

ALMINE RECH

ART SY

The Ascent of Young Ghanaian Artist Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe

Oct 2, 2020

By Terence Trouillot



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe

Wilde Wilde West, 2020

Amref Health Africa ArtBall: Benefit Auction 2020



Portrait of Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe by Dan Kvitka.

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

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.

ALMINE RECH

On a hot summer day this year, I was relieved to speak to the Ghanaian artist Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe over the phone and not through a screen. Sure, it would have been nice to see him face-to-face, but there was something quite familiar and soothing to just hear (and focus on) the timbre and natural joy in his voice—his friendly disposition signaled by the cadence in his speech. I asked him how he was doing amid the protests and forest fires in Portland, Oregon, where he lives and works. He told me solemnly, “I come to the studio to shut the world out.”

I first encountered Quaicoe’s work in early 2020 at his solo show at Roberts Projects in Los Angeles, “Black Like Me,” his first exhibition in the United States. I was enamored by his large-scale portraits of Black figures—their skins rendered in an array of tonal grays, their bodies adorned with colorful fabrics and stylish clothing. More than anything, I was fascinated by the rough, impasto treatment of his background, what the artist would later tell me was inspired by the vernacular architecture of Ghana’s Northern Region: modest edifices made from wood and mud.



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Man and his Black Cat, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold

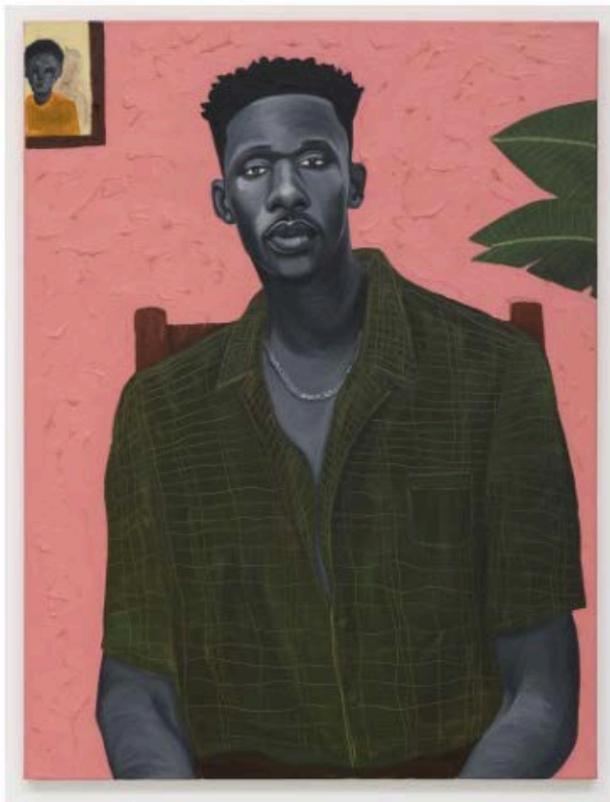


Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Sitter, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold

ALMINE RECH

Born and raised in Ghana, Quaicoe had strong aspirations to become a professional soccer player growing up: “It was my greatest passion,” he recalled. But apart from that, he also loved watching movies, particularly commercial blockbuster films. “I was more exposed to Western movies—a lot of action movies, Chinese karate movies,” he recalled. “And you have to go to the movie theater to watch the movie, even though most of us couldn’t afford it on VHS.”

At the movie theater, he was struck by the large-scale posters on display showcasing movies. One day, he was drawn to a building next door to the theater, and learned who was making those posters. “Out of curiosity, I just peeked in to see what was going on. I found a bunch of artists just painting on huge canvases,” he said. This discovery was life-changing for the young, aspiring artist. Soon thereafter, he started visiting these artists and observed them as they hand-painted movie posters. He got a sketchbook and started drawing, trying to recreate what they were doing.



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Observing, 2020
Roberts Projects
Sold



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Empty Room, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold

ALMINE RECH

Quaicoe's fascination with artmaking gradually became an obsessive hobby. He started collecting magazine and newspaper clippings—anything he could get his hands on—and tried to recreate the images he would find, and more often than not, these images were portraits. Later on, once Quaicoe moved with his family to a different neighborhood, he began noticing a woman who walked by his house with rolls of canvases every day. "Each time she would pass by, I would stop her to look at her paintings: landscapes, portraits, all types of beautiful paintings," he said.

"She told me that if I was interested in art, she'd recommend a school for me. And she took me [to the Ghanatta College of Art and Design] to visit, and it just blew my mind," he continued. "All the students, the studios—it was just heaven to me. And in that moment, I said, 'This is what I want to do.'"

It was there at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design that Quaicoe would later meet his dear friend and fellow artist, Amoako Boafo. The two became very close, both fully entrenched in the practice of Black portraiture and figuration. But it wasn't until after college that Quaicoe found his "own voice," as he put it. After graduation, he took a break from painting and started taking classes in photography, something that reminded him of how he started drawing from photographs and magazines. Through photography, Quaicoe learned that he loved creating portraits of people.



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Orange Turtleneck, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Lady on Blue Couch, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
David Theodore Cowboy, 2019
Roberts Projects
Sold

“I was looking through the photographs I had taken, and found this photo of an older woman, a headshot, just looking straight into the lens,” he remembered. “And she had some tears in her eyes. And I don’t know why, but that image caught my attention and I stared at it for a long time. I tried to recreate that image 6 or 10 times. I was trying to get at that feeling, that feeling when I first saw the image. This is what really got me into figurative painting, and from there, I started exploring more portraits.”

During this period, Quaicoe befriended a woman named Jessica on Facebook, who worked at a law firm but also had a burgeoning passion for photography. One year, at the Chale Wote Street Art festival in Ghana, Jessica visited Quaicoe for the first time; they went around Accra taking pictures together. They kept in touch for some time and formed a close relationship—Jessica returned to Ghana for Quaicoe’s birthday, and he visited her in Portland, Oregon, where she lives. Though he was hesitant to visit at first—“The U.S. was not a country that I wanted to come to”—he enjoyed the life he found there. Soon thereafter, the two eloped and Quaicoe decided to stay in Portland, where he has lived since 2017.

Although madly in love, the newly married artist felt some fear and doubt about leaving his home in Ghana and starting anew in a foreign place, an American city where he knew almost no one. Quaicoe readily immersed himself in his practice, working tirelessly in his studio. He reached out to Boafo—who at this point was living in Vienna, where he was already becoming a rising star in the art world—for comfort and advice. Boafo encouraged him to stay in the States, and even supported Quaicoe by buying some of his works. In the meantime, Quaicoe ended up working at FedEx for a few months just to make ends meet. One day, Boafo called him to invite him to his 2019 solo show at Roberts Projects in Los Angeles. Happy to support his friend and compatriot, he went to L.A., where he met gallery owner Bennett Roberts, who did not know at the time that Quaicoe was a painter.

ALMINE RECH

Boafo was also in L.A. for the La Brea Studio Residency organized by The Cabin, a small alternative art space spearheaded by Danny First. He invited Quaicoe to stay and hang out in L.A. so he could meet more people in the art world. Then Boafo received an award in Vienna and had to briefly leave L.A., leaving Quaicoe to his own devices. “I was left alone, so why not buy some canvases and paint?” he reasoned.



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe

Lady in Sunglasses, 2020

Roberts Projects



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe

Nykhor on Blue Couch, 2019

Roberts Projects

Sold

Quaicoe quit his job in Portland and started painting in L.A. As folks dropped into the studio looking for Boafo, they found another Ghanaian artist working in his stead. This is where Quaicoe’s relationship with Roberts and the gallery started, and where he also met other gallerists such as Mariane Ibrahim. He had finally caught his big break.

“Later, Amoako came back and told me I have a show with Roberts Projects, and I said, ‘What!?’” Quaicoe recalled. He returned home and started working in the grayscale palette he uses now. “I had the motivation to work larger in scale and with this type of imagery that I have now.”

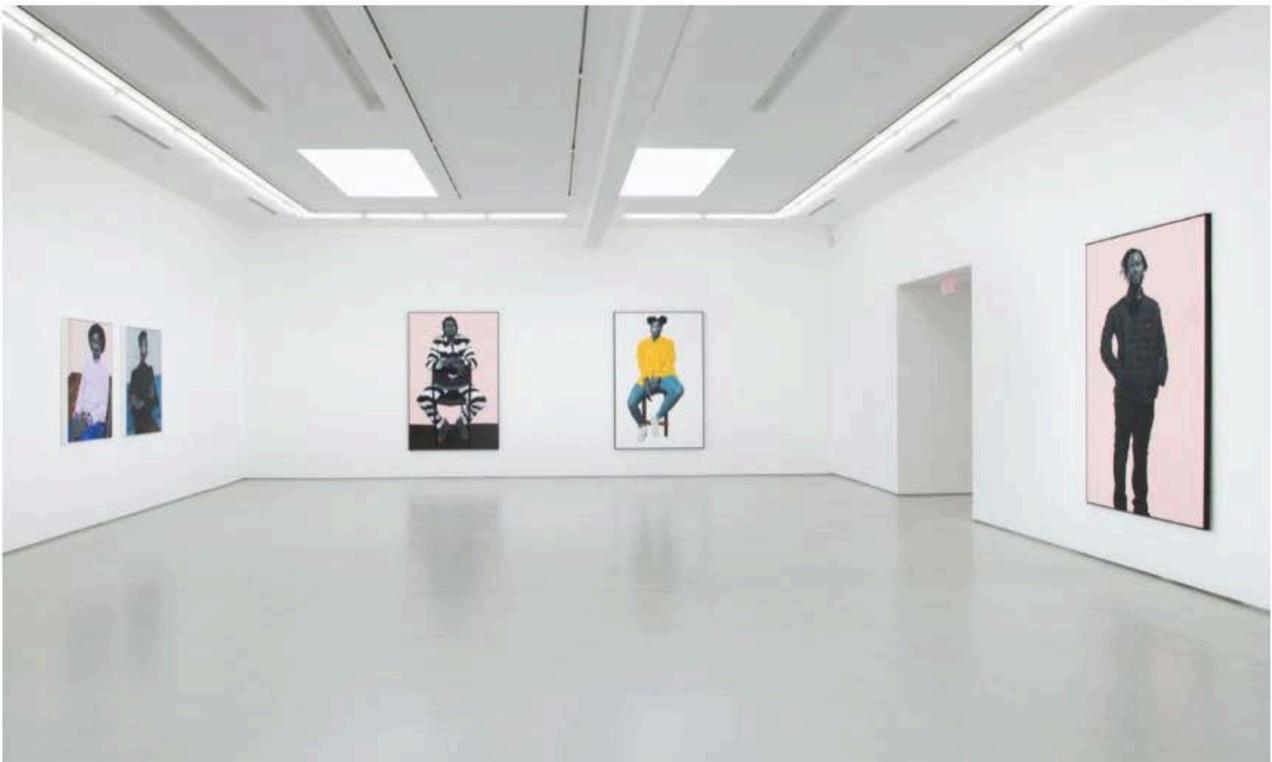
ALMINE RECH

Quaicoe's mesmerizing story is a rare feel-good story of the art world. It made me think of his nexus of support as being present in the work itself, a body of work that in some ways is a collaborative process predicated on trust and support.

"My work was really inspired by how people look at me. It's like a sense of wondering: 'Who is this person?'" Quaicoe explained. "What I realized is that people couldn't tell where I was from by the way I dress. And when they found out, they'd approach me very differently than an African American already living here."

Quaicoe started speaking to Black Americans in Portland and Los Angeles, asking them how they live, how they carry themselves, how they are perceived by others, and how they want to be seen by others in the outside world. "So it's always a combination of my African culture with Black culture living here, which all come together as a single identity," he said. "So I try to incorporate the fashion sense here and the fashion sense back home."

In effect, Quaicoe's work is a practice of collage, taking candid portraits of his subjects' faces and editorializing their outfits and environments, creating a timeless vision of the Black figure.



Installation view of "Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe: Black Like Me" at Roberts Projects, 2020. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.