

John Akompfrah

English





2

John Akomfrah works primarily in film and video, exploring place, memory, and history through the lens of postcolonialism and the black diaspora. His work takes many formats, ranging from feature-length documentaries to immersive, multichannel video installations, while employing both original and archival footage.

Akomfrah and his work came to prominence with the founding, alongside seven other collaborators, of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC, 1982–98), which explored the place of black identity and culture, and its representation, in the United Kingdom. BAFC emerged during a period of social change and unrest in Britain, defined by the shifting intellectual landscape ushered in by postcolonial and cultural studies. The young artists and thinkers of BAFC signaled a new era of British art that reflected the increasingly globalized and multicultural nature of the country. The group's approach highlighted personal subjectivities, counter-hegemonic narratives, and renewed political possibilities for time-based media. While the group formally disbanded in the late '90s (Akomfrah continues to work with some of its members), these concerns remain at the forefront of Akomfrah's practice even as he has explored new content and expanded his formal vocabulary.

Tropikos (2016) belongs to a series of recent films that are composed of original material rather than archival footage. Shot in high-definition, they have a lavishly realized and exquisitely detailed quality, giving hyperreal visuality and texture to imagined worlds and historical fictions. Exhibited as a large-scale installation, *Tropikos* is an experimental drama that offers an immersive meditation on the original encounter between British explorers and the people of Africa in the 16th century.¹ The work was filmed in the Tamar Valley, a river valley in southwestern England, and in Plymouth, a port city that sits at the mouth of the Tamar River. This area has significant, if now obscured, ties to the slave industry: it is where the first British slaving excursion set sail for Africa. The region and its waterways would soon after become a hub for the slave trade, serving as the point of departure for numerous major expeditions.

Tropikos unfolds as a series of rich *tableaux vivants*—largely still and silent scenes—that lend the work a melancholy air, with a sedate tempo that emphasizes the lingering gaze of the camera as it pans over vistas, characters, and the meticulous mise-en-scène that Akomfrah

has constructed. The scenes intermix characters and objects between African and European contexts, pointedly implying an understanding of British history as inextricably linked to the places and people it once colonized and enslaved. The setting of the film remains the same, however; the contemporary English landscape of the Tamar Valley stands in for various sites that form the historical geography of the early slave trade—Plymouth Sound itself, as well as the coasts of Guinea and Sierra Leone in western Africa. In the film, Plymouth is presented, as writer Nora M. Alter suggests, as “a conduit to modern Britain. It is a contact zone between the local and global, between the old and the new.”² In *Tropikos* the process of identity formation as an outgrowth of diaspora, social structures, and personal experience—and its broader philosophical implications about the nature of being and selfhood—are rooted in these nascent moments of globalized history.³

Tropikos is presented as a “tetralogy on water and dreams”—a meditation on the era of exploration and conquest broken up into four chapters. The work begins with the chapter, “The green sea of darkness,” a title that embodies the sense of terror and mystery that the Atlantic Ocean held in the cultural imagination of this period. The title also signifies the centrality of water in the film overall, a force that divides Europe and Africa, but that will also bring them together and enable the lucrative transportation triangle that was established between Britain, West Africa, and the Americas.

As in all of Akomfrah's works, audio plays a significant role. The film is accompanied by both an ambient soundtrack and a series of voiceovers drawn from major literary works. The soundtrack operates in tandem with, as well as against or apart from, the imagery, making scenes appear disjunctive or out of synch with what we hear, amplifying the work's dreamlike quality. An opening prologue quotes the first lines of William Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Shakespeare's narrator speaks of the play self-referentially, revealing it to be but an enactment of real life, dependent on the audience to make imaginary leaps and asking them to indulge this re-creation. Akomfrah thus sets his own work up as a play of sorts, drawing on the notion of “epic theater”—a mode of avant-garde theater developed in the early 20th century by Bertolt Brecht, among others, that eschewed narrative and illusory effects, and sought to address social realities. Akomfrah's is an ambitious if abstracted retelling of history that asks us to reflect on its

¹ Elizabeth Fullerton, “John Akomfrah: Lisson,” *Art in America* 104, no. 4 (April 2016): 123–24. ² Nora M. Alter, “Waves of Migration,” *Artforum International* 54, no. 6 (February 2016): 200. ³ See Louisa Buck, “John Akomfrah: Sea Change,” *Art Newspaper* 275 (January 2016), <http://theartnewspaper.com/features/john-akomfrah-sea-change/>; and Erik Morse, “The Oceanic Ecologies of John Akomfrah,” *Art Review* (January/February 2016): 115–16.



3

scope in the space of a single setting and through the temporality of film, which can imagine the past, but is necessarily of the present.

Throughout much of the film, repeated lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* describing the casting out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden echo—reframing original sin as the wages of slavery. Milton's ominous warning—"Ah! gentle pair, ye little think how nigh / Your change approaches, when all these delights / Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe— / More woe, the more your taste is now of joy"—is introduced over a shot of a white European explorer and flanked by scenes of the dangling bodies of dead fish and chickens—an abundant *vanitas* turned askew—along with a boat moving quickly down a river. Is the change coming to Plymouth, or to the coast of Africa, which we will soon encounter? In the course of history, it is both: woe is sown on both shores, binding them together.

Three black male figures appear separately throughout the film on a small boat traveling the river, each seeming to represent a different moment within a narrative of contact and assimilation. The boat is laden with tropical and "new world" products such as corn, potatoes, pineapples, and bananas, which sit alongside small African carved figurines and European armor. Akomfrah restages these characters to suggest their changing place and identity. The still life on the boat is one of many that punctuate the film, used to express the coalescing of cultures. At turns opulent and revealing, these tableaux also testify to the amassing of wealth that defined the Elizabethan period—luxurious textiles strewn with European portraits of royalty and jewelry, as well as products from faraway territories, provide the ground for somnolent, reclining white figures dressed in resplendent costumes. In Akomfrah's depiction, this lavish material culture suggests the inseparability of colonizer and colonized, while reminding us of the extent to which the prosperity and power of Western centers hinged on the subjugation and exploitation of non-Western people.

Akomfrah often pivots between the unique experiences of his subjects, moments of individual formation, and the epic swell of geologic time. This is beautifully exemplified in his related three-channel work, *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which premiered at the 2015 Venice Biennale. In this film, Akomfrah contends with the violence of the sea, juxtaposing sublime footage from nature with archival and media imagery of the whaling industry, the slave trade, and refugee travel. Human activity across time

is a constellation of connectedness, each moment of history bleeding together and twisting into the now. *Tropikos* alludes to this same notion of time, the seamlessness of scenes harkening to the 16th century stitched together across place, folding in on themselves and forcing us together into the cramped quarters of the present. It is the connective force of water—global history's main protagonist—that drives *Tropikos* and much of Akomfrah's recent production; it is the single setting that attunes us to the long history to which we are witness.⁴

In the second half of *Tropikos*, anachronisms become more prevalent. In the closing scenes we see one of the film's characters, dressed in Elizabethan finery, watching a large, contemporary ship pass by offshore. Our understanding of the temporality of the film, and thus of the history it depicts, becomes fully unbound, just as the notion of place has been unmoored throughout. The artist, who has consistently sought to explore the "ways fragments from the past can be commandeered to speak more ambivalently about the present," and ultimately, "about how the present became," has succeeded in doing so in this enigmatic, beautifully realized film.⁵ For Akomfrah, the present is the hallucinatory waking dream of history.

Diana Nawi
Associate Curator

⁴ See Alter, "Waves of Migration," for further discussion of the role of water in Akomfrah's recent work. ⁵ "'Vertigo Sea': Ghanaian-British filmmaker John Akomfrah – Interview," by Negarra A. Kudumu, *Art Radar* 29 (March 2016), <http://artradarjournal.com/2016/03/29/vertigo-sea-ghanaian-british-filmmaker-john-akomfrah-interview/>.

John Akomfrah: Tropikos
February 24–August 27, 2017

John Akomfrah
b. 1957 Accra, Ghana; lives in London

Tropikos, 2016
Digital color video, with sound, 36 min., 41 sec.
Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds
provided by PAMM's Collectors Council

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Biography

John Akomfrah (b. 1957 Accra, Ghana) is an artist, filmmaker, theorist, and curator. He is the cofounder of the Black Audio Film Collective, an influential association that examined black British identity through film and media. Akomfrah has been included in group exhibitions around the world, and has had solo presentations of his work at venues including Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen; STUK Kunstencentrum, Leuven,

Belgium; Arnolfini, Bristol, United Kingdom; the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan; Tate Britain, London; the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 2008, he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). Akomfrah lives and works in London.

Images

Cover, 2, 3 John Akomfrah, *Tropikos*, 2016. Digital color video, with sound, 36 min., 41 sec. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by PAMM's Collectors Council © Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery, New York



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