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Painting for the Purpose of Prestige

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The Swiss art world delights in the deliberately insouciant art of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in Basel. But why does everyone talk only about painting and not about blackness?


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Until mid-February, the skylight exhibition space at the Kunsthalle Basel is home to the stylistically consistent mounting of 26 paintings by the emerging British artist of Ghanaian descent. During the public discussion shortly after the exhibition opening, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye also unobtrusively clarified that her painted images of black women and men should not be discussed as representations of individuals, but rather as painting. The new director of the Kunstmuseum Basel seconded this suggested reading in the reliable manner of museum and immanent visual experience — for instance, by refering to paintings by Corot and Hodler.

In the exhibition, visitors face large-scale, though not necessarily outsized canvases. Many of the works' characteristics can be related to a painting discourse, including the peculiarly warm, dark-hued color scheme of these paintings, a fresh facture as a result of the pace of painting, tried and tested compositional placement of figures within the pictorial space, and deliberately recognizable echoes of some pictorial motifs of European painting. In spite of the markedly low hanging, the line of gaze of the central figure in the painting often lies above eye level of the viewer, causing it to pass above and beyond the latter. Other figures implicate us in evasive or, indeed, direct visual connections. If the sitters are not (actual) individuals, as the artist herself insists, the subjects may indeed be understood as actors and actresses: emerging from the stage-like darkness of the pictorial ground, they theatrically move into the light in front of the audience and strike self-forgetful, proud or powerful poses. Still, besides the deliberately employed artistic registers, it remains uncertain whether their power simply derives from the mode of representation and the scale of the images on the large canvases. Are the elegantly conceived figures in the paintings really performing a play about self-empowerment here? While the Black Panther activists in 1960's America, for example, adopted poses of white Americans and were highly provocative with that, creating paintings featuring blacks in white poses — moreover, with art historical references — is nowadays much more likely to signify a play with cultural encodings that is hardly unsettling anymore.

What exactly is the reason for such a striking institutional commitment to this art in Switzerland? The Kunsthalle Basel courts members with a poster on the façade featuring a photograph showing the smiling dark-skinned London-based artist; the Swiss art magazine Parkett is preparing an edition featuring the artist; the magazine Kunstbulletin puts one of her painted protagonists wearing Picasso's sailor jumper on the cover of its January–February issue, in which the review at last identifies what really was to not become a topic in the public artist's talk in Basel: the artist's allegorical protagonists display blackness. So why is there no discussion about the implications of the fact that the paintings exclusively depict dark-skinned figures?

That the painter uses exclusively dark-skinned protagonists is, understandably, something she considers natural. It is disconcerting, however, when the Swiss institutions presenting or reproducing those images want their commitment to this painting to be seen as natural. Since blackness is anything but an obvious theme in the art practices and, indeed, in everyday reality here in Switzerland, the question arises whether the failure to ask questions about the local reception and significance of this specific artistic work doesn't repeat a fundamental pattern of the self-styled ‹global› art industry, namely that it prefers to circulate works as finished transcultural products, rather than enabling processes of negotiating and weighing contextual meaning that are initiated by works. As a matter of fact, the exhibition in Basel begs the question what being of a different color means in Switzerland today. Or, more specifically, how does the exhibition of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye relate to the current debate on racial profiling in Switzerland (see for this www.stop-racial-profiling.ch)?

So as not to cede this complex and sensitive terrain to a latently racist gut feeling of rightist conservative populists, nor to socio-politically diligent problem area management, we must take a close look and analyze. To be clear from the start: it is the responsibility of the involved institutions — not that of the artist — to publicly conduct such questioning, in this case with regard to the significance of staged blackness in Basel in the winter of 2016–17. And it is not enough to state solely on the basis of an implicitly prestigious exhibition that ‹one› is in line with an international awareness.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Pander To A Prodigy*, 2016, Courtesy the artist; Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Now let’s return to the monographic exhibition. The paintings and the hanging in particular, as in the symmetry of the two ballet dancers on a green ground, are what make the empty space between the canvases appear slightly squeezed, as if the walls around the paintings could be dismissed as irrelevant. Leaving aside the theatrical gesture, Yiadom-Boakye’s carefree painting, doesn’t seem to be interested in the contextual preconditions of perception and its social and cultural encodings beyond the formal contrast to the white of the wall. Yet on closer scrutiny, this practice proves to be much less indeterminate than what it makes itself out to be: in reality, its opaque modus operandi seems to be inspired by a successful English society painter of the Rococo period: Thomas Gainsborough. His portrayals of members of the royal house and the aristocracy (as well as wealthy citizens), often placed against an indeterminate warm-hued dark ground or in a landscape, are — in their bucolically staged positioning of the protagonists, their theatrical color schemes and the large-scale canvases actually used — part of the tradition and template of European portraits of rulers and the powerful. They, in fact, lived surrounded by a whole range of in-house servants — and perhaps there were even blacks among the latter who added a touch of ‹exoticism› to the prestige and the wealth...

Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, 1770

If painting ‹blacks in the poses of white rulers› by now has far more entertainment value than shock value, one could venture to conclude that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings are appreciated, because in the eyes of a class of (white) collectors and a liberal elite they indeed stand for something ‹exotic› and convey, besides prestige (which art invariably represents), a certain contemporary, globally oriented sophistication. Incidentally, ‹subaltern chic› is bon

ton in some circles.

Thus all signs of an artistic awareness of the significance of production conditions and value creation mechanisms in the contemporary art market remain trapped on the ‹backs› of the canvases here at the Kunsthalle Basel. On the ‹fronts› of the self-pleasing poses and favor-currying codes the proud appearance is celebrated, without venturing any involvement beyond a secured subjectivity of elegance. Just as having one’s personal lifestyle portrayed in the Rococo period was relevant to those who commissioned the paintings, surrounding oneself with prestigious products is part of the elegant lifestyle of today’s buyers from the asset class who prefer the medium of painting. The fact that the painter is well aware of this class of collectors likely is one reason why the work itself — in a strategic or, perhaps, naïve omission — doesn’t make a clear statement regarding either its display or social conditions of perception.

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Regina Pfister is a pen name we offer to all our authors who prefer not to publish under their own name. In doing so, we reference the recently discontinued art blog «Donnerstag» that had been run by Annika Bender since 2012. All «Donnerstag» authors published under pen names.

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