

# PORTRAITS FOR ENGLISH TO SEE

RENÉ TAVARES

THE AFRICA CENTRE





# RENÉ TAVARES

## “Portraits for English to See”

SOLO EXHIBITION AT THE AFRICA CENTRE

9 - 29 October 2023

The Angolan-Portuguese art gallery THIS IS NOT A WHITE CUBE presents, in partnership with The Africa Centre, “Portraits for English to See” the debut solo exhibition of Santomean artist René Tavares, in London. Curated by Paula Nascimento, Tavares' exhibition features two of his latest and most iconic painting series: “Portraits for English to See”, which gives the exhibition its name, and “Cotton People Reloaded”.

The series is notable for its grandiose scale, as well as the artist's skilful manipulation of paint and powder pigments to create cotton landscapes and malleable surfaces that frequently assume an earthy appearance.

René's work has been affirmed through a plurality of media ranging from painting to drawing, photography, and installation. Through it, the artist explores themes such as migration and heritage. These themes have been, over the years, a consistent engine of innovation and creativity in his artistic practice.

The persistence of the concept of layer and the concept of miscegenation defines the capital structure of an oeuvre, where Tavares repeatedly introduces unavoidable conceptual combinations, cross-cultural and heritage references, and composite plastic solutions.

There are multiple layers that, materially and plastically, are added to each body - whether it is painting, photography, or drawing - in a process of agglomeration of layers, which results from the transposition of a gaze that can be defined as archaeological or stratified on the ancestral Santomean culture that the artist recovers, represents, and plastically reinterprets.

The rescue of its immateriality, perceived through the lens of the contemporary artistic production that René Tavares embodies, documents the intersection between personal narratives and broader historical narratives.

The collective memory of the peoples and the heritage resulting from their voluntary and involuntary crossings, which René Tavares addresses in his work, is converted into an artistic production that leads us physically and intellectually to a work that is more and more up-to-date and committed to the factual and future vision of a continent that, in the era of globalization, proceeds to recover its traditions, to reaffirm its roots and to consolidate a revision of history that nowadays, academically and politically, is taking place on the international arena.

René Tavares' work draws on a vast archive to launch countless intellectual challenges, and his practice proposes a redefinition of artistic expression fields, bringing to painting techniques, gestures, and materials that refer to drawing and transferring to drawing the gesturalism and theatricality that is the appanage of painting. This hybridization of plastic languages is also transferred to photography, claiming for art a trace of absolute.

# CURATORIAL TEXT

*My work reflects on the African diaspora and on the forms of miscegenation that have taken place; it also reflects my creative process as an artist in keeping with the rhythm of a mestization that overlaps times, places, and supports, diluting the watertight borders between domains.*

René Tavares

In his first exhibition in London, "Portraits for English to See", René Tavares presents six large-scale paintings and one installation based on two series the artist has been developing over time - "Portraits for English to See" and "Cotton People Reloaded". Tavares' multidisciplinary practice addresses the entangled histories of colonialism and its reverberation until today and reflects his travel and displacement experiences across diverse post-colonial contact zones.

The exhibition title, "Portraits for English to See," refers to the Portuguese expression "Pra Inglês Ver" (for English to see), which originated in Brazil in the first half of the 19th century, around 1830. Explained as "for the purposes of appearance" or "pretend to do something", there are several stories<sup>1</sup> around its origins; however, the more accurate refer to the narrated by philologist João Ribeiro<sup>2</sup>: during the imperial period, despite being monitored by England, Brazil continued with the slave trade. During imperial Brazil, many intellectuals proposed new ideas to reform the then-current slavery regime, which envisaged a gradual abolition and the settlement of former enslaved people on the master's lands or deportation to Africa. Under pressure, Brazil issued the Feijó Law in 1831, which prohibited the importation of slaves, but this didn't stop the traffic; the Brazilian coast was monitored by English ships, but such surveillance did not stop crime - the Brazilian government turned a blind eye to such a degree that the expression originated.

In São Tomé, the existence of a plantation complex led to the belief that there was a similar evolution in the Portuguese colonies on the African continent and in the archipelago. It would have occurred at the end of the slave production. Still, it was different than in Brazil, where the plantation labour was replaced by European salaried immigration. The plantations had forced African workers, an extension of the slavery system. The plantation system in São Tomé and other ex-Portuguese colonies was designed "for English to see". Tavares addresses these overlaps and contradictions and the web of social and financial economies that bound together the peoples and the enduring legacies of the systems. Despite referring to the past, the title assumes a more profound meaning nowadays - it simultaneously refers to the past and present day, inviting viewers to look closely at the legacies of this past.

Departing from a study within the Angular community in São Tomé, Tavares embarks on sociological research to speak about the enduring afterlife of the plantation system and the peoples as a space that alludes to a collective memory that links São Tomé and the black Atlantic lives.

Portraiture has a long tradition in Western art and has been an important medium by which the circuits of the Atlantic world were made visible. Portraits were conceived to

present the status of individuals as a means to represent the elites and a symbol of power for the aristocracy. It has had a discontinued history, reaching a decline with the rise of photography, returning later as a genre. Tavares series results from research on the São Tomé historical archive and colonial photographs - in which workers were obliged to dress in white clothing and pose for staged pictures. He refers to and subverts this archive by crafting a safe space that renders visible their identities and by producing emancipatory and liberated images of the plantation (workers) - with a sense of self-observation and a depiction of a social self. The figures are always looking straight ahead as if asking to be photographed and proud to be in a space that belongs to them. The white cloth, previously used only during the staged forced portraits, appears here as a statement and a provocation - they can wear anything they like and own their destiny. At times, it acquires a spiritual meaning. While the (post) documentary-style portraits remind us of a historical past that must be addressed, they simultaneously take us to the present and future.

Another critical aspect of the series is the materials and how the artist constructs his portraits. The cotton is both a concept and material - the works are constructed with several layers of paint and layers of symbolic references - the imaginary landscapes that could be anywhere, the cotton flowers, animals, the gold leaf, the materials, multiple references interweave in a process that mimics the functioning of memory and that alludes to the hybrid cultures resulted from the transatlantic slave trade, between Africa, South America, Asia and Europe.

In the opening installation, "Piá mú" (Look at me), the artist reclaims traditional objects used in everyday life: wooden boards that serve to mash chilli peppers become the basis for the portraits of the people from the small angular community. Those are then fixed and attached to mirror-like frames associated with upper-middle-class western families. This appropriation and combination of disparate symbolic elements speak to the complexities of identity construction and the impossibility of being circumscribed into a single space and geography, alluding to what Gilroy<sup>4</sup> describes as a multifaceted and multinational position of blackness.

In the closing work, "Visit Day - Family Portrait", a Family looks at their history. The characters claim visibility and return the viewer's gaze, asserting their right to look.

In his research, René Tavares re-examines themes from official historiography, art histories and collective memory as the foundation for creating his portraits. He is interested in narrating one and the same histories, individual and collective, and creates timeless figures across geographies and time zones.

Paula Nascimento, 2023

<sup>1</sup> Houaiss Dictionary of Portuguese Language  
<sup>2</sup> Another story revolving around the expression has its roots in the linen clothes that the English wore in Pernambuco, different from those of cashmere worn by locals, which led some jokes directed at the locals that preferred linen - whenever there was native wearing linen, some would say they only dressed like that "for the English to see".  
<sup>3</sup> Ribeiro, João, 1933, A língua nacional: notas aproveitáveis  
<sup>4</sup> Gilroy, Paul, 1993, The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993



# PORTRAITS FOR ENGLISH TO SEE



"Portraits for English to See" is the outcome of a meticulous research endeavour that traverses the realms of archival photography to painting.

The title draws inspiration from the old Portuguese idiomatic expression "para inglês ver" (literally "for English to see"), which emerged in the 1830s when England called upon Brazil to enact legislation aimed at curbing the slave trade. Regrettably, those regulatory measures yielded little to no substantive impact.

In our contemporary context, "para Inglês ver" projects epitomize initiatives that, when viewed from an external perspective, purport to address pressing issues but ultimately remain superficial in their essence. For the artist, this work serves as a poignant reminder of the historical occurrences within his native São Tomé and Príncipe, reminiscent of the bygone era of plantations. In the wake of the abolition of slavery, plantation labourers were subjected to rigorous inspections, aimed at assessing their working conditions.

These inspections, however, were characterized by meticulous orchestration, marked by illusory theatrics and cruelty. This orchestration perpetuated a harrowing system of human exploitation, which endured for decades. The documentary-style photography that underpins this project not only serves as a vehicle for elucidating a vital historical legacy but also thrusts us into the contemporary arena, where debates surrounding ideologies and concepts pertaining to territory and identity unfold in tandem. This contemporary discourse challenges the significance of both physical and ideological boundaries that separate civilizations.



RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Making Memories in front of Memories*, 2023, Oil, pigment, charcoal, acrylic and gold paper on canvas, 198 x 210 cm  
RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Visit Day - Family Portrait*, 2023, Oil, pigment, charcoal, acrylic and gold paper on canvas, 160 x 164 cm

RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Old Friends at the Museum*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 198 x 210 cm



# COTTON PEOPLE RELOADED

"Cotton People Reloaded" stands as one of the most recent and iconic series by the accomplished artist, René Tavares.

Within this series, the artist consistently employs specific iconographic elements, including cotton flower fields, plantations, modest dwellings, fauna, and various objects.

These elements are masterfully interwoven with individual and collective portraits, serving as a profound exploration of social microcosms where ancestral traditions persist amidst contemporary practices.

This exploration is deeply rooted in the historical tapestry of hybridization and miscegenation, reflecting the complex interplay between diverse ethnic groups, communities, and cultures. An intricate mosaic that encompasses elements assimilated during both colonial and post-colonial eras.

A very particular and peculiar arrangement is used by the artist in "Old Friends at the Museum", in which the series "Cotton People Reloaded", reproduced in the background, is itself the subject of representation, and re-contextualization, accompanied by its usual characters in a museum setting.

This particular creation serves as the inaugural piece in a sub-series that also encompasses "Visit day - family portrait." Furthermore, it serves as a prelude to a prominent artwork that emerges as the central figure of this exhibition: "Making memories in front of memories," which graces the cover of this publication.

With the placement of the artwork in a house or within the museum, René Tavares endeavours to establish a sanctum for the reconstruction of African historiography within a post-colonial context. Simultaneously, his aim is to inaugurate a representational realm hitherto unprecedented. This discourse is intricately interwoven with the contemporaneous movement towards historiographical reevaluation propelled by the academic community, institutional bodies, and their respective agents.

In Tavares' perspective, his series pays homage to the communities of Austral and Atlantic Africa who endured forced migrations during the transatlantic slave trade, traversing routes to the Americas and the Atlantic islands, which served as both production and storage sites, exemplified by the Sao Tome and Principe Islands.

Through this compelling series, we are impelled to embark upon a critical reassessment of preconceived and dystopian notions pertaining to the identity of the African continent. Furthermore, we are confronted with an urgent call to appreciate the diversity, opulence, and multifaceted dimensions inherent in the numerous Africas encompassed within the continent.



In the pièce de résistance, "Making Memories in Front of Memories," René Tavares seems to quote directly from a pose by one of the most iconic works in the annals of Western art, Vermeer's "The Girl with the Pearl Earring." This allusion harkens back to the notion of erecting an institutional representational space that had been previously inaccessible.

This suggestion is further fortified by the application of gold leaf within the formal realm of representation that encapsulates the painting within the painting. Gold, historically steeped in iconography associated with the sacred, has evolved into a potent symbol of authority and prosperity. Consequently, the painting metamorphoses into an altar dedicated to immortalizing those it signifies, their memories, and their resonating pleas, which reverberate throughout the exhibition, manifesting in titles that oscillate between assertion and interjection: "Piá mù - Look at me" or "This land belongs to us".

The persistence of the life-size portrait, featuring substantial figures, embodies the current resonance of contemporary African art, which seeks expression through figuration and portraiture, be it individual or collective. It aspires to share moments of vulnerability and everyday life, a figurative gesture inspired by the commonplace, which stands in opposition to the prior cycle of fetishization and hyper-stylization of the black body.

The representation of the human form permeates the entirety of the artistic work and extends across the entire spectrum of the exhibited pieces, giving rise to a profound sense of belonging. This sentiment is most notably conveyed through the characters' engagement with the audience, as they transcend the conventional boundaries of mere posing and passive presence. Instead, these characters boldly fix their gaze upon the viewer, establishing a quasi-interactive connection. They assert their rightful place, one that has long been rightfully claimed, metaphorically asserting their dominance over the entire scenic expanse of the canvas.

Additionally, within this artistic collection, we encounter figures from bygone eras, portrayed in a dignified and statuesque manner, as they are transposed into the contemporary context through the medium of representation. With an air of serenity about them, these figures serve to elucidate the enduring nature of historical memory that has been meticulously constructed within the personal sphere.

They faced the Herculean task of shaping the landscape into cotton fields. They bore the responsibility of constructing a vast empire through their labour to benefit other civilizations, all while concurrently bearing the duty of establishing and preserving a legacy and spiritual domain for their own community, forged within the confines of servitude.

They embody the essence of "The Black Atlantic",<sup>1</sup> where the body transforms into a sacred homeland, birthing the dawn of post-memory.



<sup>1</sup> Gilroy, Paul, 1993. The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993





RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Meeting to hear the Atlantic sound*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 175 x 205 cm  
RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Bailarinas de Algodão*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 210 x 210 cm



RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *This land belongs to us*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 175 x 205 cm



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

René Tavares' work is based on a process of research spanning through archives, photographs, and literature while bringing to the front stage themes related to historical and socio-political issues which affected different African countries. With a predilection for painting and drawing, Tavares' artistic practice also includes photography, video and performance. The artist's work evolves and expands in the form of projects and series which develop over time according to his own experiences of transition between different artistic languages, between the African and European continents, between insular and continental Africa, but also between the local and the global, the individual and the collective. By questioning assimilated, neglected and forgotten heritages and by challenging the rigidity of categories and prejudices, the artist's works are produced in an impulsive and engaged mode to raise awareness and to trigger processes of resilience and social empowerment.

Using a palette of rich, deep, and earthy colours and working the canvas in layers and all over, Tavares' figurative universe, with its dreamlike atmosphere, is filled with memories and human presence, faces and gazes that look at us throughout space and time. The works also emphasize iconographic and symbolic elements such as cotton flower fields and plantations, specific animals, objects, and housings along with the depiction of single and group portraits. These collective pictures of men and women, either standing peacefully or shown in their interactions and daily activities, aim to reflect on the historical processes of hybridisation and miscegenation happening between several ethnic groups, communities, and cultures including components assimilated during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Either through his paintings or multi-medium installations which often included striking words referring to racism and discrimination, Tavares fuses references taken from ancestral practices and belief systems, collective memories and heritage with contemporaneity and globalisation. Thus, the whole work highlights the processes of appropriation, integration, and merging of heterogeneous religious, social, and cultural components that compose many African cultures.

In former series, such as "In Memory We Trust", "Thinking About Africa's Future" or "New State of the Atlantic", the viewers were challenged by the necessity of a critical review of the preconceived and dystopian conceptions of African identities, and by the pressing demand to value the diversity, the richness and the multiple dimensions of the several Africas within the continent and its diaspora.

Both series "Portraits for English to See" and "Cotton People Reloaded" have their construction based on René Tavares' extended material repertoire, where cotton, burlap, linen, or jute are omnipresent.

Its 'povera' materiality, born from the gesture of rescuing everyday objects for the artistic field, invites the spectator to experiment with a sensorial dimension, but also, and most especially, to experiment with a historical significance and charge that is intrinsic to it.

The collective memory of the Atlantic peoples and their miscegenation processes are the main matrix of his large-scale works, which use matter and language to activate the reminiscences of a common past.

The cotton fields and the terminology used throughout titles are intimately linked to the notion of anthropological vestiges of a "nation" born of a centuries-old transatlantic maritime trade, where human beings and material goods are analogous objects of consumption.





RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Grand ma's treasures*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 150 x 150 cm



RENÉ TAVARES (b. 1983, São Tomé and Príncipe) | *Grand ma's memories*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 177 x 170 cm



*René Tavares's work moves comfortably between fiction, oral tradition, and memory in order to comment – with irony and humor – on the processes of construction of what we understand and validate as History, culture, and heritage. In the process, he speculates on the narratives alternative to what the past was and what the future may be.*

– Luísa Santos

# ABOUT THE CURATOR

## Paula Nascimento

Paula Nascimento (b. 1981, Luanda) is an architect and independent curator based in Luanda. She is the co-founder of Beyond Entropy Africa (2010-16), a research studio that has worked in architecture, visual arts, and geopolitics. She has developed a series of artistic and curatorial projects including Luanda Encyclopaedic City, the award-winning Angola Pavilion at the Biennial of Venice in 2013.

As an independent curator, Paula Nascimento has worked on interdisciplinary projects exploring themes related to post-colonial cities, and contemporary readings for historical themes. She has curated several exhibitions in Angola, South Africa, Portugal and Italy, and has participated at Experimenta Design, Triennale di Milano, Bamako Biennial and the VI Lubumbashi Biennial. Since 2019 she has been the curator of Foco África at ARCO Lisboa.

Paula is currently the chair of the artistic committee at Nesr Art Foundation and associate curator of the VII and VIII Lubumbashi Biennale and a curatorial advisor at Hangar - Center for Artistic Research.

In 2022 she received the 2022 Okwui Enwezor Fellowship Research Grant from the ICI.

She was awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and the Arcvision Special Award - Women for Expo in 2015 in Milan and received a Certificate of Excellence for the African Architecture Award in 2017, among others.



# ARTIST TALK:

## *Unfinished Stories*



### Speakers:

René Tavares (Artist)  
Paula Nascimento (Angolan curator and architect)

### Moderator:

Paul Goodwin (British independent curator,  
urban theorist, academic, and researcher)

### Synopsis:

As part of the presentation of René Tavares' exhibition, on October 13th (7 p.m.), the Africa Centre also hosts an artist talk entitled "Unfinished Histories" through which we will delve into the core elements of Tavares' artistic practice.

One of his defining features is the concept of layering, both material and conceptual, which he introduces into each of his artworks. This layering process reflects an archaeological gaze, uncovering and reinterpreting ancestral Santomean culture in a contemporary context. Tavares' ability to bridge personal narratives with broader historical ones invites us to explore the collective memory of peoples and the rich heritage resulting from their voluntary and involuntary crossings.

This exclusive artist talk is also a unique opportunity to engage with some influential artistic, curatorial and cultural voices working with Africa and its diaspora art scene: the Angolan architect and exhibition curator, Paula Nascimento, and the British independent curator, academic and researcher Paul Goodwin.

# ABOUT THIS IS NOT A WHITE CUBE

THIS IS NOT A WHITE CUBE is an international contemporary art gallery simultaneously based in Luanda (Angola) and Lisbon (Portugal). Representing and collaborating with emergent and established artists, the gallery focuses primarily on narratives associated with the African continent and its diaspora. Beyond its deep connection to Africa — and with a pioneering spirit of de-compartmentalization and inclusiveness, favouring intercultural dialogues — it is the first African gallery in Portugal to open its collaborative circle to both local artists and artistic productions from the Global South, including Brazil and non-lusophone African countries.

THIS IS NOT A WHITE CUBE extends its dynamic activities to several institutional and independent spaces with the organization of ambitious collective exhibitions outside the gallery's walls. On these occasions, the gallery invites external curators, associations or other art galleries to collaborate, thus promoting innovative associations and cultural enrichment while providing unexpected opportunities for artists.

Founded in Luanda by Sónia Ribeiro in 2016, the gallery quickly became a leader in Angola's artistic and cultural panorama. It was in 2019 that the project expanded to Chiado, one of Lisbon's most emblematic neighbourhoods. Given Portugal's historical relationships with Africa and its strategic location as a gateway to Europe, the

country's capital was considered a natural location for this first growth stage. Both exhibition spaces have independent programs, offering collectors and amateurs a relevant and compelling selection of contemporary artists working across a wide diversity of media and techniques. Since its creation, the gallery has remained true to one of its primary goals, that of allowing artists to share, through their work, their unique perspectives on the World. Throughout an extensive yearly program that includes regular exhibitions in Portugal and Angola along with constant participation in numerous international art fairs, attention is drawn to topics such as globalization, identity, memory, cultural heritage, and social changes.

Its two directors, Sónia Ribeiro (CEO) and Graça Rodrigues (Curator) have a singular entrepreneurial and artistic vision based on a solid curatorial and collaborative approach.

In 2019, the gallery founded "O CUBO", a non-profit platform that seeks to boost experimentation and research through the development of artistic residencies, editorial projects, archive mapping, and the establishment of a network of local and international partnerships. While furthering its expansion and the development of its fruitful connections worldwide, the gallery presented several international exhibitions, including South Africa, France, Italy, Serbia, Morocco and the UK.

## CONTACTS

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### ANGOLA /

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### OPENING HOURS

Tuesday - Saturday 2:30 pm - 7 pm

### WEBSITE

[www.thisisnotawhitecube.com](http://www.thisisnotawhitecube.com)

# ABOUT THE AFRICA CENTRE

The Africa Centre is a UK-registered charity that celebrates the diversity of Africa and its diaspora. It promotes social cohesion, education, thought leadership, and innovation in art, culture, and entrepreneurship. The Centre first opened its doors to the public in 1964 and has a rich and vibrant history of bringing Africa's cultural diversity to the fore and promoting greater awareness about political and socio-economic developments affecting the continent and its diaspora. With an original remit to foster non-governmental relations between newly independent Africa and Britain, The Africa Centre's mission today is to educate, connect, and advocate for Africa and its global diaspora, creating a home away from home for Africans in the UK and a warm and welcoming space for anyone with an interest in Africa. The Africa Centre opened its new headquarters in Southwark, London in June 2022. The new HQ is a beautifully transformed former 1960s office block that now serves as a new hub for contemporary African culture and heritage in London.

## CONTACTS

### LONDON /

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### OPENING HOURS

Tuesday - Saturday: 10 am - 6 pm  
Sunday: 10 am - 4 pm

### WEBSITE

[www.africacentre.org.uk](http://www.africacentre.org.uk)





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