

Godfried Donkor

Battle Royale II: Pantheon of Champions

2nd June – 12th August 2023, London

Gallery 1957 London is delighted to present *Battle Royale II: Pantheon of Champions*, a new solo exhibition by British-Ghanaian mixed-media artist Godfried Donkor. Following his 2019 solo exhibition in Ghana *Battle Royale I: Last Man Standing*, the show features a new body of work from his recent residency with the gallery in Accra.

Battle Royale marks the culmination of over 20 years of research by Donkor into colonialism, slavery, intercontinental trade relationships and the socio-historical relations between Africa, Europe and the Caribbean.

Using the history of boxing and its origin within Ghana as the cornerstones of his extensive research, Donkor explores its social-historical relevance and its relationship with the slave trade across the UK, USA and Ghana. The artist cites events such as ‘battles royal,’ where white men would force black slaves to fight to the death until there was only one man standing. From aristocrats fighting peasants in the UK, to plantation owners staging matches between slaves in the US, Donkor's work examines the social-historical relevance of boxing as ‘the art of self-defence.’

While *Battle Royale I* focused on the earlier iconography of boxing, depicting figures such as Tom Molineaux, Bill Richmond and John (Jack) Johnson, some of whom were born slaves, *Battle Royale II* focuses on the recent and contemporary boxing scene in Ghana. The show stems from the artist's walks through Jamestown and his visits to the many improvised boxing gyms of this part of Accra that are home to an unprecedented number of world boxing champions (8 World Champions and 2 recognised as such), and also the first port of settlement by the British in Ghana.

The advent of the Industrial Revolution during the colonial encounter indelibly changed Accra, and Jamestown in particular, into a vibrant trading centre where goods and money were exchanged. It was during that period when boxing began its transformation from a sport into a business with commercial potential, as well as a social event for entertainment patronised by educated elites and local political figures alike, thus becoming hugely popular across the country.

The antecedent boxers from *Battle Royale I* were fighting for survival and freedom, while the contemporary boxers whom Donkor is celebrating in *Battle Royale II* are fighting for their nation and kin, seeking fortune, rewards, fame, rise in society and a better life.

Donkor's *Pantheon* pays homage to 10 renowned local champions who became legendary and iconic figures, such as Roy ‘Black Flash’ Ankrah, Floyd Klutei Robertson, David Kotei Poison, Azumah ‘Zoom Zoom the Professor Nelson, Nana Yaw Konadu (Nana Yaw Konadu Yeboah), Ike ‘Bazooka’ Quartey, Alfred ‘Cobra’ Kotey, Joshua Clottey, Joseph ‘King Kong’ Agbeko A.K.A Torgbui Kaletor II (Warrior King), and Isaac Dogboe.

As well as telling the story of these champions, Donkor's icon paintings also capture the energy of Jamestown, by giving the viewer a glimpse into the dynamic and colourful public spaces, outdoor training gyms and fighting arenas of this part of Accra, which gave birth to and shaped these ‘boxing gods’.

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Gallery 1957, I, II and III Accra
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The exhibition is accompanied by critical texts by Thomas Seymour and Nii Allotey Bruce-Konuah.

About the Artist

Godfried Donkor (b. 1964, Kumasi, Ghana) is a mixed-media and multidisciplinary artist interested in the socio-historical relationships of Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. Known for his collages utilising newspaper and gold leaf in a religious-like imagery. As well as paintings which explore the relationship between slave trade and boxing, and sculptures which offer a new take on the traditional adinkra symbolism of Ghana. Adinkras offer a short-hand, often humorous representation of shared lessons, proverbs, and philosophies. They have the potential to encapsulate collective values and reflect on the health of our communities in these unprecedented times.

Donkor completed a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins, London and a Master of Arts in African Art History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. Selected solo and group presentations include: *David Adjaye: Making Memory*, Design Museum, London (2019); *The First Day of the Yam Custom: 1817*, Gallery 1957, Accra (2017); *Afriques Capitales*, Parc de la Villette, Paris (2017); *Still the Barbarians*, EVA International Ireland's Biennial, Limerick (2016); *Conversations: African and African American artworks in Dialogue*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, USA (2016-2014); *28 days: Reimagining Black History Month*, J. M. Barnicke gallery and Georgia Scherman projects, Toronto, Canada (2012); *Space and Currencies*, Museum of Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa (2010) and *Pin Up*, Tate Modern, London, UK (2004).

In 1998, the artist was awarded the Prix de la Revelation at the Dakar Biennale. Donkor's work is included in international collections such as: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Smithsonian Museum of African Art, Washington USA; Studio Museum, Harlem; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Spanish Sports Council Collection; National Collection of Senegal; University of Helsinki; National Gallery of Botswana; The World Bank Collection; Washington D.C and The Unilever Collection. The artist was commissioned by the Camberwell Society to create a public art piece for Denmark Hill Station, London, which was unveiled in 2022. His work will be featured in the group exhibition titled *The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure* curated by Ekow Eshun opening at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in early 2024 and then touring in the USA.

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: Godfried Donkor

Title: *Battle Royale II: Pantheon of Champions*

Dates: 2nd June – 8th July 2023

Opening Reception:

Thursday, 1st June, 6-9pm

Address: Gallery 1957, 1 Hyde Park Gate, London SW7 5EW

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