

John Akomfrah: Five Murmurations



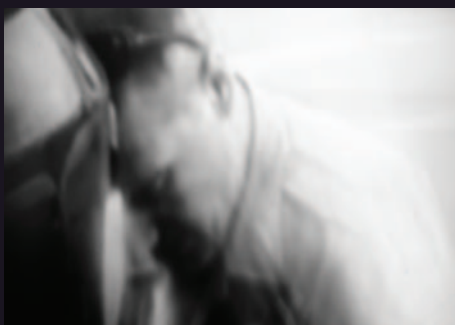
Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

On May 25, 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minn. Caught on video, the murder sparked a global debate on institutional racism and its impacts on Black lives, and it ignited a worldwide call to action. For John Akomfrah—whose cinematic and art-making practices engage with colonialism, climate change, and the crises of our time—Floyd’s murder served as a catalyst for this work, and COVID-19 its context.

Unable to either bring his team together or go out and film on location due to lockdowns, Akomfrah began to gather footage in a new way. He and his network used still cameras and DPX files to capture scenes of their daily lives in isolation. We see Akomfrah filming himself as he holds the camera before a mirror, and friends standing in isolation in parking lots, reading in bed, or cooking meals. Akomfrah juxtaposed these vignettes with transcripts and photographs of the killing of Breonna Taylor, police camera footage, scenes of Black Lives Matter protests worldwide, and news reports of the spreading coronavirus—all interspersed with images of words and phrases such as “living with danger,” “dying without consequence,” “the audacity of love,” and “hope” dissolving in liquids. He also added art historical references.

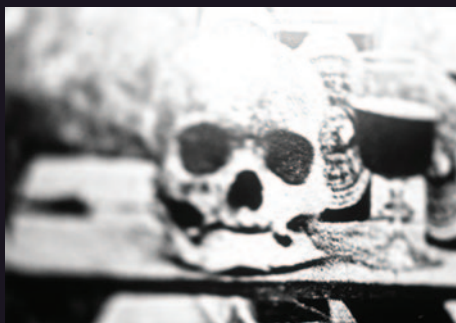


Akomfrah opens *Five Murmurations* with details of *The Conjuror*, Hieronymus Bosch's examination of the human capacity for deception. It is the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna's canvas *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, however, that, to the artist, speaks of the pathos and banality of lives lost. For Akomfrah, the distorted perspective of Mantegna's depiction and the very public nature of Christ's death is echoed in the documentations of the killings of Argentine Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara and George Floyd.



When combined, the grainy photo of the dead Guevara, the crisp details of Mantegna's masterpiece, the soundtrack of Floyd's last words, and the scenes and text of domesticity result not in a lush, cinematic 4k- or 6k-production, but an inky, intimate, haunting black-and-white montage of individuals and society during times of shared crisis. Akomfrah's assemblage of fast-paced clips reveal how human beings, like birds, come together and fly apart, forming murmurations of collective movement and isolation.

—Karen E. Milbourne, Senior Curator





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About the artist

Ghanaian born John Akomfrah, CBE RA, is a London-based artist, screenwriter, film director, curator, and critical thinker whose lyric works grapple with such defining issues of our times as climate change, migration, racism, and the legacies of colonialism and slavery. His multichannel videos weave together original and archival footage to produce narratives that layer the past with the present, the personal with the societal, and the intimate with the epic.

Akomfrah received a degree in sociology from Portsmouth Polytechnic in Portsmouth, England, before cofounding the Black Audio Film Collective in 1982. This group developed a groundbreaking experimental style that centered Black identity and experiences within portrayals of British society and history. Although it disbanded in 1998, Akomfrah has remained close collaborators with two of its founding members, David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, both of whom were involved with the making of *Five Murmurations*.

Akomfrah will represent Great Britain at the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2024. Among his numerous awards are the Artes Mundi Prize (2017); honorary doctorates from Portsmouth University (2014), University of the Arts, London (2013), and Goldsmiths, London (2013); Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (2008); and the Taipei Golden Lion, Taipei Film Festival, Taiwan (1999). He has had solo exhibitions at Seattle Art Museum, Washington (2020); Secession, Vienna, Austria (2020); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Mass. (2019); Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); New Museum, New York (2018); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2017); Turner Contemporary, Margate, England (2016); and Tate Britain, London, (2013), among others.

FRONT COVER + PAGES 3, 4
(BOTTOM), 5

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PAGE 4, TOP + CENTER
Attributed to Hieronymus Bosch
and workshop
1450–1516, Netherlands
The Conjuror
c. 1502
Oil on wood
53 x 65 cm (21 x 25 1/2 in.)
Musée Municipal, Saint-Germain-
en-Laye, France

Andrea Mantegna
1430–1506, Italy
*The Lamentation over the
Dead Christ*
c. 1483
Tempera on canvas
68 x 81 cm (27 x 32 in.)
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

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