

Wall Street International
ART

The Migration of Yellow Plastic Gallons

Serge Attukwei Clottey brings his Afrogallonism to Brighton

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Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

One of Ghana's most internationally acclaimed artists Serge Attukwei Clottey is bringing his politically charged and hopeful art to Brighton, UK. The show, *Current Affairs*, will kick off the Brighton Festival this year and take place in Fabrica between 18 April and 27 May 2019.

Attukwei Clottey is a multidisciplinary artist working across sculpture, photography, performance and installation. He came up with the word Afrogallonism, a term nowadays strongly attached to his name and increasingly used in titles of academic papers. He uses yellow plastic containers also known as jerry cans, at the heart of his artistic practice and the term refers to this material but also the culture that has been developed around it. Along with 100 other performers, he hijacks spaces to put on performances that tackle social issues in Ghana such as the environment, politics and gender. Despite his growing international reputation, he is based in Labadi, a suburb of the Ghanaian capital Accra and works with local communities. I talked to Attukwei Clottey in Brighton while he unpacked his Afrogallonism work before the show opened. He wants to transform his society through art and says that change will come; he just doesn't know when.

Can you tell me a little bit about *Current Affairs*? How did you prepare this exhibition?

The works in *Current Affairs* are from different exhibitions from across Ghana and the USA. I am interested in bringing the artworks which were exhibited and experienced in different places together, as they have different stories and different energy based on where they have been exhibited before. My work has been shown back in Ghana in public spaces and is very accessible. It is important for me to make it in a way that people can touch, walk on, and feel it. Fabrica is an old church transformed into contemporary art space, which I think is very fascinating. And we will see how the space and work will transform each other.

Plastic jerry cans are an important part of your art. What are they exactly, and what are they used for?

Back home in Ghana, this is something very important for us, because we use it every day. They originally come from the West, to transport cooking oil. Then we use them to carry water and in homes people use them as chairs - they are very comfortable to sit on. The consumption of them has become a problem, because there isn't a proper recycling infrastructure to deal with plastic and they all end up in the ocean. To me, this symbolises a struggle and has a political point to it as a symbol of the lack of affordable water in the country. I like using them in my art also as a case study, because I see there is a lot of potential in transforming them into very functional objects for home and for the country as well as them being artistically inspiring.

How did you decide to use them in your art?

My interest in them started when I was a child. Back home, children have to carry this gallon for a kilometre to collect water for the family. As a child, anytime I saw it, it scared me. But growing up to be an artist, I realised that there are other ways of exploring this issue. I have been interested in creating a strong community project out of it. The community collects the gallons with me and sometimes sell them to me. The money value of the gallons gets higher, because I use them in my artwork and people see them around the world. In this way, I help to change their value and the community benefits from them rather than the plastic becoming waste. I also use copper, which people in the same way collect and sell to me.

You created the term Afrogallonism. Can you explain it?

It's a made up word that I used for the first time in 2013 when presenting a mask. I've been working with gallons for 16 years and I think it has become very symbolic in my life and become my identity. I decided to call it Afrogallonism, after doing some background research on this object. For me, Afro is a colonial word that is attached to African migrants. But also, I am interested the circle – the gallon comes from the West and I send it back to the West. So it is becoming a migrant itself.

You have brought your large sculptures made out of cut pieces of these gallons to Brighton. They are large artworks which look very intricate to produce.

The process of making the works is very labour intensive. It goes through different processes; cutting, drilling, and stitching. Some take a month, some 7 months or a year. They are called *Follow the Yellow Brick*, as I investigate the history of my family through this piece. My family were displaced. 200 years ago, they migrated because of the trade relationships, and where they were previously settled was invaded. It is a big issue in Ghana as no proper documentation exists either. I use my art to mark the history. I use the same yellow gallons to pave the space given to my family at that time and I have invited people to walk on it to witness and experience the history that happened 200 years ago.

Your works are very political and critical to some practices of society and the government in Ghana. Do you think that you can change much in your society through your art?

I see a relief and awareness, because my work brings issues into the spotlight and criticises politics. Being an artist is a very strong responsibility and I take risks, particularly with my performance collective. I find an alternative way of pushing, keeping up with work, staying focused and trying to get people to be part of what I do as much as possible. Performance is a movement to transform the community, and as the collective, I believe that our voice is heard. We are very consistent and people pay attention and give a lot of support. We just don't know when change will come, but we know that at some point it will come.

The collective that you founded, *GoLocal*, has about 100 performers. How do you put on a performance?

We are more like collaborators, discussing the ideas together and trying to respond to the current issues in communities. Every day it is brought to my attention how powerful our tradition is, especially in terms of dance, music and costume, which I also incorporate in my performance practice. We have different performances; mostly improvising to allow the energies to evolve. We sometimes hijack a space when the performance is politically informed. We also stage performances where we entertain people.

You've had shows in the USA, UK and had other big international exhibitions too. You are so passionate about your country, region, and own family history. Being a part of this international art scene, going to talk about these issues and your art, but at the same time, hijacking spaces to do performances for small communities... How do these all work together?

For me it's just being consistent in what you do. I follow this mantra, "Think Global, Act Local". My work is centred on my community, I make sure of that. But what I believe makes my art broad and accessible to other cultures is that I create art from my heart. I also use social media platforms to promote projects, share information and I think that makes the work very visible.

One of the subjects that you are critical of is that of gender roles in your country. Ghana is a country where homosexuality is prohibited. Do you feel vulnerable when you tackle gender roles in your society?

It is the most challenging one. I took the privilege of being an artist and having people supporting my work and writing about my work. Also I think travelling brought a lot of understanding and has given me experience to deal with a subject like that and how to use performance art to address it. But I also thought about how to bring traditions into this, as men wearing women's clothes is an activity that takes place in our traditional festivals.

You had a performance walking in the streets in your late mother's clothes. This performance put you on prominent international media including a highly stylised photo shoot in Vogue. How did that performance happen?

I use my personal story to create influence, and talk about equality and human rights. According to the tradition, if you are a mother and you die, your wardrobe is locked up for a year. After a year, it's opened and your belongings are shared amongst your children. In my case, as an only child and a son, I couldn't get my mother's belongings. Other extended family members got them. As a response to this I created the performance called *My Mother's Wardrobe*. That was the most challenging performance I did. It was featured on BBC, the Guardian, even in Vogue, and it brought people's attention to that topic. There has been a radical change in the community since, they are more open and expressive. I did a photo shoot with the clothes that I took back. Now I wear women's clothes; I feel comfortable and nobody questions that.



1. Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

2. Serge Attukwei Clottey, ph. Stefan Simchowitz

3. Everyday Myth: Survival and Sustenance in Ever Gold Projects, San Francisco

4. Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

5. Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

6. Current Affairs at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, ph. Tom Thistlethwaite

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