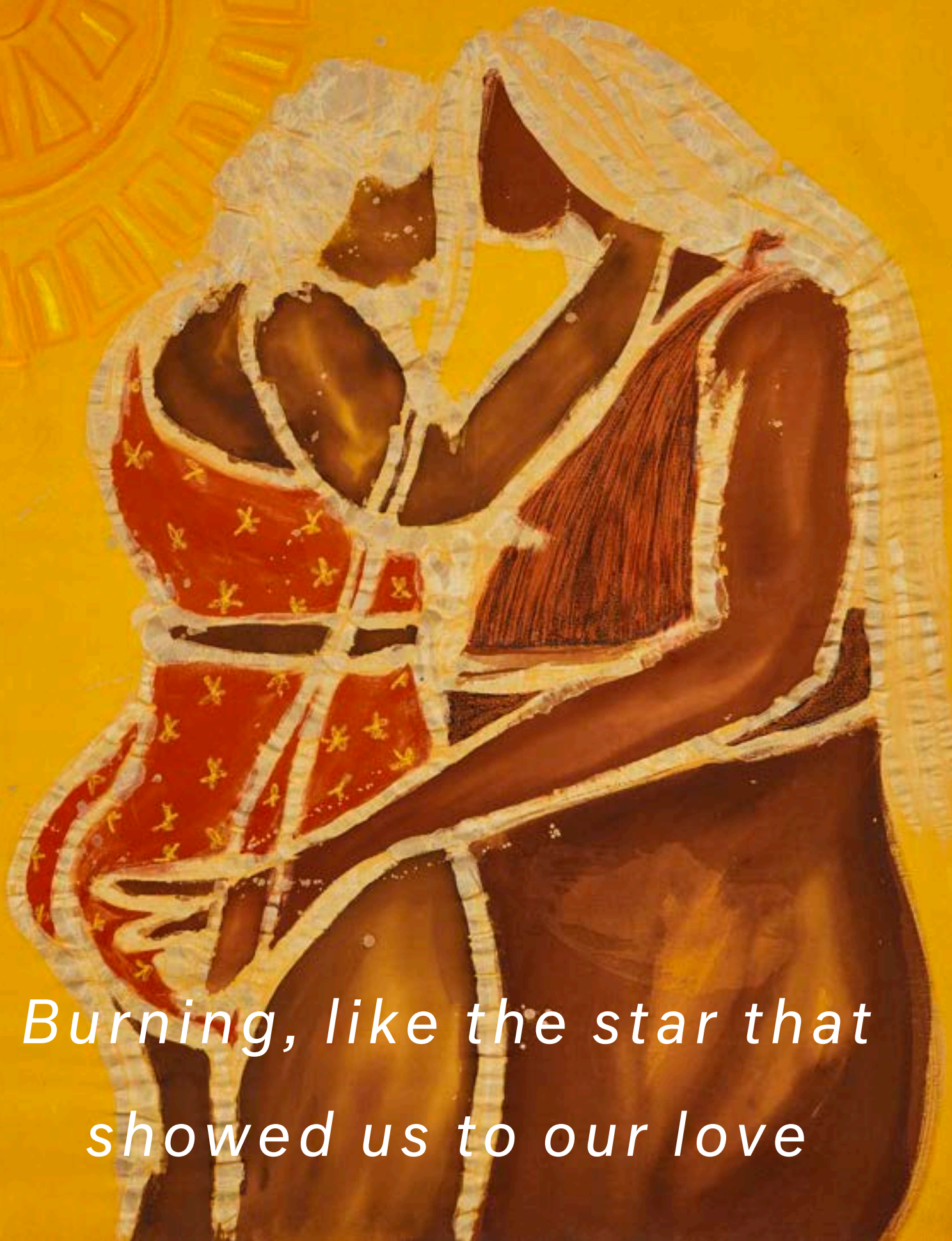


Sola Olulode



*Burning, like the star that
showed us to our love*



Sola Olulode: *Burning, like the star that showed us to our love*

August 10 – September 16, 2023

Ed Cross, 19 Garrett Street, London, EC1Y 0TY

September 30 – December 16, 2023

87 Gallery (Artlink Hull), 87 Princes Avenue, Hull, HU5 3QP

In *Burning, like the star that showed us to our love*, Sola Olulode's unmistakable visual language – tender feelings and vivid colour – finds its latest incarnation: a yellow rush of romance. Following the artist's blue and green series, depicting relationships across communities as well as between couples, *Burning* focuses on the near-universal – and all-consuming – experience of falling in love.

Charged with the electricity of a budding romance, Olulode's yellow series imbues everyday scenes with something preternatural. In a sequence verging on storyboard, the artist returns again and again to a couple as their romance blossoms: meeting, dancing late at night; huddled around a table on a date; wrapped around each other, blissful. And despite the variability of *Burning's* works – in terms of narrative, materiality, scale – Olulode's insistence on joy for her protagonists is unwavering. Her symbolism is intuitively legible: in *In the Bubble of Your Love*, bubbles rising around the lovers evoke the anechoic obliviousness that can accompany infatuation; elsewhere, a recurring sun motif represents warmth, light, love. In the immersive surrounds of *Burning*, that mood proves infectious.

Fig. 04

Working from found images as well as imagination and experience, Olulode's tableaus balance introspective subjectivity and expansive generosity; wielding the soaring cinematography of a still from Barry Jenkins' 2018 film *If Beale Street Could Talk* (as in *Whatever the Weather*) and the irresistible appeal of a music video, the artist intersperses aspirational snapshots with her own fantasies: in her words, "I paint the things I want to see". In *Burning* as elsewhere, Olulode paints Black queer women and non-binary people – demographics for whom

Fig. 03

pop-culture has historically offered little in the way of happy endings. Intent on illustrating success and pleasure for the marginalised communities with which she identifies, Olulode's *Burning* beguiles its audience, entreating them to settle in the gallery space and luxuriate in the love story unfolding on its walls. Here, blue fabric wall hangings underpin the sunny yellow of Olulode's canvases, offering an all-encompassing sense of sky and space. *Burning's* simple palette imbues the show with a chromatic coherence, liberating its individual surfaces from any such requirement – just as well, because almost every piece has been subject to a different series of techniques. Combining ink with paint, or scratching into pigment; layering yellow over blue, and using batik wax as a material in its own right; Olulode's process, wherein deviations from a vision are worked over, incorporated rather than discarded, makes for an oeuvre of extraordinary depth. While many pieces have been purpose-made for the exhibition, others have been part of the landscape of Olulode's studio for years before arriving at their final *Burning* incarnations.

Scant clues – leaves on the floor, a passerby on their phone in *In the Bubble of Your Love* – hint at settings, offering context for a work's intensity and anchoring it in the physical world; yet, Olulode always maintains one foot in dreamlike fantasy, nodding to the fiction of her source materials but also to the crazed hyper-focus that love induces in us all. Like any romance, *Burning, like the star that showed us to our love's* scenes are at once tender and quotidian, special and totally ordinary. As Olulode knows, that's what makes them precious – holding universality and specificity in generative tension, the artist consistently reaches for 'and' rather than 'or', keen to linger a little on the brink of the heart's highest stakes. Aren't we all?

Burning, like the star that showed us to our love

Interview with Sola Olulode by Liv Little

British Nigerian artist Sola Olulode's solo show *Burning, like the star that showed us to our love* is a celebration of the birth of love, a world in which the sun blazes and envelops the lives of a newly-formed couple.

Her paintings are layered, often over previous iterations – building texture is an integral part of her process, incorporating the odd paint splatter or wax spot into a composition like a sign of life. Olulode's fusing of materials – dye, paints, pastels and batik – form a rich tapestry, joy bursting through the seams. In one work, a couple's limbs are enmeshed, almost interwoven and therefore indistinguishable; in another, they are mirrored, gazing intensely into each other's eyes head-on; in more than one piece, they are enveloped in an archway of light.

Olulode's previous body of work drew inspiration from queer club nights in the UK, a world filled with friendship, community and first dances (music has always inspired her paintings); that club scene features as the imagined meeting place for the couple who star in this latest series. Here, they exist in a world imbued with hues of yellow, which to Olulode signifies pure joy – love and optimism are strong forces within her life.

When we meet, Olulode's studio is filled with the monochromatic schemes she has become widely recognised for – green, blue, yellow. She even has a speck of yellow paint on her nose as she talks me through each piece (of which there are many). Her studio practically glows, full of the jubilant energy radiated by these paintings and Olulode herself.

Liv Little: I would love to hear about your choice of colour palette – why yellow?

Sola Olulode: Yellow to me is joy. My work has always been about people and relationships, but it's been broad – it could be any kind of relationship,

so [in this series] I wanted to focus on a romantic one. And I thought, yellow is like that intense feeling, that joy, and I was imagining that's the moment that I'm capturing in a relationship.

LL: What was the process of working with this colour like?

SO: I always want things to be as bright and intense as possible. So I had to rethink my whole approach to how I would work with yellow, because I couldn't use the same natural dyes...

With indigo, it can be more formulaic, and I'm restricted to certain areas; when I dye and use batik, I can only paint on the areas that are sectioned out, because I want to keep as much of the background as possible. But with these [yellow works] I can make work across the whole surface.

LL: How do you want people to feel, stepping into the world you have created?

SO: I want this show to feel quite immersive. I want to experiment. I'm hoping to hang fabric that will be dyed a light blue as the backdrop. In my mind it will look like the sky, and then the paintings will be overlaid on the surface.

LL: Black artists are often expected to mine their trauma. Why is it that you choose to celebrate joy over and above other themes?

SO: I think I'm just tired of that narrative. I'm more drawn to and focused on happier narratives. The work for me is like therapy – I'm painting things I'd like to see in the world, things I'm thinking through, things I want to experience... The darker side of the human experience is not something that I really find myself delving into when I want to create. Maybe it's also about my personal experience in life – like, the thing that I am consumed by is joy.

I want to have narratives of queer people, just solely experiencing the good parts of love. Obviously, relationships are messy and horrible sometimes, but I just wanted to focus on this beginning phase of a couple getting to know each other.

LL: Can you talk me through the story behind the couples featured in the works?

so: In my mind it's the same couple – they never look exactly the same, but the work is following different scenes in their life. [...] I imagine they meet in a club, they have a dance, maybe they hook up... It's like they met in the blue series.

LL: For that previous series, did you look at Bernice Mulenga's photography?

so: Yeah, for that whole series I basically just referred to Bernice's photography, because they were capturing, archiving, all those nights that we used to go to.

I would take different sections of photographs and mix them in with screenshots from music videos.

LL: What's the progression for this pair, where are they now?

so: I imagine they're texting each other to meet up, and then kind of going on these dates, walks in the park... Here's one of the older ones (*Whatever the Weather*) that I want to include in this series. It was initially a blue painting with this couple under an umbrella. I repainted it yellow and put these two things in the foreground and I like that. It's like two different stages of their relationship...

And then in this one (*Into the tunnel of love*) the arm is over the shoulder. That's how I saw the story happening, getting closer and closer. [Elsewhere], their arms are wrapped around each other – like, we're really comfortable, you're my boo now. And then this is another scene on the date (*Lunch Date*), where they're leaning into each other across the table.

LL: One long night when you're ready for it to continue in the morning.

so: Yeah, like the restaurant is closing and you're just chatting, chatting, chatting. And then there's a cheeky little nude (*Send Nudes*). I was like, Ok, what's my own experience of getting into a relationship? I guess this series is getting a little bit more personal, because I usually like to distance the work from my direct life.

LL: You love a park date! Your *Laying on the grass* series is one of my favourites.

so: I would have liked to include some of that grassy series in this show –

but it has to be all yellow!

A lot of the [compositions] are just kind of floating [around] a flame, [or] a beam of light, which I like because obviously that's how I want it to feel. But then other times I want them to have settings, whether it be domestic, or even just having a table with them around it.

LL: All the images feel cinematic...

so: Well, this one (*Together Again*) is a shot from a movie; I based it on *Moonlight*, the end scene when they're reunited and they go back to someone's house.

LL: Where else do you draw inspiration from?

so: For the past couple of months, I've been watching *Love Island* in the studio. And that is interesting, because the contestants are – in this very forced way – in an early stage of building a relationship. It's about analysing people's behaviour, seeing how they act towards each other, in a very heightened way.

LL: What does your working process look like?

so: I always just try and make as much as possible. I like to fill a gallery space. The style of hanging paintings right now is very minimalist, like one big wall for one painting, while I always want to cram in as many as possible because I want that intense feeling when you're stepping into a show of mine; to feel surrounded by the figures, and have their emotions be radiating off...

LL: You could just lie down in a room filled with these paintings....

so: Yes! I want to push the boundaries; I imagine having carpets and beanbags all over the floor, so people can just come and bring their date and chill in the gallery space for an afternoon and just sit. I feel like people don't spend enough time [in exhibitions]... even when I go to shows I'm like, bam bam, in and out within five minutes.

LL: How do you build on pieces of work?

so: I don't like to give up on a painting; I will just keep going, keep reworking it. I remember at uni, they talked about the [value of the]

ability to give up on a painting and start again, but I never do that.

LL: Can you talk to me about how you look back on your earlier work and see differences or similarities with what you're making now? There are threads that obviously tie them all together, but do you look at them and think, Okay, that was when I was experimenting with this, or Oh, this is when I was really obsessed with this?

so: I think often that happens when it's the first time that I've used a particular material combination – because I pretty much use different materials in each one. I'm always experimenting in different ways.

I've been basing the whole way I approach this series off of this painting (*In the Bubble of Your Love*) because I felt it was really successful when I painted it. I'd given up, I chucked [loads] at it and I then I was like actually, this is kind of fine. So I wanted to have the same approach where if something wasn't working, I just kept going with it.

LL: And there'll be things that if people sit in there and linger that they will see, and there will also be things underneath that they will never see; things that only you'll know about, which I think is quite cool.

so: Yes, [I like how that happens with works that sit in the studio for a long time]. Even now, with some of them, I'm like, Oh yeah, it's finished, when I'm probably, in the next week, gonna add a little something-something to them... because I can.

LL: *Never Enough* is gorgeous. It's sexy. You just feel it. It feels hot. You know?

so: That's what I'm hoping for! With these ones I like to see more of the fabric, and to be relating back to the textiles... The dyes were better than the ones I used before but they still weren't strong enough, so I worked into them with inks and things. They're done with the traditional technique of batik, but I haven't ironed out the wax; I've kept that texture, and then I've collaged and sewn canvas back on. [...] There's a lot of different textures [in these works]. I'm always experimenting with different ways of applying things, so not many are made in the same way.

I was being interviewed by the BBC for this news segment on AI art and they're like "how do you feel as an artist [about AI]?" But I just don't

think [robots] will be able to recreate the different textures and the materials. I mean, maybe one day when the technology is there...

LL: These works feel alive because they've been made by human beings.

so: There's so many mistakes and splatters. I try not to be too particular about things.

LL: Do those things feel like signs of life?

so: Yeah, I don't try to keep the surface perfectly smooth. If I make a splatter, I like to turn it into *more*. With the batik, I'll get wax spots that aren't intentional – but I don't mind, it becomes part of the work.

I'm very rough with my paintings. I'm very expressive when I'm making them. I'm quite clumsy and dyspraxic, so I just kind of roll with the material as well. I manipulate it, but also, if it's being stubborn and it's working against me, then I will just work with it. I don't try to make it do exactly what I want. I like the element of surprise; I like the difficulty, the challenge of covering a [wax] spot, or letting it become something new, a part of the painting that I didn't intend.

LL: Your grandma was an artist and your family were always supportive of your practice, right?

so: Yeah, she's always been the artist of the family. She does mosaics at her church and has always painted, so whenever she comes to an exhibition, she loves to tell people I got it all from her. I've come from a family that's been interested in art. Often people expect a certain narrative, like, "how did your Nigerian family feel about you going to art school?", and I'm like, well, they were kind of fine with it. I've been drawing since I was a child, so it already made sense to them.

LL: Would you say you knew you were an artist from a young age?

so: My mum describes [me] being a toddler and how the thing that I wanted to do was painting. And I do remember that early in primary school I would just draw and I'd be interested in going to exhibitions. My parents would take me to exhibitions, not because they're artists themselves but because they've always been interested in art. I didn't really know that I would pursue it as a full-time career until after graduation. I didn't think I would be at this stage in my life. And now I'll never do anything else.

LL: You've spoken a little bit about things happening career-wise, faster than you maybe had envisioned for yourself – has working with people like Bolanie [Tajudeen] and Black Blossoms been an instrumental part of that journey? How about other peers?

so: I think [those relationships are] why I've delved so far into the art world. I'm friends with so many creatives and we're all grinding out here, but also just living and experiencing our lives. Black Blossoms showed me the kind of environment of work [where] I felt like I most belonged. When I first went to their early shows, I was like, Oh, [there's] a group of Black women and non-binary artists, they're all showing their work and they're all having similar conversations.

When I have loads of Black women and queer people coming to an exhibition, seeing themselves and relating to it in a way that I don't have to explain, that's always great. I feel like the arts community in London is very supportive, like we all go to each other's shows. I'm really excited for my friend Miranda Forrester who is having a solo show in October or November. With her and Emma Prempeh and Cece Phillips, we have these dinners in each other's studios where we get together and talk about our work, what series we're working on and what relationships we have with galleries... For me, that friendship is like the after-work drinks in an office.

LL: Those peer-to-peer relationships are more important than aspiring to talk to whoever you're told is at the top of your game...

so: I think to me these people *are* the top of the game [...] You know, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley will call me and be like, Oh, can you test this game up for me? We'll do group crits with other friends. We'll conference call and be like, This is what I'm working on. And it's so great that we have that. I want to see more of that in the art world, to be honest.

LL: Gosh – as you're talking, I keep getting lost in the paintings. I am listening, and I am also lost.

so: Yeah, me too – I'm just noticing things, like Oh, I'm going to tweak that later!

LL: In terms of decentralising the gaze – are you making art for yourself? Who do you create for? Is it you first and then it's a bonus when other

people kind of engage with it? There's no white gaze here; I mean, it's very *not* that.

so: Yeah, it's definitely me first. I always say, I paint the things I want to see; things that I find cute and lovey-dovey. It's my aesthetic. I'm very conscious of the fact that I exclusively paint Black people, Black queer people and women or non-binary people, because those are the identities that I know and understand. Those are my experiences. I can't really paint from a place I don't know, and I want to share with an audience, so that other people can see [that experience] and relate to it as well. It's important for me to have people see it, and I hope that the type of people that are seeing the work are from similar backgrounds to me, or can relate to it. I guess I create the work because I feel like I [don't] see enough of the identities I come from, like, experiencing joy.

LL: We've spoken about your peers but I know that artists like Chris Ofili have massively inspired your work – are there any others?

so: Yes, although I'm really bad with names! I have this old book from uni that I put all of my influences in. I work in a non-traditional way; I know a lot of artists are really researching, and they're directly referencing, whereas [my work] is a little bit all over the place, mostly from my imagination – but then sometimes I'm like, I need context!

So much of my imagery is found. I have lots of categories saved on Instagram, but I never know a direct source. An image can get lost when it's posted to Instagram if it's not tagged.

LL: Do you ever have downtime, or is everything in life inspiration?

so: I went to Barbados in 2021 – and I was just like, Cool, I can't wait to go home and make a series of work about this experience. I think that's just how your brain works – life experience informs you and inspires you. I always like to have the next project in my head. I feel like this project has been in my head for maybe five years and now I'm like, Okay, I've got yellow out of my system, I can close the door on that and focus on the next series. I think the way I've worked is a little bit all over the place.

LL: But you're in every single piece, and that can be felt, so it's not giving chaos in any way, shape or form. Quite the opposite, I would say.

so: I guess I want to contain myself; I think I like having restrictions.
I guess that's why I restrict myself with my colour palette...

LL: Will the next series take inspiration from your trip to Barbados?

so: Yeah, I imagine delving more into a garden setting, inspired by the tropical gardens that I visited when I was there. I'm expanding my colour palette, and that blue-green-yellow environment seems like a good place to start! It was so cute to see all the couples, these old couples who would come and sit out on the beach and watch the sunset together every night. Like, that's love.

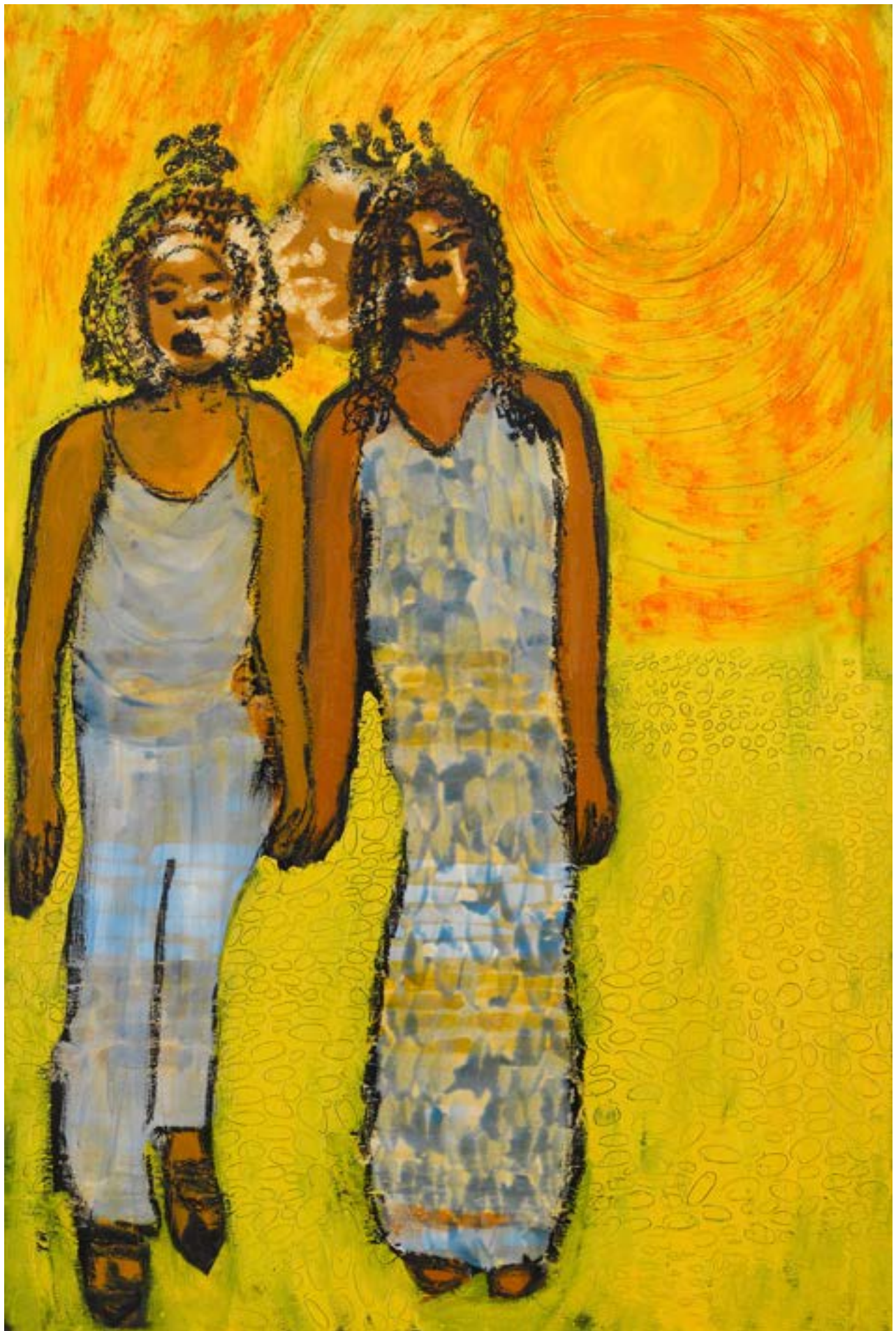


Fig.01: *Sunlight*, 2019; 180 × 120 cm
Oil, wax, oil bars, charcoal, oil pastels and pigment on canvas



Fig.02: *Lunch Date*, 2020; 152 × 122 cm
Ink, acrylic, pastel and wax on canvas



Fig.03: *Whatever the Weather*, 2021; 152 × 122 cm
Pastel, charcoal, ink, oil and pigment on canvas



Fig.04: *In the Bubble of Your Love*, 2023; 180 × 120 cm
Oil, oil bars, charcoal, oil pastels and pigment on canvas



Fig.05: *The heat of your love radiates through me*, 2023; 152 × 122 cm
Ink, acrylic, pastel and wax on canvas



Fig.06: *She walked up to me in the street and embraced me*, 2023; 180 × 120 cm
Oil, oil bars, charcoal, oil pastels and pigment on canvas

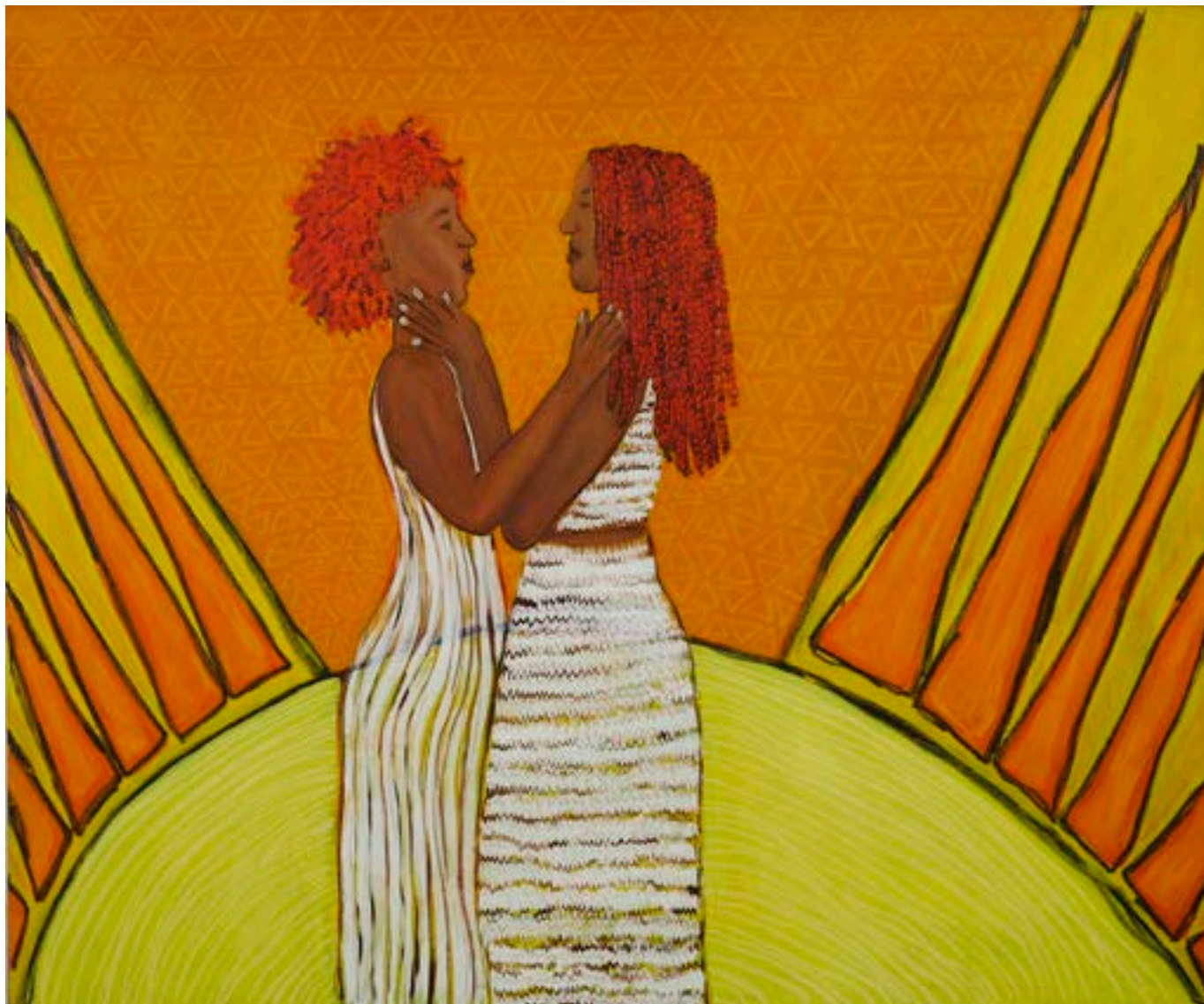


Fig.07: *Temptation to utter those 3 little words*, 2023; 150 × 180 cm
Oil and oil pastels on canvas



Fig.08: *Never Enough*, 2023; 150 × 120 cm
Batik, ink, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas



Fig.09: *Your heartbeat became my neighbour*, 2023; 150 × 120 cm
Batik, ink, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas



Fig.10: *You lit a fire inside of me and it burns bright*, 2023; 100 × 120 cm
Oil, wax, oil bars, ink, acrylic, charcoal, oil pastels and pigment on canvas



Fig.11: *Together Again*, 2023; 70 × 90 cm
Batik, ink, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas

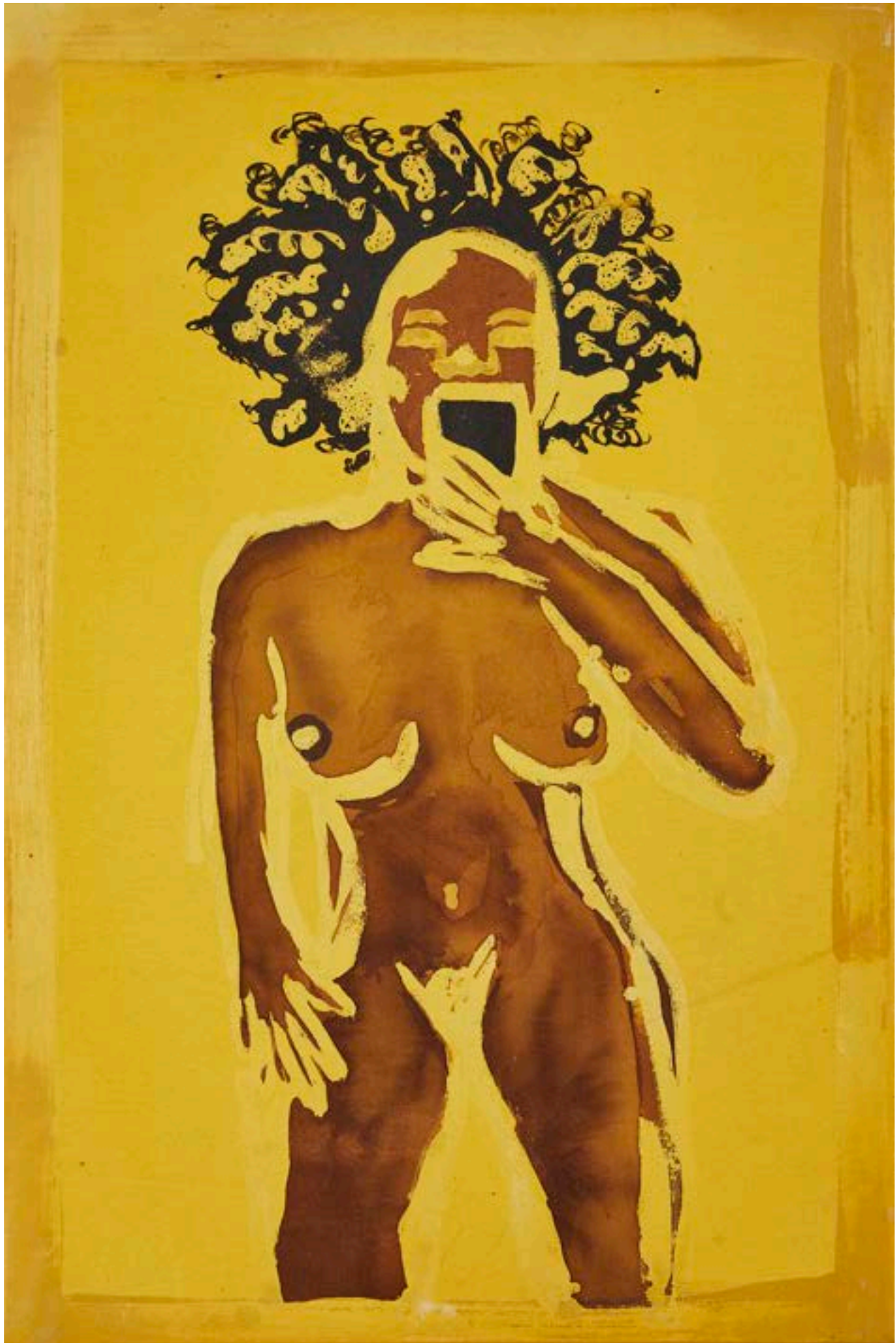


Fig.12: *Send Nudes*, 2023; 90 × 70 cm
Batik, ink, acrylic and wax on canvas



Fig.13: *Endless Laughter*, 2023; 92 × 92 cm
Batik, ink, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas



Fig.14: *Into the tunnel of love*, 2023; 53 × 63 cm
Oil and charcoal on canvas



Fig.15: *Bathing in the light of your love*, 2023
Batik, ink and acrylic on canvas

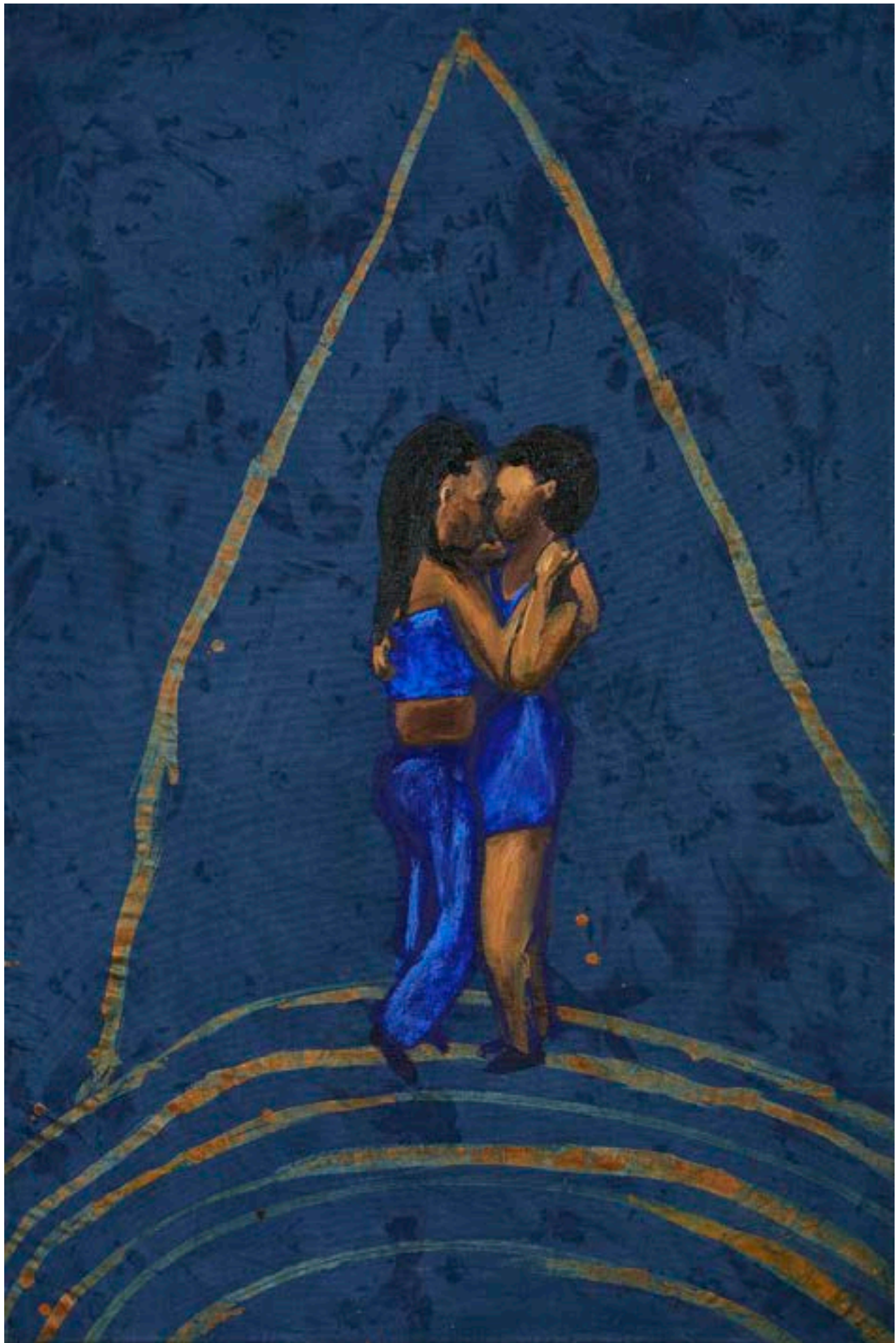


Fig.16: *The start of a Lover Girl Summer*, 2023; 90 × 70 cm
Batik, Indigo pastel, oil, pigment and wax on canvas



Fig.17: *Making a move*, 2023; 90 × 70 cm
Batik, Indigo, oil, pigment and wax on canvas

Sola Olulode (b. 1996, London) is a British Nigerian artist living and working in London. Presenting nuanced and tender visions of intimacy and community, Olulode's wistful images are celebrations of Black identity, womanhood and non-binary people. Distinguished by their use of gestural brushwork, indigo dye, wax, oil bar, impasto and monochromatic schemes (typically in blue, green or yellow) the artist's compositions speak strongly of her Nigerian heritage while centring the representation and visibility of Black queer lived experiences. Recent exhibitions include *Reverie*, Dada Gallery, Lagos, 2023; *To Be Held*, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, 2023; *Could You Be Love*, Sapar Contemporary, New York, 2022; *Summer Show #1*, Ed Cross, London, 2022; *Bold Black British*, Christie's, London, 2021; *Staying Alive*, Berntson Bhattacharjee, Sweden, 2021; *An Infinity of Traces*, Lisson Gallery, London, 2021, and *Blacklisted: An Indefinite Revolution*, Alice Black, London, 2020.

Liv Little is a writer of Jamaican and Guyanese descent via South London. Liv tells stories with heart about the people and places that matter to her. Her work spans journalism, audio, TV and curatorial projects for which she's received various accolades, including LGBTQI+ Broadcaster of The Year and Rising Star at Wow. Her short story, 'The Sisters' was published in the critically-acclaimed 'HAG' (Audible), a collection of forgotten folktales retold. She was a BBC writer in residence for 2021, in which she developed an original pilot for a queer conspiracy thriller. She was included on the Brit List for 2022/23. Liv is most at peace in Nature, and she now lives by the sea. Her debut novel, *Rosewater*, was published in 2023.

Ed Cross works with emerging and established artists across and beyond the African diaspora. The gallery seeks to stage conversations – between practitioners, international audiences and as guided by its artists – to amplify voices historically silenced, and to create space for their independent development. Since launching in 2009, Ed Cross has held exhibitions across the world: from New York to Paris, and London to Lagos, the gallery continues to build on its values of cooperation and curiosity in its permanent space at 19 Garrett Street, London.

87 Gallery supports artists to explore, make and show new work. We provide development opportunities for artists such as commissions, exhibitions, public engagement, mentoring, networking, training and sales platforms. We work with artists to develop bespoke support packages that are tailored to their needs and goals.

We are passionate advocates of inclusion, accessibility and co-production in the visual arts, supporting artists, individuals and communities alike to develop skills and collaborate on the creation of art.

87 Gallery is part of Artlink Hull. Charity number 1091217.

Ed Cross wishes to thank Artlink Hull for their support.





E D C R O S S

Ed Cross Fine Art Ltd
19 Garrett Street

London EC1Y 0TY
United Kingdom

info@edcrossfineart.com
+44(0)7507067567

edcrossfineart.com
@edcrossfineart