

Yaw Owusu

*Everything You Touch is Gold*

Curated by Azu Nwagbogu

16<sup>th</sup> September – 28<sup>th</sup> October 2023, Gallery II, Accra



Yaw Owusu, 'The Glories of Our Past' 2023, 168cm x 158cm x 9cm, 1 Ghana pesewas, steel, linen, wood.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Yaw Owusu's 'Everything You Touch Is Gold' at Gallery 1957 comprises a series of coins on wooden panels and canvas which in their intriguing interplay of colour, texture and abstract patterns call to mind the traditional craftsmanship of Ghanaian kente. Just as traditional wax-resist dyeing of fabric makes use of readily available materials such as cotton, beeswax, and the plants from which the various vegetable dyes are made, so Owusu's fabrics use copper-coated steel coins, from whose natural textures and colours he achieves his desired effect. Owusu starts with the coins' basic geometric form, the circle. From this, concentric patterns emerge, transforming into arresting geometric arrangements which become the basis of his questing for meaning and value mediated through the signifier of the coin, the universal democratic unit of economic exchange.

# 1957

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Within the intricate tapestry of value systems, the works in 'Everything You Touch Is Gold' are thought-provoking explorations of the interconnected concepts of capital and value, trade and exchange, currency, and design. Owusu's art interrogates value both as a construct and as a driving force in our globalised world. It is presented as a vulnerable organism mutating within multiple socio-political and historical contexts.

The first premise, is the location and situation of the coin as a medium—its, circumstances and materiality. The coins do not have anything to do with the often-misattributed concept of recycling, the postcolonial narrative that suffocates art from Africa. Owusu's use of the coin as an art form is entirely aside and part from anything to do with the idea of improvements on the aesthetics of trash—to be sure, in fact represents the very opposite. For the coin, its devaluation as a meaningful currency, as a medium of trade, is lost with the international fiscal controls imposed on African nations. The coin and its attributive value follow a trace in history, common to post-colonial Africa, of the continuous devaluation of the medium of exchange. Their composition — of copper-coated steel rather than copper — and their outward denominations — wherein the same coin is used to represent forever increasing denominations of a perpetually inflating currency — attest to the degradation of economic conditions. Secondly, Owusu's work is a subtle rebuke to the location of its production. Today, Ghana's coins are made by the Royal Canadian Mint and shipped to Ghana. That these Ghanaian coins are produced in Canada illustrates the persistence of colonial dynamics decades after Ghana fought for and gained Independence in 1957.

Amidst this political inquiry, Yaw Owusu is a geometrist at heart and his practice emerges as an empirical study of form and patterns. With his gaze on the ancient Ghanaian abstractions, as found on the kente and inspired by the pioneering work of Atta Kwami, his experiments encompass principles of repetition and "randomness". Yet the unexpected dance of colour, form and texture intertwine to craft his visual symphonies. Thus, Owusu's narratives emerge from the interaction between the viewer and geometric forms of abstraction. With the tapestries Owusu takes kente forms as leitmotifs and detaches from them their traditional symbolism. This detonation of traditional formalism re-emerges into the recursiveness of the patterns and the descent and ascent take on a lyrical overture. The canvas and the board become a score on which notes and lyrics are written. It is the viewer who is encouraged to sing, build narratives, and to dream. The fluidity with which these narratives unfold from the geometric formality of Owusu's patterns. They illustrate the disconnect between reality and the dream state, between prose and poetry, between noise and music.

Owusu also engages the forms and patterns as silent signifiers of economic classes and social structures within cultures/society. In this way currency, as a symbolic representation of value, occupies a central role in Owusu's artistic exploration. Through his meticulous attention to design and manipulation of various forms of currency, he unveils the relationship between economic exchange and the human condition. Here, currency is denoted by materiality, the metaphors embedded in design and the fungibility of objects. The lyrical score of Kente mutates into a canvas from its traditional social signifier and bridal gifts and as the highest honourable royal gift in the Akan culture. Yet, Owusu's exploration of currency extends beyond its material worth to encompass its visual qualities. The once-familiar faces and symbols on the coins are recontextualized, encouraging us to question the mechanisms of exchange and the narratives embedded within: is the Pesewas more than a piece of metal if Kwame Nkrumah's profile becomes unrecognisable? Owusu's art demonstrates that no item more thoroughly embodies the contradiction between the functionality that is required of daily use material objects and the purity of geometric abstraction in universal forms than a coin.

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# Gallery

As we encounter Owusu's art, we witness a visual dialogue between the inherent worthlessness of currency amidst inflation and its re-evaluation as valued art pieces. This duality serves as a social interrogation, prompting us to reflect on the transformation of value and to reconsider the intangible factors that contribute to value creation. Yet, Yaw Owusu's work goes beyond examining value and offers a compelling exploration of transformation and regeneration. The devalued coins, revitalised through Owusu's alchemical manipulations, reclaim their significance as both aesthetic objects and catalysts for introspection. This brings a certain optimism into his political inquiry. By breathing new life into mundane, devalued objects, Owusu's art reveals the cyclical nature of economic systems and suggests the potential for rebirth and prosperity. From decay we obtain rebirth; from devaluation we are offered elevation. For with Owusu's tapestries there is spiritual ascendance and transfiguration. Form and structure dissolve into a fluid form that flows and transcends their elemental states. There is a touch. Owusu has the touch of Midas that makes the simple precious.

The exhibition, 'Everything You Touch Is Gold' is an interrogation of the very foundations of our value systems. It invites us to contemplate the vulnerability of value and the socio-political and historical frameworks that influence the economy. It challenges us to re-examine our relationship with currency and exchange in a consumerist economy driven by desire, and the broader implications these relationships hold for our societies. At the same time, 'Everything You Touch Is Gold' reminds us of the interconnectedness of all things: charged objects and living beings.

- Curatorial text by Azu Nwabogu

Artist: Yaw Owusu  
Title: Everything You Touch Is Gold  
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Opening Reception: 16<sup>th</sup> September 2023- 6pm-9pm  
Address: Gallery 1957, Accra, Galleria II  
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