

**KWESI  
BOTCHWAY**

RUMORS OF BLACKNESS

PRESS RELEASE

17 February - 26 March 2022  
Avenue Louise 430 in Brussels

**MARUANI MERCIER**



## I WANT TO CELEBRATE BLACK BEAUTY

ROB PERREE

There are artists and then there are artists-with-a-mission. The second category belongs to Kwesi Botchway from Accra, Ghana. Not only with his paintings but also with his entire art practice, he wants to raise the state of being of his people to a higher level.

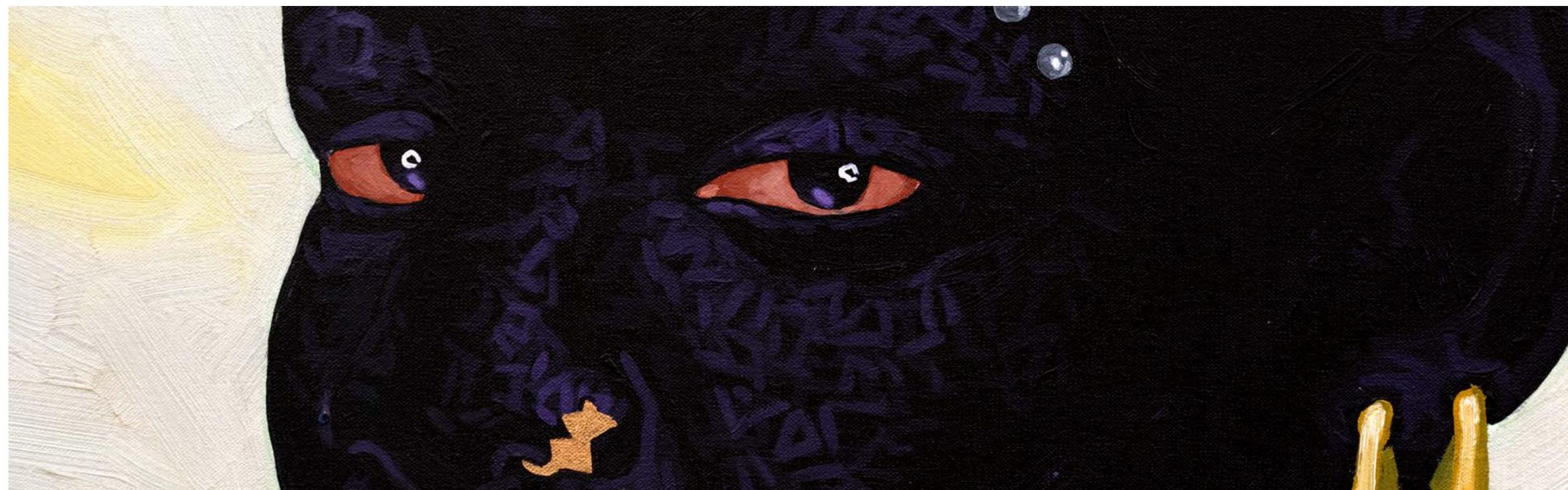
A few years ago, Kwesi Botchway founded the WorldFace Art Studio. It is located in Nima, his birthplace, one of the largest Zongo<sup>1</sup> communities in greater Accra. It is an old, diverse place of residence with a large Muslim community, a large number of African migrants, a famous market, but also a lot of poverty and a poor infrastructure. Not an environment where art plays a major role. Not exactly a favorable working climate for the many talented young artists who live there. Botchway is aware of this and not only offers them an artist-in-residence opportunity and an exhibition facility, he also wants to guide them in their artistic development, inspire them and mentally prepare them for being an artist. In this way, he makes his community part of his art practice in a natural way.

Botchway mainly paints portraits. In this show - *Rumors of Blackness* - these are portraits of girls and women. Models from his environment, fictional models or models inspired by photos from magazines. He says he chose the genre because he enjoys it. That may be so, but there are more reasons why he prefers the portrait. In art history, the black person is hardly visible. When black figures are depicted, they are usually servants or enslaved. They are not in the foreground but are partly hidden behind white men and women. If they are there, then they are of minimal importance. With his portraits, he corrects the colonial history of the genre. He makes it easy for black people to identify with his work. He implicitly urges museums and other art institutes to adapt their white collections. As one American critic put it succinctly : Representation matters.

His portraits are recognizable for black people, they often raise questions for white people, they make everyone curious. These characteristics stimulate the viewer's imagination. They can become triggers for a personal interpretation, a personal story. Botchway has further developed this narrative aspect in a number of recent works. In paintings such as *Invested in a Black and Red Shoe* and *Last Night Dream*, the portrait becomes a chapter in a story. By providing

**" I am a black artist,  
and I feel like representing  
and elevating black people  
through my works."**

**- Kwesi Botchway**





more context, the artist makes it possible to get an impression of the daily lives of black women. The often monochrome backgrounds of his portraits make way for spaces, for interiors. This also ensures that the viewer has more compassion for the depicted person. In *Last Night Dream* he even adds a second scene at the top right, as a cliffhanger.

But he does more. He doesn't just want to portray identifiable black women, he wants to emphasize their importance, their role and their beauty. He wants to show their essence, their soul. So he makes them proudly look at the visitor (*Showy*); therefore he often gives them a mysterious gaze (*Eyeing the Gossiper*); therefore he makes them seductive by painting their eyes and their lower lip orange; that's why he pays a lot of attention to their earrings; that is why he uses colors in such a way as to become references to the richness of African culture. In short, his portraits are a tribute to the black woman. In doing so, he not only sends a message to the white viewer, Black Women Matter, but also to the black viewer who suffers from, as he himself puts it, a lack of self-appreciation, self-acceptance and self-confidence.

Kwesi Botchway's portraits are a critical addition to a long, white, Western portraiture tradition. Because many portraits within that tradition originate from commissions, they are often, like Botchway's, tributes, but tributes to representatives of the well-to-do, white class, to people who could afford to have a portrait painted by well-known artists. In that respect, the motives of the African artist differ. He wants to make ordinary people special, give them pride, and for that reason does not shy away from making reality a little more beautiful, while many classical white portraits play with reality to emphasize the status and power of the depicted.

Kwesi Botchway is impressed by the Impressionist style of artists such as Van Gogh and Monet. He also wants to join that tradition and add an African variant to it. This is not a question of criticism of a Western tradition, there is admiration and respect for famous predecessors. He likes to call his style Afro-Impressionism. This style is most evident in the vividly painted backgrounds of his portraits. Like for example in *Waking Gold* or *in Free Spirit*. He uses a more subtle variant for the faces and other visible body parts. They appear monochromatic black, but up close they seem to have a grid laid over them, a grid of signs, maybe even linguistic signs. *Loyal to Self* and *90s Style* are clear examples of this. By mixing Impressionism with the Realism often used by African artists, he creates his own ism.

The term (West) African Renaissance is being used in more and more publications. It refers to a group of mainly Ghanaian artists who are attracting international attention with their portraits of African men and women. It is still too early to give a final explanation for this success. The fact that it started mainly on American soil and is now expanding there rapidly, makes it likely that the Black Lives Matter movement has played and still plays an important role. Particularly after the death of George Floyd the need for an honest representation of black people has increased. Worldwide. The perception of the black image by the white world needs to be adjusted. The prevailing prejudices must be eliminated. A realistic understanding of black culture is necessary more now than ever in the past. Artists can provide that. American artists as Kehinde Wiley, Kerry James Marshall and Henry Taylor have provided that. They are a source of inspiration for many African artists. Add to that the fact that Accra with the Ghanatta College of Art and Design had an academy that had an eye for recent international developments in the visual arts, and it is not surprising that African artists feel inspired to make their own contributions, in their own way, following their own motives. Even if the situation in Africa is not comparable to that in the United States, in both parts of the world the representation of black people does not correspond to reality.

Kwesi Botchway is an honest and striking representative of this Renaissance. With his idiosyncratic portraits, he manages to judge current art history without neglecting its achievements. The exhibition *Rumors of Blackness* is a prime example. The fact that he also involves his environment, his community, in his artistic practice, makes him an exceptional artist. An artist-with-a-mission.

Rob Perrée  
Amsterdam/Brooklyn, December 2021

<sup>1</sup> *Zongo: the eleventh region?* (ghanaweb.com) :  
<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Zongo-the-eleventh-region-281461>

**" Kwesi Botchway is an artist of compelling vision whose paintings speak of the richness and complexity of black lives. (...) These are bold, conceptual works that suggest black identity as fluid not fixed and multiple not singular. They are portraits that capture blackness, in the words of Stuart Hall, as a state of 'becoming as well as being". - Ekow Eshun**



**Kwesi Botchway produces paintings creating an intriguing dialogue between the subject's message and the viewer declaring Black identity, like a testimony of contemporary life.**



Botchway's paintings, charged with emotions, highlights the idea of beauty in relation to the black experience. Color plays an important role in the work of Botchway, expressing one's character, community, culture and even language. The color of the black skin includes purple hues, evoking the ancient color which has been linked to royalty wealth, grandeur, and also mystery, magic, seduction and wisdom. These emotionally charged portraits are presented on bright colored backgrounds that emphasizes the people in question. The spectator is being challenged directly by the subject of the paintings, creating an intriguing dialogue between the subject and the viewer. Through Botchway's choice of representation, the viewer becomes emotionally invested in the subject's story. While some of his personas are inspired by people, other characters were born from his imagination. Additionally, his subject matter depicts black people in everyday situations inspired by socio-political events around the world, with a strong desire to elevate the Black community. Through his paintings, Botchway seeks to rewrite the history of art leaving an important place for the African culture.



KWESI BOTCHWAY

Born in Accra, Ghana in 1994; lives and works in Accra, Ghana  
 Botchway is the first artist to enjoy a residency at The Warehouse by MARUANI MERCIER, where he worked on his first solo exhibition with the gallery, Rumors of Blackness.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 Rumors of Blackness, MARUANI MERCIER, Brussels, Belgium
- 2021 THE ARMORY SHOW, Booth P19, Gallery 1957, New York, USA
- 2020 Dark Purple Is Everything Black, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana  
 Becoming As Well As Being, Gallery 1957, London, UK

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 [West] African Renaissance - Gallery 1957 in collaboration with Christie's Dubai  
 Resistance(s), MARUANI MERCIER, Brussels, Belgium  
 Resistance, MARUANI MERCIER, Knokke, Belgium  
 Home Coming : Aesthetic of the cool, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana  
 Wake-up Call - blijven liggen/laten staan, Collection Tanguy & Bieke Van Quickenborne, Platform 6a by Deweer, Otegem, Belgium
- 2020 Cgunu/Nkambom Art Exhibition, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2019 Chalewote Street Art Festival, Pidginimagination, Accra, Ghana  
 Sabolai Radio Music Festival, Accra, Ghana
- 2018 James Town Caf Exhibition, Prince Charles and Camilla Duchess of Cornwall visit to Ghana  
 Chalewote Street Art Festival, PARAOTHER2018, Accra, Ghana  
 Artist Alliance Gallery, Accra, Ghana
- 2017 Hos Oona Galleri & Sundhed, Denmark  
 Chalewote street art festival, wata mata, Accra, Ghana  
 Qaba Exhibition, Alliance Francaise, Accra, Ghana  
 Ghana Culture Forum / National Theatre, Accra, Ghana
- 2016 555 Art exhibition, Accra, Ghana  
 Africa Contemporary Art Gabah, Hamburg, Germany  
 Let's Talk shit project, Alliance Francaise, Accra, Ghana  
 Hos Oona Galleri og Sundhed, Vejle, Denmark  
 Chalewote Street Art Festival, Spirit Robot, Accra, Ghana  
 Dzala Butiq, Brazil House, Accra, Ghana  
 Novica Gallery, Accra, Ghana
- 2015 Golden Tulip Hotel, Accra, Ghana  
 Ghana national Museum, Accra, Ghana  
 Ghanatta College of art and Design, Art Center, Accra, Ghana

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Vanhaerents Foundation, Belgium
- High Fashion Foundation, NY, USA
- The Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel



HEAVEN 2021 ACRYLIC AND OIL ON CANVAS 80 X 80 CM 31 1/2 X 31 1/2 IN



## **PRESS INFORMATION**

To download HR images, please contact  
Margaux De Pauw at [margaux@maruanimercier.com](mailto:margaux@maruanimercier.com)

For public information  
call +32 2 512 50 10,  
or visit [maruanimercier.com](http://maruanimercier.com)

All images courtesy MARUANI MERCIER