

# KUTLESA

## ARTIST STATEMENT

In 2020, as the pandemic peaked and months of lockdown dragged on with nothing much to do but paint, I began reading about my ancestors who were ripped from their homes in West Africa and shipped to foreign lands via the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Then I made a detour into the intricacies of slavery and cotton production in nineteenth-century America—cotton as produced by black toil, cotton as America's biggest export in the mid-1800s, cotton as a vital cash crop in the rise of capitalism and globalization in America and Britain, cotton as the foundation of the Industrial Revolution, and how cotton exported to France helped break grounds for the establishment of French fashion. In that way, I opened up myself to the trauma of slavery, which stood at the center of cotton—the most dynamic and far-reaching production complex in human history. I was also personally dealing with trauma caused by the death of several young Nigerians who were gunned down by armed men of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for protesting against the SARS movement, as well as the trauma of #blacklivesmatter in the States, of people pouring into the streets at the height of the pandemic, putting their lives at stake in fervent demand for justice and right. And in the midst of this chaos statues were pulled down and history was being revised and rewritten. Thus, I began creating art based on these experiences, working with figuration and text, while using cotton as an essential symbol of interrogating the connecting links between slavery, fashion, globalization, capitalism and black history.

My current practice is informed by a deep commitment to reimagining and reorientating black identity in the canons of history, religion and Western art, while using cotton as an essential symbol of interrogation. However, I am also interested in uncovering and visually representing the historical and nuanced experiences of black people in connection to the positive contribution slave-produced cotton played in the destiny of America and that of the world at large. As has been exemplarily noted by Herman Merivale, British colonial bureaucrat, in 1840, that Manchester's and Liverpool's "opulence is as really owing to the toil and suffering of the negro, as if his hands had excavated their docks and fabricated their steam-engines", as well as Karl Marx observing in 1846: "Without cotton you have no modern industry ... Without slavery, there is no cotton." My practice currently leans towards this direction, as I begin seeking for new ways to approach the subject matter of black visibility and representation in history painting, seeking for an approach that is traditional, experimental and transdisciplinary, one that utilizes cotton as a tangible material of visual expression.

For this reason I am deeply influenced by the works of Titus Kaphar and Meleko Mokgos. Kaphar's practice confronts history by dismantling classical structures and styles of visual representation in Western art in order to subvert them, a narrative which I adopted and explored in my recent debut Paris show Point of Correction. Mokgosi's research-led projects, on the other hand, engages history painting and cinematic tropes to uncover notions of colonialism, democracy, and liberation across African history. His visual practice can be

broadly split into figurative and text-based paintings, which has influenced the current multiplicity of my practice—figuration, text and abstraction. The works of both artists make so much use of historical research, coupled with an unfamiliar approach to the subject of painting, which echoes my interest in creating art that is multidisciplinary and experimental.

Above all, I am much a writer as I am a painter; I express ideas that I cannot visually represent on canvas in forms of short stories, some of which have been published in online magazines. I received a Nigeria Certificate of Education in Fine and Applied Arts (double major) from Emmanuel Alayande College of Education in Nigeria. I went on to study Literature-in-English at Obafemi Awolowo University in pursuance of a career in creative writing but gave up due to the pandemic break, epileptic academic calendar and because my revived interest in art had paved a career path for me in the form of a residency program at Noldor—Ghana's first independent artist residency, followed by a debut solo with Afikaris Gallery in France.