

Supermodels

Curators text

Adelaide Damoah

Nolias Gallery
60 Great Suffolk Street
Southwark, London
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Curated by Jahreen Wilson and Ola Shobowale

The possibilities of communicating without the body

The paintings that make up the supermodel series are Adelaide Damoah's response to the course of social events and circumstances that have made *size zero* such a media banquet that all have freely dined upon. The discourse that surrounds the size zero models holds no great interest to me. But the response by others once processed through the media, though of little intrinsic value, embodies a much more rewarding prize.

The Supermodels series is an enforced demonstration of Adelaide's growing confidence and sophistication both as an artist and as a social commentator. In some of the paintings she has depicted the models without mouths, a very literal statement reflecting the fact that today's models who are widely discussed are rarely if ever heard. There is a reclamation of the female body from the over bearing gaze of society.

The body has been the principal subject of Western art since the Renaissance. At the same time, the body is also a central locus and metaphor for understanding and exploring political change, in the broadest sense, whether as the body politic, in debates over the nature of sexuality or socio-biology's claims to explain personality by heredity. The modern period may be characterised in this regard as having awareness that the body is mutable, incomplete and altogether human. This feeling of instability has led to numerous efforts to control the development of the physical body by promoting certain physical characteristics at the expense of others. These utopian and related ideas explain both why the body has been such a focus of academic, popular (media) and socio-political attention.

The experience of modernity in Western societies – that is to say, the development of mass industrial society – led artists, critics, curators and intellectuals to form a critique of their own time which has come to be known as modernism. Within art history the identification of modernism with abstract techniques of representation (Picasso, Miro, Chagall, Kandinsky etc) seemed to characterise figurative techniques (all art before 1900s) as inherently conservative. Yet within Supermodels, Adelaide has skilfully embraced the figurative and the abstract, laying bare the histrionics of contemporary art, when in the hands of others, finds itself in denial of its evolution.

The body in art must be distinguished from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate. In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings which the artist cannot fully control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context, framing and style.

In the Tunisian filmmaker, Moufida Tlati 1994 film 'Silence of the palace' the story is centred around a young singer, who revisits her childhood in the household of a wealthy family where her mother was a servant. A knowing silence was crucial to the lives of the women and this injunction to remain silent also served as a bond between these women. Within Adelaide's painting entitled 'Ana' the absence of a mouth reinforces the secrecy and silence enjoined by some women who endure this condition, this silence connecting and if not bonding these semi-tragic young women.

The post-modern female body is in effect under siege on many fronts, all at the same instance in ways unknown to past generations. One can but wonder what those grand old masters of the Renaissance, would have made with contemporary obsessions with remoulding our bodies with pharmaceuticals, plastic surgery, calorie-controlled diets, gyms etc. How would these grand sages have responded, would Titan's *Ariadne* have a six pack stomach and a forehead enhanced with a lunch time botox? Their response cannot be to far from Adelaide Damoah's reading of the media's shifting portraits (sic) of Kate Moss, Lilly Cole or Beth Ditto, cultural Icons of our time, whose bodies now also belong to us all, to observe and dissect as we please.

In Vanessa Beecroft's famous performance, entitled *Show*, at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1998. The piece consisted of nineteen models, fifteen of whom wore bikinis and high-heeled sandals, the remaining four, were naked except for their footwear. For two and a half hours the performers stared out at visitors to the museum, who in turn looked at them. The awkwardness of watching (and being seen watching) scantily-clad young models causes extreme self-consciousness. This same sense of voyeurism still pervades when observing Adelaide's paintings of Ana, Naomi, Tyra et al. Although the extreme self-consciousness of being confronted by the actual person is diminished, the impact of the paintings is no less than Vanessa Beecroft's living mannequins.

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