
FICTIONAL FIGURES

In her 2017 solo exhibition at the New Museum, British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (Yeah-dum Bo-a-chie) presented 17 new portraits of elegant figures in casual poses and everyday spaces. The artist chose a deep red paint for the walls, emphasizing the warm tones and sense of ease and familiarity of the figures in her paintings. While her figures seem like people we might know, Yiadom-Boakye does not paint from life. Instead, the artist combines aspects of different poses and figures to create fictional portraits. In *Under-song for a Cipher*, all of the figures are people of color. By rendering them in oil paint and through compositional choices, Yiadom-Boakye calls to mind the history of European painting and the absence of people of color in its traditions over several centuries.

“...I suppose I don’t really think of them as people in the same way that they appear to be people. I think of them as beings of a sort... They for me are kind of immortal and also that they embody a space in my mind or psychologically that is just removed somehow. And I think of them so much as paintings as well... That’s always been my fixation in a way. I love painting the figure, maybe because it’s.. just full of possibilities, it’s just endless possibilities...”

–Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Under-song for a Cipher*

To learn more about Yiadom-Boakye’s approach to figure painting, you can watch a [video](#) or [listen](#) to an interview with Natalie Bell, who curated the New Museum exhibit with Massimiliano Gioni.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- **portrait:** an artistic representation of one or more people through drawing, painting, photography or sculpture
- **fictional:** invented and imagined, rather than having occurred or being real
- **composition:** the arrangement of visual elements in a work of art
- **figurative:** artwork that realistically represents body
- **body language:** gestures and movements that convey mood, tone, personality and context. While we are not always aware or conscious of body language, it is a form of communication and plays a role in figurative

artwork.



START WITH ART: LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

- Can you imitate the poses of the figures in the painting? How do the different poses feel?
- Where are the figures? Can you imagine the settings?
- Do you have a favorite of the paintings? How would you describe the feeling, mood, or tone of the painting?
- How does Yiadom-Boakye use **body language** and color to create a sense of familiarity in her **fictional portraits**?

LOOK AROUND

- Do you have photographs of people, or portraits in your home?
- What captures your attention in the portraits?
- What does the body language or pose in the portraits convey about the figure(s)?
- Does the setting or environment convey information about the figure(s)?
- When you are the subject of a photograph, how do you like to pose and why?

In the Artist's Words:

“... I work from scrapbooks and drawings and referencing other...paintings of mine, other paintings of other people. There’s lots of different sources plus a lot of improvisation and imagination... I don’t...really make preparatory sketches for the simple fact that...it’s very hard to translate that into a painting. I find it hard. What I might do is a composition sketch, which is literally a few marks in charcoal just to work out roughly where everything's going to be, particularly in a really larger, a much larger scale painting. But most of the...drawing happens on the canvas...”

– Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Under-song for a Cypher*

MAKE ART

Let's make our own fictional portrait by collecting images of people in photographs, magazines, newspapers and catalogues and combining them to create a new figure.

Materials

- Pens, markers, pencils or other drawing media
- Paper
- Printed or digital photographs (these can include people you know)
- Catalogs, magazines, newspapers
- Scissors
- Glue
- Optional: Paint (watercolor, tempera or acrylic), brushes, small cup for water, paper plate for a palette

Making

1. Start by collecting images of figures from magazines, catalogs and newspapers.
2. If you have copies or printouts of photographs, you can add these to your collection. If there is only one copy of a photograph, ask an adult before cutting or altering it.
3. Once you’ve collected an array of images, start cutting out poses, faces, hands, arms, legs and other body parts that interest you.
4. Experiment with arranging them into new figures on a sheet of paper. Try several compositions.
5. To help fill in gaps in the body, draw in anything that’s missing (like a neck, hand, feet, etc.), or continue looking for images.
6. When you are satisfied with an arrangement, glue it to the paper.
7. Once you have a figure and pose you like, think about where this fictional person would appear. Would they be outside in a park? At a coffee shop? In a museum?
8. Look for objects, furniture and other contextual elements in magazines and catalogs to add to the background.
9. **Optional:** Make a sketch of the assembled figure, adding in the background. Start with pencil and then add color in your drawing media of choice (markers, colored pencils, oil pastels)

10. **Optional:** Translate your sketch, or collage into a painting.

REFLECTION

- How did you decide which images to include in your collection?
- Did you notice any themes or similarities among images?
- Can you imagine a story for your fictional figure?
- Will the way you position your body in photographs change after having done this activity?

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MUSEUM

IMAGES:

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Under-song for a Cipher*, 2017. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York, 2017. Photography credit: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

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