



THE ART NEWSPAPER

New York, London, Paris, Accra: inside the cultural week bringing the art world to Ghana

Amoako Bofo and other African art stars were flying the flag for the next generation of talent at Accra Cultural Week

Stephen Smith | 22 September 2023



Gideon Appah's *Green and blue through red landscape* (2022) © Courtesy of Gallery 1957

A flying visit to Accra by the shooting star of African art, Amoako Bofo, underlines the Ghanaian capital's growing importance as one of the world's great art destinations. Bofo returned briefly to his hometown for Accra Cultural Week (13-18 September), a series of cultural events including exhibitions, talks and studio visits that drew an eclectic mix of artists, collectors, gallerists and journalists from Europe and the US, as well as Africa.

Although Bofo has had a stratospheric career trajectory to date, exhibiting with Gagosian and selling works to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the week's events revealed a strong sense of fraternity among artists of the African diaspora, who make a point of sharing their experience and good fortune with the next generation of talent.

Bofo, who is 39 and has been based in Vienna for several years, has an auction record of more than \$3m for his figurative pictures of Black subjects, often painted with his fingertips. In Accra, he is showing a self-portrait in the exhibition *In and Out of Time* (until 12 December), the highlight of the week's itinerary, which explores African cultural ideas about non-linear time.

Bofo told *The Art Newspaper* that he was also in town to check on the residency he offers other artists at his purpose-built art space, dot.ateliers. "My success, hopefully, has allowed me to impact the lives of others in my community," he said. "Being able to provide resources for members in my creative community through my residency means a lot to me."

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Residencies are a thriving part of the Ghanaian art scene, according to Gyankroma Akufo-Addo, who is the chief executive of the Creative Arts Agency, a “conduit” between the government and the creative sector. She is also the daughter of Ghana's president since 2017, Nana Akufo-Addo. “The fine art world is a gatekeeping world,” she said. “What Amoako does is he opens his doors to a residency of new artists. It's a hamster wheel of all these amazing and prolific new artists who are going through and being encouraged.”

In and Out of Time has been curated by Ekow Eshun, a former director of the ICA in London, whose family is from Ghana. The exhibition also features work by Boafo's contemporaries Serge Attukwei Clottey and Gideon Appah. Like him, they have a substantial international profile.

“These artists haven't just come out of nowhere,” Eshun said. “Although they're young, they've been working on their craft for some years now. There have been Ghanaian artists who have come before, but there's never been a generation of artists who have been able to work with this proficiency, this ease, until now.” Social media sites like Instagram have “flattened the landscape” and made African art more accessible to an international audience, he added, and the Black Lives Matter movement has spurred collectors and galleries to catch up with the continent.

The Ghanaian-born artist Arthur Timothy travelled from his home in Bath to see his works exhibited in Eshun's exhibition. Interested in Black people who lived in Italy at the time of the Renaissance but barely figured in art history, he has painted African women strolling through Florence in vivid traditional fabrics.

Accra Cultural Week, which has been running since 2016, is backed by a millionaire Lebanese-born developer, Marwan Zakhem. Eshun's show takes place at Gallery 1957, founded by Zakhem in 2016 on the premises of his newly built Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City, and named after the year Ghana gained independence from Britain. The construction magnate has been supporting and collecting works by local artists for many years.

Until recently, Ghana was considered an African success story, but that was before several economic shocks left Akufo-Addo's government struggling to pay the country's debts. The national currency is the Cedi, and one artist exhibiting in cultural week made the lowliest coin in his countrymen's pockets the subject of tapestries and sculptural pieces.

“I'm very interested in the idea of value and currency. I'm interested in the making of coinage from mere metal into objects of value,” explained Yaw Owusu, who is 30. These ideas have a clear resonance with the art market itself, he agreed.

Private collectors have been willing to travel to Ghana in recent years, and Zakhem began taking them to artists' studios to help them understand the practice of someone like Clottey, who makes works from fragments of large plastic water canisters, a ubiquitous feature of poorer communities.

“We brought people to Serge's studio and they really got it,” Zakhem said. “With these visits, they understood the artists, and that helped us sell the work.” His cultural week initiative has played no small part in building an art-world buzz around Accra. Zakhem ventures, “It's like the Young British Artists in the 80s—that's what we have here, we have a movement that's happening.”