Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

'How Do You See This World?': The Art Of Almighty God

January 16–November 20, 2022

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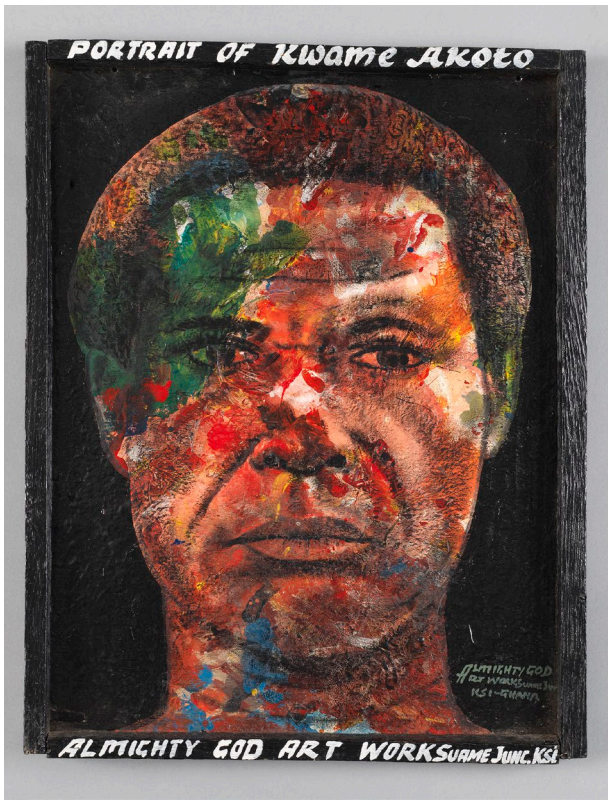
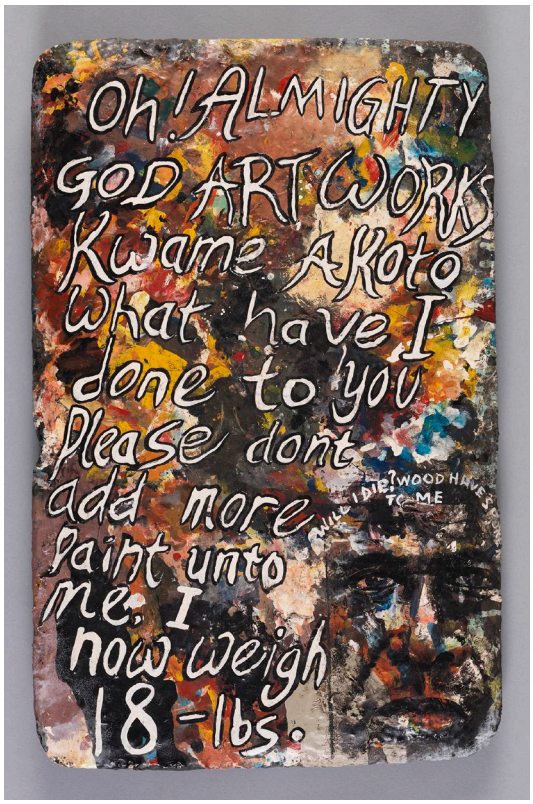
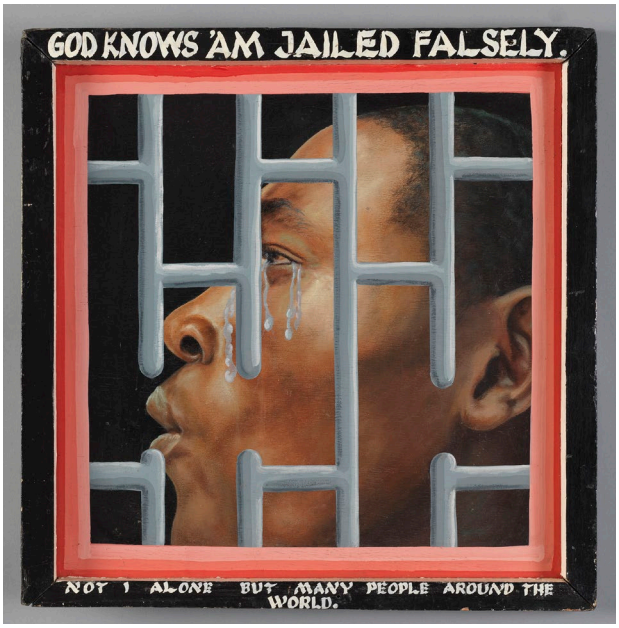
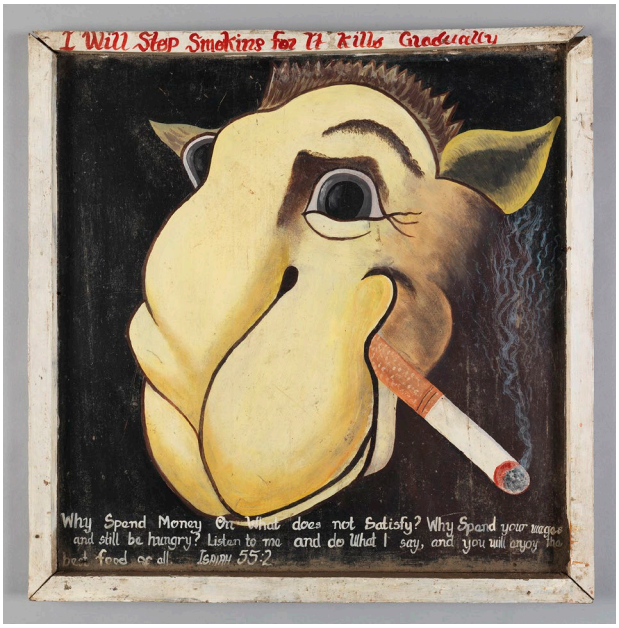




Los Angeles—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *'How Do You See This World?': The Art of Almighty God*—a retrospective of almost 80 paintings by contemporary Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto (b. 1950, Kumasi, Ghana). Drawn from the Fowler's collection of significant contemporary works from Ghana and institutional and private loans, Akoto's paintings survey a surprising array of subject matter, from portraits to animated biblical scenes to expressionistic accumulations of paint, all linked by a through line of textual commentary that appears in each work. One of the most prolific artists in West Africa, Akoto captivates an ever-growing audience, and his studio in Kumasi has become a popular tourist attraction.





Addressed as “Almighty” by friends and acquaintances, Akoto founded Almighty God Art Works in 1972, after completing a rigorous six-year apprenticeship. The studio specializes in “sign writing,” including hand-painted signs for small businesses, cloth banners for evangelical events, and tin portraits for grave monuments. As this industry continues to trend toward digital printing, Akoto has been devoting more time to what he calls “creativity arts”—the focus of this exhibition. These paintings are produced primarily for an international clientele and range from depictions of international celebrities, to Christian themes of temptation and salvation, to commentaries on the world’s problems. The universe of topics addressed in Akoto’s paintings is constantly growing, along with his use of Christian maxims and biblical citations. Self-portraits appear throughout the exhibition, offering reflections on the artist and the human condition.

Almighty’s practice as a sign writer permeates his creativity arts in the form of texts running the perimeter of wooden frames or embedded in the paintings. The written word is at least as important as the painted image in Almighty’s work; as he has said, “You need to read to understand my art.” In addition to scriptural quotes and descriptions of a given subject, the texts include expositions on the process of painting, sustaining Almighty’s firm belief that his creations “speak” to both artist and viewer. The interplay of word and image is characteristic of the arts of the Akan-speaking peoples of southern Ghana. Almighty draws upon this tradition in his own way, creating a direct channel of communication in which the subject and sometimes the paint itself initiates a dialogue with viewers.

The Fowler presentation opens with a sampling of works on a range of themes that are developed further in subsequent sections of the exhibition. A series of contextual photographs feature the artist and his family, his apprentices at work, and the vibrant setting of Almighty’s outdoor studio in Kumasi’s bustling city center. The latticed installation structures are a nod to the artist’s workshop; and the salon-style hanging of works mirrors their display for sale at Almighty God Art Works. A short video captures Almighty painting a seated model, singing hymns, and musing aloud on his sources of inspiration.

From here on, seven more painting clusters focus on unique themes in Almighty's oeuvre. Largely painted over the past three decades, these ever-evolving tropes illuminate the artist's most closely held values: his spirituality, his proud Asante heritage, and the power of his painting to communicate and change the world.

Self-Portraiture plays a significant role in defining Almighty's status as a Christian and in his declarations of being born again. Some of these paintings reflect Akoto's longing to improve himself and those around him. Others explore the creative process, the nature and accumulation of paint, the act of painting, and the business of selling work. An imaginative sub-series depicts eyes, mouths, or ears—each focused on the all-seeing God.

Beloved Ghana honors Almighty's Asante heritage, a dominant cultural force in the nation today and for at least two hundred years prior. Paintings in this section incorporate colors of the Ghanaian flag—red, yellow, green. Portraits range from late Asante kings to Ghanaian presidents to Kumasi-born Kofi Annan, as well as Barack Obama, who visited Ghana in 2009 and is pictured wearing a classic Oyokoman-patterned kente cloth.

The Human Condition paintings provide ample commentary on problems and issues on a global scale and more personal ones affecting families and friends. These works serve as framing devices for social, economic, medical, and political concerns that plague the planet in general and Ghana in particular. As an activist, Almighty takes on racism, incarceration, and ageism.

The ***"I Will Stop Smoking"*** series arises from the artist's former habit, which he came to view as unhealthy and unchristian upon his conversion. Depicting a wide range of cigarette-smoking flora and fauna, Akoto has stated: "I know and I believe that these sign boards have changed many people, if not now, in the future. This writing is helping mankind. With this drawing I am preaching." The vast array of animals and lettering styles in this series, which the studio has produced for almost thirty years, remains foundational in training the studio's rotating roster of apprentices.

Visions of Hell presents a panoply of sinister figures, including local witches and wizards, and the water spirit Mami Wata, perhaps Almighty's most enduring symbol of evil. In calling out the demons at the root of social ills, he also directs his viewers to the solution: renounce these figures—something Almighty himself is constantly trying to do.

On Death and Mourning includes some of the most poignant and personal portraits in the exhibition. Funerals, whether Christian or otherwise, are among the more time-consuming, elaborate, and expensive events in Akan/Asante culture. In some contemporary Ghanaian discourse, they have been criticized as excessive and in need of restraint; but the long-standing veneration of ancestors that shapes much of Akan culture propels the ongoing respect for departed elders.

Kwame Akoto and Doran H. Ross closes the exhibition with a tribute to the artist's long professional relationship and friendship with the posthumous curator of the exhibition, Doran H. Ross, preeminent Akan arts scholar and former director of the Fowler Museum (1996–2001). Ross worked closely with Akoto for nearly thirty years and published several articles on his work. In his inimitable style, Akoto created two "praise portraits" of his scholar friend upon Ross's passing in 2020.

> *I tell you, he was a great man and one of the great friends that I had. I cherished him too much.*
>
> —Kwame Akoto, speaking about Doran Ross in a phone conversation with scholar Silvia Forni, April 2021

About the Artist

Kwame Akoto was born to Asante parents in Kumasi, Ghana, on November 25, 1950. He completed elementary and middle school in the city, showing an early interest in drawing, even before he started his formal education. Akoto spent six years as an apprentice to master painters at two Kumasi studios, Addai and Kobia Arts, founding his own studio in 1972. Since 1995, he has been included in at least thirty exhibitions of contemporary African art outside of Ghana: in Italy, Poland, Netherlands, France, Denmark, Portugal, and the U.S. His works are in museums and private collections worldwide.

Almighty's Evangelical faith is front and center in his life, and he considers painting an essential part of his daily ministry. He has said frequently and has documented in many paintings that the two most important events and turning points in his life were his conversion to Christianity on December 13, 1991 and his marriage to Faustina Appiah in 1993. He goes to choir practice once a week and never misses a Sunday service, taking notes on biblical passages cited during the program and revisiting them when he returns to his home and studio. These passages subsequently stimulate and inform new works of art.

Credits

'How Do You See This World?' is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and was curated by the late Doran H. Ross, former director of the Fowler Museum, and completed posthumously by co-curators Erica P. Jones, curator of African arts, and Betsy D. Quick, former director of education and curatorial affairs. Generous support is provided by the Doran H. Ross Fund for African Exhibitions and the Fowler Fund.

About the Fowler

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu
Parking in UCLA Lot 4, 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, $3/hr or $14 max/day
Rideshare drop-off address: 305 Charles E Young Dr N, Los Angeles, CA 90024

Hours: Wed–Sun, 12–5pm
Admission to the Fowler is free
Complete guidelines are listed at fowler.ucla.edu/visit

Captions

PAGE 1

Left: Almighty God (Kwame Akoto) (b. 1950, Kumasi, Ghana), "*Self-portrait of Kwame Akoto*," 2012; pigment on plywood; Fowler Museum at UCLA X2016.35.2; Gift of Doran H. Ross

Right: Almighty God (Kwame Akoto) (b. 1950, Kumasi, Ghana), "*Oh! ALMIGHTY GOD ART WORKS KWAME AKOTO What have I done to you Please don't add more paint onto me. I now weigh 18 lbs,"* 2011; pigment on plywood; Fowler Museum at UCLA X2016.36.1; Gift of Doran H. Ross

PAGE 2

Left: Almighty God (Kwame Akoto) (b. 1950, Kumasi, Ghana), "*GOD KNOWS 'AM JAILED FALSELY. NOT I ALONE BUT MANY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD,"* 2005; pigment on plywood; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X2016.35.3; Gift of Doran H. Ross

Right: Kwame Akoto (Almighty God) (b. 1950, Kumasi, Ghana), "*Joe Camel, I Will Stop Smoking for it Kills Gradually. Why Spend Money On What does not Satisfy? Why spend your wages and still be hungry? Listen to me and do What I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all. ISAIAH 55:2*," 1993; pigment on plywood; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X96.33.7; Gift of Doran H. Ross

PAGE 3

Façade of Almighty God Art Works, Kumasi, Ghana, 2017. Photograph by Raymond Silverman

All paintings on view, unless otherwise noted, are by Kwame Akoto (b. Kumasi, Ghana, 1950), Almighty God Art Works. Formatting and spellings are taken verbatim from his panels.