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The Observer John Akomfrah

Interview

'Another layer of pigment needed adding to the canvas': artist John Akomfrah on changing the narrative, from Windrush to colonialism

Tim Adams

As he prepares to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale, Akomfrah talks about fleeing Ghana aged nine, the Rwanda fiasco, and creating images that shift the dial

John Akomfrah at his north London studio. Photograph: Amit Lennon

If I'd met him 50-odd years ago, John Akomfrah says, with the infectious giggle that punctuates his conversation, two words would have sprung immediately to my mind: "Black nerd." He was the kid at school who soaked up every bit of cultural learning going, who always had his head in a book on the bus. There was, of course, he says, "some connection between the hostility of the outside world in the 1960s and 1970s and the refuge kids like me found in books. I was always looking for things that allowed you to imagine this place otherwise. That's why I loved going to the Tate Gallery as a child; that's why I loved going to the cinema," he smiles again. "And don't forget, television wasn't exactly a refuge for a Black kid in the 1970s..."

If Akomfrah, now a youthful 66, sponged up that culture in his formative years, the past four decades have seen him reinventing it, in artistic film-making that is constantly curious to re-evaluate imagined pasts. In this way, Sir John – he was knighted in last year's New Year's honours – never stops making sense of the political present. With the news agenda full of postcolonial insanity – a Tory government pinning its desperate election hopes on deporting 300 refugees to Rwanda – he feels like the wisest of choices to represent the nation at this month's Venice Biennale.

When I meet him at his studio – two warehouse-sized floors in Wood Green, north London – he is being trailed by a film crew from the British Council, the body that selected him to create this year's British pavilion. Akomfrah has always led collaborative teams: in his 20s he was the leading light of a group called the Black Audio Film Collective with fellow travellers from Portsmouth Poly; since 1998, his art has been produced through Smoking Dog Films, with two survivors of that group, his friend David Lawson and his partner Lina Gopaul.

While I wait for him to finish filming, I chat with Lawson in a side studio. He flicks through some of the photographs they have been looking at – archival material is key to Akomfrah's work – from the former Belgian Congo and 1950s Britain. He agrees that he and Akomfrah and Gopaul share a pretty telepathic understanding. "We've known each other since 1982," he says. "And we always know the work that has got to be done, the histories we are covering, the sort of synapses that we have got to make connect."

And no doubt they always agree on what will work?

Meditation on migration: The Nine Muses by John Akomfrah. Photograph: Moviestore Collection /Alamy

He laughs uproariously.

Akomfrah's art is all about juxtaposition, placing stories and images from the present and from long ago and letting them start conversations. He works with split screens on gallery walls, allowing the viewer to make leaps between the images and ideas that he surfaces. When he sits down opposite me, he confirms with an apology that he's not able to talk about the detail of his plans for Venice, including a new immersive film, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, embargoed until opening. "Though I mean," he says, "it's not going to be a surprise to anyone that there are certain questions I will be raising. Because they have always been the staple of the work. Questions of memory and of our national past will figure, particularly through what I call this lens of deep listening." There is a lot of strident white noise around just now, Akomfrah suggests: his films try to tune into deeper frequencies – the 11th-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo is one departure point for the Venice work.

> *I remember very, very powerfully, that sense that everything good had turned bad. We were in danger*

There is an easy intensity about Akomfrah as a person. He is happy to engage in freewheeling chat, but he can turn up the intellectual rigour on cue. His conversation, like his films, takes in a range of references to what he calls constant influences – Virginia Woolf, say, "never goes away"; film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky likewise. And then there are the reference points currently on his mind. "So for Venice," he says, "suddenly Rothko, who I hadn't properly thought of for decades, kept coming up. I've learned to follow those thoughts: what is it that's making Rothko important? Or what is it that's making Ezra Pound – bizarrely – suddenly interesting to me again?"

A constant theme of his work, that feels personal as well as political, is a sense of uprootedness or displacement, a loss of innocence. In his 2010 film *The Nine Muses*, a full-length meditation on migration, he quotes, as elsewhere, from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*; knowing even the outline of his own biography gives an emotional freight to that borrowing. Akomfrah's parents had been prominent figures in the African independence movement in their native Ghana that brought Kwame Nkrumah to power, with his utopian vision of pan-African socialism. In 1966, when the CIA-backed plot to overthrow Nkrumah ended in a military coup, Akomfrah's father was killed, and, aged nine, Akomfrah was forced with his mother to flee the country, first to the US and then to London.

Akomfrah after receiving a CBE in 2008. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

Thinking back to that time, I wonder if the years before those horrors had an Edenic quality in his memory?

"It certainly felt like that immediately after it ended," he says. "I remember the day of the coup, the announcements that were on the radio. One of the military guys said: 'These kids, they lack discipline! Now we will cane them!' I remember thinking: 'Like, really? That's what you came to power for, to beat kids?'

We'd never heard talk like this. So yeah, what came before did feel like a paradise."

The death of your father obviously compounded that agonising sense of loss?

"Of course. And I remember very, very powerfully, that sense that everything good had turned bad. We were in danger. You knew as a kid there were people outside the house saying, we're coming to get you. I couldn't wait to be elsewhere."

Akomfrah told a story to the *New York Times*, of how before they left Accra they went to say goodbye to his grandfather, the patriarch of the Akomfrah clan. The old man, the story went, wore a ring passed down through generations, which represented the power to bring order to life's chaos. His grandfather did not pass the ring on to him, as might have been expected; instead the old man swallowed it. Akomfrah took that to mean that his grandfather believed the ring's power was at an end. You might see Akomfrah's artistic career as a continual act of defiance against that belief.

A scene from Akomfrah's three-channel 2015 installation Vertigo Sea. Photograph: Smoking Dogs Films

He has spent a lot of his life examining ideas of escape and refuge; the latter term clearly carries a powerful emotional charge for him. It originally meant a new home in the shadow of Battersea power station in south London.

"Oh my God!" he says, recalling that sanctity. "London was cold and all that, and it became something else afterwards, but certainly initially, this was like, again, a paradise."

His mother, who had lost everything, did her best to retain that feeling for him. "It was quite something to watch these women who had lost husbands in wars or coups suddenly here with kids and trying to find ways of adjusting, doing backbreaking work to survive. It's why I've never taken things like reading for granted, because I know how precious it was. I grew up among a lot of people who didn't have the time to do it."

After that beginning, London "became something else" gradually. "I always talk about it as a 'slow encounter with my doppelganger'," he says. "For a while, the things you hear seem to be about somebody else, this double of yours. And then at some point, you realise with a shock it's you they are talking about. You are the mugger, you are the foreigner, whatever."

Before any anger at this realisation, he says, "there was disenchantment that grew out of the feeling that something you love - Britain - does not love you. And then once you've come out of the space of hurt, you think: OK, I need to start saying something."

A scene from Akomfrah's 2021 video installation The Unfinished Conversation. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah's first film with the collective, back in 1983, was called *Signs of Empire* and included a quote from a Tory MP, former secretary of state for the colonies Duncan Sandys, talking about second-generation immigrants from the Commonwealth: "They don't know who they are, or what they are." "Our films were saying," Akomfrah recalls, "you are quite wrong about that, mate."

That understanding came partly through a recognition of absence. "If you wander around the Tate Gallery for years and years, as I did," he says "at some point it's going to dawn on you: I'm not here. There is no representation of people like me."

In this respect, he agrees, it feels extraordinary for him to be a part of shows like the current, fabulous exhibition Entangled Pasts at the Royal Academy in London, which reappraises that institution's relationship with colonial history, or Tate Britain's rehang that confronts the gallery's foundations in the slave trade. His generation of artists, including Sonia Boyce (winner of the Golden Lion at Venice last time around) and Keith Piper have been instrumental in forcing that change. "And without that sense that we were quote, unquote, missing [from galleries] we would never have done anything," he says.

Did it always feel as if you had an opportunity to make that mark, to fill that space?

"Yes. But not because you suddenly stopped loving Turner or admiring Constable. It was just the feeling that another layer of pigment needed to be added to this kind of canvas, and that was you."

The late cultural critic Stuart Hall, who became a close friend and mentor, was pivotal in framing some of those thoughts for Akomfrah. Before Hall died in 2014, Akomfrah made a pair of wonderful films about his life and ideas, *The Unfinished Conversation* and *The Stuart Hall Project*, as a way of acknowledging that debt. "It was only when I started to look at Stuart's archive at the BBC," Akomfrah says, "that I realised that this guy had been tracking my generation from when we were born; he understood that

whatever happened in this country, we were going to play some major role in it."

Close friend and mentor... a still from Akomfrah's 2013 film The Stuart Hall Project.

The first expression of that role was *Handsworth Songs*, the Black Audio Film Collective's 1986 reflection on recent riots in Birmingham. Speaking to the *Guardian* after that film came out, Akomfrah suggested that at a time of peak racial tension "we wanted to find a way in which images of race could be brought into a meditative, reflective arena... to build up a series of alliances that stretches from, say, a community centre in Hackney to a kind of European festival circuit". The group was steeped in film-making discourse, some from European new wave cinema, some from radical film-making in the developing world and civil rights-era America. Their ambition was nothing less than "the reformulation of the agenda of Black politics in this country".

The film, which set footage of the unrest and police violence alongside images from colonial and industrial history, was an attempt to change the pace and tone of debate about race in this country. Salman Rushdie famously took issue with it in the *Guardian*, in particular Akomfrah's belief that "there are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories": "the buzz about the film is good," Rushdie wrote. "People are calling it multilayered, original, imaginative, its director John Akomfrah is getting mentioned around town as a talent to watch. [But] unfortunately it's no good..."

Stuart Hall responded by castigating Rushdie for missing "the struggle it represents: to find a new language... to break with the tired style of the riot-documentary". The writer and activist Darcus Howe, meanwhile, welcomed this mature critical attention of Black British film-makers' work: "Rushdie simply says that the attempt to shape a new language does not work..." he wrote. "And I am certain that the film-makers will take that on board."

Akomfrah did and didn't take on board Rushdie's arguments for more journalistic specificity about Black British lives. He has never been interested in straight narrative storytelling; he has instead found disturbing and poetic ways to deconstruct historical myth, to get under the skin of current debate. There is a prophetic quality to several of the films. If you look back at *Nine Muses*, for example, the film feels like a necessary preface to the Windrush scandal.

A still from the 1986 film Handsworth Songs by the Black Audio Film Collective – John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, David Lawson and Trevor Mathison. Photograph: John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective

"I think what happens is that you get a sense that a question needs to be raised," he says. "And if it's true, then at some point that takes on a life of its own. When we started the *Nine Muses* it was with the idea that the Windrush generation was disappearing. It felt as if they were so unacknowledged that they deserved a kind of epitaph. But as soon as we did that, the rumblings for what became the Windrush scandal started."

The shock of that story, he suggests, was that issues around citizenship that seemed resolved were obviously not. "I didn't think that there could still be a home secretary and a Home Office still concerned about making this place a hostile environment for Black people."

Akomfrah unveils the multi-screen installation Mimesis: African Soldier, at the Imperial War Museum in London in 2018. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

He has a gift for finding the telling images to open up these ideas. In the Getty archive, he says, he's just come across a picture of Enoch Powell in a van, making a byelection speech about immigration. "And around the van," he says, "are three young Black kids and three young white kids who are clearly all friends. They've all picked up a leaflet from Enoch Powell. And you can see them looking at it and looking at each other really bewildered. What's going on?"

His own answer to that question long ago became: more than one thing. The multiple screens of his work emphasise the ethical and political point that there is always more than a single story, much as nationalists might try to insist on one "patriotic" thread.

"For example," he says, "when I was researching slave ships it was a really big thing for me to realise that many of them were basically customised whaling ships. Having [depleted one resource] they just changed cargo to what was more profitable. So you find these affinities, often dark, that exist between subjects."

During the pandemic he became fascinated by the congruence in the spread of fears about the virus and the advance of the Black Lives Matter movement. He wasn't able to go on the march in London that, in effect, broke social distancing rules after the death of George Floyd - Akomfrah had pneumonia - but he was alive to its energies. The result was another film, *Five Murmurations*, which examines the forcefield of anxiety in that period: "I can't breathe."

'The film of Floyd's murder felt like a crucifixion': John Akomfrah. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

One powerful section of that film sets the images of Floyd's murder against the Mantegna's Renaissance painting of the dead Christ and news footage of the death of Che Guevara.

"The film of Floyd's murder felt like a crucifixion, or an event staged in the language of art history," Akomfrah says. "The passion of George Floyd. If you are familiar with art history you couldn't not think of it in those terms."

The echoes were intended, he says, to open up questions about that iconography of suffering, rather than to present any narrow polemic or argument. I'm "interested", he likes to say, "in the ways in which unseen guests arrive at parties", the power of unconscious association.

> *These young men on the boats are figures of investment. They are a colossal loss for the place they have left*

It seems no coincidence that this kind of metaphorical practice should seem such a powerful corrective to political imagery just now. Akomfrah's 2015 film *Vertigo Sea*, for example, weaves a history of human immigration into themes of environmental pollution, in ways that pre-empt rightwing attacks on "wokery" and the science of the climate crisis. When he made that film, that rhetoric hadn't hardened into Brexit and GB News, but he knew it was coming.

"The original plan was to do a project called The Boat," he says. "We had become aware that there were these places in west Africa where people were gathering, having walked across the Sahara from Libya or wherever, and then trying to get on to boats to Europe. I had the idea to do the whole journey, and then get on a boat with them."

From Akomfrah's 2023 installation Arcadia. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

It quickly became clear that the risks involved were too high, an instance of imagination foundering on brutal reality. "I think initially, it felt like a kind of Odyssean project, but we quickly realised it was something much darker, less Greek. And the conditions that were forcing people to flee in that way had got worse, not better." He knew that at some point, "since the obsession with migration has always been with numbers", that the wave would reach Dover and "start to dictate the political rhetoric" here.

Still, he says, that did not prepare him for the "surreal quality of the Rwanda fiasco, in which politicians of colour are leading the conversation. Suella Braverman, Kemi Badenoch, that whole Tory elite of Black and Asian politicians. I used to think they were ventriloquised in some way, by other forces bigger than themselves. But at some point, you have to believe: no, this is actually them speaking."

He has a take on that narrative that rarely gets an airing these days, but which is no less true. “It never ceases to surprise me why the obviousness of what’s going on isn’t presented,” he says. “These young men risking their lives on the boats, they’ll be anything from 20 to 30. Which means that they are figures of incredible investment. Somebody’s given birth to these kids, brought them up, spent money on them. They are a colossal loss for the place they have left… I never understand why it is not presented for what it is: a story of third world subsidy for advanced economies.”

Perhaps that is one of the ideas that will be floated in Venice. Before I go, I wonder if he is daunted at all by the prospect of representing his fractured nation at this moment (though he has shown work at the Biennale before, including in the Ghana pavilion in 2015).

“Of course,” he says, “but that is absolutely as it should be. I mean, all those years when I went to the Biennale and felt maybe ‘this isn’t quite as hard as it looks’, I now know the truth. It’s difficult, because the building itself is a challenge. And trying to think about how to arrange things that’s different from Gilbert and George or Chris Ofili or Sonia Boyce.”

Those ghosts of past again; as he knows as well as anyone, they don’t go away.

- The British Council commission Listening All Night to the Rain is at the at the Venice Biennale, 20 April- 24 November

- This article was amended on 7 April 2024 because an earlier version conferred an incorrect description of “London MP” on the writer and activist Darcus Howe.

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ARTFORUM

John Akomfrah

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

By Michael Corris

John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 45 minutes 48 seconds.

John Akomfrah, a Ghanaian-born British artist and cofounder of the Black Audio Film Collective, is widely known for his large-scale, multichannel video installations that conjoin a host of seemingly disparate visual and textual materials. This exhibition, "A Space of Empathy," featured three of his works—*The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012; *Vertigo Sea*, 2015; and *Becoming Wind*, 2023—accompanied by a reading room with books reflecting the libraries of the artist and the curator, Julia Grosse.

As a social archaeologist, Akomfrah forges connections between the past and the present. Visual and textual tokens referring to historical events, cultural identities, the environment, and the textures of everyday life are drawn together to create a spectacularly powerful montage. The intellectual underpinnings of Akomfrah's work include the cultural politics of the New Left, Antonio Gramsci's "optimism of the will," and recent philosophical accounts of the Anthropocene. *The Unfinished Conversation* is a kind of visual bildungsroman on the life and times of Stuart Hall (1932–2014).

Jamaican-born, Oxford-educated, and of mixed ancestry, Hall was a pivotal intellectual who helped to found *New Left Review* and, with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, establish the field of cultural studies in Britain. Hall's profound influence on Akomfrah and other Black British artists, such as Isaac Julien, encouraged their engagement with histories beyond the dominant narratives. For Akomfrah, the crucial lesson is that cultural identities are historically constructed, and therefore reconstructible. The possibility of change reverberates throughout his work, which literalizes a hope for a transformed future through a montage aesthetic "of companionship between disparate elements, because," he believes, "if it works ethically in the film, it must work in life."

Akomfrah's cinematic eye is very much in evidence as *The Unfinished Conversation* sweeps majestically across three channels, offering a conspectus of postwar British history with its conflicts around race, organized labor, women's rights, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, and the rise of youth culture. Continuously flanked by rapid sequences of nuclear tests, police brutality, and scenes from the Suez Crisis and the Vietnam War, is the serene image of Hall himself, analyzing, explaining, and describing the world around him in a voice that is velvety, resolute, authoritative. Yet this panorama of past struggles, intended to be inspirational, begins to feel strained and ultimately raises doubts about the contribution of cultural studies to the actual political fortunes of the left. A similar sense of deflation is felt in *Vertigo Sea*, in which the ocean—this "aquatic sublime"—is the protagonist in a drama linking whaling, the enslavement and displacement of African peoples to the Americas, and contemporary migrations via sea routes. The interspersed scenes of the aquatic environment, excerpts from *Moby-Dick*,historical accounts of the Middle Passage, and images of Vietnamese refugees attempting to reach Hong Kong, are ravishing. But unless you are willing to accept the platitude that "everything is connected to everything," the result seems merely a fiction of unity.

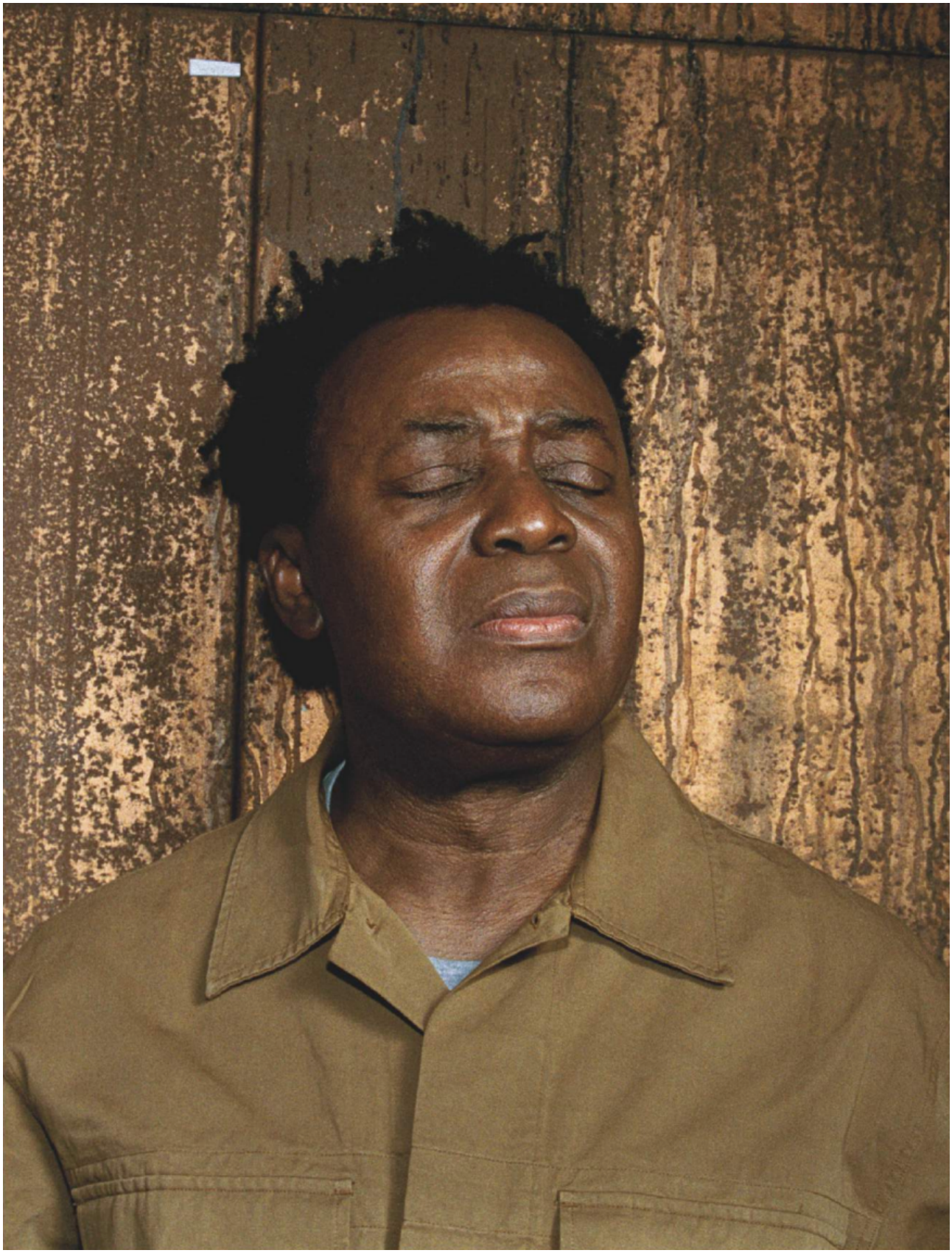
Becoming Wind—a Covid-lockdown project—expands Akomfrah's repertoire of motifs to include the natural phenomenon of wind as a trope with which to explore issues surrounding the emergence and potential transformation of minority identities. He extols its "ability to move through things"—this film's leading metaphor and a statement describing his entire practice. His idea of a democracy of source materials presumes a leveling of the sensible and the conceptual, and risks reducing history—that treasure

trove of determinants awaiting their moment on his stage—to a spectacularly animated passing parade. Regardless of the poetic appeal and cinematic charm that attaches to Akomfrah's work, it begs the question: On what basis can such a work provide political knowledge about how or where to enter the flow of history in order to steer it toward justice? Akomfrah opens up to us an enormous archive, but in a form that cries out: The archive alone will not save us.

frieze
April 2024

Profile: *Vanessa Peterson* meets with the artist ahead of his Venice presentation to discuss the challenges of representing the UK at this year's biennial and the overdue recognition of Black British art

John Akomfrah



John Akomfrah is no stranger to the Venice Biennale, but this year's appearance – his third in just under a decade – feels different, he tells me: weightier, with more pressure and expectation. Now tasked with representing the UK, he admits that it 'feels more urgent and demanding'. With previous invitations – his work was shown as part of Okwui Enwezor's 'All The World's Futures' in 2015, which marked the first time a Black African curator was at the helm of the biennial, and four years later, when curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim included Akomfrah, alongside other Ghanaian artists, in the country's first national pavilion, 'Ghana Freedom' – he accepted he was 'a player in an ensemble, a drama in which your walk-on role only lasts a few minutes'.

On a rare sunny January afternoon, I visit Akomfrah in the airy studios of Smoking Dogs – a film production company he co-founded in 1997 with fellow former Black Audio Film Collective members Lina Gopaul and David Lawson – in the bustling, north London neighbourhood of Wood Green. Upon my arrival, it becomes clear that the artist and his production team are busy working to complete the film that will be shown at this year's Venice Biennale. Despite the timing of my visit, however, his demeanour is warm and he peppers our conversation with hearty laughs and a sense of inquisitiveness: he is just as curious about me and my opinions as I am about him.

Due to the timing of our interview, Akomfrah is subject to an embargo, meaning that he can only reveal so much about what will be on view at the British pavilion. He does tell me that his film, *Listening All Night to the Rain*, draws on the work of 11th-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo, whose writings convey his love for the natural world and the landscapes he navigated during his travels in exile, while meditating on the fleeting passage of time. It was also significantly informed by the physical structure of the British Pavilion, which he describes as reminiscent of an 'ominous structure from a Stanley Kubrick film', and the sonic challenges that the building presents. 'The space comes with a lengthy list of what are effectively injunctions that go into great detail about all the things you *can't* do before telling you what you *can* do.' Given these constraints, British Pavilion programmers have traditionally erred towards sculpture and painting: Steve McQueen's *Giardini* (2009), which showcased an off-season biennial site eerily devoid of its usual throngs of visitors, was the first time curators opted for a film installation by a single artist.

Previous page
Portrait of John Akomfrah, 2024. Image commissioned for *frieze*. Photograph: Suzannah Pettigrew

Below
Testament, 1988, film still. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: © Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Opposite page
Arcadia, 2023, film still

For Akomfrah, the British Pavilion commission aligns with a hallmark of his own philosophical thinking, closely informed by Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993): that the lingering ghosts of previous exhibiting artists, all of whom have left traces of their own commissions in the building's nooks and crannies, collectively form a tapestry of British art. 'It's more than just an encounter with physical space,' he tells me. 'It's an encounter with the ancestral spirits of the pavilion.' The roll call of artists who have come before him include Gilbert & George, Sarah Lucas, J.M.W. Turner – a favourite of Akomfrah – and, most recently, Sonia Boyce. His various reflections on these many spectres result in a form of bricolage – a technique inherent in Akomfrah's deft approach to interweaving archival film with newly shot footage.

Representing the UK in 2024 could feel like an impossible task. How to successfully convey the nuances of a country whose people are widely defeatist, with a continuing disdain for anyone deemed to be Other, and whose political system has lurched to the right? Our conversation often broaches Akomfrah's feelings of disenchantment following the UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016. This coexists with what he describes to me as a 'deep, abiding love' for the country he saw as a place of refuge when he moved to London as a child in 1966. His creeping sense of disenchantment came from growing to understand the complexities of emancipation: the freedom he thought he would gain on arrival didn't entirely come to fruition. This, he believes, relates to the ways in which, as a culture, the UK has processed difference: these histories of race and gender, for instance, 'are woven into the fabric of this place, and they dictate how you are going to be treated if you are seen to be *different*.' His responsibility as he saw it, he tells me, was to make films which helped others to understand what it means to be considered an outsider in any context. Despite this, he also talks of what he describes as a 'deep fidelity' to ensuring he offers a nuanced, complex reading of British life from the perspective of someone who has migrated to the country.

Akomfrah was born in Ghana's capital, Accra, in 1957 – a little less than two months after the country declared its independence from the UK. Both his parents were involved in activist organizations and independence movements during this period of political turmoil, which saw Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, overthrown in a coup and ultimately led to the untimely death of Akomfrah's father, heralding a move away from Ghana with his mother. Taking what the artist describes to me as a 'circuitous route', they emigrated initially to the US before settling in the UK. In their London home, his family tried to reproduce their own version of Accra, filled with anecdotes and remembrances from their past, repeated and dissected through the theatre of conversation.

It's an encounter with the ancestral spirits of the pavilion.

John Akomfrah

It's a topic the filmmaker addressed in his 1988 film *Testament*, in which the lead character – a politician-turned-journalist called Abena – returns to Ghana after 22 years of self-imposed exile in the UK. Trying to track down the filmmaker Werner Herzog, who is reportedly in town to film a documentary, Abena also finds herself contending with those she left behind, in an unravelling plot of loss and grief. When I first watched *Testament*, I saw it as an elegy to those Akomfrah termed 'the vanquished' in a conversation I had with the artist alongside artist Lyle Ashton Harris for *Aperture* in 2023: those who leave, whether by their own choice or by necessity.

At this stage in his career, it makes sense to me that Akomfrah uses words such as 'responsibility' when describing his ideas of artistic legacy. From his perspective, Black British artistic production looks very different now from when he first started to make films in the mid-1980s, against a backdrop of political turbulence, police violence, racial discrimination and tense labour relations. To rewatch *Handsworth Songs* (1986) now – Akomfrah's highly acclaimed documentary chronicling the uprisings sparked by racist policing in Birmingham and London during the 1980s – at a time when those on the right of Britain's political spectrum are demonizing migrants amidst rolling labour strikes, is to see our current moment reflected at us through

Akomfrah continues to mine the depths of human experience in its myriad forms.

Vanessa Peterson

Above
Black Audio Film Collective and John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, film stills

Opposite page
The Last Angel of History, 1995, film stills

the 1980s. As the film's melancholic voiceover narrates: 'There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.' In 1985, the Handsworth area of Birmingham was contending with protests and a feeling of exclusion. Akomfrah, working in collaboration with Black Audio Film Collective, disrupted the overriding media narrative and offered Handsworth's residents the opportunity to speak for themselves about their lives. Those interviewed in the film narrated their experiences of discrimination as a primary concern, alongside a lack of quality housing and decent employment prospects. The film juxtaposes vernacular photographs and archive footage of the Windrush generation – who arrived in the 1940s and '50s, laden with hope and anticipation, sporting dapper suits and sharp haircuts – with an acute sense of how fear and suffering only serves to breed intolerance and vilification.

Rewatching *Handsworth Songs* as it approaches its 40th anniversary made me think of a quote by the poet Dionne Brand in her book *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging* (2001): 'One is born into history, one is not born in a void.' Akomfrah tells me that, upon reviewing a segment of *Handsworth Songs* recently, he noted 'the tone of elegy that underscored the project', realizing he was also still 'struck by its inherent melancholia' and the sense of it being 'a truly modernist project which says: "There is nothing new here."' Akomfrah rarely rewatches his films, he confides, noting with a wry smile: 'You watch stuff that you've made and, inevitably, you see things that you could have done differently. I don't like that feeling of subjecting work to critique from an older me.'

An older Akomfrah continues to mine the depths of human experience in its myriad forms, alongside our complex entanglement with the natural world. Multiple motifs recur throughout his films. *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Four Nocturnes* (2019), for instance, have a presiding concern with the ways in which humans can enact harm upon each other and the world around them through overconsumption, environmental pollution and the hunting and killing of animals such as whales and elephants. This interest takes an autobiographical slant in *Purple* (2017), in which thick plumes of smoke fill the sky while a voiceover narrates how toxic fumes from vehicles and factories turn into rain which damages crops and leads to polluted seas and waterways. As Akomfrah noted in a 2017 interview with *The Guardian*, living next to London's Battersea Power Station as a child meant he grew up breathing toxic air every day.

We also encounter the ocean in various guises: from *Vertigo Sea*, which traced the journeys of migrants who died while making perilous crossings in search of a better life, to *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), which documents the experiences of the Windrush generation, who traversed the Atlantic to help fill UK labour shortages following World War II. Another recurring motif in Akomfrah's work is the *Rückenfigur* – a figure viewed from behind as they look ahead, typified by Caspar David Friedrich's romantic painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) – which harks back to the 19th century era of exploration. The sonic is a key component as well, with dance, movement and song providing a means not only of forming an identity but a community, too. *Mnemosyne* (2010), for instance, includes African American spiritual hymns such as 'Motherless Child', performed by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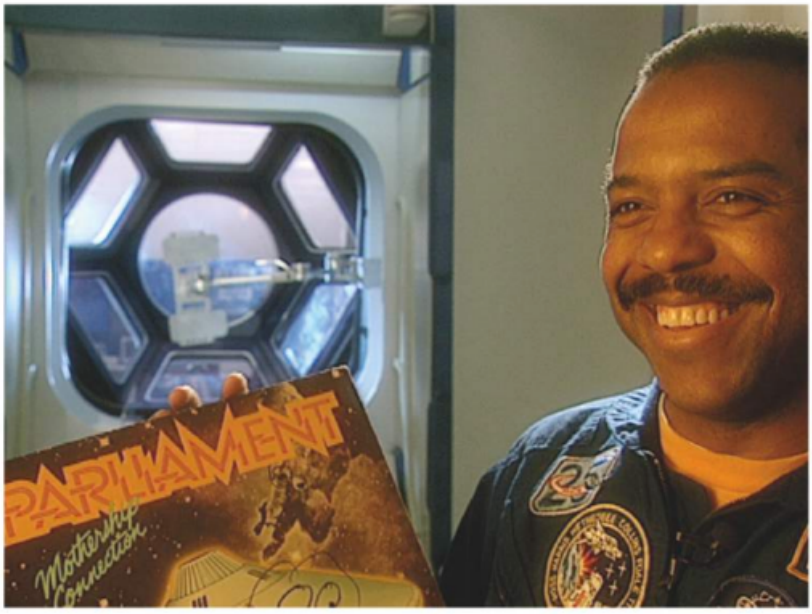
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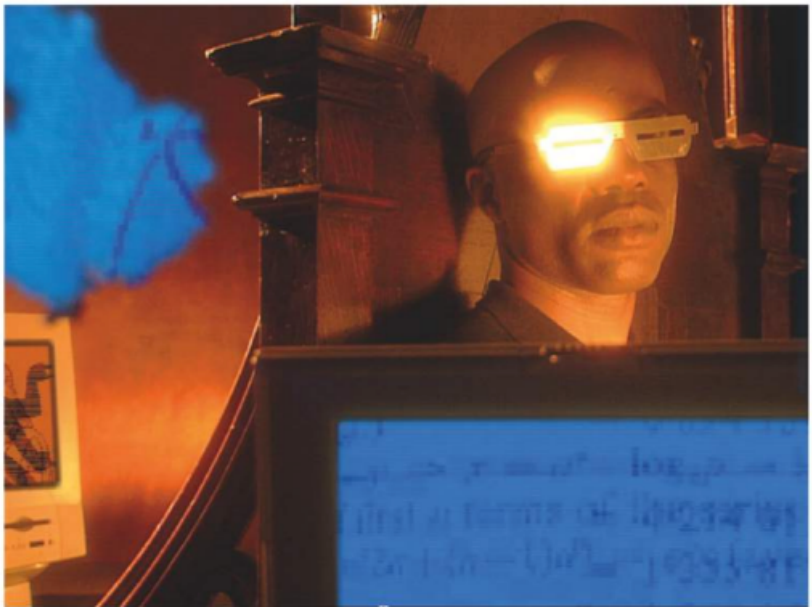


soprano Leontyne Price, and 'Go Down Moses', sung by Paul Robeson. By returning to these key thematics, Akomfrah's films assume the elegiac effect he uses to describe *Handsworth Songs*: taken together, his oeuvre reads like a prolonged lament, interspersing the grief of past and current realities with brief glimpses of what could be.

A voracious reader and scholar, Akomfrah has notably taken inspiration from various cultural figures, including the British critical theorist Stuart Hall, subject of his three-screen film *The Unfinished Conversation*, whose studies had a profound impact on how we decode the images we consume. Other films – including *Vertigo Sea*, *Purple* and *Four Nocturnes* – are laden with references and readings from writers who have reckoned with themes of power, obedience and migration, such as John Berger, John Milton and Shakespeare. Dotted across the studio are books that illustrate Akomfrah's keen interest in the visual representation of the UK, such as Paul Gilroy's *Black Britain: A Photographic History* (2007) and Daniel Meadows's *Now and Then: England 1970–2015* (2019) – both of which contain documentary images that span race, class and generations. It is evident that Britain, as both a country and a concept, continues to be a central preoccupation for the artist.

Towards the end of our conversation, I ask Akomfrah what changes he has observed over the course of his career. In some respects, he appears surprised at the way his work has been received by younger audiences: 'When people come to take my photograph, I'm completely stunned.' Akomfrah reminds me of events he attended in his youth, such as the First National Black Art Convention, held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1982. While attendees were few, those present included the likes of Boyce, Lubaina Himid and Claudette Johnson. Boyce was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2022 Venice Biennale, where she was the first Black woman to represent the UK. Himid won the Turner Prize in 2017, becoming the first Black woman and the oldest person to do so, while Johnson's recent solo show at the Courtauld Institute of Art, her first London survey exhibition, marked a new career highlight. Nowadays, Akomfrah tells me, he no longer feels a sense of isolation; rather, making the kind of work he does, alongside his many peers, feels like a 'crowded room at a fun party, where people are having a great time'. Despite the mournful minor chord struck in many of his works, his view on the meaning of art – and on how we find meaning in difficult times – is marked by a note of optimism because of the strength of community. 'The loneliness and solitude that came with being a minority or a pariah-like figure in the 1980s has completely disappeared,' he concludes. 'It's not just about whether Britain has changed, which is a question that people keep asking. It's that what we wished for has happened.' ●

It's not just about whether Britain has changed. It's that what we wished for has happened.

John Akomfrah

Vanessa Peterson is associate editor of *frieze*.

The British Council commission *Listening All Night to the Rain* runs at the Venice Biennale from Saturday 20 April to Sunday 24 November 2024.

Opposite page
Purple, 2017, film stills

Above
Five Murmurations, 2021, film stills

Art Monthly
25 March 2024

Deep Listening

The London-based artist of Ghanian descent, who is representing Britain in this year's Venice Biennale, discusses the weight of history and the legacy of Romanticism, working in frontier zones, both physical and psychological, and, above all, the importance of listening.

John Akomfrah interviewed by Chris McCormack

Arcadia, 2023, five channel video, installation view, Sharjah Biennial

Chris McCormack: What does it mean for you to be representing Great Britain at Venice in 2024?

John Akomfrah: If you had told me as a young member of Black Audio Film Collective that I would someday represent Great Britain in Venice, it would have seemed like some bizarre joke. So, it does say something quite considerable about the transformation of my attitudes and about the national culture as a whole. It has been a tumultuous process of negotiation, discussions and conversations that have led to this moment, so the invitation carries a profound sense of weight.

Certainly, artists of colour have been here before, but I still never had the expectation that this was somewhere I was going to end up. When I accepted the invitation to be part of the Ghana Pavilion in 2019 – where I was commissioned to show the video installation *Four Nocturnes* – I didn't think I was ever going to be given the chance to show at a national pavilion again, so it tells you a lot about how my own expectations have changed in a relatively short period of time.

Does the site of the British Pavilion itself pose a set of problems that you thought had to be addressed in the work that you are making?

Yes and no. I have a sense of what ambitions I need to harvest and nurture in order to make this work, but the hyper-visibility of the position means that the minute you are announced as representing the country there is a significant amount of noise that can seem to interfere with that – and I haven't been able to shut that noise down since. There is also a feeling of not wanting to let those down around me, but also the broader public. What has also struck me about the Pavilion is that the visitor experience is somewhat unactive, specifically due to how the building opens with a relatively large space but then gets smaller and smaller as you move through it. So, I definitely had thought about altering this experience if I ever got the chance to show my work there, but this is still in the process of negotiation, as they say in British Council speak.

One thing that has become increasingly apparent is that the minute you agree to showing at the British Pavilion you also take on the brute fact of the history of the building, as well as agreeing to be populated, inhabited almost, by all these phantoms from previous exhibitions.

Four Nocturnes, 2019, three channel video

Your videos already carry this sense of 'previous phantoms', notably the inclusion of archival material in your work. How will the often unexpected and syncopated proximities of personal and political associations that are scaled to the magnitude of the natural world, alongside sometimes violent imagery, take shape in the context of Venice?

I have tried to give space to the anxiety of it, put it that way. I'm in deep conversation with previous incarnations at the Pavilion, while still trying to keep a singular road, if that makes sense. I'm trying to summarise as well as take a kind of leap forward, and some of it, yes, is about other works and artists that have been there before – sometimes in absentia. For instance, I don't want to do a piece explicitly on Venice itself, because Steve McQueen's work was all about Venice. I'm also avoiding working explicitly around colours because I think of Chris Ofili's work, you know. So, you're walking these tightropes and labyrinths where I'm thinking, 'I can't go there because we went there the last time'. I'm trying all kinds of manual strategies, some involve your own memory of things, and some just a sense that you should stay away.

The work draws upon ideas of acoustomology. I wondered what led you to this. For instance, do you see this film as a musical score?

It's a word coined by Steven Feld that I've always loved, combining acoustics and epistemology seemed genius – why has no one thought about this before? The challenges of trying to render visual that which is generally considered beyond the realm of vision seemed novel, so I'm interested in trying to find the ways the visual and the auditory are inseminations of one in the other. As a result, the whole Pavilion will be about deep listening, no question.

Are you interested in heightening listening as a way of provoking more nuanced, political conversations? Your work has often addressed the legacies of empire, for example.

So many avenues that we have gone down as a species, as a set of nations, where if there were angels of history, just even one that would come and sit on our shoulders and say, 'Hello, can you just look at me and do something slightly different', then perhaps we might be in a slightly better place.

I have been returning to various points in recent history when hundreds of people have chanted and marched down city streets with the idea that this is how they are going to get the nation that is theirs, and you feel as if somebody should have said to them: 'Listen, just go and read about the First or Second World Wars' – but they don't know this history,

One thing that has become increasingly apparent is that the minute you agree to showing at the British Pavilion you also take on the brute fact of the history of the building, as well as agreeing to be populated, inhabited almost, by all these phantoms from previous exhibitions.

I love thresholds. You know, I love the sense of approaching frontier zones that are demarcated into spaces of living, spaces of the dead, spaces of memory, spaces of history.

because they're not listening. So, it's about this moment when we might take a detour through avenues of memory, suggesting paths not taken because we weren't listening.

Clearly you are also referring to Walter Benjamin's angel being blown backwards through time, a figure driven irresistibly into the future but whose back is turned.

I am interested in how things are imprinted in time, how in order for someone to obey a sign or symbol they have to also comprehend it, be it through hearing, reading or even touching what they say. A central part of my current thinking has been returning to these points of comprehension or legibility in the social sphere. The work will certainly be a rummage through our filmed histories.

Throughout your recent video installations, such as the immersive, multi-channel installation *Purple* from 2017, figures recurringly appear on shorelines surrounded by washed up objects, appearing as if somewhere between the waking world and the unconscious realm or death. What is it about this landscape that you return to?

I love thresholds. You know, I love the sense of approaching frontier zones that are demarcated into spaces of living, spaces of the dead, spaces of memory, spaces of history. I love working with them because so much of it makes us what we are. I have a forthcoming talk with the philosopher Judith Butler in Paris and one of the things that drew me to her work in the first place is precisely this question, how things are conjoined to create these new entities, these new fictions. I find myself asking in these locations, where is the wind coming from, because there is a wind coming.

You mention Benjamin, but the point of the figure appearing with their back to the viewer in my work is partly about anonymity, but it is also partly a debt to Romanticism. As I've said over and over again, and I don't want to deny it because it's true, I don't want people to ever forget the incredible debt to which people of colour owe the Romantic movement because it championed figures of colour in a way that, we'll put it this way, without that movement some of the progress made in the anti-abolitionist movement would not have been possible. The inescapable sense of a shared humanity as a point of entry into the world has to be part of any conversation we are having here, because it reminded us all that we are figures of solitude.

There's no providential signature on the question of inequality. It's man-made, so it can be changed. Ultimately, all this shit is happening because we want it to happen. What feels simple today is absolutely revolutionary – to hear William Blake in his day. I know many are embarrassed by the cloying nature of the Romantic movement and its sentimentality, and I am too, but I still find it a valuable resource, absolutely, for the films I make. I'm continuing to try and picture new ways of bearing witness for this work in Venice.

Purple, 2017, six channel video

The new work quotes the theorist Gaston Bachelard, 'that there is still water at the bottom of each memory'. It's an arresting image but I also get the feeling you would like to disturb some of that stillness.

There's a lot of water in this project, for reasons which will become self-evident by the time we finish and get to show it. For me, at the heart of any project about listening is the question of memory, because listening, in part, is a rehearsing of our oldest faculty, not just human beings but every species on the planet. You hear before you use any other sense. You hear the world before you taste, see or smell anything, but it is also the faculty which, as you practice it, becomes connected to the past.

As an English speaker, you can easily travel across the globe and meet people that can speak the same language. It is this imprint of an empire past continuing into the present.

You really don't see the question of memory and its impact on listening and hearing. If you're in Japan, for instance, you say to somebody, where should I go? I need to find my way to Shinjuku, can you show me where to go? And then you literally see them remember, you see them coming through their memory to think about you, in a way that you don't when you're in South Africa or Ghana. It feels almost natural. The people there predominately speak English. In countries that are slightly remote from a shared language, you really see the facility of memory at work as people speak or as they listen to you. You can really see people literally rummaging through that memory to see, to come up with what they think you're saying. So, I'm interested in the coupling of language and memory, particularly listening and memory.

There is an insomniac-like quality to the title of your new work, *Listening to the Sound of the Rain All Night*. In our era of sleeplessness, what drew you to this particular subject?

Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, video

It's a line from 11th-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo, and there is something strikingly modern about the poem itself. Su describes himself as a boat on a vast expanse of water, and so you're following this thought of being on water and then suddenly there is this cut, and it's quite a violent cut, to him being inside listening only to the rain. So that sense of drift, apparent in the first five or six lines of the poem, will certainly play into the work in some way. I'm drawn to the idea of recreating a sense of someone adrift with their own thoughts and memories. In the poem he says 'he's listening', but of course he's really only listening to himself.

I agree that there is a certain insomniac quality about it. There is a sense that I'm at a point where the noise of the past, my own as well as that of yours or my country or the world, is something worth repositioning and looking at again. Let's see if these histories can be repositioned, reconfigured in a slightly different way, something Jean-Luc Nancy calls the skin of the world. A skin that is fragile.

In a way, it's a phenomenological relationship to the exterior that you are trying to draw upon.

That's the operative word, the phenomenological, because Bachelard has always been important to me, but I didn't realise the extent to which his theories about the temperaments of the four elements – earth, air, fire and water – had been such an influence all these years. All of his writing comes at this question of how one makes things in a slightly different way to everybody else.

Riot and protest appear through some of your early films, most notably *Handsworth Songs*, which responds in some way to the riot along Lozells Road in Birmingham that was sparked by the arrest of a man and a police raid on a pub in the area. Do you see the impetus behind your early films as a means to reflect and give voice to those who might not otherwise have the space to be listened to?

Working with unheard voices is trying to be a kind of photographer who documents crowds, of singling out without losing track of the broader scene of what's happening. For example, perhaps in a photograph you see one or two kids in a large group, and you infer meanings from the place where they are standing. However, the search for singularity is not at the expense of the mass. I'm basically trying to make sure that the space I'm creating or filming in my work is one of empathy, one that can then be encountered and filled by as large a group as possible, but that can't be at the expense of individuation. Again, it is a tightrope.

This brings us back to listening to itself – the question of what material conditions might enable hearing to be possible and, at other times, to be silenced or denied by state-led forces. This idea has shifted into a more associative, less answerable place in your work.

It's like Benjamin says, the angel is staring backwards and all he's seeing is the carnage coming from the past, but it's not true. Perhaps the reality is that if you could just turn it around all you would see would be five kids – that's all you'd see, not blood and rivers, just five kids on their bikes, trying to make sense of growing up. For me, listening is a way of warning about arrogance and hubris, trying to say things to myself and to others. To take a moment to listen, or glance across the shoulder next to you and see what's behind.

John Akomfrah is representing Great Britain in the 2024 Venice Biennale. His exhibition 'Listening to the Sound of the Rain All Night' (commissioned by the British Council) will continue to 24 November.

Chris McCormack is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.

It's about this moment when we might take a detour through avenues of memory, suggesting paths not taken because we weren't listening.

ArtReview
19 March 2024

ArtReview

John Akomfrah on Representing the UK at the 60th Venice Biennale

ArtReview sent a questionnaire to artists and curators exhibiting in and curating the various national pavilions of the 2024 Venice Biennale, the responses to which will be published daily in the leadup to and during the Venice Biennale, which runs from 20 April to 24 November.

John Akomfrah is representing the United Kingdom; the pavilion is in the Giardini.

Photo: Christian Cassiel. © John Akomfrah; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

ArtReview *What do you think of when you think of Venice?*

John Akomfrah What do I think of when I think of Venice? Sinking? Visconti's *Death in Venice* [1971] for some reason always comes into my head. I mean, apart from the fact that it's a great film, it's also not a particularly realistic take on Venice. Another is Nicolas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now*. And, of course, the two major offshoots of the Biennale: the film festival and the architecture biennale. The film festival because I've been invited and gone there, really, since the 90s. And the art biennale since the 2000s, because I've been going either to talk or to attend openings or to be a speaker for other artists. So yeah, in short, when I think of Venice, I think work and *occasional* pleasures.

AR *What can you tell us about your exhibition plans for Venice?*

JA I can tell you that it will be concerned with the ethics of the sonic. It will be concerned with questions of attunement, and about trying to foreground the sonic as a key narrative feature for a series of installations.

AR *Why is the Venice Biennale still important, if at all? And what is the importance of showing there? Is it about visibility, inclusion, acknowledgment?*

JA I think the hypervisibility of Venice makes it still probably the most important biennale for me. It is a curious mix of high theory and pizzazz. And interesting because literally everybody gathers for it at some point, either the opening weekend or during the many sidebar events that take place all the way to November. I don't know any other biennial with the reach, the sense of entitlement or the cultural import that it brings. For every artist, it's almost certainly the highpoint. There's nowhere else to go after that.

AR *When you make artworks do you have a specific audience in mind?*

JA Sometimes. I mean there are obviously works that feel as if they are a kind of address, a *cri de coeur* or a plea for companionship with others. But even those are always more or less conversations with the self. I'm always first and foremost concerned with being loyal to the project itself. And to understanding whether the questions I asked it, and it asked me, were faithfully answered. If they are, then yeah, I'm more than happy with that.

I mean, in a way, the audience thing becomes super important when you haven't really been paying attention to the project itself. If you've had a decent conversation, a decent dialogue with a theme, a subject, a set of narratives, bringing them to fruition satisfactorily is enough. It shouldn't need other considerations, like who is it for. Those become paramount when that conversation is incomplete in some way, in my view. That's what I found over the years, and I become more concerned about those questions when the work hasn't quite found its 'fruition', when it hasn't quite been brought to a satisfactory closure.

John Akomfrah, *Arcadia* (still), 2023, five channel HD Video, colour, black and white, 15.1 surround sound, 58 min 38 sec. © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

AR *Do you think there is such a thing as national art? Or is all art universal? Is there something that defines your nation's artistic traditions? And what is misunderstood or forgotten about your nation's art history?*

JA I don't think there's such a thing as a national art, because that's too monolithic. I think there are versions of national arts, you know, like there are certain obsessions that underscore the work of a number of Black British artists or a number of feminist artists in Britain. Whether that all amounts to one giant national lab, I don't know and I don't think so. I think there are strains, themes, narratives, obsessions that can characterise the ether or particular national spaces, but I'm not sure that amounts to something as solid as a 'national' in the artmaking sense. I definitely don't buy the universal art thing, you know? Again, it's not like, 'What do you like about Lubaina Himid's work?' The Jenny Holzers or Cindy Shermans can't just be reduced to something called 'universal' art, because then that gets rid of the uniqueness of Himid and the uniqueness of Sherman. Why would you want something called universal law? Does it seem like there are things that all art can and sometimes shares? Yes, but I don't think it amounts to something called 'universal'.

AR *If someone were to visit your nation, what three things would you recommend they see or read in order to understand it better?*

JA Wow. God, I mean that's completely flummoxed me! Well, any film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger would be good. Apart from anything else, I'd love for people to be attuned to the sort of surrealism that's an undercurrent in this place. The poetry which is always there, but it's hidden behind all kinds of other stuff. I'd love for people to be attuned to that. Any Black British novelists who've ever worked here, from V.S. Naipaul to Bernardine Evaristo. Just so that they get the sense of the layering of this place, so that they come with more than just *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. The third is music...

AR *Which other artists have influenced or inspired you?*

JA Well it changes for every project, really. I mean there's some constants obviously. I've spoken over the years about my admiration for Turner – that goes without saying, that magician of light. But each project finds another set. For this one, Yves Tinguely is a big influence. Zaha Hadid has been on my mind a lot, because I was trying to deal with space in a very different way.

AR *What, other than your own work, are you looking forward to seeing while you are in Venice?*

JA I'm very much looking forward to seeing the works in the pavilions around me, because everybody in those pavilions is either a friend or someone whose work I've admired for a long time. I'm looking forward to the Canadian Pavilion for sure. The French Pavilion, the American Pavilion – those three in particular. And the main. I'm excited by the main theme of [biennale curator Adriano] Pedrosa. I want to see how many of the artists whose work I know should be in there will end up being in there.

The Voice
11 March 2024

It's all in the 'sonic'

Sir John Akomfrah gears up for British Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia

Sir John Akomfrah.

THE BRITISH Council have announcd more details of John Akomfrah's commission for the British Pavilion, entitled, *Listening All Night To The Rain*.

Listening All Night To The Rain continues artist and filmmaker's investigation into themes of memory, migration, racial injustice and climate change with a renewed focus on the act of listening and the sonic.

The exhibition, conceived as a single installation with eight interlocking and overlapping multi-screen sound and time-based works, is seen as a manifesto that encourages the idea of listening as activism and positions various progressive theories of acoustemology: how new ways of becoming are rooted in different forms of listening.

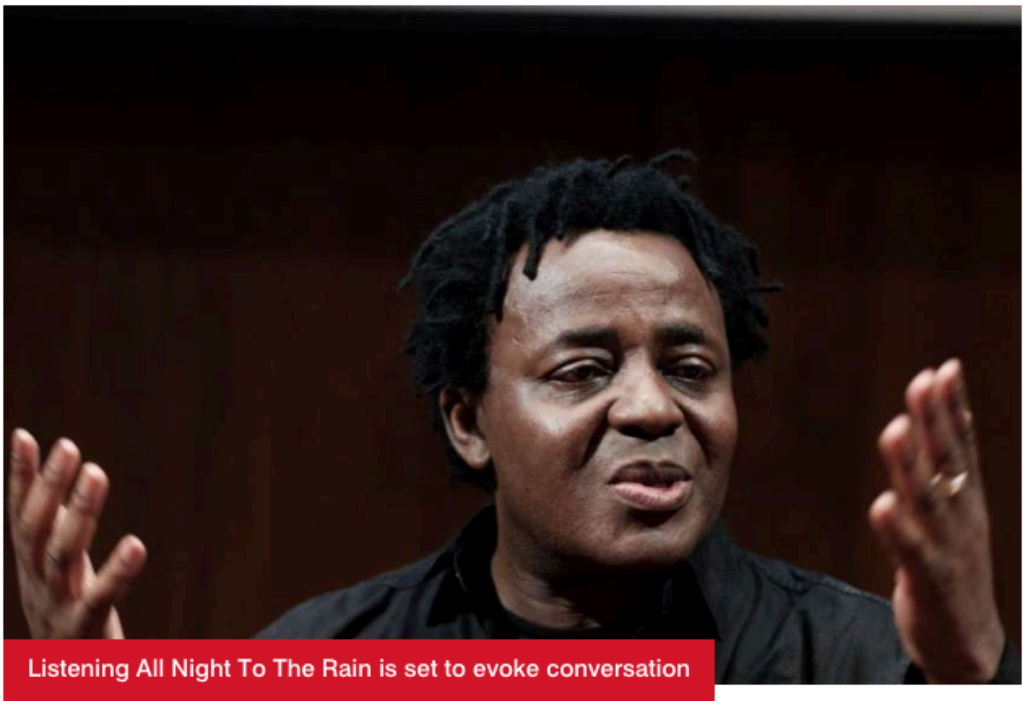
Encouraging visitors to experience the British Pavilion's 19th century neoclassical building in a different way, Akomfrah's commission interprets and transforms the fabric of the space in order to interrogate relics and monuments of colonial histories.

Open-ended in structure, the alliterative nature of the exhibition is reflective of the artist's abiding interest in non-linear forms of storytelling and collage. *Listening All Night To The Rain* repositions the role of art in its ability to write history in unexpected ways, forming both critical and poetic connections between different geographies and time periods.

Akomfrah said: "Listening All Night To The Rain alludes to the performative power that the sonic will hold in the Pavilion.

"The final ensemble of installations – iterations of acoustemology – detours back to questions of memory and of memorial but from a different vantage point, questioning the architectonics of the present and the spectres of the past, with the idea of listening as activism in mind.

"I sense that one can know the world – that you can find a name, an identity and a sense of belonging – via the sonic."



Listening All Night To The Rain is set to evoke conversation

Tarini Malik, Shane Akeroyd Associate Curator of the British Pavilion said: "John Akomfrah's landmark commission for this year's British Pavilion is true to his long-standing motivations as an artist in platforming voices from the global south and the experiences of diasporic people in Britain.

"Addressing vast and complex historical narratives that reveal and reposition our shared humanity, *Listening All Night To The Rain* is a testament to art's potential in challenging and enriching our perceptions of contemporary life."

Skinder Hundal, Global Director of Arts at the British Council and Commissioner of the British Pavilion said: "*Listening All Night To The Rain* promises to be aesthetically brilliant, contextually rich and provocative. Akomfrah's immersive style has a mesmerising quality, reaching and touching the hearts and consciousness of audiences often unseen or unheard, which is fitting for this body of work that encourages the idea of listening as activism.

“I look forward to April when John’s work is presented on the world art stage in Venice and beyond, thereafter”.

For the first time, the British Council will work with partners on an expanded public programme of events and artistic responses to bring the themes of the British Pavilion to global audiences.

This cross-disciplinary programme recognises Akomfrah’s impact and influence on younger generations of artists and filmmakers to platform new voices and narratives.

Exhibition details
John Akomfrah’s British Council Commission for the British Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia will run from April 20 – November 24, 2024. For more information visit https://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/listening-all-night
Preview: Wednesday April 17 to Friday April 19, 10am-6pm

Financial Times
01 February 2024

FINANCIAL TIMES

Visual Arts + Add to myFT

Entangled Pasts, Royal Academy review – a triumphant and surprising showcase of black art

Colonialism is in the spotlight in this exploration of black experience through both contemporary and historic art

The mad feast begins the minute you step into the Royal Academy's courtyard: 13 wildly gesticulating figures in black patinated bronze and gold leaf entice you to their table in Tavares Strachan's fizzing new sculpture "The First Supper (Galaxy Black)".

Across shining goblets and heaped platters, each expresses a life story. Poet Derek Walcott declaims. Nurse Mary Seacole throws her arms open in wide embrace. Glittery drag queen Marsha P Johnson, Afro-Brazilian resistance fighter Zumbi dos Palmares and emperor Haile Selassie compete to hold court. At one end, astronaut Robert Lawrence, the first African-American in space, looks baffled, as if just landed on another planet. At the other, a glum guy in a hoodie turns away. This Judas is a self-portrait: the artist as betrayer of Renaissance tradition, restaging Leonardo's "Last Supper" with icons from black history.

The Royal Academy's *Entangled Pasts, 1768-now, Art, Colonialism and Change* stages several brilliant spectacles within an exhibition that offers no overarching argument as it explores, rather randomly, black experience in contemporary art, and its refraction in art history's white mirror. By turns enjoyable and overburdened by ideology, it follows recent London shows — Tate's *Life Between Islands*, the Hayward's *In the Black Fantastic* — in celebrating an essential story: 20th- and 21st-century black art's exceptional inventiveness and influence.

Burlington House was built for grand set pieces, and the opening one mesmerises. In London for the first time is Hew Locke's gorgeous "Armada" (2019), a flotilla of 45 intricately decorated miniature boats — galleons, fishing vessels, cargo ships, models of the pilgrim pioneer "Mayflower" and immigrant liner "HMT Empire Windrush" — adorned with nets, medals, jewels, painted fabric. It conjures histories of arrivals, departures, hopes, desperation — "We live in a whirlwind of change and insecurity . . . History is complex and messy," Locke says — and has an epic quality, conjuring timeless dramas of man and the sea.

'Armada' by Hew Locke (2019)

'Watson and the Shark' by John Singleton Copley (1778)

In a wonderful pairing, the jaunty boats hang here from the ceiling above John Singleton Copley's monumental, violent painting "Watson and the Shark". This caused a sensation when exhibited at the RA in 1778 and, loaned from Boston, remains remarkable. Copley depicts Brook Watson, a 14-year-old sailor who, when his ship docked in Havana harbour, impulsively took a dip and met a shark. The pale adolescent flails in the water; the shark approaches (it severed Watson's ankle); his shipmates struggle to save him. In pyramid formation, they are headed by a handsome, calm, compassionate black man, posed like a classical Apollo. While the others heave, tug, shriek, he throws the boy the lifeline.

"The sea is a great leveller," Locke says. It is also, for many black artists, inescapably the site of the trauma of enslavement. The show's second tremendous grouping places Turner's luminous, tumultuous "Whalers" (c1845) — the wounded leviathan thrashing through foam and blood, borrowed from the Metropolitan Museum — with masterpieces of the tragic sublime from the last half century.

Frank Bowling's "Middle Passage" (1970), hot reds and oranges surging across a map of Africa and ghostly figural outlines, is a glowing abstraction. In "Vertigo Sea" (2015), John Akomfrah converges footage of breathtaking natural beauty, David Attenborough-style, with ecological and human horrors: whaling, nuclear testing, slave murders, migrant drownings.

'Akua's Surviving Children' by El Anatsui (1996) and, behind it, 'Middle Passage' by Frank Bowling (1970) © Guy Bell/Shutterstock

'Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776' by Kerry James Marshall (2007) © James Prinz Photography

Standing beleaguered and silent among their noise and colour, a procession of driftwood logs, partly burnt, upended to resemble jagged, abstracted figures of uneven sizes, each with a dark block of a head, is El Anatsui's "Akua's Surviving Children" (1996). Like Giacometti's skeletal personages, they evoke survivors of catastrophe, here slavery, but I thought too of all our journeys through life, each distinctive, fragile, worn down in different places, finding solace in the huddled group.

Kerry James Marshall, the most influential African-American painter, has commented that white viewers still rarely respond to black art as universal: while black viewers' empathy with art's white figures is assumed, he says, "when you put a black character in there, somehow the white audience isn't expected to identify with them. That's a problem." A strength of *Entangled Pasts* is to ask how this happened, what could change.

Marshall redresses art history's scarcity of black characters by rendering them in the language of traditional painting, insisting "the blackness of my figures is . . . unequivocal, absolute and unmediated." Here his bold imagining of an 18th-century African-American painter, ebony-dark face, bright white smock, "Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776" (2007), is the interloper in a marvellous, surprising gallery of Georgian black portraits, all borrowed from North American museums.

Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Francis Barber (c1770)

Copley's "Head of a Man" (c1777-78), a black youth with alert eyes, strong features and a smile between friendly and hesitant, is as immediately present as someone encountered on today's streets. Reynolds' lofty, stargazing "Francis Barber" (c1770), who was Samuel Johnson's secretary, and Gainsborough's nonchalantly easy "Ignatius Sancho" (1768), writer, composer, abolitionist, are classicised, noble yet individual portraits of subjects born into slavery who climbed the Georgian ladder of social mobility. Together, they form a poignant "what if" moment.

The show's clashes of past and present invite us, repeatedly, to look again. Yinka Shonibare's batik-dressed cleaner with globe head, "Woman Moving Up" (2023), sweeps the stairs in a gallery of sanitised versions — deliberate, unconscious, ironic? — of colonial rapacity. In Agostino Brunias' idyll "View of the River Roseau, Dominica" (1770-80), people of different races harmoniously bathe, chat, trade. Johann Zoffany's "The Family of Sir William Young" (1767-68), set on a bucolic English estate, centres on music-making and riding; the black servant is the only allusion to the source of Sir William's fortune as governor of Dominica and Tobago.

'Woman Moving Up' by Yinka Shonibare (2023) © Alamy

'An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters' by Kara Walker (2010)

I dislike slavery narratives irrelevantly interjected into art history as much as the next gallery-goer, but these illuminate and matter. Only, though, to a point. The exhibition utterly loses traction when, too often, the RA dredges from its storehouse banalities like Frank Dicksee's porcelain-skinned bathers "Startled" (1892) for a section on "whiteness", or swamps us with contemporary flotsam such as Bharti Parmar's holes on white paper, "Cotton Plant Morphology, Efficient pruning ensured maximum yield on slave plantations" (2021), or Barbara Walker's "Vanishing Point 18 (Titian)" (2020), a graphite reworking of "Diana and Actaeon" — the arrogance! — bleaching out all figures except the black servant.

These works' only claim is as anti-racist rhetoric, or historic racism. Art isn't sociology; as the giants here demonstrate, it is poetic, rigorous, subtle, ambivalent.

The RA's poster image is Kara Walker's etching of black hands hoisting a white ship out of the dark waters of the past. A swimmer escapes; on shore, tiny silhouettes represent slaver and enslaved. Titled "no world", this comes from Walker's sombrely beautiful series "An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters" (2010): frightening, referencing historic atrocity, but perhaps expressing hope for the new, uncharted power in black art-making which, at its best, this exhibition triumphantly showcases.

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The Art Newspaper
4 January 2024

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Artist interview // Interview

John Akomfrah: the film-maker exposing the colonial adventures of microorganisms and more

The Venice Biennale-bound artist discusses his latest video work exploring the so-called Columbian exchange and tells us why his films owe a debt to cinema but are "rendered slightly strange"

John Akomfrah
Photo: Smoking Dogs Films

Alexander Morrison

4 January 2024

The British-Ghanaian artist John Akomfrah has been pushing the boundaries of film for more than four decades. Having started out with experimental documentaries such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986)—which looks at the British race riots of the early 1980s—he has in more recent years developed a reputation for richly layered, multiscreen installations exploring topics such as climate change, colonialism and time. Akomfrah's work is intensely collaborative; he co-founded the Black Audio Film Collective in 1982, and then Smoking Dogs Films in 1998.

Akomfrah was knighted last year, and 2024 brings yet another major milestone as he prepares to represent Great Britain at the Venice Biennale. This follows on from his 2019 contribution to the inaugural Ghana pavilion in Venice. In the run-up to this year's Biennale, Akomfrah has released a new work, *Arcadia* (2023), exhibited first at the Sharjah Biennial and now in an edited form at The Box in Plymouth, UK. The film, shown across five screens organised in the shape of a cross, traces the formation of the New World and highlights the migrations of—among other things—people, commodities, plant life and diseases (known as the "Columbian exchange") that played a role. Partly a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, *Arcadia* also leaves, like so many of his films, a lot open to interpretation. And that, Akomfrah says, is exactly how he wants it.

The Art Newspaper: You have talked about how the ideas behind the film *Arcadia* changed a lot over the course of the research process. How would you describe the final product to someone who is seeing it for the first time?

John Akomfrah: I think my ideal viewer watching for the first time should think, "Okay, I'm here to watch something about how the New World was opened up."

And then think, “Oh, but this isn’t what I meant by [that] at all.” In other words, I want people who are interested in the drama of the colonial adventure to realise that not all of it is entirely the responsibility of human beings.

Fateful crossing: the film *Arcadia* (2023), screened across five channels set out as a crucifix. The film, exploring the story of European colonialism, was premiered at the Sharjah Biennial last year and is now showing at the Box in Plymouth
Photo: Motaz Mawid; courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation © Smoking Dog Films

Non-human life is a hugely important part of this film —I have seen you discuss the importance of wind, for example. Can you talk a bit about that?

The discovery of the trade winds by the Spanish and the Portuguese off the west coast of Africa was a game changer. That’s what made the journey to the New World possible. Before that, people dreamt it, but it just wasn’t a thing. You needed the enabling agency of wind. And the trade winds have always been there, we just didn’t realise.

There is also an interesting interplay between the beautiful and the threatening, as seen for example with the quite captivating images of microorganisms. Was that completely shaped by your experience of Covid?

Completely. Covid made all the difference. I’ll let you into

something else. I was watching a completely inane programme on YouTube, with two young South African adventurers in Guatemala, wandering around, and they come across this place where all these [skeletons] are coming out of the ground, and they're like, "Oh wow, how did this happen? They look old!" And I suddenly thought, oh my God, they are in one of the Aztec or Inca mass graves from the 16th [or] 17th century, and they had no idea. It suddenly connected with the narrative from the *Mayflower* [the ship that transported the Pilgrims from England to the New World in 1620], with the early accounts that [said] when they arrived there was no one around. But the question we hadn't asked ourselves was: why?

There is a phrase that repeats in the film: "death, dreams". What is the significance of this?

I try to listen to premodern voices a lot. And "death, dreams" comes from the Roman writer Artemidorus. He wrote a book that interprets dreams, and I thought this was an interesting way of piecing together narrative without necessarily being overly prescriptive. Because the dreams of flight—which have basically haunted the European imagination, really since the 12th century, since the chivalric codes begin to emerge—are absolutely central to this colonial adventure.

A term you have spoken about before is the "affective economy". You care quite passionately about how people feel when they see your work. How would you describe that in relation to this project? And is there a risk with emotional storytelling?

There is. But I think what I'm interested in more and more is constructing memorials that are about the inauguration of affective economies. And that's it—just inaugurating them so that people can explore them, get

Clocks are a recurring motif in *Arcadia*, and in your practice more broadly the lines between "then" and "now" regularly seem to blur. How do you see time—the present and the past—in your work?

I'm more and more trying to relax on the protocols, the decorum and the conventions. So one is to cultivate a state of unpreparedness for as long as possible. Because you're never free from the phantoms, you know? I can't look at a scene without thinking, "Oh, that's a [French film-maker Robert] Bresson way of looking." I can't—it's too late now. I'm completely contaminated by that history of what I've watched and listened to. So a state of unpreparedness is absolutely central because it's a way of strategically forgetting momentarily, or dreaming that you're in this thing for the first time. And that's important. It's important because otherwise nothing new happens.

You've got a big year with the Venice Biennale coming up. How do you prepare for a project like that?

Still from *Arcadia* (2023)

All of them start in the finished other, literally. So the Biennale will have a lot to do with *Arcadia*, a lot to do with the things I thought needed further exploring from *Arcadia*, the things I thought we hadn't pressed enough, the things that suggested themselves when *Arcadia* finished. They will all be the baggage that we take on to the next one. So the first meetings with people—some of them are old collaborators—will be about, "Remember that? Well, let's do that, because we didn't get it on this one, so let's go there."

• John Akomfrah: Arcadia, *The Box, Plymouth, until 2 June*

Smithsonian Magazine
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MAGAZINE

AT THE SMITHSONIAN

Artist John Akomfrah Is Having a Moment

The works of the recently knighted filmmaker address contemporary issues in two different Smithsonian museums

John Akomfrah at his London studio, 2016

Our daily immersion in a bombardment of images, in repeated patterns, at a fraught moment in contemporary history, makes the multichannel work of the artist John Akomfrah both familiar and especially compelling.

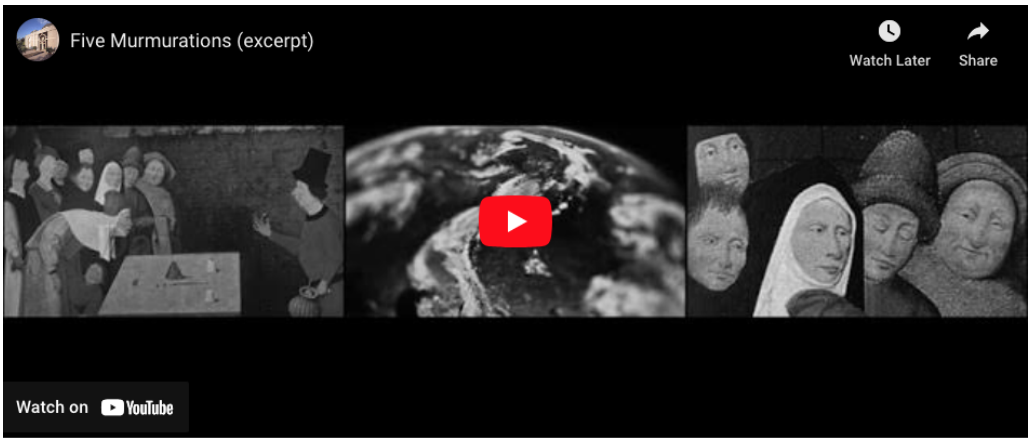
And the Ghanaian-born, London-based filmmaker is getting noticed for it. Already this year Akomfrah has been knighted—and chosen to represent Great Britain in the 2024 Venice Biennale, where he's been featured twice before.

In 2023, his work is being featured in three different exhibitions in Washington, D.C. alone, including at two Smithsonian museums. The 1986 *Handsworth Songs* was on view earlier this year in the exhibition "This Is Britain: Photographs From the 1970s and 1980s" at the National Gallery of Art. The 2017 video installation *Purple*, which the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden purchased in 2021, opened last November and continues to run for the rest of the year. And this month, his 2021 *Five Murmurations* went on view at the National Museum of African Art.

Installation view of *John Akomfrah: Purple* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Photo by Ron Blunt © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

The immersive, six-screen *Purple* deals with the environmental crisis, balancing cinematic scenes of solitary figures standing in nature with the encroachment of smoke-belching factories and power lines. Photography from Alaska, French Polynesia and Greenland is juxtaposed with archival images of industry, political movements and even scenes of life and death, with the sounds of burbling brooks and birdsong heard amid spoken word and occasional song (from Billie Holiday).

Five Murmurations, by contrast, is a black-and-white meditation on the recent era of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter, depicting scenes of handwashing and isolation with those of protests following the 2020 murder of George Floyd, whose final minutes, as viewed through the smudged lens of a police camera, are accompanied by Floyd's haunting cries for help. Disturbing scenes of past colonialism pop up. And seen intermittently throughout the production are kaleidoscopic flocks of birds, flying and changing directions together in a synchronous act that ornithologists call murmuration—a strategy that wards off predators.



The weight of being represented in a single year by three concurrent showings on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.—each addressing the era's largest concerns—is not lost on Akomfrah.

"Growing up poor in Accra is a very different experience than being in Washington," he told a crowd at a Hirshhorn artist's talk in April. "So the politics of location, the question of location, seems to me to matter a huge amount."

"It's not entirely coincidental that the two [Smithsonian] museums are in the center of the greatest power on earth," he said. "Nor is it a coincidence that when I was asked to do something I was like, 'Yes!'"

It was in 1982 that Akomfrah, who had moved to the United Kingdom with his family as a child, co-founded the Black Audio Film Collective. One of the collective's significant early works was the single-channel piece *Handsworth Songs*, which Akomfrah directed. Like the artist's other works on display in Washington this year, it runs about an hour.

"I spent about ten years in television making documentaries, and one of the things that I hated, because it seemed so old-fashioned, was what they called the 'cradle-to-grave' documentary," Akomfrah said at the Hirshhorn. But he soon realized that the format, so overdone in documentaries, might actually work in an art piece.

So for the ambitious *Purple*, he said, "I set out consciously to create what could be called a cradle-to-grave structure: Start off with people being born, and you watch them grow and die in the Anthropocene. That's the point of view."

John Akomfrah, *Purple,* 2017, 6 channel HD video installation with 15.1 surround sound, Dimensions variable, 62 minutes © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

John Akomfrah, *Purple*, 2017, 6 channel HD video installation with 15.1 surround sound, Dimensions variabl, 62 minutes © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

The Anthropocene, the term for the current geological epoch, is defined by the human impact on the planet's ecosystems. "The reality is that we as a planetary entity, human beings, have suddenly found ourselves in a place where, since 1945, we are apparently, we have left an imprint on the planet," Akomfrah said. "We're on the verge of extinction but we don't know what catalytic roles we have played in all of this. *Purple* starts from this recognition."

Purple, so named for the traditional color of mourning in Ghana, includes his own memories, growing up in southwest London next to a power station spewing out smoke and carbon. Did the power station's toxic output affect an entire generation that breathed it in? Did it help cause their generational rebelliousness?

“The two things were completely understood as being mutually exclusive,” Akomfrah said. “So *Purple* is also about trying to make these connections, which were not apparent as I lived through it.”

The film also includes clips from a 1960 movie, *Sons and Lovers*, adapted from the semi-autobiographical novel by the English writer D.H. Lawrence. “I was really interested in finding a way to register grief, and mourning, and the sense of loss in some way.” And the fact that both his mother and Lawrence grew up in Nottinghamshire—the heart of coal mining in England—was compelling, he said. “All of those things suggested that it was willing to participate in this conversation.”

It is the conversation between the moving images on the various channels that create the art, he pointed out. “In order for any multichannel piece to work, every sequence, every image, is made up of units that are prepared to participate in some kind of conversation with each other,” Akomfrah said. “So the process of arriving at what would work usually involves trying to find things that can talk to each other in some way.”

That’s what happens, too, in *Five Murmurations*, though in some ways the works are quite different. One stretches out on six screens; the other, three. One is in color; the other, black and white. And the issues they address, though contemporary, are different.

“Partly what accounts for the difference between the two is obviously the pandemic,” he said. “Suddenly, many of us in the studio found ourselves unable not only to work together, but to go anywhere at all.”

Purple was completed in 2017, a time when his team could travel to locations all over the globe and shoot in high resolution, back "when the world still felt like you could roam it unchallenged," Akomfrah explained. But, by contrast, *Five Murmurations* was made with far more basic equipment, often on still cameras.

The isolation of the Covid-19 era was reflected in shots that included the artist himself, captured dourly in mirrors.

The catalyst was the killing of George Floyd. Even with the pandemic putting a halt to so much human activity, "It felt naturally that that should be what we did something on," said Akomfrah, "as a kind of act of homage, as a remembrance, as a monument."

John Akomfrah, *Five Murmurations*, 2021 National Museum of African Art

John Akomfrah, *Five Murmurations*, 2021 National Museum of African Art

Culling from art history, the artist juxtaposes the ominous and consequential crowd-captured footage with the unsettling 1502 painting *The Conjurer* by Hieronymus Bosch, as well as the 1483 piece *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* by the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, featuring a dramatic angle and perspective that in turn reminded him of the death footage of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara.

"I couldn't see the Floyd images—especially the very last bit, where his head is on the ground, and the officer's knee is on his neck—you can't see that and the Mantegna without seeing some similarities between them," Akomfrah said.

Certainly, the museums' presentations of the works, in darkened rooms with couches, invite viewer contemplation as they take in the images and sounds.

Of his upcoming work at the Venice Biennale, Akomfrah said “there will be some continuities” with his previous work. But, he added, “the way in which you’ll experience that pavilion will be very different to how you have seen it used in the past. I promise you that.”

“John Akomfrah: Purple” continues at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. through January 7, 2024.

“John Akomfrah: Five Murmurations” opened October 14 at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. Its closing date hasn’t been determined.

Present Space
June 14, 2023

present space

"Traces, residues and aftershocks" How artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah confronts the present through the past

In conversation with Ellie Brown, June 14, 2023

Motion — Art, People, Film

Five Murmurations (2021)

Back in January 2023, it was announced that John Akomfrah would represent the UK at next year's Venice Biennale, and when we speak over Zoom in late April, the artist and filmmaker is in the city on something of a reconnaissance trip. Though Akomfrah has had time to let the news sink in, the announcement was something that could have blown him away. "Anybody who tells you that they're not absolutely over the moon about being chosen for something like this, is lying. Because it's great!" Akomfrah will be taking charge of the British Pavilion for the Biennale's 60th edition, and it's an opportunity that he says, "feels important in one really significant respect. It's like someone has said to you, "We've watched what you're doing and we'd like you to come and do the same again in this setting – one of the biggest settings on the planet."

Next year won't be Akomfrah's first encounter with the Venice Biennale however; his three-channel installation, *Vertigo Sea* first premiered there in 2015, as part of the *All the World's Future* exhibition curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, while another three-channel piece, *Four Nocturnes*, was shown at the inaugural Ghana Pavilion in 2019. And as much as the British Pavilion represents one of the biggest stages in the art world, Akomfrah intends to approach the task in much the same way he would any other work: "The project is the process, and the process is the project," he says. "I'm here now, and I'm not doing anything different to what I would normally do. You just commune with a space, and ask it what it wants and it hasn't quite told me yet!" At the time of our call it's his final day in Venice, though Akomfrah will return to Venice at a later date to get a sense of what the space has to say.

Searching for voices that resonate and communicate with Akomfrah is a defining element of his work. Since the early 1980s, when he was working with the Black Audio Film Collective, the artist and filmmaker has been drawn to the sounds and stories that reach out for archival and found footage. The collective, formed by a group of students at Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1982, produced a number of documentaries, films and tape slide works that sought to grapple with Black British and diaspora identity, as the children of immigrants to the country in the post-war decades (Akomfrah moved to South London from Accra as a young child).

Handsworth Songs (1986) is one of the collective's defining works. Part-documentary, part-montage, it examines the aftermath of "riots" occurring in Birmingham and London in 1985. It's a documentary inasmuch as it presents footage shot by the collective on the ground, but equally, by drawing on archival footage, newsreel and still photography, *Handsworth Songs* is also an exercise in searching for something that wasn't visibly, or physically, present at the scene. That's to say that the collective were searching for the ghosts of the past that were haunting Birmingham in the mid-1980s, while also giving those same ghosts a voice.

The approach taken in *Handsworth Songs* was shaped by the work of the late cultural theorist, Stuart Hall - someone whose ideas, Akomfrah says, the collective and others working in the Black art movement in Britain at the time sought to emulate. From the early 1960s on, Hall was a defining figure in the emerging field of cultural studies, and his writing on identity (and in particular defining a sense of Black British identity) remains central to this day. This provided the framework, then, for the Black Audio Film Collective's approach. As Akomfrah explains, "we understood this place [England], but we also understood the *elsewheres* that our parents came from; I knew London, but I also knew Accra - and these Janus-faced features of your life seemed to suggest that you needed a very unique kind of person who might tell you about this double-faced, double consciousness. And Stuart was that - he seemed to understand the racial dynamic that was powering our lives, and he understood the class dimensions of that."

Hall was also a well-placed figure to help contextualise what the collective sought to achieve with *Handsworth Songs*; it had been in Birmingham where he had co-founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964. “And so in a very real sense,” Akomfrah says, “he watched the evolution of the kids [who were later in Handsworth in the mid-1980s]: he was there when they were born, he saw them going to school.” The collective approached Hall for his guidance on *Handsworth Songs*, and though he didn’t agree with everything they were doing, Akomfrah says, that was something that they appreciated – support and guidance (Hall famously defended *Handsworth Songs* from criticism by author Salman Rushdie in the letter pages of *The Guardian*).

After the Black Audio Film Collective was wound up in 1998, Akomfrah went on to found the Smoking Dogs Films production company with Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, who were also members of the collective. Through Smoking Dogs, Akomfrah worked directly with Hall on two works that explore the cultural theorist’s life. The first, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), is a three-channel video installation that situates Hall’s ideas within the wider cultural and political landscape of the time through a montage of footage. *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), a feature-length documentary soundtracked with songs by Miles Davis, is more introspective; though it broadly follows the same structural narrative, it emphasises how this titan figure in twentieth-century cultural theory was himself shaped by the environments he sought to understand. While Akomfrah mourns the loss of a friend and collaborator (Hall passed away in 2014), he notes that it would be “interesting to see what an equivalent figure – younger, more agile, more mobile – would be like in the present.”

Over the past decade, Akomfrah has created a trilogy of multi-channel works starting with *Vertigo Sea* and ending with *Four Nocturnes*, that examine histories of migration through the natural environment. *Vertigo Sea* takes something of a metaphorical approach (relating, for example, the whaling industry to slavery and colonialism), in which the ocean is both central to the planet’s ecology and the setting for institutionalised cruelty and brutality. The second of the series, *Purple* (2017), is a six-channel installation commissioned for the Barbican's Curve Gallery, and co-commissioned by the TBA21—Academy; the Bildmuseet Umeå in Sweden; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. It is Akomfrah’s largest work so far - both in terms of scale and focus. As a step further into the artist’s investigation into the environment as a linchpin for human life, *Purple* is an immersive portrayal of how climate change is impacting the planet told through a montage of footage - archival and new - that examines the uneven experiences of the Anthropocene.

Though the explicit subject matter of Akomfrah's work has shifted over time, the ideas that define his oeuvre are largely unchanged. Indeed, even the images he draws upon reappear in different contexts. In *Handsworth Songs*, a brief black and white clip of a Black man working in a factory is seen, sandwiched between an audio clip warning of the threat to Britain's national identity caused by an "army of total strangers - immigrants" which is reaffirmed by another clip of Margaret Thatcher speaking of the fear posed by the "swamping" of the country. This same clip reappears in Akomfrah's later film, *The Nine Muses* (2010), an examination of post-war migration to Britain which foregrounds the journey of migration through the lens of Homer's *Odyssey.*

At one point during our conversation, Akomfrah neatly surmises what it is I am getting at with the questions I put to him, as the "hangovers and overlaps between projects." Those overlaps, Akomfrah acknowledges, remain unspoken by him. In much the same way that Akomfrah gives form to the ghosts of the archive that reach out to him, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale will afford the filmmaker and artist the chance to communicate the ideas that have defined his work to date.

Five Murmurations (2021)

Five Murmurations (2021)

Five Murmurations (2021)

Present Space

In *Vertigo Sea* you use the environment and environmental destruction as a metaphor for migration and recall some of the language that is heard in *Handsworth Songs*, in which the then-Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, can be seen describing the fear of the country being "swamped by people of a different culture". Are there parallels for you in discussing migration through the language of nature - whether as a metaphor or through language?

Present Space

There's a quote in *Handsworth Songs* that "there are no stories in the riots, just the ghosts of other stories", which made me think about whether you see that film as becoming a kind of ghost itself in the years that have passed since the film was released?

John Akomfrah

Of course, it should have struck me then that, if we were saying that the present was overdetermined by all sorts of traces and residues of the past that, at some point, we would also become part of the past. But it never entered my head to be honest – I mean frankly, it shocks me that the work is as old as it is. It feels like it was yesterday. I think it's the inevitable logic of the position taken by *Handsworth Songs* that, at some point, it itself would be rendered phantom-like; that it would hover over the present in pretty much the same way as the discourse that we were trying to talk about. From the [start of] the Black Audio Film Collective in '82, we were fascinated by ghosts, or the ghosting process by which events are kind of hollowed out by the historical present day. There were small things that seemed to suggest that there might be unseen guests, if you like, sat at the tables of our lives. We're all working with these unseen guests: the person clutching their handbag or the old man moving away from you has certain presuppositions - let's call it that. And those presuppositions clearly had origins elsewhere, other than in the present. The logic of *Handsworth Songs* was this archaeological logic of seeing how many narratives that were overdetermining the quote-unquote "riots" at the time [in Handsworth and London] one could track back [into the past], and how far back one could trace them. And it seemed in the process of doing that, that quite a lot could be traced quite far back. They were not always necessarily bad things - that was the point of *Handsworth Songs*. We wanted to understand the kind of utopian dimensions of that present as well, because of course everybody who is on the streets revolting, in both senses of the word, was a product of some kind of utopian moment.

John Akomfrah

One of the important strands of *Handsworth Songs* was its attempt to understand the process by which, by the time Thatcher and that new right project gets going in '77 - '78, race [was being used] as a sort of mirror for the multiple crises of Britain. And, of course, there's a striking resonance of that theme in the present, in the ways in which certain politicians are beginning to use that again. *Vertigo Sea* [came] at the time when journalists, certain right-wing journalists, were talking about migrants as cockroaches, vermin, and people who had these invasive, parasitic qualities to them. And I thought, "that's interesting – how do we wrestle with this?" Because in order for the migrant or the refugee to be completely accepted as a problem (not even a person but a *thing*) you have to hollow out the actual reality of refugeeship and migranthood. The thing you have to get people to forget is the utopian quality of migrantship and refugeeship, because nobody leaves their home to go anywhere with the intention of being a problem. People leave because they think they're going to go somewhere and make a contribution, not just for themselves, but to where they're going. There's a massive amnesiac machine at the heart of the anti-refugee, anti-migrant rhetoric, which is built on forgetting certain very, very positive things. And that for me is the most important thing to bear in mind. That's why we started *Vertigo Sea* to say, "Look, these things were started at the same time: hunting for whales, for oil, and hunting people, for enslavement, have a joint history. And they were both incredibly profitable."

Testament (1988)

Present Space

The Airport (2016), a multi-channel installation which focuses on the history of Greece in the context of the country's financial crisis, will be shown at the Lisson Gallery in Beijing this summer as part of your first solo exhibition in China. So, I wanted to ask you about what it means to exhibit existing works in new locations, and whether different settings can change the meaning or intention of a work?

John Akomfrah

In some ways, the relationship between cinema and the screen, audience and viewership, is really quite specific. The screen says, "I am this portal and I can be planted anywhere," and you have a relationship with *that* portal. In a way, the environment doesn't matter because it's a didactic one between you and the screen. I think most gallery work says almost the exact opposite in a way, [where] the space in which the image announces itself is important. It does believe that, somehow, the relationship between screen, environment, character matters (though that's not to say that you want that relationship to be prescriptive). The work is animated by a series of democratic impulses, which are very important for me: one is that you should be able to absolutely loathe it [laughs], and not think it has any value at all. Providing you've spent the time with it, that seems to me a takeaway that you are perfectly entitled to walk away with. You are absolutely entitled to say to yourself, "I'm only interested in what's taking place in the middle screen, or the third screen; I'm not really interested in any of this stuff because there's something there that I can follow." Equally, if you thought that, especially with the multi-screen pieces, that there's a sort of conversation between them that you're interested in, fine. It's an engine of empowerment, and your agency is important. I really do like it when people from different parts of the world write to me about their experiences, even the negative ones. You think, "Okay that's great", because at least they've turned up.

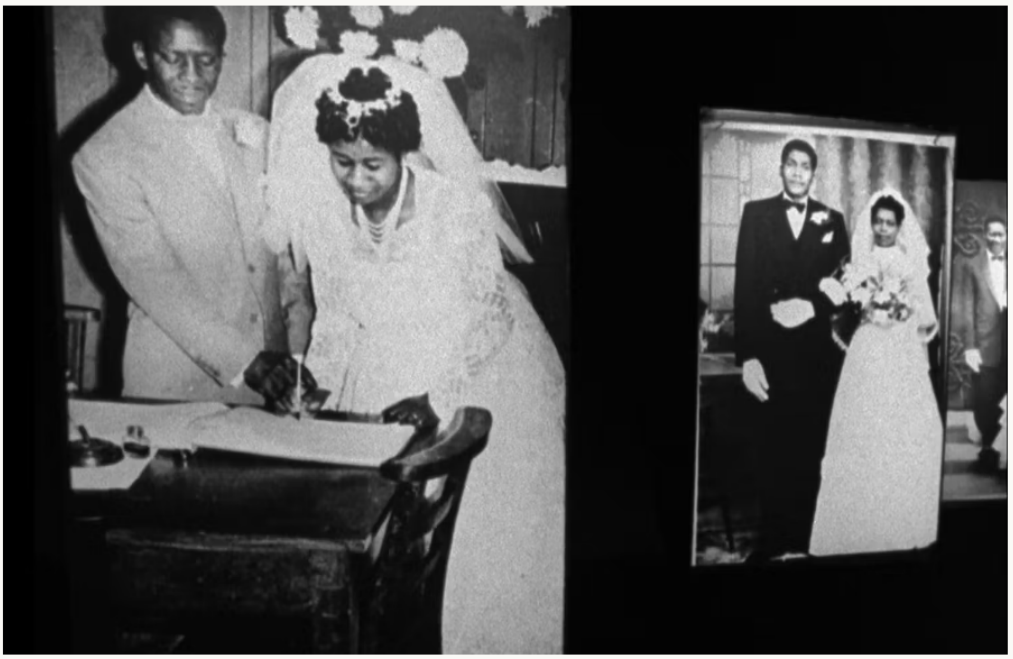
Present Space

I remember reading in a previous interview in which you discussed how *Handsworth Songs* resonated with people who had no connection to Birmingham, or even the UK. There are elements in your work that reach beyond the specifics of the footage.

John Akomfrah

Handsworth Songs is playing at MoMA in a show called *Signals* at the moment. And the question of location has now taken on an additional quality that I think is really important to follow because it isn't just about the space it's also about what [people] can get out of it. MoMA wanted to do a closed-caption version of *Handsworth Songs* – because if you're hard of hearing, the overly auditory quality of the film might not necessarily be to your taste. So, if people can plug into the film in a slightly more intimate way than just standing and watching an image, let's do that. Let's enrich that location.

Handsworth Songs (1986)



Handsworth Songs (1986)

Handsworth Songs (1986)

Present Space

When it comes to using archival footage, what draws you to certain voices or certain images that you then tease out?

John Akomfrah

There was a point when it became clear to a whole group of artists, not just the Black Art Collective, that we needed to understand our collective past. We needed to understand the ways in which our lives have been shaped by the past. We wanted to decode it because there's a kind of impossible fiction at the heart of race – an impossibility about how it works. The present of race wants to deny that it has any efficacy, but it's clear by the aftereffects of one's feelings that there is a sort of elsewhere dimension to it. So part of the attempt to demystify this rhetoric of race (which says the past is unimportant, when in fact it's quite clear that the past is central to the present) was to try and find ways to render intelligible the processes which seem to narrate the present. And the archival, both as a repository of the past, as well as a kind of embodiment of the past, seemed important. There are traces, residues and aftershocks that the archival, both as a repository and an embodiment, comes to stand for and is standing for. It was important to get to grips with that – obviously in different ways, because one of the things you reminded me of is the *becoming archival* of the practice itself! When you're in your 60s and you've been doing this since your 20s, you also leave a trace and a kind of pathway. But I'm not following it, I'm just doing it – I'm not concerned about what the pathway is.

Triptych (2020)

Triptych (2020)

Inside Climate News
18th March 2023

Inside Climate News

John Akomfrah's 'Purple' Is Climate Change Art That Asks Audiences to Feel

An hour-long multimedia exhibit about climate change, now at the Hirshhorn Museum in D.C., inundates viewers with sound, imagery and emotion.

By Kiley Bense
March 18, 2023

A general view of John Akomfrah: Purple exhibition at The Curve, Barbican on Oct. 5, 2017 in London, United Kingdom. Credit: Anthony Harvey/Getty Images for Barbican Art Gallery

As visitors enter the gallery now housing the climate artwork "Purple" by John Akomfrah at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., they are greeted by a light sculpture made out of dirty plastic bottles suspended upside down from the ceiling. The bottles illuminate a hallway that is carpeted and lined in deep purple, the color of mourning in Ghana, where Akomfrah was born.

Akomfrah is a celebrated British artist whose work about memory, migration and the environment has been exhibited around the world, including at the Venice Biennale. Before opening in D.C., "Purple" was shown in London, Madrid and Lisbon.

Around the corner, visitors to the gallery are confronted by six huge screens and a cocoon of shifting sounds: singing, rainfall, church bells, speeches, train whistles, car honks, tap shoes. The imagery is pulled from across time and space; 20th-century archival newsreels are set against sweeping contemporary shots of the natural world. Collaging the past and the present together, “Purple” spins a narrative about climate change and the post-industrial age, a story about cities, technology, manufacturing and pollution that is punctuated with footage of wilderness and the sublime, landscapes that arrive like gulps of air.

Sitting on the benches arranged in front of the screens, it isn’t possible to absorb everything. The audience can really only focus on three of the screens at one time, and they are continuously changing, flickering from spring water running clear over pebbles to a tailpipe spitting exhaust to a woman’s palms, cradling a plant. The soundtrack includes orchestral music and sirens; the staid tones of broadcasters delivering scripts and the drone of highway traffic.

Critics have noted the panoramic scope of “Purple,” and how the immersive 62-minute work, which combines six screens of video with sound and music in the darkened gallery space, mimics the incomprehensible scale of climate change as it unfolds across the planet.

“It’s hard to take in the whole work at once,” said Marina Isgro, associate curator of media and performance art at the Hirshhorn, who worked to acquire “Purple” for the museum. “Depending on where you sit in the gallery, it can feel like a slightly different work. It’s this experience of information overload. You’re constantly having to choose where to direct your attention.”

Experiencing “Purple” might feel like stepping inside a film-reel kaleidoscope, but somehow, it isn’t overwhelming. Its moments of horror and calm, of poison and beauty, of indifference and care, are transfixing in a way that an onslaught of grim video might not be. There were children in the gallery when I was there, and while some of them whispered to their parents about what they were seeing, mostly they were rapt, staring around the room as the screens blinked from one snippet to another.

“You never know how long people are going to spend with a piece,” Isgro said. “It’s a cliché that everyone’s attention span is really short these days. But I think ‘Purple’ is the kind of work that really pulls people in.”

Part of what makes “Purple” so engrossing is that it’s not purely made of panic, damage and dread. We scrutinize scans of miners’ blighted lungs and plumes of toxic smoke and uncomfortable close-ups of animal dissections. But we also see and hear joy: newborns and birds and parades, dancing couples and clean water and ripening sunsets. The effect comes much closer to the messy, changeable reality of life on Earth than any montage of global doom. “It makes us sit with this ambiguity,” Isgro said. “On the one hand, it’s showing us the violence or destruction that we have enacted on our planet. And on the other hand, it’s reminding us of what out there is worth fighting for.”

“Purple” considers what “progress” is—and weighs its gifts against its costs. The film opens with babies and children and ends with coffins, carried through narrow streets. In between, we see factories, fossil fuels, cars, medicine, planes and war. In an interview with the Guardian, Akomfrah spoke about the need to complicate the Western ideal of industrial development. “The great shifts in human progress that are made possible by technology can also cause the profoundest destruction and suffering,” he said.

This kind of progress is one that Akomfrah is familiar with. “I’m a child of the fifties, so I’m a child of that moment of high hopes, one of which involved the bright hope associated with industrialization that came with a much darker narrative that remained unspoken,” he told an interviewer in 2017. “I grew up in west London in the shadow of Battersea Power Station, at a time when it still worked producing electricity.” Once a coal-fired plant that supplied a fifth of London’s power, Battersea was closed in 1983. (It’s since been turned into what developers are calling “London’s most exciting new shopping and leisure destination!”)

“I remember its iconic chimneys and the smoke billowing from them, which was, in truth, beautiful,” Akomfrah said, in 2017, of Battersea as he knew it. “No one ever said to me or to any of my friends, listen: you’re being poisoned here, and this is a byproduct of the life you’re living, walking down the King’s Road.” That disconnect—about what industry promises and what it destroys—informs “Purple” and our present, a current that runs beneath the rolling tides of modern history.

Although its title and color scheme suggest that “Purple” is an elegy, because the film plays on a loop, a few minutes after the funeral processions and overcast graveyards are gone, we are back to the beginning, to birth and first breaths. Perhaps progress is not a line but a circle.

The film’s images of nature are sometimes foregrounded by white-coated figures who stand with their backs to the audience. Wind ruffles the edges of the coat. We follow their gaze outward over snowy mountains, dense jungles and open fields, in places as far-flung as Alaska, Greenland, Scotland and French Polynesia. We observe these landscapes through their eyes, looking over their shoulders, though we often can’t see their faces. As “Purple” progresses, we lean over a railing on the deck of a ship, ride with a bounding dog sled team, climb an icy cliff and walk on a beach. In some of the scenes, the person at the center of the screen is surrounded by litter or silhouetted against the smokestacks of a towering factory. When the white-coated characters do turn around to look at us, it feels less like judgment than a question: Do you see what I see?

“In a way, this is a person of color’s response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way,” Akomfrah told the Guardian. “We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative.”

Akomfrah wants to encourage those radically different ways of seeing, but he never intended to present a persuasive argument; “Purple” is not a lecture. Unlike so much content about climate change, Akomfrah’s piece is “emotional and authentic rather than didactic,” Isgro said, a work that doesn’t endorse any specific policy or politics. Like its creator, “Purple” is not interested in telling you what or how you should feel. It only asks that you do.

The Art Newspaper
24th January 2023

THE ART NEWSPAPER

John Akomfrah to represent Britain at 2024 Venice Biennale

The British-Ghanaian artist is well known for searing video installations examining issues ranging from climate change to colonialism

Gareth Harris

24 January 2023

John Akomfrah in his London studio

The filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah, known for his searing video installations exploring issues such as climate change and post-colonialism, will represent the UK at the 60th Venice Biennale next year (20 April-24 November 2024). Skinder Hundal, the global director of arts at the British Council and commissioner of the British Pavilion, says in a statement: "The quality and contextual depth of his artistry never fails to inspire deep reflection and awe. For the British Council to have such a significant British-Ghanaian artist in Venice is an exhilarating moment."

Akomfrah says in a statement: "I'm grateful to be given a moment to explore the complex history and significance of this institution [the British Pavilion] and the nation it represents, as well as its architectural home in Venice, with all the stories it has told and will continue to." Last year, he spoke to *The Art Newspaper* on our A Brush With podcast about his influences—including writers, musicians, filmmakers and other artists—and the cultural experiences that have shaped his life and work.

Akomfrah was born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957 but has been based in London since he was a child. He came to prominence in the early 1980s as part of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), a group of seven artists founded in 1982. From his early years with the BAFC to his recent works as a solo artist, he has explored charged social issues—including racial injustice, colonialist legacies, diasporic identities, migration and extreme weather events—through a distinctive approach to memory and history. He was knighted in the King's New Year UK Honours List for 2023.

John Akomfrah's Vertigo Sea

Akomfrah has participated in two previous Venice Biennales. His *Vertigo Sea*, the first part of a trilogy focused on the destruction of the planet, was a talking point at the 2015 biennale organised by the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor (*All the World's Futures*). The three-screen film installation fused images of marine life from the BBC's Natural History Unit with archive footage of whale hunting and the slave trade along with new material, to reflect on various aspects of humanity's relationship with the ocean.

The second part of the epic project *Purple* (2017), shown in the Curve gallery at London's Barbican in 2018, is a six-channel video installation that gives the artist's own nuanced, penetrating take on the insidious threat of climate change. In 2019, he showed the third work in the trilogy, *Four Nocturnes*, at the inaugural Ghana Pavilion in Venice which focused on humanity's destruction of the natural world via Africa's declining elephant populations.

John Akomfrah's *Four Nocturnes* (2019)

In 2017, Akomfrah won the biennial Artes Mundi prize with his 40-minute, two-screen video, *Auto Da Fé* (2016), which muses on the theme of mass migration over a 400-year period. "I wanted to focus on the fact that many people have to leave because something terrible is happening, it's not just about leaving for a better life, many people feel they have to leave to have a life at all," Akomfrah said.

In an interview in 2018, we asked Akomfrah if he felt pressure to keep raising the bar with each project. "I have wondered that. I honestly don't think so, but it's clear there is a dialogue between the commissions and what I'm asked to do," he said.

The UK representative at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Sonia Boyce, won the Golden Lion prize for Best National Participation at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia.

Artnet News
24th January 2023

artnet news

British-Ghanaian Filmmaker John Akomfrah Will Represent the United Kingdom at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024

"It is without a doubt one of the most exciting opportunities that an artist can be presented with," the artist said of the commission.

Taylor Dafoe, January 24, 2023

John Akomfrah at his London studio, 2016. Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

John Akomfrah, the British-Ghanaian artist whose ambitious films and screened installations have tackled colonial legacies, climate change, and immigration, has been selected to represent Britain at the 60th Venice Biennale, set to open in April 2024.

The nomination was announced today by the British Council, which has been responsible for the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 1937.

In a statement, Akomfrah called the commission a "huge privilege and an [honor]," adding that "it is without a doubt one of the most exciting opportunities that an artist can be presented with."

Akomfrah, 65, is widely regarded as one of the most influential video artists of his generation.

Born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957, the artist's family fled to Britain when he was just four. In 1982, he was one of seven founding artists behind Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), a group formed with the goal of increasing the representation Black British communities on screen. The collective's first film, *Handsworth Songs*, won the BFI John Grierson Award for Best Documentary in 1986.

Since then, Akomfrah has consistently turned to his chosen medium to explore topics that are both timely and universal in scope. Among the highlights are *Mnemosyne* (2010), a film about the experiences of post-war migrants living in the U.K.; *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a poetic portrait of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall; and *Purple* (2017), a 62-minute, six-channel video installation that explores the effects of changing climate patterns on human communities and natural ecosystems across the globe.

John Akomfrah, *Four Nocturnes* (2019). © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery.

Next year's presentation will mark Akomfrah's third turn at the Biennale, following, most recently, his presentation of the film *Four Nocturnes*, which was commissioned for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th iteration of the show in 2019. The artist's *Vertigo Sea* (2015) was also included in the Okwui Enwezor-curated main show in 2015.

Other artists to have represented Britain at the prestigious expo in recent years include Phyllida Barlow, Sarah Lucas, Cathy Wilkes, and Golden Lion winner Sonia Boyce. As with those figures, who were all over the age of 50 when commissioned, it seems the British Council panel of nominators prioritized Akomfrah's long history of artistic triumphs. Though the list of Akomfrah's recent accomplishments is impressive too: in 2017, he won the Artes Mundi prize, the U.K.'s biggest award for international art, while just this month, he was knighted as part of the King's New Year Honours List for 2023.

"John's inspiring style and narrative has continuously evolved, revealing key ideas and questions about the world we inhabit," Skinder Hundal, the British Council's Global Director of Arts and the Commissioner of the British Pavilion, said of the artist's nomination.

"The quality and contextual depth of his artistry never fails to inspire deep reflection and awe. For the British Council to have such a significant British-Ghanaian artist in Venice is an exhilarating moment."

ARTnews
3rd January 2023

ARTnews

British Artists John Akomfrah and Grayson Perry Knighted

BY SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI January 3, 2023 12:33pm

John Akomfrah attends the John Akomfrah: Purple exhibition at The Curve, Barbican on October 5, 2017 in London, United Kingdom. Running until the 7th January 2018
PHOTO BY ANTHONY HARVEY/GETTY IMAGES FOR BARBICAN ART GALLERY

British artists **John Akomfrah** and **Grayson Perry** were knighted as a part of the 2023 New Years Honours, in which more than a thousand people across England and beyond were recognized for their work in their respective fields and communities.

David Sutherland, an illustrator, was also recognized with an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) award, the ***BBC*** reported last week.

Akomfrah, who left Ghana in 1966 as a nine-year old, following intense political unrest, has focused much of his work on displacement, imperialism, and slavery as well as intense meditations on environmental harm. He works primarily with **art films** and multi-screen film installations. Akomfrah joins Isaac Julien as one of the few black artists to have been knighted.

Grayson Perry is a much-beloved British artist whose television show *Grayson's Art Club* began airing on Channel 4 in 2020. The conceit of the show was to provide some relief to the British public as it weathered successive COVID-19 lockdowns. Each week, Perry would ask viewers to submit a work of art they made on a theme he had chosen. Over the ensuring three years, the show has received tens of thousands of submissions. But Perry has a long history in the arts previous to this TV, having won the Turner Prize in 2003.

In years past, not just artists but art-world figures have been recognized. **In 2020**, for example, Stephen Deuchar, former director of Tate Britain who also worked at the UK's Art Fund for ten years, was knighted alongside Christopher le Brun, who had been the president of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

The honors include regular people in addition to notable politicians, athletes, researchers. 60% of the honorees are citizens who have received British Empire Medals for their work in their communities through volunteering or charity.

The Guardian
16 May 2022

The Guardian

Interview

John Akomfrah on Stuart Hall: 'When I first read him, I thought he was white'

Colin Grant

'It is not easy being black' ... John Akomfrah. Photograph: David Levene/the Guardian

The artist is revisiting his three-screen film about the legendary thinker and activist, which takes in jazz, Vietnam, and the family trauma that haunted Hall

Two years before his death in 2014, Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist, political activist and founding editor of radical journal the New Left Review, collaborated with the artist and film-maker John Akomfrah on The Unfinished Conversation. The extraordinary filmic art installation, projected on a triptych of screens, attempted to evoke and translate Hall's life and ideas until 1968's cultural revolution. Akomfrah adopts an approach that has become his signature, weaving together voiceover with music, newly shot footage and TV and film archive material. On its 10th anniversary it is being remounted at the Midlands Arts Centre as part of Birmingham 2022 festival.

Even on a Zoom call, Akomfrah is luminous; he's an intellectual without pretension and his blue, French workman's jacket looks lived in. Behind him are cabinets with each drawer identified by a single photo. More artwork and paraphernalia are propped up on the walls. Laughter prefaces all the answers to my questions, especially the mischievous ones. I start by asking what drew him to Hall.

“It was Stuart’s questioning of blackness in his early 1970s writing,” he says. “Its evolution in this country, its multiple transformations. When I first read him, though, I thought he was white. Only when I saw that campaign against racism in the media programme he made with Maggie Steed in 1979, It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum, did I realise: Oh, the brother’s black!” Prescient and excoriating, It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum revealed how the overt racism of British TV comedy and light entertainment shows was also broadcast more subtly in current affairs programmes.

“What I wouldn’t understand until later was that Stuart had many struggles, conflicts, and conversations himself on this question of blackness,” Akomfrah continues. “It wasn’t a given for him either.” When Hall arrived in Britain in 1951 on a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University, he found that white Britons did not distinguish between the classes of pioneering Caribbean migrants; he was considered just another irksome black man and faced even greater hostility when he married Catherine, a white woman.

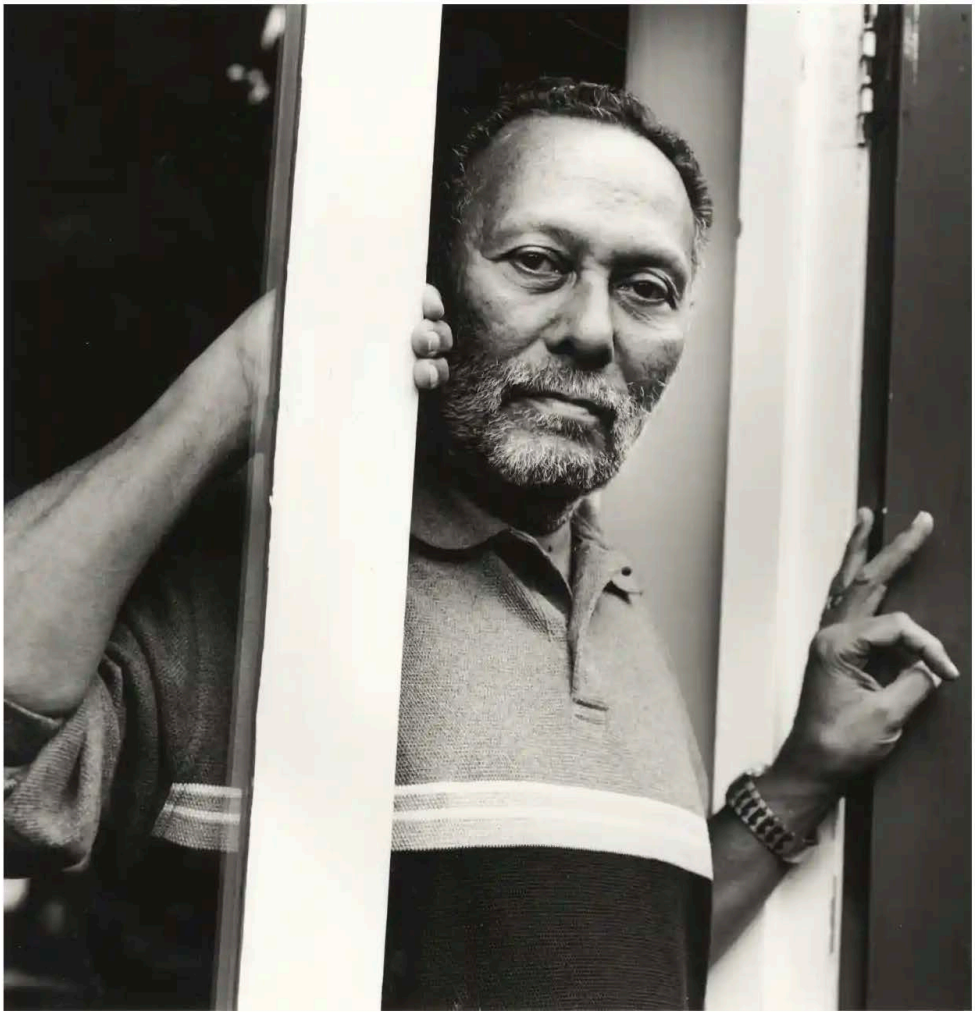
A poignant portrait … Akomfrah's installation The Unfinished Conversation. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid toni@thphotos.com/Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

With its evocative use of Miles Davis’s music and archive footage marking the defining moments of Hall’s political activism - the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) protests, US attack helicopters firing into the Vietnam rainforest, Russian tanks on Hungarian streets, Hall addressing crowds and protesters - I see Akomfrah’s triptych as a poignant portrait of Hall’s personal and public life. Akomfrah agrees, mostly.

“Its central conceit, which emerged in discussions with Stuart over many months, was that identities are constructed, at these crossroads of the historical, the imaginary and the psychic. Stuart was a perfect illustration of that; the question of identity had been a flowing river in his own life.” In the film, Hall describes himself as three shades darker than his family and how he felt like an outsider in a colonial society that promoted whiteness and its fair-skinned brown approximation. “But a portrait on its own wasn’t enough,” says Akomfrah. “We also needed to rummage through the history of the last century to make sense of the vicissitudes of race and the fortunes of the New Left.”

In the 1950s and 60s a broad collection of leftwing activists, student radicals and intellectuals came together as the New Left; it was a movement opposed to colonialism, imperialism and orthodox communism, and its revolutionary challenge to find a "third way" culminated in 1968 in mass protests in western Europe and North America. Akomfrah, who remains impressed by the New Left Review takes issue with the notion that its influence has diminished. "There was a time when people talked about the focus of the New Left - a social democratic anti-imperialism - as if it were an entirely white and European affair, even though we were embroiled in racial and cultural aspects from the beginning," he says. "And that's why in The Unfinished Conversation I revisited the crises of Suez and Vietnam."

Akomfrah's sense of common purpose with the New Left was expressed in his early films, such as Handsworth Songs, made in 1986 with the Black Audio Film Collective, illuminating the hostility directed at black people in Britain. His sympathies still reside with the New Left. "Even today, if you read New Left Review, reflecting on the current crisis in Ukraine, you'd see it's always been good at identifying how the immediate past has a bearing on the present. So, where people see the disappearance of the New Left, I see longevity."



'I think he's haunted by questions of complicity' ... Stuart Hall. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe/the Guardian

Moving from the secular to the sacred I suggest that the triptych form, exemplified in art history in Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights, has a devotional quality. Akomfrah accepts the point but argues that his triptych offers, "both, in its visual and musical form, a way of making discursivity manifest, visible. Focusing on a figure [Hall], a time, a history, a political movement and shifting identity; the triptych could survey and embody that panorama."

In one early scene, underscored by nostalgic 1950s jazz and Hall's silky-smooth voiceover offering social observations, on the central screen is Super 8 home video footage of an unidentified person relaxing in a swaying hammock on a Caribbean porch. There are two further screens, one on each side: one shows a colourful, perhaps colourised, photo of elegant colonial-era cars in Kingston, Jamaica, with the Blue Mountains in the background; the other is of commuters, captured in black-and-white BBC archive footage, emerging from London trains. Slowly, almost imperceptibly the voiceover gives way to the sound of rolling thunder announcing a coming storm. What, I ask Akomfrah, governed the alignment of images?

"I wanted to get a centre-screen story right and then find counterparts for the left and right panels. It's a portrait of a life in transition as well as a mirror to historical transformations that have some relationship with that life. I'm trying to suggest spaces in which a set of elective affinities overlapped and took place." There's warmth and candour in Hall's testimony but I wonder whether Akomfrah felt any hesitancy in highlighting Hall's mother and the nature of Jamaica's caste system. Colonial Jamaica prejudicially consigned the majority black population to the footstool of society, such that, as recounted by the journalist and scholar Vivian Durham, "it was the ambition of every black man to be white."

At one point Hall remembers his mother moaning about "awful black people who are spoiling Britain with their presence; they should be driven off the pier with a big broom". More than snobbishness, perhaps there's self-loathing, I ask Akomfrah. "The question of a caste system or pigmentocracy is central to the formation of Jamaica and to Stuart. I included it because it seemed to say something quite profound about his life."

It was key that we brought not just the ideas but the look of the ideas into the present … The Unfinished Conversation. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Hall was critical of his mother's snobbishness and prejudice. "And the tragic story of his sister who was forbidden by her mother from marrying a doctor because he was too dark-skinned … Stuart revisited this again and again, to the point where it was almost like a primal scene. His own role in it is what haunts him. He tells you the story but at some point you think: mate, what did you do? I think he's haunted by questions of complicity."

Like many artists, Akomfrah always finds fault looking back at his work, but 10 years on he's still content with the look of the triptych. "We went into the BBC archive and tried to transfer everything useful from the original material into something pristine and viewer friendly. It was important that we freed the archival material from the overarching tyranny of degradation because with it comes a set of assumptions. 'Oh, it's old, from the past, looks crappy, and therefore of no value.' It was key that we brought not just the ideas but the look of the ideas into the present."

Akomfrah is glad Hall got to see The Unfinished Conversation before he died in 2014 and recalls its poignancy. "We started working together from the very beginning; he was a seen and unseen guest, if you like. He seemed to be moved by The Unfinished Conversation … which was important to me. But in the end it's a kind of failure," he says wryly, "since the project was about trying to keep him alive." Ten years on, does Akomfrah feel his work has resonance today? "This was made before the Black Lives Matter explosion, that whole becoming of blackness as a sort of public spectacle of protest and affirmation that we've lived through. There's a prophetic echo of those themes in The Unfinished Conversation. It is prescient and timely."

When I tell Akomfrah the title of my forthcoming memoir, I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be, he nods and laughs heartily, recognising its irony. "I hear you. This is one of the central governing conversations of blackness. What do you let go and what do you allow to define you? Neither of us are ever going to claim that somehow we've reached some moment of transcendence, where we've escaped the freedoms and tyrannies of blackness. And I don't say that out of pride because nobody wants to hang on to shit that's about causing you grief. It is not easy being black."

Finally, he switches back to my earlier question of the devotional. "I don't think it's possible to speak about the question of blackness without also, in some way, reaching into the space of the spiritual. The Unfinished Conversation has that spiritual or hymnal quality." I say amen to that.

● John Akomfrah: The Unfinished Conversation, 2012, is at Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham as part of Birmingham 2022 Festival until 26 June.

Prospect Magazine
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Prospect

How John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective reframed empire

In works such as Signs of Empire, the Collective preferred elliptical questions to militant slogans

By Sukhdev Sandhu March 3, 2022

John Akomfrah (left) and the Black Audio Film Collective

Mass unemployment, IRA hunger strikes, race riots: the early 1980s was a turbulent period. In response, seven young black Britons at Portsmouth Polytechnic banded together as the Black Audio Film Collective. The filmmaker John Akomfrah, son of exiled Ghanaian radicals, was their charismatic spokesman, but each had their own interests—anti-colonial politics, sociology, psychoanalysis, post-punk

music. What united them was a desire to make work rooted in British, rather than black American, aesthetics. Until they disbanded in 1998, their experimental films were closer in spirit to seminar rooms than soapboxes. They preferred elliptical questions to militant slogans and were as likely to be screened in art galleries as in high-street cinemas. These days you can find them on Amazon Prime or YouTube.

Black Audio began work on their remarkable first film *Signs of Empire* in 1982. Originally exhibited as a tape-slide production, it's an eerie and unsettling exploration of the iconography of British imperialism. There are lingering images of statues and monuments commemorating Victorian heroes, close-ups of the soldiers who propped up British dominion, hundreds of sepia photographs of proud Englishmen standing beside flayed colonial subjects or tiger-hunt spoils. Trevor Mathison's sound design is a ghostly mix of loops, musique concrète and distorted samples, including Tory MP Ronald Bell asserting that one need only look at the faces of immigrant children to see that "they don't know who they are, or what they are."

Signs of Empire suggests connections between a colonial past and a postcolonial present, but what these might be remain deliberately opaque. Many images are overlaid with elegant calligraphy and phrases made using Letraset that wouldn't look out of place on the sleeves of arty record labels. The film delves into the nation's dark past but, perhaps confoundingly, looks beautiful. It's more moodscape than agit prop, less interested in fist-waving anger than melancholic ambiguity.

These days it's hard to move for polemical histories auditing British imperialism. *Signs of Empire*, though, preceded the rise of postcolonial studies and critical race theory. When I talk to Akomfrah, now a celebrated filmmaker, he recalls: "Black Audio were very conscious of the fact that many of the categories and the concepts we were throwing up —'palimpsests,' 'the hinterlands of narrative,' 'the rhetoric of race'—were speaking to a theory-to-come that hadn't been born. Even though we were very young, we just knew it was a matter of time before people would start to question restricted ideas about national identity and whiteness. We knew the long postcolonial fire would reach our shores, would burn. But we needed to push for it, to push for that complexity."

Signs of Empire feels resonant because of its attention to statues. Black Audio zoomed in on details that made them look fragmented and ruined. They tilted them, made them look rusted, dented their grandeur. Akomfrah has fond memories of filming at the Mall and the Albert Memorial: "as filmmakers you have to get pretty close to them. Sometimes sit on them. The fact that we were a ragamuffin, motley crew of young black kids meant that everyone who saw us assumed we were up to no good. We were supposed to be busying ourselves with chasing old ladies and taking their money!" This proximity was crucial, though. "I love the Albert Memorial. It's a profound work. But it's when you're in the statues' presence that you have to have the argument with the fiction they propose—the argument about the brilliance and excellence of empire."

What went through his mind when he saw slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol being torn down? "I saw the triumph of ethics. The so-called defenders of tradition

inaugurate this enormous thing called 'the law.' They forget that before the law there's the ethical. You know, having slaves was law; it doesn't make it right! Many of those young activists understood this. They understood that Colston's statue was something monstrous. Toppling the statue freed us. It freed the nation from this slavish adherence to the immoral in the name of justice."

The Colston controversy made Akomfrah reflect on the changes in British society over the last 40 years. "You can take a camera and deconstruct statues and pull them down that way. But if, back in 1982, we had done what those protesters in Bristol did, we would have served life prison sentences. Literally. So that's how much things have changed. These changes are both absolutely necessary and completely heartening. It is possible now to challenge some of these monstrous legacies in the language of the ethical and—possibly—win in a court case. It certainly wasn't possible in 1982."

The New York Times
1 September 2021

The New York Times

An Artist Who Brings Order to Chaos

John Akomfrah's films have shaken up official narratives around Black identity and imperialism. His latest tries to make sense of life in the pandemic.

John Akomfrah said he wants his new work "five murmurations" to engage viewers in a conversation that is "animated for sure, occasionally convivial, occasionally heated." Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

By Elizabeth Fullerton

Sept. 1, 2021 Updated 6:21 a.m. ET

LONDON — Shortly before the artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah left Ghana for Britain after a 1966 coup, the nine-year-old-boy had a final encounter with his grandfather, the High Priest of the Akomfrah clan. The venerated old man wore a ring that had passed down through generations, representing the power to bring order to life's chaos. It seemed like a perfect parting gift for his eldest grandson.

Instead the old man swallowed it.

Akomfrah always assumed this gesture signaled that the ring's powers had ended with his grandfather, but when his friend, the filmmaker Arthur Jafa, heard the story, he instantly felt it meant something different.

"What his grandfather did as a High Priest was a perfect fit for what John does as a filmmaker," Jafa said recently by phone: Akomfrah's films also bring order to chaos, he said.

"When he swallowed the ring," Jafa added, "that meant, 'You have to apply what I've taught you in a radically new context. I'm so confident that you're prepared for this task that I can take from you the material affirmation of it. Because I know you're ready.' "

Akomfrah, now 64, is too modest to call himself a High Priest of cinema. Yet for the past 40 years, he and his collaborators have shaken up official narratives around slavery, Black identity, imperialism and the environment with boundary-pushing films that seem timely today, even if they were largely ignored by the art world until recently.

These mosaic-like films retell marginalized histories, from his raw 1980s documentaries about race to his exploration of mankind's destructive impulses in immersive multiscreen epics such as "Four Nocturnes," which impressed critics at the 2019 Venice Biennale. After years of being sidelined, Akomfrah is enjoying newfound recognition.

"Five mururations" intercuts archival material with black-and-white footage that is pared back to "an absolute basic of light, shadow and texture," Akomfrah said. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

His latest work, "five murmurations," a three-channel film, will show at Lisson Gallery in New York from Sept. 9 through Oct. 16. The work is an attempt to make sense of some momentous events of the past 18 months: the coronavirus pandemic, and the murder of George Floyd, which sparked global protests in support of Black Lives Matter.

"It felt like there were almost two pandemics, overlapping, jostling and clashing with each other," Akomfrah said recently in an interview at his airy London studio.

Conveying this sense of overlap, snippets of text like "Am I safe?," "Fear" and "Dying helplessly" float in and out of focus throughout the film, obliquely linking shots of cozy domestic interiors with footage of masked protesters and police violence.

"I wanted to find a way of speaking about how generalized the sense of threat felt," Akomfrah said.

Like Akomfrah's previous films, "five murmurations" draws visual connections across media, time periods and geographies, creating echoes and affinities that allow new insights to emerge. In one kaleidoscopic sequence, for instance, stills of the police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck are juxtaposed with archival photographs of the executed revolutionary Che Guevara and the Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna's "Lamentation over the Dead Christ."

“There’s something really Christlike about George Floyd’s aura in death,” Akomfrah said. “Part of it is just the very public nature of the death: The banality, the stupidity of it — the sheer awfulness of it — seemed to transform him into something else.”

Akomfrah’s montage style has been his signature since the beginning of his career, enabling him to present multiple contrasting perspectives at once. Montage was more than just a method, he said: It reflects the fragmented nature of modern existence.

“All of us have this kind of jumble of experiences and emotions, they’re not whole,” he added. “For me the ethical task is to try and make these disparate themes, elements, forms, narratives, sit — not necessarily comfortably, but just sit momentarily with one another, long enough to form a story.”

Akomfrah said his work brings together “disparate themes, elements, forms, narratives,” that “sit momentarily with one another, long enough to form a story.”
Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

This layered approach defined Akomfrah's earliest works, made with the Black Audio Film Collective, an artists' atelier he formed in the early 1980s with six friends while at college in Portsmouth, England.

Lina Gopaul, Akomfrah's long-term collaborator and partner, who was with the collective from the start, said the group "wanted to explore these questions of identity, how race is formed and who fixes it." As well as making films, the group organized screenings, distributed other artists' work and put on symposiums.

David Lawson, who was also in the collective, said its members absorbed diverse influences, including French New Wave cinema and the works of Akira Kurosawa and Andrei Tarkovsky. The collective wanted to show that "there were different ways of making Black cinema, that were not just didactic or angry, but could be more poetic, more reflective, more meditative," Lawson said.

Its 1986 documentary essay "Handsworth Songs," about riots that broke out the previous year in London and Birmingham, England, offered an insightful take on the complexities of race relations in Britain. Through newsreel and original footage, overlaid with a sound montage, it told of immigrants from Britain's former colonies arriving here full of hope, only to face police harassment, economic hardship and a willful amnesia about the country's violent imperial past.

Tina Campt, a professor of media and modern culture at Brown University who studies the African diaspora in Europe, said in a phone interview that Akomfrah's films challenge an "official narrative" about Britain's empire as a source of comfort and security. "When you look at how unstable that actually is, and on whose backs that stability was waged, earned, perpetrated, that is the most terrifying thing," Campt said. "And he does it very gently, in a way that seduces us."

Black Audio Film Collective works played at the Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals and were broadcast on British television, yet the London art world showed little interest. For many years, Akomfrah worked primarily on television documentaries: first with the collective, until it dissolved in 1998, then with its successor, Smoking Dogs Films, made up of Akomfrah, Gopaul, their son Ashitey and Lawson. A turning point in how Akomfrah's works are regarded came when Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian curator of the 2015 Venice Biennale, commissioned Akomfrah to make the immersive video installation "Vertigo Sea" for the exhibition.

An elegy to lives lost at sea, the film assaults the senses with rapturous shots of roiling oceans across three floor-to-ceiling screens. Historical footage of sailors harpooning whales is spliced with news clips of Vietnamese refugees onboard a sinking boat and staged shots of manacled Black men crammed into a ship's hold. Akomfrah's team traveled to Norway, the Faroe Islands and the Isle of Skye in Scotland to film striking tableaux with a cast of costumed actors, and also drew on footage from the BBC Natural History Unit.

"Vertigo Sea" announced a shift in focus, the artist said. Instead of privileging humans in the narrative, Akomfrah assigned equal, or even greater, importance to the sea and the whales. Years of thinking about what race means had led him to challenge other artificial distinctions, he said, like those between humans and animals. "Not that long ago if you were an enslaved African, or a serf in rural Russia, you were definitely not human for most of the people in power," Akomfrah explained.

Landscapes, such as the sea, have taken on an increasing significance in Akomfrah's work since 2008, he said, when he had a moment of clarity while filming in Alaska, near the site of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. "You start to think, 'There are things that this place wants to say and it might not necessarily want to be just a playground for a human drama,' " he said. "It might have ancient wisdoms to offer."

Nature vies with built environments in the six-channel film "Purple" (2017), which was filmed in 10 countries and contemplates humanity's impact on the planet from the industrial to the digital age; images of belching oil refineries, frenzied factory production and traffic-choked highways suggest a civilization in overdrive.

An installation view of Akomfrah's three-screen film "Four Nocturnes," at Lisson Gallery in London. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery; George Darrell

A still from "Vertigo Sea," which was commissioned for the 2015 Venice Biennale. Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

"Purple," a 2017 work by Akomfrah, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Smoking Dogs Films and Palais de Tokyo; Marc Domage

"Vertigo Sea" and "Purple" form a trilogy with "Four Nocturnes," which was Akomfrah's contribution to Ghana's inaugural pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale: All three ruminate on time, memory, progress and, above all, humanity's barbarity.

"You get a sense of a historical sweep and vastness that you associate with 19th century realist writers like Charles Dickens, or Victor Hugo," said Massimiliano Gioni, who co-curated a 2018 exhibition of Akomfrah's works at the New Museum in New York. "But it is achieved ultimately through a deeply postmodern language, which is that of the collage and fragment," he added.

"Five murmurations" retains Akomfrah's fractured approach, but it looks starkly different from his recent works. In the original material that intercuts the archival footage, there are no high-end visuals filmed in spectacular locations. Pandemic-mandated restrictions forced a complete rethink of his approach, Akomfrah said.

Shot largely in black-and-white in the homes of friends and family during last year's lockdowns, these sections are pared back to "an absolute basic of light, shadow and texture," Akomfrah said. Besides recording the events of history unfolding, "five murmurations" also portrays the individual experience of life in the pandemic. "A lot of it is really people trying to document moments of solitude and isolation," he added.

The aim, as with all his films, Akomfrah said, is to engage viewers in a conversation that is "animated for sure, occasionally convivial, occasionally heated."

"I'm not trying to save the world or anything," he added. "I am trying to speak to it."

The Work of John Akomfrah

On Multiple Screens, John Akomfrah Deftly Weaves Tales of the African Diaspora
Aug. 23, 2018

15 Documentaries That Get Inside an Artist's Head
April 16, 2020

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 5, 2021, Section AR, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: Making Sense of Life's Chaos. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

LISSON GALLERY

FT Weekend
7-8 November 2020

FINANCIAL TIMES

"The British brought people over from Africa and the Caribbean to work. Then my generation got born. An unintended consequence, I suppose," says artist and film-maker John Akomfrah. Born in Accra, Ghana, in 1957, he has lived in the UK since he was a child after his family had to leave for political reasons: "We kids, nobody knew quite what to do with us."

For Akomfrah and other young African and Afro-Caribbean men, London in the 1970s was a dangerous place. "I would say, for example, that a white man said something to me, and I was told that it didn't happen. Just didn't happen." There was an attempt, he says, "to clean up the streets of black men. It wasn't safe. I wasn't safe. I got off the street."

The unexpected consequence of this was that the teenage Akomfrah started to go to the local repertory, the legendary Paris Pullman, not far from where he grew up in Parsons Green. It showed, among others, Bergman, Antonioni, Renoir, Bertolucci, Oshima, Fassbinder. "They had Raoul Walsh one day, [Jean-Luc] Godard the next. I was safe. Nobody else was there. I always felt free and on my own. It was glorious.

“Then one day I realised something. I realised that Godard, [François] Truffaut and all the rest were in a kind of private conversation that didn’t include me. That not including me was actually the point of the conversation. I took up the camera. It was for me, a kind of shield.”

Akomfrah photographed on the roof of his London studio, October 2020 © Adama Jalloh

> **One day I realised that Godard, Truffaut and all the rest were in a kind of private conversation that didn't include me. That not including me was the point of the conversation**

That led him into his long career and his latest show, *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster*, at London's Lisson Gallery: an exploration of the themes of Akomfrah's life — beauty, race, all the media of film-making.

"I started in the 1970s with a bunch of mates doing O-levels. We went through the system and just decided to stick together," he says. Sticking together led to the creation of the influential Black Audio Film Collective in 1982, with artists such as David Lawson (who joined in 1985) and Lina Gopaul. Akomfrah continues to collaborate with them.

The Collective's first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), examined the events and the lives involved in the social-justice uprisings in Birmingham and London of the previous year. For black film-makers and artists especially, *Handsworth Songs* was as influential as Godard's *Breathless*. It was quite simply, for us, a new way of seeing.

Stills from 'Handsworth Songs' (1986) by John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective

© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

The debut by the Black Audio Film Collective mixed newsreel, still photos and archive footage to look at the forces driving civil unrest in 1980s Britain © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

Handsworth Songs uses a combination of newsreel, still photos and archive footage. This way of making film is one of the hallmarks of Akomfrah's technique: an accumulation of image and sound and feeling. It generates one of his goals — the discovery of unintended beauty. His work does not lecture, does not harangue. It is witness. It is his encounter with real ancestors, but also with those he calls imaginary ancestors — the ones he takes for himself. Without apology.

> **There is always, for me, this kind of discontinuity and continuity. I try to figure out the spaces in between**

"I picked up these imaginary ancestors like [artist JMW] Turner. It's his cinematic eye. I love that about him. So he and I would have this private conversation. Then the time comes when you have enough imaginary ancestors, and knowledge, and you go out on your own. Your journey."

The show at Lisson examines Akomfrah's journey, his encounter with the world outside and his interior world, a mélange of questions and searching. Always searching.

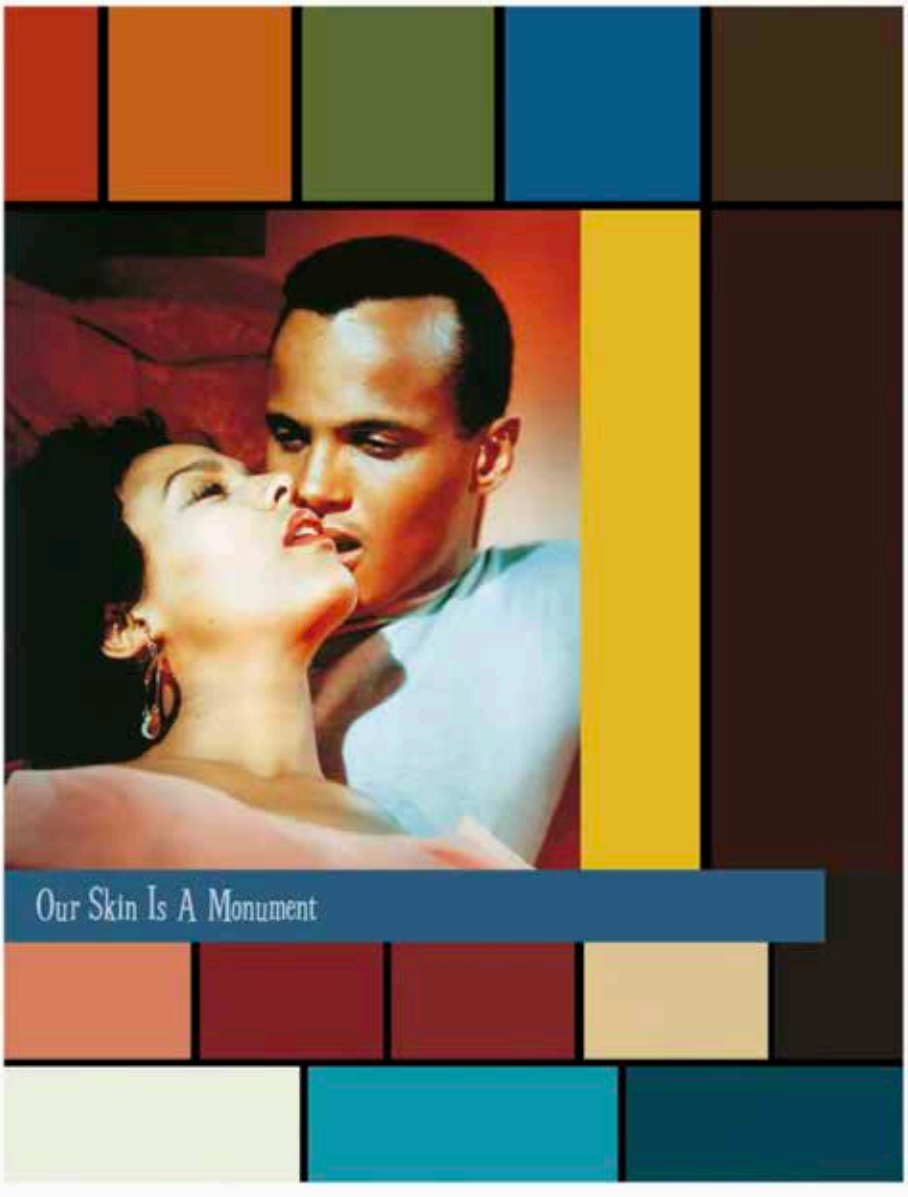
Four Nocturnes (2019), commissioned for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, is the third part of a trilogy of films that explore the intertwined relationship between the destruction of the environment and the destruction of humanity. The film meditates on loss and mortality, myth and memory, using the rapidly declining elephant population of Africa.

'Four Nocturnes', Akomfrah's commission for the Ghana Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, examines humanity's impact upon the environment © David Levene

Fragments are a motif of the film-maker: "I'm used to being made up of fragments. Deposits. Sometimes people ask me what it's like being on the 'inside'. I have relatives

on the 'outside'. So I'm not completely 'inside'. I can work with these fragments of myself. Because for me, it's about The Work and serving The Work, and helping others to work."

The show also features new photographic works based on Akomfrah's recent "Our Skin Is a Monument I" (2020), part of whose proceeds support emerging UK-based black and ethnic-minority curators. The piece referred to black Hollywood stars and how film crews used only white actors when considering colour levels during shooting. The photographs are an example of Akomfrah's continuing interest in monuments — the title is taken from an essay published in The New York Times in June this year in which the African-American writer Caroline Randall Williams suggests that the skin of black Americans is the real monument to the Confederacy, the pro-slavery side of the US Civil War, in the way that it embodies histories of enslavement and abuse.



Akomfrah's 'photo-text' 'Our Skin Is a Monument I' (2020) refers to the way in which Hollywood film crews would use white actors to calibrate colour levels © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

“I wanted to make this film in the USA, in Lowndes County, in the South,” says Akomfrah. “I wind up on this small black farm. And it could have been rural Nigeria, the faces, the voices. Everything. There is always, for me, this kind of discontinuity and continuity. I try to figure out the spaces in between.”

The Black Lives Matter protests, which spread across America and then around the world, have occupied Akomfrah’s imagination too. A new three-screen film work at Lisson Gallery entitled *Triptych* responds indirectly to the social-justice movements of 2020. “I kept looking at these pictures of Breonna Taylor. She was just an ordinary person. An ordinary woman. And then comes this extraordinary violence. Extraordinary. I want to say something about ordinary black folk. About ordinary blackness.”

Stills from ‘Triptych’ (2020)

© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

© Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

In his new three-screen film work, Akomfrah alludes to Black Lives Matter and the social-justice movements of 2020 © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery

'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster' opens in January at Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street, London NW1. From November 9-22, John Akomfrah's 'Signs of Empire' is on the gallery website, lissongallery.com

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian
15 April 2021

The Guardian

Apocalypse now: John Akomfrah's The Unintended Beauty of Disaster

Adrian Searle
@SearleAdrian
Thu 15 Apr 2021 11.24 EDT

★★★★★

▲ 'We are witness to a darkening of the world' ... Four Nocturnes, 2019 (film still). Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery, London

With a relentless video onslaught, Akomfrah confronts colonialism, slavery, migrants and the obliteration of the natural world with astonishing results

The images slide across three screens in relentless succession. White birds flap over the wetlands and a boy in the burning sun. Elephants move through the scrub. One thing after another, and then another, and then something else. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and a fleeting glimpse of Malcolm X. Someone playing sax. A rhino quivering in death. Whenever you dwell on one thing, something else calls for attention. Big game hunters climb down from a dead elephant with no more thought than if they'd slid from a bonnet of a truck, all caught in some souvenir black and white footage from their safari.

We see old, framed black and white stills of slaves in chains, subjugated women and children and further horrors, the picture frames hung from trees or half-submerged in streams and in the tide of a rocky headland. Then there are appalling glimpses of beatings and murders (did I really see that?), and a marvellous clip of a hippo, mouth agape, in the surf at the edge of an ocean. There's no stopping and there's no going back. The stars wheel overhead and there's thunder in the clouds.

▲ John Akomfrah Four Nocturnes, 2019 (film still). Photograph: George Darrell/Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

One always has a feeling of missing as much as one grasps in John Akomfrah's often lengthy multiscreen videos, although one should trust one's subconscious to pick up more than one realises. Even so, you can't always be sure if what you recall isn't a false memory. Premiered in the Ghanaian Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, Akomfrah's Four Nocturnes is now at Lisson Gallery, as the centrepiece of his new show, The Unintended Beauty of Disaster. Fifty minutes long, Four Nocturnes returns to his themes of our relationship to the natural world and to ourselves, to the histories of colonialism and slavery, to politics (everything is political) and to migrations, both human and animal.

Not for nothing is the work described as a series of nocturnes. Fierce and blinding though the light often is, we are witness here to a darkening of the world, as relentless and unstoppable as the dust storm that rolls in from horizon to horizon at one point in the work, obliterating everything. Later, we come to an astonishing image of a dune in a room. Seeing this work a second time, after two years away from it, I am familiar with far more than I had realised. This is a mark of the power of Akomfrah's work, and of course of the wildlife film-makers and others whose archival footage and images he has sampled and woven together in unexpected, often seamless ways.

▲ John Akomfrah Four Nocturnes, 2019 (film still). Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah folds his material together with staged scenes of migrants heaving their ubiquitous plastic laundry bags of possessions under desert suns and along empty highways, pausing in the midst of some great emptiness beside a windblown fence or under marching pylons. I find some of this jarring and a bit mannered, while the footage of elephants mourning their dead, and fondling their bones is both intensely moving and also feels somehow intrusive. These images haunt me.

Akomfrah plays fast and loose with time and place, the real and the constructed, to make larger, more complex narratives. A second three-screen video, Triptych, set in an unnamed location, is a panoply of street portraits. The title is taken from a track by jazz drummer and composer Max Roach, from his 1960 album We Insist! Roach's wonderful Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace, which provides the soundtrack, with singer Abbey Lincoln keening and wailing wordlessly as Akomfrah's camera glides and pauses. Practitioners of Candomblé, transgender people and queers of all sorts, street musicians, sassy kids and game old ladies, families, friends and passersby pose and smile for Akomfrah's camera. Towards the end, we see an overhead shot of a vast portrait commemorating Breonna Taylor (shot dead by US police in her home in March last year), covering two basketball courts in Annapolis, Maryland.

▲ Time and place ... a still fromTriptych, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

Mostly shot in Bahia, northern Brazil, once a centre of the slave trade, Triptych shows black skin, black faces and bodies in all their variety. Along with two new series of prints, Akomfrah's latest work takes its cues from Caroline Randall Williams' 2020 New York Times essay You want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument - her call for the removal of confederate monuments has unassailable gravity and moral power.

Set among photographic details of the monumental sculptures at the base of the Albert Memorial in London's Kensington Gardens are a number of printed definitions: Brique - with Light Skin and Reddish, Woolly Hair; Albarazado - A Child of a Lobo and an Indian; Barcino - Child of an Albarazado and Mestiza; Cuarterón - a Child of a white and a Morisco; Quintroon - of one-sixteenth African Ancestry. This dubious and racist nomenclature, all these Mulattos and Mustefinos sit alongside photographs of carved elephants and bare-breasted women, hoards of tusks and other spoils of empire. Numerous stoic colonial subjects, from India, Africa, the Middle East and who knows where, are memorialised in the white marble, but only as stereotypical, ethnographical stand-ins.

▲ The Monuments of Being Series No Three. Photograph: George Darrell/Smoking Dogs Films, courtesy Lisson Gallery

Akomfrah's Monuments of Being is in part a response to Randall Williams and also to the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol last year. Ever since his work with the Black Audio Film Collective, Akomfrah has been asking us to look again at where we are and where we come from, what we value, what we ascribe to; and who is this "we" in any case? Filled with questions, wide-ranging, at times astonishing, lyrical, troubling and passionate (and I write this, not always loving everything he does) Akomfrah often gives us too much to grasp. The difficulties multiply, but that's the world for you.

- John Akomfrah: The Unintended Beauty of Disaster is at Lisson Gallery, London, until 5 June.

Evening Standard
12 April 2021

Evening Standard

John Akomfrah at Lisson gallery review: enveloping, enthralling, sublime

This first show to open after lockdown is a brilliant reflection on resistance

A still from Four Nocturnes / Smoking Dogs Films

Review at a glance

★★★★★

Enveloping, enthralling, sublime: Four Nocturnes (2019), the centrepiece of The Unintended Beauty of Disaster, Lisson Gallery's new show by the British artist John Akomfrah, is part of a trilogy of video installations that stands among the great bodies of art produced this century. Like Vertigo Sea (2015) and Purple (2017), it collages — or "choreographs", as Akomfrah puts it — original and archival footage across three screens. It weaves together the big themes of our times — climate change, migration — with legacies of colonialism and slavery.

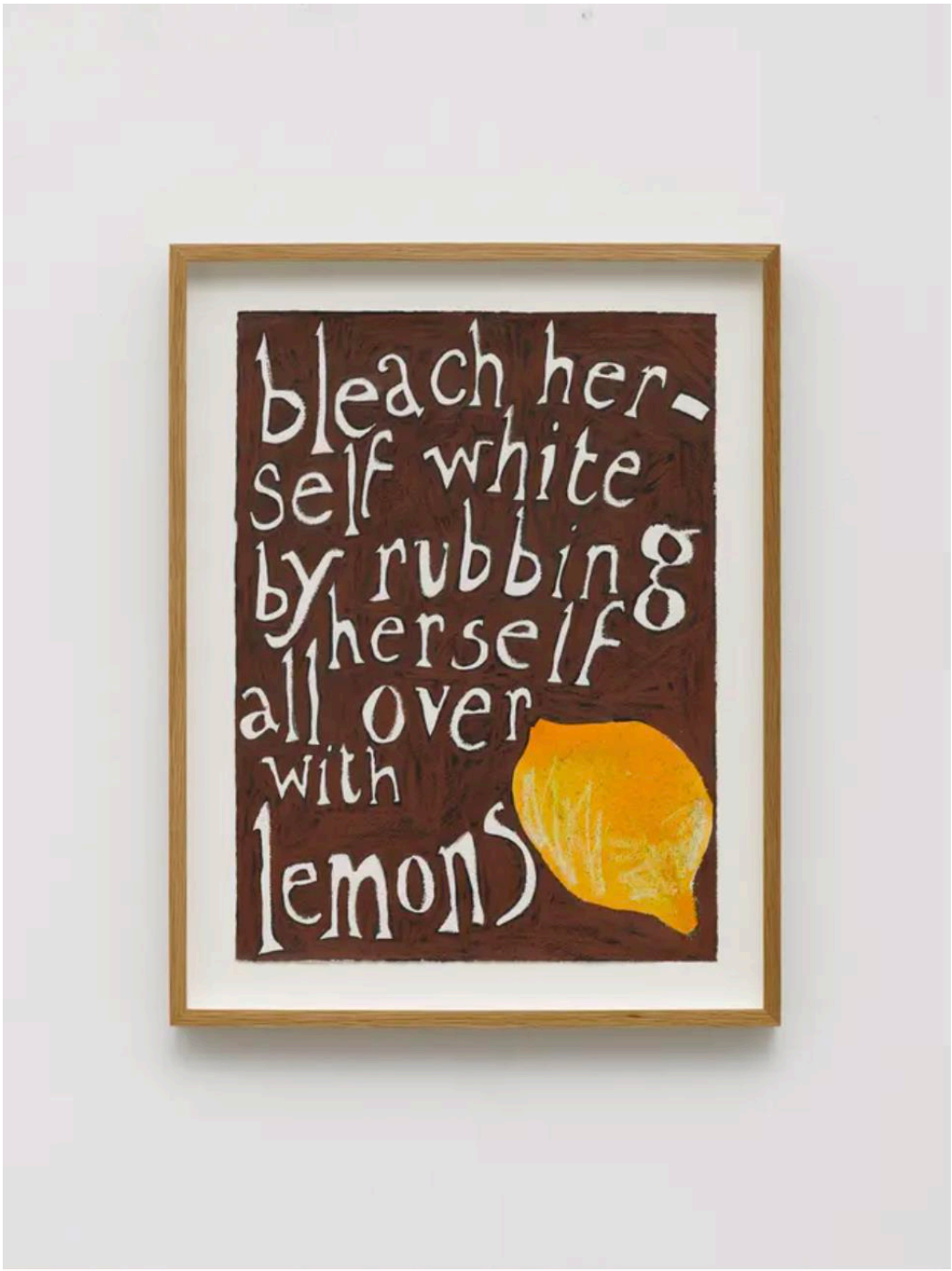
Elephants and their decline in Africa provide a leitmotif and symbol through Four Nocturnes — wandering across the vast, cracked desert earth; working in the logging industry; mourning their dead kin; and being captured as trophies in colonial hunting photographs. Meanwhile, young migrants roam the unforgiving desert amid toppled pylon. Archival footage of pan-African heroes like the assassinated Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba haunt the film. The imagery is impressionistic, impossible to consume at once, yet precise in its emotional impact: it's an urgent, devastating appraisal of the causes and effects of humanitarian and environmental crises.

By Ben Luke | 2 days ago

A still from Triptych, 2020 / Smoking Dogs Films

As well as photo and text works, Akomfrah shows Triptych (2020), a new film made amid the Black Lives Matter protests. It's a study in portraiture: a series of Black faces meet our gaze across the three screens. It follows the three-part structure of its soundtrack, the civil rights-themed jazz classic Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace, made by singer Abbey Lincoln and drummer Max Roach in 1960.

Prayer begins slowly, Lincoln's haunting notes allied to Akomfrah's images of oceans, archival images washed up in the surf, and the first lingering, beautiful portraits. In Protest, Akomfrah films people dancing, but their joyousness is made precarious by Lincoln's primal screams, a raw, unforgettable moment. In Peace, Akomfrah shows us why. With Lincoln subdued and elegiac, a different kind of portrait appears: the Maryland mural of Breonna Taylor, the woman killed by police in March 2020. A stomach-punch moment in a brilliant reflection on resistance and precariousness.



A work by Jade Montserrat / Jade Montserrat

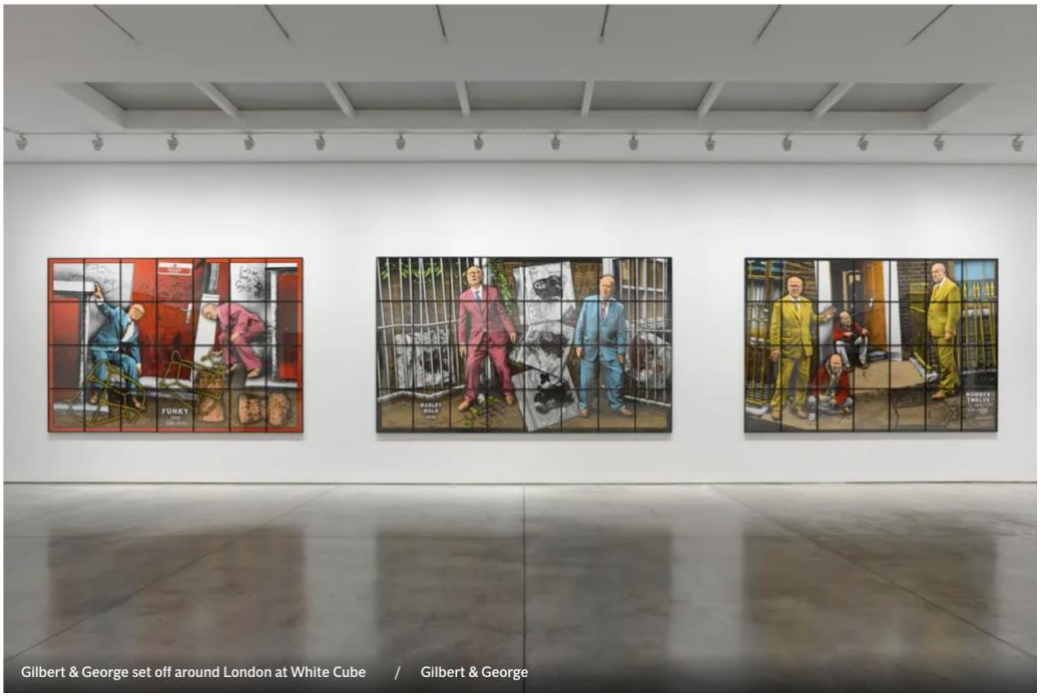
At the other Lisson space up the road is Infinity of Traces (★★★★), an Ekow Eshun-curated show by Black artists, emergent and established, seen as a "conversation" with Akomfrah, weaving around his themes in diverse artistic languages. Among many superb moments are Jade Montserrat's delicate yet affecting combinations of poetry and image in watercolour, and video works with distinctive visions of Black bodies and social space, from Rhea Storr's film on Bahamian Junkanoo carnival culture, to Ayo Akingbade's short film about cities and social housing ("let's get rid of the ghetto", she repeats) and Evan Ifekoya's 2014 video Disco Breakdown, from series of works about blackness, queerness and nightlife. Their repeated refrain — "I want to be dancing at the discotheque/Up so close I can feel you sweat" — has gained a whole new meaning.

Evening Standard
10 April 2021

Evening Standard

Art lovers, get set! The exhibitions to see when London galleries open

Not long now guys!



Gilbert & George set off around London at White Cube / Gilbert & George

The terrific accidental wheeze which means that, as 'non-essential retail' (argue that one, philosophers) commercial art galleries are able to open on-slash-not-before April 12 is a boon to those of us who have sorely missed strolling round white spaces looking at things we don't quite understand and are mildly terrified to find out the price of. In all seriousness, there's a fantastic crop of exhibitions coming up at London's stellar for-profit art spaces, and they're absolutely free to wander into. From Damien Hirst (inevitably) to John Akomfrah, Sandra Mujinga to Thomas Demand, these are the shows you should be seeing come the first week of the spring awakening.

John Akomfrah: The Unintended Beauty of Disaster

A still from The Unintended Beauty of Disaster / Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery

One of the most consistently interesting artists working in video today, John Akomfrah creates meditative reflections on our collective consciousness (his Stuart Hall Project is still one of my favourite artworks of all time which is a lot for a 96 minute film about a cultural theorist). This new body of work, featuring footage filmed over the last six months, responds directly to the events of 2020, most notably the Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations against imperialist monuments.

Lisson Gallery, April 13 to June 5

LISSON GALLERY

Culture Whisper
8 April 2021

CULTURE*Whisper*

10 unmissable exhibitions as London's galleries reopen

CW

By *CW Contributor* on 8/4/2021

London's commercial galleries are reopening from 12 April with the gradual easing of lockdown and we can't wait to don our walking shoes. Here are our top exhibition picks. But remember to check the gallery websites before visiting, as many will require pre-booking ahead of your visit.

Lisson

On April 13 the space on 67 Lisson Street will present a selection of **John Akomfrah**'s photographs and videos. Akomfrah's work explores collective consciousness – whether it manifests as the fear of ecological disaster or the emotional aftermath of a post-colonial world. This exhibition will pay particular attention to race and the idea of 'skin as a monument.' From 13 April at 27 Bell Street you can see ***An Infinity of Traces***, a group show featuring the work of UK-based black artists, exploring race, history and belonging. The Mayfair gallery space at 22 Cork Street will house an exhibition by **Julian Opie** best known for his bold, graphic style in both painting and sculpture.

*Wallpaper**
12 April 2021

Wallpaper*

Physical art exhibitions to see in London and beyond, from April 2021

As England's physical art scene gradually regains its pulse, these are the in-person art exhibitions to squeeze into your post-lockdown diary, in London and further afield around the UK

Spring is in full swing, and with it, new life will soon emerge on London's long-fallow art scene.

Though many countries are still in the throes of lockdown restrictions, England will see curbs on non-essential retail lift as part of the government's roadmap out of lockdown. From 12 April 2021, commercial galleries will have the chance to open their doors to physical visitors, while public museums and galleries in England are permitted to reopen from 17 May 2021.

For many, it will mean the first in-person art experience of 2021. For others, it will be months of show postponements and uncertainty coming to a tentative end. Ultimately, this will provide an alternative to viewing art via pixels, which – recent NFT dramas aside – just hasn't quite offered the same thrills.

As our diaries begin to cautiously fill, these are the shows, in London and beyond, worth pencilling in.

London art exhibitions

Exhibition: John Akomfrah: 'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster'
Gallery: Lisson (67 Lisson Street)
Dates: 13 April - 5 June 2021

John Akomfrah, *Triptych*, 2020 (film still). *© Smoking Dogs Films, courtesy Lisson Gallery*

John Akomfrah's latest body of work is a direct response to the events of 2020. In 'The Unintended Beauty of Disaster,' the celebrated artist, filmmaker, lecturer and writer reflects on the Black Lives Matter protests, demonstrations against imperialist monuments and the rethinking of historical narratives. New works include a three-screen video installation, *Triptych* (2020), an homage to a track on the radical album, 'We Insist!' (1960) by jazz musician Max Roach. Elsewhere, Akomfrah will present a series of new photo-texts exploring colour, race and following on from *Our Skin Is a Monument* I (2020), an edition created in support of the Frieze Emerging Curators Fellowship for UK-based Black and POC emerging curators.

lissongallery.com

The Art Newspaper
12 April 2021

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Lockdown easing: the best gallery shows to see in London right now

Eerie wooden cabins, rural quiltmakers and dismembered, tentacular dolls are among our highlights from the city's commercial exhibitions

ANNA BRADY, GARETH HARRIS, KABIR JHALA, ANNY SHAW, TOM SEYMOUR

12th April 2021 12:25 BST

At long last, today London's commercial galleries can reopen to the public (we've been here before but let's hope it goes better this time). Arm yourself with coffee, masks and sensible shoes, and take in our pick of shows that all launch this week, some of them having languished unseen for months. It's boring but remember to book in advance (see gallery websites for details).

Evan Ifekoya, Disco Breakdown, 2014 (film still) © Evan Ifekoya, courtesy Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery, An Infinity of Traces (until 29 May)
This exhibition includes works by 11 Black non-binary and women artists—including Ufuoma Essi, Rhea Storr and Ayo Akingbade—that reflect on the complex question of Black identity in the UK. Through a variety of mediums from sculpture and installation to video, it aims to provide new insights into the loaded issue of Britain's imperial past, examining a myriad of issues from queer sexuality to marginalised histories. Running alongside is an exhibition of the British artist John Akomfrah, *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster* (until 29 May), which includes a new three-screen video installation alongside a series of new photo-text works. (book via the gallery website) G.H.

LISSON GALLERY

Frieze
23 September 2020

frieze

Blackness and Post-Cinema: John Akomfrah and the Otolith Group in Conversation

During the turbulent summer of 2020, the filmmakers met to discuss contemporary filmmaking and decentring the human

BY JOHN AKOMFRAH AND THE OTOLITH GROUP IN **FEATURES** | 23 SEP 20

John Akomfrah: The post-cinematic does not involve a rejection of cinema – it's steeped in insights and knowledges and affinities with the cinematic tradition – but it clearly wants what Althusserians would call an 'epistemological break' with its practices.

Anjalika Sagar: I think of the post-cinematic in terms of evocation rather than explanation and effects more than causes. Post-cinematic affect allows a more complex relationship to multiple non-narratives that contribute to not-yet-articulated structures of feeling.

Kodwo Eshun: For me, it's not only a question of screens or phones or apps. What's useful about the term post-cinematic is its agnosticism towards narrative. It's a way of stepping away from narrative. In the UK, cinema carries with it this imperative to narrate the nation. There is an unspoken expectation, whenever a Black British film is released, that it will tell the untold story of Black Britain. To me, the post-cinematic side-steps this cruel optimism of cinema. [*Laughs*] It implies an unspoken promise to open up an imaginative dimension of post-cinematic Blackness.

Vertigo Sea, 2015, film still. Courtesy: Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

JA: If you're Black and British, and you live in the UK, there's a hierarchy of expectation about how you enter the cinematic frame. There's a way in which Blackness is positioned vis-à-vis the cinematographic machinery – especially in terms of exhibition strategies or curatorial policies. And so, the minute you say, 'I don't really want to do this anymore,' you're changing the way Blackness is framed. More people have asked me why I don't make cinema any more than they ever did when I was trying to make cinema and not getting anywhere. [*Laughs*] It's as if some detail of Blackness is missing in the cinematic frame, and they would quite like it back. And I think: well, I'm not sure I want to give it back to you, you know? [*Laughs*]

KE: That's what happens when the post-cinematic encounters Blackness. It's the question of the unthought. What makes people uneasy is the sense that you've wandered off the path, you've broken the contract without being asked. That's why they see something missing. Because it's not there yet. [*Laughs*] It's still being invented.

JA: In its potentially destabilizing effect on settled norms and assumptions about Black agency, the post-cinematic calls into question all these certainties. The main thing is the courage that it takes on our part to embrace the unthought – a courage that is not acknowledged enough.

AS: When we consider the idea of the unthought, it hasn't come out of nowhere. Some of that courage comes from a longstanding affinity between us. One of the reasons we are having this conversation in the first place is the continuities of thought we share that are fundamentally transnational and which operate outside of the institutional stewardship of Blackness in the UK.

The Otolith Group, *O Horizon*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: © The Otolith Group

JA: I couldn't agree more with everything you've just said. This is to do with manifold forms of trespassing, which become possible because we have said to each other many times: 'Let's go here.' Knowing full well, in advance, that the place you wanted to go to was not supposed to be for you. [*Laughs*] You could use the autobiographical confirmations that we've had from each other as the driving force of these trespassing journeys. I believe very strongly in the fact that we have known each other for so long. I'm indebted to the many insights that I've arrived at as a consequence of knowing you. It wouldn't have been possible for me to be who I am without those encounters. It's important to acknowledge these things, to speak about them in spaces that affirm them.

KE: This is as serious as our lives, as Val Wilmer says[1]. One of the gambles of moving into the post-cinematic is the experimentation with the sonic potential of the image. It's almost as if this dimension were repressed by standard cinematic language, as if there was something about cinema that works against it. When you multiply screens, or frames within frames, then the potential for orchestrating antiphony expands.

JA: You could say that there was a way in which we acquired these habits for licensed transgressions because of the immersive relation that we had with certain musical traditions. To say to the world: 'You said this was not the right way to put an image together: three minutes of a figure speaking, without any nod to Aristotelian narrative conventions. Well, fuck you. We're going to do it anyway.' It's not arrogance; it's just this acquired, almost prophetic sense that having a figure speak for that long feels right. If you have the same voice repeated at the

beginning and end of a work, as you do in your *The Third Part of the Third Measure* [2017] – an audiovisual installation that documents the work of composer Julius Eastman – how the hell do you know that's going to work? There's no handbook telling you this is something you can do. Yet, not only did you know it, but you did it. *The Third Part of the Third Measure* is just so wholly unto itself, you know? It has a unique ontology that is completely itself. I can't think of anything like it [*Laughs*]. I've never seen anything like it.

John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2013, film still.
Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

AS: You know a work is complete when it's alien to you. Perhaps this is a spiritual state of abstraction of the unthought. An example of this indeed are the spoken pieces in *The Third Part of the Third Measure*, we wanted a voice to perform the introduction of his concert that Julius Eastman gave at Northwestern University in 1980. We needed female and male vocal performers but ran out of time, and we had approached the eminent vocal artist Elaine Mitchener who knows Eastman's work well. But the idea to front and back-end the work with a second figure was something we had to do. A friend at the eleventh hour recommended the celebrated poet and author Dante Micheaux. Dante, also a great admirer of Eastman, solemnly recites his speech which skilfully queers the terms 'gay' and 'guerrilla' as well as other terms; Mitchener performs the same words with an improvisational and strident tone. This attempt of polyvocality was something we continued investigating in *O Horizon* [2018], with different voices and singers, and in *INFINITY minus Infinity* [2019], with this multi-headed, Black Asian goddess, whose thoughts cannot be contained within a single head. [Laughs] In *INFINITY minus Infinity* there is a sense of polyvocality in the recitations of Una Marson's poetry and fragments of text by Édouard Glissant that allude to our *Glissantbot* [2017], which tweets four Glissant quotes per hour every

day. How do these fragments speak to each other in a space of affinity that is simultaneously dissonant?

KE: That relates to the question of situating Black figuration within a post-cinematic frame. With *The Third Part of the Third Measure*, the impulse was to stay in the non-space of the studio, in which a certain strategic abstraction emerges from digital Blackness. The performers exist in a time distanced from the spectator. To me, the post-cinematic allows an interscalar extension across time and space. What strikes me about your work, John, is the transhistorical time and cosmic frame within which you position your figures. When we see the performer that plays jazz musician Buddy Bolden in *Precarity* [2017], he is framed against the elemental expanse of the open sky.

JA: There is a sense in which the human is just one of many 'resources' being marshalled to speak about the historical or the temporal in my recent work. I'm increasingly interested in those possibilities outside and beyond the solely human. I've worked in television and cinema for many years and, in those spaces, there is always a certain fiction in operation, in which everything you see in the frame is only there to make 'real' what the human does, says, believes. It's complete horseshit because there is always more than that going on. [*Laughs*] The minute you start to give power to the other active elements inside the frame, something else starts to happen – something more pagan, less humanist. And this is not just an aesthetic question, but an ethical one, too, because it has real implications for how we operate in the world. Even the term 'storytelling' itself carries these problems, because there's the assumption that everything you see in the piece is about the humans in it.

John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, three-channel video installation still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

KE: The elephants in *Four Nocturnes* [2019] or the whales in *Vertigo Sea* [2015] or the sun that begins and ends *The Unfinished Conversation* [2013] or the banyan trees in *O Horizon*: none of these is framed as background. There is an effort to foreground them. In each of these projects, I see an effort to demote or decentre the role of the human so as to pay attention to the migration of elephants or the murder of whales or the process of desertification. In Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* [1975], Jack Nicholson plays reporter David Locke, who fights the Chadian desert and the desert wins. In *Mimesis: African Soldier* [2018], your figures are not struggling with the desert. It's not clear that they are human in the way in which Antonioni wants to persuade us Nicholson's character is human. It is as if your characters exist on a diagonal between the living, the dead, the undead and the unliving that renders them agnostic entities.

AS: There is an absorption going on that compares with the free jazz of Ornette Coleman. The screens feel like a weave in which sounds and images absorb each other. Is it even montage? [*Laughs*] It feels more like a process of interrelation between everything in the wider scheme of things. The fact is humans cannot sustain themselves without a complex relationship to other forms of life. So, what does that look like politically or technologically? You have to explore this as a way of thinking the unthought.

JA: To return to the question of the post-cinematic, it seems to me that one of its strengths is that it can recognize these gestures of demotion or absorption. It's about questions of agency – multiple registers on the one hand and new relations on the other. In East Africa, colonial domination wasn't just over people; it was about insight into how one husbands space. That cultural formation had an impact on the implication and 'uses' for animals, humans, land, weather systems, water, etc. If the colonial project had just been about people, then there wouldn't have been the need to dominate the land. For *Four Nocturnes*, I looked at hundreds of images of landscapes in which colonial figures supervise fields cultivated by elephants and human beings. You might assume the elephant isn't really doing very much but, actually, most of the time, the human is sitting on an elephant who is, in fact, doing the work. The post-cinematic allows us to reconfigure the cluster of forces, ontologies and agencies at work in a given landscape in a way that wouldn't make sense in the cinematic.

KE: What I find compelling is that the ambition to decentre the figuration of Blackness requires a kind of mutism for everything else to flourish around it. That's one of the most challenging elements in your work.

JA: You're completely right. I've got problems with the idea that, when someone walks from A to B, the transformations they go through have implications for everything in that frame, including the figures themselves. I don't want to dismiss the ways in which – in a Fanonian sense – the Black body bears these burdens of misuse and therefore needs the conceptual violence of pushback. But I definitely don't want to say that, as a consequence of this misuse and abuse, the frame must always privilege 'action'. Let's just say that there are certain expectations of the Black body and muting, as you call it, is one way to circumvent some of those expectations.

John Akomfrah, *Four Nocturnes*, 2019, three-channel video installation still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London

The Otolith Group, *INFINITY Minus Infinity*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artists

JA: I love the way that Eshun speaks. It's not acting and it's not reading. It's fabulous and beguiling. This point you raise concerning racism as weather ties in with Eshun's mode of address in her performance. Anyone who thinks that the environmental and the racial are separate, discursive regimes clearly hasn't read the UK Conservative Party policy on immigration because, you know, they say it very clearly on the tin: 'hostile environment'.[3]

AS: Exactly.

JA: Geosocial pressures can be brought to bear on living conditions in order to change the climate or the way we breathe – as you highlight in *INFINITY minus Infinity* – to the point where we can't breathe. The killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police incurred, once again, the union of those two words. Racism isn't some self-contained gesture; it impacts and explodes and takes all kinds of forms and shapes in environments. And it creates environments. So, the idea that environmentalist discourse should be alien to Black people is like, well, sorry: you haven't been listening. [*Laughs*] Slavery took place on plantations. They weren't just businesses, they were environments, agricultural spaces. Slavery licensed varieties of rape and all manner of nutritional propensities and regimes. Calling it racist doesn't tell you enough, you know? You need the optics of space and environment and climate to fully grasp its totality. Anyone who's looking at the projects I'm working on, at the work that you've been making, can see that questions of the climactic are tied up, for us, with questions of the gestural.

This article first appeared in frieze *issue 214 with the headline 'The main thing is the courage that it takes on our part to embrace the unthought – a courage that is not acknowledged enough.'*

Main Image: John Akomfrah, The Unfinished Conversation*, 2013, film still. Courtesy: © John Akomfrah, Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery, London*

1 Val Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life: Black Music and the Free Jazz Revolution, 1957–1977*, 1977, reprinted by Serpent's Tail, London, 2018

2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 2016,
Duke University Press, Durham

3 The UK Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy was launched in 2012, under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, by then-Home Secretary Theresa May. It was designed to make it as difficult as possible to stay in the UK for those who do not have leave to remain.

Art Review
18 June 2020

ArtReview

Work of the Week: John Akomfrah, 'Handsworth Songs'

Oliver Basciano Work of the Week 18 June 2020 artreview.com

Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, Handsworth Songs, 1986, single channel 16mm colour film transferred to video, sound, 58 minutes 33 seconds. © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The ghosts of the artist's 1986 film – available to watch this week – have not been exorcised

"There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories." So said a local woman to a journalist pestering her for an eyewitness account of the 1985 Handsworth Riots. The dialogue is retold in the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), directed by the British artist John Akomfrah, which follows the unrest that burned for three days through the Birmingham neighbourhood, in a loose documentary format. That year, black communities came out onto the streets across Britain to protest heavy-handed policing, police killings and the racist politics of the Thatcher government. A few weeks after Handsworth, Brixton in London erupted when a black woman, Cherry Groce, was shot in the course of a police raid, as did the Broadwater Farm estate in the north of the city following the death of Cynthia Jarrett in another house search.

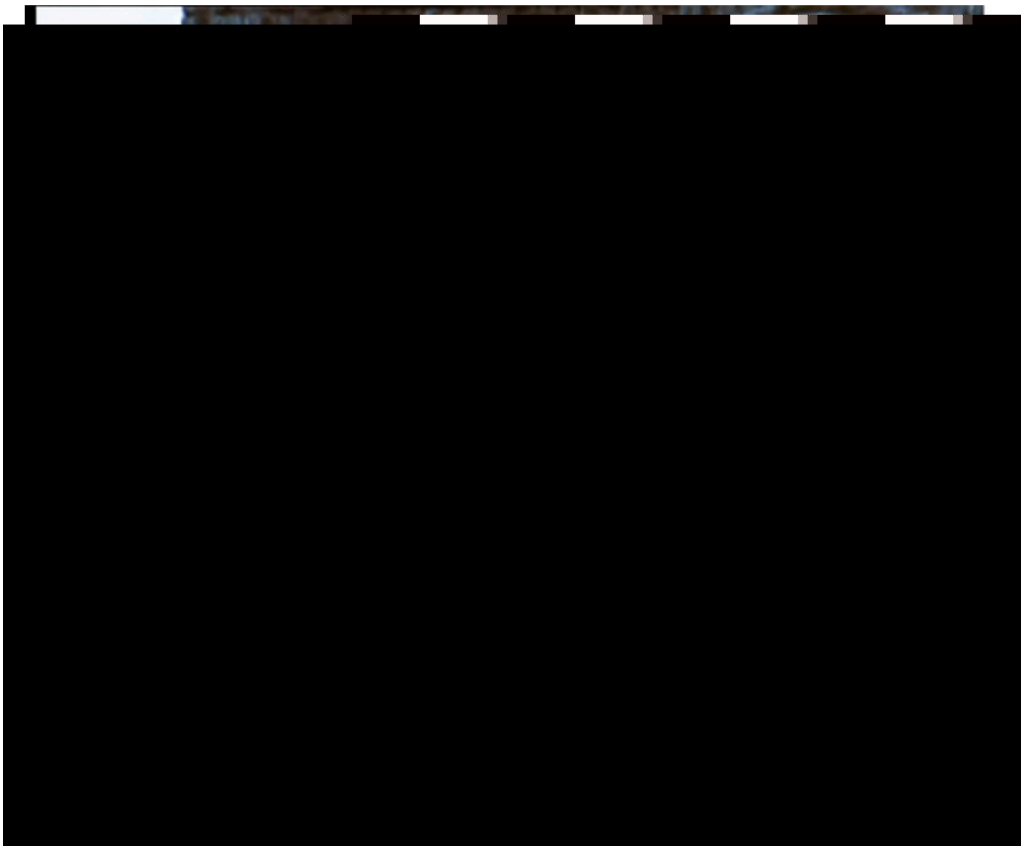
The ghosts that haunt those street fights, and hang heavy in Akomfrah's film, which was made available online for a week, are of poverty, colonialism and the betrayal of the Windrush generation. The woman being interviewed amongst the

debris recalls the racist rhetoric of Enoch Powell; she remembers when Malcolm X strode through the grey streets of Smethwick, in the West Midlands, in 1965, just nine days before he was assassinated. Akomfrah records less dramatic racism, but every bit as insidious: Douglas Hurd, then home secretary visits the scene, broken glass still underfoot, and sympathises with a white crowd of bystanders. "It must have been a scary experience," he says. Margaret Thatcher, in an interview, warns against further immigration: "The moment a minority gets a big one, people get frightened." A young Asian community worker describes how a new police commissioner, intent on getting tough on hard drugs, has initiated a tsunami of searches of young black men and raids of predominantly black pubs and parties, without evidence or success. "It's obvious, you can't have young rastas flying over to India and Pakistan collecting heroin. Afro-Caribbean and young Asian youth don't have the kind of money to push those types of drugs. Those drugs are being brought in by organised, criminal, businessmen." The police continued their harassment, evidence be damned.

Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, single channel 16mm colour film transferred to video, sound, 58 minutes 33 seconds. © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Yet they are ghosts that have not been exorcised. Originally commissioned by Channel 4 in the UK, 25 years later, in September 2011, Tate Modern showed the film again. That event was programmed in response to a wave of protests and riots across the country after the police shot Mark Duggan, a black man in north London. Akomfrah, alongside his collaborators, Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, took part in a conversation with the academic Kodwo Eshun as shops were destroyed across the city and justice was demanded. The late theorist Mark Fisher was in the audience, later writing for *Sight & Sound*: 'Watched – and listened to – now, *Handsworth Songs* seems eerily (un)timely. The continuities between the 80s and now impose themselves on the contemporary viewer with a breathtaking force: just as with the recent insurrections, the events in 1985 were triggered by police violence; and the 1985 denunciations of the riots as senseless acts of criminality could have been made by Tory politicians yesterday.' Lisson, the gallery which represents Akomfrah, uploaded the film this week, nine years on, 34 years after it was first shown, as Britain's streets are once again – *again* – filled with anger at the racism that lingers in every facet of the country. This time it was the death-by-cop of an American, George Floyd, that amplified the call that Black Lives Matter in Britain too. Tory politicians and commentators once again lined

up to denounce the protests. Prime minister Boris Johnson urged people not to protest, claiming that the movement had been 'hijacked' and would likely 'end in deliberate and calculated violence'. The toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, a man who made his money in the slave trade, was 'utterly disgraceful' decried home secretary Priti Patel. Akomfrah once again put in conversation, this time in a Zoom discussion conducted this week.



Akomfrah's work was broadcast (back when Channel 4 broadcast such things) in the white heat of the Handsworth unrest, but its subject is not confined to the events of those three late summer days. Instead it tracks how we, Britain, got there. And how we got to where we are now. It's a vital film, not just for its reflections of the myth of the 'good immigrant', of integration (the "h'integration" that the Black-Brummie comedian Lenny Henry would claim his mother saw as being of paramount importance), but it also throws up the nuances that separate the history of British racism from its American mode. Akomfrah's film does not just feature black and and white faces (the latter always in positions of power: police, politicians, reporters, clergy) but gives voice to the area's Asian community too. They speak as victims (two Asian men, Kassamali Moledina and his brother Amirali, died in a fire; many Asian people owned shops damaged in the protests) and mediators. In a recent essay, Gary Younge noted the dangers of Europe focusing its attention on American racism at the cost of its own. 'Well into my thirties, I was far more knowledgeable about the literature and history of Black America than I was about that of Black Britain, where I was born and raised, or indeed of the Caribbean, where my parents are from. Black America has a hegemonic authority in the black diaspora' he writes. America is racist because it owes its foundation to religious zealots determined to make a new world even more puritanical than the old one they had left, a new world they built off the back of black slavery. Britain is racist because we got in boats, sailed far from our own shores, to murder, pillage and enslave peoples in Africa and Asia. When the exploited nations started to turn up on this country's doorstep, it was as if the ghosts of its past had arrived for a reckoning. *Handsworth Songs* is a brilliant work; but its return, its own haunting – rerun time and again as our rotten history is never resolved – is as unwelcome as it is necessary.

Financial Times
3 May 2019

Ghana arrives at the Venice Biennale, bringing new narratives with it

With the country's first appearance at the event, curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim is testing out what a national African pavilion can be

Ghana pavilion curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim

Caroline Roux MAY 3, 2019

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There's no more fitting place to work with plaster than Venice, the stucco-lined city. But the interiors of Ghana's exhibition spaces at the 58th Biennale are unlikely to resemble the shimmering walls of a 16th-century palazzo. Along with Pakistan and Madagascar, this is Ghana's first appearance at the Biennale, and under the guidance of the architect David Adjaye, soil has been imported from Ghana. Made into a render the colour of dark sand, it will line a series of elliptical chambers containing the work of six artists.

"You really will be in Ghana when you walk in," Adjaye says, referring to the materials used as well as the pavilion's formal quality, derived from the country's regional architecture, where cooking, sleeping and other activities take place in these individual, chamber-like spaces. "We're testing out what a national African pavilion can be, creating the context of a sub-Saharan country."

It's not always easy for African nations to have a presence in Venice, for reasons ranging from the economic and the geographic to the complexities of the Biennale system itself. In 2017 Nigeria came, but as a private initiative; it is not returning this year, and Algeria has dropped out at the last minute.

The Ghana project, by contrast, is entirely supported by the ministry of tourism. Both Adjaye and the pavilion's curator, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, have been consulting with the Ghanaian government for several years about the creation of new national museums and art initiatives (Adjaye is building a new national [illegible] in Accra, both are working on the transformation of a military castle into a museum). It seems that their influence has comfortably extended to taking messages about Ghana's contemporary cultural position further afield.

Film-maker John Akomfrah © Smoking Dogs Films/Lisson Gallery/Jack Hems

Oforiatta Ayim's initial impetus was to create a show that threw the spotlight on a single contemporary artist living and working in Ghana. But advice from Okwui Enwezor, curator of the 2015 Biennale and a consultant on this project until his death in March this year, changed her mind. "He said, 'You have to come out all guns blazing'," she tells me over the phone from Venice, as the installation is nearing completion.

As a result, the six artists cross generations and genders. Felicia Abban was Ghana's first female professional portrait photographer, who worked for its first president following the country's independence from Britain in 1957. El Anatsui is the continent's most bankable artist, with his largest bottle-top works fetching up to $2m at auction. The painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has won numerous prizes, including the Pinchuk Future Generation award in 2012, and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2013. International acclaim has been delivered in spades to the film-maker John Akomfrah in the past decade. The younger Ibrahim Mahama and video-maker Selasi Awusi Sosu perhaps represent a more current and urgent view of the country's artistic practice.

> **We're testing out what a national African pavilion can be, creating the context of a sub-Saharan country**
>
> David Adjaye

Oforiatta Ayim sees pairings between the participants. The politics of representation and portraiture shared by Abban and Yiadom-Boakye, for example; stories of memory, loss and restitution in the work of Akomfrah and Sosu; the reappropriation of existing objects into new narratives on the part of El Anatsui and Mahama (the latter often using tattered jute sacks to tell the story of colonial trade).

The fact that only some of these artists actually live in Ghana is tied to the country's colonial past. Akomfrah was born in Accra, but moved with his family to the UK after the 1966 coup. Yiadom-Boakye was born in Britain, and, according to Oforiatta Ayim, hasn't been to Ghana for 20 years or so. "But it is part of her identity. When we're together we talk a lot about growing up Ghanaian in Europe," she says. The curator herself grew up in Germany and the UK, though with frequent visits to Ghana, and speaks English, German, French, Russian and Twi (a Ghanaian language).

In 2011, however, she moved permanently to Accra. "It sometimes feels like everything happens in the diaspora," she says. "That's important and it's part of who we are. But now we need to focus on evolving work in our continent."

Adjaye agrees. “The idea of colonisation lingers, but it can’t be ‘bad past, bright future,’” he says. “We have to bring the past and present together now.” His and Oforiatta Ayim’s Venice installation — a classical regional architecture brought into service to show several strands of contemporary art — is a start.

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Opinion /

BY OSEI BONSU
22 JAN 2019

John Akomfrah Commemorates the Colonial Soldiers Who Fought for a Cause that Was Not Theirs

100 years on from World War I, the filmmaker's latest work 'Mimesis: African Soldier' remembers the faces we seldom see in history books

In the opening image of John Akomfrah's *Mimesis: African Soldier* (2018), we are confronted by a row of black and brown faces who smile nervously and knowingly into the camera. They represent the faces we seldom see in war documentaries or history books; their smiles evoke a quiet sense of unease and foreboding. Once the colonial subjects of empire, they will soon assume their positions on its invisible front line. Following on from Akomfrah's previous works, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Mimesis* is split across three screens, allowing for multiple stories to be revealed simultaneously. Refusing to commit to a singular narrative, the film splices archival footage and sound with newly filmed sequences to create an impressionistic, multifaceted perspective. Visualizing the complex experiences of colonial soldiers during World War I, Akomfrah commemorates those who fought, served and died for a cause that was not theirs.

John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

You would be forgiven for thinking that the nations of Africa did not take part in World War I. However, between 1914 and 1918, millions of unknown and undocumented African soldiers served in long campaigns that contributed toward European victories. More often than not, their efforts were overshadowed by conflicts between European powers. For instance, few know that the first shot fired by British forces on land was discharged by an African, Alhaji Grunshi, at Kamina; or that the last engagement between British and German forces took place on African soil. Neither is it common knowledge that more than two million colonial soldiers, labourers and carriers served in British, French and German forces on the western front, where they experienced the widespread racism of the early 20th century. In *Mimesis*, Akomfrah brings this global reality into view, illuminating a history that has yet to be fully recognized or understood.

Fracturing a grand historical narrative, the film is characteristic of Akomfrah's cinematic practice, in which he refuses to obey historical chronology. Excising archival footage from the narratives in which it is typically embedded, he cuts and combines images in highly poetic ways. In the lush imagery that comprises the opening sequence of *Mimesis*, European and pan-African flags are used symbolically, hovering between a dual sense of loss and victory. In one scene, they are strewn across an empty battlefield like the blood-stained rags of wounded soldiers; later on, the same flags wave resiliently in the desert winds, imposing national identities onto the natural landscape. Throughout *Mimesis*, powerful images such as these are accompanied by one-word titles ('Discontent', 'Distress', 'Disgust'), each distilling the psychological effects of war. Gaining nuance in their specificity, the words speak to what Akomfrah calls 'the ambiguities of colonial disenchantment' at the heart of the soldiers's loss of identity and dispossession of self.

John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

As the film develops, we are introduced to a group of soldiers who wander the abandoned battlefields and deserted shorelines in search of their former homelands. Their earthly possessions and fading family photographs appear submerged under streams of water. While the ocean is presented as a repository of memory that washes the soldiers's belongings ashore, it is also the vast zone of human movement in which colonial exploration and the transatlantic slave trade took shape, as well as the crossroads of many contemporary migrations between territories and continents. In *Mimesis*, the soldiers's memories seem to have become faded, deformed, abstracted as the existential threat of the ocean rises.

At points, Akomfrah reveals his hand not only as a powerful filmmaker adept in the art of reconstructing historical reality but as a masterful storyteller who draws attention to the human condition. Throughout the film, traditional African and Asian song imbues the imagery with the sense of displacement so often associated with the formation of a diasporic subject. As in earlier works, such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), sound is used as a memory trigger capable of traversing time and space. Much like the images, this music is sourced from a vast media archive that the artist has assembled over the years. As cinematic strings begin to pour into the moving image, the group of soldiers can be seen standing stoically, waist-deep in the ocean's tide. On another screen, streams of water continue to engulf their belongings together with their memories of home. Here, a cacophony of sound and image transforms our reception of history, suspending past, present and future at once.

John Akomfrah, *Mimesis: African Soldier*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London

When the soldiers finally return to an unspecified African country, they come to realize that they will never reach home. Unable to fully reconnect and reunite with their loved ones, they must accept the defeat of victory. The same empires that had carved up Africa, have now turned many parts of it into a wasteland, leaving behind a path marked by death, plundering and deserted villages. With cinematic qualities bordering on those of a wartime epic, the scenes of wreckage and decay can feel more directly illustrative than allegorical. At times, *Mimesis* risks becoming a pastiche, with the floating corpses of the dead and the cries of a newborn appearing to oversimplify the film's complex narrative order. However, the moral tone of Akomfrah's memorial work ultimately yields to the clear-eyed precision of the film's visual intelligence.

Having crossed the sea to meet their indeterminate futures, African soldiers could smell death in the air, as the sound of exploding bombs and machine guns became deafening. Some feared they would never return home, while others suspected they would eventually be sold into slavery. Remarkably, Akomfrah's film never loses sight of the complex history of African participation in World War I, forcing us to question the conditions under which these men fought and lost their lives. Not only do the archival images and sounds attest to these African fighters' existence, they speak for all those whose histories have no visible monuments.

As the soldiers in *Mimesis* walk the deserts, the ocean continues to wash over their memories as the flags of nations wave ceaselessly in the distance. In the film's final, dreamlike sequence, the notion of the museum is brought into the frame as the soldiers enter a series of dimly lit rooms in which their earthly possessions are returned to them. It is a contemplative, hopeful ending, providing a utopian vision of return – albeit unrealized. In this light, Akomfrah's *Mimesis* does more to dignify the life of the African soldier than any tangible monument is ever likely to do, because it allows the dead to wander across the borders of history and into living memory.

John Akomfrah, 'Mimesis: African Soldier', runs at Imperial War Museum, London, until 31 March.

Main image: John Akomfrah, Mimesis: African Soldier, *2018, film still. Courtesy: Imperial War Museum, London*

OSEI BONSU

Osei Bonsu is a curator and writer based in London, UK, and Paris, France. He is a contributing editor of *frieze*.

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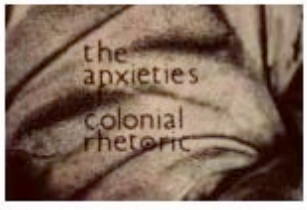
Memories of Underdevelopment

by Ratik Asokan

View of John Akomfrah's *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, three-channel video installation, 45 minutes, 48 seconds. © Smoking Dogs Film, courtesy Lisson Gallery.



In 1950 in London I was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century—a movement and a cultural mixing greater than the peopling of the United States.
—V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, 1987

These are for those to whom history has not been friendly, for those who have known the cruelties of political becoming, those who demand in the shadows of dying technologies, those who live in the sufferings of defiance, those who live among the abandoned aspirations which were the metropolis, let them bear witness to the ideals which in time will be born in hope. In time let them bear witness to the process by which the living transforms the dead into partners in struggle.
—Black Audio Film Collective, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

PAULETTE WILSON MOVED from Jamaica to the UK in 1968, attended primary and secondary school there, raised her daughter, Natalie, there, and now helps raise her granddaughter. She worked for much of that time in the restaurant sector, at one point serving members of Parliament at the House of Commons café. At her retirement, Wilson could show over three decades of National Insurance payments and a long history of tax slips. So it must have come as a surprise, when, in October of last year, she received a deportation notice from the Home Office. The government was sending her "back" to Jamaica, an island she hadn't been to since she was ten.

Wilson's is one of the many cases that emerged earlier this year as part of the *Guardian*'s investigation into the Windrush Scandal: named after a ship, the HMT *Empire Windrush*, which brought an early group of Caribbean migrants to the UK in 1948. It turns out that many West Indian migrants who moved to Britain in that era never formally naturalized or applied for a passport.[1] Half a century later they were deemed illegals.[2] Several were threatened with direct removal; others were denied care at hospitals; others still were turned out of their jobs and homes.

You invite your imperial subjects to rebuild your economy; you use their labor for over fifty years; then you wipe the slate clean and send them packing "home." As a fable, the Windrush Scandal nicely catches the tedious persistence—and potency—of colonial amnesia. "I grew up with the National Front around my area," Sarah O'Connor, another victim, recently told a reporter, referring to Britain's proudest nativist group. "I thought those attitudes had been stamped out. I think that the government has stoked it up again."[3]

If the latter half of the twentieth century is now seen as the great era of decolonization, it may also be remembered as the period when the issue of immigration, and anti-immigrant sentiment, was stitched in the cultural fabric of the formerly imperial West. It's hard to imagine now, but for two decades after World War II, Commonwealth citizens—Kenyans, Nigerians, South Africans, West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, Australians, New Zealanders, and so forth—were free to travel to and from the UK and had the right to work there. But Britain lurched rightward in the late 1960s, culminating in the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which restricted entry to people who were born in the country or who had one parent or grandparent born there. The same period saw the rise of figures like Enoch Powell, whose overtly racist "Rivers of Blood" speech turns fifty this year. (The Tories were necessarily in the lead here, but Labor—Labor parliamentarians at any rate—soon followed suit.)

By the '70s and '80s, the legacy of empire had taken on a curious double quality, a sort of split personality. On the one hand, there was the phenomenon of Raj revivalism: the cinema of Merchant Ivory and David Lean; soap operas like *The Far Pavilions*; countless coffee-table books that looked back fondly at the white man's burden.[4] On the other, the presence of people of color in the country was increasingly taken to be incongruous. If Asians were simply mocked, black youth, especially black men, came to be described in the mainstream British press as agents of social disorder, kids who were in some way fundamentally different from the white locals, and indeed untethered from history itself. "If you look at their faces, I think they don't know who they are or what they are," Tory MP Ronald Bell infamously said on the BBC news show "Panorama" in 1981, gesturing at footage of riots in Brixton, a predominantly black London suburb. "And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of sense of belonging young Englishmen have."

This statement is heard in *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1983), the debut work of the Black Audio Film Collective. A twenty-six-minute slide-tape piece, it is a sort of atmospheric, historically suggestive picture show. Rummaging through assorted archives—back issues of *National Geographic*, colonial textbooks, old catalogues—members of BAFC compiled a procession of images that in one way or another evokes what theorists today would call the "colonial imaginary": imperial statuary and painting, old maps, snapshots from the Raj album, a photo of elephants transporting Lipton tea. The latent violence of the proceedings occasionally comes to the surface: there are a few images, for example, of mutilated Africans. Over all this plays a dense soundscape, driven by chamber music and moth-eaten by tape delays, that circles around two sound bites—Bell's, and another from Labor party leader Hugh Gaitskell, who extolls the "multiracial" Commonwealth—sound bites that seem to constrict the vast and complex history of empire into a pair of clichés.

Expeditions One and its sister film *Expeditions Two: Images of Nationality* had modest opening runs. They screened at a few university film clubs and progressive art galleries. But their daring, insight, and sheer novelty as works of political art were more widely acknowledged.[5] Here were polemical films that didn't stoop to the conventions of agitprop or didactic social realism. Instead, BAFC had trapped the howling voices of empire in a sort of cinematic seashell.

Over the next fifteen years, BAFC would emerge as one of the key players in the British Black Arts Movement: a circle of painters, filmmakers, photographers, and curators loosely mentored by cultural theorist Stuart Hall.[6] Manning the barricades of representation, these artists of color looked back at a racially intermingled history of empire and forward to a truly multicultural society. Their work—their self-definition of "who they are and what they are"—amounted to a cumulative response to Bell.

Within the Black Arts movement, BAFC stood out for its formal restlessness and scholarly inclination. The group was founded in 1982, at Portsmouth Polytechnic, by six undergraduates: John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Claire Joseph, and Edward George (Joseph left in 1985 and was replaced by Trevor Mathison). Second-generation immigrants with roots in Africa and the Caribbean, they were brought together by their passion for movies, music, radical politics, and theory: disciplines they would go on to unite in more than a dozen unclassifiable essay-films, many of which were made for public television.

In these hybrid works, archival footage and found photos rubbed shoulders with new documentary material, mainly interviews, and the occasional in-studio dramatic segment modeled on street theater. A soundscape made from snatches of music and miscellaneous sound bites, stitched together by Mathison, the collective's brilliant audio designer, was key to each film's drama and atmosphere. The general mix of expression and sampling, of self and society, speaks to the influence of theory, particularly cultural studies. "Identity is formed at that point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture": Hall's iconic formulation could serve as a sort of manifesto.[7]

BAFC variously addressed the major cultural issues of the day, and race was an abiding interest. *Handsworth Songs* (1986) is a seminal insider account of the Handsworth riots of 1985; *Who Needs a Heart* (1991) blends fiction and biography to chronicle the rise of the British Black Panthers; *A Touch of the Tar Brush* (1992) explores the history of Liverpool's black community. Later, BAFC would make films about America, such as *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), a semi-fictional biopic, and *The Last Angel of History* (1995), an overview of early Afrofuturism.

JOHN AKOMFRAH (b. 1957) directed most of BAFC's films and is today the group's most visible alumnus. Born to Ghanaian parents—his father was killed in the CIA-assisted coup of the Kwame Nkrumah government[8]—he was brought up in London in a milieu of West African exiles. From a young age, Akomfrah was a radical nerd: organizing student sit-ins, prowling film clubs, reading voraciously.[9] He befriended future collaborators Auguiste and Gopaul in high school (charachteristically, he met Gopaul in a feminist theory seminar). Later, he was to become something like the group's spokesman. "In television interviews, [Akomfrah] was—and remains—both plummy and incisive, adept at discussing Althusser and Antonioni in the same sentence, brilliant at joining the dots between structuralist cinema and revolutionary politics," observes Sukhdev Sandhu.[10]

BAFC closed shop in 1998, after which Akomfrah sidestepped—solo—into the art world.[11] His breakout moment came in 2002, when Okwui Enwezor screened his films at Documenta 11. Since then Akomfrah has become a regular figure on the biennial circuit and is now represented by Lisson Gallery. Over that period, and perhaps this is the art world's influence, he has taken to multiple-channel installations. Recent projects—*The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a magisterial biopic of Stuart Hall; *Vertigo Sea* (2015), an investigation into the "aquatic sublime"; and *Precarity* (2017), about the legendary New Orleans cornetist Buddy Bolden—have involved three screens. The upgrade in equipment has made for cinema that is more technically complex and expansive; the possibilities of montage are exponentially greater when footage is spread across a triptych.

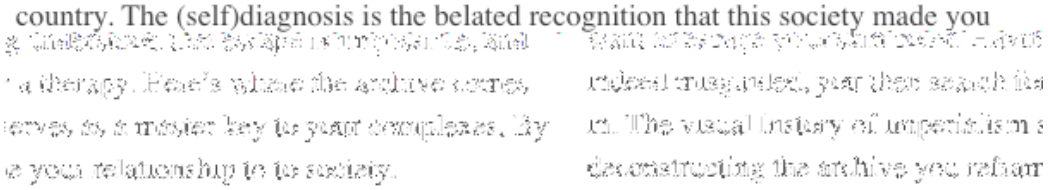
"John Akomfrah: Signs of Empire," on view this summer at the New Museum in New York, was the filmmaker's most comprehensive US exhibition to date. The show occupied the museum's second floor, which the curators turned into an elegant little cineplex, screening four films—*Expeditions One*, *The Unfinished Conversation*, *Transfigured Night* (2013), and *Vertigo Sea*—in separate galleries. (Four older BAFC films were also screened periodically in the building's basement theater.)

It's a wide time span: thirty-two years. you can tell as much from the technology. *Expeditions One*, with its patient roll call of 35mm Ektachrome tape slides, captured on a rostrum camera, seems positively dinky when set beside a later mega-production like *Vertigo Sea*, an HD video installation that washes over you like a breaker. Yet, for all the material differences, Akomfrah's key techniques—a nonnarrative, montage approach; the mix of found and new footage; quotations from literary texts; a taste for highly wrought visual surfaces—have remained constant throughout his career. Above all, he has retained an energetic and colossally patient commitment to archival research, and a corresponding, almost mystical belief in the evocative power and political significance of old footage and images.

This tendency, which dates back to the early days of BAFC, has complex, personal roots. Akomfrah addresses this in an interview with New Museum curator Gary Carrion-Murayari:

> **I've spoken a lot about the discovery, this business of how one discovers the doppelgänger, the phantom that stalks our lives as teenagers, and also about that mirror moment when you suddenly realize that actually, this figure, this ghost that you've been trying to run away from . . . the fiction of the black figure, was in fact, and is in fact, you. . . . You suddenly realize that all the news accounts and the TV reportage—about a young man or woman who is causing trouble, and who you were trying to avoid because you were trying to be a good British subject—were talking about you. You became aware of that in spite of all your disavowing gestures, something has been pinned on you. . . And that immediately throws up this question of the historical, to the extent that you are not responsible for these stereotypes . . . and mythologies around you. . . And slowly you think, well, one might need to look at this question of construction, of representation, and of narratives that precede you and that are the stage of the present before your arrival.**[12]

There is a distinctly psychoanalytic elegance to this reflection. Not for nothing does it recall Fanon. The trauma, as it were, comprises growing up black in a racist country. The (self)diagnosis is the belated recognition that this society made you



It's immediately clear how it applies to *Expeditions One*. To an extent, it flavors all Akomfrah's work. Over time, however, his interest in the archive has taken on a more complex texture (if it hadn't, he would be a pretty boring artist). The change seems to have been prompted by Akomfrah's encounter with video footage of early immigrant life in Britain: ethnographically tinted films made by the BBC, news clips from smaller outlets such as British Movietone news and Yorkshire television, other miscellaneous footage found in provincial libraries and government archives. These were portrayals of immigrants, not self-depictions. And yet Akomfrah came to feel that they were not merely catalogues of surveillance and domination—even if that's what they were initially intended to be. On the contrary, he sensed that there were forms of popular life and consciousness embedded in these documents that escaped official narratives.

His task as a filmmaker, then, would be to assemble a sort of counter-history. Marriage records at city hall, news clips of immigrants disembarking on English shores, footage of the black poor at home or black toddlers at preschool or black demonstrators in the street: all such material was double-sided. It might have been made to keep the immigrants in their place, but, with some creativity, it could be used to narrate the immigrants' own stories.[13]

IF *EXPEDITIONS ONE* amounted to a subversive genealogy, Akomfrah's mature films might be described as séance sessions or exercises in ancestor worship. He uses a range of cinematic tactics to radically reposition or open up archival material. An amazing example of this happens near the beginning of *Handsworth Songs*, which was screened downstairs at the New Museum.

Originally made for the Channel 4 series "Britain: The Lie of the Land," *Handsworth Songs* was released in 1986, a year after the titular riots in Handsworth, a predominantly black suburb of Birmingham. The film was a response to the mainstream coverage of the events, which were crassly interpreted by the press as an outburst of senseless black criminality.[14] Akomfrah cuts against this discourse by offering something like an insider account. This is achieved partly through interviews with community leaders, who discuss the neighborhood's economic problems and history of over-policing. More relevant is how Akomfrah's agenda works at the level of style.

The film opens *in media res*, with footage of the riots and its aftermath shot by BAFC: police lines and burning cars; jostling reporters and cameramen; a white politician surveying the wreckage; emptied-out side streets. Having established the setting, Akomfrah then turns to archival footage.

First, a montage of screeching newspaper front pages flashes across the screen: “Riot of Death,” “Racial Fights Could Take Over City,” “Face of a Bomber,” “Torch of Hate,” and “The Bloody Battleground.” This is the mainstream narrative of the event. It’s anxious, ill-informed, tinged with racism. And the general sense of claustrophobia is amped up by the metallic percussion on Mark Stewart’s dub track “Jerusalem.”

From here the film makes a double movement: back in time and closer to the inner life of the community. The transition is signaled sonically. As the screen slowly fades to black, an achingly beautiful track, minor key synths over a patient, funky bass line, seems to pull us away from the unforgiving gaze of the media. A procession of black-and-white wedding photographs floats past on-screen, young Caribbean men and women smiling giddily; images of hope, aspiration. As the song settles into its rhythm, we shift to old, faded footage shot at what seems to be a 1950s or ’60s immigrant dance hall where black and brown and white couples are doing their best to sex up a ballroom number. These could be the parents of the young men and women that *The Daily Mail* would like to present as inveterate criminals. They crossed the ocean, in the most adverse circumstances, hoping to make a better life for themselves and their children. The narrator seems to commune with their memories:

He said to her . . . Remember the nights of Coruba cocktails and Curuba sour, their secret pregnancies, your wet nursing and me nappy-washing. It is about time we had our own child. Our own master George Hammond Banner Bart.

Thus we come to imagine the stories of Handsworth that lie hidden behind the media coverage, that are hidden by the media coverage.

It bears repeating that this effect owes everything to editing and sound work (not to mention the lyrical script). On its own, the ballroom footage would have had little narrative or emotional significance, at least for the majority of viewers who have no personal connection with it. It has been made to speak through an inspired act of historical stereoscoping.

As the narrator continues her story, the visuals take us further back, the dance hall giving way to footage of life on the Caribbean—a man cutting sugarcane, a washerwoman smacking wet clothes with a little wooden bat—scenes of everyday struggle amid wretchedness. It is a brief and painful flash of insight; the camera soon returns to the dancers. But this much is enough to set another narrative in motion. Indeed, by this point we have lost control of the visual movement of our imagination, which sloshes backward and forward, from memory to premonition. Now it is impossible for us to watch the crass television coverage of the riot, which is introduced later in the film, without thinking of the previous generations that settled in Handsworth and tried to make a life there. Our mind keeps skipping: from the anger and desperation of the young rioters to the whittled aspirations of their working-class immigrant parents, from their immigrant parents to their grandparents in the Caribbean . . . As the narrator says later in the film: "There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories."

THOUGH *HANDSWRTH SONGS* travels great distances, the film constantly returns to the same neighborhood, burrowing deeper and deeper into its psychohistory. It is a fundamentally local undertaking, and this is part of its great appeal. Something similar can be said about much of BAFC's output. *Seven Songs*, for example, is a loving evocation and historical excavation of central Harlem. *A Touch of the Tar Brush* takes the temperature of race relations in Liverpool. And in a more personal film like *The Call of Mist* (1998), which was shot on the Isle of Sky, landscape is studied for the memories it evokes—in this case, memories of Akomfrah's mother, whose passing the movie commemorates.

By the late '90s, however, and especially after he entered the art world, Akomfrah's films grow more global in scope. He begins to think laterally, geographically: drawing parallels between histories—national, social, personal—that do not necessarily intersect.

This approach finds a tremendous success in *The Unfinished Conversation*. Mixing news footage of major postwar political and cultural events with snatches of Hall's own television appearances and more intimate photographs, the installation, entirely assembled from archival sources, is an expansive bildungsroman that charts the influential scholar's journey from provincial Jamaica to the helm of Britain's New Left. It is exemplary for how it gives equal billing to the "life" and "times," or, more precisely, for the ways in which the latter are shown to impinge on the former (for example, Hall's participation in the anti-war movement follows clips of Vietnam war newsreels.) That said, the distribution of footage across the three channels never feels obvious, not least because snatches from jazz performances—Hall was a great admirer of Miles Davis—keep breaking in.

Near the middle of the piece, around the mid-1950s, there is a long sequence in which scenes from British blue-collar life—men and women operating machines on the factory floor, workers tossing coal into a smelting furnace, panoramic shots of smokestacks and power plants—play over a reading from the famous Coketown section of *Hard Times*.[15] This is a bitter homage: Dickens's great nineteenth-century novel of factory life reminds us of the ongoing deindustrialization of Britain. And the lament is echoed by Hall, whom we soon hear discussing his early days as an activist with groups such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: "I went up and down the country, speaking at CND meetings for about three years. . . . You could still see the smoke coming out of the chimneys and there was still textile mills."

As a self-contained section, this is straightforward. Then Akomfrah dramatically reframes the matter. Industrial Britain gives way to the Global South, as a sort of greatest hits montage of decolonization, 1940–60, unfolds across the three screens. (This viewer recognized Nkrumah waving to an audience, Castro's guerrillas on horseback, and policemen "lathi-charging" Indian protesters. There were surely other episodes. In any case, the focus here is less on the narrative details than on the overall atmosphere.) Hall's voice, from the 1962 BBC radio show "Equality Between Nations," takes over from Dickens:

> **I wanted to question the very sharp opposition which you make between the concepts of liberty and equality. It seems to me not only an ethnocentric way of looking at it, but a particularly British way of looking at it. Because I don't think these two concepts are as clearly distinct if you put them, say, into the context of the nationalist revolutions of the underdeveloped territories. I think it has been the idea of equality of one sort or the other that has mobilized people to support nationalist movements of one kind or other. What they were facing were in fact inequalities: whether they were economic or human or social or racial, they were essentially inequalities. I think they impinged on their lives as inequalities. Therefore, when they said we want to be free, what they meant was we want to be free not to be unequal.**

> "Intersectionality" is too dry a term for what's happening here. True, there are echoes between the internal class dynamics of British society and the larger system of imperialism. But Akomfrah knows this didn't lead to any meaningful solidarity. Later in the film, for example, we learn how Hall was often abused on the streets of working-class Birmingham for appearing in public with a white woman (his wife). The cultural theorist worked in the shadow of this social failure, and so does his biographer. Akomfrah's poignant subject is the possibility, now perhaps lost for good, of an alliance between the British proletariat and the anti-colonial Global South.

Actually, the alliance did come to fruition: in the figure of Hall and the anti-colonial British Left more broadly. A modest legacy, to be sure, and one that's easy to dismiss. Yet a profound awareness of its limits is precisely what saves this film from bombast. To put it another way, Akomfrah makes no large claims on world history. Laying out his archival footage with extraordinary tact, he limits himself to pursuing one person's lived experience of impersonal historical events. As Enwezor writes in his generous catalogue essay, Akomfrah's films "address what it means to be a subject, and how the subject can be an agent of historical recall, interrogations, and analysis."[16]

This observation can be taken, ex negativo, as a criticism of the other two works screened at the New Museum. *Transfigured Night* is a perplexing film. Archival footage and photographs from the history of decolonization—Nkrumah's speech on nonalignment stands out—are set against languid, rather woozy shots of tourists ascending the Lincoln Memorial, and a lugubrious staged tableau showing an African politician, presumably a head of state, looking out his window at the skyline of a Western metropolis (Enwezor describes this last as a "backdrop of neocolonial imperium and global capital"[17]). The "idea" here is clear enough, but there's something debilitatingly academic about Akomfrah's take on it. He seems to approach the issue from an Olympian position; there is little sense of lived experience or memory.

Vertigo Sea suffers a more extreme version of the problem. Here the notion of a "subject" dissolves all together. The three-channel work, which was the show's centerpiece, is described in the catalogue as a "social history of the ocean." The piece has something for everyone. Nature: large swatches of underwater footage from BBC's Natural History unit. But also culture: quotes from Melville and Woolf and Nietzsche and Heathcote Williams. History: henchmen of Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla dumping corpses in the ocean; Vietnamese boat people fleeing to Hong Kong; more recent deaths in the Mediterranean; the testimony of a Nigerian fisherman. But also fiction: campy staged shots of black and white figures in period dress.

Sections of the film are, of course, deeply affecting: how could they not be, when there is so much to choose from? Yet the overall effect is slick and machined. Perhaps this has to do with the installation's sheer visual opulence. Akomfrah has always been a careful craftsman, but the extravagant production values of the film—which was partly funded by the Sharjah Art Foundation—smother all other cinematic effects.

It would be one thing if *Vertigo Sea* and *Transfigured Night* were experiments or outliers. In fact, they represent a new tendency. Over the past decade or so, Akomfrah's films have grown grander and more amorphous, with thicker passports and older histories, and they are increasingly likely to present "poetic" connections between disparate, complex subjects.[18] His stories were always global, but now they just seem broad. He doesn't offer a sharp or even a meaningful system to bring the material together.

There has been a similar dilution at the level of form. Works like *Handsworth Songs* and *The Unfinished Conversation* demand to be actively read and deciphered. They operate as montages in the true dialectical sense of the term. As viewers we were invited to intervene in the narratives of history and the direction it was taking. ("The only interest in history is that it is not truly wrapped up . . . another turning is waiting to happen," Stuart Hall says in *The Unfinished Conversation*.) By contrast, *Vertigo Sea* and *Transfigured Night* simply bathe viewers in affect. These films resemble harmonious collages. Like the worst abstract painting, they "can mean whatever you want them to mean."

ALL THIS HAS led to an unfortunate depoliticization of history. Akomfrah's new films tend to leave you with a mix of melancholy, confusion, and cosmic faux-awe. There's no spur to thought and little real feeling. If anything, you catch a whiff of the maudlin internationalism so typical of the globalized intelligentsia: the world is complex, interconnected, and terrible; the best we can do is celebrate its diversity.

To be fair to Akomfrah, he seems aware of this danger, or of something like it. "I know the archival stuff is old and inscrutable," he wrote in these pages, in 2014, referring to his film *The Nine Muses* (2010):

> **But my wish is to extend its afterlife, to have the embers burn a little bit longer. At the same time, the material always suggests something that you haven't seen or heard before. That's the quality I want those pieces to have. If they don't, that's cool, I made the fucking effort. I'm not concerned principally with whether all of the pieces translate. It's not one of my obsessions.**[19]

The overly combative tone here—"I made the fucking effort"—is telling. The trouble is not with "old and inscrutable" material: as films like *Handsworth Songs* prove, even the most obscure footage can be made to speak eloquently. The trouble, rather, is that Akomfrah is no longer doing enough with his material. If his films are still carefully scripted and designed, as the New Museum catalogue essays seem to suggest,[20] his formal decisions no longer feel significant in the sense that Clive Bell meant that term.

Perhaps Akomfrah deserves more patience. Back in 1987, Salman Rushdie famously attacked *Handsworth Songs*, which he found too abstruse, experimental, and generally self-involved.[21] There is every chance we are repeating his mistake.

Yet it might be that the art world has finally caught up with Akomfrah. BAFC came to prominence at a time when few artists or filmmakers were mining postcolonial archives.The situation could not be more different today. Over the past decade or so, there has been a spate of archival art from or about the Global South. (A partial list of the more visible figures would include Walid Raad, Emily Jacir, Naeem Mohaiemen, Yto Barrada, the Otolith Group, and Taus Makhacheva.[22]) These artists share a few things in common. They are broadly members of the international left, or fellow travelers, looking back at its historical defeat. Though born outside the West, they tend to live and work in western capitals. Most important, they self-consciously address a global art audience: that is, they approach their subject from a distance, as if it were a footnote in some grander, long-settled history, and they assume very little knowledge—let alone intimacy or investment—on the viewer's part.

Seen from this perspective, films like *The Nine Muses*, *Transfigured Night*, and *Vertigo Sea* take on a new complexion. Akomfrah's recent works seem less like messages from the future of cinema than reflections of the present condition of contemporary art. We might grant him some critical leeway on the grounds of his prior achievement. A similar leniency need not be awarded to his colleagues.

Consider the oeuvre of Naeem Mohaiemen, who has been shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize. A Bengali from Bangladesh who lives in New York, Mohaiemen makes films about obscure and generally wretched episodes from the history of the global left. "The Young Man Was (No Longer a Terrorist)," 2011–16, is a four-film series in which pivotal moments in Bangladesh's history intersect with larger geopolitical events—inevitably with unhappy results. Mohaiemen's approach in these films was to self-reflexively dramatize his research: so, for example, in *Abu Ammar Is Coming* (2016), about a few Bangladeshi fighters who joined the PLO, we see Mohaiemen's gloved hands comb through evidence on a table: photographs, news clippings, postcards.

Very interesting in outline, but what does it all amount to? The film resembles nothing so much as an outtake of a BBC documentary. There are tidbits of left history, some oblique on-the-ground footage (Mohaiemen visits Lebanon), and finally a spot of emotion—an audio sample of a Bengali folk song about Arafat; the faltering of the narrator's voice—to wrap the story up.

All that said, these short, explicitly political works are far preferable to his debut fiction feature *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), which was the centerpiece of "There Is No Last Man," Mohaiemen's 2017 solo show at MoMA PS1 in New York. This impressively self-centered movie, which was inspired by the experiences of the artist's father, follows the eccentric daily rituals of a man stranded in Athens's abandoned Ellinikon Airport. It is like cross between an absurdist drama and a piece of ruin porn; there is no character development, no montage or exercise in style, and little in the way of meaningful reflection (unless you count a few cryptic comments about Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben).

As it happens, Akomfrah's 2016 film, *The Airport*, was filmed at the same location. It too has elements of absurdist drama. Costumed characters from very different eras—men and women in Edwardian dress, a rather folksy guitarist, an astronaut, even the ape from *2001: A Space Odyssey*—walk past one another, sometimes interacting, otherwise basking in the general aphasia. Greece itself, not an individual, seems stuck in a morass. Akomfrah's film might be heavy-handed in parts, but it at least strives towards something meaningfully political.

"Leftwing melancholy" also plagues the London-based Otolith Group, which was nominated for a Turner Prize in 2010. Founded in 2002, the group comprises Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, who operate at once as filmmakers, curators, and theorists: a two-person alternative film culture as it were. (One of the sadder and more revealing aspects of contemporary archival practice is that it never comes alone. The artists tend to double as hype-men or village explainers.) The group's well-regarded "Otolith Trilogy" (2003–09)—a mishmash of found footage and photographs, silly live-action sci-fi segments, narrative voice-over, and old Bollywood songs—is an antic journey through post-Independent India's lost socialist and collectivist aspirations. The Non-Aligned Movement, Le Corbusier in Chandigarh, the leftist National Federation of Indian Women all feature—this last having a special personal interest: Sagar's grandmother, Anasuya Gyan-Chand, was once president of the organization.

It's true that socialism, Nehru's guiding light, is today almost entirely out of favor with the country's elite and ascendant middle class (it's very much alive in the various marginalized demographics). But this sushi-board approach is no way to excavate a lost tradition. What's desperately missing here is any sense of the immense consequences, both political and philosophical, of India's turn toward neoliberalism. At best the film amounts to an exercise in historical fetishism. It's a sort of academic show and tell.

Other names could be cited. These have special interest: Mohaiemen speaks freely about his debt to Akomfrah, while the Otolith Group curated a major touring retrospective of BAFC's films in 2007.[23] (Eshun, by the way, is one of the talking heads featured in *The Last Angel of History*.)

If their work bears the mark of the older filmmaker, which aspect of his legacy are they extending? Certainly, the guerilla documentary work and stormy montages of early BAFC have been done away with. Rigor of thought might be stressed on the surface—and at the seminars—but it's mutated into something hipper and less demanding. What's proved seductive to contemporary archival artists is the opulent surfaces, high production values, diffuse globalism, and general twilight atmosphere of late Akomfrah. Their work might have histographical value, but not for the reasons they think.

The Guardian
1 October 2017

theguardian

Video art
The Observer

John Akomfrah: 'Progress can cause profound suffering'

For the British artist, global warming, the subject of his ambitious new video installation, is a process rooted in technology and exploitation

John Akomfrah: 'One of the complex questions I am asking is about the relationship between our locality and the bigger issue of how we belong on the planet.' Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

John Akomfrah grew up in the 1960s, in the shadow of Battersea power station in south London. As a child, he remembers "feeling as if I was enveloped in something whenever I played on the street. You could sense it in the air, you felt it and saw it, whatever was emanating from the huge chimneys. We were being poisoned as we played, but no one spoke about it. The conversations in the pub tended to be about football rather than carbon monoxide poisoning."

Fifty years on, the local has become the global. Akomfrah's latest art work, *Purple*, is an immersive, six-channel video installation that attempts to evoke the incremental effects of climate change on our planet. Shot in 10 countries and drawing on archive footage, spoken word and music alongside often epic shots of contemporary landscapes that have been altered by global warming and rising temperatures, *Purple* eschews a linear narrative for an almost overwhelming montage of imagery and sound.

Like all of Akomfrah's work, it requires the viewer to surrender to sensory overload, while remaining alert to the often oblique connections being made throughout. "I kept thinking back, while making this work, to the local, working-class community I grew up in and how innocent we were in terms of trusting authority. One of the complex questions I am asking is about the relationship between our locality and the bigger issue of how we belong on the planet. Who can we trust with our collective future?"

Akomfrah's ambition is nothing less than epic, the timespan of *Purple* stretching from the industrial age (images of factories, mills, machines and mass employment) to the digital revolution and beyond (the possibilities promised by biotech research, artificial intelligence and genetics). The looming threat of ecological disaster is implicit throughout, most ominously in the recurring appearance of lone, white-coated, hooded figures who gaze silently at landscapes threatened or already blighted by human progress.

'Sensory overload': a still from Purple, Akomfrah's immersive, six-channel video installation about global warming. Photograph: © Smoking Dogs Films; Lisson Gallery

"The kind of work I make is essentially time-based," says Akomfrah, who is working on a new film project in New Orleans. "For that reason alone, I felt I had to widen my focus to take in the bigger narrative we are now all caught up in. Once you become aware of the implications of climate change for future generations, it is almost as if you have to respond. But I'm not a scientist or a campaigner, I'm an artist. I'm interested in the philosophy of climate change rather than the hard science."

More than once, Akomfrah describes *Purple* as "a response to Anthropocene", the term coined by scientists for the geological age in which we are now living, a period defined by the influence of manmade activity on climate and the environment. A major source of inspiration for *Purple* is a 2013 book called *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Written by Timothy Morton, an English academic, it posits the idea that global warming is the most dramatic illustration of a "hyperobject" - an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it baffles our traditional ways of thinking about it and, by extension, doing something about it.

In a perhaps unconscious way, Akomfrah's overwhelming film evokes that very dilemma: our apparent helplessness as individuals in the face of rising sea levels and temperatures, droughts and melting icecaps. Against a stirring contemporary classical soundtrack, his film begins by summoning up the momentum of industrial England, a world of mass production that signals - but is utterly unlike - the hyper-reality of contemporary globalism and digital interconnectivity.

"I'm fascinated by the strange interregnum that stretches from the post-industrial to the digital present," Akomfrah explains. "Right now, as I speak to you, I am looking at the outlines of oil refineries and sugar factories on the horizon. They are still there, still pumping out their poisons, but they seem to belong to a different age. Their numbers have dwindled, but they still have an impact on the environment and they still speak of a history of technology and exploitation. They cast a long shadow."

This notion of the past - and, in particular, the colonial past - haunting the present is another recurring theme in Akomfrah's work. It is there in the raw, turbulent montage of images and sound that marked his debut film, *Handsworth Songs*, which he made in 1986 as part of the Black Audio Film Collective. Its subject was the race riots in London and Birmingham the previous year and, in its blending of archive footage, still photos and newsreel, it set the tone for much of what was to follow, creating a formal signature known as *bricolage*, the creation of a new work from the layering and juxtaposition of various existing sources.

John Akomfrah with his art work Auto Da Fé, for which he won the Artes Mundi prize. Photograph: Polly Thomas/Rex/Shutterstock

Akomfrah, who is of Ghanaian parentage, grew up in Britain and was influenced by the late Stuart Hall, arguably this country's most influential black academic and cultural theorist. Hall's writings on memory, time and identity in the wake of colonialism inform Akomfrah's earlier films and he remains an abiding, if not so obvious, presence on *Purple*. "In a way, this is a person of colour's response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way. When I stand on a street in Accra, I can feel that it is a city that is literally at boiling point. It is way hotter than it was in the 1960s or even the 1980s. We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative. It's a pan-African concern of great urgency, but how long it will take people to see it as such is a whole other problem."

In 1989, Akomfrah had what he calls “a major turning point”, when he travelled to Alaska to make a documentary for the BBC about the Exxon Valdez oil spill and its disastrous impact on the Alaskan ecosystem. “The destruction of the livelihoods of the Inuit community immediately resounded with me because it recalled the worst excesses of colonial exploitation. It felt like I was in a post-colonial space that was very much haunted by the past.”

In 2015, Akomfrah’s three-screen film installation, *Vertigo Sea*, marked another turning point, a shift in tone and scale that signalled the grand ambition of *Purple*. In contrasting the brutality of the whaling industry with the experience of generations of migrants who crossed the sea out of necessity in search of a better life, he was struck, he says, “by the realisation that everything overlaps at some profound level, that the great shifts in human progress that are made possible by technology can also cause the profoundest destruction and suffering”.

John Akomfrah’s Vertigo Sea. Photograph: © Smoking Dogs Films. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

All these big themes are embedded in *Purple*, but may remain elusive to those unfamiliar with the tropes of conceptual art and experimental, non-narrative film-making. I was baffled, for instance, by recurring appearances of those mysterious silent figures who stand mute before often elemental landscapes on Alaska, Greenland and Skye. “In a very real way, I’m present in the film. I’m the figure in the brown shirt who gets rained on,” says Akomfrah, laughing. “It sounds a bit mystical, but for me everything starts with place. Wherever we filmed, it began with me asking the landscape the same question: ‘What can you tell me about the nature of climate change?’ As an artist and film-maker, I’m dependent on the responses I get from the environment.”

Is he aware, given the often bitterly contested nature of the public climate change debate, that a multiscreen, non-narrative conceptual art film that provides no answers may be greeted by a degree of scepticism, if not outright dismissal, from those on both sides demanding hard facts and evidence? “Well, I’m an artist. I make work for a gallery. I’m not attempting to make a science documentary. I’m coming at it from a different perspective by asking the question: what is philosophically, ethically and morally at stake here if we continue on this course? I don’t think you need to be licensed by the scientific community to ask that sort of question about the times we live in or to reflect on the anxiety many of us feel about the future of the planet. My son is old enough to become a father. On a purely personal level, it certainly felt like the right time for me as an artist to be asking these questions.”

Purple is exhibited from 6 Oct to 7 Jan at the Curve, Barbican, London

ArtReview
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ArtReview

John Akomfrah wins Artes Mundi 7 prize

British contemporary-artist John Akomfrah OBE has been chosen from a shortlist of six artists to win the UK's most valuable prize for international contemporary art, Artes Mundi 7. Ken Skates, Welsh Government cabinet secretary for economy and infrastructure, announced Akomfrah as the winner of the biennial award, and its £40,000 prize, at a ceremony held at National Museum Cardiff on Thursday evening. The other shortlisted artists were Neïl Beloufa, Nástio Mosquito, Lamia Joreige, Bedwyr Williams and Amy Franceschini/Futurefarmers.

Over more than three decades, Akomfrah's film and video work has explored the experiences of global diaspora, history, memory, colonialism and its legacy. His recent two-screen film *Auto Da Fé* (2016), on show at Nation Museum Cardiff as part of Artes Mundi 7, uses the aesthetics of period drama to consider the historical and contemporary causes of migration, focusing on religious persecution as a cause of global displacement.

Karen MacKinnon, director of Artes Mundi, said: "The Artes Mundi 7 Prize was awarded for Akomfrah's presentation of *Auto Da Fé* and for a substantial body of outstanding work dealing with issues of migration, racism and religious persecution. To speak of these things in this particular moment feels more important than ever." Oliver Basciano, International editor of *ArtReview* and chair of the judging panel, commented: "Over his long career, Akomfrah's practice underlines how art has the unique ability to reflect on and shape the human condition, principles fundamental to Artes Mundi."

Of the award, Akomfrah said: "I am absolutely touched by this and enormously grateful for the chance it offers to finally finish off something I have been planning for over a decade. Over the years, Artes Mundi has chosen some very brilliant artists for this award: all were important artists doing challenging and engaged work, and to join that group is a huge honour and responsibility."

Artes Mundi is the UK's most valuable prize for contemporary art, established in 2002 by the Cardiff-based Artes Mundi organisation. Artes Mundi supports visual artists whose work engages with social reality and lived experience. Previous winners have included Theaster Gates, Teresa Margolles, Yael Bartana and Xu Bing. The judging panel comprised Arts Council Collection curator Ann Jones, artist Phil Collins, curator and academic Elvira Dyangani Ose, curator Carolyn Chritov-Bakargiev and Nick Aiken, curator at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

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