

# June Sarpong on the Power of Black Art and Visual Storytelling

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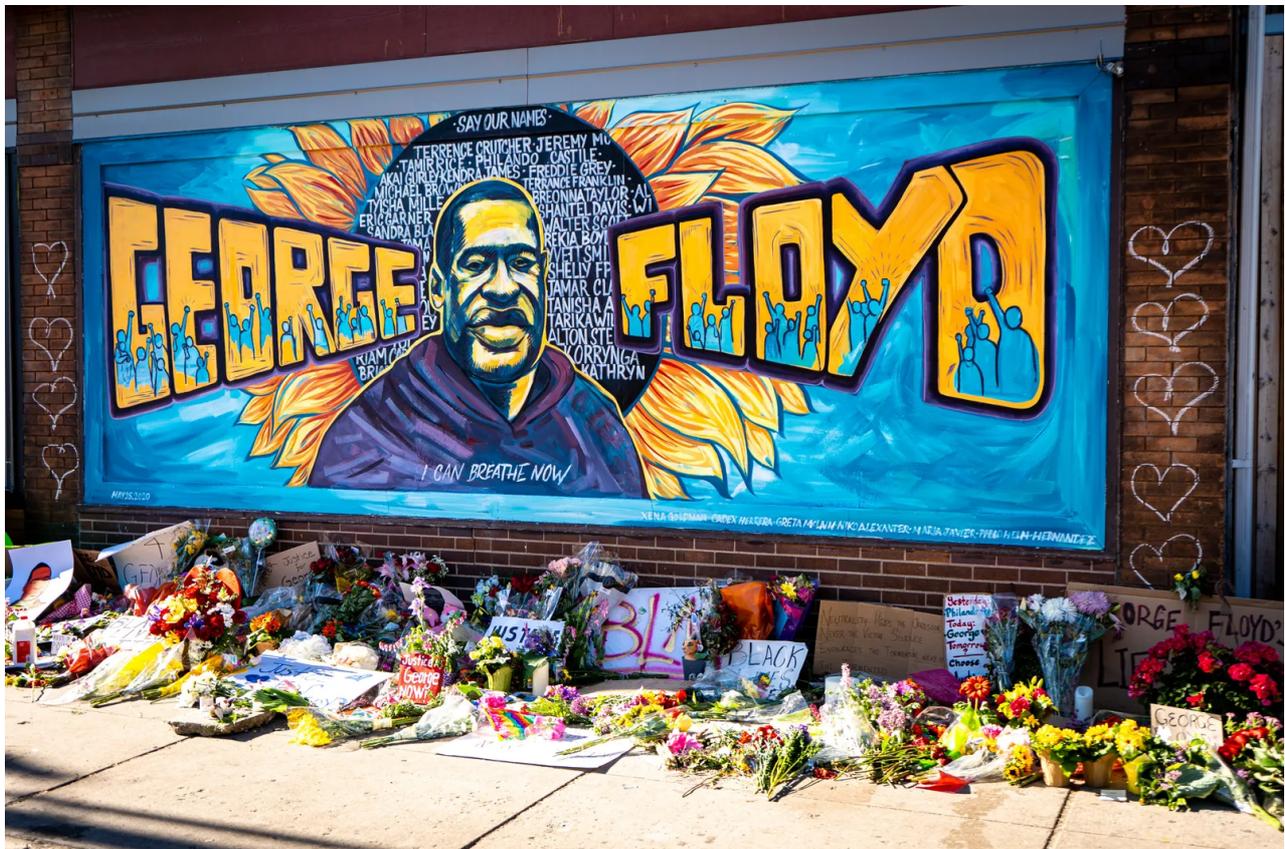
June Sarpong



Nine minutes and 29 seconds, under normal circumstances, is easily forgettable. It's the time we spend on routine activities such as taking a shower, doing the dishes, and walking to the station, our minds often elsewhere and not focusing on the task at hand. But nine minutes and 29 seconds was all it took for George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, to publicly lose his life at the hands of the police.

The injustice of those tragic nine minutes and 29 seconds would ignite a long overdue reckoning around racial justice, equity and inclusion all over the world, even at the height of a global pandemic. All of this was made possible because Darnella Frazier, who was a mere 17 years old at the time, had the foresight, composure and courage to film the horrific event unfolding. Even as George Floyd's murderer, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, screamed threats at her to stop filming, she persevered and risked her own safety to ensure the final excruciating moments of Floyd's life were documented. There would be no doubt, no justification, no hidden circumstances to disguise this gruesome act. Her harrowing footage changed everything and made this a moment that we all shared.

This is why today, on the anniversary of George Floyd’s death, I wanted to write about the power of visual storytelling and how this medium has the ability to change the world. We can all appreciate the power of images, especially visual art. Images move people, promote ideas and provide windows into different worlds. Images shape our history—and our perception of it.



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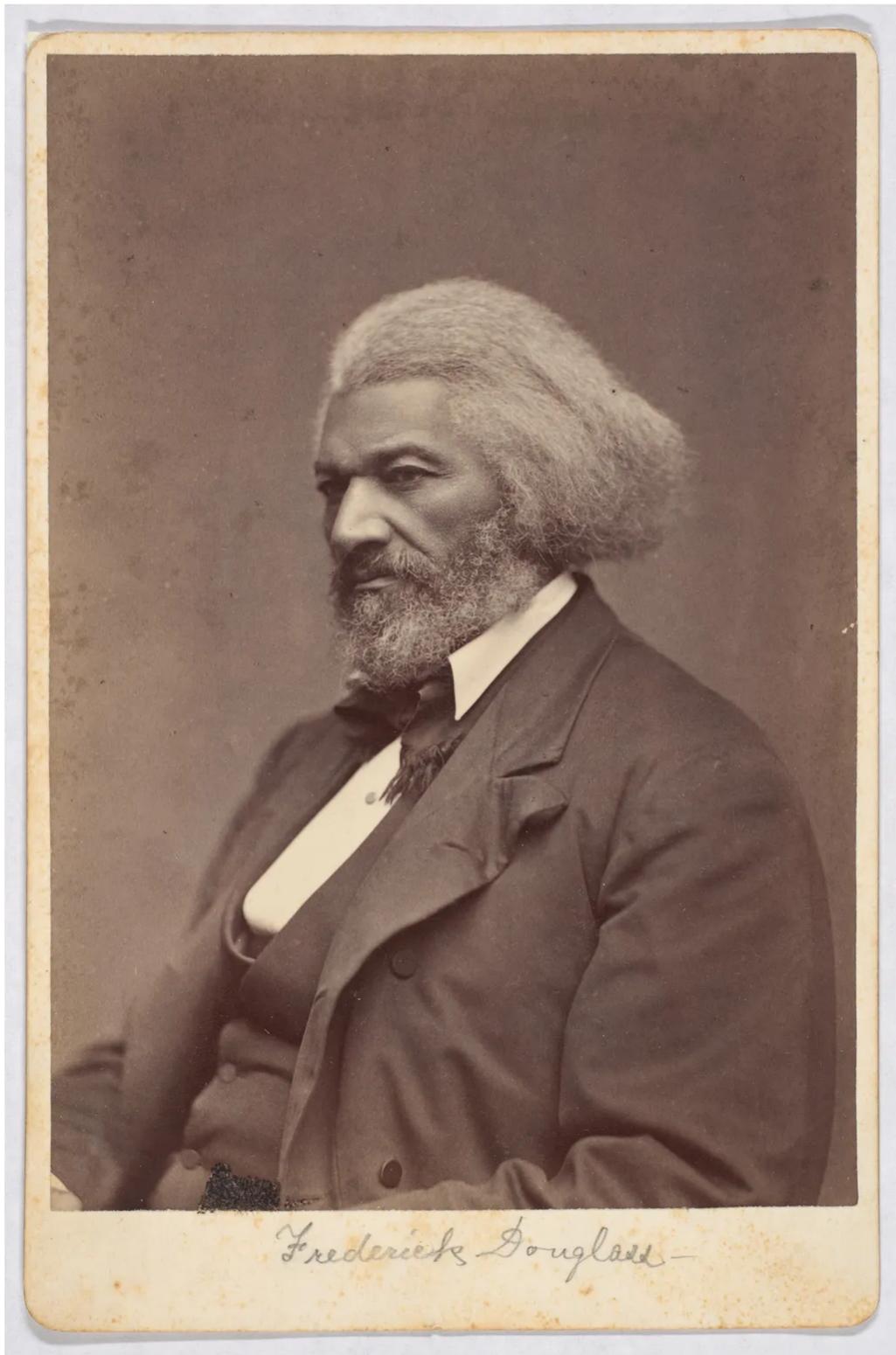
When it comes to the Black experience and the racism that comes with it, perhaps no one understood the power of imagery better than the 19th-century U.S. abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In her book *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure and the Search for Mastery*, my dear friend, art historian and Harvard educator Sarah Lewis describes Douglass’ skilful use of imagery. Douglass believed it was imagery that had the ability to bridge the real and the possible, offering us a vision of the world as it could be. In his iconic 1818 essay “Pictures and Progress”, Douglass wrote: “To the eye and spirit, pictures are just what poetry and music are to the ear and heart... Man is the only picture-making animal in the world. He alone of all the inhabitants of earth has the capacity and passion for pictures.

“Reason is exalted and called God-like, and sometimes accorded the highest place among human faculties; but grand and wonderful as is this attribute of our species, still more grand and wonderful are the resources and achievements of that power out of which come our pictures and other creations of art.”

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Frederick Douglass, c.1880. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A century later, Martin Luther King, Jr. would employ the same tactics in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, ensuring that the most prominent photographers of the day were on hand to capture the brutality civil rights activists faced. These images played a key role in shaming lawmakers into creating the legislation that would eventually lead to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

This is a concept that Lewis explores further in “Vision & Justice”, her award-winning issue of *Aperture* magazine. This year, its contents were brought to life in a tribute that served as the central strand at Frieze New York 2021, with more than 50 galleries participating. In addition to this, acclaimed artists **Carrie Mae Weems** and **Hank Willis Thomas** were commissioned to create their own works inspired by the project.



Martin Luther King, Jr. with leaders at the March on Washington, 1963  
Leffler, Warren K., photographer

The past year has seen the art world finally sit up and recognise Black artists and the influence of their visual storytelling on culture. As a result, we have seen the rise of Black artists from across the African continent and diaspora (particularly the U.K. and U.S.). This time feels different to previous moments; rather than “a one in, one out” approach, there is now a sizeable generation of creatives who are being acknowledged in a manner befitting their talents.

Beyond the faces of those who create the art, we are also witnessing the changing faces of those who ensure that we are able to see the art. There is a growing number of Black gallerists and curators who are helping to lead this movement. In New York, acclaimed curator **Nicola Vassell** has just opened her eponymous gallery in Chelsea with a retrospective of legendary photographer **Ming Smith**. **Richard Beavers’** Brooklyn Gallery, which has long supported the careers of Black artists, is enjoying global interest and the success of works by **Phyllis Stephens** and **Alexis McGrigg**. In Baltimore, **Myrtis Bedolla’s** Galerie Myrtis is experiencing demand for **Felandus Thames’** thought-provoking work. And in the U.K., **Ayo Adeyinka’s** TAFETA Gallery has just opened a new location in London’s Great Russell Street and has overseen a number of large-scale commissions of **Victor Ekpuk’s** signature glyphs.



*A Colorful Journey* by Phyllis Stephens

Black curators such as **Larry Ossei-Mensah**, **Aindrea Emelife**, **Azu Nwagbogu** and **Destinee Sutton-Ross** are pushing the boundaries of convention by championing new talent and an exciting cohort of artistic provocateurs, including **Ferrari Sheppard**, **Tunji Adeniyi-Jones**, **Ken Nwadiogbu** and **Khari Turner**. Turner's trajectory has been incredible to witness: still only in his second year at Columbia University, he has already had two sell-out solo shows—first at the Iris Project in Venice, California and now at the Voss Gallery, San Francisco.

In the U.K., exciting abstract artists such **Jadé Fadojutimi** and **Michaela Yearwood-Dan** are following in the footsteps of the legendary **Sir Frank Bowling** and redefining what it means to be a British abstract artist. Collagists such as **Larry Amponsah** are fusing the past with the present and imagining a new future, while **Joy Labinjo's** figurative paintings poignantly depict intimate scenes we can all relate to. Her more recent unflinching examination of the British BLM movement has helped spark conversations around the legacies of empire and the U.K.'s own incredibly complex history with race.



Jadé Fadojutimi, *Let's dive into the frolics of her hat*, 2020  
Courtesy of Pippy Houldsworth Gallery. Photo: Mark Blower.

African portraiture has seen an explosion that no one could have predicted. In my country of origin, Ghana, **Amoako Boafo** has taken the art world by storm with his poignant depiction of the Black form, represented by the formidable **Mariane Ibrahim**, herself a barrier breaker whose galleries in Chicago, and more recently Paris, have made her one of the few Black multinational gallery owners in the world.

Ghana has become the go-to nation for Black portraiture; **Kwesi Botchway**, **Otis Quaicoe** and **Patrick Quarm** are just some of the artistic luminaries who have collectors queuing in their droves. Earlier this year, Boafo, Botchway and Quaicoe joined forces on an eagerly anticipated group show to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Ghana's Gallery 1957. Even with their success, these artists have not forgotten how often talent can go unrecognised. As a result, they are now also creating opportunities for emerging artists in Ghana with collaborations such as **Tarek Mouganie's** Front/Back, where established artists donate works to sell and the proceeds are invested in developing new creatives. Talent is one of Africa's most precious resources and it's great to see it being developed within Africa as well as being exported and shared with a global audience.

In South Africa, we see portraits of mischief, curiosity and joy from the likes of **WonderBuhle** and **Reggie Khumalo**. Nigeria's **Nengi Omuku** uses ancient traditional Yoruba textiles as her canvas, infusing them with celebratory portraits of African family life.



*Mum* by Nengi Omuku  
Kristin Hjellergjeerde Gallery

Drawing on historical parallels, I find this renaissance of African art particularly exciting. After all, the Renaissance period, with its focus on art and the celebration of Europe's shared classical heritage, saw the emergence of Europe from the medieval period towards development and global ascendancy. Art helped redefine European identity, what was visible and what was possible. However, for Africa, the audience is global and the stage is greater, and so, therefore, are the possibilities. Africa has so often been portrayed from the outside as one monolith of Blackness, in effect masking its diversity, its creativity and

its potential in the eyes of many. However, with the platforms to create art and imagery, this generation of artists from the Continent are creating different narratives and visions through portraiture and challenging out-dated Western ideas of Blackness.

This is particularly important because it speaks to our shared humanity and allows different societies, cultures and communities to recognise each other as such. This is why art, particularly images, unites us. Some images unite us in awe, some intrigue us, and then there are images so terribly powerful that they unite us in horror and disbelief, as they did on May 25, 2020.

However, the potential for opportunity is also balanced against the potential for exploitation. Sadly, we have examples, both historical and contemporary, of art created by Black individuals that is widely consumed without artists receiving a proportionate share of the money their art generates, or in equivalence with white contemporaries. Otis Quaiocoe has used Instagram as a platform to question the motives of some patrons who buy African portraiture then immediately sell it on for a profit, which does not accrue to the artist. Learning from fellow creatives in the music industry, many Black artists have started to take more control over their work, initiating a royalties structure that ensures that the artist shares in future commercial gains based on that art. This is, it is hoped, just the beginning of a more equitable exchange as we see shifts globally in what we deem permissible treatment of Black talent across all industry sectors.



*Ranger II* by Otis Quaico  
Gallery 1957

Over the past year, I have been reflecting on the changes I have seen both personally and professionally in terms of the conversation on race. To find an equivalent moment in time of such global impact in relation to race, I have to look back beyond my lifetime to 1967-8. This was a totemic two years not simply for one moment but for a succession of them. The Loving vs Virginia case affirmed that disallowing interracial marriage was unconstitutional; then, with art imitating life, the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released. These joyous moments of racial unity were sadly punctuated by the tragic assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. In Europe, 1968 also sparked off civil unrest and protests for greater justice. Here in the U.K., the Race

Relations Act was passed making it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origin—an act that presented an alternative vision of Britain to the “No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish” signs that had greeted many British commonwealth citizens at the time.

However, I would argue that because of the increased proximity offered by globalisation and social media, 2021 is even more significant, therefore the art and imagery created this year is particularly potent. It is our duty to document and share this art for future generations. We are living through history, and although we may read it or hear it, history is brought to life when we can see it through imagery. History has all too often been hidden from us, nowhere more so than the history of Africa and its peoples. Had we been able to see images of the great walled cities of Benin and Zimbabwe or the architecture of great churches and mosques from Ethiopia in the East to Timbuktu in the West, we would have been in no doubt of their contributions to civilisation.

Science teaches us that humans are 99.9 per cent the same and that the concept of race itself is a social construct. As Douglass proclaimed, art has the power to magnify this scientific fact by reminding us of our shared humanity: “Human nature strives towards equity and shared responsibility.”

If we can find a meaningful way to honour George Floyd’s legacy, perhaps it is to ensure that through our actions we become the image of Fredrick Douglass’ words and maybe, just maybe, the art that Floyd’s death has inspired can show us how.



June Sarpong

*June Sarpong is a broadcaster, author and the current Global Director of Creative Diversity at the BBC. Her book “Diversify: Six Degrees of Integration” is out on general release.*

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Six Shows to See

*U.S.*

***Ming Smith: Evidence***

Until July 3 at Nicola Vassell Gallery, 138 Tenth Avenue, Manhattan

***Alexis McGrig: The Ether- Journey in Between***

Until June 5 at Richard Beavers Gallery, 408 Marcus Garvey Blvd, Brooklyn

***Khari Turner: Hella Water***

Until June 19 at Voss Gallery, 3344 24th St, San Francisco

*U.K.*

***Alicia Henry: To Whom It May Concern***

Until July 3 at Tiwani Gallery, 6 Little Portland St, London W1W

***Citizens of Memory: Group Show Curated by Aindrea Emelife***

Until July 19 at 20 Brownlow Mews, London WC1N

***A History Untold: group show presented by Maro Itoje and curated by Lisa Anderson***

Until June 19 at 20 Davies street, London, W1K



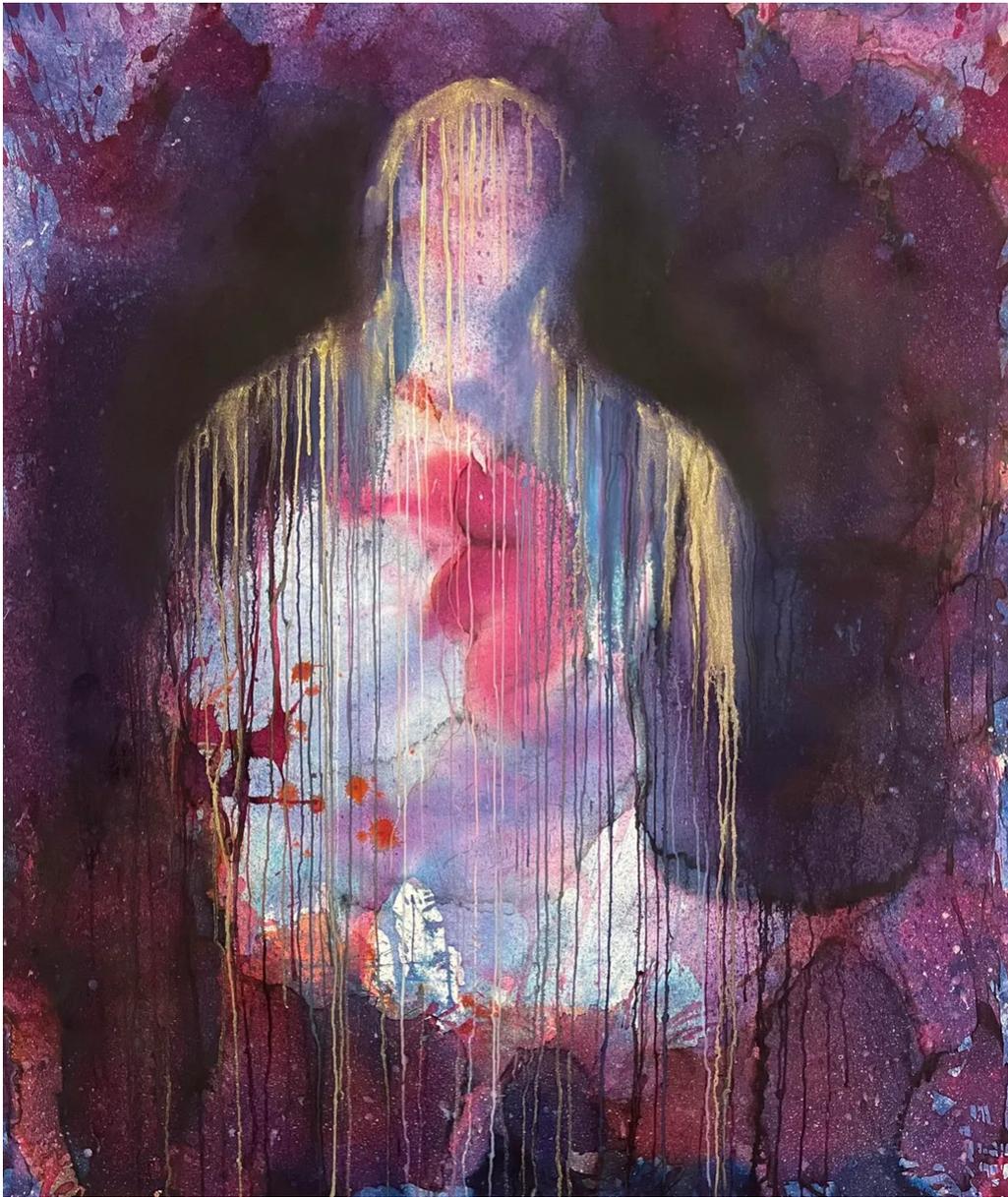
Grace Jones at Studio 54 by Ming Smith  
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Khari Turner  
Voss Gallery



Aindrea Emelife



*And He Appeared Just Before My Eyes* by Alexis McGrigg  
Richard Beavers Gallery



Destinee Ross-Sutton



*Sunbathers* by Amoako Bofo  
nii odzenma



Alexis McGrigg  
 Richard Beavers Gallery



Crown Pearls by Khari Turner



Larry Ossei-Mensah  
Aarom Ramsey



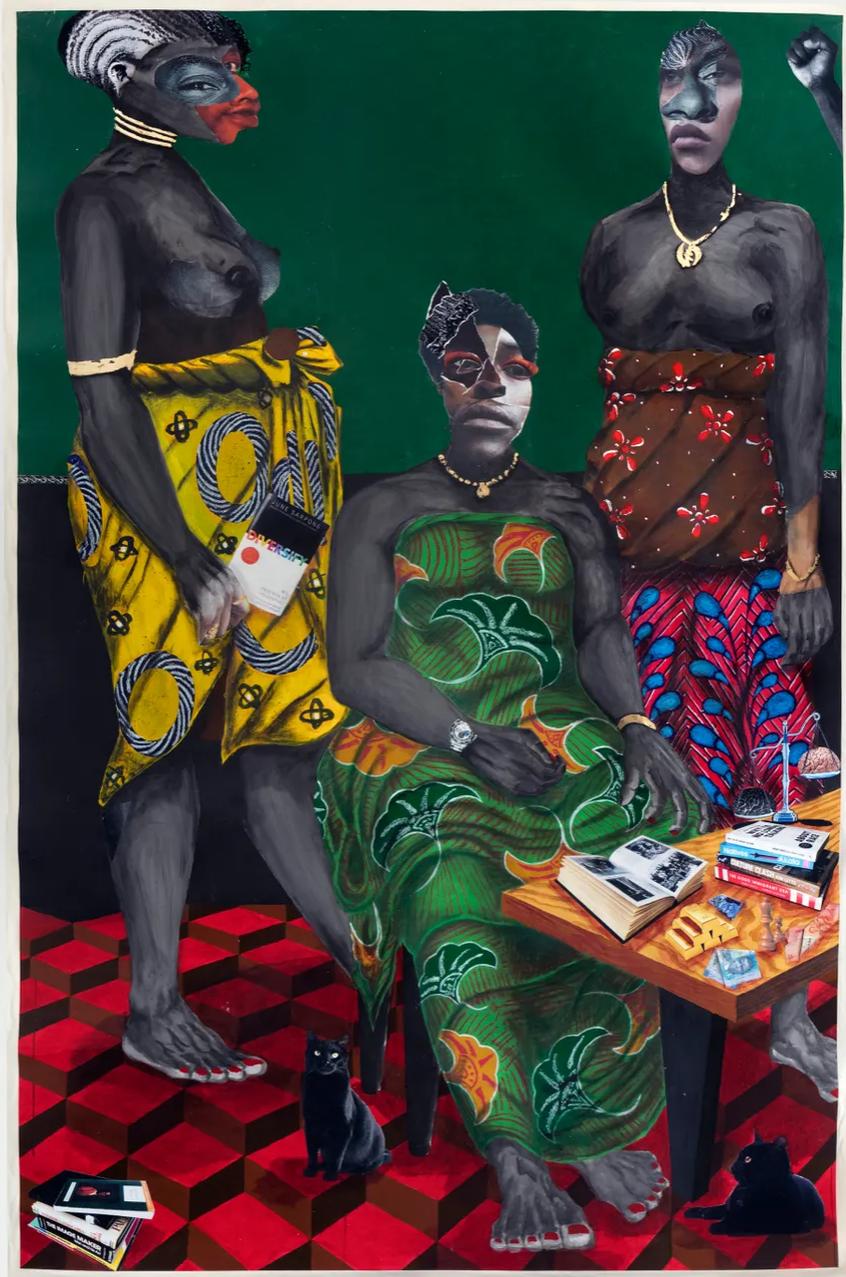
Kwesi Botchway  
Gallery 1957



By Joy Labinjo  
Tiwani Gallery



Nengi Omuku



*Supremacy Is Not A Man...* by Larry Amponsah



By Michaela Yearwood-Dan  
Tiwani Gallery



Larry Amponsah



Phyllis Stephens



Nicola Vassell



Reggie Khumalo



*Uwandle* by Reggie Khumalo



Sarah Lewis at Frieze New York



Richard Beavers  
Jeremiah Ojo



WonderBuhle



Patrick Quarm

By WonderBuhle  
WonderBuhle

Jadé Fadojutimi  
Emily Sofaly













