ALMINE RECH

Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe
Superficial Incisions

Nov 18 — Dec 22, 2023 | Paris

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to present Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe's second solo exhibition with the gallery, Superficial Incisions, on view from November 18 to December 22, 2023.

The new body of work Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe will be presenting in Paris for his second solo show at Almine Rech sees the artist reconceptualizing the black cowboy stylistically in a series of bust portraits wherein most of his figures don the outline of the iconic rodeo hat. Quaicoe's focus is twofold— the phenomenon of 'invisibility' as a clear indicator of greater battles to be fought, and the investigation into the meaning of the different scarifications and tattoos of each figure.

The characters, are studio models or friends of the artist. Some live in Ghana, where Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe is originally from; others in the United States, where he now lives, sharing his time between Ghana and the US. Alone or in pairs, the subjects are depicted in isolation, all at once observers and observed, their gaze fixed upon the artist and the viewer. The power of the portraits and momentous strokes which characterize the paintings liken them to the Accra school, a generation of talented young painters including Amoako Boafé, whom Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe met at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design and has remained a friend ever since. The tight framing, intense gazes and colourful outfits equally echo the advertising culture of the image and tradition of the portrait. Referencing the great names of Western painting –his medium-sized canvases are painted with great care, down to the extreme precision of a clothing brand's details, or an accessory, or a tree bursting through the horizon, or clouds populating the sky. The broad, thick material, through which particular care is taken in depicting hair or including objects – woven fabrics, necklaces - and the choice of a bright and lively palette points to his desire to return to a more original and sensuous expression of creation, of the kind that surrounded Otis as a child growing up.

The cowboy hat is rendered with a transparency reminiscent of a saint's halo. Contrasting with the colours of the clothing and backgrounds, the characters' skin is treated in uniform tones of grey, faces marked with facial streaks referencing tribal scarification, the stigmata of slavery and the more contemporary art of tattoos. Long despised by society as signs of primitive humankind, of the marginalized or the oppressed, tattoos have now become fashion statements and a symbolic language much more than a social, sexual or ethnic marker. By mixing the anthropological – that of various Ghanaian tribes – with fashion, Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe brings together the present and the age-old, individual life journeys and collective consciousness. Painted from memory or from photographs, the artist's models are subjected to arbitrary deformations that can be seen as a resurgence of his early abstract work. The portrait, a quintessentially academic genre, has been constantly reinvented since the emergence of photography as a competitor; here, it challenges notions of perception and one's relationships with others – particularly relationships with the viewer, that the subject proudly challenges with his gaze. Proud subjects depicted against a neutral background or a vast landscape, they physically embrace both their original and adopted culture. The plurality and seemingly paradoxical refusal of differences are what allow the artist's vision and painting to expand and thrive. The portrait serves as a pretext and support for the imagination, letting him move beyond individual expressions and assert his personal attitude towards today's world. And hence, the representation of a subject no longer serves purely to fix a depiction - ideal, transformed or fantasized – nor to designate the place it holds in society, but rather to define society as the artist sees it and symbolize universal destinies. By associating the figure of the black cowboy with the aesthetics of tattooing, Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe confers a political dimension to his portraits: the memory of ostracism and the cathartic sign of a new rebirth where the excluded and foreign body becomes deeply social and glorious.

– Cécile Godefroy, art historian, curator and researcher