

Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe





Otis Kwame Kye Quicoe, *Self Portrait*, 2019

# Otis

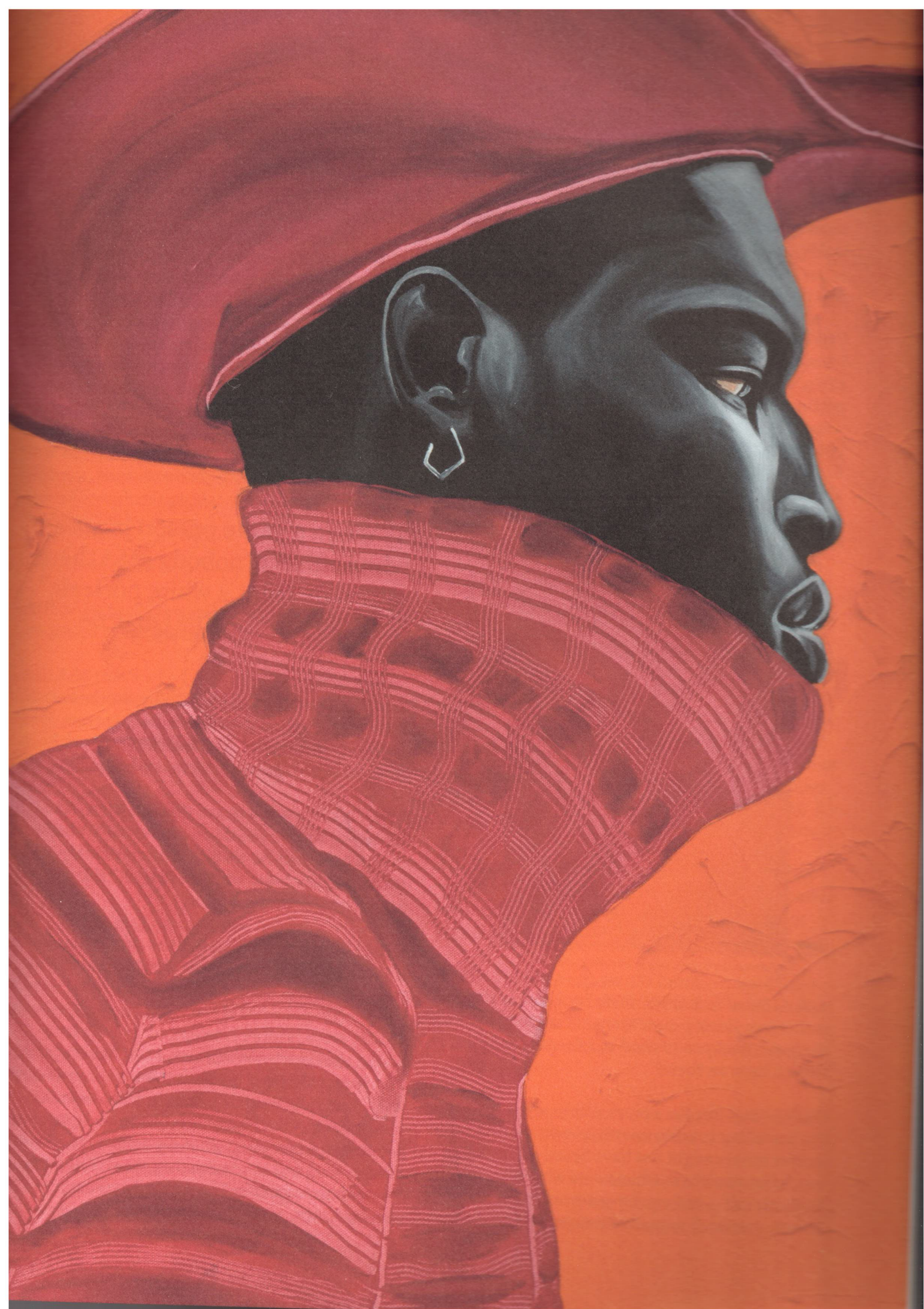


The dearth of non-white faces on the walls of the world's museums is one fact that cannot be argued. However, we can and should argue as to how and why this is the case, and whether recent moves towards dismantling such an exclusionary narrative will affect real, meaningful change.

At the end of 2020, I spoke with *Kwesi Botchway* and *Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe*, two artists who specialise in portraiture and tend to focus on Black subjects, and who both hail from Accra. After studying at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design the pair are currently living away from Ghana, with Botchway studying at the Academy of Visual Arts in Frankfurt and Quaicoe having recently located to Portland, Oregon. Both have found success as part of the international rise of Black artists, with a notable rush on talented young painters. But what does that really mean? How can artistic practice, which is inherently individual, be collective? Yes, there is a welcome increase in representation in museums and galleries, but there is also an urgency to ensure that this is not just a trend for painting Black faces. Here, Botchway and Quaicoe reflect on their success and its context during a world-changing period of pandemic and protest.

(Amah-Rose Abrams)





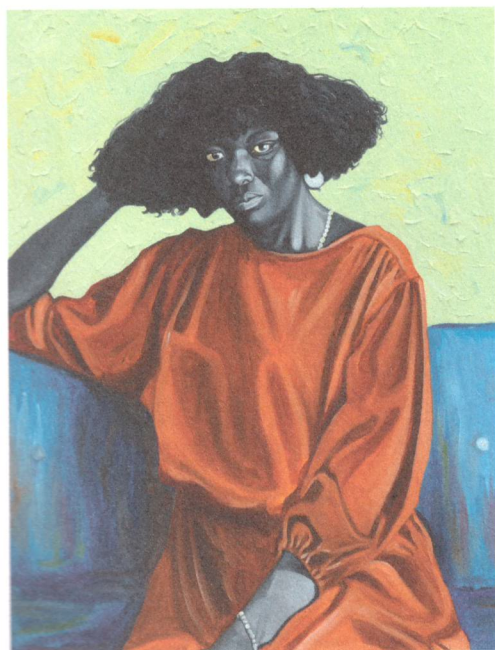


**Amah-Rose Abrams:** I want to start from the beginning. What made you choose portraiture?

**Kwesi Botchway:** I've always been a fan of painting portraits. I really love expressions, faces. I love how demanding it can be and that you can actually have a sense of people's spirit through looking at their face, their smile.

**A-R A:** What about you, Otis?

**Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe:** During art college I wasn't a big fan of portraits, they weren't my thing. It was through photography that I started getting more involved, because I felt there was a much deeper connection with the people I photographed. It became a personal thing to me first, then it became a way of telling a story about somebody who nobody knows. You will be the one bringing that person forward, bringing the story forward.



Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, *Lady on Blue Couch*, 2019

**A-R A:** What is it about these individuals that makes you think people were not interested in them? That you needed to raise them up, or shine a light on them?

**OKKQ:** I feel like I'm a journalist in my own way. I'm travelling to other countries and sharing stories others might not have heard of. Let's just say, when you live in Ghana—or wherever you find yourself—and you have not travelled much before, you don't actually know what's going

on elsewhere. It's my duty as an artist to bring this forward; it's basically just documenting the lifestyle.

**KB:** You know what I think? That people are loving Black portraiture and the narratives artists are putting out there. People are actually getting us.

**OKKQ:** Yeah, it's important for us to do that. I love the Old Masters works by the likes of Rembrandt, but we've always been portrayed in a different way, as the background, in these old paintings. For us, or for the new generation, we have a duty to talk about our people and show the image in the right way. We should be in the front, because we've been at the back door for so long. It is up to us to change that.

**“When a white person picks a white subject, nobody asks them why they paint a white portrait”**  
Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe

**KB:** Also, people are all like, “Why are these Black people painting Black people?” I mean, they don't understand. You look at Rembrandt, Picasso; they all painted in the same tone.

**OKKQ:** It's just weird to ask that question. And I always say this when I do an interview, “When a white person picks a white subject, nobody asks them why they paint a white portrait.” So, you can see where the mindset is.

**A-R A:** Where do you sit with the conceptual side of the portraiture movement that's happening at the moment?

**KB:** My work is more conceptual. I really love taking the time to do research and I believe, too, that we can do what we want to move on a deeper level. I actually wanted to create a movement of Afro impressionism, which I have never seen before. So, when you look at my style it is a blend of relativism and impressionism. I am trying to create this movement in my own way, in my own language.



OKKQ: I'm a big fan of the old paintings; I learned a lot. I realised that these artists talked about what happened in *their time*. That is why it is very important that we do the same. Whatever goes on in my life, as a Black person, maybe in the US or wherever I find myself; what goes on and how I am received, I take all those things into consideration and put it on the canvas.

So, documenting our generation—the Black generation—and what is happening right now, is more about discussing where we are heading. The style comes about after that. For me, the focus is the culture, the people and the issue: what is going on with us?

A-R A: Things seemed really bad with racism as we were heading into the summer of 2020. There was something particularly awful and inescapable about it, because we were all at home glued to the news through our phones. After a while, I began to feel assailed by it.

KB: It was so, so bad.

A-R A: I actually remember being quite pleasantly surprised to see the tide kind of turn as well.

KB: And that's why I really like the Black Lives Matter movement. I made a work about it. I've been to New York and I loved it; I was in Brooklyn and I felt like I was in Accra. What happens with the Black community [in the United States] is so, so bad.

A-R A: We have talked a bit about your subjects, so with that in mind, how do you relate to your sitters? How do you pick a subject and why?

KB: I like to play around with resemblance if I have a picture; to change the nose or the face. I also like to paint from a memory of someone I have seen or met, which I think is very challenging and often has interesting results.

OKKQ: Whether I know the person or not, it's always about connection. I might be at a restaurant when someone walks in and it suddenly hits me, like, I really want to paint this person. And even when I'm doing a painting, I put myself in the person's shoes and go through that emotion. That is how I'm able to capture the person's character, while at the same time

experiencing the feeling I had when I met the person. That story is very important for me, because this is what you show to everyone out there. Just look at Kehinde Wiley; his portraits are majestic.

A-R A: There is something very specific about your use of colour, both in the way that you paint skin and the presence of powerful, uplifting tones.

KB: In the past, a normal person would not be allowed to wear purple, because it was reserved for royalty. That is why I put purple into the skin tone of my subjects.



Kwesi Botchway, *blacklivesmatter (divine protestings)*, 2020

OKKQ: I always use Ghana as an example. We wear colourful stuff—we love our colours. There are regions and within those regions there are different tribes. Sometimes the only way you can recognise someone from a tribe is by their way of dressing. It's part of the culture, it's how we identify ourselves.

KB: Coming from a different culture means that we see colours differently, but being a professional artist, your work has to transcend that. It's not only that colour is a connection, it's a spiritual one.

OKKQ: I photograph people in colour, but I paint in black and white. I shoot them that way because I want to get the colour of their clothes and certain light sources as well. I just like to work with grey tones.

A-R A: Have your sitters ever commented on the different ways that you treat skin?

KB: Yeah, people are conscious of that and they ask you, "Why are you painting like this?" You have to give them an honest answer!









Otis Kwame Kye Quakoo, *Untitled*, 2020



OKKQ: True, because it's mostly about the identity. People used to feel ashamed of this skin colour. Like, paint a Black portrait and nobody wants to even see it. But now things have changed, there's no malice any more. This is who we are; you either accept it or walk away.

A-R A: I haven't had the opportunity to come to Accra before. Could you tell me about it? What is the life of an artist living in the city?

OKKQ: Accra is where everything started for us. It is a fun place. The only problem is that resources are a big issue. For instance, in the whole of Ghana we only have one store where you can go and get your art supplies. However, new initiatives and residences are being started all the time.

A-R A: How do you both feel about the increased presence of the international art market?

KB: The international market is good, but it also has its ups and downs. You really want to make sure that your work is going to the right people. You want to sell to collectors who will hang on to the work, not just keep it for a few months.

OKKQ: The word I would use for it is crazy. I mean, there are good collectors and there are bad. I don't focus on it all that much because, for me, it is all noise. What I need to do is paint and stay relevant.

KB: I grew up seeing a certain type of art, like images of palms and children. You could see this work at an art centre, but I feel like it has been advancing. This 'Black art' started way back, and this is a new generation trying to portray things in a modern way.

OKKQ: I want to say congratulations to my brother Kwesi on opening an exhibition in London [at Gallery 1957's new space, in December 2020]. It is a fantastic thing—let's keep everything flowing. And we are not a trend, we are here to stay. We are making history.

• *Homecoming: The Aesthetic of the Cool*, featuring Amoako Boafo, Botchway and Quaicoe, is at Gallery 1957 in Accra, 25 March–9 May. Quaicoe also has a solo show at Roberts Projects LA, in June



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