How Historical Social Power Structures, Gender, and Race Operate in our Response to Figurative Art - with Reference to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Paintings

Visual Culture

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Table Of Contents

List of Illustrations

How Historical Social Power Structures, Gender, and Race Operate in our Response to Figurative Art - with Reference to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Paintings.

Introduction

In this essay I will examine how the figurative paintings of the artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in her exhibition *Under-song For A Cipher,* can be interpreted through the lens of psychoanalytical film theory and other theories of 'The Gaze.' Firstly, I will begin by scrutinising the historical background that informs and provides context to this essay. I will do this by analysing the cultural factors applicable. I will also compare the work and practice of impressionist painters to the work of Yiadom-Boakye. The second half of this essay will examine how different ways of seeing, looking, and perceiving impact our understanding of Yiadom-Boakye's work. I will use early feminist critical film theory to explore what an awareness of 'The Gaze' does to the experience of looking at Yiadom-Boakye's paintings. Then, I will move on to examine the significance of the 'Black Gaze' to provide a broader cultural context to Yiadom-Boakye's work.

The primary literature and references that I used while writing this essay were, *The 2020 Holberg Conversation with Griselda Pollock*, The NewYorker article, *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Imaginary Portraits'* by Zadie Smith, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinem*a, by Laura Mulvey, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* by Linda Nochlin, *Ways of Seeing*, by John Berger, and *A Black Gaze,* by Tina M. Campt.

The question I am trying to tackle in this essay is understanding why we as people, have a long-standing fascination with the human form, and then applying those arguments to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's figurative work to gain an understanding of what internal and external machinations are influencing our interpretation and response to her artworks. I will examine how historical social power structures, gender, and race operate in the formation of our relationship to figurative works of art.

Historical Social Power Structures and Figurative Art

Firstly, I will begin by discussing the way figurative painting is integrated into the building of the cultural identity of countries and consequently, how that affects our understanding of contemporary figurative art. Griselda Pollock is a Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art and is the founding Director of the Center for Cultural Analysis, Theory & History at the University of Leeds. In the interview, *The 2020 Holberg Conversation with Griselda Pollock,* Pollock states multiple times that we must remember that, "Art history has a history." (Pollock, 2020) Which is as varied and multicultural as the sources from which it pulls. However, during the nineteenth century, art history became analogous with the construction of national identity. The cultural identity of a country was curated by the art it chose to showcase. "Art history becomes associated with nation building and art is seen to be the spirit of the nation. If you are German, that's Lutheran Christianity. If you are Italian, that's Catholic Christainanity." (Pollock, 2020) Therefore, it is subject to the historical prejudices of religious, sexist and racist discourse of the time in which it was assembled. A voice, which is predominantly that of the white male, is featured in museums, galleries, and other institutions of cultural preservation. "There is a racism built into who is going to represent the nation and it is not exclusively but largely these great men." (Pollock, 2020) Accordingly, figurative painting can be elucidated as an exercise in the construction of nations. In Linda Nochlin's 1971 seminal essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* The author highlights the double edge of that question as inherently suggestive of its own answer.

> *'But like so many other so-called questions involved in the feminist 'controversy,' it falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time that it insidiously supplies its own answer: 'There are no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness." (Nochlin, 1971)*

In the credulous attempt to answer the question we inadvertently reaffirm its validity instead of criticising its negative assumptions. As Nochlin points out, "The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education." (Nochlin, 1971)

I have briefly touched on topics of art history. I have argued that art is not an autonomous action done separately from the social, cultural, and political practices

of its time of creation. Thus, in this essay we must treat this examination of figurative art in accordance with its history. I will carry over this logic to the work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings, in particular from her exhibition in New York, *Under-Song For A Cipher.* And attempt to examine the cultural and historical implications of her work.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a British-Ghanian artist, among her accomplishments include being a Turner Prize finalist in 2013, a Carnegie Prize recipient in 2018, and a recipient of the Pinchuk Foundation Future Generation Prize in 2012. She received her art education at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design before transferring to Falmouth College of Art, where she obtained her undergraduate degree in 2000.

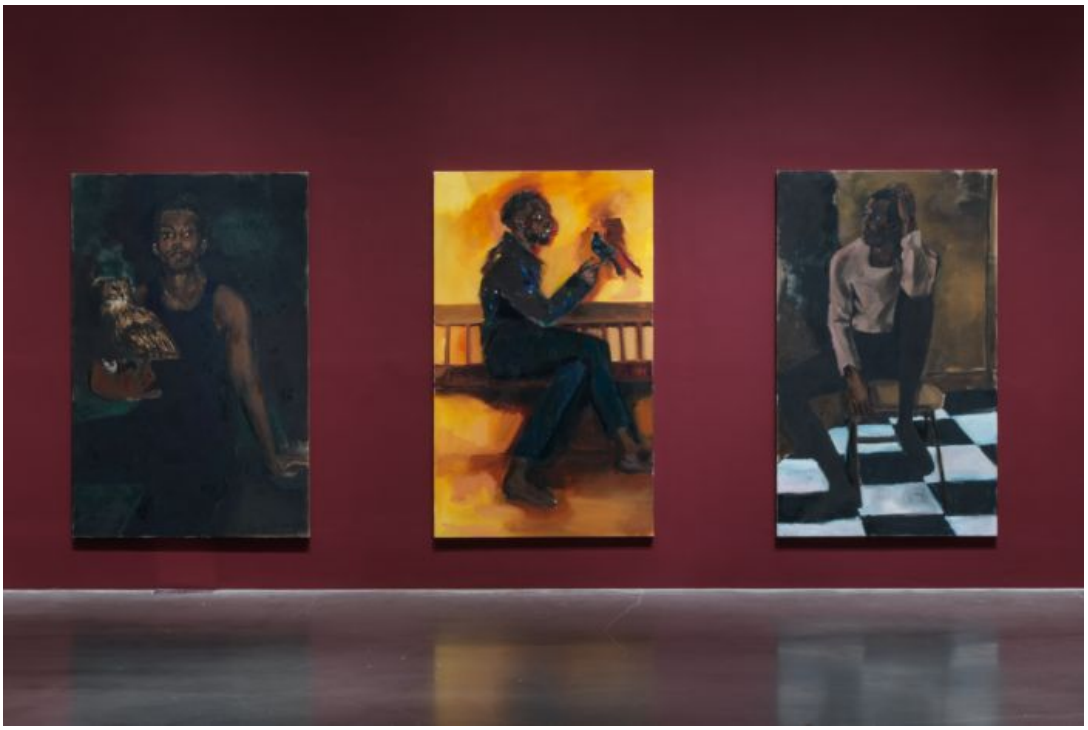

Fig. 1 Hutchinson, (2017) Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song For A Cipher, New Museum, New York.

Yiadom-Boakye's seventeen oil paintings on exhibit on the fourth floor of the New Museum in New York in *Under-Song For A Cipher* are done in a rich motley of deep browns and earthy tones. Yiadom-Boakye's visual language is one of deliberate brush strokes and muted colours. An attention to formal compositional considerations of shape, light, tone, and colour is evident across her painting discography. Yiadom-Boakye is primarily known as a figurative painter. What is

unusual about her paintings is their subject matter, namely the absence of a sitter. Yiadom-Boakye paints imaginary Black portraits of people who do not exist. In *The New Yorker,* Zadie Smith writes in her article on *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Imaginary Portrait*s,

> *'For Yiadom-Boakye's people push themselves forward, into the imagination—as literary characters do—surely, in part, because these are not really portraits. They have no models, no sitters. They are character studies of people who don't exist.' (Smith, 2017, n.p.)*

In modern art, the question prompted is how is the history of art independent from other examinations of history? Pollock informs us the answer was form, which she describes as, "That the internal autonomous transformation of form which takes the mode of styles is what makes art history specific." (Pollock, 2020) Does this declaration of art history's specificity provide separation from its accompanying historical correlations? Perhaps, that is not the implication as art's link to political purposes in our past is well documented. "During the 20th century, fascism, the Third Reich particularly, and communism took art over and used it for its very overtly ideological purposes." (Pollock, 2020) The Figurative in particular suffered most of these political constructions as the use of the human form could so easily be used to manipulate and engineer the masses. Primarily, scenes of homelife and the domestic were transformed by scheming agendas.

The question posed then is does Yiadom-Boakye's lack of real subjects in her fictitious portraits deliberately lean away from political influence and the risk of contamination? This approach to a new relationship between artist and subject is similar to the reaction of post-war Europe. Pollock says, "As a reaction against fascism and communism using art, the west created a notion that art in the west was free, democratic and the sign of that was individual and absolutely no political or historical agenda." (Pollock, 2020) However, Yiadom-Boakye continues to favour the figurative in her paintings.

> *'The figurative was fundamentally nostalgic; its subject matter was kitsch; it was too easily manipulated for the purposes of propaganda, both political and commercial… Meanwhile, the abstract sought to continue, in the realm of the visual, the modernist critique of the self. But, even when a critic allows for the somewhat antique formulation of these arguments (as Storr goes on to do), there is still something about the vicarious emotion provoked by the figurative that must be explained away or excused.'* (Smith, 2017, n.p.)

The figurative had represented something that could be used and overly commercialised. In her imaginary portraits is Yiadom-Boakye attempting to free herself and her subjects from the same scrutiny, to explore something much more timeless and indeterminate? In Yiadom-Boakye's paintings you might notice the absence of one seemingly innocuous item of clothing- shoes. But why does the artist object to the presence of footwear? The answer may lie in its historical implications. As novelist and professor Zadie Smith writes in her article in The NewYorker, "The artist dislikes attaching her figures to a particular historical moment, and there's no way around the historicity of shoes." (Smith, 2017, n.p.) Yiadom-Boakye very deliberately chooses not to tie her subjects to a time period of history. Does this refusal of time in her portraits further indicate a denial of the contemporary history she is participating in currently? Does this speak to a desire to engage solely in the realm of imagination, an abnegation of the world we live in, or both?

Pollock refers to her generation as 'Post-Traumatic' being raised after the events of both World Wars and by the generation that lived through it. Hers was a generation that was promised a dream of modernity that inevitably betrayed them, resulting in the demand for justice across a multitude of malfeasance. Movements such as Civil Rights crashed into public consciousness. Pollock talks about "the unfinished business of racism in the United States. The unfinished business of decolonisation and the violence with which the attempts to be free were met." (Pollock, 2020) The question then comes up of what does that mean for Art History? No longer is its pure autonomy acceptable or credible. Pollock states, "That story of art was absolutely itself eurocentric, white, christiano-centric, racist, heterocratic, and sexist." (Pollock, 2020)

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and The Impressionists

During an exhibition talk celebrating the translation of Griselda Pollock's essay, *Modernity and Spaces of Femininity* from the language in which it was written; English, into German, Griselda talks about her analysis of women impressionist painters, class, and gender relations towards the end of the 19th century with Susanne Leeb and Monika Bear.

Yiadom Boakye's oil paintings are different to those of the impressionist painters that Pollock references in her discussion, namely Berthe Morisot and Mary

Cassett, in a number of respects. Their style and subject matter is a departure from Yiadom-Boakye. They are of a different time and place and cultural attitude. Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are decidedly place-less and timeless in a way that Morisot's simply were not. Be that as it may, Pollock states that the generation of the impressionist's "were struggling to make sense of modernity as they experienced it." (Pollock, 2020) There was a disconnect between what was and how it should have been. Perhaps, this betrayed dream of modernity was shared by more than one generation?

Yiadom-Boakye embraces many of the traditional European values of classical fine art, though her practice expands upon the idea of imaginary portraits. She paints imaginary character portrayals while previous masters painted Greek myths and Christian fables. The paintings often contain individuals reclining, lounging, and dancing, similar to the composition of many Impressionist painters: Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, and Mary Cassatt. Yiadom-Boakye seems interested in the story she tells through her paintings. However, she denies her audience a clear narrative, often only providing a hint in the title and implying a tone through the poses, gestures and gazes of her characters. Cassatt does something similar, for example in her oil painting, *The Tea (Le Thé)*. (Fig 3) In the painting two young coming-of-age women sip tea in a civilised setting. Cassatt's paintings often detail high class social interactions of women. Both Cassatt and Yiadom-Boakye share an interest in depicting familiar, human, day-to-day subject matter. A complex social construct plays across the canvas in what at first glance may seem a deceptively simple composition. In Yiadom-Boakye's work *Ever the Women Watching,* a social dynamic is formed. In both of Yiadom-Boakye's and Cassatt's figurative works, they include an observant duo of women. Among the considerations in Yiadom-Boakye's work were "The direction of glances, whether the people were looking forward, looking down, looking up, looking away, looking to the left and to the right and how their bodies were positioned and making sense of it from there." (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) Cassatt obscures the face of one of the women and gives the inanimate objects in the tea set the same emphasis in the painting as the figures, something that was highly irregular at the time. The suggestion of a formal pose echoes in both of these artworks. Yiadom- Boakye's historical nineteenth century Impressionist references are seen in the woman leaning back, posed with a hand touching her face.

Fig. 2 Cassatt, (1880)

Fig 3 Yiadom-Boakye, (2017)

Yiadom-Boakye's expressive, painterly brushstrokes and treatment of the paint on the canvas recalls that of the Impressionist's. There is a shared investment in the emphasis of the distribution of light on the subjects across the canvas. The stylistic approach is similar to that of the Impressionists, with Yiadom-Boakye displaying "characteristics of most of the most influential and beloved figurative paintings since, at least, the middle of the 19th century: Impressionist Berthe Morisot, Henri Matisse, Willem de Kooning, Jean-Michel Basquiat and on and on." (The Clyde Fitch Report, 2017). Yiadom-Boakye's lyrical and romantic titles toy with the possibilities in her paintings, "Yiadom-Boakye has inherited a narrative compulsion, which has less to do with capturing the real than with provoking, in her

audience, a desire to impose a story upon an image." (Smith, 2017, n.p.) Similar to the Impressionist's, Yiadom Boakye's paintings are often initiated spontaneously using instinctive brushwork to create otherworldly and abstract dimensions for her figures to inhabit. Her dreamt-up portrait's absence of real life counterparts prompts us to take a more inward approach to viewership and each other as a result. "Yiadom-Boakye brings these rich gifts of empathy and attention to her necessary translations of the Impressionist's tradition."(Murray, 2021)

Psychoanalytical Film Theory and Gender

All the figures in Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are attractive, "It's impossible to avoid noticing that they are all—every man and each woman—physically beautiful." (Smith, 2017, n.p.) Is this an aesthetic choice, a nod to history or simply a necessary attribute to be included among her paintings? Why are we obsessed with representation of the ideal human form? It is a symbol plastered across our plethora of social media and visual culture, with the power to disarm, delight, and intoxicate.

But what accounts for this fascination with the human form that has contributed to the continuation of the practice of figurative painting? In this part of the essay I will use psychoanalytical film theory in Laura Mulvey's text, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, to analyse our preoccupation with figuration with reference to Yiadom-Boakye's work. In her essay, Mulvey identifies two central ways in which an audience derives pleasure from watching a film in the cinema. The first is by objectifying the image and the second is through identification with the 'ego ideal.' The 'image' in this case being the feminine character and the 'ego ideal' is the role of the masculine protagonist. Both of these processes combine to create a certain type of gaze that Mulvey called 'The Male Gaze.' This essay will present how an analysis of these internal mechanisms impact and shape human fascination with the human form and hence contribute to the prolonged interest in the practice of figuration in art.

Mulvey argues that the environment of the cinema facilitates this voyeuristic process and thus the objectification of the female body in particular as both sites of the screen and the viewer are extensions of our patriarchal social order. The second part of this 'Male Gaze' is its narcissistic form, which is identification with the 'ego ideal' presented on screen. "Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a

child recognises his own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego."(Mulvey, 1975, p.60) This stage in childhood development is called the 'Mirror Phase'. Mulvey further explains the significance of that moment as the child's perception of self upon seeing their own image as a more complete and competent version of themselves. "Recognition is thus overlaid with the mis-recognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but it's misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego." (Mulvey, 1975, p.60) Mulvey describes the act of looking as a form of domination over the objectified 'other.' Then is the voyeuristic practice associated with appreciation of figurative art creating an objectified 'other?'

The spectators in the cinema are enabled to project their voyeuristic fantasy onto the actors. "The position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer." (Mulvey, 1975, p.60) The cinema setting itself encourages voyeuristic behaviour in its assembly, "Moreover, the extreme contrast between the darkness of the auditorium and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation." (Mulvey, 1975, p.60) Similar to this phenomenon is the site of an exhibition. During an interview with assistant curator, Natalie Bell, Yiadom-Boakye commented on her invitation to exhibit in the New Museum in New York, "The first thing I wanted to think about was that space in that room and what might be possible." (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) The walls of the exhibition room were painted a "dark heritage red" (Smith, 2017, n.p.) The red framed the seventeen large scale paintings collectively. In this scenario the exhibition room acts as a cinema, facilitating the projection of fantasy of the viewer.The purpose of the exhibition is to encourage an immersive experience.

Are people in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings acting as the ego ideal or the objectified 'other?' Their beauty, poise, and dignity seep from the canvas. The artist works from a scrapbook of images, collected from magazines, books, and other sources. "I work from scrapbooks and drawings and referencing other paintings of mine and other people." (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) The works are created quickly, often completed in a day, "Plus a lot of improvisation and imagination." (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) While in Mulvey's essay she stated that the women on screen were bearers of meaning rather than active participants in the making of meaning, Yiadom-Boakye's character's despite being active grounds in the projection

of personal fantasy, deny any meaning and are intentionally ambiguous and undetermined.“The figures themselves are the basis for your fantasy, with their teasing, ambiguous titles, women dancing to unheard music, or peering through binoculars at objects unseen.” (Smith, 2017, n.p.) Yiadom-Boakye when asked about her preference for figuration answered, “I love painting the figure mainly because it is just full of possibilities, endless possibilities.” (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017)

Yiadom-Boakye’s figures reject the idea of giving her audience an easy sense of control over these imaginary people, instead these images act independently of our social order and that of the cultural image of the human form. Mulvey writes “It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip-tease, theater, shows, ect.” (Mulvey, 1975, p.60) Berger argues that the woman despite being the victim to the gaze herself becomes a proponent of it. Essentially, men observe women and women watch themselves being observed and are thus defined by themselves and others by their, ‘to-be-looked-at-ness.’

> *‘This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.’ (Berger, 1972)*

This in itself prompts many questions. How does this relate to the reading of artwork? Are Yiadom-Boakye’s imaginary figures defined by the artist's awareness of their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness?’ Is the artwork perception dependent on the gaze of the person seeing it?

One of the roles of the cinema is to satisfy an innate desire to look. Mulvey writes that one of the gratifications of cinema involves the participation in scopophilia. The definition of Scopophilia is the, “sexual stimulation or satisfaction derived principally from looking.” (Craigie, 1989) Mulvey writes that in its most extreme form scopophilia can develop from an infantile instinct into a perversion, “producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.” (Mulvey, 1975, p.60) In film and art the social interactions between men and women can be summarised as “men act and women appear.”(Berger, 1972)

During an interview, Yiadom-Boakye explains her imaginary people, “I don’t really think of them as people in the same way that they appear to be people. I think

of them as a ‘being’ of a sort.” (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) She goes on to describe them as “immortal.” However, Yiadom-Boakye's characters are not sites of imparted meaning. They act out their scenes outside of the dimensions of time and space as if they do not wish to be associated with any identifiable specificity.

> ‘*The strongest paintings pursue an entirely different relation: not the narrow point-for-point argument between artist and art history but the essential, living communication between art work and viewer, a relationship that Yiadom-Boakye reminds us is indeed vicarious, voyeuristic, ambivalent, and fundamentally uncontrollable.’ (Smith, 2017, n.p.)*

The patriarchal social order on screen exposed by Mulveys use of psychoanalytic theory reflects our social interactions in the real world and likewise acts of viewing are extensions of that order, hence the name, ‘The Male Gaze.’ In John Berger’s 1972 film series, *Ways of Looking,* he says, ″You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting “Vanity,” thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.’ (Berger, 1972) Here, Berger epitomizes and exposes the hypocrisy of the Male gaze and the systematic objectification of women represented visually.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and The Black Gaze

As I examine the viewer's relationship to the human form through the male gaze then, it is only consistent to expand on that research and questioning to the image of the Black body, of which is the preferred subject of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s own work. Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings are all of Black people, reflecting her own ethnicity. They touch the realm of representation. Despite the artist’s claiming her paintings are not seeking to be political, they often probe the boundaries of Black representation and are viewed through a politically charged lens. Even the statement that she does not intend for her Black cast of fictional characters to be a political statement can be read as so. “Rhetorically normalizing a version of progress that is not, in practice, very normal, can be an effective strategy.” (The Clyde Fitch Report, 2017) Their numerous references to European figurative painting also highlights the absence of Back portraiture in the European painting tradition. In the book, *A Black Gaze* by author Tina M. Campt, the work of numerous

contemporary Black artists is examined. Campt writes about representation of Black bodies in her book and the beauty and violence often paired with black bodies in contemporary media. Campt describes her experience of this when watching Arther Jafa's video,'Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death.' "Gorgeous images of Black people in all their vexed glory, and a split second later, moved to tears of rage at the endless cycle of violence and suffering it depicted directly alongside so many uplifting scenes of Black joy and pleasure." (Pg.2) The Black Gaze differentiates itself from other concepts of the gaze as it is "not limited to film or filmmaking." (Campt, 2021,p.21) Consequently, it is not bound to the field."A Black gaze is a structure of visual engagement that implicitly and explicitly understands blackness as neither singular nor a singularity; it embraces instead the multiplicity of blackness these artists simultaneously grapple with and personify." (Campt, 2021,p.21)

Fig.4 Valentine, V, (2017) Installation View of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Vigil For A Horseman.

Campt writes that while the depiction of Black communities and the Black

perspective is explored, it is done so as a kind of ‘otherness’ to Whiteness. Emphasis is placed on representation in the image form of Black people and communities, “while maintaining existing limitations of traditional ways of narrating the Black experience.” (Pg.7) Campt argues that this additional perspective does not do enough beyond a black point of view, to challenge the governing, controlling authority of whiteness on screen for which it is often portrayed as the ‘other.’ “It does not challenge the fundamental disparity that defines the dominant viewing practice: the fact that blackness is the elsewhere (or nowhere) of whiteness.” (Pg.7) An ancillary to whiteness. Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings exist in a separate world independent from our own. However, there are references to historical compositions and traditions of European painting, “There are a few moments when the paintings also seem to respond more or less directly to a generalized notion of the “white canon.” (Smith, 2017, n.p.) such as in the triptych, ‘Vigil For A Horseman,’ where three attractive figures pose classically. Zadie Smith identifies these paintings as, “the weaker moments in the show.” (Smith, 2017, n.p.)

However, the paintings that embody that voyeuristic relationship and enable that fantastical curiosity, outside the politics of representation and focus on the sole realm of colour, light and shade offer a rich bounty of tensions. In these paintings Blackness is something felt and experienced and is not defined by its to-be-seen-ness on screen. “In this approach to Black visuality, while Blackness is now seen (i.e., made visible to a wider audience), it is not necessarily something to be felt.” (Campt, 2021,p.7) Often viewed through a “lens of pity, sympathy, or concern.” (Campt, 2021,p.7) Much like the narrative of her paintings, Yidom-Boakye has spoken of her aversion to attaching any specific political agenda to her Black figures. The artist claims her paintings' relation to politics is in the act of creating the work. “Nothing has felt easy or straightforward. It’s hard to pin down what the politics would be, in a way. For me [the politics are] very visual and felt, thought, seen, but not necessarily put into words. The confusions and conditions within the work are the politics.” (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) In this way Yiadom-Boakye questions why people are conditioned to look at racial specifications in art as political statements. “Maybe I think more about black thought than black bodies.” (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) Yiadom-Boakye paintings pursue her interest in self person-hood. This cultivation of a distinct black gaze can be seen in

Yiadom-Boakye's paintings that are often said to explore black selfhood. But they are not a revelation of blackness. "Yiadom-Boakye is doing more than exploring the supposedly uncharted territory of black selfhood, or making—in that hackneyed phrase—the invisible visible. (Black selfhood has always existed and is not invisible to black people.) Nor are these paintings solely concerned with inserting the black figure into an overwhelmingly white canon." (Smith, 2017, n.p.)

One of the ways that Campt describes the Black gaze is, "It is at once a critical framework, a reading apparatus, a term that describes an artist's practice, and a spectatorial medium that demands particularly active modes of watching, listening, and witnessing." (Campt, 2021,p.21) Suggesting the Black gaze does not attempt to define or to place limitations on its content but instead it is something that requires activation on behalf of the viewer. Similar to the rationale behind the ambiguity present in Yiadom-Boakye's fictitious portraits.Yiadom-Boakye's paintings encourage the audience to look at her work through this Black gaze. "It is a gaze that shifts the optics of "looking at" to a politics of looking with, through and alongside another." (Pg.8) Yiadom-Boakye's figures occupy private worlds that prompt in viewers questions of representation and identity and narrative. The series of contradictions in her work draw in the viewer and play on the richness of tensions present in her work. This undecided uncertainty is important to the viewer's interpretation of Yiadom-Boakye's paintings. Through the ambiguity of her work, Yiadom-Boakye ignites in her audience imagination, curiosity, and vision. "Here the radical question they are posing is: rather than looking at Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to see oneself through the complex positionality that is blackness-and work through its implications on and for oneself?" (Campt, 2021,p.7)

Conclusion

This essay has discussed historical factors, gender, and race in relation to the figurative work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and her imaginary portraits. The aim of this essay was to provide a discussion and analysis of the influences that contribute

to the popularity and with-standing nature of figurative art and consequently with the human image. The second aim of this essay was to examine the foundations and influence of the ‘Male gaze’ and the ‘Black gaze’ in Lynette Yiadom Baokye’s figurative work.

Limitations of this essay include focusing on a solely European art historical perspective and employing psychoanalytical film theory as a means of investigation may cause some aspects not to translate to an analysis of figurative art. This essay would benefit from a broader range of psychoanalytical theories. In spite of these limitations, this essay certainly adds to our understanding of the tensions present in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings.

This thesis has provided a deeper insight into how the contradictions and contrast add to our experience of Yiadom-Boakye’s work. Yiadom-Boakye's approach to her work is both historical and ahistorical, political and apolitical. Yiadom-Boakye is aware of how her figures are viewed and unconcerned about providing a neat answer. Perhaps, it is natural to the artist-writer, “I write about the things I can’t paint and paint the things I can’t write about.” (Yiadom-Boakye, 2017) Her characters are ordinary and omnipotent, empathetic and solitary.

A natural progression of this work is to analyse further the effect and implications of the Black gaze in Fine Art. One finding to emerge from this study is that psychoanalytic theory provides assistance in explaining our fascination with our own image. “People will continue to look at people—to listen to them, read about them, or reach out and touch them—and on such flimsy sensory foundations spin their private fantasias.” (Smith, 2017, n.p.) The active exchange of looking between art and viewer fuels this relationship to the figurative.

> *“We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.” (Berger, 1972)*

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