puts it, “stand in for your kind.”

“I had to understand the fight and understand the struggle,” he says. “That was the only way I could participate, and add what I have gone through as a Black person.”



Amoako Boafo, *Untitled (work in progress)*. Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957.

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Quaicoe met Amoako Boafo, his fellow Ghanaian figurative artist, when they studied together at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design. Before college, Quaicoe knew nothing of art history—he was just obsessed with drawing. But in the studios of Ghanatta, he remembers long conversations with Boafo and their fellow students, analyzing Pablo Picasso’s evolution from figuration to abstraction, Van Gogh’s use of color, and how Rembrandt was able to create a gaze.

“We’d talk about the way he plays with the eyes. The soul in the eyes. The lighting, the shadow, the tones,” Quaicoe says. “I can stare at Rembrandt’s paintings for a long time.” His journey through art history led him to study contemporary artists; the way the American artist Kerry James Marshall sets figures in their environments, or how Kehinde Wiley confers power onto his subjects.

Boafo remains a close friend. It was through him that Quaicoe came to the attention of Bennett Roberts, owner of the Los Angeles gallery Roberts Projects. From working in FedEx, Quaicoe suddenly found himself creating work for his first solo show in America, titled “Black Like Me.”

The show opened in January 2020, marking Quaicoe’s entry into the United States art scene. It’s fair to say it went well, and Quaicoe’s work is now very much in demand. Searches for the artist’s work in Artnet’s Price Database rose from 0 to 251 between 2019 and 2020.

Since his debut with Roberts Projects, Quaicoe has seen his work hit the auction block eight times, more than doubling its high estimate every time. Such a development is often complex for a young artist (and very familiar to his friend Boafo). In July, Quaicoe’s painting *Shade of Black*, a vivid portrait, fetched \$250,000 at Phillips, shattering its high estimate of just \$30,000. Just this month, one of his portraits sold for \$163,800 at Sotheby’s (estimate: \$40,000–60,000).

Quaicoe is aware of the new Western focus on Black art. But he thinks the art world in the UK and the US “definitely still has a long way to go” when it comes to allowing African art to be understood on its own terms, and not through a postcolonial filter.

“I think there’s gradually more understanding of African art,” he says. “But the market is so big. And, back home, artists are still limited. We’re not allowed to grow bigger.”



Kwesi Botchway, *Metamorphose in July* (2020). Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957.

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Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, *Pricilla* (2021). Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957.

Quaicoe refers to the “front-liners”—the Ghanaian artists who have put the country center-stage and redrawn the parameters of the continent’s creative production: Ibrahim Mahama, Serge Attukwei Clottey, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, and Zohra Opoku.

But on the ground in Accra, most people have never heard of them, Quaicoe says: “If you say you’re an artist in Accra, people think you have nothing to do in your life. That you don’t want a job. That you sit around and take it easy.”

Meanwhile, “the Ghanaian government doesn’t know how big this is,” he says. “The kind of impact [these artists] are having, the waves they’re creating—the government has no idea. And they have no idea how far this could take Ghana, how it could contribute to the development of the country. We don’t have many art schools in Ghana. We have one art supply store in the whole country. The government is not helping. And I’m not confident they will change.”

This means artists like Quaicoe, Botchway, and Boafo still feel they have to leave Accra to have their work seen. “That’s still the only way we can build up the art in Ghana, by cutting across other countries,” he says. “You hope people will know about your country by seeing your work.”

Nevertheless, they all plan to return. “Once we have control of some of the art market, we hope to draw them back home. Then we will show them we have so many more artists,” Quaicoe says. “They need to come and see.”

“Homecoming: The Aesthetic of the Cool” is on view March 25 until May 9 at Gallery 1957, Accra.