

# AFTER NYNEX



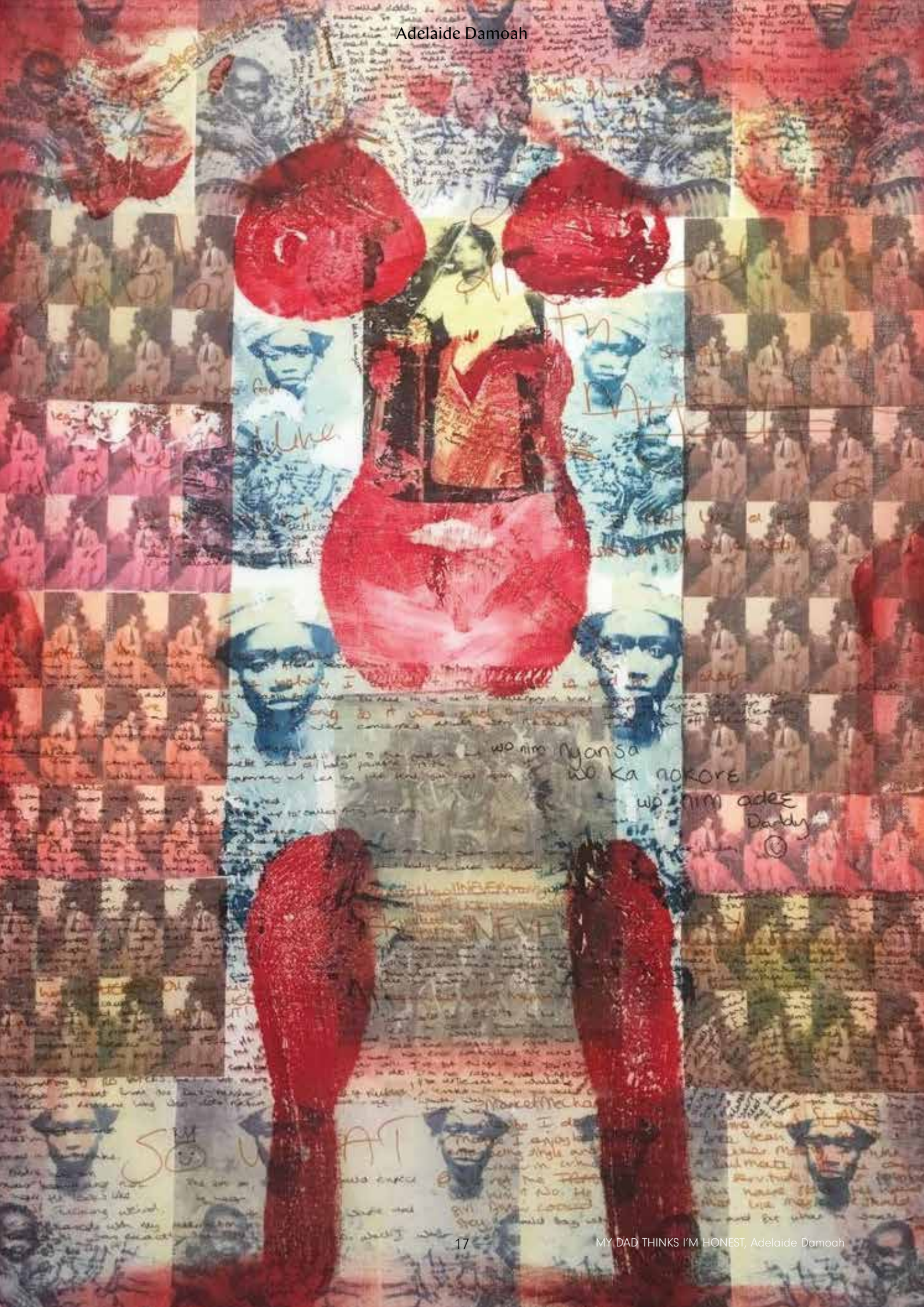
Marilyn Stafford • Anni Albers • Sarah Lucas

Adelaide Damoah • Carrie Beth Waghorn • Philly Adams & Florence Hutchings

# THE WOMEN IN ART ISSUE

# POWER DYNAMICS

*After Nyne meets*  
Adelaide Damoah



wo nim nyansa  
 wo ka nokore  
 wo nim adee  
 Daddyy

SO U AT

— **Adelaide** Damoah is a British artist of Ghanaian descent whose earlier work combined African and Western influences while highlighting social issues.

After graduating in 1999 with an honours degree in Applied Biology, Damoah went on to work in the pharmaceutical industry. During this time, she was diagnosed with endometriosis, following many years of chronic pain. Damoah's time spent convalescing allowed her to learn more about painting.

Her current practice involves using her body as a "living paintbrush" to paint or print onto various surfaces. The artist works with photographs and text later in the creation of the work. Damoah's new direction was inspired by a desire to subvert Yves Klein's "Anthropometrie's" series, engaging live performance, body-printing, and writing.

**Tell us about the epiphany that started your career in the art world.**

I'm not sure that it was an epiphany as such. It was more of a slow realisation that I should be following this path. I worked in pharmaceutical sales for six years prior to making the decision to become an artist. I fell in love with art as a teenager when I discovered Frida Kahlo and it was my encounter with her work that encouraged me to express my experiences through art. At that time it was nothing but teen angst! I kept up the habit of art making in that way all the way through school, university and my early career in pharmaceuticals. I was diagnosed with a chronic illness called endometriosis early on in my working career and was very ill on and off for some time.

During those periods of convalescence I had the luxury of time to explore my art more deeply and doing so gave me some respite and peace. I attracted the attention of friends and family and pretty soon, people were offering to pay me for my works. When money started to change hands, I started to understand what was possible for my future so I made the decision in 2005 to give up my career in pharmaceuticals and to focus on a new career as an artist.

**People consider art and science to be such different fields - do you see any areas where the two disci-**

**plines have things in common?**

It doesn't matter what type of scientist you are, you must have the ability to think creatively, or you fail. The same applies in art. When I was a student of biology, I had to think through and imagine how specific biological mechanisms worked in order to understand them. Once you understand the process, you then have to think creatively about how to use it to solve problems. I go through the same thing as an artist. I imagine what I want to produce on a blank page and then figure out the process required to produce what I have imagined before executing it. To be a successful scientist, you have to be an excellent researcher.

You research what has gone before and apply that past knowledge to solve new problems. I apply the same logic to the creation of my artwork. For example, I became interested in body printing and performance, so I deeply researched historic artists working in these fields and learnt all I could about their process and techniques. I then try to think laterally and creatively applying what I have learned from them to try to achieve originality and meaning in my own work. So there are definitely some elements in my science background that have crossed over into my art practice. Alongside all of that, both disciplines converge where they try to make sense of the world.







**“The 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair has grown massively on a global scale in the last five years or so and this alone is having a significant impact on the positioning of people of colour in the art world – but at times I feel that this impacts a particular segment of the market more than on those of us from the diaspora.”**

- ADELAIDE DAMOAH

**Have you had any difficulties in making the transition between the two fields?**

The difficulties I had in transitioning had nothing to do with perceived differences between the two fields and everything to do with the fact that I knew nothing of the art world, had absolutely no contacts and was making very naïve work! I spent the first year of my transition believing that if I made the work and put on an exhibition, the art world would come. Of course, it did not work like that! Friends and family came and supported, as well as friends of friends, but the “art world” knew nothing of me and I was invisible for a long time- which in hind sight was definitely a good thing.

When I started to realise how little I knew, I set about trying to widen and deepen my knowl-

edge through research as well as networking and getting to know other artists through interviewing them about their careers. The main difficulty was transitioning from having a salary to not having a salary and only occasionally selling work. When you have a mortgage to pay that is a huge challenge. I worked it out by freelance writing, recruitment and odd jobs. The journey thus far has been interesting and challenging to say the least!

**How would you describe your work to those unfamiliar to it?**

A writer called Stephen Baycroft with whom I am currently working, suggested that in some of my current works it is evident that I “think with [my] body” to make “sculptural prints”. That is a pretty accurate way of describing some of my current

work. The first part of the process often involves using of my body as a tool to create various imprints that often stimulate visceral and deeply buried emotions in the viewer. Sometimes this is where the journey ends for a particular piece. In other pieces I incorporate strong, occasionally gilded, images of my Ghanaian forebears as a way of reaching into and connecting with the past to try to begin to make some sense of my lived experience and the social, economic, political and anthropological forces that have come together to produce me in this place at this time.

Sometimes these images are woven into the body prints, while at others they stand on their own as repeated collages which resemble textiles. Sometimes I weave hand written text in and around the work and at other times I make pieces which are composed entirely of handwritten text. In other works, I print my face and hands onto the pages of old books that carry particular meanings or resonance with me. My interests in politics, race, culture, history, religion and feminism often surface (or lie hidden) in my work.

**What areas of interest are you keen to explore in your work?**

I have a saved search set up on Ebay for printed matter related to the British Empire. I am always buying old books, magazines, photos and

stamps about or depicting this subject: particularly if they relate to the history of Ghana - which was the British Gold Coast under Colonial rule. My current work touches on various themes suggested by these objects, but I always want to explore deeper. Currently I am becoming fascinated by the history of religion in Africa, and the ways in which "imported" religions such as Islam and Christianity ultimately led to the decline of African spiritual practices.

**What do you feel are the issues faced by women in the arts in 2018?**

The issues facing women in 2018 are much the same as they were last year and the year before that. Inequality and lack of representation. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, 51% of visual artists today are women, yet according to the Art Newspaper, a study of 70 institutions over six years showed that only 27% of solo exhibitions were by women artists. The Gallery Tally project found that just 25% of artists represented by galleries in the US and the UK are women. As curator Maura Reily pointed out, "Numbers don't lie."

Fortunately, the subject is being researched more now than ever before and people are starting to react with solutions. What is unfortunate, however, is the lack of data for women of colour. We

already know that the world is not stacked in our favour as women and we know that women of colour have double the issue because of the way in which race intersects with gender. However, there is a distinct lack of data about this.

Around a year ago, I was researching with Enam Gbewonyo and the sculptor, Arlene Wandera, for a paper we had to deliver at the British Library. The title of the paper was, "The Value of Black Women in Western Art." I think I had the idea to search for statistics on black women at a certain well known art school and was shocked, but not altogether surprised to find that, while there was data for just about every other category of student there was no data available at all on their number of black female students. It was as if there were no black women studying art at that particular school. While this was inherently unlikely given that I know plenty of black female artists and students, it is undeniably the case that we are significantly underrepresented at art schools.

**Do you feel the art world has made progress with regards to the positioning of people of colour in the industry?**

It certainly feels like it from my vantage point, but that may be because of the way I see things improving for myself and my colleagues of colour. Certainly the rise in interest in African art has

had an impact and auction houses like Bonhams have had significant African art departments for some time now. The 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair has grown massively on a global scale in the last five years or so and this alone is having a significant impact on the positioning of people of colour in the art world – but at times I feel that this impacts a particular segment of the market more than on those of us from the diaspora. There is a growing group of collectors who have a very specific interest in African art, so this has led to the development of these markets.

Also, alongside the very exciting opening of the National Gallery of African Art in Washington, there are a growing number of galleries in the US who focus on the development of the careers of artists of colour. This has led to significant growth in opportunities for certain artists. With this kind of question, it is important to have the ability to stand back and look outside of one's own situation- which could be anomalous- to what is really happening on the ground. And to be honest, there is still a lot of work to be done in the UK.

**What can you tell us about what you've got planned in the coming year?**

"Muse, Model or Mistress" opens on 24 September at Gallery Different in Fitzrovia and Genesis

opens on 2 October at One Bedford Avenue and runs through to 30th October. I will be performing my first durational piece (33 hours total) titled, "My Body is Present" as a part of the programme of events for Genesis. One hour will be performed at an event at Christie's auction house and I will perform for another hour at this year's Bloomsbury Festival. After that, the remaining 31 hours will be performed privately and live streamed via various social platforms over three days. Next year there will be much more in the way of exhibitions, performances and travelling. Exciting times ahead!