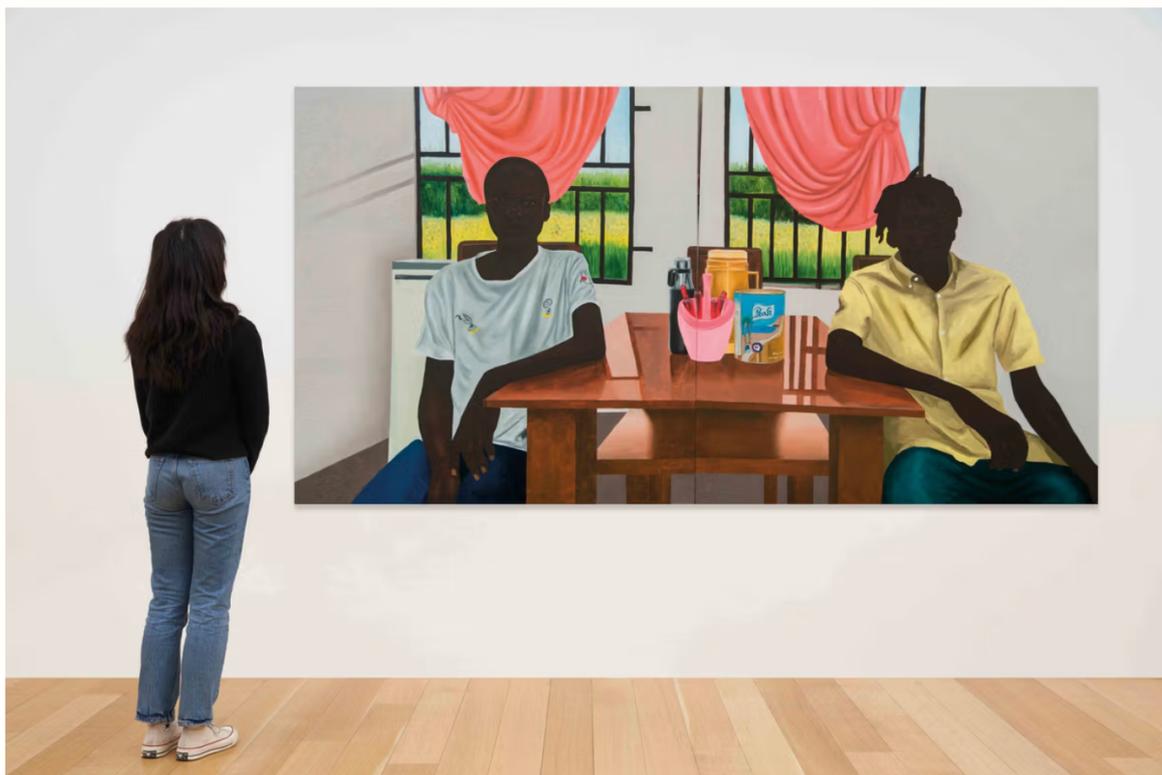




## Christie's exhibition of Black art is not about virtue signalling, curator says

Destinee Ross-Sutton has co-organised the online selling show Say It Loud which features works by 22 artists including Nelson Makamo and Yoyo Lander



Eniwaye Oluwaseyi's *The Breakfast* is one of the works included in the Say It Loud show at Christie's

Courtesy the artist and Destinee Ross-Sutton 2020

“I saw this as an opportunity to assure that this isn’t just a one-off PR move to prove how diverse or ‘woke’ Christie’s can be,” says Destinee Ross-Sutton, the New York-based curator and art advisor, referring to *Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)*, an online selling exhibition on Christie’s platform “dedicated to the promotion and empowerment of Black art”.

Ross-Sutton has co-organised the sale which includes works by 22 emerging and mid-career international Black artists (closes 18 August) including Johannesburg-based Nelson Makamo, who is showing works from his *Untitled, from Blue series* (2020), along with Los Angeles-based Yoyo Lander (*Have Tears* triptych, 2020).

However, some commentators on social media say that, in light of recent Black Lives Matter protests, this is an example of virtue-signalling by the art trade. “I can see why that is a concern for people, frankly I was concerned as well,” Ross-Sutton says. “I then realised that I had the chance to take it beyond this, and really connect with people who actually want change within the institutions and the art market in general, as a way to give some power back to the artists.”

Christie’s selected 11 of the artists included, with Ross-Sutton contributing ten names and the non-profit advocacy group Harlem Arts Alliance putting forward one artist. Some of the artists also appeared in Ross-Sutton’s recent exhibition *Black Voices/Black Microcosm* at CFHILL Art Space in Stockholm.

All proceeds from the selling exhibition will go to the respective artists. Ross-Sutton says: “Christie’s is not adding buyer’s premiums; all sale transactions are handled either by the artists themselves or by their representatives. [Participating artists] Amani Lewis, Ambrose Murray who are friends of mine, and Alexis McGrigg, have also asked me to conclude their sales from this exhibition in order to furnish the buyers with my strict sales agreements. Christie’s is being most supportive of this effort to avoid all the flippers that are rushing to buy art by Black artists.”

Prices are fixed, ranging from \$475 for a limited edition print by Cary Fagan to \$43,000 each for the two large works by the South African artist Nelson Makamo, says Ross-Sutton. “The medium prices are around \$6,000 to \$8,000 for Collins Obijiaku, Khari Turner, Isshaq Ismail, Juwon Aderemi and Eniwaye Oluwaseyi; \$15,000 for the single work by Yoyo Lander; \$17,000 for the large work by South African WonderBuhle”. But, she adds, “all of their works basically sold on the first day.”

“The current significant social climate highlighted the need for re-evaluation, for the confrontation of systemic racism and for considered change to be implemented,” says Celine Cunha, the co-chairman of the employee initiatives group (corporate social responsibility) at Christie’s, who co-organised the sale.

“Each of these artists play upon perception, calling attention to the historical perception of ‘Blackness’ and putting it on its head, ambitiously challenging the viewer to redefine their pre-conceived and historically taught notions of Black identity,” Cunha adds.

The project is the first of many which will “empower and amplify the voices of the Black Art Community,” Cunha says. Crucially, she says that Christie’s is “in conversations with several external individuals and organisations for the implementation of substantial programming including mentorship programs and programmes specifically catering to collectors of colour.” Art market commentators have pointed out that the initiative might cultivate emerging buyers.

A two-part Artist Talk & Consortium curated by The Harlem Arts Alliance—which will discuss “the marked lack of Black and Brown accessibility to the art market and institutions on a global scale” according to a project statement—is due to take place on 5 August.