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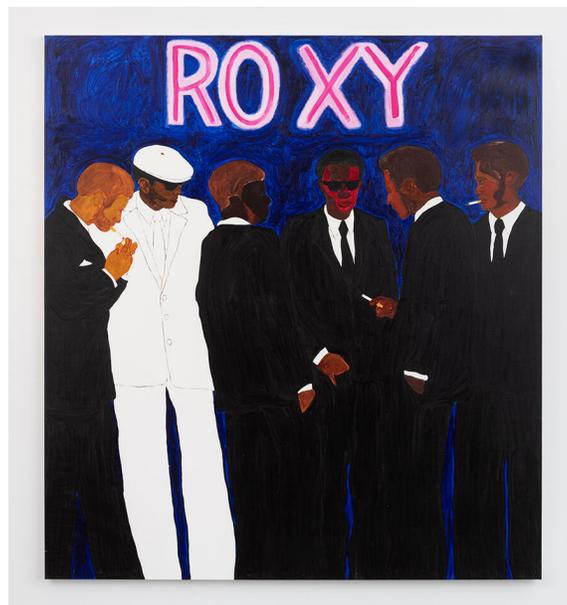
Gideon Appah's Fascination With the Fragmented Body

At the Institute of Contemporary Art Virginia Commonwealth University, the artist cobbles together filmic and digital imagery to form spiritual beings

BY SIMON WU IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 12 MAY 22



For his first institutional solo show in the US, 'Forgotten, Nudes, Landscapes' at ICA VCU, Ghanaian artist Gideon Appah presents a series of newly commissioned, large-scale canvases. In the first gallery, *Red Valley* and *Ten Nudes and a Landscape* (both 2021) depict hazy, magma-like landscapes onto which the silhouettes of various figures – dancing, reclining – have been lightly superimposed. They might be the ghosts of clubbers in some primordial land, or visions of future party-goers in a post-apocalyptic world. Alongside these works hang three smaller paintings of mythic nudes: gods to occupy these otherworldly scenes, perhaps. Appah's figures are usually composites of friends, characters from popular Ghanaian films and chance acquaintances. These paintings, which mark a departure from his earlier work about Ghanaian nightlife, increasingly incorporate shamanic or tarot-like symbols: *The Young Minotaur* (2021), for instance, who looks pensively off into the distance across a stormy sky, two fleshy skin-tone horns sprouting from his head.



Gideon Appah, *Roxy 2*, 2020-21, oil and acrylic on canvas. Courtesy: the artist and ICA VCU; photograph: Adam Reich

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In the subsequent gallery, Appah's paintings take on a more explicitly mystical character. *Lonely Stallion* (2020–21), for instance, features a seal brown horse grazing on a hill, haloed by a shroud of ominous dark clouds, abstracted to fields of colour. Produced quickly and at high volume, the works have a provisional, immediate quality reminiscent of digital engagement. Appah is an astute student of images and their systems, sensitive to the ones in popular media that are readily adopted by his Ghanaian peers from Western tropes, as well as the more mystic ones that come from tarot cards and spiritual images.

A selection of charcoal drawings reveals a range of Appah's other references – from dismembered limbs and moonscapes to portraits of the artist's family and still lifes. In *Feet, Hand, Fruit and Dagger* (2021), each element is isolated and arranged like belongings in a desk drawer; *Black Moon* (2021) shows the image of a moon shimmering on the surface of the glimmering sea, while a body below is either submerged or idly lying on the shore. In these newer, more prophetic works the artist presents images as simultaneously powerful yet mundane.



Gideon Appah, *Two Men Having a Smoke*, 2020-2021. Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; photographer: Adam Reich

Appah is a keen student of Black portraiture. The influence of Barkley L. Hendricks and Charles White, as well as more contemporary painters such as Henry Taylor, is particularly evident in the last room of the show, which features works from the artist's pre-pandemic fascination with the movie theatres and nightlife of Ghana. The men wearing suits in *Roxy 2* (2020–21) smoke cigarettes under the neon sign of an iconic cinema in Accra, comporting themselves in the image of Western glamour often propagandized through Ghanaian popular film. The gleaming car hood in *Two Men Having a Smoke* (2020–21) features a bloopy, swirly river that foreshadows the artist's eventual turn to landscape. The white suits worn by the men in this series, which Appah leaves purposefully as blank canvas, recall Hendricks's portraits of white-clad figures like *Steve* (1945), but here they serve as an admonishment of the soft imperialism propagated through Western sartorial culture. My favourites, however, are those that merge this nightlife with a cosmic one: the array of men in white briefs and socks in *Remember Our Stars* (2020), for instance, or *White Castle* (2021) in which Accra is rendered as a mirage city in the sky. *Purple Lake* (2019), the earliest work in the show, depicts severed limbs and torsos embedded into the landscape, both surrealist and craft-like, while the trees behind the bodies form a patchwork. This image foretells Appah's eventual fascination with the fragmented body, cobbled together from a torrent of images, both filmic and digital.

Gideon Appah's *'Forgotten, Nudes, Landscapes'* is on view at ICA VCU until 19 June

Main image: Gideon Appah, *Purple Lake*, 2019, oil on canvas. Courtesy: the artist and ICA VCU; photograph: Adam Reich