

Celebrating Black Culture and Identity with Amoako Boafo

Photography by Brigitte Lacombe
Interview by Max Homaei

Amoako Boafo is an artist who transcends the boundaries of traditional portraiture, emerging as a key figure in shaping the contemporary cultural landscape of Africa and the African diaspora. His elegant paintings, with their vibrant strokes, serve as a poignant testament to the confidence, style and character of his subjects, while also representing a profound reinterpretation of portraiture. Boafo's approach is nothing short of revolutionary, as he manipulates pigments with his fingers instead of traditional brushes, capturing the essence of his subjects through the direct touch of his hand.

Born in the Ghanaian capital city of Accra in 1984, Boafo's early life was marked by an inherent talent for drawing and painting. Despite his early artistic inclinations, he embarked on various professional pursuits, including a noteworthy stint as a semi-professional tennis player. Boafo's art career didn't take flight until 2008 when he graduated from the Ghanatta College of Art and Design in Accra, earning recognition as the college's best portrait painter that year.

Boafo's journey took an exciting turn in 2013, when he relocated to Vienna, Austria. Here he joined forces with artist and curator Sunanda Mesquita to establish WE DEY, a dynamic centre for exhibitions, workshops and community programs dedicated to promoting the voices of artists of colour and the LGBTQ+ community.

In Austria, Boafo was confronted with the stark realities of the marginalisation of Black individuals, a situation that ignited a profound artistic mission within him. Fueled by the glaring underrepresentation of Black subjects in the global contemporary art scene, Boafo embarked on a creative odyssey that would redefine the narrative of portraiture.

Inspired by the expressive portraiture of Vienna Secession icons such as Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, Boafo fused these influences with his own unique perspective and a contemporary touch to craft his distinctive style. Among his contemporaneous influences he counts luminaries Jordan Casteel, Maria Lassnig, Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, all of whom have contributed to shaping his artistic vision.

The core of Amoako Boafo's art is deeply rooted in the belief that Black culture and identity deserve to be celebrated and elevated in the realm of contemporary art. With each of his finger-painted portraits, he challenges preconceived notions, inviting viewers to engage with the complexities and multifaceted identities of his subjects. Boafo's portraits are a window into a world where Black individuals are not confined to stereotypes or marginalised narratives but are instead empowered by their presence on the canvas.

Through his art, Boafo breathes life into his subjects, capturing not just their physical appearances but also the spirit and vitality that define their existence.





Amoako Bofo, *Green Petals*, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.



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His choice to use his fingers as a primary tool in the creative process adds an intimate layer to his work, emphasising the tactile and personal connection between artist and subject. This unfiltered touch is imbued with the power to convey the depth of emotion, personality and human experience that might be lost with more conventional methods.

The following interview, conducted by Max Homaei, Director of Yavuz Gallery, delves deeper into the rich tapestry of Amoako Boafo's art. From the powerful narratives that thread through his work to the technical innovations that set him apart, Homaei explores the multifaceted dimensions of Boafo's artistic prowess.

Uncovering the layers of meaning, history and culture that enrich each of Boafo's remarkable portraits, *A-M Journal* celebrates an artist who is at the forefront of redefining contemporary portraiture and reshaping the cultural conversation surrounding Africa and the African diaspora.

Max Homaei: Accra continues to influence your trajectory as an artist. How did your hometown foster your interest in art when you were growing up?

Amoako Boafo: My entry point into art began when I was young. I just drew and painted, as I saw it as a way to say what I couldn't express in words. I was not aware of the larger art world and the business of it or a career in it, but having friends in my hometown I painted with did encourage my interest in art.

Homaei: How did your time at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna shape your thinking about your art?

Boafo: Technically, I learned a lot in Vienna, as I did at Ghanatta College of Arts and Design in Accra. However, what made Vienna significant was the access to galleries, museums and artists from other backgrounds. I was able to find inspiration from unlikely sources. My knowledge of art history grew in that period as well, and I'm thankful for that.

Homaei: What is the significance of having mentors as a younger artist?

Boafo: When you're a young artist you're just trying things out. Experimenting and failing until you find what works. You don't know what you don't know. A mentor can help you navigate those mysteries, in the studio and outside of the studio.

Homaei: You connected with Kehinde Wiley via social media. Tell us how that connection came about and where it led to?

Boafo: Kehinde and I did connect via social media and his support for my work was a major step for me. His support came in the early days of my career, and this partly inspired my desire to continue to form relationships and share spaces with my fellow artists and creatives for the purpose of sharing experiences, which would hopefully be beneficial in their career.

Homaei: How do you choose the subjects for your portraits, especially when they range from personal acquaintances to public figures such as Maya Angelou?

Boafo: I document and celebrate people from my community who would usually not have the chance of ever being portrayed or have their voices

heard anywhere. Also, people who provide spaces for others to coexist, because such people make the world go around and they inspire me. And then there are those times when a person's sense of fashion, style, confidence and poise draw me to portray them, or to portray that look of confidence.

Homaei: The palettes in your works are quite striking. Can you please explain your process when it comes to choosing colours?

Boafo: Colour for me is a form of language that I choose to express myself, as the world around us is filled with vibrant colour being used for communication. Colours are used to express and affect moods in our everyday lives. In my culture, for instance, certain colours convey a direct message in communicating a person's mood. So it is in my paintings – I use colour to convey the mood of my subjects or my own mood while painting, be it the background, the clothes of the subject or an item surrounding my subjects. These colours mostly inspire connections between the observer and subjects of the work.

Homaei: You tread an interesting space between painting and sculpture on your canvases. Can you explain the process of using your hands, and how that impacts your practice?

Boafo: I paint the faces, hands and other exposed parts of the body of my subjects with my fingers. Having explored many technical and figurative expressions of skin tone and movement, I realised that using my finger is organic, and that especially shows through in the abstract forms that create the face of my subjects. The lack of instruments allows me to create freely and achieve a very expressive skin tone while unveiling these sculptural figures.

Homaei: Your work has been part of the mainstream conversation in the creative world, from your collaboration with fashion house Dior to sending a painting on a space mission via Jeff Bezos' New Shepard rocket. How do you balance your achievements with maintaining a steady studio practice?

Boafo: The side projects are fun! But I always prioritise painting to maintain the flow, because my creative process demands it and because I enjoy painting, honestly. In Accra, I have a studio space at home as well as my studio space in town. I try to maintain a studio wherever I travel. So, whether I'm working on a Dior collaboration or a 'space mission', as you call it, I don't feel like I'm abandoning my studio practice.

Homaei: Can you describe a working day in Amoako Boafo's studio?

Boafo: Haha... There is nothing like a typical working day in Amoako Boafo's studio!

Homaei: In your spirit of giving back to others, what are some of the things you are currently working on to mentor and help emerging artists?

Boafo: My studio and artist residency, dot.ateliers, was built for just that. It's a resource for young creatives, mostly in my community, to have access to space to work, experiment and grow. As a younger artist growing up in Ghana, I remember aspiring to be successful just to have access to a space dedicated to creating that didn't lack supplies and community. So, I'm hoping I can provide that for creatives that come to the residency.

Amoako Boafo, *White & Three Shades Of Yellow*, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.



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