

**Rita Mawuena Benissan**

***The Ones Before Her Were Covered in Gold***

**Gallery 1957, London**

Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> October – 20<sup>th</sup> December 2025

Opening Reception Wednesday 14th October 2025 | 6-9pm



Rita Mawuena Benissan, *The Passing of A Kingdom*, 2025, Embroidery on canvas, 300 x 450 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery 1957.

**Gallery 1957** is pleased to present *The Ones Before Her Were Covered in Gold*, a solo exhibition by Ghanaian artist **Rita Mawuena Benissan**, opening in London on **14th October 2025**. Known for her research-driven, materially rich explorations of Ghanaian cultural memory, Benissan presents a new body of work that reclaims historical photographic archives through acts of colour, stitch, and sculpture. Drawing on collections across Europe and the United States, the artist reanimates late 19th and early 20th-century portraits of Ghanaian royals, elites, and anonymised subjects - figures long held in stasis by the colonial gaze.

Benissan's practice has always centered on the aesthetics of sovereignty. Her first solo exhibition reimagined the royal umbrella not only as a ceremonial structure, but as a potent, living symbol of authority and memory. In *The Ones Before Her Were Covered in Gold*, that impulse toward re-inscription deepens. Here, Benissan turns toward historical photographs that have often been preserved with little or no information about their subjects, and uses colour, scale, and recontextualisation to ask: What if the stories were told differently? What if Black figures in the archive were not frozen in monochrome, but remembered in full vibrancy, being seen in the dignity they always held?

Many of the photographs Benissan reclaims were taken in the late 1800s and early 1900s, before Ghana became Ghana, during the era of the British-controlled Gold Coast. Though they depict African

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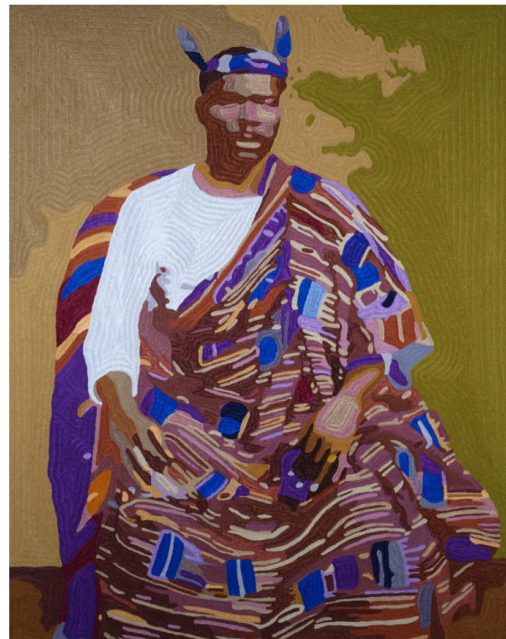
subjects, these images remain largely housed in European and American institutions, where they are catalogued, preserved, and framed within foreign systems of knowledge. Benissan's work responds to this paradox: what does it mean to reclaim a visual archive that one does not materially own? Her reimaginings, then, are not only artistic gestures but acts of symbolic repossession; ways of returning presence, dignity, and colour to images long held in colonial custody.

Set within the Victorian surrounds of Gallery 1957's London space, the exhibition reimagines the architecture itself as a speculative archive — a reversal of imperial narrative. What if this building, once emblematic of British decorum and control, had always housed the visual legacies of Ghanaian royalty? What if the archives belonged not to the coloniser, but to the colonised?

This imaginative provocation is grounded in rigorous research. During her 2025 residency in London, Benissan worked extensively with archival collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the National Archives UK, and the National Maritime Museum. She also drew from the database of *Si Hene*, her own foundation dedicated to the documentation of Ghanaian chieftaincy and visual culture, as well as materials encountered through *WereldLab* at the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam. These investigations revealed recurring visual patterns: the royal umbrella held in procession, the heavy drape of cloth, the upright posture of sitters composed before unfamiliar backdrops. Many of the images she encountered—sketches, reports, and photographs—were created through a distinctly colonial lens, distilling royal figures and cultural markers into simplified or exoticised forms.



**Source Photograph:**  
Basel Mission Archives



**Reimagined work:**  
*Man of The Cloth*, 2025, Embroidery on canvas, 200 x 162 cm.

In her reimagined works, Benissan intervenes in these representations with luminous colour, intricate embroidery, and shifts in scale. The process begins with AI-assisted digital recolouring—a contemporary technology used to breathe life back into monochrome surfaces. From there, she collaborates with Ghanaian artisans, including traditional umbrella makers and male embroiderers, to transform the recoloured images into richly stitched textile pieces. This convergence of digital and

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hand-made methods, the computational and the ceremonial, creates a tension that is central to Benissan's practice: a visual language where the future and the ancestral meet.

One of the works that encapsulates these themes is *Man of the Cloth*, based on an archival photograph from the Basel Mission Archives in Switzerland. Originally taken by European missionaries documenting life on the Gold Coast, the black-and-white image offered no information about the subject beyond his visual presence. In Benissan's version, the man is draped in vivid colour, his traditional cloth rendered in golds, reds and blues, and his gaze is restored in full intensity. Where the original photograph flattens him into an anonymous subject, Benissan's work returns his individuality and presence, reasserting his position as a figure of cultural pride and continuity.

Some of the source photographs depict kings, queens, chiefs, and their courts. Others feature elite families or individuals styled in the aesthetics of royalty. In many, subtle details reveal the entanglements of colonial modernity: a European-style hat clutched in one hand, a Victorian flower vase beside a seated woman, or a painted backdrop that imposes foreign order onto African subjects. These details serve as reminders that late 19th and early 20th-century photography was not a neutral tool, but a site of negotiation where sovereignty and subjugation were often framed in the same image. Across the exhibition, Benissan reclaims these histories through acts of visual translation. Threaded surfaces, digitally recoloured tones, and glowing textile compositions transform flat, monochrome documents into vibrant fields of presence. In this act of translation, she challenges the omissions and distortions embedded in historical archives, foregrounding the complexity, richness, and agency of her subjects. Her palette—full of golds, crimsons, ochre, and indigo—serves not only aesthetic ends, but symbolic ones: each hue layered with cultural reference and emotional charge.

Benissan's use of embroidery is both personal and political. It evokes Ghanaian craft traditions and royal regalia, but also engages in a broader dialogue with textile practices across cultures. While embroidery in Western contexts has often been associated with domestic, feminised labor, Benissan's works are created through collaboration with Ghanaian male artisans, many of whom are traditional umbrella makers. This cross-cultural contrast deepens the meaning of the stitched surface—not simply as ornament, but as a site of memory, authority, and reinvention.

Sculptural elements form a second key pillar of the exhibition. A series of bronze-like folded umbrellas, inspired by ceremonial chieftaincy processions, appear throughout the space. Rendered in a state of rest, these sculptural umbrellas echo the stillness of the archival image, yet carry the full weight of sovereignty. No longer active in procession, they become quiet monuments; guardians of memory, standing in dignified pause. These works, like their textile counterparts, explore what it means for power to be present even in stillness, and for heritage to reside not only in objects, but in form, material, and gesture.

In reframing colonial-era images through a Ghanaian lens, Benissan neither erases the archive nor replicates it. Instead, she opens a space in between, where new narratives unfold in gold thread and glimmering recolour. *The Ones Before Her Were Covered in Gold* transforms the gallery into a portal: part archive, part palace, part sanctuary. It is both a tribute and a challenge—to remember, to reimagine, and to restore what was always there, waiting to be seen in full colour.

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## About the Artist

### Rita Mawuena Benissan

(b. 1995, Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire. Lives and works in Accra, Ghana)

Rita Mawuena Benissan, a Ghanaian-American interdisciplinary artist, is on a mission to reimagine the royal umbrella, transforming it from a mere protective object into a potent symbol of Ghanaian identity. With a profound passion for art and cultural history, Rita collaborates with traditional artisans to breathe life into archival photos, immortalizing individual figures and communal scenes while embodying the beauty and power of her people.

Born in Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire in 1995 to Ghanaian parents, Rita's journey led her to the United States as a baby, where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Apparel and Textile Design from Michigan State University in 2017, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in photography and an African Studies Program Certificate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2021. In 2020, Rita established Si Hene, a foundation dedicated to preserving Ghana's chieftaincy and traditional culture, leaving a significant mark on Ghana's artistic and historical narratives. Through her foundation, she played a pivotal role in the reopening of the National Museum of Ghana in 2022 and served as the Chief Curator at the Institute Museum of Ghana (Noldor Artist Residency) until 2022. Furthermore, Rita served as the artistic director for the Open Society Foundation's Restitution Conference in Accra, demonstrating her commitment to cultural preservation and representation.

Rita's artistic prowess has garnered global recognition, with exhibitions at prestigious venues such as Arts + Literature Laboratory in Wisconsin (2021), the Foundation Contemporary of Art at Afrochella Festival (2021), Dak'Art - Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain at the IFAN African Art Museum in Dakar, Senegal (2022), and the group show "EFIE: Museum as Home" in Dortmund, Germany, Mitchell and Innes Gallery in New York (2023). Her solo exhibition, "In the World Not of the World," curated by Ekow Eshun at Gallery 1957 in Accra (2023), stands as a testament to her unwavering dedication to redefining the narrative of Ghanaian identity through beauty and strength. Rita has exhibited at 1-54 Marrakesh, in Morocco (2024) alongside Amoako Boafo and Zanele Muholi and participated in a group exhibition at the Venice Biennale (2024) called Unapologetic WomXn: The Dream is the Truth curated by Destinee Ross-Sutton. She currently has her first museum show at Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, South Africa and works featured in the Sharjah Biennale in the UAE. She has an exciting year ahead with a solo at the Atrium In Zeitz MOCAA and her first solo exhibition in London with Gallery 1957 at the end of 2025.

Rita's works have been acquired by private and institutional collections, including Foundation H, The Dean Collection, Fundacion Yannick Y Ben, Paola Pavirani Golinelli, Nicolas Berggruen, Amoako Boafo, and many others.

## 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.

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# Gallery

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.

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