

PRESS RELEASE

Araba Opoku

Whispers Down the Lane

September 24 – October 22, 2022 Accra, Ghana, Gallery II



Araba Opoku, *Helike; Cold Fire*, 2022, Acrylic on canvas 200 x 200 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

The moon follows me everywhere I go. At night, in the back seat of my mother's car, the moon watches over me with her eyes. My eyes are heavy, and I fall in and out of sleep as the wind blows over me. Will the moon take its eyes off me as I dream? Follow me moon, watch over me, follow me all the way home...

Gallery 1957, Ghana is proud to announce the gallery's first solo exhibition of new works by Araba Opoku (b. 1998, Ghana), running from September 24 to October 22, 2022. Opoku won the first edition of The Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize in 2021, an accolade launched by Gallery 1957 dedicated to women artists living and working in Ghana and its diaspora. *Whispers Down the Lane* is curated by Katherine Finerty, London-based curator, art historian, and writer.

Based in Accra, artist Araba Opoku paints psychological dreamscapes that delve into socio-economic problems. This new body of work focuses on the midnight hour of gathering water: a daunting yet dreamlike cycle in resonance with the moon. The artist's creative process is informed by her current studies towards a Psychology degree at the University of Ghana, empowering her to explore the individual and familial effects on those deprived of a basic need, whilst also celebrating their resilience in the light of it.

Across an abstract, ethereal body of work, Opoku's paintings of aquatic blues and vegetative greens subtly evoke her ritualistic experience of collecting water, which began when she moved to Dansoman with her mother and sister a decade ago. The artist's process starts with collaged collections of everyday objects relating to her midnight fetching ceremony, from sinks and streets to plants and the

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moon. She then transfers these collages to the computer, creating warped compositions that serve as maps to her physical and spiritual processes. When Opoku finally transports these sketches to paper, she relishes in pouring splashes of water and paint directly onto the canvas. This aqueous foundation is then built up through layers of acrylic colour and web-like borders, their undulating surfaces mirroring the effects of water with collaged details recalling our dream states. Whilst painting, Opoku fills her studio with the sounds of alternative musicians such as FKA Twigs, Sevdaliza, and Amaarae – as if in a subcultural sisterhood. The artist explains, “The mind is a map, an entire world waiting to become tangible in form, I explore how and why I want to make that possible”.

This immersive show invites us on a sensory journey that starts with the artist’s ritualistic vigil and travels across the many moons of our solar systems: their origin stories, their lunar cycles, their mythological namesakes. The artwork titles’ intergalactic inspiration is derived from Sci-Fi TV shows, from the fantastical Sandman and horrific Stranger Things to animated space opera Final Space and adult comedy Rick and Morty. Further informed by 15 different moons discovered on Nasa’s Solar System Exploration platform, science is presented as an entity full of secrets – whispers that disperse from creature to creator, planet to galaxy. Their slippages form memories that live on through endless storytelling. Exploring this tradition of gathering water at midnight across generations, the exhibition considers the effects of moonlight, the cyclical nature of being, the lost symmetry of twins, the passing of transitory memory, and the omnipresent constellations created by stars and spiders. Opoku persistently turns towards these nocturnal creatures, who under interstellar skies connect intricate worlds by spinning expansive blankets ensuing from their webs; textile-like places that make you feel safe, held, and capable of imagining new and endless possibilities.

Accompanying 15 new paintings is Opoku’s first video work documenting the sensory, insomniatic stages of midnight rising and water rationing with her sister. *Spider’s Blanket*, directed by Christine Boateng, layers vignettes of what is both shared and lost in the collective process of collecting water, as in the childhood game of *Whispers Down the Lane*, where messages are passed from ear to ear, starting where they finish and transforming as they traverse. Opoku’s choice of characters, colours, and visual language portray the diverse experiences of Accra residents, capturing still moments that also narrate stories of ordinary people and the essence of water in all our daily lives. As an accompanying programme to the exhibition, Opoku invites groups of children to engage in a thematic workshop series responding to the installation.

Opoku’s watery worlds conjure hope, beauty, and even satisfaction from struggle. Whilst inside the artist’s dreamscape, we join in her choreographies of colour, cosmology, and kinship. The dance propels us into another universe: an upside-down limbo where our rituals in the wake of twilight help us not only hydrate, but heal.

Text by Curator Katherine Finerty

I am now a moon, and I am the light to this new world. I begin to feel uneasy as I am drawn to a young woman, sitting in the backseat of a vehicle, with eyes heavy and full of dreams. I see my reflection, I see myself. My eyes shut slowly and my light dims gradually. Is this the beginning of the end? Wake up Araba... I hear the sound of water flowing... Wake up.

About Araba Opoku

Maame Araba Baboa Opoku, possibly the 18th of her name, was born in Ghana in May 1998. She is a multidisciplinary artist, creative director and collaborator. She is currently studying Psychology at the University of Ghana, Legon. Her expansive and autobiographical practice presently explores water scarcity in Accra alongside ideas of the supernatural and world-building. Elements of memory, masochism and mental health also continue to inform Opoku, expanding upon her 2020 body of work “Children of the Motley’s Cycle”, painted with acrylic on skiagraph (X Ray films sewn together with cotton threads). Her works take on the form of borderline abstraction with a touch of surrealism and she is inspired by artists including Adebayo Bolaji, Hilma af Klint, Yayoi Kusama, Francis Bacon, Cindy Sherman, Tracy Thompson, Inka Essenheigh, David Hockney, Louise Bourgeois and Joana Choumali.

Opoku recently exhibited in a solo show, *Come Hell or High Water* at the ADA\ Contemporary Art Gallery and is currently in her residency programme at Gallery 1957. Recent group exhibitions include *Birds of a Feather*, Phillips Auction House, (London, 2022); *Art X Lagos* (Lagos, 2021); *Stations of Protest*, Cult Meraki and Nubuke Foundation (Accra, 2020); *AfriFem*, Art+Feminism, Nubuke Foundation (Accra, 2020); and *Fullmoon Exhibition*, Artemartis (Accra, 2019). Other collaborations include being a member of the Artemartis Art Collective, 2022 Junior Fellow of the Noldor Residency (Accra) and a three-month residency project on fashion and art with Vlisco International in March 2021. Opoku was awarded the first edition of The Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize from Gallery 1957 in 2021, an initiative aiming to promote female artists in Africa and the diaspora. In her spare time, she works on personal fashion projects which contribute to her textile-like painting; as well as charity projects with friends and other artists, where she educates children in orphanages on art and helps them nurture their talents.

“My work for the past 5 years has explored aspects of complexity, chaos and intricacy. Most of my work stems from the need to break free from boundaries society has set on me and the need to draw other people like me together, as a collective unit, creating an ecosystem of boundless, limitless expressions of self. I find myself continually returning to aspects of life that are often hidden or misrepresented in the society that we live in. I focus on the topics society talks about but has minimum or no control over. My research allows me to channel my energy into producing art that represents the silent voices that need to be heard and the context and final products of my work have had an impact on people like and unlike me who have experienced my process or viewed my art.”

About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra, with a London outpost opened in 2020, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on Africa and its diaspora. Presenting a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the continent’s most significant artists, the gallery serves as a vital platform for promoting Africa’s presence within the art scene by hosting ambitious exhibitions, providing resources for residencies and participating in international art fairs. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016 with an initial focus on supporting the West African arts scene, Gallery 1957 has since expanded to collaborate with leading artists globally. The gallery now hosts three spaces in Accra – one in the Kempinski Hotel and two in Galleria Mall – and a London outpost in Hyde Park Gate.

Artist: Araba Opoku

Title: *Whispers Down the Lane*

Dates: 24th September – 22nd October

Opening Reception: 24th September, 2022 - 6pm-9pm

Address: Gallery 1957, Accra, Gallery II
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