

# The Daily Telegraph

BRITAIN'S BEST QUALITY NEWSPAPER



## Art inspired by black history that packs a powerful punch

### Exhibition

### Say My Name

Signature African Art, W1



By Alastair Smart

This is a hit-and-miss exhibition, but when it hits, it hits very hard indeed. Opening to catch the end of Black History Month, *Say My Name* features work by 13 African contemporary artists, all inspired by an episode or figure from black history.

On entering the gallery, one is almost knocked out straight away – by the sight of a huge, raised fist. This sculpture, made from fire clay by Cameroon's Djakou Kassi Nathalie, takes the unmistakable form of the Black Power salute (made famous at the 1968 Olympics).

None of the show's artists is well known. But many of their subjects are. Tragically so in the case of George Floyd, the black man killed in Minnesota in May after a white police officer knelt excessively on his neck. He appears in a work by Oluwole Omofemi comprising nine paintings of Floyd in a grid, each one with an actual zip placed over his mouth. The zips are all open, and Floyd's nine final sentences on earth have been written beneath them – including "Please, sir" and "I can't breathe". It's a stunning work, the implication being that the police officer in question zipped Floyd up and silenced him forever.

The show is co-curated by the black American film director Ava DuVernay, best known for her historical drama *Selma* (2014), about the right-to-vote marches led by Martin Luther King. DuVernay helped the artists choose the subject for many of the works. These include the American activist and scholar Angela Davis, captured in a collage portrait; and Breonna Taylor, remembered in a haunting painting by Moufouli Bello. Taylor was another victim at the hands of US police this year and looks out at us incriminatingly – as if asking

whether we as a society could have done more to save her.

Those are a few of the hits. The biggest miss is Adjaratou Ouedraogo's childlike depiction of passengers on HMS Windrush bearing placards that read "Please pity" and "Help". If you're going to create work inspired by history, surely there's an onus not to misrepresent that history.

All 13 works are for sale, with a share of the profits from the Floyd and Taylor paintings going to their respective families.

DuVernay's co-curator is Khalil Akar – the director of Signature African Art gallery in Mayfair, where the show is being held. The pair say one of their aims is to raise awareness of black history. As such, a number of the pieces have subjects that will be little-known to the average viewer (such as the fate of Bruce's Beach in California). Alas, art doesn't work best when you have to consult Google to understand it.

That said, this exhibition still comes recommended. Given the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, it certainly feels topical. And given that its subjects include Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win a Nobel Prize, it also strikes the right note. Between celebrating black people's achievements, that is, and exposing their sufferings.



Silenced: Oluwole Omofemi's grid portrait of George Floyd, below, and Moufouli Bello's painting of Breonna Taylor

Until Nov 28; [signatureafricanart.com](http://signatureafricanart.com)  
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