

Serge  
Attukwei  
Clottey

Simchowitz



**Serge Attukwei Clottey** (b. 1985, Accra, Ghana) is an artist living and working in Accra, Ghana. Working primarily in sculpture, photography, installation, and performance, Clottey has received international acclaim and recognition for his radically unique revisioning of scrap materials. Often working with readily-available discarded plastics found near his home of Accra, Ghana, Clottey shapes, cuts, weaves, and binds refuse into vibrant and vital reimagined art objects. Tactile and formally beautiful, Clottey's sculptures, installations, garments and masks point to the unabiding human need to create.

1985 Born in Accra, Ghana  
Lives & works in Accra, Ghana

## Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 *Distinctive Gestures*, Gallery 1957, London, UK  
*Beyond Skin*, Simchowitz, Los Angeles, CA
- 2020 *Sensitive Balance*, Gnyp, Berlin, Germany  
*Routes*, The Mistake Room at The Platform, Culver City, Los Angeles, CA  
*Adesa We*, Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA
- 2019 *Sometime In Your Life*, Lorenzelli Arte, Milan, Italy  
*Solo Chorus*, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA  
*Kubatana*, Vestfossen Kunslaboratorium Foundation, Oslo, Norway
- 2018 Solo presentation with Gallery 1957 at UNTITLED, Miami, FL  
*Differences Between*, Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, NY  
*Defying the Narrative*, Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA  
*The Displaced*, Gallery 1957 at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2017 Gallery 1957 at Cape Town Art Fair, Cape Town, South Africa  
Gallery 1957 at 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, New York, NY  
*Burning in Water* w/ Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, New York, NY
- 2016 *My Mother's Wardrobe*, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana  
*Hand to Mouth*, Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA  
*Earthly Conversations*, GNYP Gallery, Berlin, Germany  
Solo presentation w/ Gallery 1957 at 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, UK
- 2015 *The Displaced*, Mesler/Feuer, New York, NY  
*Global Warming* (Featured Project), British Council, Accra, Ghana  
*Portrait of Accra*, Junior Art Club Sponsorship, Bristol, UK

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2021 *La Condition Publique*, Roubaix, France  
*Desert X*, Curated by Cesar Garcia and Neville Wakefield, Palm Desert, CA  
*Kugarisana*, Simchowitz at Christie's Beverly Hills, CA
- 2020 *Radical Revisionists*, The Moody Center, Rice University, Houston, TX  
*Materiality*, Iziko South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2019 *Fabrica*, Brighton Festival, UK  
*Tradition Interrupted*, Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA
- 2018 *Art Los Angeles Contemporary* w/ Ever Gold [Projects], Los Angeles, CA
- 2017 *Dans Un Ciel Ensoleillé*, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, CA  
*Atsala Tsala (A Selection of Contemporary African Art)*, Patricia Low Contemporary, Gstaad, Switzerland  
*Untitled Group Show*, Ibid Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*Group Show*, Blank Projects, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Practical Common Sense*, Chale Wote Street Art Festival, Accra, Ghana
- 2016 *Spielzeiteröffnung 2015: We Don't Contemporary Festival*, Hamburg, Germany  
*What is Matter*, Intelligentsia Gallery, Beijing, China  
*The Silence of Ordinary Things*, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA
- 2014 *Colour Unfinished*, 27th Festival Les Instants Vidéo, Marseille, France  
*Migration Messages, Collective Realities of African Migration*, Werkstätten-nd Kulturhaus, Vienna, Austria  
*Global Art Local View*, European Monument Day, Mohr-Villa, Münich, Germany  
*MULTIPOINT*, The International Art Symposium, Nitra, Slovakia  
*African Contemporary Photography*, The Auction Room &

	Ozwald Boateng, London, UK <i>Masked/Unmasked</i> , DAK'ART - 11th Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain, Dakar, Senegal 'Colour Unfinished, Du Bois In Our Time II,' University of Amherst Nubuke Foundation and the Du Bois Centre, Accra, Ghana Muses, Goethe Institut, Accra, Ghana Art Speaks, Werkstätten-und Kulturhaus, Vienna, Austria <i>Inside The Mosquito Net</i> , Alliance Française, Accra, Ghana We Are Africa, Nubuke Foundation, Accra, Ghana <i>Time, Trade &amp; Travel</i> , Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Denmark <i>The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born</i> , Goethe Institut, Accra, Ghana <i>Alternative Independence Day Celebration, Freedom Tour</i> , Nubuke Foundation, Accra, Ghana <i>Inside The Mosquito Net</i> , Brazil House, Jamestown, Ghana <i>Cultures in Confluence</i> , Alliance Française & Goethe Institut, Accra, Ghana <i>Trash To Treasure</i> , Alliance Française & Goethe Institut, Accra, Ghana <i>Climate Change</i> , Caspar House, Accra, Ghana Africa Show, African Contemporary Art, Naples, Italy Untying the Human Spirit, CAN 2008, Goethe Institut, Accra, Ghana
2013	
2012	
2011	
2009	
2008	

## Selected Bibliography

- 2019 Caldwell, Erica. "To Go Local." *BOMB magazine*, August 26, 2019. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/to-go-local/>

Can, Gülnaz. "The Migration of Yellow Plastica Gallons." *Wall Street International Magazine*, 29 April, 2019. <https://wsimag.com/art/53038-the-migration-of-yellow-plastic-gallons>  
Donoghue, Katy. "Serge Attukwei Clottey Uses Performance to Address Political, Social, and Local Issues." *Whitewall*, 3 April, 2019. <https://www.whitewall.art/art/serge-attukwei-clottey-uses-performance-to-address-political-social-and-local-issues>  
*Harpers Bazaar Arabia Art* (cover), July, 2019.  
Donogho, Katy. 'SERGE ATTUKWEI CLOTTEY'S "TIME AFTER TIME"', *Whitewall Magazine*. [www.whitewall.art/art/serge-attukwei-clotteys-time-time](http://www.whitewall.art/art/serge-attukwei-clotteys-time-time)  
Chase, Dylan. 'If this jerrycan could talk', *Flaunt Magazine*. [www.flault.com/content/serge-clottey](http://www.flault.com/content/serge-clottey)  
Gotthardt, Alexxa. 'Serge Attukwei Clottey Is Creating a Real-Life Yellow Brick Road in Accra', *Artsy*. [www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-serge-attukwei-clottey-creating-real-life-yellow-brick-road-accra](http://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-serge-attukwei-clottey-creating-real-life-yellow-brick-road-accra)  
'In pictures: Follow Ghana's 'yellow-brick road', *BBC News*. [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45836387](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45836387)  
'Ghanaian artist making art for Facebook HQ from plastic waste', *BBC World*. [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p068w4j1](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p068w4j1)  
Nnadi, Chioma. 'This Artist Is Wearing His Mother's Clothing to Promote Social Change in Ghana', *Vogue Magazine*. [www.vogue.com/article/serge-attukwei-clottey-my-mothers-wardrobe-project](http://www.vogue.com/article/serge-attukwei-clottey-my-mothers-wardrobe-project)  
Frizzell, Nell. 'Serge Attukwei Clottey: the artist urging African men to dress as Women', *The Guardian*. [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/06/serge-attukwei-clottey-ghana-artist-dead-mothers-clothes](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/06/serge-attukwei-clottey-ghana-artist-dead-mothers-clothes)  
Brownell Mitic, Gianne. 'Technology Expands the

*World for African Artists*', The New York Times.  
[www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/arts/international/  
technology-expands-the-world-for-african-artists.  
html?mwrsm=Email&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/arts/international/technology-expands-the-world-for-african-artists.html?mwrsm=Email&_r=2)  
'Can Art Change the World?', BBC World Service. [www.  
bbc.co.uk/programmes/p048sqjq/p048sqk4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p048sqjq/p048sqk4)

### **Public Collections**

Kunstmuseum Arnhem, The Netherlands  
Modern Forms, UK  
Nubuke Foundation, Accra, Ghana  
Seth Dei Foundation, Accra, Ghana  
The World Bank Collection, Washington D.C., US  
Facebook, Menlo Park, CA

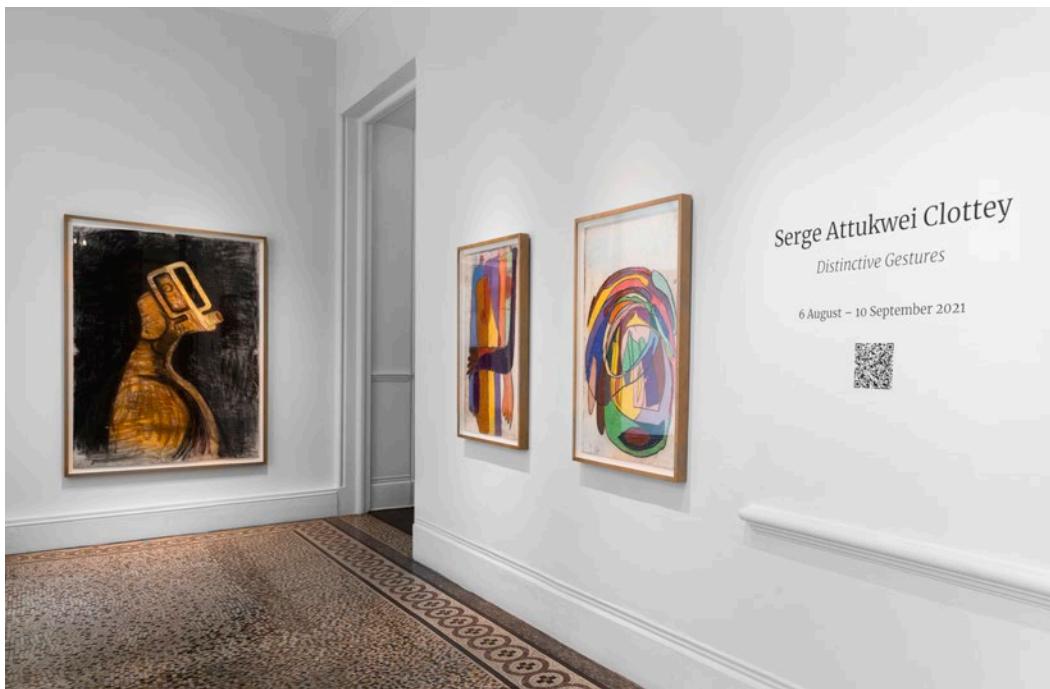
### **Awards and Honors**

Doctor of Arts, University of Brighton, UK

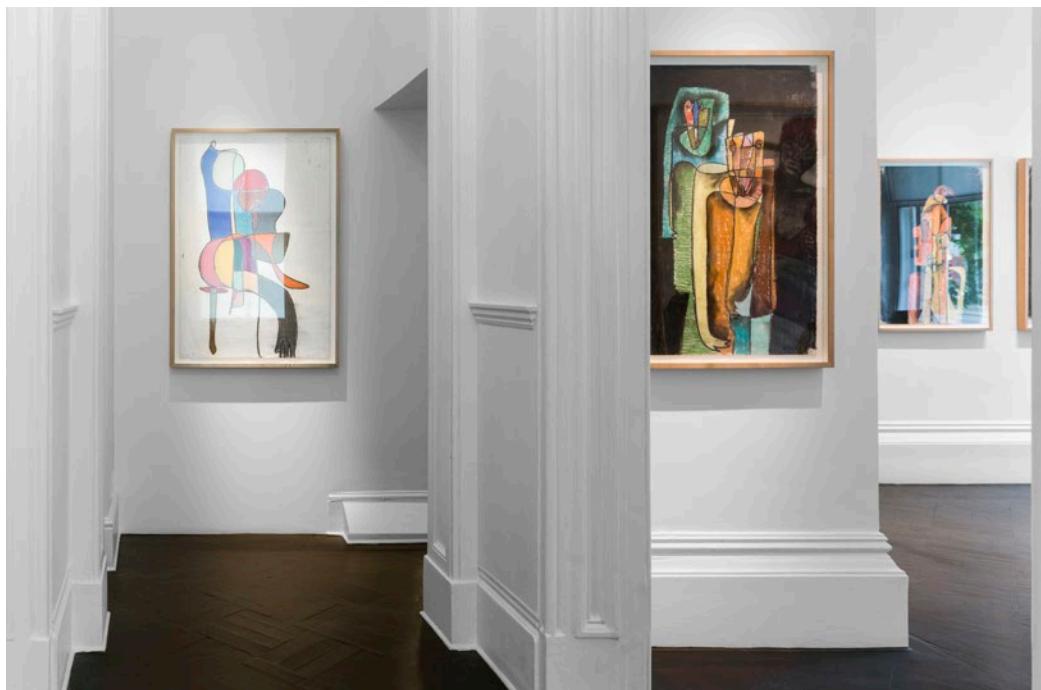
# Installation Views

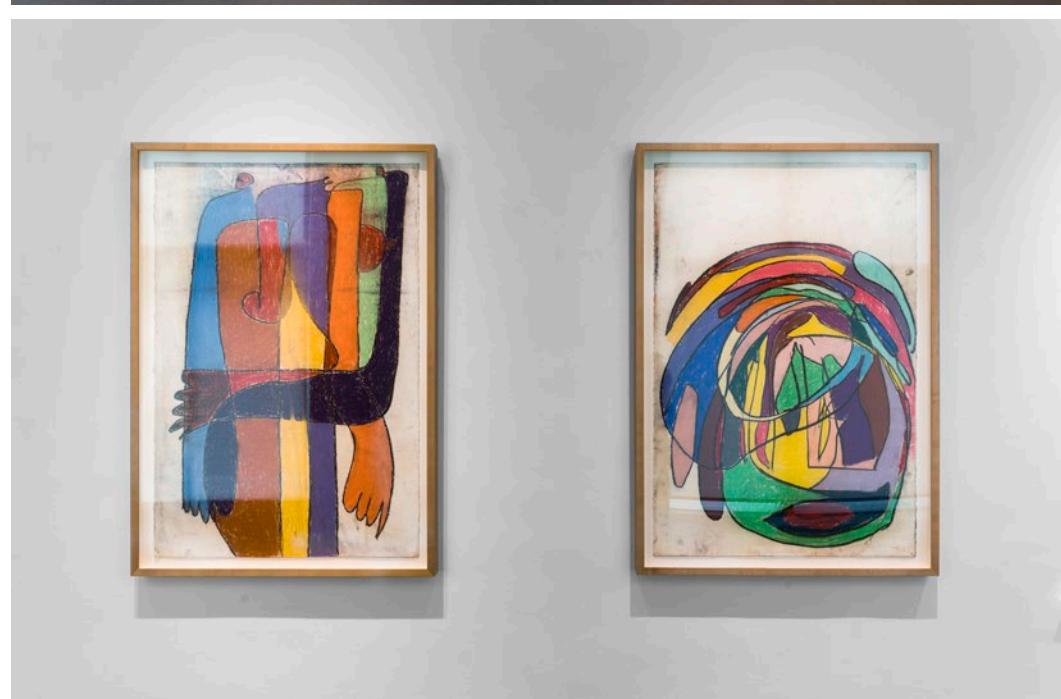
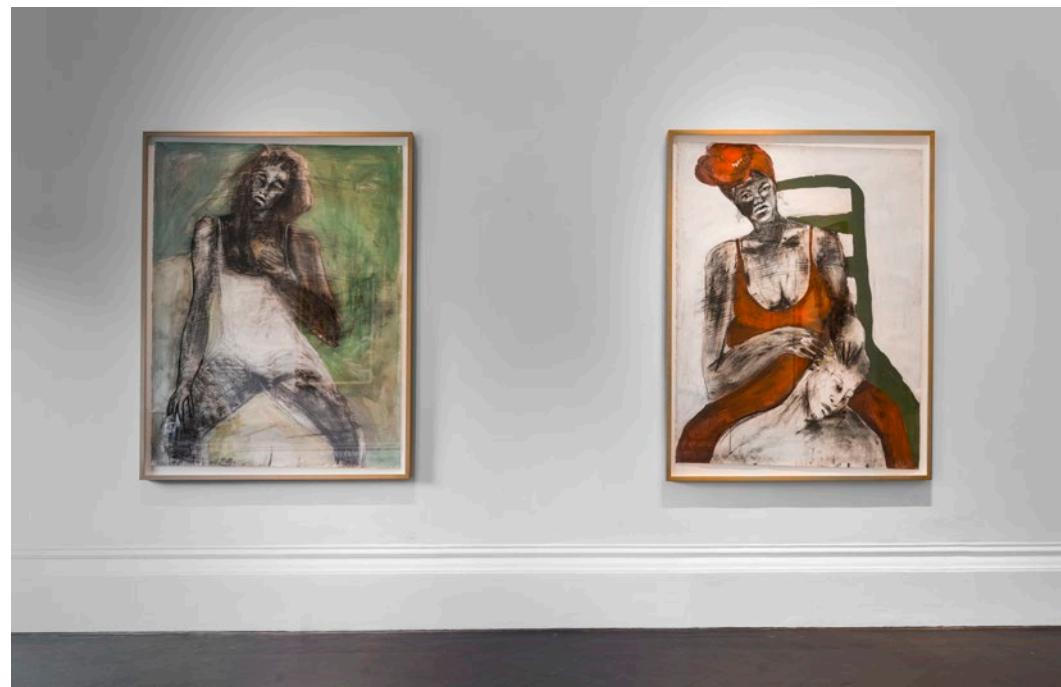


Installation view: *Distinctive Gestures*  
Gallery 1957, London, UK



Installation views: *Distinctive Gestures*  
Gallery 1957, London, UK

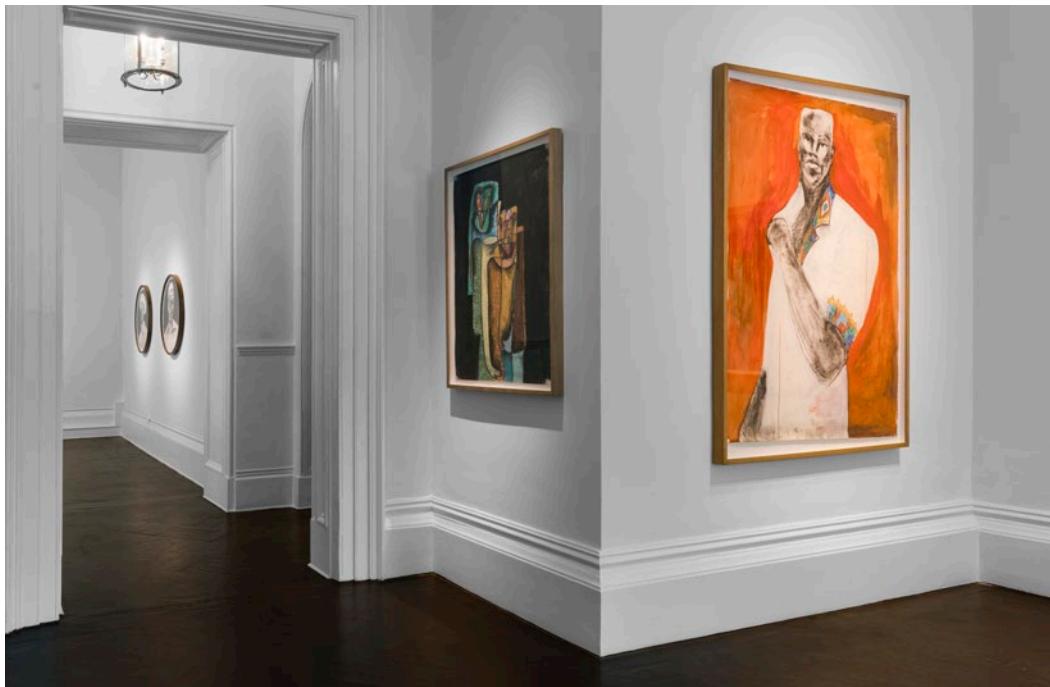




Installation views: *Distinctive Gestures*  
Gallery 1957, London, UK

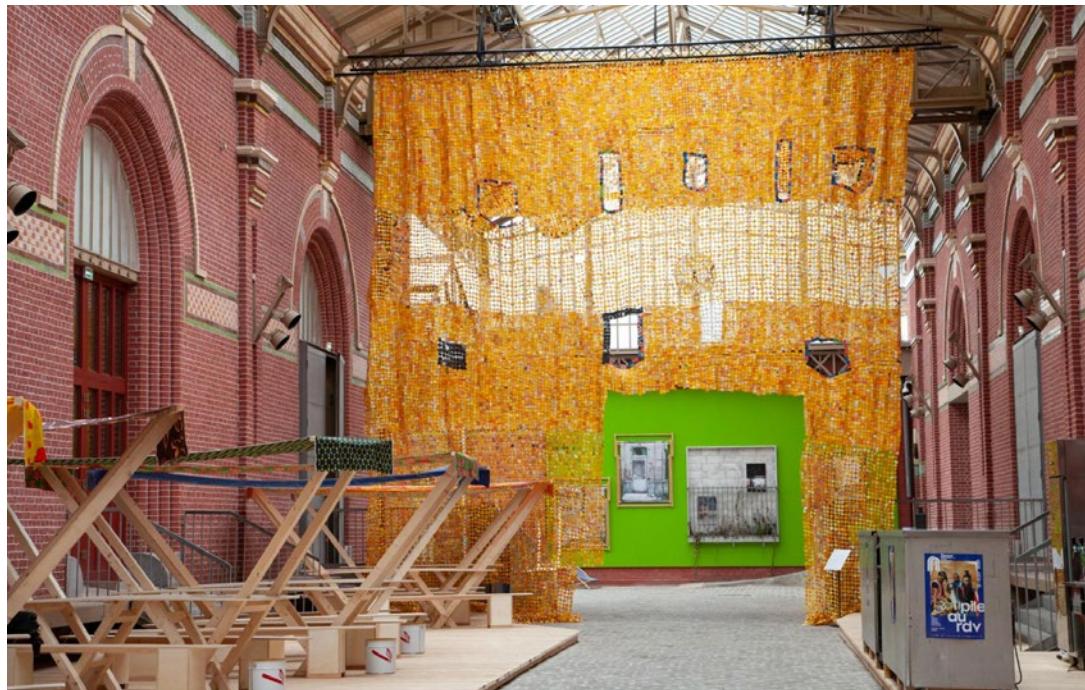


Installation view: *Distinctive Gestures*  
Gallery 1957, London, UK



Installation views: *Distinctive Gestures*  
Gallery 1957, London, UK





Installation views: *Installation*  
La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France



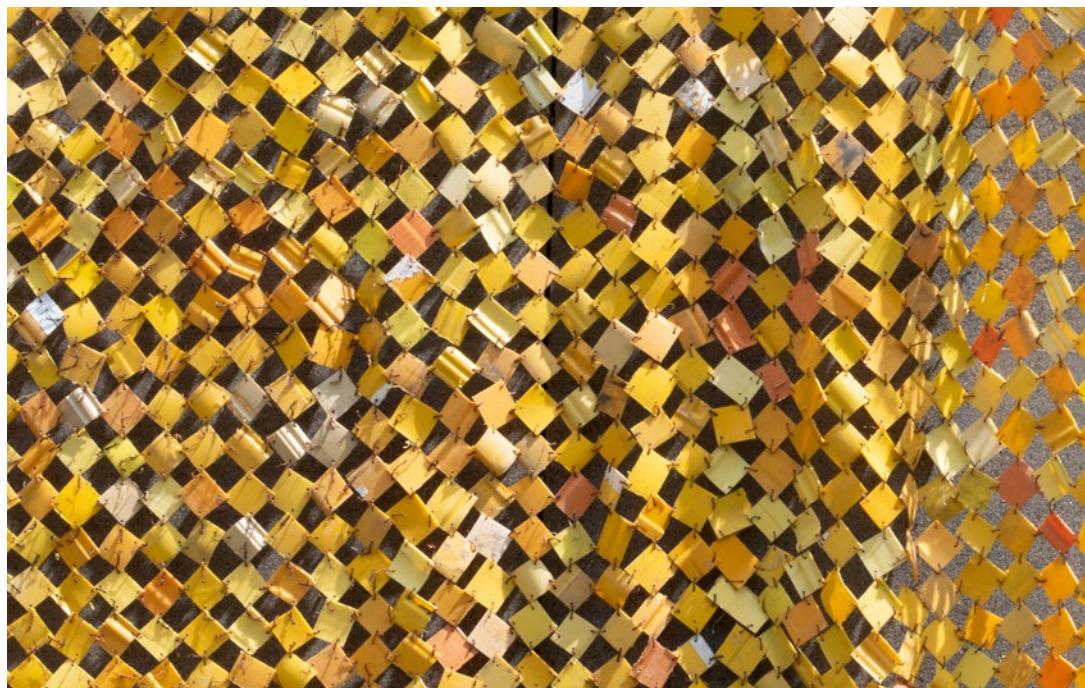


Installation views: *Installation*  
La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France





Installation views: *Installation*  
La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France





Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA

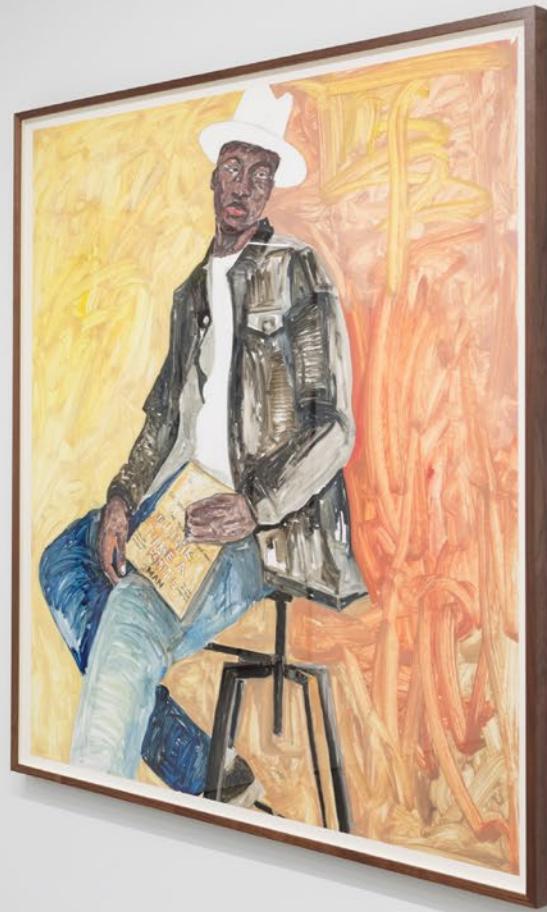


Installation views: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA





Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation view: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation views: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA





Installation detail: *Beyond Skin*  
Simchowitz, CA



Installation view: *The Wishing Well*  
Desert X, Palm Desert, CA





Performance still: "Form, contrast & motion"  
Desert X, Palm Desert, CA





Performance still: "Form, contrast & motion"  
Desert X, Palm Desert, CA



Installation view: *The Wishing Well*  
Desert X, Labadi, Ghana



Installation view: *The Wishing Well*  
Desert X, Labadi, Ghana





Installation view: *The Wishing Well*  
Desert X, Labadi, Ghana



Installation views: *Kugarisana*,  
Simchowitz at Christie's Beverly Hills, CA





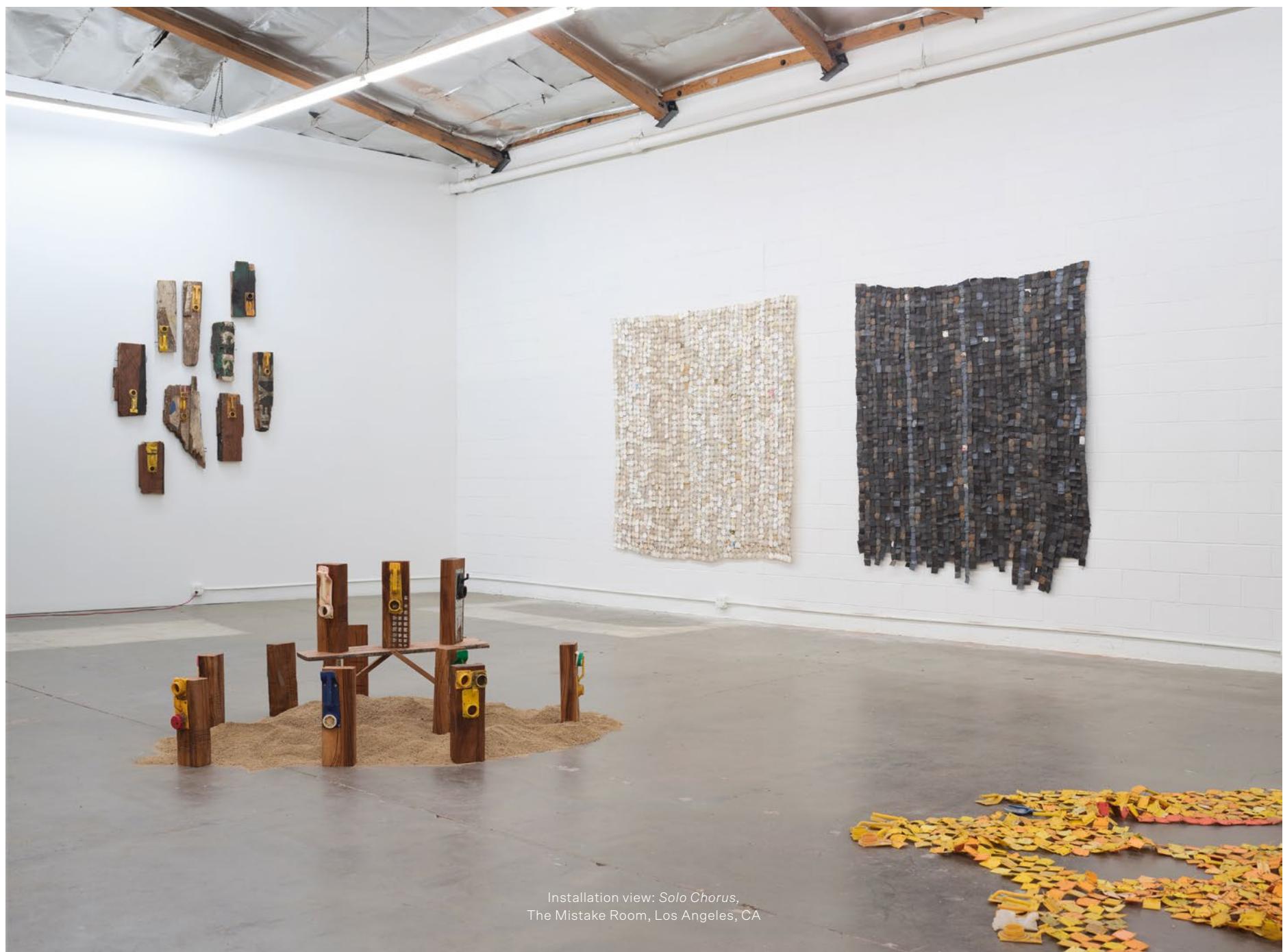
Installation view: *Kugarisana*,  
Simchowitz at Christie's Beverly Hills, CA



Installation views: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA



Installation view: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA



Installation view: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA



Installation views: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA





Installation views: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA





Installation view: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA



Installation view: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA

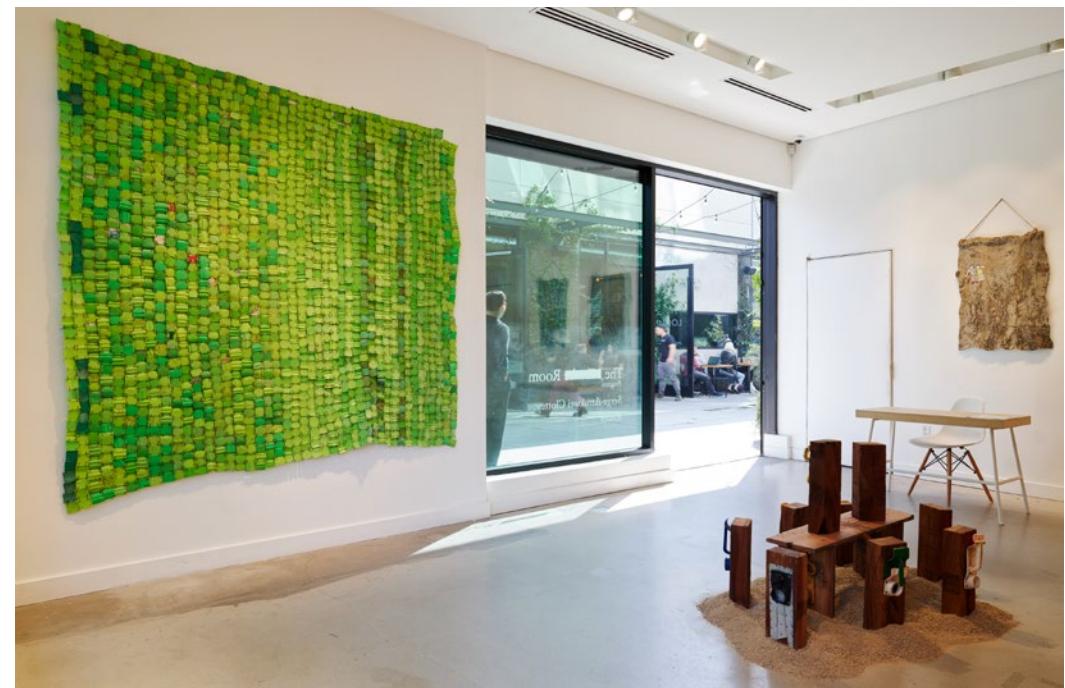


Installation views: *Solo Chorus*,  
The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA





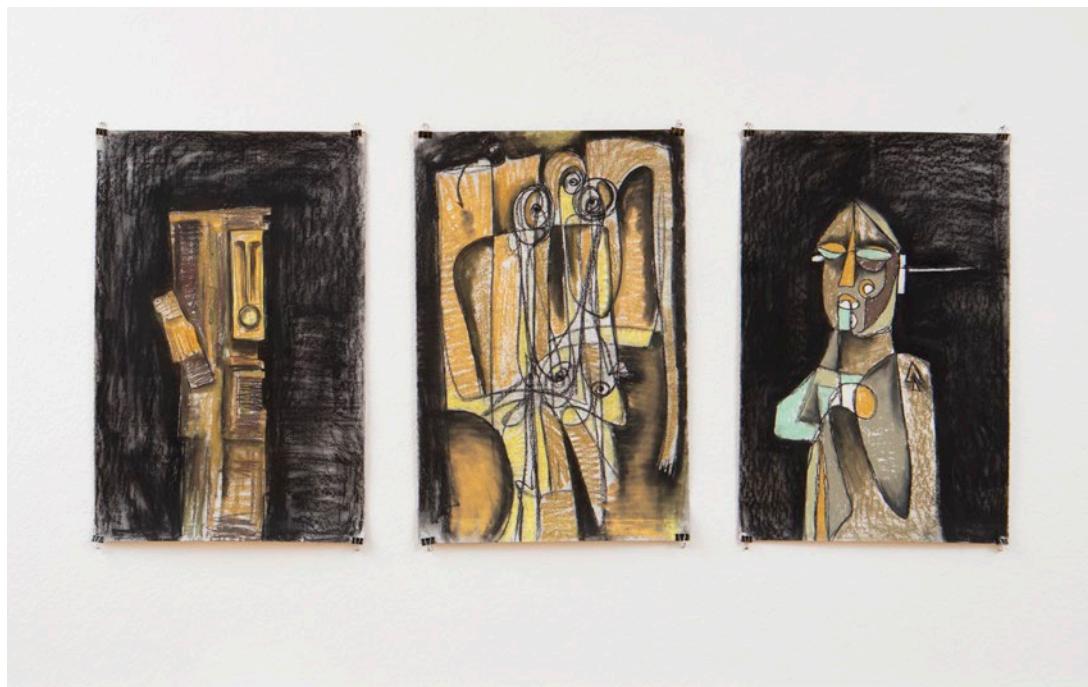
Installation views: *Routes*,  
The Mistake Room at The Platform, Culver City , CA







Installation view: *Sensitive Balance*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany



Installation views: *Sensitive Balance*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany





Installation detail: *Sensitive Balance*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany



Installation view: Berggruen Institute,  
Los Angeles, CA



Installation views: Berggruen Institute,  
Los Angeles, CA



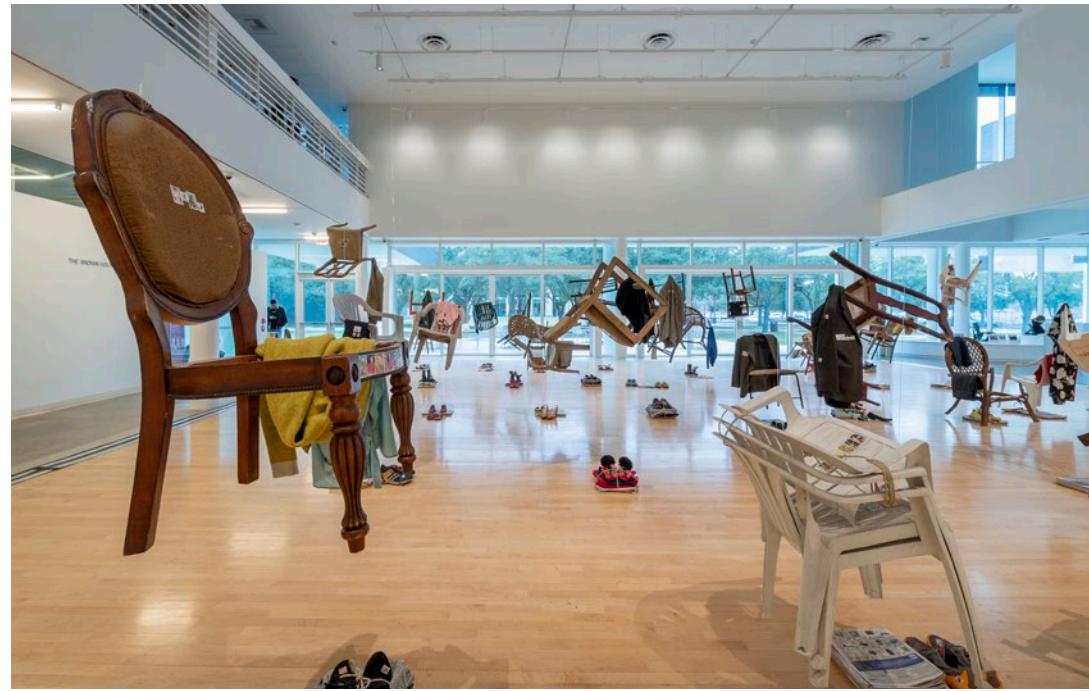


Installation view: *Softening Borders*,  
Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX

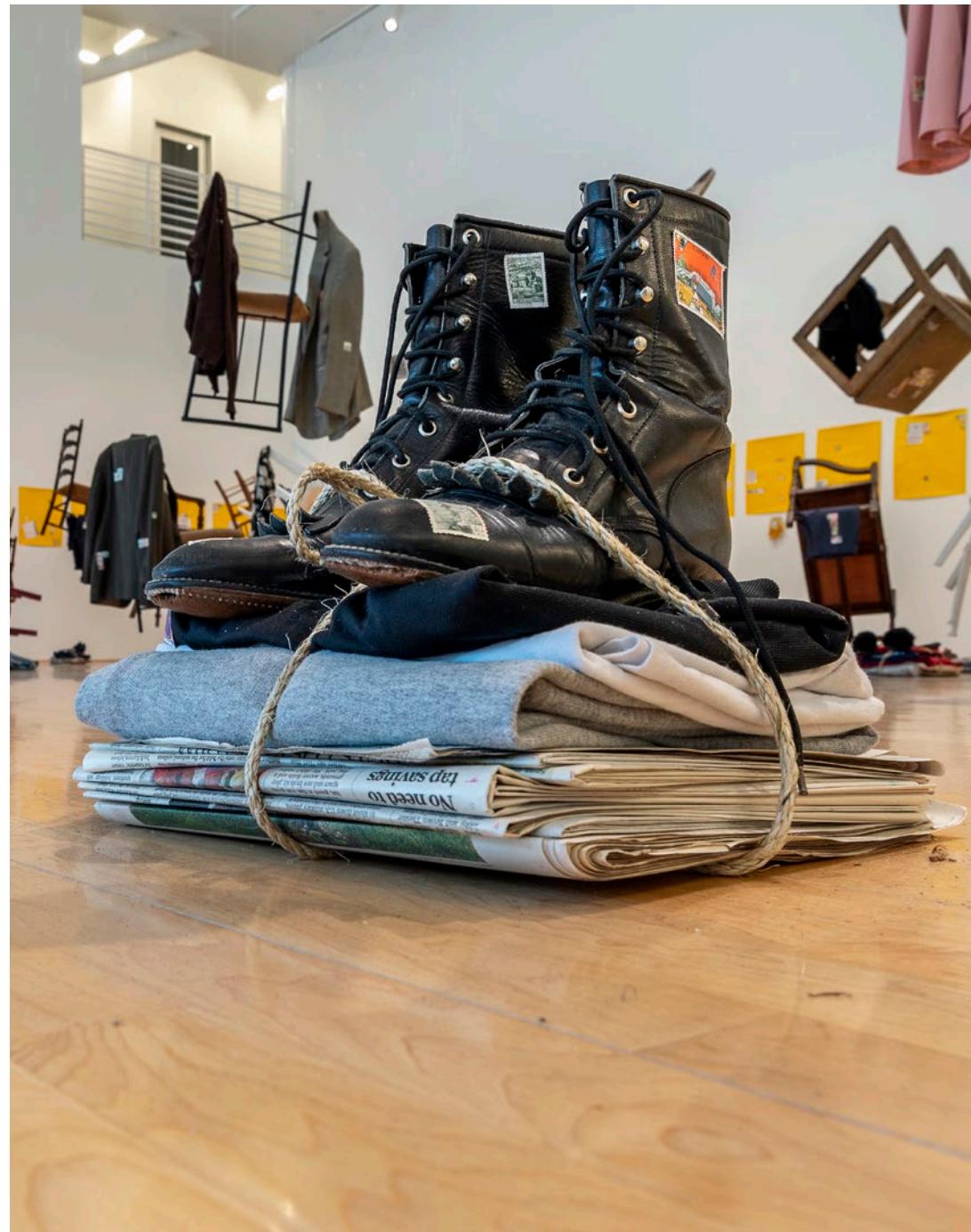


Installation view: *Softening Borders*,  
Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX

Installation views: *Softening Borders*,  
Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX



Installation views: *Softening Borders*,  
Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX





Installation view: *Adesa We*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA



Installation views: *Adesa We*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA





Installation views: *Adesa We*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA



Installation views: *Sometime In Your Life*,  
Lorenzelli Arte, Milan, Italy





Installation views: *Sometime In Your Life*,  
Lorenzelli Arte, Milan, Italy





Installation view: *Sometime In Your Life*,  
Lorenzelli Arte, Milan, Italy



Installation view: *Kubatana*,  
Kunstlaboratorium, Vestfossen, Norway



Production process: *Kubatana*,  
Accra, Ghana





Installation views at Brighton Festival,  
presented by Fabrica, Brighton, UK

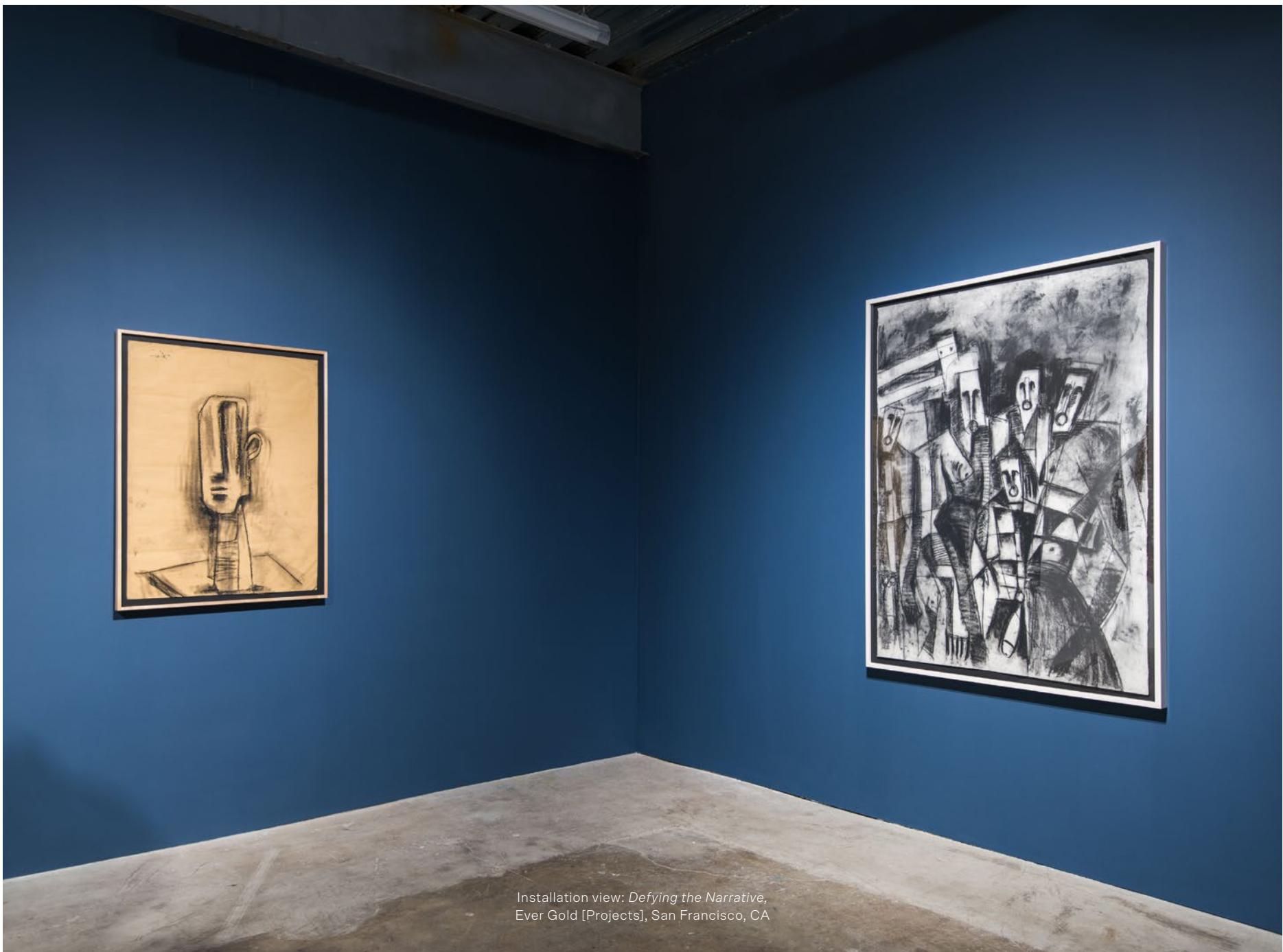


Installation views at UNTITLED, Miami,  
presented by Gallery 1957



Installation views at UNTITLED, Miami,  
presented by Gallery 1957





Installation view: *Defying the Narrative*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA

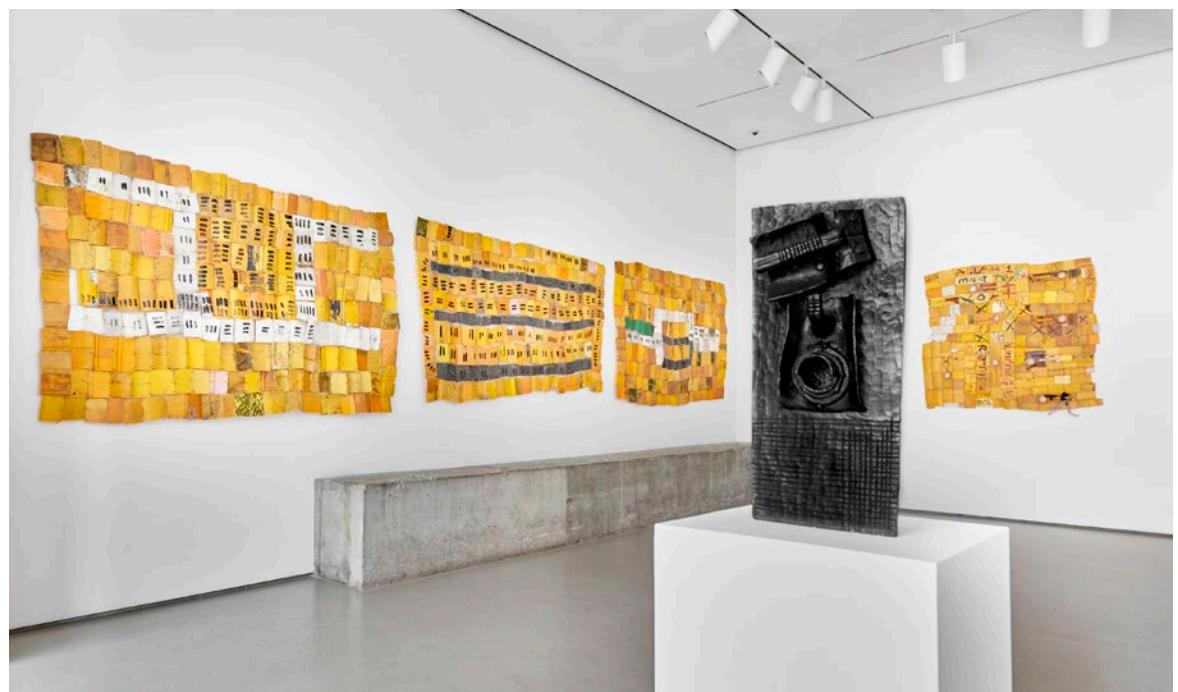


Installation view: *Defying the Narrative*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA



Installation views: *Defying the Narrative*,  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco, CA





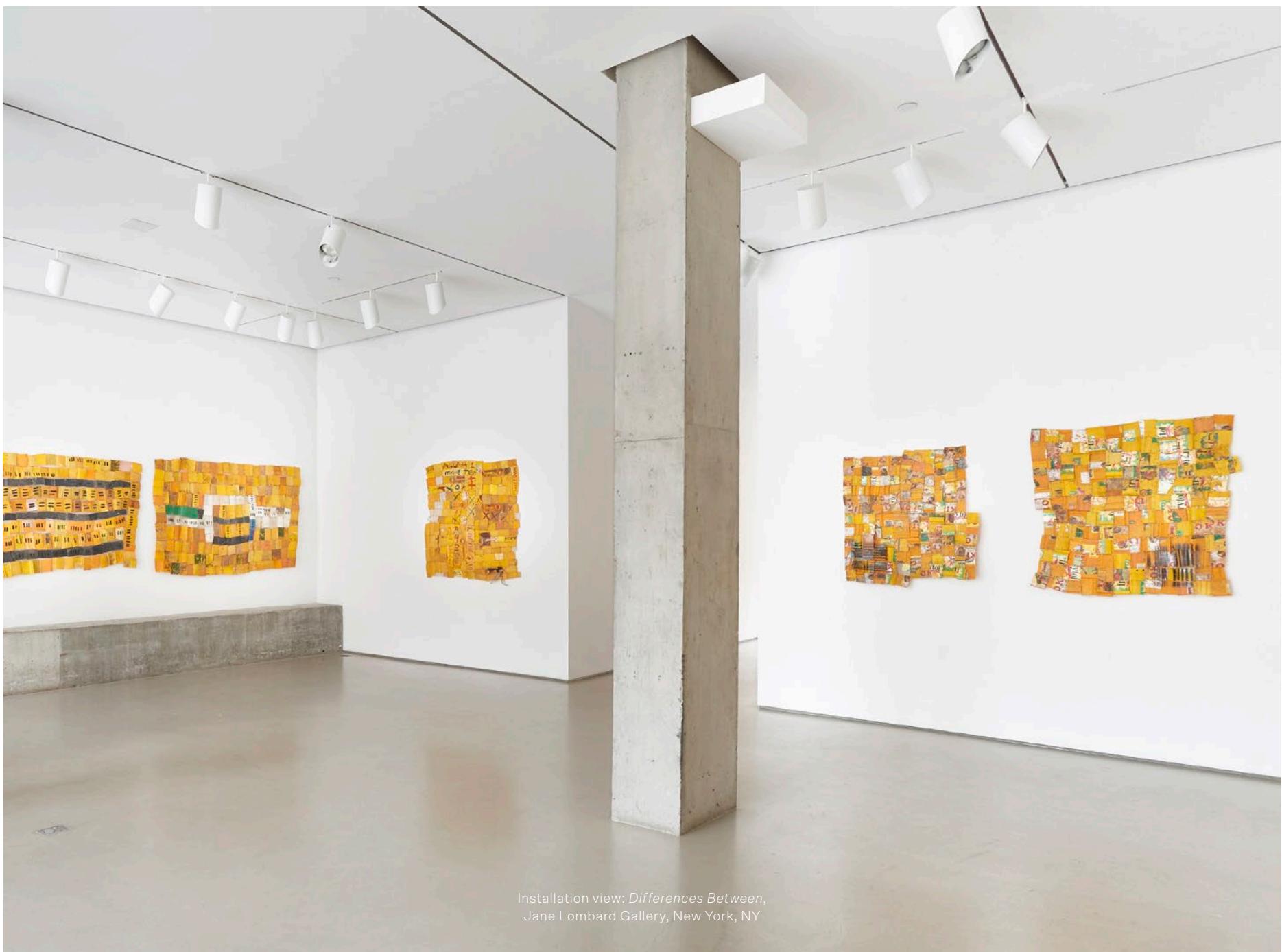
Installation views: *Differences Between*,  
Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, NY





Installation views: *Differences Between*,  
Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, NY





Installation view: *Differences Between*,  
Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, NY



Installation view: *Differences Between*,  
Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, NY



Live performance still of  
*La 360*, Accra, Ghana



Live performance still of  
*La 360*, Accra, Ghana



Live performance stills of  
*La 360*, Accra, Ghana





Live performance stills of  
La 360, Accra, Ghana



Live performance stills of  
La 360, Accra, Ghana





Installation view: *The Displaced*,  
Gallery 1957 at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, UAE

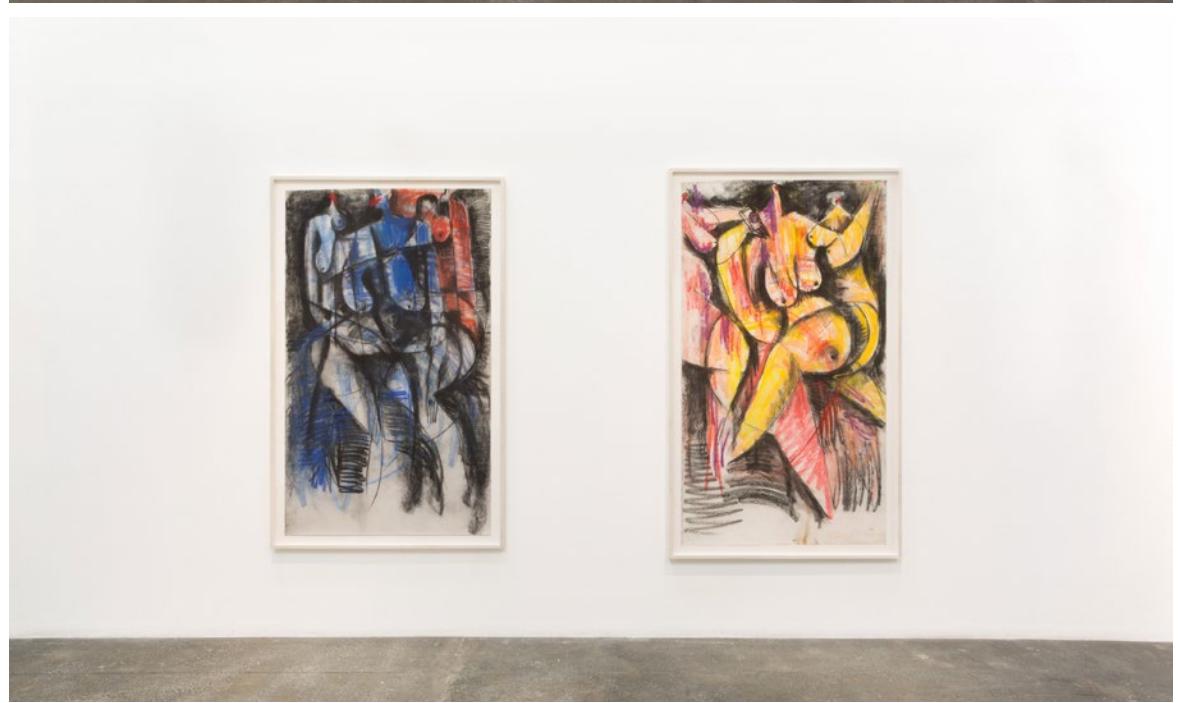


Installation views: *The Displaced*,  
Gallery 1957 at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, UAE





Installation views: *The Displaced*,  
Gallery 1957 at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, UAE





Yellow Brick Road,  
Labadi, Ghana



*Yellow Brick Road,  
Labadi, Ghana*





Installation process, Facebook,  
San Francisco, CA



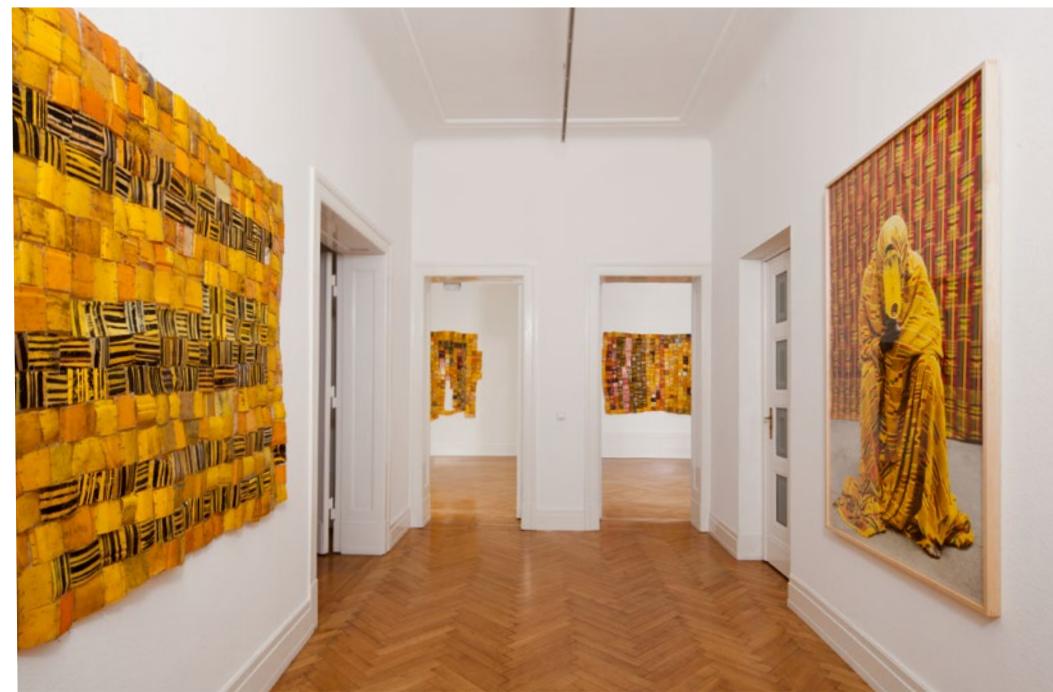
Installation process, Facebook,  
San Francisco, CA



The artist draped in his tapestry,  
Facebook, San Francisco, CA



Installation views: *Earthly Conversations*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany



Installation views: *Earthly Conversations*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany



Installation views: *Earthly Conversations*,  
GNYP, Berlin, Germany



Serge  
Attukwei  
Clottey

*My Mother's Wardrobe*

7 March – 20 May 2016

Gallery 1957



Installation view: *My Mother's Wardrobe*,  
Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana



Installation views: *My Mother's Wardrobe*,  
Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana





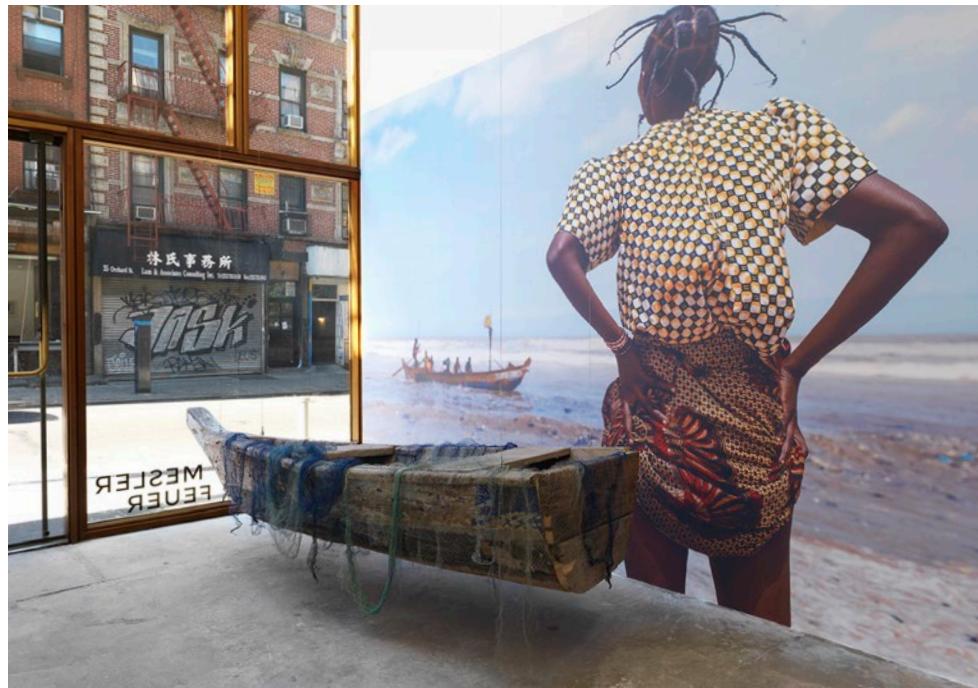
Installation views: *My Mother's Wardrobe*,  
Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana





Installation views: *My Mother's Wardrobe*,  
Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana





Installation views: *The Displaced*,  
Mesler/Feuer, New York, NY





Installation views: *The Displaced*,  
Mesler/Feuer, New York, NY





Installation view: *The Displaced*,  
Mesler/Feuer, New York, NY

# Selected Press

# Curator

May 28, 2021

## Serge Attukwei Clottey

—  
Editor-in-chief Amanda Quinn Olivar speaks with the acclaimed artist about his community-focused artistic practice and Beyond Skin, his recent exhibition at Simchowitz Gallery in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Serge Attukwei Clottey at his exhibition, Beyond Skin, Simchowitz Gallery, Los Angeles, April 17—May 8, 2021. Courtesy of Simchowitz Gallery

Serge Attukwei Clottey is an Accra-based artist who works in various mediums to explore migration, identity, and the environment. He studied at the Ghanatta College of Art and Design in Ghana and the Escola Guindard University of Art in Brazil. In 2019, Clottey received an Honorary Doctorate of Art from the University of Brighton. He has had solo exhibitions at Lorenzelli Arte in Milan, Ever Gold Projects in San Francisco, The Mistake Room in Los Angeles, Gallery 1957 in Accra, Jane Lombard Gallery in New York, and Feuer/Mesler in New

York, among others.

More recently, Clottey showed his abstract and expansive sculptural installation made out of flattened, yellow Kuffuor gallon containers at the Desert X biennial exhibition in Palm Springs. In his latest solo exhibition at Simchowitz Gallery, Beyond Skin, Clottey presented a collection of paintings and drawings of various figures, ranging from the late actor Chadwick Boseman to figures from his Instagram feed, clad in vibrant, unique clothes that force viewers to confront their individuality and gender expression.



Chadwick, 2020-2021, oil paint, duct tape on cork board 71 x 46.5 inches

## To begin with, why do you make art?

Everyone who knows me from infancy will say it was obvious that I'd become an artist. That's because my Dad, Seth Clottey, is an artist... and so even before I went to art school, I had started painting by learning from my dad. However, after art

school, I realized that I could use art to provoke conversations about issues that affect my community, country, and the world at large. The intention to use art to get people to talk and share ideas about issues concerning my people in my immediate environment, and relatable to people outside of my community, is one of the many reasons I make art.

**Can you tell us about your upbringing in Ghana and how it shaped the direction of your work?**

My upbringing in Ghana, I will say, was communal. By this, I mean I grew up in a community where we all lived as one big family in my area. I was brought up in an extended family setting where every adult was responsible for every child in the community, regardless of the house they come from. In relation to my work, it is easy for people to identify the significance of 'community' in it. From the sourcing of materials to the production process, it is more like a communal work than an individual's work. Even if you look at the politics of trade, environment, and histories I explore in my work, you notice that it starts with my family and the community I was raised in.

**Let's talk about your subject matter and your focus...**

We don't create art in a void... For me, I believe every artist, and just like musicians and film producers, create works based on specific narratives they've explored or are investigating. They present their findings in unique ways that either educate, inform, entertain or start a conversation. That's where we start looking at the subject matter... So I believe in every artistic dispensation, your subject matter is the starting point in creating a shared understanding.

So for me, my subject matter has always been about

issues that affect my country, be it partisan politics, media, environment (illegal mining and plastic pollution), history, and[/or] trade. It's easy to see these themes in my performances, photography, paintings, and sculptures. So from what I've said, I guess you know where my focus is...

**Are there common themes that carry across your different series?**

Yes, there are common themes that cut across the various mediums I use in creating. For example, you can easily see themes about the environment and materiality in most of my series. Also, my family history, and media, especially new media (social media)...



*Chadwick*, 2020-2021, oil paint, duct tape on cork board 71 x 46.5 inches

**Can you tell us about Afrogallionism, what drove you to create it, and what you hope to communicate? Are there specific reactions you hope to stir up or conjure in your audiences?**

Afrogallionism, in much more simple terms, is an artistic intervention where I'm looking at ways we deal with plastic

(mostly the Jerry cans) in our community. I explore the origins of these plastic materials, their use, and what becomes of them when they have outlived their purpose in peoples' homes. Also, what can I, as an artist, create out of these discarded materials... This project aims to provoke serious conversation around the consumption of these materials and the issue of water scarcity in Ghana, Africa, and the world.

**You're known for experimenting with discarded, everyday things. What are some of the most unconventional materials you've worked with? When deciding on materials, what are the most important factors you consider? Are there any materials you'd like to explore next that you haven't tried yet?**

I honestly can't point out any unconventional material I've used. I think most of the materials I used are discarded materials I source from people's homes and dump sites, meaning these materials are being used for the day-to-day activities of people in the community. So I don't regard them as unconventional. Instead, I'd rather say I sometimes create unconventional artworks out of these discarded materials.

When it comes to materials, it just has to fit in the idea I'm exploring. Before I use a material, I ask myself... what is the significance of the material to the idea I'm developing or the work I'm creating? Artists are always working with new materials, but artists don't go for any material because they think it will be aesthetically pleasing to others, but rather the importance of the material to the work they are creating.

**The title of your first solo exhibition in Los Angeles at Simchowitz Gallery is Beyond Skin. Please tell us about that title, the work on view... and the cast of characters you portray.**



Tapestries from Serge Clottey's Afrogallionism series being assembled. Photo by Nil Odzenma. Courtesy of Simchowitz Gallery

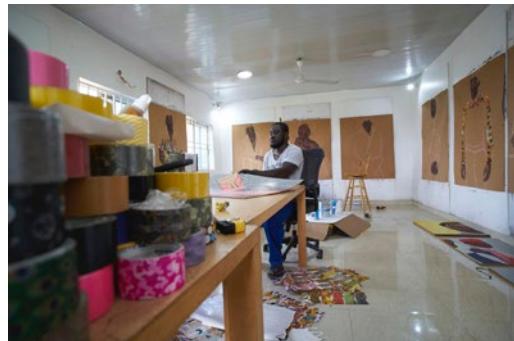
I believe you know figurative paintings of black bodies are in vogue now. And it will be easy to classify my new works under this trend. But that is not what I'm interested in. For my new works, I want people to look past the color of the people in the paintings and rather focus on the many themes I explore in them. One can look at themes like materiality, fashion, and media in these works.

As an ardent user of social media, I look at how this form of media influences Africans who are social media savvy... from their fashion sense, [to] language, and how they choose to present themselves to the world via social media. That is the reason why I chose most characters from social media. The characters in these paintings are friends, artists, fashionistas, and random black people worldwide.

**Was there any more specific moment or impetus that inspired this series?**

I was inspired by how young Africans are using social media to tell stories about themselves, their communities, and their

continent. In Okwui Enwezor's book *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, he spoke about how the discovery of works by African photographers like Seydou Keita contributed to the rewriting of African history from the angle of 'Afro-pessimism' to a more respectable angle. I believe this has not changed, and young Africans are continuing the works of Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé, James Barnor, and many others through social media channels like Instagram. I can say this, among many others, inspires these new works.



Serge Attukwei Clottey studio image, courtesy of Simchowitz Gallery

#### **Is your process generally spontaneous or more planned?**

My work process is planned. From the selection of an image on social media to the type of duct tape I use is usually planned.

#### **Is there a story behind Asantewaa?**

I can't say there's a specific story behind Asantewaa. She's a Ghanaian spoken word artist I've collaborated with before

on a project some years back. She's a strong feminist who's creating works and developing interventions that are helping her fellow female artists and emerging female creatives in Accra hone their talents. Some years back, she, together with some friends, founded 'Black Girls Glow.'

#### **What is your favorite art accident? Did it change your perspective?**

I won't call it an accident... I'd rather an art opportunity. This was when a benevolent Brazilian I met on Facebook decided to fund my art education in Brazil. It did change my perspective, and the product of that change in perspective is what has made me today and the work I make now.

# ARTAFRICA

May 25, 2021

## Beyond Skin? Ashraf Jamal reflects on Serge Attukwei Clottey's recent solo

—  
by Ashraf Jamal



Portrait of Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey

The title of Serge Attukwei Clottey's recent solo show – 'Beyond Skin' – at the newly opened Simchowitz Gallery in LA, is baffling. Whether it is smart or merely provocative is hard to tell, especially given the fact that today there is no greater currency in the contemporary art world other than black skin. Dealerships trade in black bodies, museums are being redefined to accommodate black narratives, every major collector requires one or more works by leading black artists.

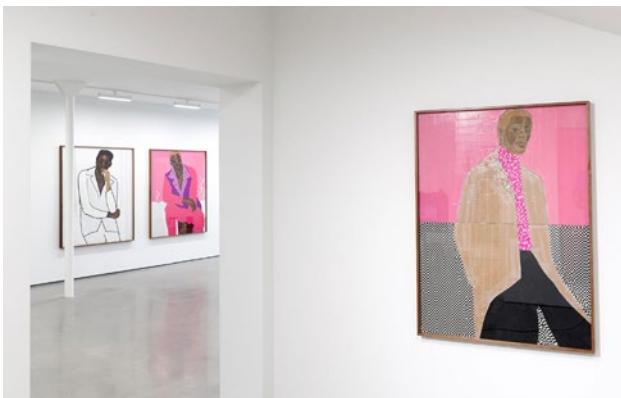
In 2020-21 the Tate Modern showcased the photography of Zanele Muholi, while Tate Britain celebrated Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Amoako Boafo was the most sought-after artist last year. There are many other examples of the prominence of black artists in the Western orbit. If Muholi's rise was a slow burn, Boafo's was meteoric. But what we are indisputably dealing with is the hyper-visibility of black artists, and black portraiture in particular.



Asantewaa, 2020-2021. Oil paint and duct tape on corkboard, 180,34 x 120,65cm.

A case of reconciliation? A need to right a historical wrong, reboot the art canon, ensure diversity and inclusivity? Certainly. These are all matters of great importance at this historical moment, signalling a seismic shift in the art world, rather than a mere trend. For beneath the exploded view that is black portraiture lies an existential quest to rethink the Human. As Steve Bantu Biko prophetically declared in I write what I like, Africa would give the world a 'human face'. Africa, and the African diaspora, is not the last frontier of the art world but its frontline. As such, it is a critical matter of concern, a way to

rethink the obscenity of colonialism, which persists today. In this regard, Clottey's title, 'Beyond Skin', assumes a peculiar traction. Its trigger is not the absence of race, or the dubious fantasy of post-racialism, but the need, over and above the persistent fetishisation of race, to re-evaluate the Human. Like Biko's, his is a liberating idea in a time of heated contestation. In the face of neo-colonialism and ascendant fascism worldwide, Clottey broaches the weakening belief in humanism. Religion too has proved a destructive dimension of racism, part and parcel of an imperial civilising mission. In her poem, *Growing up Black & Christian*, Koleka Putuma writes: 'The gospel / is how whiteness breaks into our homes / and brings us to our knees'. One cannot ignore the absorptive and controlling power of religion or political ideology. Secular humanism too has its dangers. The contemporary art world is complicit in this regard. While just in its desire to incorporate cultural difference, deconstruct and reconstruct a Western art canon and acknowledge the critical place within it of the African diaspora, this move remains as cynical as it is proactive. If black portraiture is a sign of the times,



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Adrien*, 2021. Oil paint and duct tape on cork board, 149,86 x 116,84cm. *Colored man*, 2021. Oil paint and duct tape on cork board, 149,86 x 116,84cm. *Transparent suit*, 2020-2021. Oil paint and duct tape on cork board, 127 x 93,98cm.

its fetishisation in the Western world in particular remains troubling. There is no doubt that black portraiture, as the defining current trope of taste and value, is unassailably evident. That we finally need to recognise and see the lives of others is telling. Once the domain of the powerful, portraiture is now a democratic genre. If all faces are now fair game in the public domain, black faces have become iconic, a currency in and of itself. Does the black face constitute a genre? If so, is this an ethical venture? In objectifying the black face, black skin, black lives, are we not further subtracting its existence?

Taste is a thrilling and dangerous affair. The modern art world has trafficked in this thrill and danger for over a century. However, at no point in the Western world, until now, has it elected to privilege a racial other – the black body – as its defining obsession. An overblown case of atonement? Is it any wonder that the inflation of contemporary black portraiture occurs at the precise point when the West confronts the looting of African artworks and, now, their repatriation? The Benin bronzes are a case in point. Here justice meets a cynical pragmatism. Ever capable of absorbing contradiction, the West is doubtless brokering black portraiture to save face, not only to right a wrong. C.A. Bayly has marked out three phases in imperial modern European history, 'the Iberian and Dutch conquests in the New World and Asia between 1520 and 1620', territorial seizure in South and south-east Asia, America and Australia between 1760 and 1830, followed by 'the Partition of Africa after 1878', Russian control of central Asia, 'and the battle for concessions in China'. The war continues to this day. One cannot consider the stratospheric rise of black portraiture in the West without recognising a prior oppressive and extractive imperial history.

While an individual artist's skill is paramount, I remain troubled by the extent to which individual capacity is overridden by a

new rule – the iconicity of blackness. While there is much to celebrate in the newfound presence of the black body in the narrative of Western art, one cannot ignore its belatedness, and wonder as to its significance. For centuries, Africa and the African diaspora have been an integral, if invisible, dimension of the Western world. On the optimistic front, Teju Cole, in his essay on Zanele Muholi, *Portrait of a Lady*, reflects on how we've become 'newly aware of the power of portraiture in a gifted artist's hands'. 'Muholi doesn't grant her sitters independence – they are independent – but she makes their independence visible'. Cole's view is a healthy counter to the cynical brokerage in black bodies. It allows us to strip away the veil of prejudice and lovelessness which has made it impossible to see the humanity of others. If, more generally, there is one distinctive aspect of black portraiture, it is that, at its best, it allows for independence.



*Yvonne Nelson*, 2020-2021. Oil paint and duct tape on cork board, 127 x 93,98cm.

Serge Attukwei Clottey's portraits in oil and duct tape on cork capture a comparable stridency. His figures are

empowered, confident, wholly in place. No existential dread, no inherited culture of invisibility, consumes them. Unlike Muholi's photographs, however, it is not the singularity of being alone that matters. Clottey is as fascinated by what, in the fashion world, is dubbed being 'in the look' – the projection of style. This is evident in the bold colour blocking and the deliberate play-off of the human and its cultural context – what makes us what we are. There is a lightness in Clottey's paintings, a desire to fend off historical hurt. Perhaps it is this decision which accounts for the title of the show – 'Beyond Skin'? Is Clottey punting Jean-Paul Sartre's call for a 'future universalism', a position challenged by Frantz Fanon? How else can one account for a post-racial global vision and a belief in the particularities of place and community? If both the local and global, the singular and inclusive, must be kept in play it is perhaps because we are not dealing with a paradox but with an evolving story of 'black consciousness'. 'I am wholly what I am', Fanon declared, 'I do not have to look for the universal... My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower'. In this regard, Clottey would agree. However, unlike Fanon, Clottey's take is post-reactive. He does not affirm being in relation to oppression, or the spectre of non-being and invisibility. Instead, the self-presence of his portraits is strident, wholly in the world – worldly – and, in this regard, utterly affirming.

As for the choice of surfaces, his portraits are painted on cork? They are part and parcel of a project, spanning twenty years, in which the artist, as performer and activist, has recycled Western material waste into art. The diced and stitched yellow plastic oil drums in their multitude is his greater signature, the root of a practice he has dubbed 'Afrogallonism', whereby a manipulated Western product is returned to a putative global centre as art. His monumental commission for Facebook,

which began as a community project, is a case in point, as is his contribution to the Desert X Biennial. Clottey is equally interested in the migration of objects and people. While wholly committed to the idea of ‘community’, a word he repeats more than any other, he is as committed to Africa’s diasporic impact. ‘Objects migrate, change their value’, he says. So do people. Today we find the migration of the black body to the centre of the art world. While I remain sceptical as to the significance of this move, it cannot be glibly discounted. If it is unsurprising that the Simchowitz Gallery should place this move centre-stage, it is because it is part of a greater revisionist project. Within that project, however, one needs to be more discerning, more rigorous, in one’s understanding of its endgame. The black body is not a generic type, band-aid, nor a panacea.



Vitalism and innovation are the key at any moment in art history. In this moment, I am concerned with the continued exploitation of black life, and, as intensively, with its liberatory power. If Clottey has titled his solo show ‘Beyond Skin’, it is because he is as vexed by the commodification of black life.

If his painted figures possess a vital ease, it is because he is not preoccupied with an existential threat. Moving forward, we must continue to weigh the ills and strengths of this highly ambivalent moment in art history, and the role of black portraiture therein.

*‘Beyond Skin’ was on view at Simchowitz Gallery from the 17th of April until the 8th of May 2021.*

Ashraf Jamal is a Cape Town-based academic, writer and cultural theorist. He is a Research Associate in the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, and teaches in the Media Studies Programme at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town. He is the co-author of *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* and co-editor of *Indian Ocean Studies: Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives*. Ashraf Jamal is also the author of *Predicaments of culture in South Africa, Love themes for the wilderness*, and the award-winning short fiction, *The Shades*. Jamal’s latest book is *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art*, published in 2017 by Skira.

# Wallpaper\*

May 4, 2021

## Serge Attukwei Clottey on fashion, gender, and unexpected art

—  
by Pei-Ru Keh

*In captivating new portraits for ‘Beyond Skin’, Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey explores fashion as identity and subverts antiquated ideas of gender and sexuality*



Portrait of Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey

Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey is hot off the back of Desert X in Palm Springs, where he staged a sculptural installation comprising yellow plastic jerry cans, used to transport water in Ghana. Now, he is presenting a new body of work in ‘Beyond Skin’, a solo show currently on view at Simchowitz Gallery, Los Angeles. The exhibition brings

together ideas of image-making and identity construction – themes that Clottey has long explored.

Inspired by mid-century black and white photography originating from the coast of West Africa, Clottey’s works update the visual language of historical images and transports them into the present day.



Portrait of Serge Attukwei Clottey  
at Simchowitz Gallery, Los Angeles

Working with a wide array of materials, including duct tape, cork and collages made from posters in dressmaking shops, Clottey combines a dynamic energy with a variety of cultural influences. ‘The conversation starts with our histories and how we [Africans] have evolved in terms of how we present ourselves,’ explains Clottey. ‘I won’t say I’m juxtaposing the classical with the unexpected, but I’m throwing light on the evolution of image-making; who makes the image, and where are these images shown.’

Another memorable aspect of the portrait-based series is the use of fashion as a facet of identity. Vibrantly detailed and demonstrating a bold choice of colours that intentionally subvert conventional notions of gender and sexuality, Clottey's subjects collectively celebrate individuality, while rebelling against antiquated notions of personhood.



Portrait of Serge Attukwei Clottey. Photography: Jacob Messex

'I'm interested in finding everyday materials and using them in unconventional ways,' says Clottey, who was a fashion model for a time. 'The exploration of these materials sometimes gives them a whole different meaning and also starts conversations on the alternative uses of the material that people may not have thought of. I won't say they are unexpected materials but rather, they help me create unexpected artworks.'

He continues, 'I'm always looking at how materials can

significantly influence a work, and how it fits in the ideas I explore to create a shared understanding. I've always been inspired by alternative fashion and styling; one that is created by the individuals who wear them, and the media they use in sharing these creations. So instead of using paint to design the dresses of the characters, I use a material, [like duct tape] that will let me cut and join materials like the designers, tailors and seamstresses do in their shops and fashion houses.'



Installation view of Serge Attukwei Clottey's 'Beyond Skin' at Simchowitz Gallery, Los Angeles

The result is an uplifting array of work that recognises the past while reframing it for the present. Duct tape, a crude and at times violent tool, has been reclaimed as a symbol of strength and protection when tracing the body of Clottey's subjects. His use of cork as a canvas also alludes to the use of notice boards back in his hometown as a means of communication and conveyance.

Steeped in meaning, while still charged with visual energy, the works invite viewers to delve beneath the surface.

# ARTFORUM

April 29, 2021

## Dry Goods

—  
by Andrew Berardin

fragments of the water cans pooled around Clottey's cubes of the same material, yielding to grass that disappeared into the desert sand mere steps from this sculpture, the idea, material, and placement of the artwork took on an elegant conceptual unity, connecting these vastly different places and their shared need for this foundation of all life. ...



Installation view of Serge Attukwei Clottey's "Beyond Skin," courtesy of the artist and Simchowitz Gallery.

... Water is a serious issue for the denizens of the desert, and Serge Attukwei Clottey's dual cubes, laced together with used jerrycans from his native Ghana and erected on the manicured grass of a nondescript community park, captured a strong and thirsty story. In many parts of Ghana, freshwater for daily use is found only in those jerrycans, usually carried home from a water source at great difficulty. As I looked at the yellow

# whitewall

April 20, 2021

## Serge Attukwei Clottey, from Afrogallonism to Duct Tape Portraiture

—  
by Pearl Fontaine



Installation view of Serge Attukwei Clottey's "Beyond Skin," courtesy of the artist and Simchowitz Gallery.

Serge Attukwei Clottey is known for using plastic Kufuor gallons as a medium in his artwork—a concept which he has coined as “Afrogallonism.” Looking at the effects of the colonization in Africa (of which the plastic, oil-bearing jerrycans are a product), Clottey utilizes the commonly found containers in his art as a means of exploring issues like global warming, water scarcity, and other environmental problems.

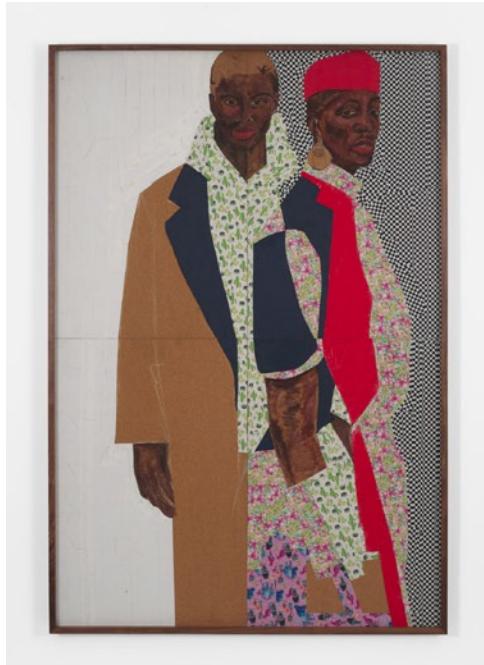


Installation view of Serge Attukwei Clottey's "Beyond Skin," courtesy of the artist and Simchowitz Gallery.

In his current installation at Desert X, *The Wishing Well*, viewers saw the yellow plastic from the jerrycans composing the thousands of tiny, tile-like units that composed the giant fixtures situated in the Coachella Valley. Combining installation with facets of performance and photography, Clottey expanded his narrative to look at ideas of our shared future from the gaze of the desert landscape, which greatly depends on water supply for the livelihood of its inhabitants.

More recently, the artist’s exhibition “Beyond Skin” opened at Simchowitz Gallery in Los Angeles. Open through May 8, the show centers a series of portraits, which the artist has made taking cues from mid-century photographs from the coast of West Africa. With this in mind, Clottey explores ideas of identity construction, recreating existing images of names like Chadwick Boseman as well as lesser known individuals, in two formats—duct tape and oil on cork, or tondo charcoal drawings.

To learn more about his new body work, Whitewall caught up with the artist.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, "Fashion Icons," 2020-2021, courtesy of the artist and Simchowitz Gallery.

**WHITEWALL:** How did you first conceive the exhibition "Beyond Skin"? Was it a natural progression to use devices like fashion, gender, and sexuality to look at constructs of identity or something you turned to consciously?

**SERGE ATTUKWEI CLOTTEY:** Fashion, gender, and sexuality have always been keen in my practice, and looking at it

from African traditional perspectives, it describes [how] our historical relationship with Europeans settling on the coast of Africa has conspired through construction of identity, so it was natural progress.

**WW:** What prompted you to update mid-century photographic styles for contemporary art? What types of visual elements make these portraits seem dated versus new?

SAC: I was prompted through the work of James Barnor, Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé, and Youssouf Tata Cissé with the exceptional lengths to bring out the beauty of subjects and the brilliant patterns of their backdrops as a particularly effective foil. The work around ideas of image making and identity construction.

**WW:** Tell us about your installation *The Wishing Well at Desert X*. What role do the plastic Kufuor gallons play here and how does the narrative created with your "Yellow Brick Road" series continue in the context of the Coachella Valley?

SAC: I think the new theme I have realized is narratives of architecture and its interaction with space. [With] Coachella Valley as an exhibition space I have built on ideas reimaging mobile temporary rooms with plastics tapestry. So I'm looking to consider that for a futuristic project to develop urban communities within the country and beyond.

Until these materials have outlived their use in the people's homes and are discarded, they are literally part of the lives of the people who use them. They are therefore an embodiment of many personal stories. Thus, every gallon has a story. When they are discarded, where they end up gives them different

realities and meaning. And these realities begin with who collects them, and where they end up.

I believe people literally throw a part of their personal stories away when they discard these gallons. Also, it is necessary for them to throw away the old and worn out ones and make room for new and strong ones. When this happens, we then begin to ask questions about how and where these gallons are disposed of and end up. So In this project, I employ two mediums (performance and photography) of my practice to explore the realities of the gallons by personifying them.



Portrait courtesy of Serge Attukwei Clottey

**WW: Tell us about environmental responsibility and sustainability as facets of your artistic practice. How would you say your work relates to the greater discussion of sustainability happening across the world today?**

SAC: It demands social justice by exposing environmental problems in today's society. It inspires the human spirit by

calling people to action. It builds the foundations for an open society by imagining a community where we conserve, recycle, and respect. The key to this all is education. If the youth learn about the issues in school, and if the government instills environmental education as a norm, then the people can begin to make changes in their lives.

Climate change is of particular concern in Ghana, but it is an issue that affects the entire planet. I have already been able to have an impact locally by connecting with the youth in alleys and on slum corners. I have discussed my project with communities across regions in Ghana, an organization where I volunteer with at-risk youth to help them develop their skills in art and creativity. Yet my work does not stop there. Eventually, I hope to be an ambassador not just to my local community, but to the world.

# ARTNOWLA

April 2021

**Serge Attukwei Clottey**  
Exploring Issues of Belonging and Place

—  
by Victoria Looseleaf



photo by Nii Odzenma

A Ghana-born and based artist whose works include installations, performances, photography and sculptures that seek to update the visual language of historical images to fit the contemporary – and is also the creator of *Afrogallionism*, an artistic concept that explores the relationship between the prevalence of the yellow oil gallons in regards to consumption and necessity in the life of the modern African – Clottey plumbs his own psychological depths to discover what makes him love work and life.

**What historical art figure would you like to have lunch with and why?** Tupac Shakur because he is a powerful figure in hip hop music and I appreciate his intention to uplift the black community.

**What did you purchase with the proceeds from your first sale?** Art supplies.

**What words or phrases do you overuse?** Chale! [friend or buddy]

**How do you know when a work is finished?** When I photograph it and post it on social media.

**When and where were you happiest?** When I first came to America in 2015.

**What is your most treasured possession?** My mother's wardrobe.

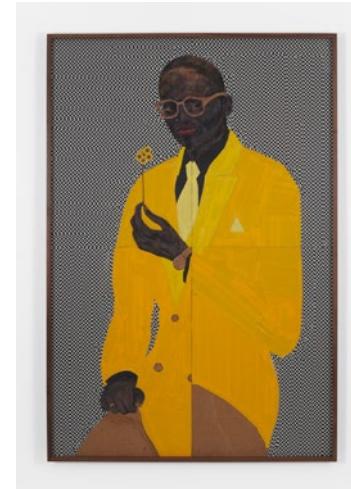


photo by Nii Odzenma

**Where is your ideal escape destination?** The beach.

**What's the worst survival job you've ever had?** Modeling.



The artist with his work, *Feeling cool*

**What TV series or film from your youth best describes your approach to life?** The movie *Home Alone*.

**If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?** I'd like to be taller.

**What is your most treasured memory?** My first exhibition in Ghana.

**What makes you smile?** Food.

**What makes you cry?** Life.

**What is your go-to drink when you toast to a sale?** Whiskey.

**After an all-nighter, what's your breakfast of champions?** Kenky and crabs.

**Who inspires you?** My father.

**What's your best quality?** My skin.

**What's your biggest flaw?** My height.

**What is your current state of mind?** Love.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement?** My installation at Desert X.

**If you were to die and come back as a person or thing, what would it be?** Gold.



The artist at Desert X; photo by Stefan

# Los Angeles Times

March 16, 2021

**Review: Desert X has a great big wall. Beyond that, this art biennial feels thin**

—  
by Christopher Knight



"The Wishing Well" (2021) in Coachella Valley.

All images © Serge Attukwei Clottey, courtesy of Desert X, by Lance Gerber, shared with permission

... Most notable are works by Serge Attukwei Clottey and Ghada Amer.

On a green community center lawn, Attukwei Clottey draped a pair of monumental Minimalist cubes with a textile made from small, square pieces of bright yellow plastic laboriously wired together by hand. The technique recalls the work of fellow Ghanaian-born artist El Anatsui; rather than his bottle caps

and shiny bits of commercial packaging, however, the drapery in Attukwei Clottey's "The Wishing Well" is pieced from fragments of common plastic water containers.

As an artistic form, the machine-geometry of a classic Minimalist cube has long signaled the heavy industrialization of the modern world — which ravaged Africa, contributing to the water crises that today plague Ghana. Securing the resource for survival requires relentless daily labor.

That's what all those yellow water containers are for. Bringing the local desert into the endurance narrative, Attukwei Clottey spread a puddle-shaped sheet on the ground that links the two cubes. ...

# CULTURE

March 16, 2021

## Two Imposing Cubes Covered in Yellow Plastic by Artist Serge Attukwei Clottey Respond to Global Water Insecurity

—  
by Grace Ebert



"The Wishing Well" (2021) in Coachella Valley.

All images © Serge Attukwei Clottey, courtesy of Desert X, by Lance Gerber, shared with permission

A mottled patchwork of plastic cloaks two cubes that tower over the desert landscape of Coachella Valley. Titled "The Wishing Well," the bright pair are the work of Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey, who created the nine-foot pieces from scraps of Kufuor gallons, or jerrycans, in response to shared struggles with water insecurity that ripple across the world. Resembling a yellow brick road, a paved

walkway connects the two woven structures that stand in contrast to the surrounding environment, which faces continual struggles with access to the natural resource.

Clottey's use of the material is tied to a larger critique of colonialism's enduring legacy and the ways it continues to affect populations around the world, particularly in relation to the climate crisis. Originally, European colonists brought Kufuor gallons to Ghana to transport cooking oil. Today, the plastic vessels are ubiquitous and used to haul potable water. "As repurposed relics of the colonial project, they serve as a constant reminder of the legacies of empire and of global movements for environmental justice," says a statement about the work that's part of Desert X, a biennial bringing site-specific installations to Southern California.

"The Wishing Well" is one facet of Clottey's larger Afrogallonism project, which he describes as "an artistic concept to explore the relationship between the prevalence of the yellow oil gallons in regards to consumption and necessity in the life of the modern African." The Accra-based artist works in a variety of mediums spanning installation, sculpture, and performance that deal with the broader influence of colonialism in Africa. You can see a larger collection of his pieces on Artsy and Instagram.

# The New York Times

March 13, 2021

## Desert X Artists Dig Beneath the Sandy Surface

by Jori Finkel



"The Wishing Well" (2021) in Coachella Valley.

All images © Serge Attukwei Clottey, courtesy of Desert X, by Lance Gerber, shared with permission

*Artworks in this year's biennial, scattered around the Palm Springs area, explore issues of land rights, water supply and more.*

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — The odds were fully stacked against the Desert X biennial taking place this year. Bigger and better-organized destination exhibitions have punted on their plans since the pandemic struck, and even in the best of years, Desert X, which commissions site-specific public art in and around Palm Springs, has a hard time raising money to realize its projects. Its decision two years ago to accept funding from the Saudi Arabian government for a spinoff event caused prominent board members to resign and artists to speak out in protest.

And the guest curator chosen for the 2021 edition, César García-Alvarez, fell ill with Covid-19 last year, just as he began working with artists to develop their projects. "I was very sick from mid-March through the end of May, and I still am; I'm a Covid long-hauler," he said.

"It was hard organizing a show like this during a pandemic, I think we're all very honest about that," he added. "But it was important we continue to do this and continue supporting artists."

Neville Wakefield, who is Desert X's artistic director and co-curator of its third edition, agreed. "We never considered canceling it," he said of the show, which opens on Friday. "Just the opposite. The fact that we're outdoors and free to the public made our purpose more urgent in some respects. While museums in L.A. have been closed for a year, we felt a responsibility to do what our walled institutions couldn't and nourish the need for culture."

The biennial is smaller than usual, featuring the work of 13 artists compared with as many as 19 in years past, with a more compact footprint. "We weren't sure if hotels would be open, so we organized a show that someone from L.A. or San Diego could drive in to see in a day," said García-Alvarez. (They are installing hand-sanitizing stations at some artworks and "health ambassadors" at others to distribute masks and ensure social distancing.)

The show features work by several international artists, including Alicja Kwade from Berlin, Serge Attukwei Clottey from Accra, Ghana; Oscar Murillo from La Paila, Colombia; Eduardo Sarabia from Guadalajara, Mexico; and Vivian Suter from Panajachel, Guatemala. Most have showed at the

Mistake Room, the nonprofit exhibition space García-Alvarez founded. His original idea was to help Desert X artists work with community organizations in Palm Springs and other Coachella Valley towns, but Covid-19 safety protocols largely scrambled those plans as well.



A detail of "The Wishing Well," showing pieces of the Ghana water containers that Serge Attukwei Clottey uses in his sculptures. Jim Mangan for The New York Times

Still, most artworks are rooted in some sense of place. "The desert is not an empty void," he said. "So you will see the artists here responding not just to the physical landscape but to environmental and social issues, whether it's Felipe Baeza's mural on the history of undocumented migrants and queer communities of color in the desert or Serge Attukwei Clottey's installation dealing with issues of water access or Xaviera Simmons's billboards looking at the way the desert perpetuates notions of whiteness."

Works by Baeza, Murillo and Christopher Myers are for different reasons scheduled to go public after the show's official opening, while plans for an ephemeral "smoke sculpture" by Judy Chicago are uncertain. (Since the Living Desert has pulled out as her venue, she has been looking for

a new location and on Friday said, "We couldn't find one.") Of the artworks already installed, here are five well worth the drive.

#### Serge Attukwei Clottey's 'The Wishing Well'



"The Wishing Well," a sculptural installation by Serge Attukwei Clottey set outside a Palm Springs community center. Jim Mangan for The New York Times

This pair of yellow-orange cubes recalls from a distance a fan favorite from the last Desert X: Sterling Ruby's bright orange rectangular prism set against the desert terrain. But that was a slick geometric form appearing incongruously and improbably in the craggy landscape (not unlike the unidentified monolith found last year in Utah that inspired a thousand conspiracy theories), while Clottey's humble choice of material speaks to the droughts and water supply issues that threaten Southern California as well as his native Ghana. He cuts plastic pieces from so-called Kufuor gallons, colorful containers used in Ghana for storing water, and stitches them together with wire. He has previously used this material to fabricate everything from flags to a yellow brick road. Here the boxy forms, planted in grass outside a Palm Springs community center, evoke water tanks, and the plastic blanket below them spreads out like much-needed water.



January 30, 2020

## Contemporary African artists shine in Moody Center's 'Radical Revisionists' show

—  
by Molly Glentzer



"One of many broken chairs that hang from the ceiling of Moody Center for the Arts' Lobby and a series of collaged drawings on yellow canvas are elements of Serge Attukwei Clottey's site-specific installation 'Softening Borders.' Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

A cyclone appears to be striking Moody Center for the Arts' lobby.

Broken chairs hang every which way, suspended in space as if they are being tossed through the air. Clothes dangle from some of them. Bundles of shoes and folded newspapers dot the floor, inexplicably neat-looking, adding to the sense of disorientation yet oddly suggesting a human impulse to organize even in the midst of chaos.

This is Serge Attukwei Clottey's "Softening Borders," the largest work of the dynamic group show "Radical Revisionists: Contemporary African Artists Confront Past and Present."

Clottey, who is from Ghana, wants to convey what it feels like to be a stranger in a strange land. He's thinking about the displacement of migrants who must learn to navigate new and often unfriendly environments. Mental as well as physical upheaval. Clottey also is considering how all kinds of objects migrate — furniture, shirts and postage stamps, all carrying bits of history with them.

He collected chairs locally, amassing a hodge-podge of styles that speak to different origins: A regal-looking stool, cheap plastic stackers, a Chippendale dining chair, an upholstered French number, a child's miniature seat. Some of the designs are similar to prestige stools from the Asante and Akan cultures, he says. "In Ghana, chairs are very symbolic, a very strong element of power."



Serge Attukwei Clottey's site-specific installation "Softening Borders" fills the lobby of the Moody Center for the Arts as part of the exhibition "Radical Revisionists." Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

He was sitting in a utilitarian chair at work table, drawing words and lines on a series of collages that contain copies of his passport and stamps from his travels. Passports are about “defining identities,” he says, pointing out a coat of arms, official forms and inked stamps, images that convey the recording and tracking of human movement.

His choice of Crayolas was deliberate. “It’s very easy, a childish way of working,” he says. “I want that because this exhibition deals not only with adults but with children, and how they have been displaced because of the migration situation.”

For the show’s opening, Clottey performed shirtless, wiping the floor and representing a migrant figure, while a group of collaborating Rice students in fancy clothes partied around him, oblivious. His long line of collages on yellow canvas now runs along the lobby walls, evoking a Yellow Brick Road.



Ghanian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey pauses as he finishes a collaged drawing for his installation that fills the lobby of Moody Center for the Arts as part of the exhibition "Radical Revisionists." Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

Yellow is a signature color for Clottey, who famously reclaims yellow plastic cooking oil cans from dumps in Africa, cuts them into small pieces and works with local groups to reassemble them as tapestries. Those pieces are about consumption and water shortages. Since his mother died in 2014, he also has explored gender roles and cultural rules by wearing her clothes when he performs with his collaborative, GoLokal.

All ten artists represented in “Radical Revisionists” are creative recyclers of ideas, if not materials. As the show’s title implies, they are reframing and challenging cultural narratives that have been dominated for centuries by Western colonialist thinking. Born between 1962 and 1986, they grew up globally engaged; mostly in South, Central and West Africa (although one was born in London and one in Brooklyn, to African parents).

The show actually begins outside, with a huge banner print of Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s collage “In the Lavender Room” — a piece that provides an apt metaphor, depicting a woman gazing toward an open doorway amid a roomful of photographs that even fill the shadows underneath her.

In the Moody’s gallery, architect Carlos Jiménez has created a dramatic, serpentine environment of green, yellow and red walls that thrusts visitors immediately into a vibrant and somewhat unsteady world.

Jiménez’ design pivots on works by the British-Nigerian superstar Yinka Shonibare CBE. His headless “Girl on a Globe 3,” on loan from Houston collectors Leigh and Reggie Smith, captures attention first.

Placed within a semi-circular, drum-like space painted bright yellow, the figure wears a culturally-loaded costume made of colorfully-patterned Dutch wax-print fabric that most any

Westerner would identify now as African. The textile's history is more complicated, consulting curator Rachel Kabukala notes during a tour of the show. Invented in Holland centuries ago, the cloth was originally made for Indonesian markets but didn't sell there; Africans got it by default.

Shinobare's figure is losing her balance atop a globe covered with heat maps, emphasizing areas of climate change in the contemporary world.

A maquette for Shonibare's "Nelson in a Bottle" sculpture, a famous piece relating Britain's maritime heritage to the history of slavery, and two sculptural installations by Cameroon's Pascale Marthine Tayou also help make it less obvious that "Radical Revisionists" is largely a show of photographs, timed to coincide with FotoFest's upcoming biennial. (It also honors Rice University's new Center for African and African American Studies.)

Each piece opens a window into a potential conversation, making the tightly-edited exhibition feel expansive. These artists aren't proposing answers, they're posing questions — an idea underscored by a comment from Shinobare that appears on the text panel for "Girl with a Globe 3": "Art must never simply be the illustration of a problem; it has to transcend it."

Shinobare explores art history with "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Africa)," on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The photograph printed on aluminum is from a series that recreates a late 18th century etching by Francisco de Goya depicting the owl and bat-filled nightmare of a white, colonial-era artist.

Photographer Omar Victor Diop of Senegal more literally rewrites history, bringing forgotten heroes of the African diaspora into

the present with a series of beautiful self-portraits that combine elaborate costumes and soccer balls and shoes. The stories of the dignified characters he depicts could fill books. Most of them were enslaved at some point in their lives.

Diop's empowered gaze is only slightly less confrontational than that of Zanele Muholi, whose high-contrast, black and white self-portraits convey the viewpoint of Black queer and trans people in South Africa. A self-described 'visual activist,' Muholi uses black face paint to bring attention to standards of beauty and creates intriguing headdresses with objects such as rubber gloves and dish-scrubbing pads to address issues of gender and servitude.

Self-portraiture also shines in three images by Brooklyn-born Adama Delphine Fawundu, who explores her heritage by posing in clothes that have been worn by her mother. She positions herself alongside older women from her family, in settings that emphasize interwoven lives.

Tayou's "Plastic Tree" installation juts out surprisingly from a wall. An aesthetic delight with a repulsive message, it involves dozens of slender tree branches hung with brightly-colored plastic bags, looking a lot like the banks of a Houston bayou after a flood.

Photographer Sammy Baloji of the Democratic Republic of Congo also investigates Africa's environment, focused on colonialism's lingering impact on the landscape. His diptychs juxtapose scenes of current-day Chinese mining operations with fantastical poster images produced in China that evoke an African Shangri-la.

The most compelling fantasy trip, however, happens in the Moody's media arts chamber with Mary Sibande's "A Crescendo of Ecstasy." Her installation takes viewers into a

dark atmosphere aglow in purple. Three bronzy masks molded from the artist's face hold the virtual reality goggles — the most efficient ones I've seen, because they don't have to be strapped on. They activate simply by touching your skin as you hold the masks to your face.

Each mask contains a three-minute, 360-degree experience featuring Sibande's alter ego "Sophie," a regal figure who sprouts bright, snaky veins. Organic, tuberous figures with eyes float around her — and you. In one video, feral dogs circle and growl. You might be literally inside the artist's womb, or drifting through a less literal place of creation peopled with curious roots. They're migrant spirits, too.

Wherever Sibande's virtual reality takes you, as with last fall's show at the Moody, it's best to save this room for last, so the magic lingers.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

January 6, 2020

## Private view: must-see gallery shows opening in January

by Anna Brady and Margaret Carrigan

sculptures feature a particular kind of yellow plastic container that clogs the waterways of Ghana's capital, Accra, as well as tyres, discarded wood and jute sacks. For his third exhibition, Clottey presents new large-scale, mixed-media wall works, charcoal drawings, and wood and bronze sculptures.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, Heritage II (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Ever Gold [Projects]

Serge Attukwei Clottey  
Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco  
11 January-29 February

Serge Attukwei Clottey's multimedia works riff on the textile traditions of his Ghanaian culture while incorporating Western materials and aesthetic influences to highlight the cultural and material exchange between Africa and the West. Many of his

# BOMB

August 22, 2019

## To Go Local

—  
by Erica Caldwell



"Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal, My Mother's Wardrobe, performance at Gallery 1957, March 2016.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra. Photos by Nii Odzenma."

I.

The water of the Donko Nsuo River—known to some as the “Slave River”—is surprisingly calm, its crispness in stark contrast to the thick air of the Assin Manso forest. “You may now enter the water,” were the instructions, delivered by our local Ghanaian guide moments before. One by one, we ease our feet into the shallow edge, resting them between grass and stone. In a timid chorus, each of us bends down to let the water gather in our palms. We lift our hands to our temples, to our forearms. The salt

of our tears mingles with the freshwater. We don’t look at one another as we walk away. As we near the bus, a group of children surrounds us. Thin arms link with my own, our browns mingling. I begin to leave. Several sets of shiny gray and black eyes remain intent, saying “take a picture” or “stay with us.”

It is the Year of the Return—400 years have passed since the first African slaves arrived in the English colonies in Virginia in 1619. I am traveling as a faculty chaperone with a group of multinational college students on a political education trip to Accra. On the Gold Coast of West Africa, the British and Portuguese built sixty forts for enslaved captives during the time of the slave trade; in Ghana there were forty-four. Africans were taken to the Donko Nsuo River to have their “last bath” before they were violently picked over, separated, and taken to one of the forts before being forced to board the slave ships. Our group made the drive to the Donko Nsuo near the end of our trip. As we drove, the coastline softened our concerned gazes. The bus parked; each of us hastily dismounted and rushed toward the endless sky and abrasive salt of the waves, stopping to place our hands in the water.

“They Clapped”  
by Nikki Giovanni

*they clapped when we landed  
thinking africa was just an extension  
of the black world  
[...] allegiance to the mother land  
not knowing despite having read fanon and davenport  
hearing all of j.h. clarke’s lectures, supporting  
nkrumah in ghana and nigeria in the war that there was once  
a tribe called afro-americans that populated the whole  
of africa*

With each roll of the tide, plastics and debris tumbled onto the shore. Some of us began to laugh, cracked open and gratefully unmoored. Others of us dug our hands between the coppery sand and cockles, afraid to look into each other's darkened eyes.

## II.

A hair's breadth away from me sits the Ghana-based artist Serge Attukwei Clottey, known for his highly publicized Afrogallonism project, which interrogates global resource consumption and the African water crisis. We are in his studio in the coastal village of Labadi.

Earlier, a cab driver dropped me off at the Artist Alliance, the first contemporary art gallery in Accra, where Clottey comes to meet me. I watch as the artist steps gingerly across the muddy median. It takes me a moment to realize he's flagging me down to join him halfway. I am stuck, replaying the image of him in my head as it collided with his presence a few yards away. Beyond us, the ocean is loud. The mixture of traffic noise and crackling waves stirs me up inside. When I make it across the street, he shows me to an SUV parked nearby. The vehicle wobbles as he drives a very short distance into the village, an apparent courtesy for his visitor. As we exit the car, the area immediately fills with curious faces. I can hear hiplife music playing and at once notice the ubiquitous jerrycans everywhere.

"Oh, I see!"

"Yeah," Clottey replies, accustomed to the yelping naivete of visitors from the West.

My chest swells and my eyes grow wider—I continue to speak in spite of myself. "The gallons," I say. Shame heats my face with nowhere to go. I'm struck, suddenly, as I was at the river, with the terror and guilt of having been spared. Here, in front of me, is the cost of my life. I feel sick.

*[...] they brought out their cameras and bought out africa's drums  
when they finally realized that they are strangers all over  
and love is only and always about the lover not the beloved  
they marveled at the beauty of the people and the richness  
of the land knowing they could never possess either*



Serge Attukwei Clottey and members of GoLokal, performance views of 360 La, 2018.

Moments later, several community members greet us, wearing T-shirts, sneakers, and gentle smiles. Some are studio assistants—he has fifteen, including three women—and the rest are among the more than one hundred members of the GoLokal collective, an expanding group of friends and

artists Clottey has been making performances with since 2012. I offer a “hello,” which is met with an impersonation that mimics my snappy upspeak. It’s a bit of a “trying on,” a somewhat higher inflection that’s somehow even more American.

“Hello! And, how are you?”

Clottey guides me into one of the buildings, which opens onto a sparse dirt courtyard filled with rolled-up remnants of the “yellow brick road” that the artist and his team constructed out of bits of jerrycan. The sun’s heat subsides under a cloud cover and rain begins to fall.

Clottey’s workspace, a one-story building with several small flats, is more home than studio. His family name—Ni Tetteh—is painted on the front of the building. His aunt and uncle reside in the backroom.

“We have the space mostly on the weekends. During the week it’s used for family gatherings.”

He says something in Twi to one of his collective members, and two green plastic chairs appear before us. As more community members arrive to greet us, I can’t help but feel I’m in the presence of the anointed.

Clottey claims that, as a child, he never wanted to be an artist. He was more interested in “taking his toys apart and making them into something else.”

Eventually, he studied art for four years in Ghana before going on to art school in Brazil, where he began to work with found objects and incorporate other forms, particularly performance. After returning to Labadi to live, Clottey



Serge Attukwei Clottey and members of GoLokal, performance views of 360 La, 2018.

continued to work with materials at hand, such as the jerrycans, or gallons, found around his village. The jerrycans start as containers for cooking oil transported from Europe and Asia; in turn, Ghanaians collect the bottles and use them to transfer water to their homes. To Americans, the predominantly yellow jerrycans might evoke mundane nostalgia for lawn mowers, two-car garages, and obscenely large tractor trailers. In Ghana, it’s a symbol of scarcity and contamination.

“My family was selling alcohol and beef on the coast nearly two hundred years ago [at Jamestown]. The chief awarded my family this space. And because of the trade relationship, my family migrated from James to Labadi. Recently there’s been an issue with property claim and the people realized we are not from here so they’ve begun to avoid our space.”

Through Clottey’s repurposing, the plastic gallons take on a new and unconscious dimension, once they’ve been

pulled apart and made into art. Afrogallonism isn't meant for aesthetic pleasure, and somehow isn't capable of it either. Through the metaphor of material, it tells a story of environmental and humanitarian neglect. According to Clottey, when strewn on the ground, the Afrogallonism squares also serve to demarcate his family's land for the Ghanaian government, a form of installation he calls the "yellow brick road."

"That's how I got the community involved as part of the process. The gallon is a functional and available commodity. The idea was to transform it and send it back to the West, so the continent can benefit from that transaction. To be able to get back to the more traditional way of storing, which is the clay pot."

Clottey continues, "'Follow the yellow brick road,' which leads home and investigates the history of settlement. I invite people to walk on it to be a witness. How do you recreate the property line that wasn't written? I incorporate the history of my family into my practice to share it with the coming generations before we pass away so it isn't lost."

Essentially, Clottey has created a living archive. As a means for social transformation and community engagement, Afrogallonism is rooted in the practice of fellow Ghanaian El Anatsui and the iconic technique and cloth-like texture of his large-size bottle-cap assemblages. Both artists break down and rearrange found materials, removing the patina of their everyday functionality and allowing us to envision how we might engage them anew. In an interview with San Francisco Arts Quarterly, Clottey subtly distinguishes his oeuvre: "Anatsui's work references handwoven kente, which is a traditional fabric, but mine represents a migration of objects and how we consume so much plastic in our daily lives."



Serge Attukwei Clottey and members of GoLokal, performance views of 360 La, 2018.

### III.

I first became aware of Clottey a few years ago, when I saw a photograph of him dressed in women's clothing—a clay-colored two-piece kente garment with a modest neckline.

Upon first engagement with the photograph, I couldn't look away. I stared for a long while, concerned for his safety, and also feeling a deep sense of family, a paradox rooted in the displacement of our ancestors. The image held pain, but also familiarity and honesty. I wanted him to be queer, to be an outsider. What I wanted, what my soul was asking: Is he like me?

In Ghanaian tradition, when a mother dies, her clothing and belongings are locked up for a year before being given to her daughters. An only child with no sisters like Clottey would inherit nothing. Following the death of Clottey's mother in 2014, the artist thought, "I am being tied away from my mom."



Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal, My Mother's Wardrobe, performance at Gallery 1957, March 2016.

I He became interested in the history of fabric and how it intersects with questions of gender equality and LGBTQ rights, which led him to organize My Mother's Wardrobe (2016), a performance in collaboration with his collective.

nitially, the male members of GoLokal were skeptical about wearing women's clothing, for fear of being pegged as homosexual, which is viewed as evil in traditional Ghanaian culture and is punishable by law. But Clottey reminded them of Homowo, a festival celebrated by the Ga tribe, where men dress as women and women dress as men.

"When they began to understand, to see it as a part of culture, other members of the collective went to get their mother's clothing from home. They got dressed and wore them as they walked to my studio."

Soon the GoLokal members could be seen all over Accra—a collective symbol of both tradition and resistance—heads

tied, wrapped in their mother's kente garments. Clottey went on to incorporate these elements into the Afrogallonism performances as Afrofuturistic parades of gender nonconformity, drastic femininity, and repurposed yellow plastic.

*they clapped when they took off  
for home despite the dead  
dream they saw a free future*

Erica Cardwell is a writer, critic, and educator based in New York. Her essays and criticism have appeared in *The Believer*, *Hyperallergic*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Sinister Wisdom*, the *Feminist Wire*, *Bitch Media*, and elsewhere.

# BAZAAR ART

July 2019





April 29, 2019

## The Migration of Yellow Plastic Gallons

Serge Attukwei Clottey brings his Afrogallonism to Brighton  
by Gülnaz Can



Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

One of Ghana's most internationally acclaimed artists Serge Attukwei Clottey is bringing his politically charged and hopeful art to Brighton, UK. The show, *Current Affairs*, will kick off the Brighton Festival this year and take place in Fabrica between 18 April and 27 May 2019.

Attukwei Clottey is a multidisciplinary artist working across sculpture, photography, performance and installation. He

came up with the word Afrogallonism, a term nowadays strongly attached to his name and increasingly used in titles of academic papers. He uses yellow plastic containers also known as jerry cans, at the heart of his artistic practice and the term refers to this material but also the culture that has been developed around it. Along with 100 other performers, he hijacks spaces to put on performances that tackle social issues in Ghana such as the environment, politics and gender. Despite his growing international reputation, he is based in Labadi, a suburb of the Ghanaian capital Accra and works with local communities. I talked to Attukwei Clottey in Brighton while he unpacked his Afrogallonism work before the show opened. He wants to transform his society through art and says that change will come; he just doesn't know when.

### Can you tell me a little bit about Current Affairs? How did you prepare this exhibition?

The works in *Current Affairs* are from different exhibitions from across Ghana and the USA. I am interested in bringing the artworks which were exhibited and experienced in different places together, as they have different stories and different energy based on where they have been exhibited before. My work has been shown back in Ghana in public spaces and is very accessible. It is important for me to make it in a way that people can touch, walk on, and feel it. Fabrica is an old church transformed into contemporary art space, which I think is very fascinating. And we will see how the space and work will transform each other.

### Plastic jerry cans are an important part of your art. What are they exactly, and what are they used for?

Back home in Ghana, this is something very important for us,

because we use it every day. They originally come from the West, to transport cooking oil. Then we use them to carry water and in homes people use them as chairs - they are very comfortable to sit on. The consumption of them has become a problem, because there isn't a proper recycling infrastructure to deal with plastic and they all end up in the ocean. To me, this symbolises a struggle and has a political point to it as a symbol of the lack of affordable water in the country. I like using them in my art also as a case study, because I see there is a lot of potential in transforming them into very functional objects for home and for the country as well as them being artistically inspiring.

#### **How did you decide to use them in your art?**

My interest in them started when I was a child. Back home, children have to carry this gallon for a kilometre to collect water for the family. As a child, anytime I saw it, it scared me. But growing up to be an artist, I realised that there are other ways of exploring this issue. I have been interested in creating a strong community project out of it. The community collects the gallons with me and sometimes sell them to me. The money value of the gallons gets higher, because I use them in my artwork and people see them around the world. In this way, I help to change their value and the community benefits from them rather than the plastic becoming waste. I also use copper, which people in the same way collect and sell to me.

#### **You created the term Afrogallonism. Can you explain it?**

It's a made up word that I used for the first time in 2013 when presenting a mask. I've been working with gallons for 16 years and I think it has become very symbolic in my life and become my identity. I decided to call it Afrogallonism, after doing

some background research on this object. For me, Afro is a colonial word that is attached to African migrants. But also, I am interested the circle – the gallon comes from the West and I send it back to the West. So it is becoming a migrant itself.

**You have brought your large sculptures made out of cut pieces of these gallons to Brighton. They are large artworks which look very intricate to produce.**

The process of making the works is very labour intensive. It goes through different processes; cutting, drilling, and stitching. Some take a month, some 7 months or a year. They are called *Follow the Yellow Brick*, as I investigate the history of my family through this piece. My family were displaced. 200 years ago, they migrated because of the trade relationships, and where they were previously settled was invaded. It is a big issue in Ghana as no proper documentation exists either. I use my art to mark the history. I use the same yellow gallons to pave the space given to my family at that time and I have invited people to walk on it to witness and experience the history that happened 200 years ago.

**Your works are very political and critical to some practices of society and the government in Ghana. Do you think that you can change much in your society through your art?**

I see a relief and awareness, because my work brings issues into the spotlight and criticises politics. Being an artist is a very strong responsibility and I take risks, particularly with my performance collective. I find an alternative way of pushing, keeping up with work, staying focused and trying to get people to be part of what I do as much as possible. Performance is a movement to transform the community, and as the collective, I believe that our voice is heard. We are very

consistent and people pay attention and give a lot of support. We just don't know when change will come, but we know that at some point it will come.

**The collective that you founded, GoLocal, has about 100 performers. How do you put on a performance?**

We are more like collaborators, discussing the ideas together and trying to respond to the current issues in communities. Every day it is brought to my attention how powerful our tradition is, especially in terms of dance, music and costume, which I also incorporate in my performance practice. We have different performances; mostly improvising to allow the energies to evolve. We sometimes hijack a space when the performance is politically informed. We also stage performances where we entertain people.

**You've had shows in the USA, UK and had other big international exhibitions too. You are so passionate about your country, region, and own family history. Being a part of this international art scene, going to talk about these issues and your art, but at the same time, hijacking spaces to do performances for small communities... How do these all work together?**

For me it's just being consistent in what you do. I follow this mantra, "Think Global, Act Local". My work is centred on my community, I make sure of that. But what I believe makes my art broad and accessible to other cultures is that I create art from my heart. I also use social media platforms to promote projects, share information and I think that makes the work very visible.

**One of the subjects that you are critical of is that of gender roles in your country. Ghana is a country where homosexuality is prohibited. Do you feel vulnerable when you tackle gender roles in your society?**

It is the most challenging one. I took the privilege of being an artist and having people supporting my work and writing about my work. Also I think travelling brought a lot of understanding and has given me experience to deal with a subject like that and how to use performance art to address it. But I also thought about how to bring traditions into this, as men wearing women's clothes is an activity that takes place in our traditional festivals.

**You had a performance walking in the streets in your late mother's clothes. This performance put you on prominent international media including a highly stylised photo shoot in Vogue. How did that performance happen?**

I use my personal story to create influence, and talk about equality and human rights. According to the tradition, if you are a mother and you die, your wardrobe is locked up for a year. After a year, it's opened and your belongings are shared amongst your children. In my case, as an only child and a son, I couldn't get my mother's belongings. Other extended family members got them. As a response to this I created the performance called *My Mother's Wardrobe*. That was the most challenging performance I did. It was featured on BBC, the Guardian, even in Vogue, and it brought people's attention to that topic. There has been a radical change in the community since, they are more open and expressive. I did a photo shoot with the clothes that I took back. Now I wear women's clothes; I feel comfortable and nobody questions that.

# whitewall

April 3, 2019

## Serge Attukwei Clottey Uses Performance to Address Political, Social, and Local Issues

by Katy Donoghue



Serge Attukwei Clottey. Portrait by Luke Walker. Courtesy of Gallery 1957.

Serge Attukwei Clottey may be best recognized for his woven, tapestry-like works made from plastic jerrycans. From his studio in the Labadi Beach area of Accra, he engages directly with his neighborhood and community via the GoLokal performance collective he founded, as well as the sculpture he creates addressing issues of sustainability, health, migration, and gender issues. Last year, he debuted a major commission at Facebook's headquarters in San Francisco, focused on the migration of objects through coastal cities.

His work will be on view at a group show at the Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium in Norway this spring and in the Karachi Biennale this fall.

Whitewall spoke with the artist about the role of performance in his practice and as a means for social change.

### WHITEWALL: Can you tell us about the term you use for your work, "Afrogallonism"?

SERGE ATTUKWEI CLOTTEY: Afrogallonism is a concept I began exploring when I started using the gallon containers as a material over 17 years ago. The plastic containers themselves are a powerful symbol, as they touch on issues of the environment, consumerism, and Ghana's relations with the Western world. My practice involves cutting, melting, and stitching the versatile plastic material—originally filled with oil and sold to Ghana from the West—into these pieces of art. It is interesting to me that these gallon containers then often migrate back to the West, but now as artworks.

### WW: How did you first start working with the material of plastic jerrycans?

SAC: I was trying to deal with environmental issues, because I couldn't express myself with painting. And plastic was the first thing I encountered. I grew up with these plastic jerrycans, which are used to transport and store fresh water. When I was a child, it was my responsibility to carry fresh water to the house. It represents a problem, carrying with it issues of water scarcity, environmental problems, and global warming. I used the water jerrycans by using them as a canvas instead of using a real canvas. So I started putting them together and painting portraits on them.



Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal, My Mother's Wardrobe, performance at Gallery 1957, March 6, 2016. Photo by Nii Odzenma. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra.

I realized there are more stories about the jerrycan. I researched where it came from and what it means to us and where it goes after it's been used.

**WW: This issue of plastic consumption, that's also a global issue.**

SAC: Exactly. So that was where the interest started developing, using my work to address issues of politics and environment, as well as religion, sexuality.

How the sexuality idea developed is that this particular object is very symbolic to women. Mostly, it is women who use it to store and fetch water. We decided to create a performance around this to create awareness of how women are attached to that object. In my studio, the assistants are all men. So any time we were going to collect water, we dressed as women.

Women would question us, and that started a conversation about getting the gallons out of the system. It's not safe to store water in them. Our performance became educative for the community. It's not hygienic to store water in them—the water becomes contaminated by the plastic eventually. So it has become a community-based project, where the awareness has been raised, and eventually we are getting rid of the plastic gallons in the community. Some women bring them to me to use in the studio.

**WW: What was the moment for you when you realized that the work you were making could have this educative impact?**

SAC: The first time was when I started cutting the gallons. I began to see what the inside looked like. The inside looked very rusty; you could tell that it's not safe to store. People literally keep it under the sun for months because of the water scarcity.

So I would keep how they looked inside for the final work—I didn't clean them. That was the moment when I realized this was a problem. That was when I realized that this could be a very strong statement to create awareness.

**WW: What were the first reactions you saw from people who saw that?**

SAC: I exhibited the pieces around my studio, which is my community. At first, they questioned why I cut them and what am I using them for. So those conversations happened. I could point to the work and say, "This is why it's not hygienic to store water inside them."

I make my work very accessible to the community, because I think the community is part of my process.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, *The Displaced*, 2018. Installation view at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra.

**WW: Is that why performance is such a major part of your practice?**

SAC: Performance is very big part of our culture. Our traditions are rooted in performance. I think more in performance terms because performance allows me to express myself very comfortably. Every tradition has a rite, and the rite is always a performance. The body is used to demonstrate, or it's used for communicating.

Performance is how I approach my installations, my sculptures, my drawings. Performance is how I process all of my art forms.

It can also be very risky, when I'm dealing with political issues, and using myself.

**WW: Can you tell us about the collective you founded in 2012, GoLokal?**

SAC: We were about five in 2012 and now we are about eighty. It's a call to other people in the community. We can't all draw, but performance will allow you to express yourself in a way that you can have an impact on people.

And as a collective, the kind of impact and information we can express is strong because we are a larger number. I'm interested in addressing critical issues, and believe that through art we can create movement. I have the platform, I am an artist, and collaboration is key to exploring those ideas.

**WW: You've addressed issues of environment and sustainability, and you've addressed some women's issues as well with your 2016 performance *My Mother's Wardrobe*. What issues are you really interested in addressing in the next phase of your practice?**

SAC: I'm trying to address issues of human rights. I think that it's something that came about after my *My Mother's Wardrobe*. I want to advocate on human rights by dealing especially with sexuality. It's something that I need to address, starting with my community.

After the *My Mother's Wardrobe* performance, there has been an engagement and understanding of the right of

sexuality. I want to push that further by developing more projects. And I'm finding every possible means to still use the community, because once I use the community, it influences a wider audience.



Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal My Mother's Wardrobe performance at Gallery 1957, March 6, 2016. Photo by Nii Odzenma. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra.

# F L A U N T

December 4, 2018

## Serge Attukwei Clottey | If This Jerrycan Could Talk

—  
by Dylan Chase



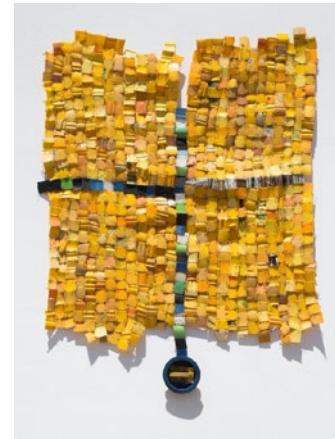
Serge Attukwei Clottey. "Awaken IV" (2018). Plastics, wires and oil paint. 44 X 49 in.  
Photo: Nii Odzenma.

Famous artists are often a reflection of the societies that celebrate them. It's hard to separate the prominence of Warhol from the rise of advertising; difficult to extricate our image of Basquiat from the graffiti-strewn urban landscapes that spawned him; nigh impossible to extricate Duchamp's urinal from the French people's taste for the sexually subversive and absurd.

In which case, what to make of the rise of Ghanaian artist Serge Clottey, in today's context? What might his newfound, burgeoning celebrity say about our global society, its priorities and its values? In every age except for ours, it may have seemed less-than-feasible that a multimedia artist from Accra (pop. 1.5 million) could acquire major exhibitions across the world, features in major magazines, and name cache that leads to his works—many of which are composed out of small bits of plastic waste—selling at median five-figure prices.

Of course, our age is unlike any other, and Clottey's work reflects the increasingly hot, flat, and crowded psychological landscape we all share.

"I follow the mantra, 'Think global, act local,'" Clottey says, speaking via telephone from London, where he was awaiting participation in an exhibition and panel appearance, "For me, art is global—it is not about just yourself, it is about the world; it's about your position in the world, and asking, 'How do I transform it?'"



Serge Attukwei Clottey. "Good Judgement" (2018). Plastics, wires and oil paint. 66 X 51 in.  
Photo: Nii Odzenma.

This is a fitting summation of the 33-year-old artist's work. Clottey first acquired the attention of Western collectors and gallerists by using Instagram and email to showcase his work, which contains a blend of paintings, performance, sculpture, and quilting. The most common feature of these disparate practices is their employment of what Clottey has called 'Afrogallonism'—the use and re-appropriation of yellow plastic "Kufuor gallons," colloquially named after the president at the time, John Kufuor, whose administration distributed the jerrycans en masse across the Ghanaian population in order to be used as vessels for cooking oil, though they were later repurposed in countless ways. As one might imagine, most of these cans became chemical-laced waste, littering Ghanaian townships and cities, and it was these pieces of 'waste' that a young Clottey began using as makeshift canvasses over 17 years ago.

"This gallon represents differently in different spaces,' says Clottey. 'The materials that I explore are not African materials... They are imported from the West to Africa, but through artistic process I can overcome the limitations of the object and change its value in a different space."

Sometimes, Clottey incorporates these gallon cans with traditional African ceremonial dress; other times, he uses them in performance, like when he built Kufuor gallon bridges across lagoons in his beachside Accra neighborhood. His radical re-interpolation of the ubiquitous object is often aided by the hands of his GoLokal collective—a grassroots group of Accra citizens who have banded, one at a time in growing number, with Clottey to help construct his recycled flights of fancy.

Most recently, one such project was entitled "Follow The Yellow Brick Road": an installation of Kuofor gallons



Serge Attukwei Clottey. "Nothing Else Matters" (2018). Plastics, wires and oil paint. 53 X 88 in.  
Photo: Nii Odzenma.

that covered the streets of Accra, leading the way to the neighborhood of La, where the GoLokal collective have their headquarters. As always with Clottey's work, the installation had a critical bent—Clottey told the BBC in August that the work was about property rights, and the sad fact that many of the residents of developing communities in Africa cannot prove land ownership because they do not have the proper papers, and are therefore targets for exploitation.

Other times, his work challenges traditional notions of gender and propriety. As part of his project My Mother's Wardrobe, men and women in Clottey's retinue donned the inherited clothes of their mothers as they marched through the city; following the death of his own mother, Clottey wanted to challenge a central tradition In Ghana, wherein the clothes of the mother are handed down to her daughters after a year of being stowed away. As an only child and active opponent of the status quo, Clottey took an opportunity to both honor

his mother and the broader community of women who are so central to the African family structure.



Serge Attukwei Clottey. "Yesterday and Tomorrow" (2018). Plastics, wires and oil paint. 99 X 75 in.  
Photo: Nii Odzenma.

Though the work of Clottey and his collective is indeed wide-ranging, there is one form of their work that is most commonly cited—rectangular, quilted mosaics constructed with cut-up bits of Kufuor gallons, usually bound together with wire. One Google image search of the name ‘Serge Clottey,’ and you will be confronted with countless images of these works.

If you picture them hanging, as they have, in galleries from California to London, it is not hard to imagine these objects—constructed from Western plastic and imported to developing nations in a poorly planned administrative effort, then discarded and re-issued within a Western art space—changing their value and meaning.

"I believe my work is a kind of manipulation, in a way, because I speak a language that I try to sell to people," suggests Clottey. "I try to sell the language to people, and whoever buys it kind of spreads it into the next person, and into the next person, and it spreads out."

If Clottey is true in this aim, and his work is truly intended as a global endeavor of consciousness-raising, then the art world may be forced to consider some uncomfortable truths. Given that Clottey comes from Ghana, one of 20 nations to receive a 'very vulnerable' rating from a Standard and Poor evaluation of climate change impact, and that he works with materials that are part and parcel of our own disposable, plastic-oriented Western ways, the reflection his work holds up to us may not be the most pleasant one—even if his work is often, at base level, aesthetically gorgeous.

Serge Clottey is an artist turning “global ideas” into visceral feeling. An artist that, if celebrated appropriately, may just reflect something redemptive about our time, and our society.

# whitewall

December 3, 2018

## Serge Attukwei Clottey's "Time After Time"

—  
by Katy Donoghue

This year Gallery 1957, the Accra-based space, is participating in Untitled Art, Miami Beach for the first time. For the fair, they'll present a solo booth of new works by Serge Attukwei Clottey. The Ghanaian artist, known for his work in performance and sculpture using discarded plastic containers, has studios in Accra and Los Angeles, and recently created a site-specific installation at Facebook's headquarters in San Francisco.

Whitewaller asked the artist about what he'll be showing in Miami this year.



Serge Attukwei Clottey. 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Photo by Luke Walker.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

**WHITEWALLER:** Can you tell us about the work you'll be showing with Gallery 1957 at Untitled Art?

**SERGE ATTUKWEI CLOTTEY:** I will be showing a selection of new plastic gallon sculptures as well as drawings in Miami. This is the first time that Gallery 1957 will be at Untitled Art, Miami Beach, so I am very excited to be showing these new works with them.

**WW:** Is there a theme or focus that ties all the work together?

**SAC:** The theme of the new works is "Time After Time." They focus on concerns of mobility and migration, referring to the lines and colors which depict various settlements on maps.

**WW:** What materials did you work with for these pieces?

**SAC:** I work with gallon container plastic in my sculptural works, which act as a means of inquiry into the languages of form and abstraction. Some people describe the works as tapestries, as they resemble local textile traditions such as kente, a key reference in West African modernism throughout the 20th century.

**WW:** Did you experiment with anything new for this body of work?

**SAC:** In the new body of work I've worked specifically with barcode data, translating them into maps—adapting the information into a form which helps us to navigate people and places. The work examines how we are surrounded by an abundance of data through the materials we use and consume.

**WW: Can you tell us about the term you use for your work, "Afrogallonism"?**

SAC: "Afrogallonism" is a concept I began exploring when I started using the gallon containers as a material over 17 years ago. The plastic containers themselves are a powerful symbol, as they touch on issues of the environment, consumerism, and Ghana's relations with the Western world. My practice involves cutting, melting, and stitching the versatile plastic material—originally filled with oil and sold to Ghana from the West—into these pieces of art. It is interesting to me that these gallon containers then often migrate back to the West, but now as artworks.



Serge Attukwei Clottey. 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Photo by Luke Walker.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

**WW: Earlier this year, you unveiled a monumental installation at Facebook's headquarters in San Francisco. Can you tell us about that installation and about what kind**

**of impact you wanted to create there?**

SAC: The work that was created for Facebook's headquarters was made in my studio in Los Angeles. San Francisco, similarly to Accra, is also on the coast, so I was really interested in the migration of objects, and how the work traveled from one continent to another. I wanted to focus on how the work would interact with that space in particular, so that really influenced the form of the work during the creation process.

**WW: Will you be in Miami for the fair? If so, what are you looking forward to seeing in and around the fair?**

SAC: Yes, I will be at Miami for the fair. I can't wait to hear the discussion and feedback around my work, and obviously I am looking forward to having a good time in the city!

**ART SY**

November 15, 2018

## Serge Attukwei Clottey Is Creating a Real-Life Yellow Brick Road in Accra

—  
by Alexxa Godhardt



"Courtesy of Serge Attukwei Clottey and Gallery 1957, Accra."

What lies at the end of “the yellow brick road?” For Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey, the answer is home.

Walk through Clottey’s birthplace of Labadi, a neighborhood in Ghana’s capital of Accra, and you’ll come across his most ambitious public project to date, Yellow Brick Road—a patchwork of yellow plastic squares covering the area’s dirt streets, and occasionally draped over the walls and roofs of huts. An aerial view of the installation shows brilliant golden

lines and dots flowing through a maze of grey and brown homes and structures. “For me, it signifies the history of migration—and home,” Clottey explained of the piece.

Clottey drew the project’s name from the renowned novel-turned-film *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the protagonist, Dorothy, finds herself lost in a fantastical, foreign world. The only way back to her native Kansas is to “follow the yellow brick road,” as good witch named Glinda famously tells her. Since the film’s 1939 release, the term “yellow brick road” has come to more generally signify a path leading towards home, comfort, and promise. (In 2009, the renowned talk-show impresario Oprah Winfrey described her many achievements as a “yellow brick road of blessings.”)



"Courtesy of Serge Attukwei Clottey and Gallery 1957, Accra."

The metaphor resonated with Clottey. His work investigates the history and culture of his own hometown, Accra, and his primary medium, a type of plastic water jug known as a Kufuor

gallon, happens to be yellow. He began using the vessels at the beginning of his career, in the early 2000s, when he realized they were not only readily available in Accra's dumpsites, but also resonated with his interests as an artist—from his country's history of trade to its people's daily rituals and struggles.

At their core, the yellow containers once signified Ghana's trade history: They were originally used to transport cooking oil from the West to Africa. When Clottey was young, however, they'd been repurposed as water jugs during one of the country's worst water shortages (they were dubbed "Kufuor" gallons, after Ghana's president at the time). Women, primarily, were tasked with hauling heavy containers of rationed water back to their family homes; their trips could be miles long. The yellow jugs came to represent not just water, but distress, as well.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, Perfect budget, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra.

The jugs' yellow hue also carried metaphorical weight for Clottey. Ironically, it reminded him of the gold stripe that zips through the center of the Ghanaian flag, which symbolizes mineral wealth. In this way, he's come to see the jugs as precious objects that transcend their original purpose.

Clottey has cut up and used the gallon containers to create his signature body of work: intricate yellow tapestries embodying the social history and material culture of his home. (The latest of these works will be on view with Gallery 1957 this December 5th through 9th at Untitled Art, Miami Beach.) It wasn't until 2012, however, that the artist applied this process, which he's dubbed "Afrogallonism," to public projects displayed in the very streets—and for the very people—that motivated his work. "I wanted my community to be able to experience the work their routines inspired," he said.

He started with ephemeral works: public interventions and performances. On several occasions, Clottey and his assistants donned lipstick and dresses on their journeys to collect jugs, emphasizing the vessel's gendered history and honoring the work of women who'd transported water to their families and friends. Other times, Clottey hung the plastic tapestries from the sides of homes, accenting the grey city with bright spots of color.

The community's response was so positive that Clottey began to envision a larger, more permanent project that would become an everyday part of Accra's landscape—and actively involve its residents. In 2016, he began Yellow Brick Road, a vibrant, ever-growing pathway coursing through the streets of Labadi, past hundreds of homes and under the feet of thousands of Ghanaians.



"Courtesy of Serge Attukwei Clottey and Gallery 1957, Accra.

For Clottey, Yellow Brick Road signifies the history, resilience, and resourcefulness of the Ghanaian people as whole: a patchwork of personal homes, stories, and struggles woven together to build the country's identity.

# SFWEEKLY

October 18, 2018

## Out of Africa, with Serge Attukwei Clottey

—  
Comprehensive depictions of contemporary African art elude most institutions, but Ever Gold [Projects] succeeds in “Defying the Narrative: Contemporary Art from West and Southern Africa.”

—  
by Jonathan Curiel



Four works by Serge Attukwei Clottey. | Courtesy of the artist and Ever Gold [Projects]

On a July day in Menlo Park, Serge Attukwei Clottey stood on a mechanical platform inside Facebook’s shimmering new building and looked up at his giant new artwork. The sculpture is two stories tall and more than 10 feet wide — a cascade of interlocking yellow pieces that Clottey, his team

of assistants, and assorted well-wishers assembled in the artist’s native Ghana.

In the capital, Accra, Clottey and his support staff made the Facebook art from discarded oil jugs that originated in the United States and Europe. In Ghana, they’re repurposed for carrying water — and they’re an environmental hazard, a cheap product that ultimately taxes the country’s ability to recycle. Clottey not only recycles the plastic into art, he uses the proceeds from his artwork to pay assistants and support a growing art network in Ghana. As he oversaw the hanging of his new piece at Facebook three months ago, he thought about that network, which includes children learning about art. He thought about the Ghanaian map that he’d embedded into the piece. And he thought about how this colossal two-story curtain of yellows had come a long way from its assemblage in Accra, where Clottey and his art community spread that and similar works across dirt roads and atop buildings.

“What excites me about the work and the commission is that the work is originally made in Ghana, and how many people were involved,” Clottey tells SF Weekly by phone. “Facebook is about community, and bringing people together. So the work brought together a lot of people in my community — including those who had heard of my work but hadn’t seen it before. The whole outside installation and working in public brought a lot of people together. They feel that they’re part of the work. And I felt joy because it was as if I brought the whole community in Ghana back to Facebook’s premises.” Smaller iterations of that same yellow Facebook art help anchor “Defying the Narrative: Contemporary Art from West and Southern Africa,” an Ever Gold [Projects] exhibit that also features another Ghanaian artist (Paa Joe) and artists

from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ivory Coast, and Great Britain. Almost 400 million people — or five percent of the world's population — live in West Africa, and about 100 million more live in Africa's southern tier.

It's a herculean task to pick visual artists who represent the current state of art in West Africa and Southern Africa. Even the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, which has more than 1,000 works of contemporary African work, struggles to convey the true depth of the continent's emerging art scene. But that didn't stop Andrew McClintock, the owner of Ever Gold [Projects], from assembling his aptly named "Defying the Narrative" exhibit.

Traditional masks may be the continent's most widely known art form. But there's none of that at Ever Gold [Projects]. The closest thing may be Frédéric Bruly Bouabré's maze of small, drawn figures and shapes — with names like Untitled (Mythologie Bété) — that resemble folkloric playing cards of playful Ivory Coast archetypes, including musicians, couples, and suitors. And Paa Joe almost steals the exhibit with his huge rhino sculpture whose African-patterned interior is a perfect fit for one person. Yes, Rhinois an art coffin.

Also worth noting is South African Simphiwe Ndzube, whose *Torchbearers* is a fantastical assemblage of headless, armless figures trying to find their way in a room of cones, ties, and other odd elements. So, too, is Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude, a Zimbabwean whose *The Duplicity of Waiting Part 2* is an abstraction of shapes that read like a map of human toil.

Clottey's small pieces in the San Francisco exhibit speak

to the overriding term that Clottey coined for his jug-pieced art: "Afrogallonism." That's also the title of Clottey's Instagram account, where he has almost 15,000 followers, and where he posted a photo of himself on that July platform inside Facebook, where his piece takes up one of the main lobby areas. "We are very proud of you," Ghana's Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture, which follows Clottey, posted on Clottey's Instagram.

The ministry's comment is indicative of Clottey's growing status in Ghana, and in the global art world. The 33-year-old increasingly exhibits his work around Africa, Europe, and the United States. Clottey spoke to SF Weekly from England, where he was invited to give art talks at the University of Brighton and to collaborate with the university's "Responsible Futures" team, an academic offshoot that researches new ways to improve environmental sustainability.

"My work has evolved," Clottey says. "More people are paying attention, especially in Africa. It's about the material culture — about exploring different materials and finding narratives in the material. The only pressure is to stay focused. I don't want to be dragged into African politics. I just want to be an artist. I just want to stay focused on my work and develop a community."

Besides Afrogallonism, Clottey has started to invest in projects about migration that have the title, "Follow the Yellow Brick Road." The title is a reference to The Wizard of Oz, where the yellow brick road is a magical directional that leads the main characters, including Dorothy, to the Emerald City. Dorothy's adventure takes her to magical places and — at least in the movie version — back to Kansas, where she says,

"There's no place like home."

For Clottey, "home" is anywhere that people — art-goers, academics, and others — are curious about artwork with an environmental message, a message about the economics that link world powers and African communities, and a message based on yellow material that from a distance could be the yellow of jewels or even yellowish gold. Like the work of the veteran Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, Clottey's sculptures reveal their pedestrian origins when you get up close. By then, it's too late: You've already seen the art as something alluring and something that's valuable. Facebook executives paid a lot of money for Clottey's work — but that money is being recycled back into the Ghanaian economy, including to recyclers who bring jugs to Clottey's Accra studio. The theme of recycling and interconnectedness — between continents, between geographically close areas — is there at Ever Gold [Projects]'s exhibit and, in the longer term, in Menlo Park.

"Even the smaller works have a lot of people working on it," says Clottey. "It has people cutting, it has people stitching. People who are drilling and assembling. Some of the smaller works have very specific patterns. So they take a lot of time as well. Every piece goes through a whole sketch and an assessment."

The two-story Facebook piece took seven months to make. "It's the biggest piece I've ever produced," says Clottey, who grew up in the area of Accra called Labadi after his parents moved from another area called Jamestown. "The work relates to the history of [Labadi], as well as my family's migration history from Jamestown to Labadi. The work tries to replicate a map into patterns. I'm interested in using my history of migration to demarcate that space. So it has the

history of Labadi, because I invited the community to be part of the process. The work brings people together. We live on the coast, and the work went to San Francisco, which is on the coast. We're trying to have this conversation whereby people work on the piece and the piece migrates to San Francisco."

# The Guardian

October 6, 2016

## Interview: Serge Attukwei Clottey: the artist urging African men to dress as women

—  
by Nell Frizzell

Serge Attukwei Clottey walked through Ghana's capital city in his dead mother's clothes to honour her memory – and to highlight injustice against women. It is the latest step in his art collective's mission to create social change



Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal perform *My Mother's Wardrobe* at Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana.  
Photograph: Nii Odzenma/Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957

A muscle-heavy man sits, staring unsmiling at the camera, on a throne of yellow plastic water cans. His biceps push out

from under the puffed shoulders of a wax-print blouse; two hairy ankles emerge from below a blue patterned skirt; his head is wrapped in a large piece of fabric, a huge bow hanging over his left ear.

The man is Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey and the clothes he's wearing belonged to his recently deceased mother. The piece, *My Mother's Wardrobe*, was inspired by what Clottey saw as the basic injustice at the heart of Ghanaian funeral rituals. According to Ghanaian tradition, a mother's belongings are locked away for a year after her death and then distributed to her daughters and other women in the family.

As an only son, Clottey had no sister to inherit these belongings and so would have lost the very fabric of his mother's memory. So he decided instead to put on his mother's blouses, carry her bags and walk through the streets of Accra.

"I wanted to enact my relationship with my mother but also point out this imbalance," explains Clottey, speaking to me at the 1:54 Contemporary African art fair in London. "I could feel her presence very close up, they had her smell." The rest of Clottey's GoLokal Collective – a group of artists, family and friends based around Clottey's studio – also joined in, with both men and women leaving their homes, dressed in their mother's wardrobes, to convene in the centre of the city. "Gender roles are very limited in our community but we all felt very comfortable in those clothes," explains Clottey. "People who saw us were taking pictures and very happy at the idea."

Clottey, who trained in Brazil and whose father is also an artist, is perhaps best known for his work with yellow plastic

jerry cans used to collect and carry water – what he calls “Afrogallonism”. Tapestries and sculptures made from these objects are intended to highlight Ghana’s water crisis and soaring levels of pollution. But, twinned with his mother’s clothes, the cans also said something interesting about female domesticity, duty and daily life. “My mother was collecting the plastic gallon cans for me when she was alive,” says Clottey. “They are of the streets, they’re everywhere, but they are related to women because most of the time they’re the ones who collect water. So I like to bring them into the gallery space – to give them that prestige.”

Clottey’s performance installations have included *The Displaced*, shown in video at Feuer/Mesler New York in 2015, in which the GoLokal collective stood on Labadi Beach, with fishing nets covering their bodies, enacting the trade and migration story of the Clottey family; and *African Electronics* in which GoLokal paraded through the streets of the Jamestown district wearing costumes made from suits, cameras, cassette tapes, ceremonial robes, body paint, rope, fabric and, of course, those yellow jerry cans. “African Electronics isn’t about electronic gadgets, but about the minds behind those inventions, about individual power,” says Clottey. “In Ghana we use animals, plants, nature to heal ourselves, to communicate our spiritual problems and that is very powerful. I grew up in a religious family but I’m now getting more spiritual by accepting our traditions.”

Ghana, like much of the developing world, is a place where pre-industrial, analogue and digital technology coexist; where mines, mobile phones, water cans, Instagram, fishing nets and video cassettes weave together in daily life. Clottey uses his own body, in performance, to try and bring together these disparate and competing forces.



Serge Attukwei Clottey walks through Accra in his mother’s clothes.  
Photograph: Nii Odzenma/Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957

“I used to work as a model,” he says. “To work in the arts you have to find a way to make money, but I was also interested in how modelling can manipulate the way you move. When I realised that I could also use that body in my work, I already had an audience who were interested in me as a model.”

Clottey says that his performances are now met with enthusiasm and curiosity in Accra, but it has taken some time. “Our costumes are made from simple materials and we use people’s energy; so people would attack us because they thought there was something spiritual to what we were doing. People without skill are scared to express themselves; they feel like they don’t have a platform. But they want to experiment with their ideas.”

GoLokal’s next project will be a mock election, held at the 1957 Gallery in Accra in December. “It will be called The Museum of No Tolerance and I’m going to campaign to be

president,” says Clottey, his voice deep and serious. “We’ll start working on it in November. There will be posters all over the city and I’ll go from house to house offering food and water to people as part of the campaign. We want to make people aware and conscious of who they vote for. People treat this country like a medium that they have no control over but politics is very powerful.” Clottey wants to highlight Ghana’s problems with corruption, so the ballot boxes will be made of white porcelain so, as he says, it feels like you’re dropping your vote into a toilet. It’s another example of Clottey using everyday objects to engage people with contemporary politics and personal decisions.

carving up the yellow plastic cans that litter the streets and beaches, wearing his mother’s blouses is both strange and moving. “Sometimes I wrap the fabric around my waist,” he adds, “just to feel her close.”



Serge Attukwei Clottey and GoLokal Collective.  
Photograph: Nii Odzenma/Courtesy the artist and Gallery 1957

Which brings us back to his mother’s wardrobe. What, I wonder, has happened to the clothes he wore for the project? “I still have them,” says Clottey. “I often wear her clothes when I’m working in my studio.” The image of this 6ft 1in man,

# VOGUE

October 20, 2017

## This Artist Is Wearing His Mother's Clothing to Promote Social Change in Ghana

—  
by Chioma Nndi



Photographed by Dennis Akuoku-Frimpong

Ghanaian Independence Day falls on March 6 and last year artist Serge Attukwei Clottey marked the occasion with a boundary-pushing act of self-liberation. He walked through the streets of Accra, the nation's capital, in his deceased mother's clothes with members of his art collective—also in their mothers' clothing—marching by his side in solidarity. Wearing vibrantly printed traditional dress, the mostly male crew drew hundreds of onlookers out of their homes and onto the street, sending shockwaves through Ghanaian society

where the conversation around gender fluidity is only just beginning to open up and homosexuality is illegal.

For Clottey, who lost his mother in 2014, the public performance was born out of a personal frustration with the country's funeral traditions in which a mother's belongings are distributed among her daughters a year after her passing. As an only son, he was essentially disinherited from his mother's legacy. He has recuperated much of her textile collection from his family for phase two of his project, entitled *My Mother's Wardrobe*. The new photo series is set against the lush landscape of Labadi, a coastal neighborhood on the outskirts of the city where the artist spent his childhood. According to local legend, the Labadi lagoon is home to a river goddess and has been a place of spiritual sanctuary for generations. The 6-foot-1 artist has all the swagger of a modern-day Poseidon as he poses with traditional fabrics wrapped tightly around his muscular body. "In my culture, a woman's richness lies in her closet. My mom would always say, instead of putting money in the bank, I'm investing in your future in this way," says Clottey, speaking via Skype from his studio in Accra. "The truth is historically fabric was used in the trade of humans, and because of that we have inherited this idea. When a man is married to a woman, he's expected to present these fabrics to his wife."

The most prized of them all is undoubtedly kente, the fabric of the Ashante people. A ghostlike figure draped in the distinctive handwoven cloth hovers ominously in the background of one of his portraits. "That piece of kente is the most valuable. It was used to cover my mother's coffin," he explains. Kente has origins that are believed to trace back to the Ashanti Asantehene, or king Nana Osei Tutu, who founded the Ashante empire in the early 1700s. Back then it was made



Photographed by Dennis Akuoku-Frimpong

from pure silk, a rare and precious commodity, though these days that level of quality and craftsmanship is much scarcer in Ghana. Unlike traditional kente, the cheaply made African-inspired fabrics imported from China that are piled high in the markets of Accra hardly stand that test of time. In fact in the next stage of his project, Clottey plans to set some of those mass-produced textiles on fire, a telling commentary on the ephemeral nature of fast fashion and the threat it poses to Ghana's centuries-old artisanal practices.

Though it's been over a year since Clottey first took to the streets in his mother's clothes, his performance continues to spark debate around gender equality and the question of LGBTQ rights. He's since managed to more than triple the size of his GoLokal art collective, galvanizing many of his young creative followers with a rallying call for social change. "It took me a month and a half to convince my collective to join me on *My Mother's Wardrobe*. Some of them were against homosexuality and didn't want to be seen as gay for fear

of being physically attacked. But in the end their attitudes changed," he says. "If I can make people think with my work, break down those stereotypes, then perhaps more change will come."



Photographed by Dennis Akuoku-Frimpong

# GOOD

September 15, 2015

## Serge Attukwei Clottey on upending a Westernized narrative of Africa and relinquishing his art to the public

—  
by Eli Tetteh

Artist Serge Attukwei Clottey gestures around the cramped back room of his workshop in Accra, Ghana. Intricate lattice sheaths litter the space: the ones rolled up on the floor are mostly yellow and red tangles of plastic; the stringy matrix hanging by the door is a black mesh of interwoven rubber. What others consider useless scraps, Attukwei sees as a bevy of supplies. “My materials are what society has left behind, what people see as discarded,” he says. “The process I put it through isn’t recycling. But I change the function. It becomes valuable.”



The journey from garbage to gallery piece is central to the overarching narrative of Attukwei’s art, in part because his own ancestral story is one rife with voyages. In the past, he says, the Clottey clan was known to travel to the northern part of Ghana and return to the coast with voodoo. When the chief of Labadi, now one of Accra’s renowned beach towns, needed to be spiritually fortified for an impending skirmish against a rival township, it was the Clotteys’ mysticism he called upon. In return, they were rewarded with land—from Attukwei’s studio located on Labadi Beach Road, minutes from the water’s edge, to the oceanfront. “That is how we migrated here,” he says.

The name of one of his great-great grandfathers, Nii Tetteh Nteni, hangs above an awning in Attukwei’s studio space like an incantation. “My ancestors sold alcohol and meat to the people of Labadi,” he continues, recalling his seafaring family history, pointing out that “Nteni” signifies “liquor” in the Ga language of the coastal people of Ghana. “When they got to the shore, they transported the alcohol with these plastic gallons.”



The gallons to which he refers are the ubiquitous yellow gallon containers, or jerrycans, found all over Ghana. “These are imported oil containers. When they get here, we pour the oil out and, after, use the container for something else.” To Attukwei and the citizens of Ghana, they are stark reminders of Africa’s lopsided trade relationship with the West. And as the country’s fortunes improve and even the poorest homes acquire indoor plumbing, the yellow cans are outstaying their welcome. “Plastic has a long life span. How do we deal with that?” Attukwei asks, pointing out the massive environmental implications of the cans. For him, the omnipresent yellow plastic became a canvas to be drilled, stitched, and painted upon, hacking the jerrycans to craft conceptual masks and large-scale art installations conspicuously staged in Accra’s public spaces.

Resettlement, relocation, and repatriation: Attukwei obsesses over these themes because he has seen the difference even a slight change of course can make. As a child, his father, himself a painter, enrolled Attukwei in art school while simultaneously trying to discourage his son’s interest in electronics. “I would play with toys meant for little white children. I got interested in playing with gadgets, fixing broken radios, trying to understand how things were built,” he remembers. “My dad told me that I was a black boy and I could not invent. I should just do art—draw nicely, sell, and make money.”

But that explanation didn’t satisfy Attukwei. At some point, he combined his interests, creating art installations that incorporated light and sound. His father rebuffed his mixed media experimentation, as did a number of local galleries, but Attukwei continued to labor. This refusal to accept restrictive norms has come to be characteristic of his resilient spirit and

dedication to exploring what resonates with him, both as a citizen and as an artist.



But that explanation didn’t satisfy Attukwei. At some point, he combined his interests, creating art installations that incorporated light and sound. His father rebuffed his mixed media experimentation, as did a number of local galleries, but Attukwei continued to labor. This refusal to accept restrictive norms has come to be characteristic of his resilient spirit and dedication to exploring what resonates with him, both as a citizen and as an artist.

To that, public participation has become fundamental to Attukwei’s work. He founded the GoLokal performance art collective in Ghana, hoping to bring art closer to the people and, most importantly, promote community development. In 2012, during the country’s elections, GoLokal carried out a

particularly pointed performance as political commentary—well-dressed participants acting as wealthy politicians dragging a bound Attukwei through the streets by a noose, a sign saying “YOUTH” hanging around his chest. National news sources played the footage on their broadcasts for a week.

“When I first [moved to Labadi], I was doing my art in private,” Attukwei says. “After my performances started being aired on television, people began approaching me, asking if they could participate.” Not only was he encouraging his community, showing them that they could have a very public voice in a national arena, but his process benefited as well. Now, Attukwei employs a team of five eager young men who help bring his visions to life, remarking that “[the guys] make the production easier. Now, I can take a week to create a huge piece.”

Even the process his team undertakes for each piece has became a performance in itself. “We go to dump sites and buy the gallons. Then we transport them to the studio on our backs. We don’t use cars.” Attukwei enjoys enthraling and involving people on the streets by turning even mundane tasks into a spectacle.

It all fits into his Afrofuturist statement of intent: “Afrogallonism”. Through art, he argues, the faulty economic relationship between Africa and the West can be upended. “Afrogallonism is about pushing back to the West what they left behind,” Attukwei says. Fittingly, the creations Attukwei is currently making explore this very idea, and will be on display for his upcoming solo exhibition at recently-opened dual galleries Feuer/Mesler and Mesler/Feuer in New York. And while he’s excited for his show in the U.S., he remains committed to making sure his work and the dialogue he’s

seeking to provoke are present outside the more exclusive world of art galleries and private collections. For Attukwei, the art should be about the people, and for the people.

“It’s a cycle: It comes as an oil container, I turn it into art. It goes back and serves a different purpose. Then, we benefit.”

*Photos by Nancy Borowick*

# The Guardian

March 31, 2016

## The Ghanaian turning thousands of discarded plastic bottles into art

—  
by Charlotte Jansen

A new exhibition showcases a local artist using jerry cans to draw attention to the country's pollution crisis



Serge Attukwei Clottey uses his art installations to educate local communities about pollution and waste.  
Photograph: Serge Attukwei Clottey

The brightly coloured plastic jugs once played a vital role transporting water during Ghana's droughts. Now, they're creating a new environmental catastrophe of their own.

Seas of discarded yellow, blue and white containers – referred to locally as “Kufuor gallons” after the water crises endured under president John Kufuor in the early 2000s – have become a troubling part of Ghana’s landscape.

No longer used by local communities, vast quantities of jerry cans have built up on city streets, dumps and beaches, contributing to worsening pollution levels. In response to the growing crisis and government inaction, local artist Serge Attukwei Clottey has started using large-scale plastic art installations as a way to draw attention to the issue.

The artist says his aim is to galvanise the local community to combat the large quantities of plastic waste now blocking sewers in cities and endangering wildlife habitats along the coastline.



‘Kufuor’ gallons seen on the streets of Accra. Photograph: Serge Attukwei Clottey

Clottey, who has been gathering the containers for more than 15 years, cuts them into small tiles and shapes them over an open flame, later moulding sections together and binding them with copper.

The process results in what he refers to as “paint-less paintings” – large plastic tapestries that also incorporate other salvaged waste items, such as discarded electrical goods or wood, bones and shells gathered from the coastal neighbourhood where he lives and works in the capital, Accra.

Influenced by local folk art, Clottey says his work is not just a commentary on the human consumption and waste but a much-needed practical response to the endless cycle of water shortages and pollution experienced in Ghana.

“Every second across the world, someone leaves a faucet running, takes a long shower, or pours out some unwanted water. Every day in Ghana – where not everyone has access to running water – the streets are filled with children carrying yellow buckets on their heads, on their way to a fountain,” he says.

In recent years environmental groups have focused efforts on educating locals about littering and waste management, however the recurring water shortages complicate the issue as the need for the cans keeps returning.

“Ghana is one of the driest countries and faces some of the most detrimental consequences from climate change and water shortages. Yet the government does nothing, so I have taken it upon myself to educate through art,” Clottey says.

In the wake of El Niño, Ghana is once again one of several countries on the continent facing further water crises. In

Ethiopia, the population is now heading towards its worst drought in 50 years while in Zimbabwe’s president Robert Mugabe has declared a state of disaster.

“People do not care to listen about how they should use less water or waste less. Children are not educated about global warming in school, and they are not inclined to take action about the issue,” Clottey says, but he hopes the vast plastic installations will help change attitudes both at home and abroad.



A selection of Clottey's art works are now being shown in San Francisco.  
Photograph: Nii Odzenma

# BAZAAR

December 31, 2017

## Accra's Gallery 1957 to "Takeover" Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai

The initiative, running from 20 January till 3 March, is the first of its kind in the Middle East and mirrors current trends for younger galleries wishing to develop international programmes through a sharing of resources



Serge Attukwei Clottey. Impressing myself. 2017. Charcoal, pastel on paper. 106.68x76.20cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra

Established in March 2016, Ghana's Gallery 1957 is at the forefront of a growing interest in art from West Africa. One of Accra's first contemporary art galleries, it aims to provide a platform for African artists with an international reach.

The gallery participated for the second consecutive year in the fifth edition of 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in Somerset House in London in October 2017, alongside first-time participant Lawrie Shabibi. It was there that co-director Asmaa Shabibi became acquainted with the gallery.

"Sharing our space with another gallery for a period of time is experimental," said Shabibi in a statement. "It's exciting for us and the local audience who will be presented with something fresh." This first gallery "takeover" is the start of an initiative that Shabibi hopes will "expand into the whole Dubai gallery community inviting other international galleries into local spaces."



Serge Attukwei Clottey. Out of Conversation. 2017. Plastic, wires and oil paint. 170.18x180.34cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra. Photo by Nii Odzenma

For the takeover Gallery 1957 will present The Displaced, a solo exhibition of new works by Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey. Featured will be a new series of pastel

drawings on paper depicting disjointed faces and figures resembling the fragmented portrayals of Cubism – a movement that was greatly inspired by traditional African tribal sculpture. One might recall the non-generic art forms of Picasso, Braque and Matisse that experimented with abstract representations of the human figure – all of which were heavily influenced by African art. In Clottey's work we see a resemblance of such forms, albeit through contemporary depiction. In these new works the artist introduces colour, marking a departure from his previous works made in charcoal.

Also presented are Clottey's wall-based sculptures made from the ubiquitous yellow gallon containers found throughout Ghana. Known as "Kufuour" gallons after John Kufuor, the second President of the Fourth Republic of Ghana, these yellow cans reference serious water shortages in Accra during Kufuour's tenure. According to Clottey, they were brought to Ghana from Europe as cooking oil canisters and then reused to store petrol and water. Upon seeing the yellow cans throughout Ghana, the artist decided to use them as the basis for the artistic movement that he has termed Afrogallonism – one that addresses the topic of migration through an investigation into form and abstraction. In addition to these sculptures and drawings, Clottey will present The Displaced, a video installation enacting the story of his family through trade and migration.



October 7, 2018

## Ghana art scene rises from streets to international galleries

Auctioneers and gallerists are sensing a promising future for Ghanaian artists

by Neil Munshi

A giant Coke bottle, a human-sized fish, a lion, a rhino, a pair of Nike trainers. Ghanaian artist Paa Joe's fantasy coffins are world-renowned and — excluding those sold locally and sent six feet under after an elaborate Ghanaian funeral — they have been displayed at the V&A, the Brooklyn Museum and the Pompidou Centre.

Yet though Paa Joe has won an international reputation for his coffins, he says he struggles to make a comfortable living. At 71, he still works in his Accra studio producing new work, having been pushed out of the centre of the city 10 years ago by higher rents.

"This is my profession, though I am now old enough to have retired," he says. He sees a brighter future, however, for Ghana's up-and-coming artists. "I wish I had this art scene when I was growing up as an artist."

While the difficulty of turning art into a living is not limited to Paa Joe, things are changing as the reputation of Ghanaian art spreads. In October, Bonhams, the London auction house,

will put on the first single-collector auction of Ghanaian works when paintings amassed by Seth Dei, a Ghanaian businessman, will go under the hammer.

Giles Peppiatt, director of contemporary African art at Bonhams, says interest in Ghanaian art has never been higher and that the auction should bring added attention. He compares the market to that of Nigeria — now among the biggest art markets on the continent — a decade ago.

"There's a lot of interest, some good collectors, some very good artists and I wouldn't be surprised if in 10 years' time the Ghanaian market is an awful lot stronger than it is now," he says. "I don't think it will eclipse Lagos, but it is looking very undervalued at the moment."

Victoria Cooke, director of Gallery 1957 in Accra, says it is "really telling" that a big auction house is going to hold a sale from a single Ghanaian collector. But "the art scene has always been really strong here... It's all communication at the end of the day — it's not that this art scene wasn't here before, it's not new, it just wasn't recognised internationally."

Serge Attukwei Clottey, a 33-year-old artist in Accra whose installations feature everyday objects — yellow gallon jugs, discarded car tyres, jute sacks — says international attention has arrived because of Ghana's vibrant scene. This in turn helps foster more creativity because of the funding it often brings. "A lot of artists have projects that need support and most of the funding comes from the west, and if artists don't get that access, they migrate, they go to where the funds come from — and may not even be pursuing arts," he says.

Now, he adds, Ghana is seeing "more access to gallery space,

more access to institutions and fellowships, more access to see and collaborate with other artists nationwide”.

Mr Dei, who began collecting art as a student in the US in the 1960s, says it is difficult to be an artist in Ghana “because society as a whole doesn’t appreciate art”, which means Ghanaian artists often pitch their work at a western audience. “The next step for them will be to take Africans as their audience,” he says.

That is already happening, about 250km north-west of Accra. Hassan Issah, a 25-year-old artist in the central city of Kumasi, says there is a quiet revolution in Ghana’s art, which runs deeper than the world of big auctions. It is centred on the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology’s art school in Kumasi, he adds, where 15 years ago, the lecturer kṣrī’kachā seid’ou “politicised” the curriculum, introducing critical theory to an institution that for years was a place where, in his words, “art was understood as a product or as a souvenir aimed at the tourist market or the expatriate”.

Mr seid’ou introduced “curating, exhibition histories, 20th and 21st century philosophy, postcolonial theory, gender and queer studies, film studies, psychoanalysis, [the first president of Ghana] Kwame Nkrumah’s political texts, African literature and politics … spatial theory, abstract mathematics, post-Marxist economics, the international art market and so forth”.

Mr Issah adds that Mr seid’ou freed students at a school traditionally focused on painting and sculpture to explore and experiment with new forms, from poetry and performance to videography and music — and to create in collaboration with their community.

“What makes it special here is that students are free to explore,” he says.

Mr Issah is a painter whose work takes the form of wrought-iron gates — built with local gatemakers — invoking baroque and modern Ghanaian style and including images of migrants, labourers and sex workers in Kumasi. Part of the students’ work is about building and reaching new audiences.

He points to the blaxTARLINES, a contemporary art gallery inside the art school based on “economic-intellectual emancipation and political sensitivity”, and the Chale Wote Street Art Festival in Accra’s Jamestown neighbourhood.

That festival is one that unites the two strains running through the Ghanaian art scene right now: hyperlocal, inclusive accessibility, and international attention from collectors and gallerists.

8255 Beverly Blvd, Los Angeles CA  
+1 310 290 7370  
[info@simchowitz.com](mailto:info@simchowitz.com)

**Simchowitz**