

Amoako Boafo: Soul of Black Folks

**Contemporary
Arts Museum
Houston**

Amoako Boafo: Soul of Black Folks is the debut solo museum exhibition in the United States for Ghanaian artist Amoako Boafo. The show brings together over 30 works created between 2016–2022. The subjects featured in Boafo’s paintings represent the nuance and complexities of Black life globally. Boafo creates paintings that feature extremely calculated brushwork combined with skillfully executed finger-painted strokes that actively center Black subjectivity, Black joy, the Black gaze, and radical care as a foundational framework for his artistic practice.

Soul of Black Folks is a timely exploration into the varying strategies that Boafo employs to capture the essence of the Black figure. The crux of his work is a high-stakes interest in investigating the relationship between the self, representation, and history. He questions the art historical canon by asking—Who is represented within art history? Who has been omitted from the canon? Moreover, this spatial tension evoked within each of his paintings yields both inward and outward-looking explorations of Boafo’s subjects and the political act of painting Black figures themselves.

The seminal ethnographic study of Black life behind the veil of race by sociologist and Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, inspires the exhibition’s title. Du Bois’s text serves as a catalyst that asks the viewer to think deeply about Boafo’s artistic practice and how it challenges an “othered” gaze often applied to the Black body. *Soul of Black Folks* invite us as a society to meditate on the questions—Where can Black people find a respite? Furthermore, how can Boafo’s work inspire and teach us about Black life and humanity? For Boafo, these paintings serve as a means of self-preservation—a celebration of his identity, Black people, and Blackness. These works are more than mere portraits; they are images constructed to assert the dignity and importance of Black people.

Amoako Boafo: Soul of Black Folks is presented in partnership between Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), San Francisco. The exhibition is curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah.

Reflection I, 2018

Oil on paper

Courtesy of Private Collection and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles

In *Reflection I* (2018) we find the artist looking at himself in the mirror. With his head resting on his hand, Boafo resembles artist Auguste Rodin's famed sculpture *The Thinker*, a work that has come to symbolize both the suffering and salvation found in self reflection. In this painting, Boafo captures the complex nature of a self divided, perhaps alluding to W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness as outlined in his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), for which this exhibition is named. The phrase "double-consciousness" interrogates the notion that Black people constantly have to look at themselves through the eyes of "others." Du Bois's text serves as an invitation to think deeply about Boafo's artistic practice and how it challenges an "othered" gaze often applied to the Black body.



Ghana Must Go, 2017

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Kehinde Wiley Collection



Another self portrait, *Ghana Must Go* (2017), finds the artist, alone and nude, reading British-American of Nigerian and Ghanaian author Taiye Selasi's novel of the same name. Selasi's text serves as an intricate exploration of the importance of honoring where we come from and the journey needed to understand who we are. This understanding of "self" as eternally evolving and never static, is an important theme in the series of self-portraits that Boafo started in 2016. In each piece the artist offers an image of himself that is multifaceted and unafraid of the viewer's gaze. In *Ghana Must Go*, Boafo depicts a moment of rest, comfort, and safety—all scenarios that tend to elude the Black male figure.

White on White, 2019

Oil on paper

Courtesy of Private Collection
and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles**Black Skin, White Mask, 2016**

Acrylic on canvas

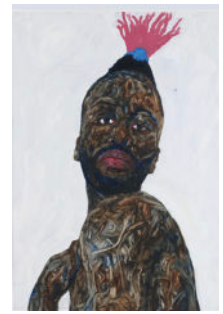
Courtesy of Kehinde Wiley Collection



Self with blue band and pink hair, 2019

Oil on paper

Courtesy of Betsey Witten Collection



Hudson Burk and Benedita Furacao, 2018

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Private Collection

and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago and Paris



Red Dress, 2017

Oil on paper

Jesse Williams Collection

Red Dress (2017) depicts a short-haired woman who resembles the incomparable Studio Museum in Harlem's Director, Thelma Golden, adorned in a dotted red dress. This work is a quintessential example of the textiles and patterns that have become synonymous with Boafo's practice, specifically his employment of a photo transfer technique to add texture to the work. Boafo's figures not only express themselves through their body language and facial expressions but also through their fashion and home decor.



Sunflower Bee Shirt, 2021

Oil and paper transfer on canvas
Courtesy the artist



Red Collar, 2021

Oil on canvas
Pamela Hornik Collection



Yellow Pullover, 2019

Oil on paper
Lester Marks/LCM Partners Collection



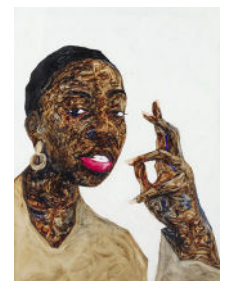
Deep Pink Sofa, 2022

Oil on wall
Courtesy the artist



Fuck You Mean Tho, 2019

Oil on paper
Courtesy of Private Collection and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles



Happy Siblings, 2019

Oil on canvas

Jesse Williams Collection



Pink Astilbe, 2021

Oil on canvas

Courtesy the artist



Libby and D-Lee, 2019

Oil on canvas

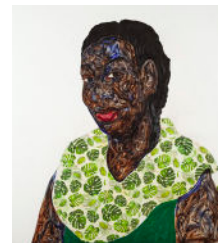
Courtesy of Holly Jane Butler
and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles



Monstera Leaf Cape, 2021

Paper transfer and oil on canvas

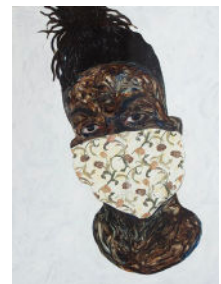
Courtesy the artist



Self Portrait - Masked, 2020

Oil on paper

Courtesy the artist



Sam, 2019

Oil on paper

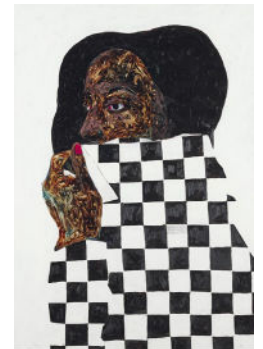
Lester Marks/LCM Partners Collection



Black and White, 2018

Oil on paper

Courtesy of Private Collection and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles



A recurring theme in Boafo's work is an emphasis on personal style and fashion. In fact, his titles most often direct our attention to a specific garment worn by his subjects. In *Black and White* (2018), the woman's checkered jacket serves as both an emblem of her specific tastes as well as a means of cloaking. Throughout his practice, the artist keenly and strategically uses a touch of bright red paint to draw our focus, here to the woman's nails, but elsewhere to his subject's lips.

Lady in Blue, 2019

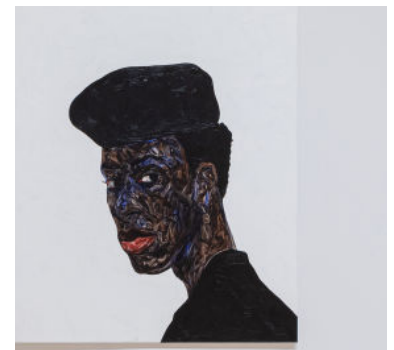
Oil on paper

Vanessa Guo Collection

**Black Hat, 2021**

Oil on canvas

Courtesy the artist



Depicting a figure dressed in black and donning a black beret, Boafo's *Black Hat* (2021) summons the powerful, strong, and militant images of the Black Panthers, alluding to both the Civil Rights era and the ongoing fight for social justice. By using a mixture of brown and blue tones to render the figure's skin, the latter associated with both the color of royalty and a bruise, the artist perhaps suggests both the man's importance as well as his vulnerability. As with other works by Boafo, the painting evokes the phrase "the eyes are the window to the soul," as the sitter looks directly at the viewer with an equally confident and knowing stare.

Steven Onoja, 2018

Oil on canvas
Private Collection



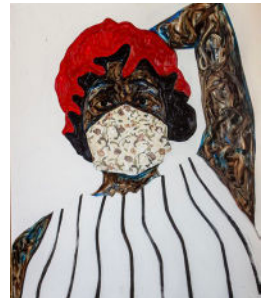
Basquiat - Buttoned Jacket, 2020

Oil and paper transfer on canvas
Courtesy the artist



Amoabea - Masked, 2020

Oil and paper transfer on canvas
Courtesy the artist



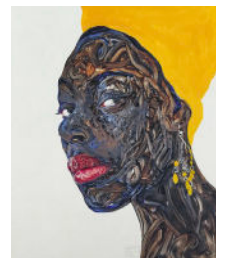
Beanie Hat, 2021

Oil on canvas
Courtesy the artist



Bella Sontez, 2019

Oil on paper
Courtesy of Private Collection and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles



The Menu, 2020

Paper transfer and oil on canvas
Courtesy the artist



White Turtleneck, 2020

Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Anonymous and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery,
Chicago and Paris



Seye, 2019

Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Hernandahan Family Collection, Jacinto J. Hernandez and Chet
Callahan, and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles



Green Clutch, 2021

Paper transfer and oil on canvas

Courtesy of Private Collection and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago and Paris

In *Green Clutch* (2021) Boafo depicts his solitary subject within an identifiably domestic interior, giving the viewer a glimpse into her home life. The spare scene contrasts with the richness of the artist's painterly technique and use of texture, which give the seated figure a palpable energy. Her stern and confident gaze, which looks directly back at the viewer, suggests a woman unapologetically owning the body and space she inhabits. In titling the work *Green Clutch*, Boafo also emphasizes how one's material possessions are an extension of the self.

**Abena Boamah, 2019**

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Private Collection
and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago and Paris