

Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed and finally exhausted me. For though the life of colour is a glorious life it is a short one.

Virginia Woolf.<sup>1</sup>

1.

On first viewing *What the Owl Knows*, you find yourself face to face with a digital video that appears to be documenting a painter at work on a number of paintings during the Summer of 2022 in what might be her studio somewhere in London. What seems to be self-evident, in a video that spends its time studying a painter as she studies her painting, watching a visual study of the ways in which the work of painting is inseparable from the work of study, in which painting is nothing other than the practice and theory of study, begins, gradually to lose its appearance of self-evidence. What becomes apparent is that in attending to the ways in which the painter studies each aspect of her work - the expression of fingers that hover, briefly, hefting, lifting, dropping brushes from a heap piled on the desk, the precise angles at which her brush approaches, descends, targets and makes contact with **the** surface of painting within the painting within the canvas - the video is working to detach itself from the ambition to chart the progress of painting towards completion. Not only is the video not concerned with providing a narrative arc for what the painting is becoming; it is preoccupied with the back of the painter, a back clad in a white work vest that reverses slowly until its fabric overwhelms the depth of field and obscures your view. In those moments when the painter faces her painting, walking backwards with a measured pace of thought, keeping her canvas in perspective, what becomes clear is the extent to which the painter is not painting for but in spite of the camera. As the painter backs into the camera, there is a proximity and a presence that overwhelms the legibility of video. The painter has preserved her self, her expression from exposure; the access of the camera to her face has been frustrated. Perhaps the video is inviting you to imagine her saccade, to deduce her concentration from the effort discernible in her neck or shoulders. Then again, her back carries its own means of expression; it speaks in its own dorsal language; it addresses you. If you concentrate, you can hear its speech in the comportment of the painter. You can listen to its speech in the ways in which she holds herself in the presence of the canvas.

**What** *What the Owl Knows* wants, in these scenes, is to join forces with the painter in an effort to thwart the desire of the spectator to contemplate the face of the painter. It would like to interrupt the expectation of the availability of the face of the painter for the pleasure of the spectator. It is not so much a matter of withdrawing the sight of the face from the frame; it is more a matter of rendering the automatic expectation of availability intermittent, unreliable, insupportable. What *What the Owl Knows* seeks are all the ways in which it might suspend documentary's expectations of disclosure. It aims at frustrating the revelation of facial disclosure promised by documentary, understood in its widest sense, when it encounters the artist, epitomised in the figure of the

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, Walter Sickert: *A Conversation, Oh, to Be a Painter!*, David Zwirner Books, Introduced and selected by Claudia Tobin, 2021, p.68

painter, in the setting of what it pictures as her studio. Whenever documentary encounters the painter *qua* painter in the studio, it offers spectators the prospect and the pleasure of insight into the interior of the artist where her artistic intention is presumed to reside. It is this yearning for access to the psyche of the artist, to her innermost motivation, that animates the epistemic fantasy of documentary. The fantasy of disclosure is heightened when the painter at work is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and the moving image artists at work are Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun of The Otolith Group. Documentary's appetite for disclosure takes on a heightened degree of expectation when it bears down upon the public figure of the artist of colour, a category to be understood here in its widest possible sense. It renders the public figure of the black artist, understood as expansively as possible, in terms that are never less than hypervisible, hyperliteral, hyperexplicable and hyperbolic.

By shifting attention from the painter as the object of attention towards the quality of attention bestowed upon the paint by the painter, *What the Owl Knows* aims to displace documentary's fantasy of wanting to know towards a study of study. To pay attention to the ways in which video pays attention to the ways in which a painter pays attention to what she paints is to begin to apprehend the ways in which Yiadom-Boakye thinks in and with and by way of paint. It is to approach her as a thinker whose practice enacts her theories of what painting, in its details, its implications, its repercussions, might, can and should be. What emerges is a kind of choreography in which the thought of the camera lens and the thought of the sound recorder deployed by The Otolith Group enters into a dialogue with the walking-thought and the pausing-thought of Yiadom-Boakye's thought of painting. To move the attention of video from the goal of accessibility towards the texture of attention bestowed by the painter upon her painting is to bring viewers face to face with the imagination of scale at work within the work of Yiadom-Boakye's painting. What *What the Owl Knows* aims for and aims at is the sensorial magnification of the temporal passage between motion and movement, the **phenomenological** intensification of the theory carried in the **practice** held in the transitions between pose, pause and posture, stare, stance and saccade. What video makes available for thought is the thought of the painter carried in the specific marks she makes, seen from specific angles, witnessed according to specific perspectives.

*What the Owl Knows* does not impose those angles upon the work of painting undertaken by Yiadom-Boakye. Those perspectives emerge from a preoccupation shared between the artists: a concern to displace the promise of disclosure in order to liberate the pleasure of the work of study. What the artists share is a desire to study the style in which study happens. This appreciation for the specific quality of attending to attention, its texture, its timbre, its tone, indicates one of the ways of comprehending the affinity that provides the like-mindedness that sustains the longstanding friendship between Yiadom-Boakye, Eshun and Sagar. Shorn of such elective affinity, it is difficult to imagine the existence of *What the Owl Knows*. These shared sympathies for recursion and for reflexivity indicate the reasons for the style, the approach and the sensibility operative throughout *What the Owl Knows*; equally, they indicate its reasons for its condition of existence; they are its apriori; they indicate the deeply held, consistently articulated guiding principles of the artists within themselves, within, across, between media.

Locked into each coil, each curl of ornament, just like the coil and curl of your hair, and my hair, darling, -Afro hair, as we call it - is the secret salvation of us all.

Shola von Reinhold. <sup>2</sup>

2.

In interviews, Yiadom-Boakye often takes pain to elucidate her work by focusing upon painting in itself, on the formal demands that paint, as a material with its own force, tendencies and dispositions, makes upon her painting. Her interlocutors, by contrast, tend to concern themselves with questions regarding realism, figuration, blackness, black figuration, the figuration of the black body after the so-called racial reckoning engendered after the global protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Yiadom-Boakye's focus on the formal problems posed by her work in and with paint is encouraging her interlocutors to alter the scale of their enquiry from that of figuration, blackness, black figuration or the figuration of blackness towards that of paint. It is not so much a matter of avoiding these enquiries as it is a matter of adjusting the scale at which they are posed. A matter of approaching these questions from within a world whose forces she commands, whose power she wields, whose authority she holds rights in. It is a matter of meeting a painter on the field of paint. A question of descending to the level at which and in which she is most intimate. A level in which painting surpasses the authority of chronology or the precedence of history upon the present. A level at which painting enters into the dimension of the transhistorical. A dimension in which each painter lives and on which she sustains herself. In painting, as in poetry, in the words of Derek Walcott, 'one acknowledges not an exchange of influences, not imitation, but the tidal advance of the metropolitan language, of its empire, if you like, which carries simultaneously, fed by such strong colonial tributaries, poets of such different beliefs as Rimbaud, Char, Claudel, Perse, and Césaire. It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes.'<sup>3</sup> **Yiadom-Boakye positions her work within the empire of painting: it is there, in its waves, on its tributaries, that you should meet.**

To attend to the power of paint is to attend towards the force and the fissiparousness of the mark. It is to think of the making of marks according to their multiplicative logic. It is to comprehend the act of the making of marks as a form of study. Video's power of magnification renders the work of paint within the mark available for study. By transposing Yiadom-Boakye's preoccupation with the fissile force **within** paint into a study of the ways in which video decides to study the ways in which a painter studies her painting, *What the Owl Knows* suggests one way of enacting the adjustment in scale. Video makes the mark available for study, renders its contact and its surface available for a scrutiny according to precise angles that speak of the necessary constraints within the studio. It adopts an interscalar approach towards painting. It moves between the scales of the mark in order to make perceptible the intrachromatic dimension that opens the dimension of the chromatic within the mark. *What the Owl Knows* could be characterised as a kind of interscalar vehicle designed to navigate the intrachromatic.<sup>4</sup> Within, across and between each mark, one can glimpse chromatic oxbows, isthmuses, lagoons, mangroves, islands, junctures, junctions, borders and archipelagoes whose gravity, weight, mass **and** force are subject to the painter's saccadic critique, judgment, appraisal, assessment and adjudication. *What the Owl Knows* seeks to make visible the force of abstraction which exists within the form of figuration. It sets out to decompose the marks which assemble themselves toward legibility, which announce themselves in the recognisable form of fingers,

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<sup>2</sup> Shola von Reinhold, *LOTE*, Jacaranda Books, 2020, p.312.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History, What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1998, p. 51

<sup>4</sup> See Gabrielle Hecht, Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality and Violence, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 33, Issue 1, pp. 109-141

which converge towards what must be a palm, which begins to resolve itself in what can be said to be a wrist. It does not disrupt as much as it seeks to delay or dilate the spectatorial pleasure that flows from recognising the outline of the young woman in the shape of her back that turns itself towards the canvas, readable in the curved air held within the shape that arms make as they hold themselves above what must be a neck which supports what can only be a head. Video carries, it plays within the field of the interchromatic which is held and carried within **black morphologies**; <sup>5</sup>it explores its gradients, its intervals, its adjacencies, its leaps, which are not so much improvisational nor intuitive as much as they are inventivist.<sup>6</sup>

Yiadam-Boakye's inventivism subjects a finite range of colours to procedures which render them infinite. Inventivism engenders infinitude. When Yiadam-Boakye speaks of blackness in her painting, she refers, often, to its 'infinity'. This aesthetico-political formulation, which is simultaneously a question of the form of politics and a matter of the politics of form, should be thought in relation to and in articulation with an aesthetic principle rigorously practiced by Yiadam-Boakye, a prohibition on the use of black paint. To comprehend the infinity of blackness within paint requires an interdiction on black paint for **the** insufficiency of its monochromaticism. Excluding the self-evidence of black paint is the key that opens the door to the intrachromatic kingdom; that opens the path to the work of inventing the colours that compose blackness in **the** infinitude of its irreality, its conditional, subjunctive, hypothetical force of existence. In contemporary fashion and advertising photography evident in **the** online ads that **intrude** on your **webpage**, in the glass landscapes of fashion store windows, in the double page spreads in magazines, in escalators ascending the tube, on the side of buses, the visual languages of black female, male and gender nonconforming models assumes **a** hypersaturated chromaticism which aims to provide viewers with a form of certainty. Instead of supplying **forms of certainty** for those unsure **of** the racial limits of the representable, <sup>7</sup> Yiadam-Boakye invents an infinitude that insists upon the incompleteness of the representable in order to open up the **unlimited limits of and in** the racial. In this **opening, this overture**, paint descends into definitive indefiniteness.

In my solitude  
you taunt me  
with memories  
that never die.

Billie Holiday.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Keith Hudson, *The Black Morphologist of Reggae*, Vista Sounds, 1983

<sup>6</sup> The term is adopted and adapted from Brian Massumi who states 'For Simondon's thought to resonate, constructivism has to make way for an integral inventivism (if such a thought exists). An inventivism that is not afraid of nature, and *its* creativity.' See 'Technical Mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon, with Arne De Boever, Alex Murray and Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia* Number 7, 2009, p. 38

<sup>7</sup> David Marriott, *The X of Representation: Rereading Stuart Hall*, *New Formations* Volume 2019 Issue 96-7, p. 178

<sup>8</sup> Billie Holiday, *Solitude*, 1956, Clef Records, 1956.

3.

As *What the Owl Knows* scales up towards the study of painted women, painted men, by themselves, in groups, what becomes available for thought are encounters that bring you face to face with the figuration of a same sex sociality that does not entail similarity as much as the **forms of its solitude and the faces of its solicitude**. What becomes apparent is the attention Yiadom-Boakye pays to the specific ways in which each person, each figure, holds themselves, which is nothing other than the ways in which paint holds them or the ways in which paint bears meanings. In attending to the bearing of these partially predicated entities, what draws your attention is Yiadom-Boakye's attention to modes of comportment, deportment and posture, particularities of pose, stance and attitude, certain kinds of demeanour, mannerism and manner. Taken together, **these meditations on moods, modes and modalities lure** the spectator until you catch yourself in the act of attributing intention to intimation. Having proceeded along a primrose path of inference, without ever having consciously decided upon doing so, **you** find yourself conjecturing their characters, inferring temperament, extrapolating an ethos of their lives, their loves, their desires, their sociality.

These young women and young men, whose conduct neither conforms nor deviates from a heterosexual presumption of gender normativity, whose codes speak of a self-sufficiency that contains itself, orchestrates itself, **conspire in their own mystery**, a conspiracy which is nothing other than the ways in which they breathe together, a mystery that you, the spectator, find yourself in the act of narrating, **as they hold** their own counsel, in themselves, with each other. What they are protecting is the mystery of themselves, **not from each other as from** the spectatorial gaze. They harbour the mystery of themselves, of what they were doing, of what they might be doing, of their own conditionality, their subjunctive irreality which operates according to its own rules, which are their rules, which slide away from spectators unused to coming face to face with a sustained study of whitelessness. A **whitelessness which is not contingent but categorical, structural, imperative**.

One way in which this whitelessness emerges is in and through their preoccupation with themselves and with each other. They pose their existence as a question whose answers are to be found in each other. This sense of drawing sustenance from themselves, from their unspecified, unqualified friendship encourages you to draw closer, to **catch** yourself in the act of drawing closer to **a thought that is full** of the silence of camaraderie. Wanting to share their time, their company, to be with them, beside them, each painting seems to partake in **a process described by Virginia Woolf** in the paintings of Walter Sickert. 'The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis', observed Virginia Woolf, 'it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying.'<sup>9</sup> Yiadom-Boakye's paintings liberate themselves from the crisis of emergency and emergence that overprescribes the image of the black in painting of modern life. Her figures do not struggle.

These characters, these people gracefully, effortlessly, negotiate the line between the girlish indoors and the boyish outdoors.<sup>10</sup> These young men and women are at ease with bookishness as they are with ballet as they are with the blackness of bookishness and the ballet of blackness. Their devotion to dance gives them a heightened awareness of deportment in which athleticism meets introspection. A world in which gender nonconformity is a medium for and of **disalienation within femininity and masculinity**. A matter of appointment **that goes without saying**. These boys are sissies from a world in which sobriety acts as a safe harbour for

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<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, p.71.

<sup>10</sup> Marlon. B. Ross, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*, Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2022, pp.1-49.

their seriousness. These women are concerned with a sorority which neither acknowledges nor requires anything from spectatorship. Perhaps that is why you continually discover yourself, as if in an act of vigilant somnambulism, assembling elements from **the language of their comportment** into an anatomy of black homophily. This homophilic homosociality finds itself at home in carefully atemporal and precisely delocalised settings; it belongs in and to these landscapes of unbelonging. In each world, which is underdetermined from within rather than overdetermined from without, the attributes and the qualities of each woman or man is magnified until they become unqualified, unchecked by external forces. It is the unbinding of these predicates that becomes discernible within and across each Yiadom-Boakye painting. It is the effort to attribute significance to these unqualified qualities that puts pressure upon the spectator's capacity to read the properties of personhood. It is a matter of coming face to face with a world in which the painterly idioms of recognisability, legibility and readability **exist** at a persistent remove from the norms of the gallery or the museum, a world that operates according to its own rules that are asymptotic to the institution of spectatorship.

The Garnet cast out demons, and the Hydropicus deprived the Moon of her colour.

Oscar Wilde. <sup>11</sup>

4.

Suspending documentary's demand for explanation opens a space for the poetic language of a painter that writes. Stripping out the interview favoured by documentary enables poetry to take the place of biography. In the titles, the poems and the fables of Yiadom-Boakye, **you may begin to discern figures of thought that generate allegories of reading capable of operating** at a variety of degrees of distance from that of painting. *What the Owl Knows* uses video to perform the writing of Yiadom-Boakye by setting **its text in motion**. It seeks to host a series of convocations between poetry, prose and painting in which the asymptotic and the appositional presence of her parallel poetics becomes **auricular allegory**. Poetry creates aberrations in meaning that generate moments of blindness and insight whose effects can be enacted, performed and distributed by video. What strikes the reading eye is the capitalization of terms which imbues **each term** with a specific power of symbolism, a Symbolist power of archaism which draws them towards a deliberately untimely poetics of **nominative entification**. Each poem contains capitalised words that become understandable as **nominated Entities, nominal Personifications** that interact on the idea and the stage of the imagination of their world. These Entities populate her writing, which is nothing but the sentences pronounced by these creatures upon each other. They behave according to their own logics of alliteration and laws of archaism that owe nothing to what Zadie Smith calls the 'narrative mysteries' of the figures that populate her paintings. <sup>12</sup> Nor do they obey the rules of the world of the spectator. As **allegories of reading, however**, they are, insistently, immediately legible and readable to both.

Yiadom-Boakye populates her fabular poetic with **creatures**: Owls, Pigeons, Crows, Foxes, and Field Mice. Their sly civility, cunning calculation and morbid amorality provides them with a vantage point from which to comment upon the deceptions, the duplicities and the cruelties enacted in the front rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms of the dinner parties, the affairs and the murders

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited by Nicholas Frankel, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 167

<sup>12</sup> Zadie Smith, Lynette Yiadom's Imaginary Portraits, *The New Yorker*, June 12 2017,.

committed by capitalists that are neither as clever nor as sophisticated as they believe themselves to be. In Yiadom-Boakye's writings, down at heel aristocrats, and sleazy bourgeoisie **fall prey to the unforeseen plot twists of their own criminal-mindedness**. This structure **of emplotment**, in which characters hoist themselves by their own petard, has a logic of fatality that draws the attention of Yiadom-Boakye. It is fitting, then, that it is her voice **that you** hear throughout *What the Owl Knows* reciting the recondite malevolence of the mechanisms by and in and through which her characters engineer their own misfortune. In *What the Owl Knows*, it is the Pigeon, at the hands, **or rather**, the wings of the Owl, that **discovers itself the object of its own self-inflicted demise**. What the Owl knows, in contrast to the Pigeon, is that appetite **is its own reward, its own sustenance its own motor**.

In staging its diurnal encounters between painting, prose, poetry and video, *What the Owl Knows* moves from the studio interior to the urban parks of South London carrying the night-thoughts of Yiadom-Boakye from light to dark and back again. As she reads from her poems organised for and according to the temporal structure of editing, an introspective expressionism takes hold of the time of watching. The figure of the painter appears in the form of a silhouette under sodium light, a solitary walker whose reverie circumnavigates **an urban pastoral** whose undisclosed settings speak of the significance of **their** intimation. Her **voice, which** alludes to images of thought beyond the camera, freights what happens in the frame with a sense of implication. Video orchestrates meanings within audible reach. It invokes a convocation between the irreality of painting, the abyss of poetry and the invocation of vocality. To listen to the light of night is to hear the night of day. Each passage undertaken by the painter alludes to a specific geography of recollection. Each walk traces a specific line of desire that holds within its path an itinerary of becoming.

For Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is, after all, a South Londoner. The withdrawal of overt references to South London **within** her work leaves a void that enables her North American interlocutors to account for her work **with** criteria shaped by their preoccupations. In situating the painter as a walker within a city voiced by her words, *What the Owl Knows* does not aim to fill this void with meaning as much as it seeks to redirect poetry's abyss of meaning towards London itself. What forms, it asks, would a notion of Black Britishness, in the differential specificity of its Ghanaian-Britishness, in its precise South Londonness, take, when it was, and is subject to, and the subject of **an aesthetic of intentional underdetermination and intrachromatic infinitude**? For those that can hear, this specific style of South Londonness, this precise form of Ghanaian-Britishness, can be heard in the reading voice of Yiadom-Boakye, in the exactitude of its educated enunciation, in its **accentuated consonance and assonance**. In the affective tonality of her reading voice can be heard the potency of the poetic, its capacity for generating a drama of defamiliarization that distances spectatorship from the nature and the content of racialisation that you find yourself reaching for when you find yourself wanting to describe the identities in and of her paintings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David Marriott, Bastard Allegories: Black British Independent Cinema, *Black Camera*, Volume 7, Number 1, Fall 2015, p. 181