



Sometimes we look at figurative paintings in order to better understand ourselves. We visit museums and galleries to get a glimpse of portraits that appear to gaze back at us—we engage them in a silent back-and-forth, an unspoken negotiation. The *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–19) seems to tease us with a condescending smirk; in *Las Meninas* (1656), Infanta Margarita Teresa stares us down with an imperial glare; and the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (ca. 1665) locks eyes with us as she slightly parts her lips. When we look up at these portraits, we can't help but feel that these figures are exalted or majestic or one step away from godliness. But how are we ever supposed to see ourselves, to truly engage in that silent exchange, if the subjects of these paintings never resemble us?

Historically, it has been difficult for members of the African diaspora to see ourselves represented in such paintings. However, this is beginning to change as contemporary artists like Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald, Henry Taylor, Jordan Casteel, and a number of others are at the forefront of the genre. The increased visibility for black figurative painters has led to a shift in the dialogue around painting and identity, and has given more black artists the opportunity to showcase their work in places where they had previously been excluded.

Importantly, there is a wide swathe of young and lesser-known black artists pursuing figurative painting today, ensuring the longevity and richness of this thriving tradition while also building upon it. Here, we feature 10 of these artists, each of whom offers a fresh, thoughtful approach to painting the human form.

Kassou Seydou

Follow

B. 1971, Ziguinchor, Senegal. Lives and works in Keur Massar, Senegal.



Kassou Seydou, *Fro-fro*, 2018. © Kassou Seydou.
Courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury.



Portrait of Kassou Seydou. Courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury.

Swirls, abstract patterns, and warm colors characterize Kassou Seydou's paintings. For example, *RED BANTAMBA (L'ARBRE À PALABRES ROUGE)* (2018) shows two purplish-brown figures that are enveloped in yellow spirals; we register the figures, but we are also forced to contemplate the surrounding atmosphere. "For me, painting is an essential means of expression, a way of communicating with the rest of the world; my immediate neighbors, as well as potential distant spectators," Seydou said. "So it seemed quite natural to me to use forms, motifs, and figures that everyone can identify and appropriate, whatever the context in which my painting is seen."



The compositions of Seydou's paintings often feel associative—figures float in space next to lines and objects. The figures themselves are, at times, coated in washes of soft colors—greens, yellows, and purples—that we often wouldn't find on healthy human skin. But these compositional elements are also closely tied to the deeper, contextual meanings of these paintings: “The influence of the colors and patterns that populate my work have their origin in my African daily life, where there is an incredible sensory diversity—the smells, the warmth, the bright colors, the patterns of the clothes,” Seydou said. “All these things correspond to an imagination attached to Africa, sometimes in a slightly caricatured way, but often with a background of truth.”