

Jessica Silverman Gallery is pleased to present “Ameliorations,” a solo exhibition of new paintings by Conrad Egyir. Addressing contemporary American culture, biblical parables and Ashanti iconography from his native Ghana, Egyir’s work explores questions of ethics, honesty, identity and the social-psychology of community. Monumental, uncanny and often satirically grandiose, the paintings combine the graphic sensuality of Pop Art with the far-reaching narratives of history painting.

The largest painting in the show is *Joseph’s Lullaby*, a sunny colored 7×9 foot tableau of a family in the midst of a mysterious quandary. The tensions between mother, father, son and viewer are richly ambiguous, but evoke power struggles, pain and victory, unity and fracture. Over the boy’s head is a double handprint, suggesting the crest of a rooster, a crown or even a halo. One of the boy’s hands grasps upward, embodying a desire for supremacy; the other rests behind his back, indicating patience or even submission. The mother appears twice. On the left, she makes eye contact with the viewer and holds an “okyeame poma,” a staff that signals her status as the “linguist” who has the authority to speak for the chief. On the right, she has her eyes tightly closed, appearing deep in thought. “Be still and know,” says a line in laser-cut wood that sits atop the canvas. The boy’s father sits solidly, anchoring the picture, looking up at his wife who communicates to the outside world.

The exhibition also features a pair of regal paintings in which giant figures loom like omnipotent gods over three smaller versions of themselves. *Uncions of the Luminaries* presents an empress in a green gown, whose self-possessed gaze invites her beholders to witness her powers to anoint. Like a puppet-master, she lords over her merely mortal alter egos, who are in various phases of healing. The male counterpart to this painting, titled *Paragons of Rest*, depicts the artist himself in a puzzling pose; he has open arms, but clenched fists. Three smaller, lighter skinned Egyirs float within his embrace. Combined with the text mounted on the canvas, which refers to “a testament,” the painting evokes last wills, afterlives, legacies, and the positive spirit of voodoo.

“Ameliorations” also features a series of smaller scale portraits of creative people the artist has met in Detroit. Fascinated by etymology and linguistic origins, Egyir riffs on his sitters’ names in ways that transforms them from individuals into archetypes – the fair, the faithful, the messenger, the one born on Saturday. Each painting is emblazoned with a stamp that depicts the top of the Ashanti linguist’s staff and refers variously to Detroit as the “Comeback City,” “Paris of the Midwest,” “Bestriding two worlds.”

Egyir’s materials include oil, acrylic, glitter, Plexiglas, wood and found fabric flowers. His works are deeply art historical, often making explicit reference to specific works by Kerry James Marshall,

Jacob Lawrence, Charles White and Kara Walker. They are also in dialogue with diverse forms of popular culture, whether they are religious, musical or animated.

Conrad Egyir (b. 1989, Ghana; lives and works in Detroit) has an MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art. His work has been featured in group shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills, MI) and Grand Rapids Art Museum (MI). Paintings have been acquired by the Rennie Collection (Vancouver, BC), the Jimenez-Colon Collection (Puerto Rico) and the Cranbrook Art Museum (MI).

* The word “Ashanti” means “because of war” and refers to the way the tribe united to combat the Denkyira Kingdom in the 17th century. Known as fierce fighters, the Ashanti or Akan comprise the largest ethnic group in Ghana and have their own city-state, whose wealth derives from the gold mined within its territory. Prior to 1957, Ghana was known as the Gold Coast.

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