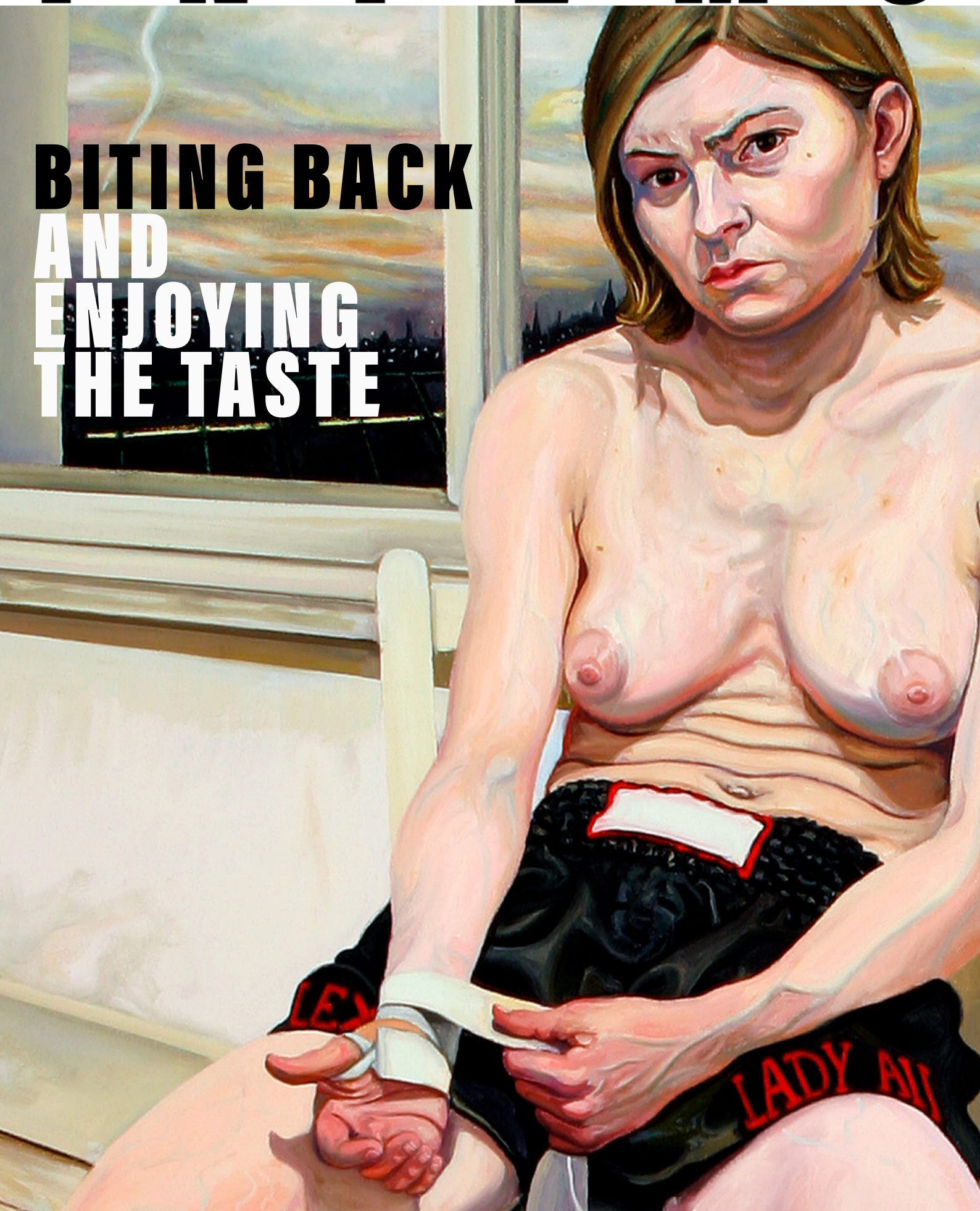


I N F E M S

**BITING BACK
AND
ENJOYING
THE TASTE**



I N F E M S
Intersectional Feminist Art Collective

Biting Back and Enjoying the Taste

EXHIBITING ARTISTS

Adelaide Damoah
Roxana Halls
Wendy Elia
Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf
Rita GT
Keyezua

CURATED BY

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf & Marie-Anne Mancio

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P A
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D A
+ + +

COVER

Alex (fighter)
Wendy Elia
Oil on Canvas
166cm x 91cm

MOVART

InFems (Intersectional Feminist Art Collective) is an organisation whose aim is to empower women and girls from diverse backgrounds to share their stories and become engaged with the arts.

InFems: Biting Back and Enjoying the Taste

Marie-Anne Mancio

Roxana Halls's *Laughing While Marauding*, 2020 (oil on linen, 90 X 120 cm) captures the rebellious spirit of collaboration and collusion which marks InFems's inaugural exhibition *Biting Back And Enjoying The Taste*. The painting belongs to one of Halls's most renowned series, 'Laughing While' (2012 onwards) in which she referenced the writings of French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, particularly Cixous's essay 'Castration or Decapitation?' (University of Chicago Press, 1981), claiming 'for me écriture féminine is most alluring as an enduring provocation.' These acts of provocation might appear as commonplace as laughing, eating, talking, and so on, but the point is that even such actions can become subversive when they are censored or performed in "inappropriate" contexts.

In *Laughing While Marauding* the models were once Halls's students, one of her first groups in fact, to whom she has remained close over the years. It's a bittersweet painting for her as the central figure of a black woman, Michelle, has since died of breast cancer. Halls describes the scene as 'a kind of Bauhaus/ Dadaist hen party,' this description in itself a neat collision of popular culture and fine art. Unlike many art schools at the time, the experimental Bauhaus welcomed women from its inception in 1919. And even if the cohort remained mostly (three-quarters) male, and Walter Gropius, one of its directors, expressed the belief that women were only able to think in two dimensions rather than three, women thrived there, as is evidenced by the successes of Marianne Brandt, Anni Albers, Gunta Stölzl, and others. Under the direction of Oskar Schlemmer, the theatre workshop at the Bauhaus was where students from painting, sculpture, textiles etc. came together to collaborate on productions. It also had the role of organising the school's parties and when the Bauhaus was based in the industrial and conservative town of Weimar, local inhabitants were shocked by the antics of these bohemian students. Photos give a hint of the innovative costumes. The 1929 Metal Party: guests wearing tin foil clothes and spoons. Similarly, Dada



Roxana Halls, *Laughing While Marauding*, 2020, oil on linen, 90 X 120 cm

was renowned for the puppets of textile artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for its now legendary 1916 event at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich where Hugo Ball was carried on stage because blue cardboard tubes restricted his legs and torso and a red-lined gold cardboard cape his upper body. Halls has a longstanding interest in theatre and cabaret (her studio occupies the saloon bar of a former 1930s London theatre, now a Bingo Hall) and she works from photographs, her models abetting the creation of scenarios that lend themselves to multiple narratives.

In the last thirty years or so, traditional hen parties have also involved outlandish costumes, but there's a residual snobbery about this rite-of-passage. However hard the hen party tries to re-invent itself, it cannot quite shake its reputation. And why should it?

Even in its most traditional, heterosexual context, there is something liberating about the rituals of tables turned, male strippers, drunk brides-in-waiting sporting 'L' (learner) plates and pink tutus, spilling out of one too many bars. A carnivalesque, transgressive display of female pleasure and impropriety. In *Laughing While Marauding*, despite the emptiness of the train platform in what Halls has said is Zurich, birthplace of Dada, but also legible as anywhere in Mittel Europe, it's easy to imagine commuters shying away from this group, as if the women are already sporting the traces of the abject aftermath of their night-to-be except instead of smeared lipstick and vomit on glittery party shoes, they are blood-spattered, brandishing trophies. Too loud, too screechy; out of control, behaving "badly," taking up much more than their allotted space. Marauders with prop weapons – rifles, swords, guns – and animal masks...Fearless, stalking their prey, they have you in their sights.

The mood shifts from the roar of the marauders to a sombre concentration. Emotions, no less deeply felt, are coiled and concealed in the three lone figures from Anglo-Cypriot artist Wendy Elia's 'Half-Naked' series (2004-2011). Yet these women, too, are behaving outside of expected norms. Whereas the nude is arguably one of the most recognisable tropes of academic art, Elia calls her figures half-naked as if to draw attention to art history's spurious distinction. Traditionally, the Nude in art was thought of as noble subject matter, arranged in classical poses and displaying an idealised body. This was in contrast to nakedness – a mundane state attained by the removal of clothes. As Walter Sickert wrote in his critique 'The Naked and the Nude' (The New Age, 21 July 1910, pp.276-7), 'when I speak of the nude I must not be understood to mean a man in bathing-drawers. Imagine Mantegna's Hercules and Antæus both in bathing-drawers!'

A goddess cannot be naked, then, because she lacks clothes to begin with. Though not spelled out, the implication is also that nakedness arouses voyeurism, whereas the beauty of the nude is supposed – in the neo-Platonic scheme at least – to encourage aspiration to a higher ideal. This argument is being



Wendy Elia, *Champion (Nick)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm

played out as I write, the Louvre and Uffizi objecting to Pornhub's appropriation and recreation of their images for their Classic Nudes series by La Cicciolina – erstwhile porn star, politician and contributor to Koons's 'Made In Heaven' series (1990). Sickert recognised the silliness of privileging one state over the other (though arguably his own images of naked women are problematic for other reasons). In Elia's practice, the figures are almost life-size; there is no escaping their nakedness. It's a state we associate with vulnerability, the newborn. These figures are only half naked, though. As she explains of her process, 'I have no interest...in capturing someone's "inner personality" or character, though sometimes this might happen by default, as the poses are chosen/negotiated with the sitter and also whether the sitter is clothed, part clothed or fully naked before starting,' (cited in <https://floatingcircle-rwa.org/2019/03/27/meet-the-artist-wendy-elia-rwa/>). Elia stopped painting for a while and became a qualified Thai boxer



Wendy Elia, *Maxime Spinning*, 2011 oil on canvas, 166 x 91cm

and martial arts instructor, competing in the ring a few times. In her words, she lost a few teeth and developed a six pack, but then returned to art wanting to paint female fighters. *Champion (Nick)*, 2006 (oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm) is one of them. There's an open medal case at Nick's feet, the inscription clearly legible – "Muay Thai British Champion," a contact sport of kicks, thrusts, jabs, and clinches. Elia's practice of painting from life in most of her series including this one sees her models lit from above and lends her figures a heightened realism that defy an objectifying gaze. We see Nick's green-blue veins and uneven breasts, her reddened hands held in tension in front of her vulva (note, too, how the latter's inverted triangle has an echo in the shadow beneath Nick's neck). Her fingers create circles like ovaries; bruises bloom on her shins. Her head may be tilted but that gaze is direct, her nakedness confrontational. Elia's subjects interrogate Laura Mulvey's hugely important 1973 essay on the male gaze. In keeping with intersectional feminism, we must now do more to consider the idea of a female gaze and what that might mean in an increasingly non-binary world.

Elia nearly always paints friends or family. *Maxime Spinning*, 2011 (oil on canvas, 166 x 91cm) depicts her friend, a pre-op transsexual man. At first glance she appears to be sitting in the same room as *Nick*, but look more closely and you'll see a different skirting board, a laminate rather than a real wooden floor. Maxime exudes a touching combination of vulnerability and strength: her blistered feet are crammed in too-tight pointy heels and there's a Tiffany's love heart bracelet on her arm; her clothes hint at bondage gear. The spinning, a meditative device, also references 'Rumpelstiltskin.'

Maxime sits on a high, chrome stool, as remote as the miller's daughter imprisoned in a tower whose life depends on the imp spinning straw into gold for her – the only way of fulfilling her father's lying boast to the King. This comes at a price: she must give up her future baby in return. Fortunately, she outwits the imp who flies out of the window on a ladle in a fit of fury when she guesses his name. In *Maxime Spinning* Elia leaves us guessing whether Maxime is the imp or the

miller's daughter or both of them simultaneously; we hope she will survive.

We see another fighter in *Alex (Fighter)*, 2004 (oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm). Her name is spelled out in red letters on the edge of her black silk shorts, preceded by 'Lady,' yet she rebels against any of the usual connotations of that term. Hers is no "ladylike" pose of legs together, crossed at the ankles. Instead, she sits with legs apart, occupying space. It's a pose that several of Elia's sitters adopt in the series. Alex's boxing wraps are wound round her outstretched wrist; she could almost be bandaged, simultaneously pre- and post- fight. These wraps fall between her legs like a joke phallus, to gather in folds on the floor. (Elia uses a very similar pose with wraps for her 2015 self-portrait *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman* where she sits aloft a concrete throne). Alex's frown alerts us that she is deep in thought, perhaps beyond engaging with the rituals of the ring. Through the window, we see an evening sky streaked with yellows, oranges, pinks, rent through with the white tracks of a plane. But this is no country landscape; we are in a metropolis, London's high-rise blocks in the distance, their windows lit up, inviting us to imagine there are more such lone inhabitants, waiting in private spaces to repel our voyeurism.

Portuguese artist Rita GT (guest artist at this, InFems's inaugural exhibition) has also explored the idea of ties in her ceramic series 'Devassa' ("debauched"), 2019, asking – in her words – 'What binds us? What controls us? How do we react to that restraint?' The history of ceramics has links with the history of colonialism in Portugal as ceramics were often brought to Africa during Vasco da Gama's "explorations." As George Shire writes in his essay '(Re)membering/(For)getting: The troubled ceramic histories of Portugal at home and abroad,' (<https://www.buala.org/en/ill-visit/remembering-forgetting-by-rita-gt>) there has been little focus on the 'lives of the women who accompanied these "explorers" [to Africa and Brazil] or those women who set out to settle in the colonies.' Traditionally considered "female" and "domestic," ceramics become the ideal vehicle through which to re-visit gender roles in Portugal. Rita GT's porcelain (delicate, precious),



Wendy Elia, *Alex (Fighter)*, 2004 oil on canvas, 166 x 91 cm

painted and sprayed with marks familiar from street art or abstract expressionism, strains against the ropes which secure it to wooden stools/ plinths. With their fluorescent pinks, bold yellows, stark blacks, or their lyrical pastels, whether alone or paired (a round vessel alongside a column), these are ceramics that demand attention.

The potential for physical action that is implied in Elia's figures and the wantonness held in tension in Rita GT's ceramics is given free rein again in Roxana Halls's *Laughing While Smashing*, 2018 (oil on linen, 105 x 105 cm). Here, two women flee, the blonde still brandishing a rock in her upstretched hand, leaving behind tell-tale shattered glass where they have vandalised a hamburger chain restaurant at 16-18 Beak Street in contemporary Soho.

With a long-standing interest in theatre and performance, Halls chose her models for their 'vague resemblance' to the actresses Joanne Whalley and Bridget Fonda who played Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies respectively in the 1989 film *Scandal*. Their clothes are similar to those worn by the women during the infamous 1963 court case that would make the Profumo Affair the talk of Britain and result in Stephen Ward's suicide. In the women's handbags (open wide like this they echo the use of receptacles to symbolise female genitalia – everything from pots and frying pans in seventeenth century Dutch Golden Age painting to the 'purse' in Eric Fischl's suburban psychodrama *Bad Boy*, 1981) we see what Halls describes as 'the repeated, distorted image of Keeler, wrapped loosely around rocks.' This reminds us how frequently Keeler appeared in print, mostly mis-represented, and that she was held responsible for the government's collapse. The act of throwing rocks recalls the punishment destined for the adulterous woman of the Bible – a neat reversal as the adulterer was Profumo. Except Halls's characters do not set down their stones in a show of mercy; quite the opposite. Whilst the painting does not depict Soho as it was in the 1960s, their target, the hamburger restaurant, is sited on what was once the infamous Murray's Cabaret Club where, on a spotlit revolving stage which was cobbled together from car headlamps and



tin cans, girls danced or held poses, half-naked. Keeler and Rice-Davies met at Murray's, their friendship evolving from an initial dislike of one another. Halls gives us a much-needed image of female solidarity (images of female friendships in art aren't as common as they should be) which in fact did not last in real life. Without nostalgia, she reminds us that their Soho has all but gone, as has the Soho of the late 1980s when the film was made. They are hinted at in the pulsing neon signs pushed to the edges of the frame. Their replacement is an altogether more soulless and gentrified place, making her women's actions all the brasher.



Rita GT, 'Devassa' ("debauched"), 2019



Roxana Halls, *Laughing While Smashing*, 2018 , oil on linen, 105 x 105 cm

So Halls's painting is a performance (by her models) of a performance (the film actresses's) of what was in any case a performance (the real-life Keeler and Rice-Davies on the witness stand, primed by lawyers, tabloid journalists, and corrupt police). In the light of the #metoo movement and belated reports of the historic sexual grooming of girls in care homes, recent accounts of Keeler have stressed her youth, economically deprived upbringing, vulnerability and the swingeing way she was castigated in the press as a 'shameless slut' or 'cold-blooded harlot,' never recovering from it. She is now more likely to be perceived as a victim, despite her wish not to be seen that way. Mandy Rice-Davies may have avoided a lot of public approbation at the time by moving abroad but she was castigated too: for not spinning from one disaster to another like Keeler; for appearing to 'sail through' proceedings; for becoming rich and settled. Here, then, is the double transgression in *Laughing While Smashing*: the women are smashing the glass on the site of "their" old club on their way out, as a form of revenge against the establishment (in both senses of the word), but also *smashing it* – in contemporary parlance, making a success of it.

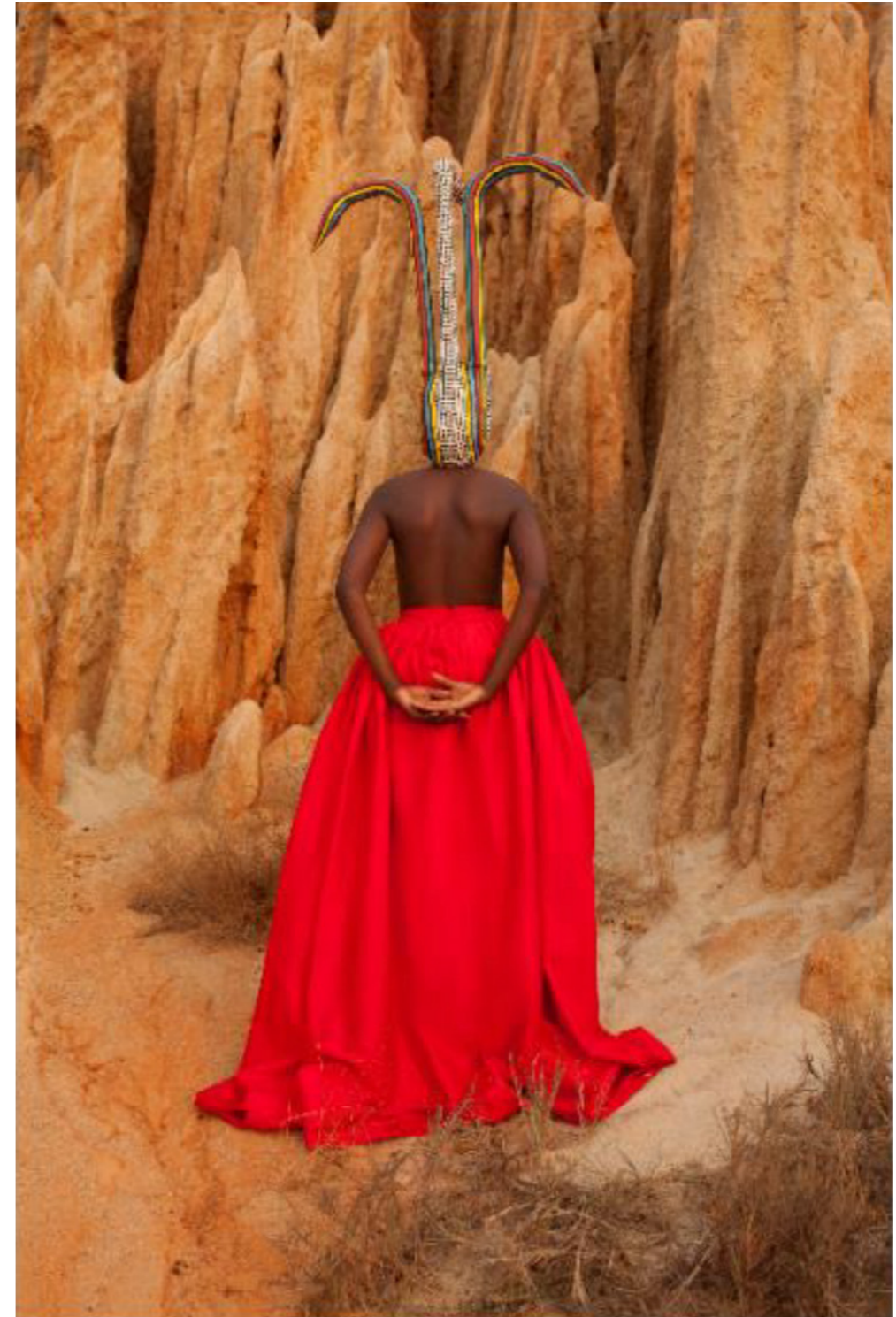
This kind of refracted lens and a focus on the transgressive performance of the sexualised female body are themes explored by both Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf and Dutch-Angolan artist Keyezua (guest artist with InFems). Both seduce the viewer with the beauty of their images – it's a tactic – even where the subject matter disturbs. Keyezua's 'Floating Nightmares' series, commissioned by BredaPhoto, imagines human traffickers infecting African migrants with an unclassified virus. In *Floating Nightmares 8*, 2018 (Epson Semi-gloss on Dibond, 80 x 120 cm) we could be looking at a latter-day Pero performing one of the seven works of Mercy, a stoic figure of Charity. But this seated, topless 'older' woman, a rope round her neck falling to a knot, a Madonna-blue robe covering her legs, is a Congolese sexworker. There's a kneeling man holding on to her arm as he suckles her bare breast. The word 'Willy' is tattooed above the other bare breast. Is that her son's name? The name of her trafficker? An indication of her job? Keyezua has spoken before of how research into beauty standards racially separates women rather



Keyezua, Floating Nightmares 8, 2018 (Epson Semi-gloss on Dibond, 80 x 120 cm)

than unites them and she has sought to dispel stereotypes around the African body. Her 'Fortia' ("strength") series, for instance, created in homage to her late father, shows masked amputees. Bringing the marginalised and stigmatised back into view, Keyezua imbues her subjects with the dignity they deserve and are often denied.

With Fontaine-Wolf using her own naked body in her photographs, there is an element of self-portraiture in the work. She is literally laying herself bare, revealing and concealing, choosing what to let us see. The fact this body belongs to a young, white, beautiful, able-bodied woman might attract the same criticism levelled at Cindy Sherman's early *Untitled (Film Stills)* (1977-80), namely that she is playing to the desiring "male gaze." However, like Sherman, Fontaine-Wolf



Keyezua, Floating Fortia 04, 2017, Epson Semi-gloss on Dibond, 118.9 x 84.1 cm

deliberately complicates her images to create something much more troubling and more rooted in the female experience of looking at herself, rather than only being looked at by others.

Her 'Relentless Hope' series (2021) comprises mixed media works on aluminium which she created using a range of physi-digital processes from the more traditional media like painting, collage, printmaking and photography to digital manipulation. Even the traditional does not look familiar, though, because of her experimental approach to technique. Some marks are carefully controlled; others created through chance. The forms morph between figurative and abstract: a leg that seems to disintegrate into a brushstroke; the discernible curve of a thigh, a head that disappears amid smoke-like flourishes of paint. It is no coincidence that walking has become a key part of Fontaine-Wolf's artistic process; an action that enables her to clear her head and process her thoughts. Our eye is in constant motion, travelling across the surfaces of her works to map the body, to make sense, for instance, of breasts that appear in the "wrong" place in *The Luminous Dark III*.

There is a glorious sensuousness in Fontaine-Wolf's use of colour. In *The Luminous Dark I, II, and III* (each 100 x 200 cm) cool lapis blues, violets and pinks vie with greys. The figure's skin is green in parts, alien or snake-like, recalling the snake in early depictions of the Garden of Eden, the snake of temptation that came with a woman's face. (In her 2020 *Malus* works, we see a spill of juicy red fruits, including cherries and pomegranates with their associations of virginity and Persephone, of blood. Their imminent disintegration is in the best tradition of *vanitas* painting). Here is both a mortal body that is destined to age and decay versus what Fontaine-Wolf, with her interest in mysticism and the occult, calls the 'possibility of an eternal spirit.'

We orient ourselves by the edges of a mirror that is held up, a body reflected back on itself. Art is full of mirrors. Those mirrors have multiple meanings: self-



Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, *Malus I*, 2020, Limited edition Giclee Print

knowledge, the faculty of reasoning, Truth. The mirror appears in images of the cardinal virtue of Prudence to imply that the ability to see something from multiple angles is a mark of wisdom. Whilst the mirror is not always associated with women, (think Narcissus), it mostly is. So, it also features in personifications of the vices: Lust grips her mirror; a devil lurks in Pride's. Accusations of Vanity are never far away. Iconic examples in painting include Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) where the convex mirror has an elaborate frame with roundels depicting scenes from The Passion that exhort the fifteenth century viewer to remember the suffering of Christ every time they peruse their own face. Or Caravaggio's Magdalene of *Mary and Martha* (c.1598) whose sixteenth century mirror is a symbol of the luxuries she will relinquish to follow Christ.



Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, *The Luminus Dark III*, 2021, oil, acrylic and vinyl on aluminium

In Fontaine-Wolf's 'Relentless Hope' series, the mirror is also about the challenge of digital representation. Mirrors, like photographs, were once held to be receptacles of our soul. Already Fontaine-Wolf has described 'the contradictory forces that make up so much of our embodied human experience.' By this she means those liminal spaces that occur between the external and internal, the boundaries between physical and psychological. In cultures where the selfie has become common currency and the photograph can be flipped, re-sized, re-coloured, where self-image is under constant scrutiny and 'curation,' both me and not-me, it is easy to feel fragmented. Artists have used the trope of the female body in the mirror to explore the disconnect between how we appear to others and how we appear to ourselves (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932). Louise Bourgeois went as far as describing the mirror as her 'enemy' at one point, since she could not accept the self she saw in it and therefore could not accept *herself*. As a result of this disassociation, she banned mirrors. When she recognised the danger of that, it shifted her viewpoint. 'You see this mirror here?' she told an interviewer, 'It is not [here] out of vanity—it is a deforming mirror. It doesn't reflect me, it reflects somebody else. It reflects a kind of monstrous image of myself. So I can play with that' (cited in Bernadac, Marie-Laure and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Eds. *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997* London: Violette, 1998, p.260-261.) Perhaps, as viewers, we are doomed to project our selves onto the images others make; and perhaps it is this that Velasquez realised when the mirror in his ('Rokeby') *Toilet of Venus*, 1644 returned a blurred reflection, concealing the nude's identity or, more likely, allowing us to imagine the face of our fantasies on her supine body. Fontaine-Wolf's own face is obscured or distorted in her images, 'even otherworldly,' she has said. Like a spirit, an apparition captured unexpectedly in a photograph. A sleight of hand in the way a Victorian ghost could be conjured with ectoplasm. This shifts the focus from her as individual to an archetype.

In *Relentless Hope* (200 x 250 cm), Fontaine-Wolf's figure is even more fragmented, repeated, seen through a kaleidoscope of layered shards. The mirror distorts.



Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, *Relentless Hope*, 2021, oil, acrylic and vinyl on aluminium

Manet plays tricks on us with the barmaid's reflection in *Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882) which appears wrong but is, in fact, technically correct. Michelangelo Pistoletto shatters mirrors; Yayoi Kusama creates infinity rooms where mirrors double and redouble us ad infinitum. In Fontaine-Wolf's work there is a similar sense of dislocation as limbs multiply like those of ancient Hindu deities or the many-limbed figures of Los Angeles painter Christina Quarles. Fontaine-Wolf's use of mirrors also reflects (pun intended) her interest in French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's mirror theory. Basing his thinking on empirical evidence, Lacan argued that the mirror stage is where the very young child recognises itself in a reflective surface. As the child's experiences at this stage are often negative (marked by frustration, anxiety, distress) because it is not yet mature or autonomous, depending on others for food etc., the image it sees in the mirror is alluringly whole and 'together;' it is like the adults that surround it. The child reaches out to try to touch this image. Fontaine-Wolf's hand is often visible, multiplied, seen grasping a mirror or a mirror's frame. For Lacan we, in our adult state, are destined to chase this elusive image of harmony and mastery over ourselves forever – an attempt doomed to failure. Yet as Fontaine-Wolf's title *Relentless Hope* implies, we press on, regardless, this apparently disembodied hand of the artist leading us on.

The hands (and feet) of the artist are also very much present in British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah's works. When the charity Rural Refugee Network asked her to create a performance and artwork to represent the struggle of Syrian refugee families trying to acclimatise to life in the U.K., Damoah's in-depth research led her to create *A Litany for Survival* 2019 (video of performance and oil on canvas, 500 cm x 280 cm). The title is an homage to a 1978 poem of the same name by writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde and was also subsequently used for a documentary on Lorde. Lorde's poem deliberately avoids consistency in its rhythm to engender a feeling of uncertainty and confusion in the reader, a destabilisation that mirrors the experiences of those of whom she speaks. Damoah recognised parallels between the latter and the refugees she was listening to. Their struggle, as interpreted by Damoah, is embodied in her

performance. It is 'lived,' not 'acted'.

Dressed in simple white underclothes, resistance bands looped around her feet and fastened to the base of a pillar, Damoah is on all fours. As she attempts to crawl forwards, the bands stretch taut, holding her back. To resist in any



Adelaide Damoah, film still from *A Litany for Survival* performance 2019

context, of course, is to come up against opposition so this is already a powerful demonstration. And the very point of resistance bands like these, when used in exercise, is to build resilience, to make the muscles work harder. That notion, too, can be translated into a message around struggle. Intersectional feminism, from which InFems takes its name, was a term coined in the 1980s by American law professor and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe a way of foregrounding women whose experiences of discrimination and oppression are heightened by intersecting inequalities (be these of gender/ class/ race/ sexual

orientation/ age etc.). At its heart is the recognition that the black woman has to work harder than her white counterpart to resist oppression as she is at least doubly oppressed.

Damoah pushes and drags her body on. The white canvas on the floor and her pristine white clothes are soon marked black with the paint from her body. Her arms tense, the pressure on her knees is palpable, as is the strain on the bands. We witness her tiredness, her breathing becoming visibly heavier with the effort of resisting restraint. Then she pushes on again. There is a history of live art practice that makes use of endurance techniques with practitioners like Vito Acconci, Marina Abramovic, Ron Athey expelling sweat, sperm, blood, tears... Damoah does not celebrate pain for the sake of pain, though; she harnesses it to convey the refugees's suffering.

Taken separately, each element in *A Litany for Survival* works on multiple levels. Whilst functional, the pillar is also familiar in Christian iconography and therefore through centuries of art, recalling other bodies in pain (the flagellation of Christ). Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, first published in 1985, was a ground-breaking study in querying the consequences of being in pain or of having pain inflicted (Scarry drew on examples from Amnesty International records of tortured individuals). How has pain been weaponised to destroy a person's sense of self? As Scarry noted, there is a perceived powerlessness around pain. Even language crumbles before it. How do we articulate pain when the words we have are insufficient? The medical profession has sought various solutions, asking sufferers to describe whether it throbs or jabs or stabs, is persistent or sporadic, where it sits on a numeric scale. And then there is the question of the relationship between physical pain and psychic pain. Without romanticising pain, Damoah makes us witness the enormity of the task facing refugees. Her openness about her own health issues – in 2005, the agony of debilitating endometriosis meant she had to leave a successful career in pharmaceuticals – adds an extra dimension to the work.



Adelaide Damoah, *A Litany for Survival*, oil on canvas, 500 cm x 280 cm

If the performance encapsulates the trauma of resisting, it also invites us to recognise true strength. Again, the pillar is a useful device, appearing in personifications of Fortitude – we still use the idiom ‘a pillar of strength’. In the Old Testament story of Samson, recounted in Judges 13-16, the blinded, captured Samson, grabs the pillars of the house of his Philistine enemies and tears it down. The resistance bands are another powerful symbol, evoking all the connotations of the bound black body. In an interview (April 23, 2021) with Mary Louise Kelly of NPR (National Public Radio), Debra Walker King, professor at the University of Florida and author of the 2008 book *African Americans And The Culture Of Pain* discusses what it means to witness the black body in pain. Historically, she says, this can other it, causing the viewer to think, ‘That is not my body. That is the body of otherness. That’s the body that we reject.’ It is this ‘othering,’ here in relation to the refugee, that Damoah tackles.

The way the black paint on her body leaves imprints during the performance to create an artefact after the event might appear to have echoes of Yves Klein’s *Anthropométries* events. These originated in June 1958 and saw Klein act as a kind of orchestra conductor as his female ‘human paintbrushes’ sponged their naked breasts, stomach, and thighs with his patented International Klein Blue paint and made imprints against paper. Whilst Klein’s models subsequently argued that they had more agency than was supposed in these performances, and that Klein respected them as collaborators, there is still something controlled, almost choreographed in Klein, a studied elegance about these nudes being guided up or down from plinths, even when pulling one another across a white floor as musicians play Klein’s one-note, twenty-minute long Monotone Symphony, then twenty minutes of silence while suited men watch on. Even the blue paint itself, a colour inspired by the skies of Nice acts like that in Matisse’s Blue Nudes of the early 1950s: it creates a sense of cool detachment that is supposed to counter the sensuality of the nude. Contemporary artist Rachel Lachowicz appropriated and subverted Klein with her 1992 performance *Red not Blue* where naked men were painted with red lipstick and instructed to press their bodies against surfaces

to make prints. But Damoah’s performance was filmed in private (by Cameron Prins, assisted by artist Emma Thistleton). This makes for a much more intimate performing and viewing experience. We sense the toll it takes on Damoah. It’s closer to Valie Export’s *Eros/ion* (1971) a performance which saw Export roll naked across glass that made little cuts in her skin. When she subsequently rolled over paper, the traces of those incisions left their marks.

Damoah has articulated that her practice interrogates ‘outdated ideologies of colour, creed, race and gender;’ here we see a literal blackening of the white surface of the canvas evidenced by the heavy press of black paint, like a much-needed incursion into the canon of western art history which still overwhelmingly prioritises the white male artist. There’s a clamour of hands, their palms hailing upwards as if seen through a window.

She has said, ‘I am not arrogant enough to imagine that my performance can in any way make a difference to those [refugees] in this position, but I wanted the performance to be somewhat representative of struggle while simultaneously representing hope for a better future.’ Resistance bands aren’t supposed to snap. Yet Damoah pushes them too to their limits. And when they do break, there is a feeling of hope for a future which is literally boundless as we watch her stand up and leave. Damoah continues, ‘Most importantly, I hope that anyone who sees this work can be reminded to have empathy, rather than tolerance for those in this position. The overall narrative around refugees is problematic and needs to change.’ Empathy is about learning to walk in another’s shoes. It is imagining that odyssey of a journey that so many refugees feel they have no choice but to undertake from Syria to Europe. It is picturing the prints left by countless pairs of shoes or, sometimes, by bare feet. Like those traces of Damoah’s feet when she walks away at the end of the performance. In the resulting work, the footprints we see, the paint paler now, seem to ascend to the upper edges of canvas.

A liberating sense of escape infuses Roxana Halls’s *Laughing While Leaving*,



Roxana Halls, *Laughing While Leaving*, 2017, oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm

2017 (oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm) too. The duo here – a couple, perhaps – appear to have set fire to the house behind them. A huge blaze flares; aptly, one of the women seems to be wearing a wig of flaming orange. As they flee, they travel light, taking with them just two shoulder bags and a pair of white pedigree cats in their carrier. Their feline selves – cats so often appearing in paintings to signify the loose female, the witch, the quality of disloyalty, or as a visual pun for female genitalia – sit in poses that recall those of Hogarth's shackled dogs in his 'Marriage a la Mode' series (1753). Unlike the unhappy bride and groom in the Hogarth, whom the dogs represent, Halls's women look ecstatic: they clasp hands, grinning like true accomplices in crime. And their wide-open mouths, so glossy red-lipped and white-toothed (Halls always paints the teeth last of all) mock us. Here is the *vagina dentata* feared in myriad folk tales. As Halls says, 'Acts of political resistance come in many forms.' Whether painting, performing, photographing, or writing, InFems are biting back and having the last laugh.

Marie-Anne Mancio,

July 2021

ADDITIONAL WORKS



Keyezua, Floating Nightmares 3, 2018 (Epson Semi-gloss on Dibond, 80 x 120 cm)



Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, Malus III, 2020, Limited edition Giclee Print



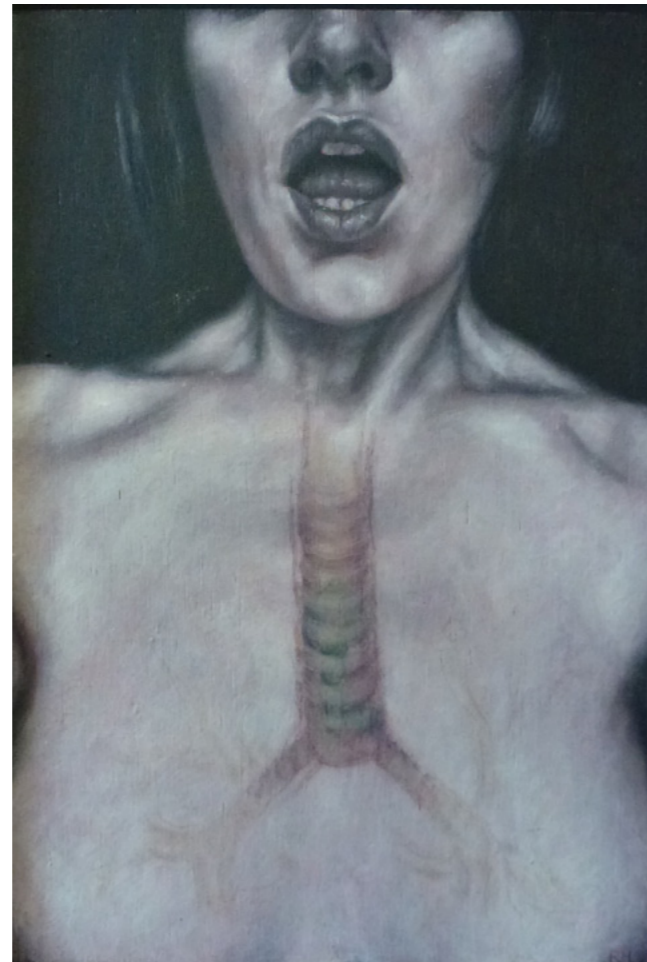
Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, The Luminus Dark II, 2021, oil, acrylic and vinyl on aluminium



Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf, The Luminus Dark I, 2021, oil, acrylic and vinyl on aluminium



Roxana Halls, *Laughing Head III*, 2021, Oil on aluminium, 20 x 30cm



Roxana Halls, *Trachea*, 2003, oil on panel, 32 x 22 cm



Rita GT, *O PitéU*, 2018,
screen print, spray paint, charcoal and acrylic, 160 x 120cm



Rita GT, *Tia Maria*, 2018,
screen print, spray paint, charcoal and acrylic, 160 x 120cm



Rita GT, 'Devassa' ("debauched"), 2019



Rita GT, Kayangulo, 2018, screen print, spray paint, charcoal and acrylic, 160 x 120cm

INFEMS

Adelaide Damoah RWA, FRSA

British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah works at the intersection of painting and performance within the context of colonialism, identity, sexuality and spirituality. After studying applied biology (BA Hons, Kingston University, Surrey, her subsequent career in the pharmaceutical industry was cut short following a diagnosis of debilitating chronic endometriosis. While convalescing, she dedicated herself to art.

Since her debut exhibition 'Black Brits' in 2006 (Charlie Allen's Boutique, London, UK), Damoah has exhibited in myriad group shows including Opera Gallery, Budapest, Hungary (2009); Bargehouse Gallery, London (2015) as part of the AACDD Festival; 'A Seat at the Table', 198 Gallery, London, 'Dispersed', Nubuke Foundation (+Chale Wote), Ghana; UNFOLD Festival, London; Article 10, Amnesty International, London, ACDF Festival, Lagos, Nigeria, and in 2018 at 'We Face Forward' Bonhams, London, Little Africa Des Gosses, Marrakesh, (Off the Tracks) as part of an artist residency. In 2019, Damoah was selected for 'No Room for Fear' with SMO Contemporary, BBFA Collective and Smithsonian in London, 'Under the Skin' (Royal College of Physicians Museum, London), and ArtX Lagos with Tafeta Gallery.

She has performed internationally including her ongoing 'Confronting Colonisation' project, #MYFACE Visual Diet, Cannes Lions Festival, Cannes, 'This is Me: The Inconsistency of the Self II' Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris, Adidas 'Calling all Creators' performance Portland Oregon, USA. Past solo exhibitions include 'Supermodels', Nolia's Gallery, London (2008); 'Domestic Violence', Mayfair, London (2009); 'This is Us', Camden Image Gallery, London (2015) and 'Genesis', 1 Bedford Avenue, London (2018).

Damoah has works in private collections nationally and internationally. She is a member of the BBFA Collective which is represented by Tafeta Gallery, London. In 2019, Damoah became the first black artist to be appointed an academician of the Royal West of England Academy (RWA) and was an invited artist and selector at their open exhibition in Bristol.

www.adelaidedamoahart.com

Wendy Elia RWA

Wendy Elia is a British painter of Anglo/ Greek Cypriot descent who trained at St Martins School of Art. She has exhibited widely and been a finalist in a number of national and international competitions including the National Portrait Gallery JPS and BP Portrait Awards (4 times), Sovereign European Art Prize, Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Prize, and the Threadneedle Prize. Her work is held in public permanent collections across the UK, including at the RWA (Royal West of England Academy), University of Essex, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, Falmouth Art Gallery, and Priseman Seabrook Collection: 21st Century British Painting and in private collections in the UK, Italy and South Africa. She was recently the recipient of a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and in 2019 was elected as an RWA Academician. Notable commissions include Arts Council funded projects such as a portrait for the cultural Olympiad (converted into life sized posters and displayed on billboards, bus stops etc.) and 'Shifting Subjects: Contemporary Women Telling the Self through the Visual Arts' (Grimsby and Usher Gallery, Lincoln) exhibiting alongside Sarah Lucas, Miranda Whall and others. In addition to her many solo exhibitions, Elia has exhibited widely in numerous group shows, including a recent tour of China with the Contemporary British Painting collective and 'Strange Worlds -The Vision of Angela Carter' (RWA, Bristol). She has contributed to symposia in the UK and has been called upon to judge art competitions.

www.wendyelia.com

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf SWA

Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf is an interdisciplinary artist of mixed European heritage who grew up between Germany and the UK and currently resident in Lisbon. Her work is primarily figurative, focusing on self-portraiture and depictions of women in her direct surroundings. She is a co-founder of Infems : Intersectional Feminist Art Collective and former vice president to the Society of Women Artists (UK).

Fontaine-Wolf studied Fine Art at the University for the Creative Arts (2000-04) and was awarded the Chelsea Arts Club Trust Award Grant to complete her MFA at Wimbledon College of Arts (2013- 15). She's exhibited widely in both group and solo exhibitions at venues such as the the V&A, Mall Galleries and the RCA and has been invited to show for the Discerning Eye exhibition.

She was featured Hauser & Wirth's 'Herstory' Series on inspiring women in the artworld and her work has appeared in numerous publications including Aesthetica, Forbes, the Guardian, ID/Vice, Hunger, Wonderland and FAD magazines, as well as appearing on the BBC. Fontaine-Wolf's work can be found in public and private collections in the UK and internationally including the Standard Chartered Bank, 100 Mothers, Landmark collection and the private collections of Sir Tim Rice, the Earl of Mornington & Jemma Kidd.

www.rebeccafontaine-wolf.com

Roxana Halls

Roxana Halls has held numerous solo exhibitions including at The National Theatre, Beaux Arts Bath Gallery and Hayhill Gallery, Mayfair. Her work has been exhibited in numerous group shows including the BP Portrait Award, The RA Summer Exhibition, The Royal Society of Portrait Painters and the Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Competition and has been exhibited and auctioned at

Christies, London. She has twice been invited to exhibit work at The Discerning Eye exhibition. She was recently invited to produce new works for museum and touring shows including Kapow! held at Stoke Potteries Museum and Dear Christine which toured the UK in 2019 and 2020. She regularly exhibits with RCFA Gallery in Birmingham with whom she will hold her forthcoming solo exhibition in 2021.

Halls has been the recipient of several awards, including the Villiers David Prize, The Discerning Eye Founder's Purchase Prize, The Derwent Special Prize and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Award. She has written articles for and has been featured in many leading art magazines including Time Out, Modern Painters, Wallpaper*, Art of England, Artists & Illustrators, The Independent, The Sunday Telegraph, Galleries, The London Evening Standard, City AM, Airmail, Bust, Diva Magazine, Art North and Trebuchet and she was recorded in conversation at her London studio for BBC Radio 4's Only Artists.

Her commissions include Alan Grieve CBE, Chairman of the Jerwood Foundation, Debbie Bliss MBE, John Simopoulos, Emeritus Professor and has also produced a series of portraits for the BBC Arts production of Sitting by Katherine Parkinson, made for BBC FOUR to be broadcast in early 2021. She has created works commissioned by and for Arts Council England funded exhibitions and has contributed to symposia in the UK and been called upon to judge several art competitions.

Halls is course leader of the FD Contemporary Portraiture at Art Academy London. A portrait of Roxana Halls was exhibited among a series of photographs of 30 women painters as part of the celebrations for the one hundredth anniversary of women's suffrage in the Upper Waiting Hall in the Palace of Westminster in March 2019. Her work is held in numerous private and public collections in the UK and internationally including The Discerning Eye Collection, St. Catherine's College Oxford, Brian Sewell, Katherine Parkinson, Bel Mooney, Rosa Bosch, Julie

Burchill, Debbie Bliss MBE, Luke Jennings, author of the Killing Eve novels. In 2020 her portrait of Horse McDonald was purchased for the permanent collection of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, which currently hangs in the gallery's Great Hall.

www.roxanahalls.com

Dr. Marie-Anne Mancio

Marie-Anne Mancio trained as an artist in interdisciplinary practice before gaining a DPhil from Sussex University for her thesis *Maps for Wayward Performers: feminist readings of contemporary live art practice in Britain* and a subsequent MPhil (Distinction) in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. She has written for myriad publications including *Make* [formerly *Women's Art Magazine*], *Soho Clarion*, *Independent on Sunday*, and created online art history courses for Tate and Pearson's 'Love to Learn.' Mancio was a researcher and contributor to a retrospective of the Theatre of Mistakes (Raven Row, London). She was also awarded a Proboscis grant to write an A-Z around the Theatre of Mistakes' archive. Mancio has lectured in art history nationally and internationally for institutions like Tate, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London Art Salon, The Course, and City Lit, and is an accredited Arts Society speaker who recently made a film for HENI talks on 'The Bed in Art' and was a guest on performance artist Oriana Fox's 'The O show.' Her research interests include conceptual art, women artists, and the representation of women and sexuality in art. As a sex work advocate, she has also written historical fiction featuring sex workers including her novella 'Whorticulture' about four migrant women in antebellum America and is currently working on a novel set in Caravaggio's Rome. Of mixed European and Uruguayan heritage, she runs international art history study tours through her company Hotel Alphabet.

www.hotelalphabet.com

GUEST ARTISTS

Keyezua

"My art provokes, educates and empowers without pity. It is a powerful tool. It is in the hands of this generation to create value for our government, organisations and foundations, and to place artists as an integral component for the further development of culture, economics, feminism and individual development in Africa."

Keyezua was raised in Holland and graduated from the Royal Academy of Arts at The Hague (Holland) in 2014. Her robotic installation *FACTICIUS* was shown during the Museumnacht Den Haag in 2014 at the Dutch Parliament a month later and by the end of that year she moved to Berlin. She then returned to Luanda, living there from May 2015 to 2019 researching black identity and the black body, often putting herself in dangerous places to better understand the context of poverty and the inhabitants whose histories inspired her.

A contemporary storyteller, her creative process begins with the female body but has also explored pain and stigmatisation, whether dealing with issues like genital mutilation in *Stone Orgasms*, or disability in visual culture in *Fortia*. She works across media: sculpture, photography, painting, performance, video art and installation.

Since 2015, Keyezua has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions worldwide. These include: *The Power of My Hands – Africa(s): Women Artists* (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Paris, France, 2021); *Aida Muluneh-Homebound: A Journey in Photography* (Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, 2020); *NOW LOOK HERE. THE AFRICAN ART OF APPEARANCE* (Amsterdam, 2020); *Modest Fashion* (Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, 2019); *New African Photography III* (Nataal and Red Hook Labs, Red Hook Labs, New York, 2018); *FORTIA* (Steven Kasher Gallery, New York

and MOV'ART Gallery booth, Cape Town Art Fair, Cape Town, 2018); Stone Orgasms (Recontres de Bamako, Biennale Africaine de la Photographie, Bamako, 2017), Summer Show (Blank Projects, Cape Town, 2017) and Addis Photo Festival (Addis Ababa, 2016).

Rita GT

Rita GT graduated in Communication Design from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, Portugal in 2003, completed the Advanced Visual Arts Course at the Maumaus School of Visual Arts in Lisbon, Portugal in 2004 and attended the Masters program in Fine Arts at Malmö Art Academy – Lund University, Sweden in 2006.

A critical and interventionist artist, her themes include memory, identity and the importance of human rights. She frequently deploys colonial symbolism to redefine her identity and artistic language. Through image, word or performance, her practice is one of constant questioning and experimentation, both material and conceptual.

Rita has exhibited at venues such as 50 Golborne Gallery (England), MNAC – Chiado Museum (Portugal), Camões Institute (Angola), KunstKraftWerk Museum, Leipzig & Freies / Savvy Contemporary (Germany), 56th Venice Biennale, among others.

Her solo exhibitions include: artist in residence at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK (2021); Nano Gallery, Lisbon (2019); Carlos Machado Museum, São Miguel, Azores (2019); Decorative Arts Museum, Viana do Castelo (2019); Special projects, ARCO, Lisbon (2019); Gallery Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon (2019); Movart, Luanda (2018) and group exhibitions include: Venice Design Biennial (2021); Macau Biennial (2020); La Junqueira, Lisbon (2019); Outono Projects, Lisbon (2019); Príncipe Bienal, São Tomé e Príncipe (2019); Walk&Talk, São Miguel, Azores (2019); In Spite of, Porto

(2019); Museu Arpad Szenes - Vieira da Silva, Lisbon (2019); ICAF, Lagos (2017); Efeito-Suruba, Lisbon (2017); Art of Kindness, London (2017); Lagos Biennial, Lagos (2017); Summer Exhibition at Royal Academy of Arts, London (2017) and many more.

Rita GT is the founder of the e-studio Luanda project and was the commissioner for the Angolan Pavilion, curated by António Ole at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015).



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MOVART

I N F E M S
Intersectional Feminist Art Collective

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BACK COVER
Malus I
Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf

CURATED BY
Rebecca Fontaine-Wolf & Marie-Anne Mancio

