



Amoako Boafo, *Purple Shadow*, 2021.
Photo: Craig Smith



Amoako Boafo, *Kofi*, 2019.
Photo: Craig Smith

Amoako Boafo has emerged as one of the most important figurative painters of his time. His portraits are noted for their singular style, engaging subjects, and vibrant colors and patterns. His paintings offer a new approach to black representation by documenting and celebrating the Black subject in art. He often depicts his magnetic subjects in thick, gestural brushstrokes in front of monochromatic color backgrounds.

Boafo's striking portraits have a crucial relationship to 'the white gaze'—the ways in which whiteness dominates how Black people are portrayed—and instead encourages a different way of looking and new trajectories of seeing within figurative portraiture. *Kofi* and *Purple Shadow* exemplify his singular finger painting style, often applied only to the faces and exposed body parts of his subjects. These swirls of brown or black paint makes visible a complex interiority within his subjects even as they gaze outward. *Kofi* and *Purple Shadow* are vivid and precise monochromatic portraits of two very different Black men. The artists' formal and conceptual process allows for distinct subjects, gifted with an exquisite degree of regality and self-awareness.

Boafo is expert at blending interiority and exteriority in his subjects—all of whom are familiar, friendly, in community with the artist—and hold an intimacy and capacity for self-possession, self-awareness, and self-fullness. In this context, Black interiority speaks to the inner aliveness of Black people and the expressive cultural production they shape. Simultaneously, the subject of the painting gazes outward, is situated outside, and shapes or acts on the material world. The Black body is thus unconstrained by the duality of interior/exterior, or divorced from the political and from public life. Interiority is not a protection against the dominance of a racially-charged, oppressive, social world. Instead, it allows Boafo's subjects proclaim their sovereignty within it.

We only need to ask a few very simple but fundamental questions about Amoako Boafo's portraits of self-aware Black subjects to reveal the incredible possibilities for reading other aesthetic trajectories and for valuing their different qualities: Who is looking? Who is being seen? Who is being represented? And who is doing the representing?

-Natasha Becker, Curator of African Art
de Young Museum