THE JOURNEY IS MINE: CHAPTER ONE

Gallery Text

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Paintings by William Kwamena-Poh.

Gallery Text — Descriptions of the paintings in the artist’s own words.

The paintings are arranged alphabetically by title.

Telfair Museums, Jepson Center

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The Journey is Mine is part of Telfair Museums’ #art912 initiative, a dedicated platform to showcase the work of Savannah artists. This exhibition is organized by Telfair Museums and curated by Erin Dunn, Assistant Curator.
Big Catch, 2004
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of John McFadden and Lisa Kabnick

In 2000, I took the photograph that formed the foundation for this watercolor painting while I was visiting Cape Coast Castle, a large commercial fort that was used in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. It was my first visit to Cape Coast, and I was mesmerized and overwhelmed by the scenes. I took many photographs.

Around the time I took this photograph, I started incorporating Adinkra symbolism into my images to help people know a little more about my culture. Often used and seen in Ghana, Adinkra are symbols that represent concepts in life. In this painting, I have included three adinkra symbols to tell the story of brave fishermen who have brought us an abundance of a catch and with the cooperation of the community, can sort it. Kwatakye means bravery and valor. This symbol used to be shaved in the back of the head of the king’s bravest soldiers. Bese saka represent cola nuts as a symbol of abundance and success. Nkonsonkonso is a chain or link. “We are linked in both life and death. Those who share common blood relations never break apart.” This is a symbol of cooperation.
A lot of minibuses that transport people from parts of our major cities in Ghana have sayings on them. They are mostly written in English, which is the official language of the country. In a society where most people practice Christianity, most of these sayings center on religious beliefs and inspiration. I took the photograph that this painting is based on when I visited home for the first time in 1989 since I left around 40 years prior. These minibuses are known as trotro in the Ga language, spoken by a group of people who primarily live in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Tro means threepence, a form of currency, and tro tro means three three pence, which is the cost of the bus, and this became the foundation for the name of the minibuses.
I met this woman at my sister’s celebration of life service in Amonokrom, a town in Ghana, where my sister had lived with my mother. The fabric she is wearing is called "May the Lord keep me in the bosom of Abraham." As is tradition, when we buried my sister on Saturday, we all wore black or red, and on Sunday, we wore black and white to church. The entire church wears black and white, with the family wearing a chosen specific pattern to distinguish them. It is at these gatherings that no matter how far we’ve traveled, we all come together, and we learn about our extended family as well as our traditional mores and folkways. The black plastic behind her was hung to keep the focus on the ceremony by blocking the house.
Deborah in Praise, 1999
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of Debra Jones

Deborah was one of the first people I met when I moved to Savannah more than 20 years ago. I wanted to try and capture her humility, dedication and praise to the Almighty God as a practicing Muslim woman. My sincere hope is that this painting is a glowing representation of an African American woman of faith in the South.
Feed Your Self, 2011
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

In 1972, the Government of Ghana, under the regime of General Acheampong launched an operation called “Feed Yourself/Industries.” This was a self-reliant policy, which resulted in high growth yields of rice, maize, and other crops. When I visited home in 2010, I saw this boat in Jamestown with the phrase “Feed Your Self” hand painted on the side. The message resonated for me on so many levels that I knew it had to be told in the right light. This was not just about our physical hunger, but spiritually, emotionally, and beyond anything else, our mental nurturing that we should work on. Free our minds from mental slavery and fill it up with our own journeys and knowledge. Teach a man to fish and he will feed himself for life.
*Fishermen’s Blues, 2019*
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

This is part of the scenery of Jamestown. The fishermen are absorbed in the never-ending work of mending nets to reduce their loss from the daily fishing catch. Working together, they strengthen their trust that exist between one another.
God never fails, 2016
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

I have always believed that no one can draw an image of our creator who I believe created the heavens and earth. How can we limit the creator to a look or color or form with something the creator created? Once we limit our Creator to an earthly form, we limit our spirit and our ability to fully live in the light of ourselves. We can use words and sayings of our Lord to show our faith and hopefully it will also light our way as we walk through life. The boats are synonymous to our spiritual vehicles to spread the good word, the Good seed. This scene is also from Jamestown.
Hope, 2006
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

The adinkra symbol on this boat is Osram ne nsoromma (translated to “the moon and star”). “The North Star has an affinity for marriage. She is waiting in the sky for the return of her husband, the moon.” Just as this young lady has faith and hope as she waits for her husband, the fisherman, to return home safely.
Jamestown Enterprise, 2010
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of Bonnie Gentes

Jamestown is a neighborhood in Accra, the capital of Ghana. It is where all the real tough Ga boxers come from. In this part of town, boys become men earlier than they want to be. And yet they retain their self-worth while building a strong work ethic. You can also see so much fabric worn through the simple things they do, because they work with their hands and as a united group with one common cause, they preserve their way of life. Nearly all fishermen can repair their nets when they break and tear, but when you need professional help and experts, these are the guys who can help you.
Kalekye, 2014
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

*Kalekye* means "to set free." Many artists go through periods where certain colors dominate their palettes. I have always loved turquoise blue and when I get a chance to work with it and the various shades of it, it brings me joy. There’s so much warmth and thought in this pose that I hope the viewer responds to her contemplative energy.
*Love Life*, 2012
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of Earl Waters & Ron Spivack

This painted mural wall features the phrase “STOP AIDS LOVE LIFE” along with maps and schoolchildren that serve as an educational tool for the young children that stand in front of it. It is my belief that if they are educated and told the truth, instead of lies and fear, they will travel the country and spread truth and love.
Matriarch, 2009
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of John McFadden and Lisa Kabnick

Matriarch is the third painting I've done of my mother. This work was hard for me to finish because part of me constantly worried whether it really looked like her and presented her in a loving light.
Networking, 2019
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

I met this fisherman at Lake Bosomtwi, which is a crater lake near Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana. This lake has so many stories about how it was formed and how it acquired its name. Some say it was formed of volcanic activity, others claim a meteorite fell and created one of the most expansive natural bodies of freshwater.

According to folklore, a hunter was chasing an injured antelope through the forest when it ran into this lake and vanished. He is believed to have named the place Bosomtwi, meaning antelope god. He settled here and went fishing. The Ashantis consider Lake Bosomtwi to be a god created on Sunday and the lake inhabitants celebrate its birthday in a special festival called Akwasidae. In times past, it was a taboo to touch the water with anything of iron, so the people around this lake don’t use any conventional boats, but rather a wooden plank known as the padua, which requires expert handling to maneuver.

This painting is modeled after a fisherman who allowed me to take some photographs of him working. I admired his net and his focus on it, a tool that allows him to control his own life and industry.
Networth, 2010
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Without a net, a fisherman is very limited in his/her ability to fish for a living. He sees his net worth through his net, even his first true and most beloved net that helped him get his first catch and taught him the mechanics and art of fishing. This painting is a reminder of the importance of the never-ending job of fixing his net to help him work daily. Tunisia 94, written on the side of the boat in front of the man, represents his passions and love for soccer. In 1994, Tunisia was the host country of the Africa Cup of Nations and these fishermen didn’t need visas to travel anywhere along the coast of West Africa and beyond. Their love for sports was not restricted by manmade barriers.

In this image I strive to tell many conscious and unconscious stories. The noose and the backward crucifix represent the stories of people of color who have been mistreated and lynched because of the color of their skin. The boats also indirectly conjure up images of black people being shipped across the Atlantic Ocean for sale into enslavement. In the 17th century, Jamestown Fort was a shipping port and it is one port from which enslaved African people were exported as commodities to the New World.
Along with the painting *Reflections*, *New Beginnings* is also part of the series I did featuring Kandy as my model. As Kandy was fixing her headwrap, I took a photograph. The image was different for me in the way it was backlit, which gave it a certain kind of power. Normally, I take side-view portraits rather than straightforward poses; however, I discovered a new camera angle for my portraits, and this was strong pose which I'm glad happened. In her pose, I wanted to share a feeling of a new journey. Whether she's taking her headwrap off, or simply adjusting it, it's a new beginning.
We were in Accra, the capital of Ghana, taking in the scenes, as my cabbie fixed his car. There were street hawkers, or individuals selling wares on the street, everywhere selling mangos, water, shoes, and all kinds of fruit. This woman was sitting quietly by the side of the road, picking through her okra and sorting them. She had a sincere and kind face of someone familiar and regular. I also loved her baskets and circular movements. They keep one's eyes happy and constantly enjoying the scene.
Pride of the Fishmonger, 2017
Gouache on watercolor paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Pride of the Fishmonger is of a woman who came to my father and stepmother’s home in 2014. I was interested in her strength and self-assured posture of letting us know that once you got a taste her smoked fish, you would want more. I captured her beautiful head wrap with the tail feather, because it made her look distinguished, just as her yellow load carrier made her look stately.
In 2013, I won Best of Show, for a portrait of the woman from Ghana titled *Fisherman's Daughter*. I was beyond excited that my portrait had won, and I was motivated to make another painting with the same subject matter. *Profile in Grace* exercises my artistic license as I made a few changes from the original. I changed her hairstyle, added the red beads to draw the eye up, and the earring to bring the eye down and move you from left to right through the movement of the wooly wrap and her distant yet powerful gaze of determination.

This young lady depicted was visiting from Ghana and I had a chance to meet with her. The earring she is wearing includes the Adinkra symbolism, *Gye Nyame* (directly translated, “except God”). It stands for the omnipotence and immortality of God, and means, without God, I am nothing. It means that if I am going to believe in a God, I want that faith and belief to be to the one true living God.
Kandy is a young woman who modeled for me. I have always admired the work of the watercolor painter Steve Hanks, who produced a large body of work featuring white women as his subject matter and I’ve always wanted to emulate his project using women of color. I have tried to give them the praise, strength and dignity that they surely deserve.
I was a featured artist at the Coconut Grove Art Festival in Miami when a young lady and her mother stopped by my booth and told me of her trip to Ghana. She had taken a lot of pictures and asked if I was interested in seeing them. When I visited with her, I saw the photo that this watercolor is based on and absolutely loved it! My painting shows two ladies with their babies on their backs taking a respite on a side street bench and getting some water to drink from the water seller. In Ghana, the easiest way to carry your baby is to wrap her/him with your cloth and carry them on your back, which allows you free usage of your hands and nestles the baby snuggly. Women normally wear a top blouse and bottom wrap and cocoon the baby in an under fabric, which is often plain white, so that it does not conflict with the rest of the outfit.
I met this young lady in an art gallery in Detroit. Once while visiting with me, she decided she wanted to sleep on these wooden planks, which were no bigger than a foot wide and 6 feet long. I had a black, white, and green blanket that I used to cover the wooden planks so that she could take a rest. I was drawn to take some shots of her resting, and from those photographs I painted this work which I called *Sleeping Gypsy*. She is a gypsy because of her spirit of freedom and the feeling of safety that she could lay on the back porch of my apartment be safe and protected. I love the repetition of her hands, and how her whole body replicates the movement of those hands. Just as her dress falls out of the confines of the edges of the painting, I hope the viewer will continually dream with her as she sleeps.
Fishermen and the ocean are important subject matters in my work. I came across the fishermen on my first visit back home in 1989 and took some photographs. I have returned to the same locations to capture them anew. This painting *Songs of the Fisherman* is based off several photographs I took in 2010. To me, the colors of the scene make it very festive and alive. There are many elements to the boats that make them unique.Ghanaians love soccer and many men note their team affiliations on their boats. The different flags identify each other’s boats and along with the prows of the boats seemingly form musical notes, which influenced the title. Additionally, the men sing songs as they mend their nets, plugging the holes in their nets which help them make a living.
This young girl is the future. Today, she's wondering if her father's fishing crew will have a good catch with enough fish to feed their family and have some left over for sale on the market. With polluted waters and global warming, the simpler times are gone. Nowadays in Ghana, huge trawlers come from Europe to fish on Ghanaian shores because corrupt local officials are trying to run her father and his fishing crew out of business. However, she still has faith and determination to succeed. She will work hard to keep her tomorrow hopeful.
Within Myself, 2008
Gouache on watercolor paper
Collection of Janet Riehl

*Within Myself* is a painting where I really wanted to focus on one’s inner strength through the form of this woman to hopefully show how we can draw on the unseen inner core of our spiritual essence. Combined with our physical self, our spiritual essence can lift ourselves forward through the mists and fog that cobweb our vision and try to blind our paths.