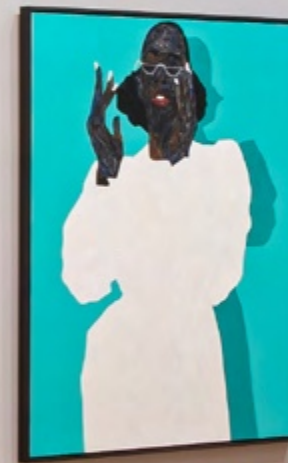


Amoako BOAFO

Painting an honest narrative of the world,
filled with energy, emotion, and community.



By Eliza Jordan
Portraits by Nana Kwadwo

The Ghanaian artist Amoako Bofo has been artistic from a young age. In an effort to capture his surroundings and the emotions of those around him, he began creating in his childhood, and later organized drawing competitions among friends. Along with his interest in the creative arts, he was drawn to the vibrancy of complex life encircling him—interested in community, charmed by the intimacy between like-minded people, and puzzled by cultural, social, and political dynamics. His curiosity led him to paint familiar faces, from friends and family to people he admired, allowing viewers a look at his tender take on figuration through subjects that appear self-confident, seeking direct eye contact. In college, he further explored painting nuanced emotions by studying in his hometown at Ghanatta College of Art and Design.

Ten years ago, Bofo left Accra to pursue a master's degree at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. It was there in Austria, and in the years that followed, that he doubled down on his focus and developed a recognizable creative style—one informed by texture in an unusual finger-painting technique and subjects looking into the viewer's gaze. Through painting and this distinct aesthetic, his work in portraiture explores Black bodies and their ability to be seen, reframing their dispositions despite the cultural context of Black culture worldwide. Friends and family still make appearances among acquaintances and public figures, yet all present a contemporary image of Black self-empowerment and self-perception. In many works, floral and geometric wallpaper patterns inform garments, referencing Black culture's historical and political dress codes. Other paintings reference self-reflection, literary works, the idea of "otherness," and time-defining global moments—from the Black Freedom Movement to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bofo's alluring artistic language quickly gained him a series of accolades and presentations thereafter, including the Walter Koschatzky Art Award; the STRABAG Artaward International; his first solo show in the United States, at Roberts Projects; and the first spot at the Rubell Museum's artist-in-residence program in Miami. Bofo's works have also been collected by institutions around the world—including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the High Museum of Art, the Hammer Museum, the Leopold Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Longlati Foundation, The Bass Museum of Art, the Aishti Foundation, and The Albertina Museum. In 2020, Bofo made fashion headlines, too, by creating "Portrait of an Artist," a suite of artworks for garments in Dior's Spring/Summer 2021 collection, under the direction of Kim Jones.

Now, a decade after his formative years in Vienna, Bofo returned to the city that shaped him for a homecoming—his first museum show in Europe. At the Belvedere Museum through January 12, 2025, an exhibition entitled "Proper Love" debuts a collection of creations by the artist, continuing his portraiture practice's emphasis on representation. The show is on the museum's lower level, and a selection of works can also be viewed on the upper level in dialogue with works by art historical figures like Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt.

Ahead of his show at the Norton Museum of Art, "Strike Fast, Dance Lightly" (October 26, 2024–March 9, 2025), Bofo shared with *Whitewall* what returning to Vienna means to him and how he's expanding his practice to include new mediums to honor texture, time, and technique.

WHITEWALL: *Your return to Vienna has been a decade in the making. How did you begin planning this show for the Belvedere?*

AMOAKO BOAFO: The starting point was my history with Vienna. It was, and in many ways still is, my home. For my first solo exhibition in Europe, it's only fitting that it takes place in Vienna. The Belvedere is also home to many historic works that I admire that will also be on view alongside mine.

WW: *"Proper Love" spans your career, presenting works from the beginning of your practice until today. How do you want viewers to move through the space?*

AB: The exhibition will show works dating back from the beginning of my career, and highlights new works, and never before shown pieces that are important to me. I want viewers to move through the space being informed by the historical works in the Belvedere collection that accompany mine to see references, but also to see my works and see how Vienna was indicative in my early career, which you still see in my practice.

WW: *You must have learned a lot about work and life while studying and living in Vienna. How did the city shape you?*

AB: The city marks a turning point in my career, where my practice went from being present to being seen. It feels odd, to be honest, to return to a city that once didn't embrace me—to one that has now welcomed me and my work. I think that, in itself, it is beautiful to see the evolution of my relationship with the city—and to the city with me.

WW: *Your painting technique was developed during your years in Vienna. How did this begin?*

AB: My ability to see art historical works physically in Vienna expanded my knowledge of technique, so naturally I was driven to find my own technique.

WW: *How does your painting's emphasis on texture enhance or help convey certain emotions?*

AB: The texture is a physical reference to emotion, and, as all of my figures are elevated through the work—or that is my intention—it is only natural that that texture is focused on both the skin, through finger stroke gesture, and the clothing, through the patterns and textile.

WW: *Your artworks explore the presentation of Black bodies and reframe their dispositions despite the cultural context of Black culture worldwide. How do you hope your subjects are seen?*

AB: Just exactly that. I hope my subjects are seen.

WW: *Often, your paintings portray friends, acquaintances, and people from public life. Who have you been capturing lately in the studio? What makes you drawn to a subject?*



Amoako Bofo, portrait by Nana Kwadwo.



Amoako Bofo, *Monstera Leaf Background*, 2020, oil on canvas and mixed media, 81 1/2 x 65 3/4 inches, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim.



Exhibition view Amoako Bofo, "Proper Love," Lower Belvedere, photo by Johannes Stoll / Belvedere, Vienna.

AB: It is mostly about energy for me. I'm drawn to the energy of people. For instance, when I come across a photo of someone in a pose that resonates with me, it inspires me to create a subject whose energy matches that pose. In this case, while the pose serves as my inspiration, it's the energy that draws me.

WW: Most of your subjects appear self-confident and often seek eye contact. Why is this important for you to convey?

AB: A way to capture one's attention is through a gaze. I want the viewers to stop and have immediate personal contact with the subject. It's most powerful.

WW: Can you share with us what your studio in Accra is like today? What is a typical day here like?

AB: A day in my studio is filled with friends and other creatives. I love to have everyone's energy in the space; it affects the way I present my subjects, and it's important for me to instill a sense of community in every aspect of what I do.

WW: A few years ago, you collaborated with Dior to feature a series of artworks on the men's collection's garments. What was that like? Might we see a fashion collaboration again in the future?

AB: In many ways, the fashion and art world are similar in their creative venture, in their craft. To convey genuine messages about being, and self-worth, much aligns with why I create artworks—to elevate individuals and to define oneself. Fashion is a vehicle for art, and art can be a vehicle of empowerment for individuals. This was a momentous creative opportunity for my career and for the future of my artwork.

WW: This year, you continued exploring other mediums, including stained glass for a solo exhibition named "The one that got away" in Mexico City at Mariane Ibrahim Gallery. How are you thinking of expanding your practice to include other mediums?

AB: I have been interested in experimenting and working in mediums that are able to replicate my texture and techniques, but through their own avenue of an image-making process. Glass and mosaic were the first, and I am still excited to delve further into them as a medium in my practice. It was a great experiment.



Amoako Bofo, Mr. Palm - Green Wristband, 2022, courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim, © 2024 Amoako Bofo / Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna.

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Exhibition view of Amoako Bofo, "Proper Love," Lower Belvedere, photo by Johannes Stoll / Belvedere, Vienna.



Amoako Bofo, *Enyom's Black Shawl*, 2020, photo by Johannes Stoll / Balveders, Vienna © 2024 Amoako Bofo / Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna.

