

Press Release

John Akomfrah *Five Murmurations*

September 9 – October 16, 2021
508 West 24th Street, New York
Opening: September 9, 6 – 8pm

Since March 2020, the London-based artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah has been working on the longest continuous-running project of his career. Living through one of the most turbulent, monumental periods in history, Akomfrah has turned his attention to the creation of a filmic archive of today, made in real-time, documenting how individuals and communities have been coping with the pandemic, the radical mobilization seen on the streets and the disruption of cycles of racism, and the increasingly urgent crisis of climate change. Culminating in a new three-screen video installation, this body of work is a deep exploration into our understanding of the personal within a collective consciousness of emergency, portraiture, mortality, revenge, mourning and memory.

Akomfrah has gained renown for engaging with the most pressing global questions concerning us today – from the destruction of our fragile global environments, to post-colonialism and the specters of those past histories; from memory as literal archive, to the temporal and spatial tropes of race in landscapes. This past year, as the world lurched from one global crisis to another, Akomfrah – like the majority of the population – was forced to shield at home. During this time, he worked remotely with his team worldwide to collect local footage in order to document and reflect the current condition. The resulting work, presented in five orchestrated murmurations, is entitled *Five Murmurations*, referring to when a flock of birds fly in tight, fast formation as a defense mechanism against predators. These chapters act as markers for the themes explored, resulting in a powerful reflection of our experience living today, one that is both dark and haunting yet cathartic, reminding us of how crisis can yield change. Metonymic and metaphorical in its composition, the exhibition impressionistically highlights our psychological and physical responses to the lockdowns, the incompetence of our politicians in the face of this challenge and the international reckoning of racial inequalities highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement.

Against the backdrop of the daily shifting tectonic plates of the pandemic, Akomfrah's new work is what he calls "gestalt cinema", an exhibition that mirrors our "current emotional states" as well as "states of emotion" themselves. The film takes its cue from Akomfrah's obsession with early cinema; the work is shot entirely in black and white, forming a bricolage of new and archival footage, bringing together newly shot footage, found footage and 19th century early photography. Alongside the imagery, a sonic soundscape – designed by Akomfrah in collaboration with an ensemble of composers – poetically weaves the passages of the film together.

The thematic and formal template of this new project is founded in the two highly acclaimed and ground-breaking works by Akomfrah that featured in previous Venice Biennales - *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Four Nocturnes* (2019). *Five Murmurations* continues the engagement of these prescient concerns, using the subjects and images as ghosts of past conversations, be it real or imagined. Recent tragic incidences and victims of 2020, including Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and 13 year old Adam Toledo from Chicago, find their moments in Akomfrah's portal, echoed through imagery of tragedies in art history, such as Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* (1480).

This exhibition follows Akomfrah's major US solo exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum (2020), ICA Boston (2019) and New Museum, New York (2018), and precedes presentations at Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK; The Box, Plymouth; Sharjah Biennial; The Hirshhorn, Washington DC; Baltimore Art Museum; and the Menil Collection in 2022.

About the artist

John Akomfrah is a hugely respected artist and filmmaker, whose works are characterised by their investigations into memory, post-colonialism, temporality and aesthetics and often explores the experiences of migrant diasporas globally. Akomfrah was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which started in London in 1982 alongside the artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, who he still collaborates with today. Their first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) explored the events surrounding the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London through a charged combination of archive footage, still photos and newsreel. The film won several international prizes and established a multi-layered visual style that has become a recognisable motif of Akomfrah's practice. Other works include the three-screen installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a moving portrait of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's life and work; *Peripeteia* (2012), an imagined drama visualising the lives of individuals included in two 16th century portraits by Albrecht Dürer and *Mnemosyne* (2010) which exposes the experience of migrants in the UK, questioning the notion of Britain as a promised land by revealing the realities of economic hardship and casual racism.

In 2015, Akomfrah premiered his three-screen film installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which explores what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls 'the sublime seas'. Fusing archival material, readings from classical sources and newly shot footage, Akomfrah's piece focuses on the disorder and cruelty of the whaling industry and juxtaposes it with scenes of many generations of migrants making epic crossings of the ocean for a better life. In 2017, Akomfrah presented his largest film installation to date, *Purple* (2017), at the Barbican in London, co-commissioned by Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden, TBA21—Academy, The Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston, Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon and Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow. The six-channel video installation addresses climate change, human communities and the wilderness. More recently, Akomfrah debuted *Precarity* (2017) at Prospect 4 New Orleans, following the life of forgotten New Orleans jazz singer Charles 'Buddy' Bolden. In 2019, on the occasion of his participation at the first Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, John Akomfrah presented *Four Nocturnes* (2019), a three-channel piece that reflects on the complex intertwined relationship between humanity's destruction of the natural world and our destruction of ourselves.

Akomfrah (born 1957) lives and works in London. He has had numerous solo exhibitions including Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain (2021); Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla, Spain (2020); Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, USA (2020); Secession, Vienna, Austria (2020); BALTIC, Gateshead, UK (2019); ICA Boston, MA, USA (2019); Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); New Museum, New York, NY, USA (2018); Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (2015, 2018); SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA, USA (2018); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain (2018); Barbican, London, UK (2017); Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (2017); Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK (2016); Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, Denmark (2016); STUK Kunstcentrum, Leuven, Belgium (2016); Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan, USA (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2013-14) and a week long series of screenings at MoMA, New York, USA (2011). His participation in international group shows includes: Ghana Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2019); 'Strange Days: Memories of the Future', New Museum x The Store, London, UK (2018); Prospect 4, New Orleans, LA, USA (2017); 'Restless Earth', La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2017); 'Unfinished Conversations', Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY, USA (2017); 'British Art Show 8' (2015-17); 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2015); 'History is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain', Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2015); 'Africa Now: Political Patterns', SeMA, Seoul, South Korea (2014); Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2013); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012) and Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2012). He has also been featured in many international film festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, Utah, USA (2013 and 2011) and Toronto International Film Festival, Canada (2012). He was awarded the Artes Mundi Prize in 2017.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art &

Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer.

In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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