

PRESS RELEASE

Tjaša Renar

In Your Presence I Meet My Absence

October 27 – December 1, 2022 Accra, Ghana, Gallery III



Tjaša Renar, *Harmony 6/4*, 2022. Chalk and dry pastel on canvas, 153 x 126cm
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is pleased to present *In Your Presence I Meet My Absence*, a solo exhibition by Accra based, Slovenia born artist, Tjaša Renar. Running from October 27th - December 1st at Gallery III, Accra, Ghana. *In Your Presence I Meet My Absence* is an allegory of coming home into one another. It is a series of figurative portraits that reflect a transformational narrative of mutual discovery and connection.

Earlier this year, Accra based Slovenian artist, Tjaša Renar, was invited by Gallery 1957 to do a residency. During the months of March and April 2022, the gallery organised portrait sittings for various members of its creative community. For the artist, this presented a challenge. Whereas before that, her live painting had evolved into a deeply personal and transformational part of her practice, mainly involving subjects that touched her life or that she had a previous connection to, she was now facing the prospect of painting people the majority of whom were strangers, or unknown. The artist

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explains: “What inspires me is the relationship. Making a portrait is more about spending time together than about painting.”

Rener’s process started by researching some of her subjects, and by going door to door for studio visits that would allow her to establish a point of contact. She then fell back on a prerequisite of her practice: setting the stage, or designing the context. In her own words: “How can people emerge, or come out without support? The background helps with providing that support.” Her approach to cultivating the scene is at once ritualistic and intuitive. It speaks of a tension between the grounded and the ephemeral, and harkens to bird nesting: the meditative act of turning a loose grouping of twigs into a structurally sound home base. Although fictional and fabricated, the context nonetheless lends itself to the establishment of a safe zone that makes room for imperfections while sowing the seeds of a mutual and authentic exchange. The fetching of a plant, and a particular quality of light anchor Rener to the present while connecting her to her home back in Slovenia where she is affectionately referred to as *Sonček* or ‘Little Sun’. A table, a chair or couch, and floor mats are often part of the scene, the latter adding an element of locality, personality and contrast. The artist explains: “I sometimes change the scenography. It happens instinctively because the setting doesn’t feel right in this particular moment, for that particular person.” Whereas the staging part of Rener’s process is driven by thoughtfulness and an attention to detail, the painting stage is more visceral and improvisational in nature. The artist comments: “I never sit still when I paint. I engage with my whole body.”

She works primarily on paper and non-stretched canvas, alternating between charcoal, acrylic paint as well as dry and oil pastels. Rener also juggles a number of brushes which don’t get cleaned during the session. The point of the portrait, in her eyes, is not to present an idealised, sanitised vision of the sitter, but rather to embrace a certain flow of energy: a quality of aliveness and presence that is felt and shared in a particular moment in time. The artist explains: “All my portraits are also self portraits. I’m not interested in perfection. I may leave some elements out, such as an eye, a nail, a shoe...they are indicators, but not the most important thing. The whole is.”

The exhibition’s signature work *Harmony 6/4* is a portrait of Isshaq Ismail, and a beautiful depiction of the power of human connection. The work as a whole is a paradox of depth and simplicity, energy and restfulness, autonomy and abandon. The minimalist charcoal lines stand out against a spread of sunrise colours-longer wavelength colours, namely pink, peach and orange- which while unexpected against the sheer presence and masculinity of the figure, induce an immediate sense of calm and effortlessness. The eyes are the focal point of the portrait: they seem to follow and look into the viewer regardless of the angle they’re taken from, suggesting a sustained focus and awareness. Between the laser eyes and the half smile which is at once wistful, empathetic and mysterious, there is something vaguely ‘monalisaesque’ about the work, and though it is obviously a contemporary portrait that is very different in style, composition and sensibility.

In *Reflection 1/4*, there is a sense of being left out of the full picture or of only being granted partial access through the lens of the mirror reflection. The face in the mirror is surrounded by bright light and yet missing its eyes, which is echoed in the thick shadows that box in the central figure of the sitter. The pursed lips evoke a degree of disconnect which is further reinforced in the absent heel and slide. Stylistically, *Reflection 1/4* is very different from *Harmony 6/4* in that it exudes a certain impressionistic messiness in the broad paint strokes as well as the muted charcoal lines that are embedded in the wet paint. In contrast, there is a certain fragility and humanity to the work which is conveyed in the delicate pastel lines of light, kissing along the back of the neck and along the arms and hands of the figure.

Spiral 16/3 is a brilliant portrayal of what it feels like to be safe and lost to the moment. The work can be legitimately viewed from different cardinal points or perspectives, each highlighting particular details or nuances of the portrait. The female figure is engrossed in her phone at the heart of a “flying” carpet or matrix that is protective and womblike in its composition, while her reflection seems to be encapsulated in an alternate space, outside of the matrix. Whereas she seems to be courting the edge of sleep, her reflection appears to be either already asleep or else in a deep meditative state. The undulating braids and bleeding paint around her feet imply a looseness of being and a freedom from constraint which underline the escapist nature of the work. *Spiral 16/3* is stylistically distinct from the previous two works in that its execution straddles a fine balance between premeditation and spontaneity,

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suggesting that the artist's live painting technique is versatile and more sensitive to the needs or visual language of the moment than to any rigid adherence to style.

In Your Presence I Meet My Absence is a body of work that posits the notion of homecoming as a shared and mutual pursuit, while being refreshing in both its humanity and emotional honesty.

- Curatorial essay by Rania Odaymat

About the Artist

(b.1986, Slovenia. Lives and works in Accra)

Tjaša Renner is a Slovenian figurative artist and printmaker based in Accra. After earning her Masters of Fine Arts from the University Of Ljubljana where she was awarded a special merit prize, Tjaša moved to a remote village by lake Bosumtwi, situated over a meteorite impact crater, in 2013. For the next 3 years, she became part of a local community where she had her first real foray into the culture and its customs. As a figurative artist, she was naturally inspired to paint portraits of her fellow villagers. She also ran a successful Kickstarter campaign for an original picture book, *A Story From Africa*, which was presented at the Slovenian Biennale Of Illustration, and which she then published one year after.

In 2016, she settled in the capital, Accra, where she was initially astonished by the great economic divide. She found herself drawn to the people she came into contact with in her everyday life and to their systems of survival. This led her to develop her portraits into larger and more complex works combining various techniques and materials: xerox, printed fabric, found objects, screen prints, batik etc... Her work evolved into a hybrid of her formal training as a model painter and the culture she was immersed in, which was starting to pollinate her artistic vision. In 2017, she rented an artist's studio in Dzorwulu in which she had an open door policy and where she held regular events: workshops, exhibitions, art talks... This introduced her to a community of diverse people, from her neighbours (business owners, employees, street hawkers, children, homeless people) to fellow artists and art enthusiasts. In 2020, she officially launched the *Open House Studio*, a creative space that served as an art cohabitation network, promoting creative exchanges and providing a platform to both established and non established artists. It was a godsend to many artists who otherwise didn't have access to any platform that would agree to show their work. It was also open to children, and to the general public offering them a rare insight into the contemporary art scene.

In 2021, Tjaša kicked off the *Tiniest Accra Gallery*, an ongoing initiative whose aim is to expose street children to art, and to engage them creatively.

About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra, with a London outpost opened in 2020, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. Presenting a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists, 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. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. The gallery now hosts three spaces in Accra – one in the Kempinski Hotel and two in the Galleria Mall – and a London outpost in Hyde Park Gate.

Artist: Tjaša Renner

Title: *In Your Presence I Meet My Absence*

Dates: 27th October – 1st December

Opening Reception: 27th October, 2022 - 6pm-9pm

Address: Gallery 1957, Accra, Gallery III
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