



By Victoria L. Valentine

THE WOMEN confidently claim space on sofas, gazing directly at the viewer, holding our attention. The women, reclining and sitting, embrace their culture and express their style through the vibrant colors and patterned fabrics of their clothing, head scarves and throw pillows. The women, by turns introspective, skeptical, and assertive, are the subjects of three paintings by **Wangari Mathenge**. The trio of works was presented last fall in “Aura of Quiet” (Oct. 19-Nov. 16, 2019), the artist’s first solo show with Roberts Projects, where it was on view in the gallery’s project space.

The collaboration seeded an official relationship. Roberts Projects in Los Angeles announced its representation of Mathenge on April 13. Her second exhibition with the gallery is planned for 2021 and will be accompanied by a new publication.

Mathenge blends the historic and the contemporary. Giving voice and context to the experiences of women, her layered scenes reflect customary African society through the lens of the current moment. Produced in 2019 and 2020, her most recent series “The Expats” and “The Ascendents” feature women in familial scenes. The images portray non-Western migrants and explore the socioeconomic and political implications of their status. Her subjects exude pride and dignity, refusing to allow the discrimination and othering they bear to shape their identity or define their humanity.

In a statement on her website, Mathenge describes her work. She says it “confronts issues regarding the visibility of the black female in the context of both the traditional African patriarchal society and the Diaspora” and notes that her “portraits and figurative paintings are realized through bold gestural strokes and mark making at times within structured compositions which derive from images of herself and those of friends and acquaintances.”

Mathenge inspires and is inspired by critically recognized black female authors. The works in “Aura of Quiet” were influenced by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2009 TED Talk, titled “The Danger of a Single Story.” In the presentation, Adichie explains how she found her authentic voice and contends that “our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories.”

In its representation announcement, the gallery cites Natalie Baszile. The author of “Queen Sugar,” the novel that is the basis for the TV show, has said she was “struck by the sense of leisure” evoked in Mathenge’s paintings. Baszile said: “Here were black women, whole and intact, captured in ordinary moments. Here were black women exercising their agency to care for and celebrate themselves, feeling joy regardless, perhaps in spite of, any personal sorrow.”

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, Mathenge was previously based in Sacramento, Calif. Today, she lives and works in Chicago, where she is pursuing an MFA in painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The artist brings a formidable perspective to her work, a foundation in law and business. A graduate of Howard University, she went on to earn an LL.M., degree in international business and economic law from Georgetown University Law Center.

In February, she commented on her work in an Artsy feature about black figurative painters to watch. “I’ve heard comments about how empowering and inspiring it is for black people to see themselves reflected this way,” Mathenge said. “However, for me, painting is merely an expression of myself, a form of catharsis.”



WANGARI MATHENGE, “The Cacophony of Silence,” 2019 (oil on canvas, 55 x 75 inches / 139.7 x 190.5 cm). I © Wangari Mathenge, Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles