

LISSON

JOHN AKOMFRAH



BIOGRAPHY

John Akomfrah is a widely respected artist and filmmaker, whose works are characterised by their investigations into memory, post-colonialism, temporality and aesthetics, and often explore the experiences of migrant diasporas globally. Akomfrah was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which he started in London in 1982 alongside artist Lina Gopaul, later joined by David Lawson who he still collaborates with today alongside Ashitey Akomfrah as Smoking Dogs Films. Their first film, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) explored events surrounding the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London through a charged combination of archive footage, still photos, newly shot material and newsreel. The film won several international prizes and established a multi-layered visual style that has become a recognisable motif of Akomfrah's practice. Other works include the three-screen installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a moving portrait of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's life and work; *Peripeteia* (2012), an imagined drama visualising the lives of individuals included in two 16th century portraits by Albrecht Dürer and *Mnemosyne* (2010), which exposes experiences of migrants in the UK, questioning the notion of Britain as a promised land by revealing the realities of economic hardship and casual racism. In 2015, Akomfrah premiered his three-screen film installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which explores what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls 'the sublime seas'. Fusing archival material, readings from classical sources and newly shot footage, *Vertigo Sea* highlights the cruelty of the whaling industry and juxtaposes it with scenes of many generations of migrants making epic crossings of the ocean for a better life. In 2017, Akomfrah presented *Purple* (2017), which addresses climate change, human communities and wilderness; and *Precarity* (2017), following the life of forgotten New

Orleans jazz trumpeter Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden. In 2018, Akomfrah participated in the UK wide World War One arts programme 14-18 Now, with his multiscreen installation *Mimesis: African Soldier* (2018), which commemorated African and colonial participants who fought, served and perished during The Great War. In 2019 Akomfrah presented *Four Nocturnes* (2019) in the Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, a three-channel piece reflecting on the intertwined relationship between humanity’s destruction of the natural world and our of ourselves. In 2023, he premiered two major five channel films at the 15th Sharjah Biennial: *Arcadia* (2023), reflecting on ‘The Columbian Exchange’ between the Americas, Afro-Eurasia and Europe from the 1400s onwards; and *Becoming Wind* (2023), an allegorical representation of the Garden of Eden and its disappearance. In 2024 Akomfrah presented a new body of work entitled *Listening All Night to the Rain* in the British Pavilion in Venice, commissioned by the British Council for the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

Akomfrah (born 1957) lives and works in London. Recent solo exhibitions include The Menil Collection, Houston, USA (2026); Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, US (2025); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza Madrid, Spain (2025); the National Museum of Cardiff, Wales (2025); Glasgow Museum of Art, Scotland (2024); Wrightwood 659. Chicago, USA (2024); British Pavilion, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Italy (2024); The Box, Plymouth, UK (2023); Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany (2023); Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (2023) and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., USA (2022); Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada (2022); Towner Eastbourne, UK (2021); Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain (2021); Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla, Spain (2020); Seattle Art Museum, WA, USA (2020); Secession, Vienna, Austria (2020); BALTIC, Gateshead, UK (2019); ICA Boston, MA, USA (2019); Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); New Museum, New York, NY, USA (2018); Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (2015, 2018); SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA, USA (2018); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain (2018); Barbican, London, UK (2017). Recent international group exhibitions include ‘Ocean’, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark (2024); ‘Entangles pasts, 1768-now’, Royal Academy, London, UK (2024); ‘Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present’, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2023); ‘Global Ghana’, The Africa Institute, Sharjah, UAE and Accra, Ghana (2022); ‘Fault Lines’, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, USA (2022); ‘Posteriority’, Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, South Korea (2021); ‘Family – Visions of a shared humanity’, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2021); ‘Am I Human To You?’, Art Museum KUBE, Alesund, Norway (2021); ‘Affect Machine: Self-healing in the Post-Capitalist Era’, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan (2021); ‘Terminal’, City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand (2020); Ghana Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2019); ‘Strange Days: Memories of the Future’, New Museum x The Store, London, UK (2018); ‘Histórias Afro-Atlânticas’, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); ‘From where I stand, my eye will send a light to you in the North’, Te Tuhi Museum, Auckland, New Zealand (2018); Prospect 4, New Orleans, LA, USA (2017); ‘Restless Earth’, La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2017); ‘Unfinished Conversations’, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY, USA (2017); ‘British Art Show 8’ (2015-17); ‘All the World’s Futures’, 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2015); ‘Africa Now: Political Patterns’, SeMA, Seoul, South Korea (2014); Sharjah Biennial II, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2013); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012) and Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2012). Akomfrah was awarded the Artes Mundi Prize in 2017 and a Knighthood for services to the Arts in the 2023 New Year Honours.