

Arthur Timothy
Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)
Gallery 1957, London

Thursday 10th July – 30th August 2025
Opening Reception: 10th July, 6pm - 9pm



Arthur Timothy, *The Ghost Ship (Triptych)*, 2025, Oil on canvas, 150 x 360 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is delighted to present a solo exhibition by **Arthur Timothy**, titled ***Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)***, at its London space. This latest body of work by the Ghanaian-born, British-Sierran artist explores the complex intersections of race, identity, and belonging through the lens of the Krio people of Sierra Leone and their historical parallels with the figure of Othello in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*.

In *Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)*, Arthur Timothy visualises these psychological and cultural legacies in large-scale oil paintings rendered in fresh washes of colour.

Drawing from personal memory, archival family photographs, and historical research, Timothy works invite reflection on the lasting impact of colonialism and the fragile complexities of assimilation. At once intimate and expansive, this timely and poignant exhibition explores how identity is shaped - and often fractured - by the forces of history.

Krios - descendants of freed enslaved Africans - were once referred to as “Black English”, a label worn with pride by the community's upper classes. For many, this designation affirmed their embrace of Victorian values: they were Christian, educated in the British system, and regarded England as a second home. The Sierra Leone colony had, in fact, been founded on the idea of creating “Black Englishmen” - enlightened and civilised Africans who reflected British ideals and rejected the “uncivilised” customs of the African interior.

Many Krios completed their education at elite British schools, dressed in the latest London styles, and mingled, often self-consciously, within upper-class British society. But as the 19th century wore on, attitudes in Europe shifted. The same traits that had once marked the Krios as model subjects began to be viewed with suspicion. Their Britishness was no longer enough. Increasingly, they were treated

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not as peers, but as imitations - reminders of a vision the empire no longer believed in. For many Krios, who had been raised to believe in their acceptance, this shift was disorienting and painful, forcing a reckoning with the limits of equality under empire.

Timothy draws a compelling connection between this historical disillusionment and the character of Othello, who, as Frantz Fanon noted, embodies the internal struggle of a racialised outsider seeking validation within a dominant culture. Othello is eloquent, respected, Christian, and accomplished - yet his adjustment into Venetian society cannot override the prejudices rooted in his Blackness. His tragic arc reflects the same tensions faced by the Krios: the promise of belonging, shattered by the rigid boundaries of race. In Timothy's work, this parallel becomes more than a reflection on history - it turns into a deeply personal meditation, threading together family memory, the weight of postcolonial legacy, and the quiet, ongoing search to find oneself in the spaces in-between.

***Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)* by Isabella Timothy**

We live in the wake of slavery. That is, we live always in its afterlife, its haunting residue¹

The phantom of a slave ship looms menacingly in the corner of Arthur Timothy's triptych, *Ghost Ship*. It is pale and translucent, yet its haunting presence has an all-too-real impact on those whose ancestors were forcibly uprooted centuries ago. For the artist, this is an inescapable fact of the Krio people. Arthur Timothy was born in Ghana in 1957 to a Ghanaian mother and Sierra Leonean Krio father, and grew up in Freetown, Sierra Leone, until the age of 9. In *Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)*, Timothy seeks to explore the Krio roots of his family and the lasting impact of slavery, displacement, and a century and a half of colonial rule on Sierra Leone.

The Krio are not a tribe of Sierra Leone, such as the Mende and Temne (among others native to the land), but rather the descendants of various freed enslaved Africans brought to the country as part of the 'Sierra Leone Experiment': an experiment in "social and cultural engineering"² initiated by Granville Sharp and supported by abolitionists and philanthropists. The first settlers in 1787 were the Black Poor from Britain, followed by the Nova Scotians (those who had fought for the British in the American War of Independence and been liberated to Canada, but found the climate harsh and the land they were promised unattainable) in 1792. Next came the Maroons, enslaved people who had fought for their freedom in the plantations of Jamaica in bloody uprisings. Finally, throughout the first half of the 19th century, the Recaptives or Liberated Africans arrived: freed directly from slave ships that had been caught illegally transporting human chattel after the official abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

While these people had a shared experience in the struggle of slavery and liberation, they were anything but a cohesive group at first. They had come originally from throughout the continent of Africa, from various tribes and speaking numerous languages. Furthermore, they had varying exposure to Western society: "the first settlers from London, Nova Scotia and Jamaica were acculturated Africans, most of them born into European civilisation"³, while the Recaptives had barely left continental waters before being brought to Sierra Leone. It was not until the 1870s that the delineation of these groups began to fully blur.

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The foreground of *Ghost Ship* depicts a small crowd of people, closely grouped on a ferry crossing the Sierra Leone River estuary, and fixated on the ghostly apparition or looking at the viewer. The individuals aboard this fictional boat are a mixture of Krio people from different eras and walks of life, equally as diverse as the first settlers. Their faces tell a story of horror when facing their shared history.

As we scan from left to right, we meet a young girl with braided hair, a woman whose face is contorted in mid-speech, two young ladies in their Sunday best complete with hats, a soldier in camouflage fatigues (calling to mind the brutal civil war of the nineties), and a blue-collar worker in a uniform and cap. The final figure in the triptych stands out for his anachronistic and somewhat inappropriate tropical attire: he is wearing a heavy three-piece suit and fedora hat and smoking a cigar through a cigar holder, while the undulations of the man's shirt behind him mimic billowing smoke. Krios were often referred to as “Black Englishmen” and had adopted anglicised customs, education, religion, language, and, as can be seen here, fashions. “One obvious way in which Creoles sought to emulate English middle-class manners was the wearing of European dress”, writes Leo Spitzer, the result of which was often “ostentatious and unsuited to Sierra Leone’s climate”.⁴ Timothy remembers laughingly that his great-uncle Thomas was a tall, gaunt figure, wearing a pith helmet.

The way in which Krio people had embraced European ways had long placed them as Britain’s ‘favoured Africans’, “nurtured in the belief that they were somehow special ... and as good as any Englishman”. However, due to the heightened racism that characterised the late nineteenth century, “they were increasingly rejected by the British and began to undergo a crisis of cultural self-confidence”⁵. The title *Othello’s Countrymen* is taken from the work by the Sierra Leonean Professor Eldred Jones, which examines Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes to Blackness in the theatre.⁶ Othello, the tragic Moor of Shakespeare’s play, had seemingly successfully assimilated into Western society, only to be betrayed and ultimately rejected; a parallel that can be drawn to the Krio people. Timothy states:

I was looking at Othello's life and the way that he was ultimately not accepted in Venetian society despite how far he'd risen. I think that's what happened to the Krios, because they achieved a great deal and they thought that they were accepted in English society, but then there was a period when the English seemed to turn against them.⁷

It’s worth noting that while the Krios embraced several aspects of British life, “Adoption of one way of life did not mean rejection of another”⁸, and uniquely Krio customs were, and remain, a key part of the culture. An example of the facets of Kriodom comes from the two portraits of the artist’s paternal grandmother, Harriet Timothy, that feature in the show. She is placed in two starkly contrasting surroundings in the paintings *Krio Mammy* and *Pala*, and the dichotomy of cultures is evident in these paintings. Harriet is shown in a nearly identical pose in each painting: seated in a wooden chair with her hands resting gently in her lap, holding her eyeglasses and observing the onlooker with a look of unwavering resilience. Her feet, clad in a pair of traditional patterned carpet slippers, cross-stitched by hand over several weeks, rest neatly beneath her.

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While she wears the same slippers in both compositions, the rest of Harriet's attire seems to be uniquely suited to her environs. In *Pala*, we are invited into the ornately tiled room of an Italian palazzo, where Grandma Harriet sits in the centre dressed in a smart pencil dress in a geometric pattern. She wears large, round, golden earrings and a wide-brimmed hat that dips at her brow. The shapes we see in her clothing are echoed in the ornate architectural details of doorways, tiled flooring, wall panelling and oval leaded windows.

The word *pala* means parlour in Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, and having a parlour to entertain guests was a symbol of status in 18th and 19th-century Europe. The artist recollects that at his Grandmother's house, "She and her guests always retreated to her parlour, and the children in the house were sent to bring refreshments". Timothy has transformed his Grandmother's *pala* into something even more grandiose than the middle-class English parlour to which a Victorian Krio person would have aspired. Harriet never left Sierra Leone; perhaps this was the image she had of an aspirational life in Europe.

In *Krio Mammy*, however, the viewer is brought into a much more humble scene. In this painting, Harriet wears a traditional Krio 'print dress' or 'kabba slot', a loose-fitting dress with an embroidered square yoke and frilled sleeves. Her hair is tied in a simple headscarf. While the fabric is patterned and the embroidery is intricate, the overall effect is simplicity. This is in great part due to Timothy's choice to create a minimal backdrop of a sparse wall and floor in shades of deep blue, and a frameless rectangular doorway. There are no architectural flourishes, or even curves and diagonal lines, as seen in *Pala*. The only adornment in the scene comes from three vibrant but at the same time sheer and somewhat intangible, red clay pots in the bottom left corner. These represent "local custom, ritual and folklore", according to the artist.

These traditional "low-fired and smoked, round-bottomed pots", typical of the region for centuries, are made solid again in the form of the ceramics created for the exhibition by Erica Timothy, ceramicist and Arthur's wife and collaborator. Erica was inspired by this style of pottery when she first visited Freetown in the 1980s, for its duality as "both functional vessels and also tactile, sculptural objects."⁹ Follow the gaze of Grandma Harriet and you'll be transported to a state banquet in the second large triptych of the show, *The Last Dance*. It is a striking imagined composition that brings a visual tension to a fêted historical event. In 1961, the year Sierra Leone gained its independence from Great Britain, a young Queen Elizabeth II visited the country during her first tour of West Africa. On the itinerary was a state banquet thrown by the country's first Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai, which is the subject of this painting.

In the painting, we see an ensemble of British royalty and Sierra Leoneans in black-tie regalia, set against the dramatic backdrop of an orange sky, dense forest and blue mountains. Reading the painting left to right, we are first met with Emmanuel Bankole Timothy, the artist's father, smiling at the viewer: gold pen in hand, a medal pinned to his tuxedo jacket. This is the MVO (Member of the Royal Victorian Order), which was awarded to EBT for his outstanding services as Press Liaison for the royal visit. At the centre of the composition, Queen Elizabeth II, bedecked in diamonds, tiara and sash, holds the arm of the new leader of the country, Prime Minister Margai. In the final panel of the triptych, Prince Philip dances with Mrs Mustapha, the wife of Sierra Leone's Deputy Premier. The mood of the painting is jubilant, and Timothy intended to "capture the genuine gaiety, warmth and

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affection of this historic visit and celebration.” Joyous though this moment may have been, the “exploitation, betrayal and marginalization by the British during more than a century of stormy British-Krio colonial relations”¹⁰ cannot be forgotten, and the juxtaposition of the tropical environment with such formal grandeur hints at such a conflict.

James Baldwin wrote that “*people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them*”¹¹. To the artist, the history that is trapped in himself and other Krio people manifests as one’s “sense of belonging being displaced”. To not know where your ancestors came from, but to be certain that they had endured the cruelty of slavery and had been sent to an alien land as an experiment in social engineering, is a heavy burden. This enigmatic history has endured in Krio people through the generations, and is set out in vibrant colour by the artist in these paintings.

References

¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake; Blackness and Being*, 2016

² Akintola J. G. Wyse, *The Krio of Sierra Leone; An Interpretive History*, 1989

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone; Responses to Colonialism, 1870-1945*, 1974

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen; The African in English Renaissance Drama*, 1965

⁷ Arthur Timothy, 2025 (All quotes taken from artist's statement or conversation with the artist, June 2025)

⁸ Spitzer, 1974

⁹ Erica Timothy, 2025

¹⁰ Gibril Raschid Cole & Mac Dixon-Fyle, *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio*, 2006

¹¹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955

About the Artist

Arthur Timothy is an artist and architect, whose artworks depict close family members and autobiographical events, specifically in Accra, where the artist was born in the year Ghana gained independence from colonial rule, and Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he lived until the age of 9. His large-scale oil paintings are inspired by an archive of photographs found amongst his father's papers which encourage considered and nuanced responses frozen in time. In fresh washes of colour, the artist presents images that are underpinned by memory, both personal and political.

Timothy attended Queen's College in Taunton, England before studying Architecture at The University of Sheffield and setting up his architectural practice, Timothy Associates, in 1986. After decades of practising as a RIBA Chartered Architect, the artist embarked on his career as a painter in 2018. Solo exhibitions include: Pippy Houldsworth Gallery - Insight (online) (2020); Grandma's Hands, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2021), Postcards from a Promised Land, Gallery 1957, London (2022-3); Curated by Ekow Eshun; Insight, and a Solo booth at The Armory Art Fair, New York, USA (2023).

The artist's group presentations include: Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK (2019); Introducing Arthur Timothy + Juan Miguel Quiñones, Ronchini Gallery, London, UK (2020); [West] African Renaissance, Christies, Dubai, UAE (2021); The Storytellers, Gallery 1957, London, UK (2022); Fire Figure Fantasy: Selections from ICA Miami's Collection, ICA Miami, USA (2022); UNLIMITED II, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana (2023); In and Out of time, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana

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(2023); Keeping Time, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana, (2024) Curated by Ekow Eshun and The Time is Always Now, Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA (2024), Curated by Ekow Eshun.

Timothy's work is included in the permanent collection of the V&A + RIBA Drawings Collection, UK; Lloyds of London, UK and ICA Miami's Permanent Collection, USA, The Dean Collection, USA; The Philadelphia Museum of Arts Permanent Collection, USA and The Tia Collection, USA. He's also been featured in a number of publications including: Apollo Magazine, The Financial Times, FT 'How to Spend It' Magazine, Nataal Magazine, Something Curated, Forbes Magazine, Mission Magazine; Toast Magazine and Mission TV and GQ; and architectural publications including Architects Journal, Building, the Sunday Times and The Observer. Arthur Timothy has also been a guest on BBC Radio 4's 'Saturday Live'.

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.

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: Arthur Timothy

Title: *Othello's Countrymen (The Krio Enigma)*

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