

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Explores Psychological Depths

The painter's introspective subjects can make the viewer feel uncomfortably voyeuristic.



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Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Level with the Lawn" (2018), oil on canvas, 55 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches (all images courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery)

British-Ghanaian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's canvases call attention to the simple pleasure of looking, even as they acknowledge the complex, freighted nature of the act. Her celebrated portraits of fictional imaginary black people, whose bodies are in various states of pose and repose, are expressive marvels of wet-on-wet painting. Her charismatically nonchalant brushstrokes contour moody sections of paint that cohere into low-contrast compositions in which figure and ground incorporate shades of coffee, tan, and brown. Even as she uses overcast, muted

hues to underscore her subjects' bodily expressions of malaise and ennui, Yiadom-Boakye's canvases affirm painting's tactile verve.

Yet her subjects' introspective languor can make the viewer feel uncomfortably voyeuristic, similar to the intrusive feeling of glimpsing a stranger crying in public. Their eyes are particularly telling in this regard. Many, such as the woman in "Level with the Lawn" (2018), have a downcast or averted gaze. Others have a wary or distant stare. Still others, as in the figures in "Monday Midnight" (2018) and "Southbound Catechism" (2018), look back at the viewer with searching, almost accusatory vulnerability. A couple have a jarring splotch of color — orange or green — in lieu of the white of one eye. In all their guises, the characters' eyes hint at psychological depths that a painted surface, however evocative, can only begin to plumb.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Amber and Jasmine" (2018), oil on linen, 59 1/4x 55 1/8 inches

Considerations about looking matter not just to Yiadom-Boakye's work but also to its reception. Her paintings have often drawn comparison to the supposed timelessness of Old Master portraiture, as well as historical and contemporary traditions — and omissions — of black figuration. But as her renown has increased, some critics note subtle developments over time, such as her selective incorporation of bold color in her latest exhibition, *In Lieu Of a Louder Love*, at both Chelsea locations of Jack Shainman Gallery. Others find her new work too familiar, like a pop song that reiterates the same formula as the artist's previous hits. Yet her

work, sensuous and smart, encourages us to reflect on what we think we're seeing when we look at something, and on why we choose to look in the first place.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: In Lieu of a Louder Love *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th and 524 West 24th Street) through February 16.*

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