

GAGOSIAN

Forbes

A Powerful Group Exhibition At Gagosian London Considers Postcolonial Black Identity

Nargess Banks



Àsikò "Pillars at the Port" (2022), giclée print on baryta paper 63 x 42 1/8 in 160 x 107 cm edition ... [+]
ÀSÌKÒ. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Liminality is the uncertain and ambiguous state amid a rite of passage. Its contemporary usage was pioneered by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his study of religion as a cultural artifact. His work on liminal spaces, published in his book “Rites of Passage” in 1909, speaks of how the critical transitional events we go through — birth, puberty, marriage, death, etc. — are marked by ceremonies with a ritual function that transcend cultural boundaries.

This is the premise for the latest exhibition at Gagosian London. Borrowing the book’s title, “Rites of Passage” explores the idea of liminal space through the lens of nineteen contemporary artists, primarily based in the UK, who share a migration history. And by showing work in various mediums and through multiple voices, the curator, Gagosian’s associate director Pájú Oshin, sets out to challenge linear narratives and fixed concepts of identity to great effect.



Elsa James' "Ode to David Lammy MP" (2022) at "Rites of Passage," Gagosian Gallery PHOTO LUCY DAWKINS

The focus is on the status of postcolonial Black identity, specifically the “triple consciousness” experienced by many in the African diaspora in the UK when encountering counterparts who identify with local majority populations.

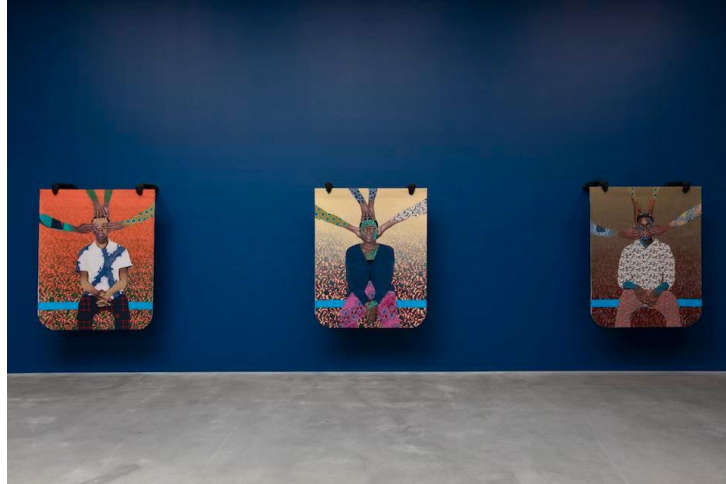
Meanwhile, separation, transition and return — liminality’s three stages — form the exhibition structure, each addressing the act of movement, told through individual and communal experiences. The artists are then further grouped according to tradition, spirituality and place themes.



Enam Gbewonyo's "Colonialist ravelry, an infection of mind, skin and being. Blackness hangs on, a ... [+] PHOTO NOAH DA COSTA/COURTESY THE ARTIST

The narrative begins with a black neon artwork that reads: “I AM HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE,” greeting visitors on entering the exhibition. The work of Elsa James, “Ode to David Lammy MP” (2022) echoes a line from a speech by David Lammy in 2018. The politician was responding to the Windrush scandal when British subjects, many of whom had arrived here from Caribbean nations decades earlier, were detained or threatened with deportation.

Enam Gbewonyo speaks to the Windrush generation's experiences by investigating cultural history through manufacturing and manipulating textiles. The symbolic use of fabric also comes into play in Patrick Quarm's "Make you no see, Make you no hear, Make you no speak" (2022). The three-part mixed-media artwork ponders the cultural reflectivity of batik, despite the material's commodified status.



Patrick Quarm's "Make you no see, Make you no hear, Make you no speak" (2022) is in three parts, ... [+] PHOTO LUCY DAWKINS

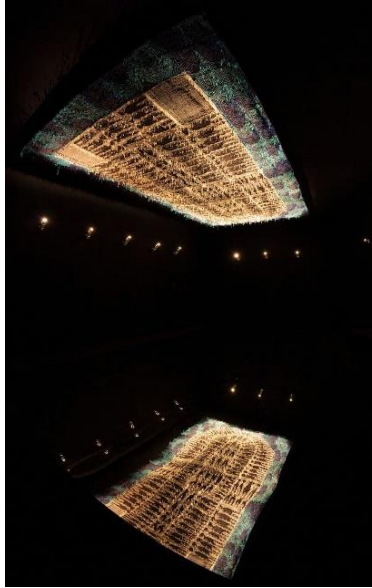
Meanwhile, with his tapestry "Do This In Memory Of Us" (2019-20), Victor Ehikhamenor stitches thousands of rosary beads to canvas and lace, cutting across history, memory and belief. The Nigerian-born, US-based artist thus explores religion and spirituality's place as tools for both survival and oppression.

Particularly powerful is "Pillars at the Port" (2022) by the London-based visual artist Àsìkò. Here he is re-imagining masquerade traditions rooted in Yoruba history and culture to see how the representation of ancestral communities might inflect contemporary diasporic identities.



Adelaide Damoah's "Nyanya (Ten)" (2023), in two parts is created with cyanotype, ink and gold on ... [+] PHOTO PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES. COURTESY ADELAIDE DAMOAH AND GAGOSIAN

Elsewhere artist Adelaide Damoah challenges ideologies imposed on her familial narrative in “Nyɔɔma (Ten)” (2023) by transposing texts and maps onto photo collages of herself, her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother as a way of exploring colonial history. And Manyaku Mashilo’s “Celestial Cartographies” (2020) is a series of paintings in which imaginary characters move through abstracted cosmological landscapes that refer to African faiths and identities.



Victor Ehikhamenor's "Do This In Memory Of Us" (2019 - 2020). Rosary beads, thread on lace and ... [+] PHOTO LUCY DAWKINS

The complexity of place comes through in most of the work on display at Gagosian. For Phoebe Boswell, water performs as a symbol of pain and hope. Her “The Saltwater Within Us, The Depths of Our Grief, The Leagues of Our Love” (2023) reflects on the historical experiences formed by movement and migration and forging better futures through water’s healing properties and expansive possibility. And Mary Evans employs pop-cultural imagery to examine the relationship between contemporary Britain and its imperial past through the lens of her childhood.



Julianknxx's "...?inawhirlwindofencounters at Gagosian London PHOTO LUCY DAWKINS

Finally, an installation by the film and performance artist Julianknxx movingly blends poetry with film. Figures appear and then vanish to the sound of the artist’s poetry as a stretched fishing net distances us, the viewer, from the subject.

Julianknxx, who traces his family to Sierra Leone, is reflecting on how it feels to exist in liminal spaces, those in-between spaces, by rethinking the linear socio-political narratives that lead to fixed identities. The title, “...?inawhirlwindofencounters,” is a nod to a poem by the late Édouard Glissant, one of the most influential writers of the French Caribbean and a leading voice on the postcolonial condition, for a powerful observation on themes of identity and building new worlds.

“Rites of Passage” is on exhibition at Gagosian London’s Britannia Street gallery until April 29, 2023.