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Isa Freeling, Contributor

Art & Culture Writer & Adviser: Talking all things artful

Artist Uthman Wahaab Paints Beauty Big!

09/20/2017 02:10 pm ET



UTHMAN WAHAAB



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Phenomenal Woman, Sapar Contemporary Gallery & Incubator

African Artist Uthman Wahaab has heart and soul to spare as he addresses beauty from an unconventional point of view. He asks, “What is beauty?” “Why do we have this standard and why are willing to give up knowing someone’s authentic self because they might be considered physically different? What does that do to them and what does that do to us? I spent an hour talking with this very passionate Nigerian artist about his show “Phenomenal Women” now on view at Sapar Contemporary Gallery an Incubator in Tribeca.

I listened to Wahaab intently as he told me about a chance telephone encounter with a woman he had met while he was in college. It is something we have all done, heard the voice and been attracted to the soul. But once asking the woman to meet, she found it hard to materialize; to show herself fully and when she actually did, his college friends teased him but he did not relent in trying to maintain a friendship with her. In the end, she disappeared.

And so it is she who passes through Uthman’s paintbrush onto the canvas and full heartedly he painted her softly and tenderly. Breaking the rules of proportion allowing societies unacceptable heavy woman to float. Embracing her largeness while disrupting it with limbs and head in delicate and diminutive portrayal. In several paintings, he gives her ballet shoes so she can fly through the air reaching for something beyond this judgmental world in burnished tones of amber, rust, browns, white and black. He explains that “in Yoruba culture, there are certain dances only women who have extra flesh are allowed to dance because their flesh shakes to the drum beat. At one time heaviness was acceptable but because of the West’s fixation on slenderness and the African fixation on the West, it has become unacceptable.”

Uthman is a man who paints channeling societies failures and triumphs trying to enliven and unite the two in symbolic

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harmony. Being mindful of the aftermath of colonization he explains that “Africa is left with a complex problem of keeping itself relevant and not giving up our identity and language for the standardized West. Some people no longer speak or know their language here.”

He addresses the importance of what is happening because of technology and wants to create a revolutionary experience marrying technology with ancient tradition. “The devices we use are making tradition disappear, but there is no way around technology, it is here to stay we must use it to benefit tradition. We must adapt to it.”

I am interested in what he is working on for his next series. For the next one, his investigation is primarily focused on ancient talismans and how to portray culturally iconic symbolism in the less organic and tactile world in which we live. To ask the protective keepers of these relics to open the doors on what they are protecting so he can convey a new culturally relevant technologically engaged portrayal of ancient tradition being reborn so that it can never be lost. Uthman Wahaab is an innovator and a thinker, ever evolving in his work, medium and technique. I look forward to seeing what he returns with from his next discoveries.

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