

PRESS RELEASE

Isshaq Ismail

13th May – 18th June 2022 Accra, Ghana, Gallery I

BEAUTY
BEHIND THE
MADNESS



For his debut solo exhibition at Gallery 1957, the artist Isshaq Ismail takes inspiration from a somewhat unusual source: the second studio album by Canadian singer-songwriter The Weeknd. This debut solo is also eponymously titled after the same album.

1957

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Beauty Behind the Madness by Ismail has as its refrain, paintings that reflect a leitmotif of learning and unlearning that has come to characterise Ismail's work over the years. In his voyage of rediscovery, Ismail dares to be naïve, to move beyond Black portraiture, Romanticism and Representation to a form of Naturalism with a focus on social commentary, objectivism, determinism and characterisation of subject matter through a form of detonated formalism and abstraction. Ismail aims, in his words, "to capture daily life and imagination". Ismail is concerned with the quotidian and mundane aspects of human society. Ismail is amongst those rarified few who are able to learn through a process of observation and synthesis. He observes society, processes and crystallises; what he offers is a heuristic narrative of where society is at any given moment in time. It is literature but in picture form.

In *Beauty Behind the Madness* Ismail, speaks to knowledge and how Western canons, for Africans, can sometimes stifle creative impulse. Again Ismail references, the Weeknd's, *Losers*, the second track on the Album which speaks to the corrupting nature of "growing up" through automatic absorption and rote adherence to archaic forms of learning, to religion and to societal norms.

Ismail use of heavy impasto, gestural quick lines and associative colour palette that allow him to create texture and feeling with his subjects. Each character is alive due to their animated attributes. Texture upon texture, feeling upon feeling to give layers of complexity to his subjects. He aims for the very opposite of monumental but achieves the same memorable effect with subversive imprecision. The didacticism in Ismail's portraits is expressed by using distortions and the grotesque to generate meaning, especially advocacy for the voiceless. The emotions and moods of subjects suffering from our angst-inducing social, cultural and political contemporary reality are captured far more vividly and effectively by his distortions than by a more 'realistic' rendering. Ismail compassionately presents to the viewer identities fractured by anxieties induced by judgements about appearance; by material aspirations; by racial or gender-based oppression. Ismail himself coined the felicitous epithet "infantile semi-abstraction" for his intriguing and original paintings, but their childishness lies only in tapping into the same fount of inspiration as does a child and their tendency away from representational fidelity and towards abstraction is only a coda to their comprehensive examinations of form and line, colour and texture. Ismail's is a naïveté and abstraction that could only be conceived and executed by an excellent draughtsman.

Extract from curatorial text by Azu Nwagbogu

About the Artist

Isshaq Ismail is a Multidisciplinary artist born in Accra Ghana in 1989. He attended Ghanatta College of Arts and Design, where he studied from 2009 to 2012. He began his first portraits when he was between 19 and 20 years old. The relationship to painting is experienced as something organic for the artist; a place of expression and a means of escaping loneliness, art gives him comfort and autonomy in the expression of himself. He has exhibited all over the world; USA, France, Netherlands, Germany, South Africa and his native country Ghana where he currently lives and works.

About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra and London and working internationally, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. The gallery presents a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists currently bridging the gap between local and international practices. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. Opened in 2017, Gallery 1957 II is the gallery's second space, situated in Accra's Galleria Mall. The gallery serves as a vital platform, promoting West Africa's presence within the art scene by hosting ambitious exhibitions, providing resources for residencies and participating in international art fairs.

Email: info@gallery1957.com
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