

## **Ghanaian artist draws inspiration from powerful woman in works to be exhibited at 57<sup>th</sup> Street Art Fair**

By Vee L. Harrison

In 2017 when Kwame Boama Mensa arrived in the United States, he didn't know what reception his art would receive. Would they welcome this newcomer into the American art scene? Mensa, 42, was born and raised in West African Ghana. He started painting full-time after graduating from art school. Studying in Ghana in the 90s gave him a sense of his place as an artist. After graduating in 1999 he realized that his journey was not coincidental; it was purposeful, and a path he'd been on since early childhood.

"When I was growing up in Africa, we would draw all the time, and compare who was the better artist," Mensa recalled. "I grew up with more than fifteen boys in my extended family and we would draw every day."

From there, he grew interested in painting, and in 1999 began to paint full-time. Then...it happened. After graduating college, Mensa sold one of his paintings and received his first paycheck as a working artist.

This year, he will exhibit his rich and vibrant works in Hyde Park at the [74<sup>th</sup> Annual 57<sup>th</sup> Street Virtual Art Fair](#). Patrons can view and purchase Mensa's art online through May 2022 . This will be his very first public exhibition, something he had to put off last year due to COVID-19.

The works capture the mood and the movement of a bustling community. Amorphous shapes in riotous shades of red, green, yellow and purple; others in subdued tones of white, gold and beige, capture both overflowing crowds at a marketplace, as well as the surreptitious side conversations between just a few. Joyful, uplifting and colorful, his works elicit smiles.

Mensa describes himself as "gifted" and said that based on the observations of his patrons, it is the way he uses his colors that people tend to love. "I don't mix colors; I apply the color straight onto the canvas. The works can be around for many years, but the color remains the same."

Raised by a single mother, Mensa said he often remembers seeing his mother work hard in the market. He said his memories of those scenes are what inspire his current paintings of working women and colorful landscapes.

"My single Mom raised me and my two siblings," Mensa explained. "I grew up and saw the hard work of women, their dedication to their kids and home. I draw my inspiration from my mother, from her life and the life of her friends."

Mensa, who resides in suburban Woodridge, with his wife of ten years and their four children, says he is on a journey to build both his family, and his reputation as an artist. After just four

years as a full-time artist in the Midwest, Mensa found himself grappling with the fallout from the pandemic. Although they were fortunate that his wife was working, being a working artist was more challenging. “Last year I’d decided to exhibit at most of the art fairs, then the pandemic hit, and they canceled the shows,” he explained.

However, when opportunities came to apply again this year, Mensa was selected as a featured artist at the 57th Street Art Fair. He’s looking forward to sharing his work via the virtual show, and perhaps in person in 2021.

Mensa’s day consists of home schooling followed by studio time, the time of day the artists says he feels most free. “I love painting, especially that moment when a concept sets in your mind. It gives you a (good) feeling, that’s sometimes hard to describe. There is something within you, even when you are tired, that makes you want to continue painting,” the artist says.

Mensa said his art is meant to leave an impression for generations to come and, in tandem with that, he intends to leave his children with an understanding that they can also be anything they want to be.

“I want my kids to understand this universe in a certain way. I want them to understand that whatever you have in your mind, you can have it in your life. I don’t think it is so necessary to give them wealth, not money. I want them to understand that no matter where you were born you can achieve your dreams, you can choose.”

“If you are an artist, you are blessed because the field allows you to think in a certain way, and it opens your mind and your eyes to see and understand life in a different way.” The messages within his paintings tell a story of where he’s from, what he’s seen. His imagery portrays the strong, hard-working women in his life that he cherishes.

“When you tell your story, people may not listen today, but the time will come because your art keeps on telling your story, Mesa concludes.”

Visit <https://www.57thstreetartfair.org> to learn more about Kwame’s work and all of the artists that will exhibiting through May of 2022.