



Art in Embassies Exhibition
U.S. Mission to the African Union

ayana v. jackson *Sleep to Dream*, 2017
Archival pigment print on German etching paper, 41 ¾ x 42 ½ in. (106 x 108 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

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Art in Embassies

Established in 1963, the U.S. Department of State's office of Art in Embassies (AIE) plays a vital role in our nation's public diplomacy through a culturally expansive mission, creating temporary and permanent exhibitions, artist programming, and publications. The Museum of Modern Art first envisioned this global visual arts program a decade earlier. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy formalized it, naming the program's first director. Now with over 200 venues, AIE curates temporary and permanent exhibitions for the representational spaces of all U.S. chanceries, consulates, and embassy residences worldwide, selecting and commissioning contemporary art from the U.S. and the host countries. These exhibitions provide international audiences with a sense of the quality, scope, and diversity of both countries' art and culture, establishing AIE's presence in more countries than any other U.S. foundation or arts organization.

AIE's exhibitions allow citizens, many of whom might never travel to the United States, to personally experience the depth and breadth of our artistic heritage and values, making what has been called a "footprint that can be left where people have no opportunity to see American art."

<https://art.state.gov/>

Portrait of Partnership

In foreign policy, we talk a lot about partnership – economic partnership, trade partnership, security partnership. But what about cultural partnership? In this exhibition, *Portrait of Partnership*, that is what I have sought to explore. Partnership is fundamentally about relationships between equals. There is not a teacher and a student but rather colleagues or collaborators or co-creators; each side learns from the other. Cultural partnership is no different, with each side drawing inspiration and insight from the other. That experience can be formal, perhaps through a residency or an exchange, or it can be informal, by sharing lived experiences or working side by side. This exhibition is intended to explore and celebrate partnership, by showcasing American artists who have trained, studied, and learned across Africa.

Learning from and truly partnering with the African Union are priorities for me and the entire United States Mission to the African Union (USAU) team. We seek to listen to and learn from our counterparts, those representing Member States and those serving the African Union Commission. We want to ask what their countries are experiencing and how they are looking to solve some of the continent's most pressing problems. By truly listening and partnering, we believe we can contribute to and support those solutions.

The U.S. Government has an amazing history of commitment to cultural partnership, including

through the Fulbright Program, and this exhibition includes several Fulbright alumnae. Fulbright Scholars to the region build lasting relationships that serve as the foundation for future collaboration by developing partnerships between American and African institutions and individuals in the United States and Africa or assisting in training and curriculum development, including in the arts.

I intentionally selected the work of younger artists in recognition of the important theme of youth across the continent. All the artists in this exhibition are young and still creating. They are still partnering across countries and cultures. Africa has a population of roughly 1.3 billion people with a median age of nineteen, making the continent's youth a critical resource. USAU and United States Embassies across Africa work with public and private sector and civil society partners to develop initiatives and economic opportunities to harness the innovation, creativity, and energy of Africa's youth.

I ended up selecting only women artists. While not my plan at the outset, the works of these amazing women – who, like me, work hard, juggle demands, and travel the globe – resonated deeply with me. You will also notice that this exhibition includes many portraits – a reflection of my belief that true partnerships are often based upon connections between individuals.

My tenure as the United States Ambassador to the African Union began in late 2019, but in early 2020, COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill. So, I write this introduction in 2021 when – after twenty-one months in my role – I feel an ever-greater ability to partner with the AU and to celebrate alongside my AU colleagues who selected *The AU Year of the Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want* as the AU theme for 2021. I salute their recognition of the importance of arts and culture and their dedication to amplifying the continent's rich heritage, including its global impact.

One of the African Union's greatest strengths is its convening power as the forum for the continent's leaders to collectively solve shared problems and to establish shared norms and standards. This exhibit is also intended to convene by bringing together American and African strengths and vision in producing beautiful and meaningful artwork.

My son Jasper and I are honored to live with these works and to enjoy them in our home in Addis Ababa. I thank Art in Embassies for helping me realize my vision for this exhibition and, despite COVID-19, persisting in bringing the pieces together.

Ambassador Jessye Lapenn

*Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
July 2021*

ruby onyinyechi amanze

born 1971

“[ruby onyinyechi] amanze’s large-scaled and multi-dimensional drawings are part of an ongoing, yet non-linear narrative that employ the malleability of space as the primary antagonist. A nameless, self-imagined, chimeric universe has simultaneously been positioned between nowhere and everywhere. Taking roots in architecture, design, migration histories, and non-nationalist politics, the manipulation of space functions as a poetic alternative to fixed identities and geographies. Navigating fictional and conflating worlds, a cohort of aliens, hybrids, and ghosts play effortlessly and access magic as their mundane, yet expansive norm.”ⁱ

The way you think is like a wing blurs the lines between fantasy, memory, imagination, and reality. Whimsical, detached characters—such

as plant life and motorcycles—swim throughout the composition. The artist’s head floats above the vast expanse as if her mind is removed from the physical location of her body.ⁱⁱ Inspired by her emigration from Nigeria to the United Kingdom and later the United States, amanze’s work comments on cultural hybridityⁱⁱⁱ and evokes nostalgia for her home country.

Prior to her Fulbright scholarship at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, amanze earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Temple University, Philadelphia, and her Master of Fine Arts degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. She completed residencies in New York at the Queens Museum and the Drawing Center, and her work has been shown in California, New York, and internationally.

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The way you think is like a wing, 2015

Graphite, ink, photo transfers, and metallic enamel, 50 x 38 in. (127 x 96,5 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

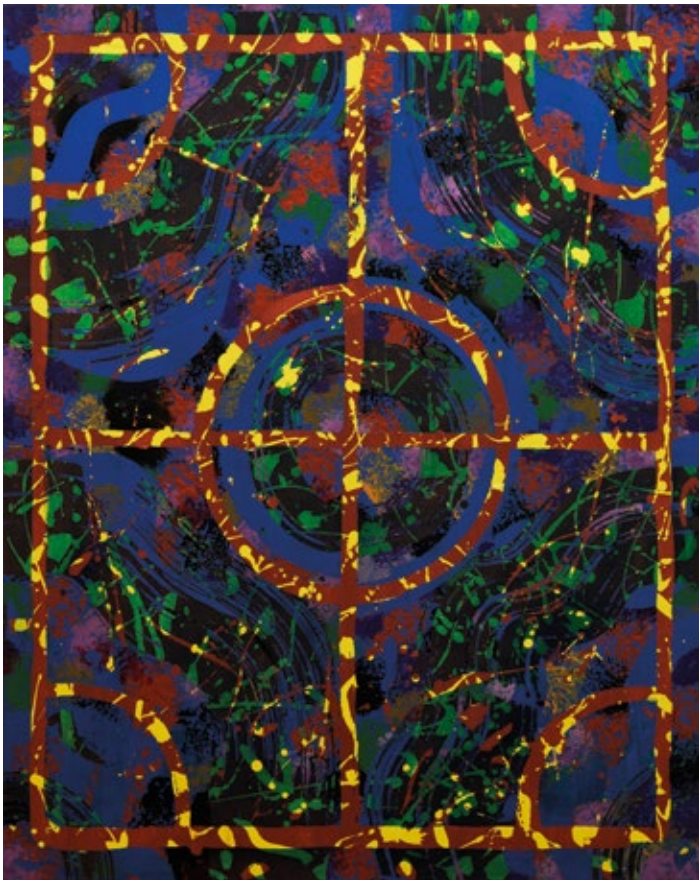


andrea bergart

born 1984

Artist and designer Andrea Bergart specializes in abstract paintings that reference diverse visual traditions, specifically woven textiles, urban fashion, and boundary lines on basketball courts.^{iv} Almost shaped like a court, with the center circle as one of the boundary lines, *Alfalfa* is reminiscent of Bergart's involvement in Downtown Girls Basketball, an all-women basketball community comprised of artists, photographers, and writers.^v Similar to abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock's drip technique, swift brushstrokes and paint splatters in *Alfalfa* represent players' movements across the court; red, orange, green, and pink spots could also indicate the dribbling of a basketball. *Sea Mop* features rich, bold colors primarily inspired by West African textiles. Bergart uses fluid brushstrokes to create swirls of purple, yellow, light pink, green, and dark blue that dominate the background, while geometric renderings of sea anemone are contained in a white rectangle.

A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York-based Bergart first received a Fulbright scholarship to Ghana, where she researched the bead and textile industries.^{vi} She was an artist resident at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Senegal and the Tilleard Projects residency in Lamu, Kenya. In 2018, with a United States Embassy Grant, Bergart led solar printing workshops with students and community members in the United Arab Emirates.^{vii} Her work has been exhibited throughout the United States in New York, California, Louisiana, and Massachusetts, and abroad in and the United Kingdom.



Alfalfa, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 in. (127 x 101,6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Ridgewood, New York



Sea Mop, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (152,4 x 121,9 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Ridgewood, New York

anna groth-shive

born 1971



Thread series, 2013
Photograph, 20 x 16 in. (50,8 x 40,6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Brooklyn, New York

Producer and artist Anna Groth-Shive creates work that straddles both commercial production and fine art photography. *Thread series* is a collection of photographs from her travels to southeastern Senegal as part of Thread, an artist residency supported by the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. The foundation promotes the achievements of the couple, artistic adventurers and twentieth-century modernist pioneers, and the aesthetic and philosophical principles by which they lived, offering several residencies in different countries.^{viii} Thread is located in Sinthian, a rural village in Tambacounda, and allows artists from Senegal and around the world to further their work and to work with local artists to preserve traditional practices and facilitate new ones.^{ix}

While at Thread, Groth-Shive set up a photography studio, replete with backdrops, and invited people from the community to be photographed. Influenced by the bright patterns, textures, and colors found in works by the Albers, *Thread series* pays homage to the rich portrait photography tradition of West Africa. The images provided a means for the artist to connect with the Sinthian community and culture.^x Before attending Thread, Brooklyn-based Groth-Shive earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in commercial design and illustration from the Pratt Institute, New York.



Thread series, 2013
Photograph, 20 x 16 in. (50,8 x 40,6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Brooklyn, New York



Thread series, 2013
Photographs, 20 x 16 in. (50,8 x 40,6 cm) each
Courtesy of the artist, Brooklyn, New York



Thread series, 2013
Photographs, 20 x 16 in. (50,8 x 40,6 cm) each
Courtesy of the artist, Brooklyn, New York

ayana v. jackson

born 1977

Primarily inspired by nineteenth- and twentieth-century portraiture, Ayana V. Jackson's photographs explore race, gender, and reproduction. Throughout her work, Jackson "examines myths of the Black Diaspora and re-stages colonial archival images as a means to liberate the Black body."^{xi} In *Sleep to Dream*, an African American woman in Victorian dress is centered against a colorless tapestry. With one hand on her hip and the other on her knee, the woman sits tall and confident, purposefully obscuring the fabric, which contains predominately White figures. She is the center of attention, as well as the epitome of beauty and grace. Near her foot, a light pink rose signifies femininity and elegance. *Sleep to Dream* honors the legacy of African American women, challenging the viewer to re-contextualize their role and place throughout history.^{xii}

Based between New York, Paris, and Johannesburg, Jackson earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from Spelman College, Atlanta, and studied critical theory and large-format printing at the University of Berlin. The artist was a 2014 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow for photography and a 2018 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow at the National Museum of African Art. Her work is held in permanent collections at the Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; and the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al-Maden, Marrakech, Morocco.



Sleep to Dream, 2017
Archival pigment print on German etching paper, 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (106 x 108 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

thenjiwe niki nkosi

born 1980

“The memorialization of living and historical figures—through statues, monuments, faces on currency—is a crucial element in the construction of History (with a capital H), with those in power at a given time determining who, and so *what*, is worth remembering. Memorialization is thus never a neutral endeavor, but rather a political project that usually has the consolidation of power at its core.

The idea for this series arose from my thinking about how we come to value different contributions, different actions, different lives. To expand or change historical narratives, I wanted to complicate the idea of the ‘hero,’ and I started thinking of people who might subvert the conventional understanding of that word—an often patriarchal, revisionist, exclusivist ideal—and allow for a broader, more inclusive definition.

As the first few portraits leaned against the wall of my studio, I realized I was creating a personal pantheon. These were people I was thinking about, reading about, dreaming about. Some were figures who had fought against Apartheid, or colonialism in general, but whose contributions had been either forgotten or downplayed. Others were people I felt were being reduced to symbols in the media. One was my great-grandmother, who was not a public figure at all. Every day on countless platforms, we are told who is important. These ideas can eclipse our own and drown out our inner voices. I want to engage with that and work against it.

There also arises the question of *how* we remember people. For example, two of the people whose portraits I have painted (Anene Booysen and Emidio Josias “Mido” Macia) are remembered mostly for one moment at the end of their lives, their deaths screens onto which people project ideas about violence and injustice. Their full reality as human beings is eclipsed in the process.

While painting their images in 2013, I gleaned all the personal information about them I could. Somewhat lost within case reports and political analysis were small glimpses of their lives: Mido was father to one child and guardian to three others. Teenaged Anene loved orange cake. I do not want people to forget how they died, but to consider their deaths just as *part* of their stories as human beings. By painting each portrait against the same sort of background, removed from recognizable contexts, I am hoping to achieve a horizontality, a flattening not only of time and space but also a democratizing of historical stature. In this series, I aim to make room for a new way of considering the humanity of each person and history in general.

Even as it has been publicly exhibited, this ongoing series remains a personal project. In some ways, it is a multifaceted self-portrait: these people are all part of my consciousness. My awareness is made up of all these people’s ideas, stories, and contributions. Perhaps it is a manifestation of the idea of collective consciousness. Representing these people in this series is a contribution, and a challenge, to the writing of new histories.”^{xiii}



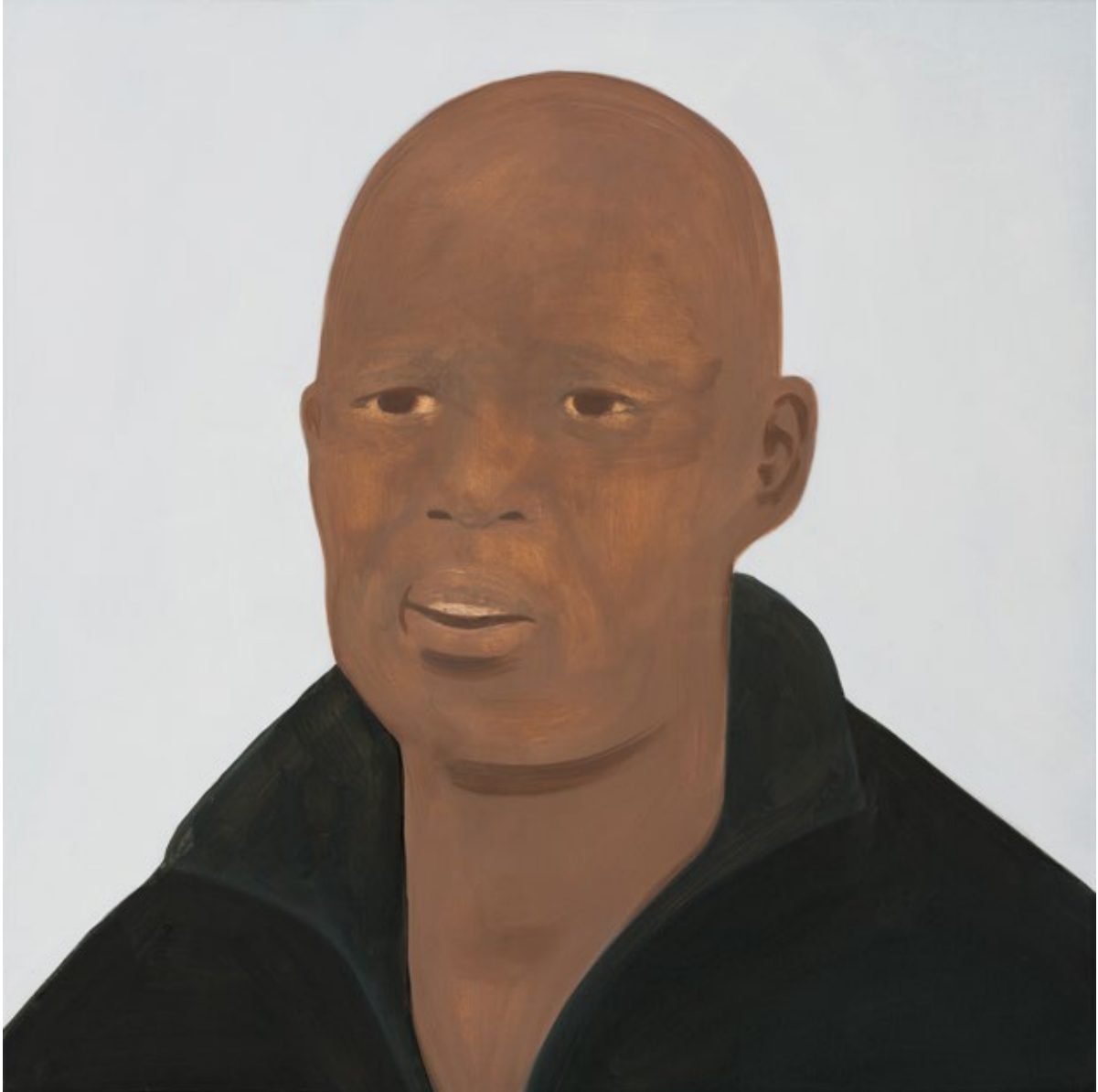
Anene (After Anene Booysen), 2013
Oil on canvas, 19 1/6 x 19 1/6 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Nando's UK Collection, London, United Kingdom

“Born in Bredasdorp in Western Cape, South Africa, she grew up and attended school there. Her death at the age of seventeen caused a national outcry about gender-based violence.”



Mido (After Emidio Josias "Mido" Macia), 2013
Oil on canvas, 19 1/6 x 19 1/6 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Nando's UK Collection, London, United Kingdom

"Mozambiquan-born taxi driver and father living in South Africa. He was the victim of police brutality that resulted in his death."



Ngwana wa Tshwenyina (After Jabu Mahlangu), 2013
Oil on canvas, 19 1/6 x 19 1/6 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Nando's UK Collection, London, United Kingdom

“South African footballer famous for his prodigious talent and off-field personal struggles.”



Kennedy (After Florynce Rae Kennedy), 2017
Oil on canvas, 19 1/6 x 19 1/6 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Nando's UK Collection, London, United Kingdom

"American lawyer, civil rights activist, and radical Black feminist."



Mother (After Winnie Madikizela-Mandela), 2013
Oil on canvas, 19 1/16 x 19 1/16 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Nando's UK Collection, London, United Kingdom

“South African activist and politician, sometimes referred to as ‘Mother of the Nation’.”

Notes

- i "Artist Statement," ruby onyinyechi amanze, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.rubyamanze.com/about>.
- ii Bridget Gleeson, "A Nigerian-born Artist Meditates on Displacement and Longing in 'Salt Water,'" Artsy, December 15, 2015, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-a-nigerian-born-artist-meditates-on-displacement-and-longing-in-salt-water>.
- iii Bridget Gleeson.
- iv "About," Andrea Bergart, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.andreabergart.com/about>.
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- x Anna Groth-Shive, email to the author, May 14, 2021.
- xi "Ayana V. Jackson," Mariane Ibrahim, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://marianeibrahim.com/artists/27-ayana-v-jackson/biography/>.
- xii L. Jonathan Collier, "Women Picturing Revolution: An Interview with Lesly Deschler-Canossi and Zoraida Lopez-Diago," Black Perspectives, April 21, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/women-picturing-revolution-an-interview-with-lesly-deschler-canossi-and-zoraida-lopez-diago/>.
- xiii Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, email to the author, May 21, 2021.

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