

Press Release

John Akomfrah *The Unintended Beauty of Disaster*

13 April – 5 June 2021
67 Lisson Street, London

Lisson Gallery is delighted to unveil a series of new and recent works by celebrated artist, filmmaker, lecturer and writer, John Akomfrah. The exhibition includes a new three-screen video installation alongside a series of new photo-text works. Featuring footage filmed over the past year, this new body of work responds directly to the events of 2020, most notably the Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations against imperialist monuments, presenting a rethinking of historical narratives. The exhibition will also include the UK premiere of the ground-breaking three-screen film, *Four Nocturnes* (2019), co-commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Ghana, Sharjah Art Foundation and Smoking Dogs Films for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia.

Akomfrah's work is characterised by an ethical and emotional impetus to reflect on our collective consciousness – be it the existential threat of ecological disaster, exploring Black British identity and post-colonialism, or giving voice to minority communities. Akomfrah creates impressionist meditations through film and media; using montage techniques and bricolage, new footage is weaved together with archival material, newsreel and still photography. Overlaid with an immersive sound design, the artist often plays with imagery to construct conversations between the past and present, unapologetically bringing forth the multiplicity of these issues through non-linear narratives.

The first room in the gallery will house *Four Nocturnes*, the third part of a trilogy of films including the renowned *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Purple* (2017) that explore the complex intertwined relationship between humanity's destruction of the natural world and our destruction of ourselves. Using Africa's declining elephant populations as its narrative spine, *Four Nocturnes* questions mortality, loss, fragmented identity, mythology and memory through poetic visuals that survey the landscape of African cultural heritage.

In the front gallery of 67 Lisson Street, Akomfrah will present a series of new photo-texts, exploring colour, race and our obsession with 'The Great Chain of Being', following on from the artist's recent edition, *Our Skin Is a Monument I* (2020), created in support of the Frieze Emerging Curators Fellowship for UK-based Black and POC emerging curators. This work, published on the October 2020 cover of frieze magazine, incorporates a still from the American film 'Carmen Jones' (1954), starring Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge. The still is placed into a Shirley card, a reference device used in colour-film technology since the 1940s to calibrate skin-colour balance, that for decades, only used white models to set their parameters, dramatically affecting how Black skin was rendered on film.

Our Skin Is a Monument builds on Akomfrah's long-standing return to 'the monument', following on from films such as *Signs of Empire* (1983) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986) that challenged the existence of imperialist effigies. The term 'Our Skin Is a Monument' is taken from poet Caroline Randall Williams' influential essay, 'My Body is a Confederate Monument', first published in The New York Times, in which she questions "What is a monument but a standing memory?" As she states, "If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument." This series of works prompts us to evaluate not just what monuments we want to speak for our society, but why statues such as those of Edward Colston, were ever erected. As Williams puts it, there is a difference between "rewriting and reframing the past"; "it is not a matter of "airbrushing" history, but of adding a new perspective."

The upstairs gallery will feature a new, three-screen video installation. Entitled *Triptych* (2020), the film is a homage to the centrepiece track on the radical, political album, 'We Insist!' (1960) by the jazz musician Max Roach – the ideas of which prefigured the themes that became the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements. *Triptych*, like the track, is sectioned into three parts: Prayer, Protest and Peace. The catalyst for this film was the broadcasted portraits of figures such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and the evident incongruity between the beguiling ordinariness of the images that represented them with the violent end we know they endured. Through a rare focus on portraiture, Akomfrah seeks to express the diversity of Black characters, characteristics and characterisations that should form the bedrock of any de-colonial or anti-racist future.

About the artist

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

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

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

About Lisson Gallery

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Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer.

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

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