

A close-up, warm-toned portrait of a young Black woman with her hair in braids. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a gentle smile. The lighting is soft and directional, highlighting her features.

ALIYA
LOGUN

PORTRAITURE OF
BLACK YOUTH

A TIME CAPSULE OF INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

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Art Gallery of Alberta
October 26, 2024 - January 19, 2025

Aliya Logun: Portraiture of Black Youth - A Time Capsule of Infinite Possibilities

If the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” is true, then how much more complex is the subject of that picture? The person in a still photo, suspended in a particular time and space, represents only a fragment of history. Our exhibition, *Portraiture of Black Youth - A Time Capsule of Infinite Possibilities*, presents a glimpse of the endless forms of self-expression and existence among Black youth, countering historical stereotypes and misrepresentations while empowering observers in both the present and future to recognize their autonomy in defining themselves. Through the symbolism of a time capsule, we share the images, thoughts and characteristics of Black youth today.

Photos represent history, showcasing the nuance of a person, era, place and more. Inventions like digital cameras and smartphones make the act of capturing our lives increasingly accessible and seemingly mundane. But to future generations twenty, forty, or even one hundred years from now, these images will be pieces of history that shed light on who we were. Taken together, collections of these images will form a kind of time capsule, providing an account of the essence of our time. Images develop into narratives and stories shared in history books, TV shows, and conversations about culture and people. For this reason, it is important that the images we capture in this archive of our era are diverse and represent the complexity of those living in it.

For Black people and Black youth in the diaspora, the ability to define ourselves has and continues to be a struggle fought over generations. Before our bodies even enter the world, definitions and expectations of what we can and cannot be engulf our identities via media, music and culture. We endure tropes portraying Black youth as “cool,” “exotic,” “dangerous,” “loud,” “ugly,” “athletic,” “hypersexual,” “funny,” “aggressive,” “lazy”—the list goes on. Although not all stereotypes of Blackness are inherently harmful, the challenge emerges when we lose the autonomy to define Blackness for ourselves.

We aim to take back that autonomy. This array of portraits of Black youth from across Edmonton show individual stories, histories and modes of self-expression. Through the photography of Aliya Logun, we showcase the diversity and complexity of an often misunderstood and misrepresented identity.



Aliya Logun, *Lexus Morgan*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Logun’s work does not produce a textbook definition of what it means to be “Black” or how to be “Black”; rather, she visualizes the infinite ways that Blackness is expressed. Logun’s style of portraiture draws attention to the sitters’ expressions, focusing on features like smiles, hair, eyes, skin, and so on. The contrast between the subject and the plain background allows for each sitter to be the centre of attention in their given frame.

The grid-like arrangement of the portraits on the wall undermines the perception of “Blackness” as a monolith, a result of society’s tendency to overlook individuality. While our Black youth are often categorized by their exterior appearance, true understanding comes from looking deeper—seeing through their eyes, and in this case, their portrait. This installation invites viewers to peer into each frame, revealing the distinctiveness of every individual and the collective uniqueness of the group. The notion of indefinability is not a limitation but a liberation. It frees Black youth from the confines of narrowly defined stereotypes and allows them to fully explore and express their multifaceted identities. Each portrait in this exhibition is a testament to individuality, illustrating the many ways Black youth can show up in the world.

Moreover, this exhibition aims to create a dialogue between the present and future by capturing the present-day experiences of Black youth and contributing these experiences to the historical record. These portraits serve as a time capsule, offering viewers in the future a glimpse into the lives of Black youth today. They will see the joy, resilience, creativity and complexity that define this generation, challenging any monolithic representations of Blackness.

The power of portraiture lies in its ability to convey the humanity of its subjects. Logun’s portraits offer an intimate glimpse into the life of Black youth, with the full truth of the sitter’s dreams, struggles and triumphs known only to them. This perspective challenges viewers to see beyond stereotypes and recognize the individuality of each person. For example, a portrait of a young woman in box braids—a hairstyle traditionally worn by women of African descent—juxtaposed with modern accessories speaks volumes about cultural identity and the blending of heritage with contemporary life. It also indicates self-expression and the creativity of Black youth, showcasing hairstyles that have not always been embraced in the Western world.



Aliya Logun, *Hugues Paulo*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.



Aliya Logun, *Asha Bille*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

In addition to individual portraits, this exhibition features a series of collective responses to the question, “What does Blackness mean to you?” This collection of definitions highlights the myriad ways Black youth see themselves, showcasing a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives. One person might define Blackness in terms of resilience and strength, while another might focus on cultural pride and heritage, and yet another might emphasize creativity and innovation.

Ultimately *Portraiture of Black Youth - A Time Capsule of Infinite Possibilities* is more than just an exhibition of art; it is a celebration of Black youth and their limitless potential. It is a call to action for all of us to recognize and honour the diversity and complexity of Black identities. By doing so, we work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society where every young person has the freedom to define themselves on their own terms.

One hundred years from now, if historians choose to reflect on what Black youth were like at this moment in time, we hope they gather that we were everything and anything—with infinite versatility in appearance, expression and, ultimately, identity. Through this presentation of Black portraiture, we hope to answer the question “What defines Blackness?” –in other words “Who are we?”—with another question: “Can Blackness, Black bodies and Black identity really be defined?” We hope to inspire a new generation of Black youth to embrace their uniqueness, to challenge the stereotypes that seek to confine them, and to take pride in their ability to define themselves. Just as Nina Simone sings, “Yours is the quest that’s just begun,” we celebrate the beginning of countless journeys toward self-discovery and self-expression.¹

In conclusion, *Portraiture of Black Youth - A Time Capsule of Infinite Possibilities* explores identity, self-expression and autonomy. It challenges people to rethink their perceptions and embrace the limitless potential of Black youth. By capturing the present and creating a dialogue with the future, this exhibition paves the way for a more inclusive and open dialogue about Black identity. Through Aliya Logun’s photography, we celebrate the beauty, resilience, and complexity of Black youth, leaving a lasting legacy—or time capsule—for generations to come.



Aliya Logun, *Juan Lako*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Written by YEG TheComeUp, a Black youth empowerment initiative of Africa Centre's Youth Resilience Building Program. YEG TheComeUp works towards uplifting and sharing the voices of young people of African descent while also addressing challenges, societal issues and barriers.

The exhibition *Portraiture of Black Youth - A Time Capsule of Infinite Possibilities* is organized by the Africa Centre and the Art Gallery of Alberta and curated by the Africa Centre. The RBC New Works Gallery features new artworks by Alberta artists and continues the Art Gallery of Alberta's tradition of supporting and promoting Alberta artists.

Endnotes

- 1 Nina Simone, vocalist, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," lyrics by Weldon Irvine, recorded October 26, 1969, track 7 on *Black Gold*, RCA Victor, vinyl LP.



Aliya Logun, *Jean Bruce Koua*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Artist's Biography

Aliya Logun is a distinguished portrait and editorial photographer, renowned for her compelling imagery that celebrates the beauty and essence of Black bodies and subjects around her. Her photography is not just a visual art form but a powerful statement on diversity and inclusion, resonating with audiences and inspiring meaningful conversations.

Writers' Biographies

Yar Anyieth is the coordinator of the Africa Centre's YEG TheComeUp. Taking on the role in late 2022, Yar's main focus is empowering youth of African descent to love and celebrate their strengths. Her hobbies include creating and consuming art, reading, and researching African history.

Iqmat Iyiola is an undergraduate student and researcher at the University of Alberta. Joining the Africa Centre's YEG TheComeUp in 2023, Iqmat is a member of the Arts and Culture task force and leads the collective's weekly opportunities board. In her spare time, Iqmat enjoys giving back to the community and writing poetry.

Liisa Otchie joined the Africa Centre's YEG TheComeUp in late 2019 to gain hands-on experience in community engagement. She is currently the collective's Arts and Culture task force lead. In her spare time, Liisa enjoys creating art, reading, and creative writing. Her artistic interests are influenced by Ghanaian and African culture as a whole. She is currently interested in studying traditional African folktales and storytelling practices to use them as inspiration to generate new ones.



Aliya Logun, *Mona Atilla*, 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

List of Works

Digital prints, 27x40.6cm

Akech Abiamwol

Wol Abiamwol

Sophia Adad

Victor Adeoye

Fiyin Adesina

Hermon Afowork

Tennyola Ajayi

Kwami Aku-Dominguez

Taiye Alawiye

Yar Anyieth

Mona Atilla

Ca'Leah Ayedzi

Nicole Bango

Asha Bille

Mimi Boadu

Janisse Breitzkreuz

Erykah Brown

Musabe Bwimba

Lisa Cyuzuzo

Keno Egor

Princess Eze

Tariq Greaves

Hermella Haile

Nkechinyere Irabor

Iqmat Iyiola

Marie Kamara

Bernie Karabani

Laura Kirezi

Jean Bruce Koua

Abibah Kromah

Ayodeji Kulepa

Juan Lako

Alliyah Lecky

Aliya Logun

Ater Magok

Esther Marah

Giada Pacifico Magok

Nonso Morah

Tobechukwu Morah

Lexus Morgan

Ufoma Muwhen

Glenn Omwega

Safiyah Oni

Liisa Otchie

Hugues Paulo

Lissa Rukande

Kaden Scott

Shaihiem Small

Trevonte Smith

Belinda Uwase

Ada Uzor

Chioma Uzor

Deanne Vuzi

Ijoema Webonga

Dorcas Woolaston

Amina Yassin

Goy Yien

Nyakhan Yoh

Rain Zewde

The RBC New Works Gallery features new works by Alberta artists. Initiated in 1998 and named the RBC New Works Gallery in 2008, this gallery space continues the Art Gallery of Alberta's commitment to supporting Alberta artists.

Organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta and the Africa Centre.



Located in Edmonton *Amiskwacîwâskahikan* ᑃᓯᓄᐅᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ. We respectfully acknowledge Treaty 6 Territory and Region 4 of the Métis Nation of Alberta, the traditional lands of First Nations and Métis peoples.

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Cover Image: Aliya Logun, *Rain Zwede* (detail), 2024. Digital print. Courtesy of the Artist.

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WORKS
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