

Awanle Ayiyboro Hawa Ali

Fine Feathers Don't Make Fine Birds

Thursday 13th February 2025 – 29th March 2025

Gallery I, Accra



Awanle Ayiyboro Hawa Ali, *Maya Waiting*, 2025, Acrylic on Canvas, 91 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 proudly presents '*Fine Feathers Don't Make Fine Birds*,' a solo show by Awanle Ayiyboro Hawa Ali. This new body of work is curated by Nana Yaa Poku Asare-Boadu and follows a ten-month residency with the gallery in Accra.

Awanle Ayiyboro Hawa Ali fully embodies the ethos of Édouard Manet's assertion, "We must accept our own times and paint what we see." In her latest series, "Fine feathers don't make fine birds," the series delves into the lives of two marginalized groups of young women in Accra: the Kayayei girls—female porters migrating from northern Ghana—and the Girly Girls, sex workers on Oxford Street. Through these narratives, Ayiyboro interrogates themes of power, gender, survival, and agency, employing deconstructed visual elements such as men's suiting, nudity, and Baroque reinterpretations of African female sexuality. These choices challenge entrenched Ghanaian societal norms, provoking critical questions about class, morality, and representation.

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Ayiboro's subjects exist at the intersection of societal exploitation and economic contribution. Despite enduring systemic biases and limited opportunities for women in Ghana, both groups play an essential yet overlooked role in the nation's economic landscape. The Kayayei girls, with their relentless labor, sustain the markets of Accra, facilitating trade and commerce. The Girly Girls, by navigating taboo professions, embody a resilience that fuels the informal economy, although under the shadow of moral judgment. What does it mean for these women to be both exploited and essential? How does their contribution reshape the narrative of who holds power and agency within Ghana's socio-economic terrain?

At the heart of Ayiboro's work is an intense tension: these women's roles are bound to societal taboos that constrain them, yet they carve out spaces of survival and significance. Their present realities challenge Ghana's deeply rooted notions of womanhood, where traditional roles often bind women to domesticity and moral scrutiny. What opportunities did their past deny them? What futures can they envision within a system that both uses and ostracizes them?

By depicting women born into poverty and tracing their struggles, Ayiboro not only sheds light on the layers of exploitation they endure but also draws provocative parallels to the history of the Baroque. This lavish and grandiose aesthetic, celebrated as the peak of European art in the 17th and 18th centuries, is recontextualized in her work. Her semi-opulent, Baroque-inspired settings reclaim the narrative, asserting that the Baroque's magnificence—its excess and decadence—was inseparable from the colonial exploitation of Africa, including the Gold Coast. Ayiboro's work becomes an act of reclamation, challenging the colonial histories embedded in art and culture. By anchoring her depictions of contemporary Ghanaian women within this historical framework, she positions their stories as central to both past and present, making a heartfelt statement about resilience, erasure, and the enduring legacies of exploitation and beauty.

Ayiboro's process was a collaborative effort, bringing together the two groups of women into the studio, in partnership with curator/artist Nana Yaa Poku Asare-Boadu. This all-female collaboration fostered an environment of trust and creativity, allowing the women to express themselves authentically. Asare-Boadu's photography captured the raw narratives and energy of the subjects, which Ayiboro later translated onto her canvases. This approach underscores the connection between studio photography and painting, as Ayiboro treats the photographic session as a painterly gesture, setting the tone for her detailed works. The interplay of light, pose, and drapery echoes the traditions of portraiture, where every element contributes to the narrative while emphasizing the power of collective female storytelling.

Among the recurring motifs in Ayiboro's paintings are lush satin curtains, their voluminous folds, creases and radiant sheen evoking Baroque richness. These folds, however, invite deeper reflection, as the Baroque differentiates its folds along two infinities: the pleats of matter, which represent the tangible and physical, and the folds of the soul, which evoke the intangible and metaphysical. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze's "The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque," Ayiboro masterfully intertwines these dualities, presenting curtains that are both physical backdrops of wealth and symbols of inner transformation and resilience. This interplay mirrors her signature blue-toned skin, rendered through softly whisked layers of brushstrokes, which invites viewers to consider both the material realities and the emotional depths of her subjects.

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undervalued women in Accra with lush drapes, Ayiboro crafts a poignant dialogue between past and present, grandeur and struggle, exploitation and resilience. The curtains serve as both a visual and metaphorical frame, uncovering the hidden costs of luxury while amplifying the contributions and untold stories of those whose labor and histories have shaped it.

- Curatorial Text by Nana Yaa Poku Asare-Boadu

About the Artist

Awanle Ayiboro Hawa Ali

b. 1997 Nima, Ghana. Lives and works in Accra, Ghana

Awanle Ayiboro Hawa Ali, a Ghanaian visual artist delves into the realities faced by African women living within a patriarchal society. Having grown up in a strict Muslim household as the eldest daughter, Hawa experienced the weight of societal expectations and the pressure to conform to traditional norms. Despite initial resistance, her exposure to the visual art domain and the guidance of supportive mentors ignited her latent passion, empowering her to break free from imposed expectations.

Hawa's artistic exploration is deeply rooted in the intricate tapestry of her environment, serving as an anthem of liberation that portrays women adorned in suits. Dedicated to extensive research, experiments, and ceaseless artistic exploration, she navigates the delicate balance between tradition and liberation within the sacred intimacy and complexities of home.

About Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 is a contemporary art gallery with spaces across Accra, Ghana and London, UK.

It dedicates its programme to spearheading international exchanges between art practices from these communities and the rest of the world, presenting artists who interrogate concepts of belonging and identity, cultural exchange, and social history beyond Western narratives.

Launched by Marwan Zakhem in 2016 on Ghanaian Independence Day, Gallery 1957 has since expanded across three gallery spaces in Accra. Originally set up to promote Ghana and West Africa's presence in the arts scene, it now encompasses the Global South and its diaspora. Gallery 1957's London space opened in October 2020, providing a further platform for artists to build dialogues with its growing network of international collaborators.

Gallery 1957 presents exhibitions, installations, and performances by celebrated artists, fostering connections between local and international audiences. The Gallery's global gallery partnerships and ongoing artist residency program have attracted numerous international artists and arts professionals to Ghana. The Gallery's annual Cultural Week in September serves as a platform for encouraging deeper engagement with Ghana's vibrant contemporary art scene.

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Gallery

In 2021, Gallery 1957 launched the Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize for female Ghanaian artists, the first ever dedicated art prize of its kind. The prize aims to further strengthen the gallery's commitment to supporting and promoting emerging and established artists.

Gallery 1957's work expands beyond the gallery walls through a public programme that includes local and international art fairs, talks, off-site projects, and site-specific installations as well as the publication of books and catalogues – continuously supporting cultural initiatives in Ghana, Africa and beyond.

Artist: Awanle Ayiboro Hawa Ali

Title: Fine Feathers Don't Make Fine Birds

Dates: 13th February 2025 – 29th March 2025

Artist & Curator Talk: Thursday 13th February 2025 5pm

Opening Reception: Thursday 13th February 2025 6pm-9pm

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