

Glass meets MOLLIE E BARNES and EMMA PREMPEH, two emerging artists seeking to make their mark during a time of great change

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Emma Prempeh (2020) Forgetting

EQUAL TO THE TASK

The arts have struggled this year as repeated lockdowns have forced venues to close and kept creatives from their work. In the meantime, change is also being demanded of an industry that continues to prioritise the privileged. Following the announcement of the UK's first lockdown in March last year, Mollie Barnes sought a way to connect with the artists she had previously worked with. Her answer was She Curates, an organisation that acts as both directory and platform to champion the work of female and non-binary creatives. One of them is Emma E Prempeh, an artist exploring the most intimate and intangible of themes and their profound impact on the human experience, all grounded in a look at her own ancestry.

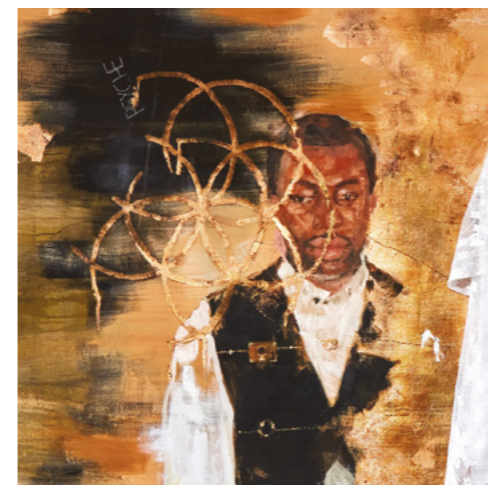
Both talked of the other glowingly, and I was left with a glimpse of a mutually beneficial community of artists centred around the needs of those at risk of marginalisation. Prempeh works in acrylics and oils layered with imitation gold leaf, which means, she says, "In 10 years' time my work will look completely different", a physical manifestation of the idea of time passing that she seeks to address. Her pieces are arresting, large-scale and populated by figures at once confrontational and intimately rendered. In the wake of her graduation from Goldsmiths, University of London and an array of awards, demand for her paintings took off and almost everything she produced sold. With an approaching residency in Ghana, where her father hails from, she is taking time to build up her portfolio in order to "put everything" that she wants into them and "refine" her skills.

She tells me about the artist's balancing act between creating work authentically, the necessity of financial success, and navigating the difficult tides of the art world. "I've been very lucky," she says, when I ask her about her impression of the art world's claims of growing inclusion. "It was about the end of 2019 when things started happening for me. So in 2020,



Emma Prempeh (2020) Red white blue and brown

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Emma Prempeh (2020)
Install, Hindsight

with George Floyd and [the rise of] Black Lives Matter, [this] added to people actually noticing black creators ... I've been noticing that lots of galleries are approaching me and branching out more internationally, [looking at] the African diaspora ... There's such a demand for new art from black artists at the moment. It's quite scary because I'm so new to it. It's like, who do I trust right now? Who's there to stay? And who's just there for this period of time?"

Barnes shares her scepticism. Her work at She Curates encourages systemic change. "When movements happen, people respond, and museums, institutions and individuals rethink what they've been doing ... [But as] we've seen on

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Emma Prempeh (2020) The Cain's

International Women's Day, brands will suddenly care about feminism, and then it drops off. We see that in the art world. It's staggering the number of all-white shows you see now, or all-male shows, which perhaps wouldn't have happened last June with the Black Lives Matter when everyone was considering how they were working."

She Curates platforms women and non-binary artists but Barnes roots real change in integrated shows. "I would love it if someone looked at She Curates and went, 'we're looking for artists, we're really trying to do better'. Or use it as a jumping off point to find other artists and start looking at women and under-represented artists as a starting point and not as a 'oh no, we've accidentally curated an all-male, white show, and we've got to tick some boxes' kind of exercise."

As well as championing women and non-binary artists, She Curates also targets people aged 40-plus whose underrepresentation is "shocking", she says, alongside those "who have taken on caring responsibilities", among others. One of Barnes' triumphs has been the co-designing of Fundamentals of Art Business, a short course being run at Christie's. "I myself am an art professional with many privileges, but I couldn't afford endless internships or to have the time off working. I wasn't able to travel to London for each and every show and couldn't afford the university I wanted to attend and so decided against going ... Many people can afford to do unpaid internships for experience and contacts, but for many that is completely inaccessible, and a huge barrier, which is such a shame and needs to change."

Of the course, she says, "We tried to think of everything". It runs virtually at 2pm BST to allow overseas attendees, and optional coursework replaces exams. Although there is a fee "it is possible to pay in instalments, which I don't think they'd done before at Christie's." The course highlights the breadth of considerations which must be made to meaningfully broaden the art world's accessibility, and its success proves people are ready for this change, she says.

Prempeh also highlights the air of obscurity that ensconces so much of the art world's operations and ultimately keeps people out. "On my BA course, they didn't talk about money. They didn't talk about taxes. They didn't talk about selling to collectors ... They were kind of like, 'one day you could be like Damien Hirst'. I had no one to look up to really to tell me what to do. So when [students] ask me what I'm doing, I'm like, 'Yeah! This is what happens, this is how much you make'. I want to be transparent about that, and I think everyone should be."

More than this, many artists can't afford to make art full time. Prempeh says there should



Emma Prempeh (2020) Tarnishing



Curator, Mollie E Barnes

be an awareness that as an artist "you might have two jobs for a long time, to sustain your practice". Her goal for the future is to become a full-time artist, but for now "I'm so scared to leave [my job] because ... I won't have that stable income anymore."

She Curates works to break down some of these barriers and preconceptions, and Prempeh is grateful for the patience and support she was met with when Barnes invited her to be featured in a show. Barnes emphasises that, in her mind, this is the true role of the curator. "Curator comes from the word 'to care', traditionally meaning to care for the objects, caring for the artefacts, But to me, to curate means to care for the artists, especially in such a confusing market and world. And it means being sensitive to the works. It's such big thing

to make sure that you are inviting them to something that will benefit them more than it will benefit you." When I ask Barnes to sum up the progression towards meaningful inclusivity, she talks about the work of The Guerrilla Girls, a collective of anonymous US female artists trying to draw attention to the racism and sexism in the art world. "The Guerrilla Girls do those classic iconic posters showing solo shows in big galleries like MOMA. [The numbers of women's shows] do increase, but they increase by maybe one at a time. It's slow, but I think we can get there through positivity. There are so many people that are working towards the right direction and doing the right thing. It's slow, but there is progress."

she-curates.com
emmaprempeh.com