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The Road to Accra

Gideon Appah's cinematic paintings make their U.S. debut | Images courtesy Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU

by Don Harrison

January 18, 2022 1:02 PM



Artist **Gideon Appah**'s story begins with homemade comic books of dinosaurs living among people and the adventures of Night Man, his very own masked crusader. "He fought for justice, kind of like Superman or Batman," Appah says via teleconference from Ghana.

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In a relatively short career, the West African painter has gone through many different stylistic phases, exploring — and combining — surrealism, nature scenes and portraiture. The 35-year-old rising star will have his first solo U.S. exhibition [at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU](#) this year from Feb. 11 to June 19. More than 30 of his paintings, most of them new works, will be showcased on both sides of the museum's upstairs gallery.

"There is a kind of cycle of life and death that you'll see in Gideon's new work," says Amber Esseiva, associate curator at the ICA. "It is portraiture — people are shown in domestic spaces smoking, and outside of clubs. The works recall a lot of familiar cinematic themes, even if you aren't familiar with Ghana history, and you can understand that culture of theater-and of club-going that is universal." The ICA will release a companion catalog of Appah's art sometime during the exhibit's five-month run. He also plans to visit Richmond, if COVID-19 travel restrictions don't prohibit it.

The artist says that his first drawing medium was the charcoal that his grandmother used to cook meals for their large family. "I used to make comics mostly by drawing with that charcoal," says Appah, speaking from his rural studio outside of Accra, Ghana's capital and largest city.

"My studio is like an hour's drive away from the city, where most artists are set up," he says, noting the importance of eliminating distractions. "I hardly ever see what other artists are doing, unless it's online, so it sets me on my path of making paintings from my own imagination, without interference."

Appah discovered painting in high school, but it was only after earning his BFA in 2012 from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, that he got serious about art. All it took was encouragement.

"After I graduated from university, a lady came from Canada, from the Royal Ontario Museum, and she visited my space, and she thought I was good," he recalls. The museum later purchased some of his works for its permanent collection.

In 2013, he had his first solo exhibition at Accra's Goethe Institute, and he earned first place in South Africa's Absa L'Atelier Art Competition in 2015. Dealing at first with acrylic paints, he describes this early work as "dark experimental landscapes. I

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didn't really know what to make of them, and I later put them away. ... I didn't think they were good. But in 2021, I got them out and took another look, and I think it was part of the process that an artist goes through that shapes his aesthetic." There will be a few of these pieces in his ICA show, he adds.

Now he's working in oils, and his latest paintings feature the human form, often backgrounded by images of trees, water and horses — appropriated from movie posters and newspapers.

"His work is interested in the rise and fall of the Ghanaian cinema house and film culture from the '30s to the '80s," Esseiva says. "He merges that with his own memory of growing up in Ghana." For example, older West African film actors are shown in Appah's grandmother's kitchen, or situated within landscapes he likes to draw.

"It's my memories of these times and what I've seen in these movies and photographs," Appah says, citing a box of rare old West African newspapers and the discovery of vintage Ghanaian movies — such as "Kukurantumi: Road to Accra" and "I Told You So" — as inspiration.

This was a freer, more open era that Appah says he cherishes. "At the time of these films and newspapers, Accra had become the hub of Ghana," he says. "The country gained independence from Britain, so it was more like people were trying to have a good time — and kind of discovering itself." He doesn't want people to forget this time in his country's history, and the promise that it showed.

"I want to talk about things that are overlooked, to talk about shame, distress or love. Love is good."