

Where Inspiration Strikes

by Konstantin Rega

A new exhibit at The Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) explores the move from external to internal subject matter.

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Luis Camnitzer, *A Museum is a School*, 2009/2022. Vinyl, 3D postcard. Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU, Markel Center, *A Museum is a School*, (Mar 12, 2022 – Jan 1, 2023). Artwork © Luis Camnitzer. Photo: David Hale

In his first institutional solo exhibition (*Forgotten, Nudes, Landscapes*), artist Gideon Appah gives a look into how an artist reacts and interacts with the changing landscape he is part of. The exhibition's paintings merge the artist's interests in Ghanaian popular culture with his own imagination, dreams, and fantasies. Newspaper clippings, entertainment posters, and films spanning the 1950s through the '80s become source material for Appah's explorations of the rise and fall of Ghanaian cinema and leisure culture.

ICA curator Amber Esseiva says that there's "a move away from the built environment to an inner one." The first paintings, from 2020, mainly feature characters at clubs or by taxis or exploring the city. It is a celebration of community and being a part of something bigger than one's self. The fact that these figures (similar to those of artist Barkley L. Hendricks) wear white suits could be inspired by the character in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* who wears a white kerchief. This blending of identity is very interesting because it plays with metaphors about colors and what they mean to different viewers.

The later paintings (the eerie horses and the dreamy nightscape of a chalk-white city) came into creation recently, in the last year or so. Esseiva notes the "landscape of the consciousness" in these art pieces. Being from dreams and the imagination, they are disembodied subjects—estranged from their creator once on canvas. But that doesn't make them any less powerful and intriguing. Rather, they attract the eye. The one of the city at night is mysterious; are the white, fuzzy daubs snow or a sort of dust? It keeps the looker guessing and contrasts well with the portraits of figures living their life, physically in a location that can still be visited.

But whether you're interested in men in pale suits or horses that look stretched-out and scrunched, *Forgotten, Nudes, Landscapes* captures and demands attention. It also allows you to connect with the artist: to see where he started from, where he wound up, and where he's headed.