

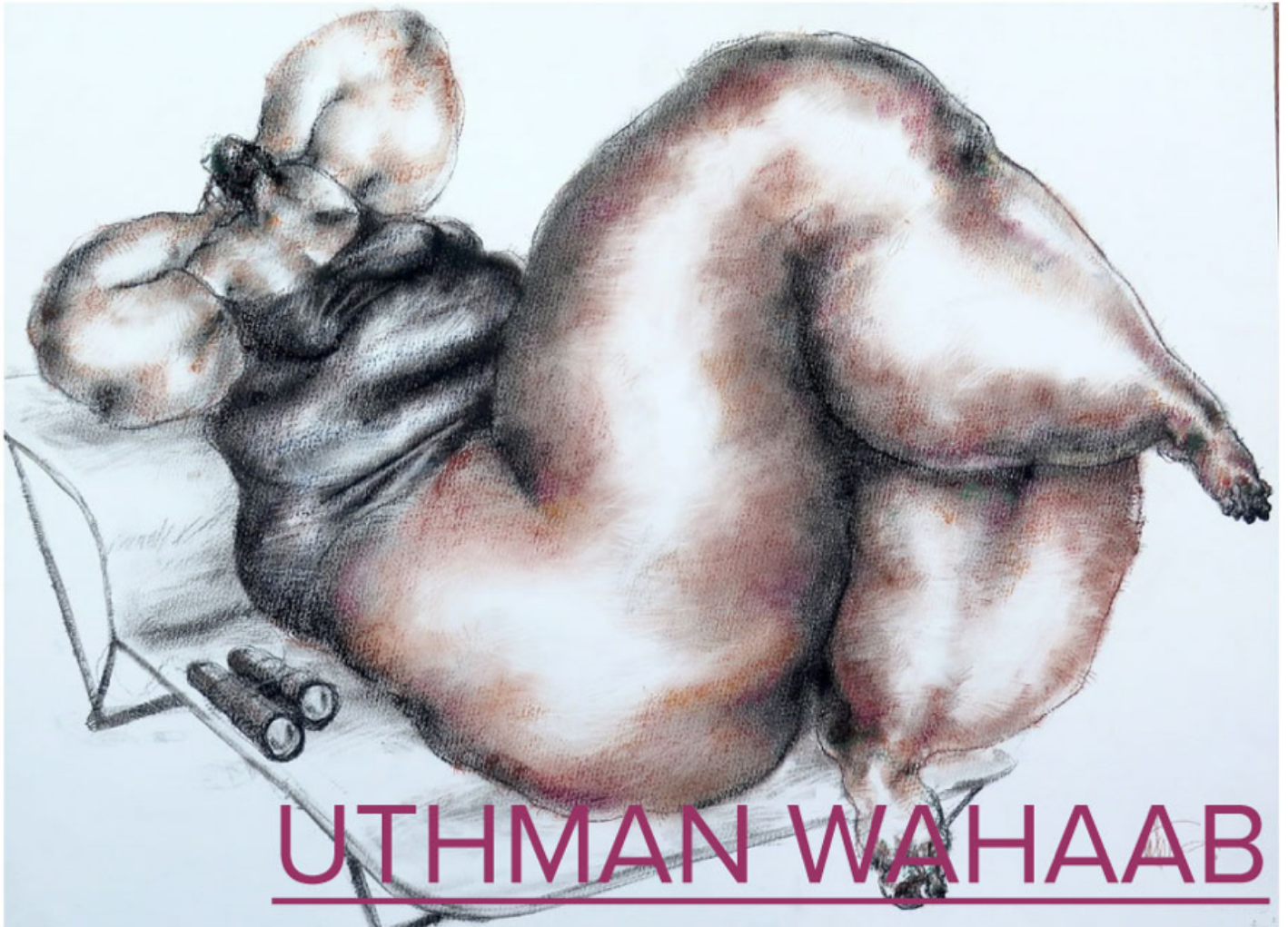
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# FRESH FRIDAY



## UTHMAN WAHAAB AND THE “NEW GAZE”

The historic and systematic use of “the gaze” has been central in art, Nigerian artist Uthman Wahaab transposes this theme, redefining and evolving its many functions.

From an art historical perspective, “the gaze” has always been the backbone of emotion in a piece of art. Over the centuries of portraiture and narrative pieces, artists have conveyed expression through their subject's eyes. With each type of look, whether that be an averted gaze or a coy, direct connection, the viewer and the subject create a dialogue. Furthermore these directions have consistently corresponded to a certain form of symbolism. For instance, the knowing smile of the *Mona Lisa* (1503) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona\\_Lisa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Lisa)) is one of the first examples of a direct gaze at the viewer/painter. This forthright acknowledgment of the viewer's presence shifts the conversation, making it a mutual exchange between the image and the viewer. In another earlier example, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486)

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Birth\\_of\\_Venus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus)), Venus is presented nude with an averted side gaze. By not confronting the viewer, we are allowed to observe her nudity.

This deep rooted use of the gaze has been manipulated over time to convey a variety of meanings. A Nigerian artist, Uthman Wahaab has again, redefined its purpose. With little use of the gaze, to the point of non-existence, Wahaab paints with a different focus; the body. Wahaab's figures are full-bodied women, usually nude or scantily clad, that are depicted with "shrunk" heads, in an almost scratched out style. Very similar to previously seen images of female nudes throughout history, Wahaab's scenes depict women lounging or relaxing. In a more rare scene, the females are dancing, but even that is reminiscent of Degas' "dancers", ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar\\_Degas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Degas)) another example of a historically predominant female space.

Wahaab's females are inspired by his native Nigerian women, who culturally celebrate larger bodies and associate them with affluence and comfort. However, with the rise of social media and a Westernized image of beauty, these traditional concepts of the body have been transformed. A shift away from this ideal has changed Nigerian women's view of themselves and these cultural constructs.

Wahaab's inspiration from these women are rooted in these traditional ideals; namely their comfort and leisure. Although Wahaab's female forms lack any facial recognition, their bodies take on the sense of pure relaxation in their poses. In this way, "the gaze" is applied not through the eyes, but through these draped postures. The same unopposing observation of nudity is permitted. However, the context is not one of gazing upon an unwanting participant, but rather women unyielding in their comfort. Wahaab's depiction and use of "the gaze" serves a different function that equally celebrates the female form and honors his native Nigerian heritage.

View more of Uthman Wahaab's (<https://www.artsy.net/artist/uthman-wahaab>) work.



**FAT Ballerina. Courtesy of Saatchi Art.**



**Untitled (Nude #6), 2016. Courtesy of Artsy.**

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