

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

John Akomfrah

22 January – 12 March 2016
27 Bell Street, London

"I'm a born bricoleur. I love the way that things that are otherwise discrete and self-contained start to suggest things once they are forced into a dialogue with something else."

John Akomfrah

Lisson gallery is proud to present John Akomfrah's first exhibition with the gallery, showing new and recent works by this internationally acclaimed artist and filmmaker. Akomfrah's work is characterised by a rich, multi-layered visual style that is as poetic as it is political and which frequently fuses contemporary issues with history, fiction and mythology. Collaging archival film footage, still photography and newsreel with new material, he investigates personal and collective memories, post-colonialism, temporality and aesthetics in works that frequently explore the experience of the African diaspora in Europe and the US.

Akomfrah first came to attention in the early 1980s as a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective alongside the artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, with whom he still collaborates today. Their film *Handsworth Songs* (1986), which marks its thirtieth anniversary next year, explored the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London through a charged combination of archival material, that won international prizes and attracted a huge audience when shown at Tate Modern in the wake of the 2011 riots. Similarly, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) combines found and newly shot footage to create a kaleidoscopic biopic of the cultural theorist Professor Stuart Hall's life and work — a piece that is simultaneously projected onto three screens and has been described by the critic Jennifer Higginson as being "as sensitive to the nuances of music, collage, atmosphere and biography as it is to the brute facts of politics". Other works such as *Mnemosyne* (2010), *Peripeteia* (2012) and *Vertigo Sea* (2015) borrow their premises from literature, mythology and art history, adopting fictional, even oneiric registers to create meditations on memory, African diaspora and global migration.

For his debut at Lisson, Akomfrah is presenting three new film installations, alongside a series of large scale photographs related to the works. The first work, *The Airport* (2016), is a three screen film installation which recalls the work of two filmmaking greats: Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) and Theo Angelopoulos (1935-2012). The film's narrative, complete with sweeping shots of the landscapes of Athens and Southern Greece, contemplates the significance of empire, and the ghosts which linger in our collective consciousness — both physically through architectural ruins and metaphorically through the traces and personal histories of previous generations. The film's elastic sense of time, where characters from different eras and generations encounter one another references Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Angelopoulos's technique of employing constant movement between camera, characters and locations is also reflected to poetic affect.

The second work *Auto Da Fé* (2016), which translates as *Acts Of Faith*, is a diptych that looks at migration through the lens of religious persecution. Presented as a poetic period drama, the film presents a series of eight historical migrations over the last 400 years, starting with the little known 1654 fleeing of Sephardic Jews from Catholic Brazil to Barbados. As the film develops, we are presented with tale after tale of populations being displaced along religious lines, right up to the present day migrations from Hombori, Mali and Mosul, Iraq. Religion, persecution and migration are, it seems, old and continuing bedfellows. The work was filmed on location in Barbados, but the landscape is deliberately anonymous, reflecting the universal nature of these stories.

The third and final film *Tropikos* (2016), transforms the landscape of the Tamar Valley in the South West of England into a sixteenth-century port of exploration on the African continent

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in order to reveal the deep-rooted and darker history of the river and the UK's role in the development and proliferation of the slave trade.

Tropikos is a 70th Anniversary Commission for the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre London, with the River Tamar Project and Smoking Dogs Films.

The Lisson Gallery exhibition will coincide with the first UK showing of Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* at the Arnolfini in Bristol (16 January – 10 April 2016), following its premiere as part of Okwui Enwezor's exhibition 'All the World's Futures' at the Venice Biennale in May 2015. Together with Trevor Mathison, Akomfrah created *All That Is Solid* (2015) for the British Art Show 8 (which opened at Leeds Art Gallery in 2015, and will tour to Edinburgh, Norwich and Southampton though 2016). Akomfrah has also been nominated for the prestigious Artes Mundi, the UK's largest art prize, the winner of which will be announced in January 2017.

About the artist

Akomfrah (born 1957, Accra, Ghana) lives and works in London. He has had numerous solo exhibitions including Arnolfini, Bristol, UK (2016); Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden (2015); Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan, USA (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2013-14) and a week long series of screenings at MoMA, New York, USA (2011). His participation in international group shows has included: 'British Art Show 8', Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds (2015); 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale, Italy (2015); 'History is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain', Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2015); 'Africa Now: Political Patterns', SeMA, Seoul, South Korea (2014); Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2013); Liverpool Biennial, UK (2012) and Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2012). He has also been featured in many international film festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, Utah, USA (2013 and 2011) and Toronto International Film Festival (2012).

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, it pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt and Richard Long, as well as those of significant British sculptors from Anish Kapoor and Tony Cragg to a younger generation led by Ryan Gander and Haroon Mirza. With two exhibition spaces in London, one in Milan and a fourth to open under the High Line in New York, Lisson Gallery supports and develops artists globally, including Marina Abramovic, Allora and Calzadilla, Ai Weiwei, Gerard Byrne, Liu Xiaodong, Tatsuo Miyajima, Rashid Rana, Pedro Reyes and Santiago Sierra.

Opening Hours

Monday-Friday, 10am-6pm
Saturday, 11am-5pm

Press enquiries

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