

## BRITISH VOGUE



"Final Track (We Can Do it Real Big)" (2023), Michaela Yearwood-Dan.  
Courtesy of Gallery 1957

### AN EXHIBITION DRAWING THE ART CROWD TO ACCRA THIS DETTY DECEMBER FEATURES STELLAR BLACK BRITISH TALENT

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Detty December is traditionally a time in the year when the African diaspora descends on the continent for a month of culture and partying. But in Ghana – the West African nation shaping up to be a must-visit destination for the global art crowd – the celebrations have long since begun.

Every autumn Gallery 1957, the foremost art gallery in Accra, kickstarts the December countdown with Culture Week. There are exhibitions, talks, performances, tours, artist studio visits and workshops staged in and around cultural hotspots, such as the community-focused residency dot.ateliers, the non-profit La Foundation for the Arts, Nkrumah Volini – a vacant grain silo that's been repurposed as an open art space – the Savannah Centre For Contemporary Art, Dikan Center, and the Red Clay studio in Tamale, founded by the globally lauded Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama.

Godfried Donkor, the veteran Ghanaian-born artist who moved to the UK aged eight, now splits his time between London and Accra, and his three decades of experience means he has witnessed the artistic transformation of Ghana first-hand. "Before, artist studios and residencies didn't exist," he says. "And although these new changes aren't all sustainable – galleries open and close – so long as culture remains and young people can engage and explore being artists, it will have an impact long term."

Hannah O'Leary, senior director and head of modern and contemporary African art at Sotheby's, acknowledges the shift, but she's keen to emphasise the historical challenges faced by artists in a contemporary art market that tends to look to "the next big thing or hot new artist" – and the importance of laying the foundations for an industry that will continue to thrive into the future. "So how do you make sure it's sustainable beyond a trend or fashion? How do we

make sure that we have collectors who are invested in this market, or who are following these artists' careers for the long term? There's always going to be trends so whenever I speak to artists, the piece of advice I give them is to stay true to your practice. Don't think about what's going to sell. When you believe in your work, you're always going to hold your head up high."



"The Wisdom from Above II" (2024), Rita Mawuena Benissan.  
Courtesy of Gallery 1957

This intention to encourage a deeper engagement with Ghana's vibrant contemporary art scene has certainly hit the spot with the British art crowd. Hence industry heavy hitters including O'Leary, the V&A East's Madeleine Haddon and Tate Modern's Osei Bonsu recently descended on Accra, as did an array of Black British artists including Donkor, Julian Knox, Michaela Yearwood-Dan, Arthur Timothy and Alberta Whittle, who represented Scotland at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Their work features alongside that of Ghanaian artists including Rita Mawuena Benissan, Amoako Bofo and Gideon Appah in an expansive new exhibition, *Keeping Time*, overseen by British curators Ekow Eshun and Karon Hepburn.

Featuring work by artists from across Africa and the African diaspora, *Keeping Time* explores what it means to live as a Black person in a world constructed by whiteness. "The artists in the exhibition are questioning the idea that there's only one way to read time. Drawing on African diasporic histories and knowledge systems, they critique historical readings of time that have sometimes marginalised people of colour and misrepresented them," explains Eshun.

A continuation of *In and Out of Time*, his 2023 show with Gallery 1957, Eshun likens the title of his new show to a musical term, as it aims to create a dialogue among the artworks, akin to musicians keeping tempo together. "There's a visual poetry that unites them. Some of them work in abstraction, others in lyrical film... if they're painters, you see this dreamlike quality... This is about saying we're not going to be confined and bound by one way to be, think and imagine ourselves in the present and into the future."

Michaela Yearwood-Dan's "Final Track (We Can Do it Real Big)", which is part of the exhibition, is a lush large-scale painting that features a quote from Sappho the Greek and references popular music, and came from the artist's personal collection. The newlywed artist describes it as "a love letter to my wife. It's centred around self, femininity, queerness and love. But whilst thinking about queer love, you can't not think about the darker political side of things that are ignored, the same with thinking about the self as a Black woman and how I navigate through the world."

For London-born Barbadian DJ-turned-multi-disciplinary artist Andrew Pierre Hart, being in Ghana began with his recent artist residency with Gallery 1957. He spent time exploring the country's bustling and vibrant cultural landscape, attending music nights, football and boxing matches and protests – such as the anti-illegal mining protest. The constant beating of drums he heard at gatherings and celebrations doesn't have a physical presence in the exhibition, but its essence is felt in the works. The colour palette of green, yellow and red in "The Listening Sweet II Ghana" is inspired by the shades of the Ghanaian flag, while the geometric forms on the piece are taken from Gurunsi architecture found in Northern Ghana. "I thought about what exemplifies the country, and the musical element and movement in the paintings represent that," explains Pierre Hart.



"The Three Graces" (2022), Godfried Donkor.  
Courtesy of Gallery 1957.

Meanwhile, Julian Knox's moving and powerful short film *Temple Run* – representing the fraught and dangerous journey Sierra Leoneans take to Europe – analyses the meaning of migration and the challenges migrants face, but also the importance of creating a dialogue, safe space and opportunity for growth within Sierra Leone, emphasising the need for local narratives to be told and celebrated. Knox is now travelling across Ghana working on another project rooted in people having autonomy. "It's about what it looks like for us to lead and to tell our own stories," he said.

*Keeping Time is on at Gallery 1957 till 11 January 2025*