

PRESS RELEASE
Artemartis Collective
When The Birds Fly Home
7th February – 15th March 2023



James Mishio, Confidential, 2022, Acrylic, Oil, Pastel & Fabric on Canvas, 100 x 80 cm

In the heart of Dansoman, Accra, next to a noisy primary school, there is a blueish-grey house where the members of the collective Artemartis gather and work. *When The Birds Fly Home* is a group exhibition dedicated to showcasing these artists' individuality in a great variety of different mediums and visual languages, as well as interrogating the meaning behind being in a collective Artspace in contemporary Ghana. For the first time, these young men and women -or the *birds*- present their works together in their home country, as a collective act of *flying home*. As different as their processes and techniques are, their works share narratives that are socially and politically engaged, that arise from a common sense of belonging to and identification with the collective.

Building on the body of work presented at the "Whispers Down the Lane " solo show at Gallery 1957 in September 2022, **Araba Opoku's** interest in the economy of water develops into broader research of ecosystems and human relations with the fluid element. Her surfaces, even more densified by layers of repetitive patterns and symbolic elements, turn fabric into rivers of meanings swishing and rustling softly before our eyes, making visible, underneath, the very molecules and veins of vivid water made in acrylic paint. The all-shades-of-blue palette is replaced by a brighter yet drier spectrum of colors: a comment on the consequences of climate change on Ghana's warm and tropical climate.

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With her large-scale abstract works, Opoku's shares a personal experience that is both dark and bright; happening at times at night when fetching water under the moonlight, and at times under the bright light of Ghana's scorching sun shining on the fast-developing metropolis. She sews and stitches these experiences together, giving the threads of the fabric a protagonist role.

Opoku's contribution to this exhibition goes beyond her exhibited works. As the Creative Director of Artemartis, she believes in the importance of community and the power of teamwork and how it goes a long way in developing individual skill sets and talents, especially with artists.

In **Awanle Ayiboro's** works, shades of blue are visually predominant. Her articulation of the skin is rendered in a dense cobalt blue that moves, almost pulsating, often animating her characters' gaze. Ayiboro's blue figures are predominantly women and children. In this case, they are child-women, as the artist addresses in particular the theme of child marriage with the works presented in the show. Intertwined with her personal journey through womanhood and sexual discovery, the artist tells us a story about deprived innocence in utter simplicity. She paints a reminiscent of a time that was lost, a naivety that was stolen.

Ayiboro, like many contemporaries, uses the woman's body to present the battlefield that is her human condition, one unfairly written for her by circumstances and scarred by a loss of agency. However, her works are not merely a critical commentary of civil rights. The artist conveys poetic portraits of hope, using blue as a metaphorical hymn to the freedom in vast blue skies and mighty oceans.

Similar to the works of Opoku and Ayiboro, we find social issues of Contemporary Ghana threading a theme through the rest of the collection.

Courage Hunke's practice for instance carries a strong socio-political theme, commenting on the accusations of witchcraft in Ghana that are often brought against older Ghanaian women, who get detained in 'witch camps.' Hunke dedicates his work to these women and articulates with precise and recognizable color harmonies in acrylic paint. The women's skins are in tones of acid green and yellow, colors often associated in popular culture and cartoons to villains. The figures are juxtaposed to a warm combination of ochre and violet in the backgrounds.

These figures are calm. They appear to be resting as their weary hands indulge on their laps, yet, their proud and penetrating gazes inspire a non-surrounding attitude towards their condition of captivity and the unfairness of their faith.

The artist borrows shapes and patterns traditionally used by local women in the village of Sirigu in the Upper East Region of Ghana to decorate buildings in his paintings. Moving beyond a state of injustice, the artist focuses on the subjects' dignity as human beings, who are resourceful as anyone else. Hunke adds a final layer to his works by painting vertical poems in a hieroglyphic-like scripts that read "*My mother is the moon, my father is the sun*".

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James Mishio's portraits shed light on the severity of conservative traditions and social norms that can manifest in Ghana in the stigmatisation of the individual. Painted with his signature use of the palette knife sculpting thick-impasto figures, these works belong to a series titled "Invisible Realities". The realities that cannot be seen, and to which Mishio alludes, are safe environments that enable his characters to simply exist, as they are, far removed from the judgmental eyes of society. He paints spaces in which figures find in their privacy a way be comfortable with themselves, their sexual orientation, their taste, and their whole way of being.

Social rejection is a recurrent theme in Mishio's artistic discourse. For example, his male figures often display braided hair. Mishio draws attention to the widespread Ghanaian prejudice that associates men's choice of braids to the espousal of a sinful life and an unholy transgression to critique archaic idealism that, in his view, should be overcome.

In the last phase of his process, after having painted the background in acrylic and sculpted his figures in oil, Mishio applies fabric clothing onto his figures, which he details with pastel. This last operation carries a special meaning for the artist as it is his brother, a fashion designer, who scouts the fabric for him.

Kwaku Yaro's works are similarly linked to fashion, in particular, to the fashion scene of Labadi Beach in Accra. Yaro finds in fashion the very first self-presentation of every person in society. It is self-affirmation, expressed through style and posture, that inspires the artist's research and his compositions. His attempt is to portray the swag and mannerism of the characters that inhabited the neighbourhood where he grew up. He evokes their state of mind and unique visual language through the use, or re-use, of materials.

In Yaro's childhood, plastic bags were visually recurrent. The relationship between these everyday objects and consumption is very intimate, and yet plastic bags transcend the immediate, short-lived use they were originally designed for. Yaro thus started integrating plastic bags into his works, to set up scenes that were intimately reminiscent of his childhood. He later expanded his use of up-cycled materials to include African mats, which quickly became the artist's signature mark. The bags carry everyone's belongings on a daily basis and the great majority of the population often sleeps, rests, or prays on the mats. As such, these objects thus carry with them all these intimate stories and often complicated circumstances.

Yaro's integration of these materials results in playful collages. Within the work, the mat, functions as the frame of the artwork itself. His figures are painted with *pointillism* in a mixture of colors resulting in a strong visual triangle of bold red lipstick, a green-skin tones, and royal blue eyes.

The study of portraiture develops in surreal directions in the work of **Efia Serwah Barning**, as well as in that of **Kwaku Owusu Osei Achim**.

The voluptuous women's bodies that Serwah paints are repositories of her most intimate message. Her female characters, always surrounded by mysterious scenes, are captured in

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fluctuating movements inspiring sensuality and freedom. As we move with them, we soon realize that they operate in the works on a multiplicity of layers, symbols and signifiers. Like Man Ray and Magritte, Serwah cuts along the edges of her figures to replicate them into visions, appearances of themselves in a different silhouette in her work *Between a rock and a hard place*, in which the female character becomes one with the waterfall surrounding her.

Serwah's visual game is one of reflections. Her figures are playing with symbolic elements such as mirrors and gates to manifest the introspective aspect of their own quest for self-liberation from societal boundaries. Women, as per the artist's own experience, are confined into strictly pre-designed confines. The characters she paints are trying to escape these boundaries that society puts into expectations, pressures, and definitions of what the role and the place of a woman is. These layers and symbols trigger in Serwah an act of resistance; an act that reclaims a body into a new and personal definition of it.

The duality of meaning in Serwah's reflective surfaces as they simultaneously imprison and yet protect her protagonists is emblematic of the artist's intrigue, which in *Spirit And Body*, she uses to address the complex theme of preparation and performance.

Achim's oil and acrylic paintings also belong in the realm of surrealism and showcase a particular interest in the notion of *the unseen*. His narrative rotates around sign-language, a mode of communication that is simultaneously visual and non-visible. Having been exposed for a long period to children with special needs as a fine art teacher in a primary school in Accra, Achim finds himself drawn by this special and powerful form of communication.

In a world saturated with meaningless noise, sign language represents for the artist the purity of real and meaningful interactions, a means to overcome physical barriers to create truthful connections. In the artist's words: "It is a language about intuition, about love and about being vulnerable". Extremely fascinated by the physical expressions of a language that preserves sincerity and intimacy, Achim visually articulates these human contacts by connecting his figure's bodily parts, mostly extending their elongated necks and heads, which meet and merge into the canvas as metaphors of the figures' thoughts. Achim hence paints the meeting of their dreams, the connection of the unseen, the truth captured in the unspoken. He does so with a minimalist color spectrum of soft and pastel tones, a sense of calmness and universality; the idea that these figures are the idealized human, communicating something universal to all of us.

Joshua Oheneba-Takyi's works are also at the crossroads between portraiture and surrealism. While some elements are painted with extreme realism, others are deliberately left unfinished, showing the undercoats of *sanguigna* paint, a tone used in Renaissance for preparatory drawings. Oheneba is very interested in the dramatic effect of bodily motions and gestures in Renaissance paintings. We find this *dramatism of the bodies* in his large-scale oil paintings, especially in his subjects' interaction with the element of the chair: undisputed protagonist of his research.

Oheneba's passion for chairs is of a political kind. He investigates the power relationships, cultural connotations, and psychological features that sitters express by means of their chair

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and the ways of sitting on them and interacting with them. For instance, chairs, according to Oheneba, capture the idea of being “part of the conversation, by being allowed a seat at the table”. In a more philosophical sense, Oheneba’s intent is also to reference the common game of the musical chairs where players are eliminated once they no longer have a chair to sit on: a metaphor, in the artist’s narrative, of death. Chairs are also witnesses of everything that has been done and said, they are the repositories of historical traces. For this very reason, Oheneba –also inspired by Doris Salcedo *Chair* installation (2003) – has been collecting original chairs from across the country, which he uses to stage the scenes that he photographs and paints.

The two works by **Abdur Rahman Muhammad** exhibited in this group show belong to a larger series that revolves around the commonly known *Ghana Must Go* bags. These objects take their name from the documented migration flow in which, in the 80s, thousands of immigrants, mostly Ghanaian, were forced to flee from Nigeria with very short notice. They stuffed their belongings into these bags that today carry a visual historical connotation that Rahman centers his contemporary narrative around.

In *Cross Of Gold*, a young woman is sitting cross-legged absorbed in her thoughts. She is staring right back at us. Her gaze encloses the complex dilemma that Rahman’s attempts to visually formulate in the series. A dilemma inhabiting an entire youth generation persuaded by the idea that “somewhere else”, there are better opportunities for them. Her gaze displays her predicament. She is torn between the desire to accomplish her perceived responsibility towards her own country and her yearning for a better life. She wonders: “Should I stay, or should I go? What if this idea of being abroad is idealized? How can I build my identity within this doubt and inability to position myself?”. Rahman thus flips the *Ghana Must Go*’s connotation by inverting the bags’ predetermined function, by filling it with his characters’ vastest dreams and hopes.

The bittersweet sadness of his portraits is beautifully rendered in oil paint, which he thickly applies with hard brushes to give texture to the yellow and brown skins. Rahman paints people he has shared relationships or experiences with, in one way or another. Often, he paints the other artists of the collective. In portraiture, he searches, he says, “for the distinctive aspect that makes us all unique.”

When the Birds Fly Home is a reunion and a celebration. On one hand it reunites these birds in their home, allowing us to experience each and everyone’s accomplishment - their talent, inspiration, and perseverance - and on the other hand, it pays a tribute to the vastness of the impact that Artemartis has played in supporting their flight. Artemartis is a family, a nest, that has allowed every artist to take flight on their own.

This exhibition is a contemporary and wonderful image of Ghana. One forged by the desire to build a bright future for its people, filled with love and admiration for its heritage, yet also involved into a critical and artistic approach to improve what is wrong and can be bettered.

Curatorial text by Angelica Litta Modignani

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About the artists

Abdur Rahman Muhammad (Ghanaian, b. 1992) is a contemporary artist who works and resides in Accra. He has been a practising artist for over six years. His works are usually influenced by the culture of western music, especially hip-hop and its effect on the youth of Ghana. He is a member of the Ghanaian art collective, Artemartis. His works have found their way to collectors and exhibitions all over the world. He applies oil in his works, and he focuses on stories of the youth in his community, often experienced first-hand.

Maame Araba Baboia Opoku, possibly the 18th of her name, was born in Ghana. She is a multidisciplinary artist, creative director and collaborator. She is currently studying Psychology at University of Ghana, Legon. Her expansive practice presently explores water scarcity in Accra alongside ideas of the supernatural and world building. The multiplicity of ecologies at all stages inform Opoku, expanding upon her practice. Her works take on the form of borderline abstraction with a touch of surrealism.

Awanle Ayiboro Hawa Ali (Ghanaian, b. 1997) is a visual artist focused on creating art based on the experiences of the African woman in a patriarchal society. Born into a strict muslim family as the first female child of her nuclear family, there had always been unrealistic societal expectations and pressure on her concerning 'settling down' and having children. However, Awanle does not believe in the institution of marriage and its limitation to a woman's worth; she paints with the intent of defying the standards set for women like her. Hawa aims to achieve her goals of becoming an artist who will be known for generations to come. She currently works with Artemartis, an art collective in Accra, where she spends time researching, experimenting and painting.

Courage K. Hunke (Ghanaian, b.2000) is a contemporary Experimental artist who resides in Ashaiman, Tema. His practices involve the use of acrylic on canvas as well as graphite. He is a member of the Artemartis collective based in Accra, Ghana. His works were recently exhibited at the "Birds Of A Feather" exhibition, a collaboration between Phillips Auction House and Artemartis I London. His art is influenced by the stories of everyday Ghanaian women and children. He is a member of the Artemartis collective in Accra.

Efia Serwah (Ghanaian, b. 1998) is a surreal visual artist whose practice responds to aesthetic representations of black femininity throughout art history. Using natural landscapes and symbolic imagery such as gates and mirrors, her works reimagine the interior worlds of her subjects unbounded by cultural expectations and respectability politics. Her works express the growing pains of becoming, unlearning and struggling to discover new definitions of femininity that are expansive, free and inclusive. Efia graduated from the University of Birmingham in 2020 where she studied international Law and Globalization with a focus on Women's Rights and Migrant Issues. She is part of the Ghana based art collective and agency, Artemartis.

James Mishio, (Ghanaian b.1997) is a mixed media artist of the Ghanaian contemporary art scene, who works and lives in Korle-Bu, Accra. His experimentation with various forms of media and materials and sensitive exploration of the humanity of his subjects fuels his work. He uses Impasto, with a palette knife, applying Oil and Fabric on canvas to create his works. His use of oil for the skins of his subject emphasises on the richness and wealth of the African individual and the history their skin holds. His works have found their way to private collections, a notable exhibition titled 'Bird of A Feather' by Phillips Auction House and Artemartis, and galleries such as the Coningsby Gallery, in London.

Oheneba-Takyi Joshua, (Ghanaian b.1997) is a painter whose growing career reveals both a painter of technical prowess and a person dedicated to research. Exploring themes centred on the human experience, Oheneba focuses his practice on the interaction between chairs and humans, using that as

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a starting point in his work. He is interested in the universality of chairs, the residual history, memory, and experiences that develop as a result of the continuous relationship between humans and this man-made object. The mundane and inanimate object is imbued with life of its own through placement, magnification and repetition. The chairs dominate space in his work, competing fervently with human presence. Yet, given his academic background in the field of science, he dedicated himself to pursue art full time. He is a member of the Ghanaian art collective, Artemartis.

Kwaku Osei Owusu Achim (Ghanaian b. 1991) is an emerging conceptual contemporary artist based in Accra, Ghana. His work stems from recognizing that the scope of our interaction and engagement with the world defines the meaning we attach to life. He intends to project a communication form, hand sign language, which many persons rely on as a medium to access and interact with the world, other than the use of words formulated in specific dialects, also encompasses his fascination with how expressions of individualism through decision-making have a trickledown effect on collective interests.

Emmanuel Kwaku Yaro (Ghanaian, b. 1995) is a contemporary artist who resides in Labadi, Accra. He has been a practising artist for over six years and has a number of group exhibitions to his name, working with notable institutions including Alliance Française d'Accra. Yaro has also had a solo exhibition in the African Regent Hotel in Accra which also resulted in growth in the interest in his works, both locally and internationally. He has also been involved in a number of group exhibitions with Efie Gallery in Dubai and Phillips Auction House in London. He is a member of the Artemartis collective in Accra. Inspired by a range of artists like Georges Seurat, Marie-Guillemine Benoist and Sami Bentil, Yaro's research and development practices go beyond the limitation of his five senses, and his works are a testament to his passion for detail.

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.

Title: *When The Birds Fly Home*

Dates: 7th February – 15th March

Address: Gallery 1957 II, Accra - Located in Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City & Galleria Mall

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