



KOJO MARFO
CRUCIBLE OF HOPE

JD MALAT
GALLERY

11 OCTOBER - 11 NOVEMBER 2023

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*Joy Is The Justice We Give Ourselves:
Emancipation in the paintings of Kojo Marfo.*

Pride & Joy. Living Essence. Divine Symphony. Oracle. These are some of the titles in Kojo Marfo's latest paintings. Made between 2021 and 2023, they variously present scenes of families, of mothers with children, or pairings of older figures with their kin. Characteristically brightly coloured, with figures decorated in floral headdresses and layers upon layers of beads, the paintings feel radically joyful and vibrant, even celebratory. Mothers hold their children in tender embraces; each body is physically connected through touch. These are pictures of closeness, of intimacy; manifestations of a mother's love and bond to her child.

There is something deeply universal about these works. In iconography, they recall early Christian representations of the Madonna and child in which Mary holds the baby Christ on her lap. *Crucible*, in particular, reminds me of an altarpiece by Giotto which hangs in the Uffizi in Florence. Mary, wearing a similar blue robe to Marfo's figure, reaches out to hold one of Christ's hands, his other one gently grabbing for her collar. As Christ touches the fabric around her neck, it crinkles and ruffles. His fingers carry weight, the gesture a material impact. For Giotto and subsequent Italian painters, the divine was expressed in the everyday; Christ and Mary were here in this world, their bodies solid, present, able to block light, cast shadows. Marfo's titles suggests that in his painted worlds a complimentary inverse is true. That the everyday can hold expressions of the divine. That what we are witnessing are a series of mothers and their pride and joys, their miracles, their oracles.

And yet. The titles are the key to unlocking a more ambivalent position about the intersubjective relationship between mother and child, which makes this work conceptually rich and worthwhile. Alongside *Pride & Joy, Living Essence, Divine Symphony* and *Oracle*, there is also *The Euphoria of Achievement*. It is a fact of life that any parent or caregiver is going to shape their child, influencing their thinking and how they conduct themselves in the world, and that parents will hold spoken – or sometimes unspoken – expectations and desires for who they hope their child will become. Despite

being seemingly universal in their subject matter, these paintings are also deeply personal, informed by Marfo's courageous mining of his own upbringing and the pressures and expectations he experienced to be *something*: to be the pride and joy, to follow a certain path. He grew up in Ghana within a family system in which being a doctor, lawyer or engineer held value. And he grew up in an educational system in which success was narrowly defined by achievement and attaining a perceived degree of outwardly-measured perfection. Students would look a certain way, act a certain way, get in line for fear of being punished. No wonder achievement came with euphoria. There are, he admits four doctors in his family. He is the only artist, perceived as being different, other, "crazy."¹

These pictures then, while seeming exuberant and celebratory, also contain a liberatory edge when we shift our position from mother to child. Borne out of Marfo's own experience of separateness, of disentangling from the maternal dyad that others think of him, they are informed by breaking free from the perceptions and baggage of others and they wrestle with the hurt and pain of what it means to be alive, to grow up, and to want to be truly seen, heard and understood for who we are, rather than what we think we should be, or what our parents or others want for us to be. And we see that in the pictures as both motherhood and non-motherhood is explored, as attention is given to the older female figures as well as the children. *Mind to Mind* is a great example of this ambivalence and the capacity of Marfo's pictures to hold conflicting, contradictory viewpoints at once. The work is a double portrait, showing a high-cheek boned woman holding a cockerel and bright red fan with a dog on the left; on her right, a fellow woman holds an abstractly represented child – there is lace doily-like pattern in lieu of hair, a single zip for a mouth. For Marfo, the scene addresses how we may view each other based on what we see – one woman with animals and one woman with a child – and he wants it raise questions about the value we attach to lifestyle choices: is raising a child more valuable than rearing animals?

In presenting different attitudes towards parenthood, and revealing the various pressures and emotional states that can be experienced by children in his titles, Marfo engages in a strong emancipatory politics that can move beyond the personal and take hold on a larger, global scale. As American theorist and social critic bell hooks notes, "if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete."² To make creative work, then, is about decolonisation of the mind, which Marfo experienced as he moved out of the subjugation of his parents' desires to form his own path. Each work is an act of setting his imagination free.

¹Interview with the author, 24 August 2023

²bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (The New Press: New York, 1995), p. xv

Marfo has no preconceived notions of what he is going to present when he starts. His mind is loose. He begins by putting paint on the canvas and witnessing what emerges, before turning to magazines for visual references to help him transmute a colour or form into a story. Fashion photography and magazines are useful for him because of the drama; in the staged vignettes, he sees 'crazy things' that open creative possibility for character and narrative. Each figure, though stylised to the degree that they could be stand-ins for anyone, has been individuated by their clothes, hairstyles or facial features so we are clear we are looking at someone. A person. Often, Marfo shows the figures exploring their own creative pursuits, and gives visibility to creative impulses. In *Oracle*, a man in profile plays a Kora (a stringed instrument used extensively in West Africa), while in *Pride & Joy*, a child plays a similar instrument. Music and art may not be deemed as successful within the system Marfo was raised, but what is it if not joyous?

If the conceptual origins of this work are based on the acknowledgement that people make assumptions about others based on what they see - as in Marfo's own experience that people can be perceived as successful if they are doctors, 'crazy' if they are artists - then there is an apparent irony in the fact that Marfo turns to representation to communicate this point. Representation is based on seeing, and it relies on recognising things, objects, forms that seem familiar to our world. Yet, what makes Marfo's work interesting is that it relies on representation at the same time that it critiques it, revealing its limitations as a descriptive system through a highly sophisticated process of what bell hooks calls familiarization and de-familiarization: "it takes what we see/ know and makes us look at it in a new way."³

It is impossible to pin these paintings down, to say they present a single position on motherhood or devotion or creativity, or even that they are about one thing. They have the potential to trap the viewer in their own projections of who these people are based on appearances. I am struck, for instance, that Marfo's figures exist in an in-between state, where they cannot be said to be black or white, African or European, here or there based on appearances alone. Take the figure in *Living Essence*, for example, whose large body fills the whole canvas. There is a lot that feels familiar, and yet her face is black and white; and she wears items of clothing that work to mark her as 'authentically' African while also denying that origin; the beads, for example, are an important part of dress for women in Ghana, who are bestowed with the valuable jewelry when they reach adolescence, while her puffed sleeves and the ruffled neck of her child feel distinctly more European. Who is she, where is she from, what is she? Marfo productively refuses answers.

In *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*, bell hooks argues for a new cultural criticism that looks at the aesthetic value of work produced by a Black artist, and asks for the urgent liberation of what she calls "the politics of seeing - how we perceive the visual and how we write and talk about it."⁴ In today's world, the way we talk about art is often over-determined by location and identity, with a Black artist's work interpreted as valuable 'Black Art' because of its ability to 'authentically', in its capacity to represent, produce Black images. While Marfo's work is deeply informed by his unique subject position - and the specificity of his upbringing in a matriarchy in Ghana is critical to the origins and meaning of the work -- part of its merit, its aesthetic value, is that it moves away from picturing an identity that is stuck in essentialist traits that are fixed and static. To encounter one of his portraits is to be met with cultural difference, hybridity, a sense that identity - and within that, race - is a constructed fiction and there is nothing essential.

Marfo is keen to steer away from political readings of his work, and yet they are engaged in an emancipation from the burdens and baggage of racist assumptions that undergird both the artworld and society at large. bell hooks, again, said it best: "black folks who are interrogating essentialist assumptions about black identity are engaged in an act of decolonization that empowers and liberates."⁵ His choice to turn to representation, then, is a critical device in the success of the work: he shows images to be a site of contestation, a place of resistance where ambivalences - around motherhood, around growing up, around defining oneself and our identity at large - can be aired and voiced. This is where the veil between art and life is surprisingly thin and art has the potential to carry importance and efficacy: art can expand what we deem to be familiar, change what we are able to see and sense so we can live in the gray, in-between area outside of binaries, black and white thinking, and a sense that something is either right or wrong.

How do we reconcile the weight and heavy importance of these images, which belies their bright colours, metallic shine, and overall feeling of celebration and joyousness? I am not sure I can answer this, but am reminded of poem by J. Drew Lanham "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves." In it, he writes:

*Joy is the heart still beating
even though
what could have been -
wasn't*

This is at the heart of Marfo's paintings, and why they are, in his words, *Crucibles of Hope*. Despite the hurt and pain, the weight of expectations, the desire for what could have been, there is hope, beauty and resistance in continuing on, alive. In an unfree world, that is the ultimate freedom, the ultimate joy.

Wells Fray-Smith, Curator at the Barbican Centre, London © 2023



⁶J. Drew Lanham, 'Joy is the Justice We Give Ourselves', *Emergence Magazine* (August, 2023) <https://emergencemagazine.org/poem/joy-is-the-justice-we-give-ourselves/> accessed 25 September 2023



Sankofa, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
67 3/4 x 65 in
172 x 165 cm





Dominion, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
79 1/4 x 77 5/8 in
201.2 x 197.2 cm



The Spark Of Life, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
77 1/8 x 67 1/8 in
196 x 170.5 cm





Divine Symphony, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
75 5/8 x 66 7/8 in
192 x 170 cm



Flawless, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
76 x 66 1/2 in
193 x 169 cm





Oracle, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
74 3/4 x 65 3/4 in
190 x 167 cm



Pride & Joy, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
74 3/8 x 68 1/2 in
189 x 174 cm





Crucible, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
74 3/8 x 65 3/4 in
189 x 167 cm



Mind to mind, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
73 3/8 x 66 7/8 in
186.5 x 170 cm





Vanity, 2023

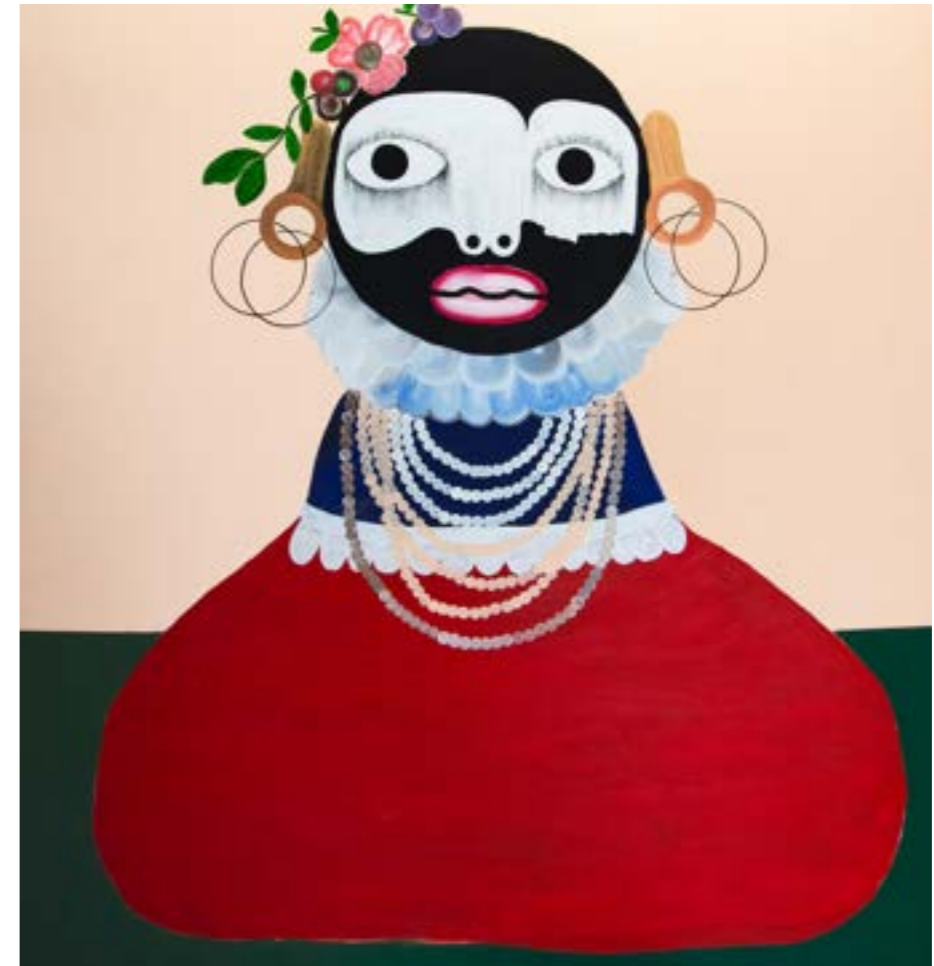
Acrylic on canvas
72 1/4 x 66 1/2 in
183.5 x 169 cm



Celebration of perfection, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
72 1/2 x 65 3/4 in
184 x 167 cm





Devotion #3, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
69 3/4 x 66 7/8 in
177 x 170 cm



Reborn, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
67 3/8 x 54 in
171 x 137 cm





Devotion #2, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
66 7/8 x 66 1/2 in
170 x 169 cm



The Euphoria Of Achievement, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
67 1/8 x 55 7/8 in
170.5 x 142 cm





Boy In Red Hat, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
66 7/8 x 54 1/2 in
170 x 138.5 cm



Breathing Life, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
66 3/4 x 54 7/8 in
169.5 x 139.5 cm





Living Essence, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
75 1/4 x 67 1/8 in
191 x 170.5 cm



Hearts Offering, 2023

Acrylic on canvas
66 1/2 x 54 3/4 in
169 x 139 cm





KOJO MARFO

RETROSPECTIVE

KOJO MARFO
DREAMING OF IDENTITY

10 JUNE - 17 JULY 2021

Dreaming of Identity presented a vibrant new body of paintings by London-based Ghanaian artist Kojo Marfo, marking his debut solo show in the UK.

The exhibition marked a year since Gallery Founder, Jean-David Malat, discovered Marfo's work through the open-call exhibition *Isolation Mastered* which took place after the UK's first lockdown in an effort to support aspiring artists.

Jean-David, as well as an impressive committee of judges, which included the art historian and Programme Director at Sotheby's Institute of Art, Dr. David Bellingham, were captivated by his work. Since working with the gallery, Marfo's work has been acquired by top international collectors.





KOJO MARFO
GATEKEEPERS OF HERITAGE

3 MAY - 2 JUNE 2022

Gatekeepers of Heritage presented a vibrant new body of paintings, marking his return to the dynamic art scene in New York. As a teenager in the 1990s, Marfo moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he studied and began his artistic career. *Gatekeepers of Heritage* acted as a mirror of his experiences from those years; the stylistic elements of Akan art are paired with his experiences in the West. Trying to find his place in the world, Marfo dabbled in art by hanging out with members of a graffiti crew.

In the 90s, the city of New York was vibrant and flourishing with new artistic waves, giving Marfo the opportunity to spend time with people from a variety of different social circles. These social circles were rich with diverse cultural backgrounds which has ultimately inspired him to share their stories in Marfo's art.



ZONAMACO 2023, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

8 FEBRUARY - 12 FEBRUARY 2023



UNTITLED, ART, ART BASEL, MIAMI BEACH

29 NOVEMBER - 3 DECEMBER 2022



KOJO MARFO AT MAYFAIR SCULPTURE TRAIL 2022

20 JUNE - 31 JULY 2022

Kojo Marfo
b. 1980 - Ghana

Works and lives in London, United Kingdom

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2023 *Crucible of Hope*, JD Malat Gallery, London, UK
2022 *Gatekeepers of Heritage*, JD Malat Gallery, New York City, USA
2021 *Dreaming of Identity*, JD Malat Gallery, London, UK
2010 *Spirit & Soul*, Originals Art Gallery, Poole, Dorset, UK
2009 *African Concept of Brutalism*, Martin Lockwood, London, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions

2023 *Africa Supernova*, Kunsthal KAdE, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
2023 *Past, Present, Future*, JD Malat Gallery, London, UK
2022 *Art Icon 2022 Charity Auction*, Whitechapel Gallery, Online
2021 *Say It Loud: Visionaries of Self*, Christie's, New York, USA
2020 *Summer Group Exhibition*, JD Malat Gallery, London, UK
2020 *Re-See, Independent & Image Art Space*, Chongqing, China
2020 *Isolation Mastered*, JD Malat Gallery, London, UK
2020 *Threesome*, 19Karen Contemporary Gallery, Gold Coast, Australia
2014 Brick Lane Gallery, London UK

Art Fairs

2023 ZONAMACO 2023, Mexico City, Mexico
2021 *Stolen Stories*, UNTITLED, Miami Beach, USA
2015 *Oxford International Art Fair*, Oxford, UK

Collections

Carla and Pieter Schulting Foundation, The Netherlands
The Eleanor Crook Foundation (ECF), USA
The Lithuanian National Museum of Art (LNDM), Lithuania
Museu Inima de Paula, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Selected Press

2020 *5 Up-And-Coming Artists With New Exhibitions That You Can See This July*, Artnet Gallery Network, July 7

2020 *Artist Kojo Marfo on how lockdown breakups inspired him to paint*, British GQ, Thomas Barrie, September 8

2020 *Kojo Marfo: A Mirror To Society*, Metal Magazine, Rachel Campbell, December 16

2021 *Spotlight: Ghanaian Artist Kojo Marfo Paints an 'Unreal' World Where Shared Human Hopes and Dreams Emerge*, Artnet Gallery Network, June 7

2021 *Ghana's Kojo Marfo: Sell-out show for butcher-turned-painter*, BBC News, Andy Jones, July 13

2021 *Ghanaian artist Kojo Marfo's sell-out show pays homage to multiculturalism*, CNN Style, August 18

2021 *In The Studio | Kojo Marfo*, London, Collectors Agenda, November 15

2021 *Stolen Stories: Interview with Ghanaian Artist Kojo Marfo*, Artland Magazine, Adam Hencz, December 11

2022 *Kojo Marfo's Portraits Depict the Cracks in Polite Society*, Hyperallergic, Taylor Michael, May 26

2023 *Mexico City's Zona Maco Fair Showcases an Eclectic Range, From Poignant Photographs to Provocative Textiles*, Artnet News, William Van Meter, February 10

2023 *Kojo Marfo: Crucible of Hope*, Art Plugged, September 20

2023 *Kojo Marfo: the maverick Ghanaian artist on his new Mayfair exhibition, and why truth trumps beauty*, Evening Standard, Nancy Durrant, September 24

Acknowledgments

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Annie Pereira

Wells Fray-Smith is Curator at the Barbican Centre, London. Prior to Barbican, Wells held similar positions at Whitechapel Gallery, Pace Gallery, London and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. At Whitechapel Gallery, she was responsible for the Max Mara Art Prize for Women and curated Emma Talbot: The Age/ L'Età, The London Open (2022) and Helen Cammock: Che si puó fare (2019). Wells writes on modern and contemporary art, recently contributing catalogue essays on the artists Ilse D'Hollander (2023), Tess Jaray (2022), Secundino Hernandez (2022), Prabhavathi Meppayil (2022) and Fabienne Verdier (2020).

Graphic Designer: Yana Sergeeva

info@jdmalat.com

30 Davies Street, London, W1K4NB
+44 203 746 68 30
www.jdmalat.com

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