

SAPAR CONTEMPORARY

GALLERY + INCUBATOR



Uthman Wahaab, *Languishing: Reading a Letter*, 2017

Phenomenal Woman

Uthman Wahaab (Lagos, Nigeria)

Essay by Jasmine Wahi

August 16 - September 20, 2017

Opening hours in August are Tue., Wed., and Thur. (11- 6pm) and
in September Tue- Sat (11-6 pm).

*Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. / I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size/
But when I start to tell them, / They think I'm telling lies. / I say, / It's in the reach of my arms, / The
span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips. / I'm a woman / Phenomenally. /
Phenomenal woman, / That's me.*

*I walk into a room / Just as cool as you please, / And to a man, The fellows stand or / Fall down
on their knees. / Then they swarm around me, / A hive of honey bees. / I say, / It's the fire in my
eyes, / And the flash of my teeth, / The swing in my waist, / And the joy in my feet. / I'm a woman /
Phenomenally.*

Phenomenal woman, / That's me.

*Men themselves have wondered / What they see in me. / They try so much / But they can't touch /
My inner mystery. / When I try to show them, / They say they still can't see. / I say, / It's in the arch
of my back, / The sun of my smile, / The ride of my breasts, / The grace of my style. / I'm a woman /
Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me.*

*Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed. / I don't shout or jump about / Or have to
talk real loud. / When you see me passing, / It ought to make you proud. / I say, / It's in the click of
my heels, / The bend of my hair, / the palm of my hand, / The need for my care. / 'Cause I'm a
woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me.*

Maya Angelou, Phenomenal Woman, 1978

SAPAR Contemporary is pleased to present *Uthman Wahaab: Phenomenal Woman*, a solo exhibition of work from the *Languishing* series.

Uthman Wahaab is an artist who possesses an overarching interest in social phenomenon; yet, he is not concerned with a consistent use of medium or even singular aesthetic style. Utilizing the disciplines of painting, graphics design, film, photography, sculpture and installation, Wahaab's work positions a critical lens at social phenomenon not only within Africa; but also, in the way that globalism and post-coloniality continues to complicate the African socialscape.

The artist is keenly critical of the impact of technology on shifting cultural structures, and the complex conundrum of navigating traditional values and social and economic progress. Each series is an in depth analysis of a new sociological study, and an exciting study manipulating new material. His bodies, such as the Victorian Lagos Series, investigate what the artist refers to as a crisis Black African identity in the post-Colonial aftermath. This series, as well as the Hybrid Theory Series, critiques the way in which Africa continues to flounder in the global economic forum while simultaneously being influenced socially by the West.

Wahaab's range in style, medium, and process is vast and impressive; he is an artist who both welcomes and successfully wrangles new ideas and modes of artmaking. What remains consistent throughout each of his series' is his use of the body a point of departure, either as the catalyst to his appraisal, or as the subject of it, as in the case of the works found in his first New York solo exhibition, *Phenomenal Woman*.

Inheriting its name from Maya Angelou's highly acclaimed celebratory poem, *Phenomenal Woman*, Wahaab's exhibition is an exploration of the conventions of beauty imposed upon the

female body. In part, this collection of mixed media paintings and drawings is a celebration of body, form, and beauty beyond the accepted understanding of what is contemporarily considered physically ideal. In this show, Wahaab confronts and questions the subjectivity of beauty; his goal through this work is to critique the ever-shifting social paradigm around the female form and to challenge the dominant standards of the attractiveness.

The pieces in this exhibition depict a population of heavy women in various states of repose and relaxation. The figures are nothing short of resplendent in rotundness- rolls of fat gracefully spilling over themselves, limbs draped over chairs, hands placidly playing on cellphones or with beads or with fruit. This sense of quietude that flavors the works should not be interpreted as a portrayal laziness; but rather, with luxury and beauty.

Viewers, particularly in the West, may be apt to associate these figures with art historical references such as the Venus of Willendorf or Ruben's fleshy nudes. However, while Wahaab acknowledges the existence of this work, he is not inspired by the canonical portrayal of plump women. He is concerned with the phenomenon of body image in the modern Nigerian context. Historically, heaviness has been correlated with wealth. Wahaab references the Nigerian term 'Orobo'- a term that loosely means 'fat in a sexy way' in the context of marriage. He speaks of an old tradition of 'plumping' a bride-to-be prior to her wedding as a demonstration of affluence and comfort. In talking about the work, he speaks of how that tradition is gradually being erased, due in part to the narrowing scope of beauty standards due to social media exposure to contemporary Western beauty ideals.

As with much of his work, the pieces in Phenomenal Woman originate from the artist's own life experiences. The Languishing series was inspired by an encounter that the artist had with a woman of larger than 'normal' stature. He was struck by her lack of confidence, her anxiety in navigating a world in which big may not be considered beautiful. In response to this sentiment, Wahaab created worlds in which full figured is phenomenal- a harkening back to the luxury of being able to languish.

Small details within the paintings and drawings are cues to the conflation of corpulence, success, and beauty. The figures have delicate feet that are uncalloused and unadorned with signs of strenuous work. Some of the figures even frolic across the canvas in silky toe shoes-leaping with a an untroubled abandon. The subjects of these works are unconcerned with the imposition of contemporary Western beauty ideals. They are unapologetically phenomenal, saying 'Phenomenal woman. That's me.'

-Jasmine Wah, 2017

About Uthman Wahaab

Multidisciplinary artist Uthman Wahaab was born in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria in 1983, and raised in Lagos. He received a degree in Fine Art from the School of Art, Design and Printing, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos.

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conundrum of navigating traditional values and social and economic progress. Each series is an in depth analysis of a new sociological study, and an exciting study manipulating new material. Wahaab's range in style, medium, and process is vast and impressive; he is an artist who both welcomes and successfully wrangles new ideas and modes of artmaking.

Wahaab's work has been shown internationally to wide acclaim in Africa and Europe. This is his first show in North America. Uthman Wahaab currently works and lives in Lagos

SAPAR Contemporary Gallery + Incubator is a new art space in Tribeca that represents established and young international artists. Sapar Contemporary artists span three generations and five continents. They engage in global conversations and develop vocabularies that resonate as strongly in Istanbul, Baku and Mumbai, as they do in New York, Berlin, and Mexico City. Their artistic practices vary from meditative traditional ink painting to writing programming code; what connects them are the artists' capacity to empathy, insight, and imagination; their whimsy and generosity of spirit, as well as the rigor and depth of their studio practice. Sapar Contemporary is the driving force behind Tribeca Art Night that the gallery organized together with the 20 other art venues. Sapar Contemporary is the brainchild of Raushan Sapar (collector) and Nina Levent (art historian). www.saparcontemporary.com