Exhibitions

Amoako Boafo: Soul of Black Folks
Billie Zangewa: Thread for a Web Begun
Sam Vernon: Impasse of Desires
Beyond the Sky
Emerging Artist Sydney Cain: Refutations
Amoako Boafo: Soul of Black Folks, is the premier museum solo exhibition for Ghanaian artist Amoako Boafo. The show is a presentation of over 20 works created between 2018-2021. Soul of Black Folks is a timely exploration into the varying strategies that Boafo employs within his practice to capture the essence of the Black figure. Variables such as COVID-19, the constant resistance against systemic oppression, and the commodification of Black bodies in the media are some of the issues that heighten this exhibition’s urgency. These concerns invite the question – where can Black people find a respite from society’s ills? Furthermore, how can Boafo’s work inspire and teach us about Black life and humanity?

Amoako Boafo creates paintings that actively center Black subjectivity, Black joy, and the Black gaze. Anchored by extremely calculated brushwork combined with skillfully executed finger-painted strokes, his mark-making generates a rich visual dichotomy that produces an evocative tension between the foreground and background. Moreover, this spatial tension yields both inward and outward-looking explorations of Boafo’s subjects and the act of painting Black figures themselves.

The seminal text by sociologist and Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois inspires the exhibition title—The Souls Black of Folk, an ethnographic study of Black life behind the veil of race. This research resulted in the coining of the phrase double-consciousness, which evoked this sense of Black people constantly having to look at themselves through the eyes of others. Du Bois’ text serves as an invitation to think deeply about Boafo’s artistic practice and how it challenges an “othered” gaze concerning the Black figure. Moreover, this exhibition asks how taking agency in the cultivation of one’s narrative, aesthetic, and cultural expression results in the activation of a heightened Black consciousness that is antithetical to the western canonical discourse.

Amoako Boafo’s paintings are deeply personal and intimately connected to his experience as a Ghanaian artist living and working between Vienna and Accra. The crux of Boafo’s practice is a high-stakes interest in investigating the relationship between the personal and the
structural by assessing the canon of painting and who is or is not represented and centering Black subjectivity. His pictures serve as a means of self-preservation—a celebration of his identity, Black people, and Blackness. These works are more than mere portraits; they are images constructed to assert the dignity and importance of Black people. The way Boafo paints his luscious portraits suggests a widening diaspora imbued with change, understanding, and resolution. Whereas the bodies of these subjects are discernible as literal figures occupying space and time, the looseness of Boafo’s painting style suggests a transition, or one might even go so far as to say, a transgression, juxtaposing the tension within the paint itself against the precise and evenly rendered line work that creates the totality of each image.

The works featured in *Soul of Black Folks* center the viewers’ gaze on the presence of Boafo’s subjects, who represent all walks of Black life. He vividly and attentively illustrates the connectivity and cultural overlap of existence within the Black diaspora. When one encounters Amoako Boafo’s work, they are disarmed by his subject’s unyielding essence and gracefulness—all in one fell swoop. Despite the physical and emotional friction of Boafo’s mark-making, his painted subjects appear confident and steadfast. This delicate balance defines much of Black life and how it has been perceived and received in the West. There is a continuous negotiation between the outside world and internal turmoil that challenges and reveals our humanity. As much as Amoako Boafo’s works are about the viewer, these beautifully constructed paintings are buoys. They aid him and many people of color in their continuing journeys toward asserting their presence and place in foreign places or spaces that attempt to make Black people feel othered. Boafo’s ability to capture the spirit of the individuals in his works and engage viewers has made him one of the most influential artistic voices of his generation. The work’s power lies in its communication of a shared experience beyond the Black diaspora and anyone that feels they are on the margins of society.

“I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND.”
— Zora Neale Hurston
Billie Zangewa: Thread for a Web Begun

Support for this exhibition is provided by
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Billie Zangewa: Thread for a Web Begun is curated by
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of Art World Conference.

Thread for a Web Begun, Malawi-born, Johannesburg-based artist, Billie Zangewa’s first solo U.S. museum exhibition will include examples of the artist’s work from the past 15 years, as well as new pieces made specifically for the show. The exhibition comes at an important time for Zangewa, whose career has developed primarily in Europe and South Africa. This exhibition will bring her work to entirely new audiences across the United States.

Although many of the scenes depicted in Zangewa’s layered silk tapestries are autobiographical, there is a relatability that goes beyond her personal journey as an artist. Zangewa’s labor-intensive processes recall the historic implications of “women’s work” but remain a steadfastly contemporary interpretation of lived experiences. Zangewa is dealing firstly with identity, as well as socio-politics around gender and skin tone, in a gentle everyday manner. She is also exploring the different roles that women play in society, including motherhood and the impact that it has individually and collectively. The images in her work are deliberately decontextualized. However, when shown in a group, their fragmentary nature is further emphasized, suggesting they are excerpted from a larger narrative.

Zangewa does not make grand gestures or even overt political statements, but rather, like a kind of ‘daily feminism’, focuses on mundane domestic preoccupations; themes connecting us all. Zangewa states “I use fabric and sewing, which traditionally is a female pastime, to empower myself. I tell my personal story, how it’s happening on the home front, and show the intimate life of a woman, which usually we’re not encouraged to do.” Zangewa views telling her own story in her own voice as a kind of personal empowerment. Historically, this has been very difficult for women in general, but for women of color in particular, with many social obstacles to overcome.
Billie Zangewa creates intricate collages composed of hand-stitched fragments of raw silk. These figurative compositions explore contemporary intersectional identity in an attempt to challenge the historical stereotype, objectification, and exploitation of the black female form.

Beginning her career in the fashion and advertising industries, Zangewa employs her understanding of textiles to portray personal and universal experiences through domestic interiors, urban landscapes, and portraiture. Her earliest works were embroideries on found fabrics depicting remembered botanical scenes and animals from Botswana, where the artist was raised, but she soon transitioned to creating cityscapes, focusing on her experience as a woman in the city of Johannesburg and her personal relationships. These works explored her experience of the male gaze, leading her to begin to think more critically about how women view themselves and what the visualization of the female gaze, through self-portraiture, could look like.

After the birth of her son, Zangewa began making her well-known domestic interiors to explore the shift in focus from self-examination and femininity to motherhood and the home. Often referencing scenes or experiences from everyday life, Zangewa has stated that she is interested in depicting the work done by women that keeps society running smoothly, but which is often overlooked, undervalued, or ignored. Zangewa refers to this as “daily feminism,” which can be considered a contemporary version of “The Personal is Political.” Through the narrative content and method of making silk paintings, Zangewa illustrates gendered labor in a socio-political context, where the domestic sphere becomes a pretext for a deeper understanding of the construction of identity, questions around gender stereotypes, and racial prejudice.
Museum of the African Diaspora is pleased to present Sam Vernon: Impasse of Desires, a site-specific installation and solo exhibition of the artist’s work. Using Matt Richardson’s 2013 publication The Queer Limit of Memory as a critical entry point, Vernon drapes the Lloyd H. Dean Gallery with sheets of colored fabric and creates a constellation of made and found images throughout the first floor.

Sam Vernon earned her MFA in Painting/Printmaking from Yale University in 2015 and her BFA from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 2009. Her installations combine xeroxed drawings, photographs, and sculptural components in an exploration of personal narrative and identity. She uses installation and performance to honor the past while revising historical memory. Most recently, Vernon has exhibited with King School Museum of Contemporary Art, Downtown Gallery, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Ashara Ekundayo Gallery, Gallery 44 Center for Contemporary Photography, Toronto, We Buy Gold, Interstitial Gallery, Coney Art Walls curated by Jeffery Deitch, Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum, Fowler Museum at UCLA and Seattle Art Museum. Vernon lives in San Francisco, CA and teaches in Printmedia as an Assistant Professor at California College of the Arts (CCA).
Refutations is an ongoing body of work exploring ancestral memory and the power of Black myth. The project includes various multimedia series of artwork, publications and exhibitions emerging from personal genealogy research alongside process documentation through photography and drawing. Through play between ephemerality and figurative representation, Cain teases resistance against erasure while also celebrating metamorphoses that occur in the voids of invisibility. The work is an exploration in the perimeters of both existing and not existing through imaginative landscapes.

Sydney Cain was born and raised in San Francisco. Her multimedia work is largely on paper using dye, graphite, powdered metals, and chalk as emblems of impermanence and transformation. She investigates remembrance, evolution and spirituality from her perspective as a queer black woman. The encoded language of DNA is deciphered through the practice of drawing contributing to the concept of collective Black mythos. Her current work is founded on genealogy research alongside the effects of urban renewal/colonialism and threats against Black afterlives. Cain has exhibited throughout the Bay Area including SOMArts, Betti Ono, Ashara Ekundayo Gallery, Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco Arts Commission, and the African American Arts and Culture Complex.

Sydney Cain is an awardee of MoAD’s 2019–2020 Emerging Artists Program.
Beyond the Sky is a presentation of 4 short films from a selection of contemporary African filmmakers. In this collection, each film moves seamlessly between the personal and metaphysical, connecting cinematic voices across different regions of Africa.

Finding comfort floating in uncertainty, these filmmakers pose questions—some obvious, some hidden—in an attempt at guiding us toward futurity. While maintaining allegiance to specific regional traditions, the images presented in this series reframe traditional African images into a new digital vernacular. This series of moving images suspends you in a space that conjures personal memories and locates a common language in digital gestures.

Curated by Leila Weefur

left to right:
Yo-Yo Gonthier, Burey Bombata
Lebohang Kgonye, Ke Sale Teng
Kalu Oji, The Moon & Me
Tabita Rezaire, Deep Down Tidal
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- The MoAD Bookstore offers select titles highlighting local writers, exhibition catalogues, and authors from across the African Diaspora. Shop in person or online at store.moadsf.org
- MoAD Emerging Artists program is a juried solo exhibition opportunity for Bay Area-based artists to present new and dynamic work in the MoAD Salon.
- Through MoAD in the Classroom, our education team interfaces with 41 local Title I public schools using an evidence-based visual literacy and cultural studies curriculum to inspire positive youth development. Using current exhibitions, students learn to view, produce, and discuss art, expanding their vocabulary and understanding of art concepts, and increasing confidence in creating and connecting with art more generally.

Find out more about all of the public and educational programs and how to get involved at moadsf.org
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