

## GQ

## Serge Attukwei Clottey Discusses 'Afrogallonism' and His Installation at Desert X AIUla 2022

*GQ caught up with Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey at his studio in Accra to find out more about his fascination with plastic gallons and the meaning behind his most recent public art installation for Desert X AIUla in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*

by Ekow Barnes February 21, 2022



"Each plastic gallon has a story, a defined identity and a whole language behind it," says [Ghanaian visual artist](#) Serge Attukwei Clottey who's making a case for sustainable art with unique installations made from repurposed jerry cans and other everyday objects.

In a time when so much emphasis is being placed on being able to create meaningful work without compromising the environment, artists such as Serge Attukwei Clottey are being hailed as the heroes of the day in [Ghana](#). His punkish art addresses contemporaneous issues of human consumption and sustainability by resuscitating discarded plastics through sculptures and performance art. With a father who was a painter, it is no surprise then that Clottey speaks a powerful and fluent language of art through his mixed media works.



Photo: Fifi Abban

"I grew up with gallons," Serge Attukwei Clottey recounts. "When I was staying with my mum's family, we used to fetch water every morning with these gallons and when I moved to my uncle's house, which had a water fountain, people came to buy water using these gallons. Most often when these gallons broke, people left them with us so gallons were accessible to me right from the bat."

These days, Clottey's work follows through with his childhood fascination: the plastic gallons, how his community interacts with them and the diverse narratives it generates. He calls it "Afrogallonism" – a concept that embodies the spirit of a new Africa. "Afrogallonism is a word I made up somewhere around 2012 and 2013. I've been using these gallons for roughly 18 years and the work has evolved over time. I made up this word because I was looking at the history of the gallons," says Clottey. "Afro is a colonial word attached to migrants and these gallons were imported; they are not originally from Africa. For me to explore this concept of migration through the objects, I made up the word 'Afrogallonism', which essentially means this is Africa now. This is how we have been able to transact the same gallons back to the West."



Photo: @afrogallonism

His large-scale assemblages are site-specific and his tapestries are made from cut-into-bits of yellow plastic gallons interlaced with jute sacks and found objects. The art installations – which often allude to cultural references such as the Ghanaian kente motif – have become synonymous with Clotey and his work.

But Clotey's Afrogallonism story has not always been that of cut and woven plastic gallons. "From the beginning, I was using the whole gallon to make portraits of presidents. The first one I did was a portrait of Ghana's first president Dr Kwame Nkrumah on the occasion of Ghana's 60th Independence Day commemoration. I gathered 60 gallons to achieve the painting. It was like a puzzle because, after painting, I dismantled the gallons and moved them around for my next exhibition. But after everything, I realised storage was becoming a problem for me," Serge Attukwei Clotey says.

"I started cutting the gallons into smaller pieces just to save space but then I got this new idea to weave these pieces together to form new objects. I saw it as my way of saving the environment. I had the privilege to study arts in Brazil. Brazil gave me a different approach to art by combining performance, installation and sculptures. This particular medium is very multi-disciplinary where I use the objects as a layout scheme and it becomes a part of the performance. Travelling around and exploring different cultures has influenced my style because I am really interested in migration and the history behind it."



Photos: Lance Gerber

In his latest Afrogallonism installation titled *The Gold Falls*, we see a golden water's steep fall over a rocky ledge into a bright yellow pool set against the backdrop of the Saudi desert. For viewers, it was a refreshing sight to witness a bright yellow stream contrasting with the browns of the desert.

"The desert for Africans means a lot of things; it represents migration, struggle and dirt," Serge Attukwei Clotey explains. "But when I visited Saudi Arabia, the narrative of its deserts was different; it was not a space that represented migration, rather it was a place to celebrate and preserve nature. I realised the Saudi desert was not a place of struggle so I turned to the idea of falls because, for deserts, the most important thing is a source of water." Tapping into his rich Ghanaian heritage and culture prompted Clotey to name the installation *The Gold Falls*. "Originally, the gallons are used for transporting cooking oil and when it comes to Africa, we repurpose it to store water. *The Gold Falls* was not only to mimic but portray displacement because the oil gallons that are otherwise used for storing water are covering the desert to represent a waterfall. It is my way of creating an environment," Serge Attukwei Clotey explains.

Follow Serge Attukwei Clotey on [Instagram](#) to view more of his artworks. [Desert X AIUla](#) runs until 31 March 2022.