

**AKUTIA:  
BLINDFOLDING THE  
SUN AND THE POETICS  
OF PEACE  
A RETROSPECTIVE OF  
AGYEMAN OSSEI (DOTA)**



## Message from the Artistic Director of SCCA Tamale

Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA Tamale) is an artist-run project space that provides a platform for lively exploration of modern and contemporary art. The initiative for this came from Ibrahim Mahama, the world-renowned Ghanaian artist, who is inspired by the transformative potential of art to affect society.

Located in different sites in the city of Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana, SCCA Tamale, with its offshoot Red Clay, carries forward that mission by making the institution an open and active place that promotes access to artistic, scientific, cultural education and experiences through its varied programmings.

The institution thinks and acts both locally and internationally. Taking a cue from the cross-generational interactions stimulated by blaxTARLINES KUMASI, of which it is affiliated, the institution has dedicated a decade to show a retrospective of precursors to the New School; moments that would allow people of all ages and social backgrounds to meet and exchange experiences, starting with its maiden exhibition: In pursuit of Something 'Beautiful', perhaps... (A Retrospective), honouring the Ghanaian Modernist artist Galle Winston Kofi Dawson, curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson in 2019 at the SCCA Tamale gallery. This initiative is also about contextualising and documenting practices which might not be in the spotlight yet are significant.

This year, SCCA Tamale, together with Red Clay, will show Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and The Poetics of Peace (A Retrospective of Agyeman Ossei 'Dota'). The exhibition guides us through the lifework of the multifaceted artist as we familiarize ourselves with his approach to traditional techniques of painting, collage, sculpture and expanded methods that include literary works, performing art and new media. We are invited to

explore the formal and aesthetic investigations nurtured through Ossei's interest in Akan proverbs, all of which encompass his politics of assertion. We also get a glimpse of the resilience and struggle that birthed the artworks echoed in the title. There seems to be no respite if we are to blindfold the sun, and let us take heed not to fully burn before we attain pitch black space which is a fertile milieu to stimulate our imagination; if that is what peace presents to us. A subtle but profound statement to make sense of the world that comes to us through an innuendo.

We appreciate the effort of the curatorial team: Adwoa Amoah, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson to enable this reflection in various forms distributed across space-time links. From the formal, to the phenomenological, to the ecological and the virtual ... a gesamtkunstwerk of a kind. We owe a debt to all who have worked whole-heartedly to make the exhibition come to fruition. Thank you for your goodwill!

The exhibition is organised by SCCA Tamale and Red Clay in cooperation with blaxTARLINES KUMASI, Foundation for Contemporary Art- Ghana, Exit Frame and the Centre for National Culture, Tamale.

Selom Koffi Kudjie  
(Artistic Director, SCCA Tamale)



# Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace (A Retrospective of Agyeman Ossei, 'Dota')

Co-curated by Adwoa Amoah, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

## Press Release

*Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace* is a retrospective exhibition which traces the lifework of dynamic Ghanaian artist, dramatist, and educator Agyeman Ossei (Dota) to its earliest days in the 1980s. Remaining true to the artist's irreverent attitude to art, the exhibition amplifies the dialogic relations between the linguistic, structural, and formal elements operative in Ossei's work— inspired by Asante proverbial culture and philosophy, folk/Highlife music, and poetry translated via collage, drama, literature, painting, sculpture, video, and new media. As an artist whose aesthetic and cultural sensibilities have been shaped as much by formal education as by the "farmers and so called bums" he encountered during the inspired "Koforidua years" in the early 1990s, Ossei experimentally weaves a secular linkage between the traditional, modernist and extra-modernist elements evidenced in his practice.

This landmark exhibition marks twenty-seven years since the artist's preceding solo exhibition and will run between Savanna Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Tamale and its sister institution, Red Clay, located in neighboring Janna Kpeɲɲ in the Northern Region of Ghana. To complement the main exhibitions, a rich lineup of live and virtual events encompassing other areas of the artist's interests, ranging from musical concerts, theater, workshops, film screenings, and many more, will be programmed throughout the year. These events are designed

to adhere to the requisite COVID-19 guidelines provided by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, and the Government of Ghana. There will also be a radio play, translated into Dagbani, which will circulate on airwaves, podcasts, and digital listening stations in Ghana and around the world.

The exhibition acknowledges the kind support of the Center for National Culture in Tamale, blaxTARLINES KUMASI, Foundation for Contemporary Art - Ghana, and Exit Frame Collective.

## About SCCA Tamale:

SCCA Tamale is an artist-run institution that functions as project space, exhibition and research hub, cultural repository and artists' residency. It is the initiative of world-renowned Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama as a contribution to the development and expansion of infrastructure for contemporary art in Ghana. Since its opening in 2019 the institution has dedicated its programming to unravelling modernist and contemporary histories in Ghanaian art beginning with its twentieth century progenitors. *Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace* is the sophomore exhibition in this regard. Affiliated to blaxTARLINES KUMASI, SCCA works to produce and share knowledge through exhibitions, workshops, publications and allied activities.

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### SCCA opening reception:

Friday, 4th September, 2020 @ 17:30hrs  
Opening hours: Monday - Thursday, 11 am – 8 pm,  
Friday - closed  
Saturday - Sunday, 11am – 6 pm  
Closing date: Thursday, 7th March, 2021

### Red Clay opening:

Saturday, 5th September, 2020 @ 17: 30hrs  
Opening hours: Monday - Thursday, 11 am – 8 pm,  
Friday - closed  
Saturday - Sunday, 11am – 6 pm  
Closing date: Thursday, 7th March, 2021

### Venues:

SCCA, SSNIT Junction, adjacent St. John of the Cross School, Tamale.  
Red Clay, Janna Kpeɲɲ (Giana on Google Map, on the Nanton Road).

## Agyeman Ossei (Dota) bio:

Agyeman Ossei (b. 1960) is an artist and senior lecturer who has provided administrative and academic leadership as head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ghana, Legon from 2014 until his voluntary retirement in 2017. He was the artistic director of Abibigromma— resident theater group at the University of Ghana, Legon— from 2005-2009 and served as acting Executive Director of the National Theater of Ghana between 2012 and 2014. He is the founder of EvenSolomon Ethnic Homes, a building society and co-operative which proposes earthy housing solutions to the urban and rural poor. He is the Artistic Director of Openemaa Productions— a media production house involved in the creation of content related to performing arts, radio plays, animations, and many more.

Ossei has directed and produced concerts with legendary 'Palm wine' Highlife musician Agya Koo Nimo and the National Symphony Orchestra as well as skits and jingles for radio in local Ghanaian languages such as Twi, Dagbani, Frafra, Ewe and Wala. Ossei has contributed to numerous academic journals and publications worldwide and has translated and adapted literary works into theatre plays— notable among them Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, *Osiris Rising* and *The Healers*. He has also directed the play *Ananse and the Gum Man* by Joe De-Graft selected for the Ghana @50 Theater Classics at the National Theater (2007). His two solo exhibitions 'Reviewed Traditions in Ghanaian Painting' and 'Proverbs: An Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures' respectively happened in 1989 and 1993 in Accra. In 2017 he participated in the large scale group exhibition *Orderly Disorderly*, organised by blax-TARLINES KUMASI at the Museum of Science and Technology in Accra, Ghana.

## Curatorial Statement

“Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace” honours the lifework of an artist, dramatist, educator, storyteller and social engineer. Born in 1960, the same year as the dawn of Ghana’s Republican epoch, Agyeman ‘Dota’ Ossei’s resolve to understand, use, translate, and extend the philosophical and socio-political knowledges and ideas captured in Asante proverbs and analogous African cultural systems into modern art practice and social transformation is exemplary. Ossei’s journey in art is a lesson in maturity through commitment, self-admonishment, and modesty. His disposition and affirmative attitude to making art can be summarised from two anecdotes. The first is a lesson he picked up from an older artist and educator, Dr. Sylvanus Kwami Amenuke<sup>1</sup> (b. 1940), in 1983 when Ossei was a sophomore at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi. Amenuke was by then a distinguished social realist painter and lecturer at the Department of Art Education at KNUST, who had tactically withdrawn from painting any more pictures until he was certain that his mother, who was a potter in Akoefe, a village in the Volta Region of Ghana, could also participate in the construction of meaning and appreciation<sup>2</sup> of his work. Ossei recalls having imbibed the egalitarian ethic behind Amenuke’s rejection of the elitism then tied to Ghana’s modern art in an insightful conversation he had with the older artist-educator. At the time, Amenuke was searching for a democratic solution to the elevated and exclusionary cultures built silently into the modern art establishment and discourse. This egalitarian principle, also articulated in postcolonial Ghana by Kwame Nkrumah<sup>3</sup>, underlies Ossei’s approach to art and pedagogy in his work as an educator and storyteller<sup>4</sup>.

The second anecdotal event happened in the early 1990s. By then, Ossei had finished his undergraduate education, abandoned a stable job in Ghana’s first university, and had begun to

spend time at local palm wine bars in the company of his cousin Karikari Ossei and “farmers and so-called bums”— custodians of Asante proverbs and innuendoes who were living on the edge in Afidwase-Koforidua. In this company, conversations, like the dialogue between Okoye and Unoka in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, were full of proverbial expressions based on which a corpus of notes were made. This is the period when the decision to pursue an independent art practice divorced from market pressures came to him, much to the displeasure of his concerned parents on whom he depended for “accommodation and one meal a day”. When asked by his father what practising art had meant for his future, his elevated “art-for-art’s sake” rhetoric was hardly convincing. It was at this point that his father, speaking in Asante-Twi but interestingly echoing the last line of Wittgenstein’s “*Tractatus*”<sup>5</sup>, gave him a piece of advice; “If you have nothing to say, don’t talk”<sup>6</sup>. Later, it was an unlettered woman’s close encounter with Ossei’s sculptures that would direct the neophyte on a path that would eventually answer his father’s pessimist quip, and also resolve his mentor Dr. Amenuke’s concerns. “Don’t you realize that all the sculptures you have created are proverbs that communicate to us?”, she had asked the befuddled Ossei who was throwing art-school explanations about his work around. This experience connected the several epiphanies he had in Afidwase-Koforidua regarding Asante proverbs as tropes of indirect communication, their contexts of use, and their milieu of community criticism. Jolted into being more reflective about his practice, Ossei became aroused to the responsibilities and paradoxes that accompany the taken-for-granted ethos of freedom and independence associated with the autonomous practice of modern art. Asante proverbs also became a cipher through which to exercise a politics of self-assertion while preparing him up for the broader questions about the symbolic, semiotic and metaphysical in art. Ossei then developed an expanded practice and a conception of art

as a critical attitude to things and experiences, rather than as an activity that can be exhausted in any particular skill, process, medium or genre.

While the formative years of Ossei's mature corpus aligns with the 1980s and 1990s multicultural turn in art and culture which patronized localised or indigenous subject matter, he conceived his Africa-inspired praxis as a challenge to the Ghanaian status quo. During his years in the KNUST MFA programme (1996 - 1998), Ossei had already been experimenting with digital imaging technologies to create animations as an extension of his autonomous paintings and sculptures. Meanwhile, video, animation, photography and other such media and formats were, by then, covertly proscribed by the conservative art curriculum in Ghana even though they had already seen significant developments elsewhere in Africa and its global diasporas by that time<sup>7</sup>.

The two-part structure of the title, "Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace", reflects the "innuendo-proverb" pairing—the tropes of indirect and collective communication that underpin Ossei's retrospective project. "Akutia", the Twi idiom employed in this context to mean innuendoes expressed through visual, verbal, and gestural communicative means could be interpreted as a body of allusions that register Agyeman Ossei's reflections. Tapping into the reserves of collective memory through the subtleties of Asante proverbs, Agyeman Ossei intimates that:

"Blindfolding the Sun is an allegory of the proverb, *Ɔbaakofo nsa nso Nyame ani kata* (One person's hands are not sufficient to cover the eyes of God). Ancient religions have all acknowledged the Sun as God. The ubiquity yet anonymity of the Sun in terms of day and night is the mystery encoded in the narratives that the exhibition presents. The collective psychology of our ancestors who bequeathed the heritage of proverbs as well as the community of artists who came together to put up the show

is symbolic of the many hands needed to cover the eyes of the Sun. Though "Akutia" is suggestive of strife, in the long run it ensures peace because as the saying goes, *Abubɛ ne atebɛ te a, ntɔkwa nni hɔ* (When the speaker of proverbs communicates with the hearer of proverbs, there is bound to be peace.)"

This retrospective also assimilates the animating principle of intergenerational conversations inaugurated between 2015-2017 with the trilogy of large-scale group exhibitions<sup>8</sup> of KNUST alumni, organised by blaxTARLINES KUMASI in Accra, Ghana. Agyeman Ossei's works, which featured in the final edition in the series, titled *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), was among other 20th century Ghanaian Modernists— such as Galle Winston Kofi Dawson<sup>9</sup> and Ablade Glover— and practitioners of the millennial generation. The show also commemorates twenty seven years since the last major solo exhibition of an artist who has only ever staged two solo shows in his career— the first, titled *Reviewed Traditions in Ghanaian Painting*, which happened in the Shangri-la Hotel, Accra in 1989, and the second, titled *Proverbs: An Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture* which took place at the National Museum, Accra, in 1993.

A willful outsider to the limelight of mainstream exhibition circuits locally and internationally, Ossei forges through this seeming limitation with the conviction that artistic freedom is a political commitment to struggle. He exemplifies the figure of a committed artist whose silent but prolific practice in Ghana since the late 1980s reassesses what we have come to take for granted in mainstream exhibition making. Through pedagogy, theater, and other socially-conscious interventions, Ossei's secularisation and translation of abstract substances into paintings, sculptures, theater plays, animation, TV/radio productions, and many more, works to expand the coordinates of what is possible with respect to exhibition making and art as such.

Ossei's works, in addition to paraphrasing and translating moments in Akan linguistic culture, also point us to the



relational qualities of their idiomatic expressions. For example, in the full Asante-Twi expression *Akutia nim ne wura* (which means “The one to whom an innuendo is cast unambiguously knows it”), the personification of “*Akutia*” draws our attention to its phenomenology, and although the content of the message may be generally extrapolated, the tension at the heart of “*Akutia*” is what sustains the true meaning of the specific remark or criticism. This tension is at one and same time between its necessary logic of equivocation (or the seeming emptiness of meaning or vagueness of content to those whom it is not addressed) versus the singularity of its message directed at the object of interest who decodes it without difficulty. This apparent vagueness, shot through with pinpoint accuracy, is what gives “*Akutia*” its essence. And since we are all familiar with some kind of “*Akutia*” or other, regardless of our cultural backgrounds, the audience is invited into an inclusive para-consistent dynamic where perceptions, meanings, and confrontations are based as much on essence and autonomy as they are on contingency and tangible experiences.

As we indirectly experience Ossei’s life poems through his works— in terms of his pleasures, loves, fears, aspirations, anxieties, and convictions— we are also exposed to the vicarious relationship which ensures the infinite translatability of texts such as clichés, proverbs, fables, myths, legends, and novels into both known and new forms. This horizon of possibility is one of the most important lessons to take from Ossei’s approach to art. And the plurality of “sub-phenomenal”, visual, aural, and anthropomorphic elements sited between SCCA Tamale and Red Clay create an atmosphere of interactivity with co-present dynamics between organic, virtual, mute, plastic, ephemeral, and synthetic objects— including plants, braille captions, paper collages, paintings, raised floor, natural landscapes, sculptures, a makeshift pool of water with lilies, participatory installation, radio play, and so on. Some of these forms will be

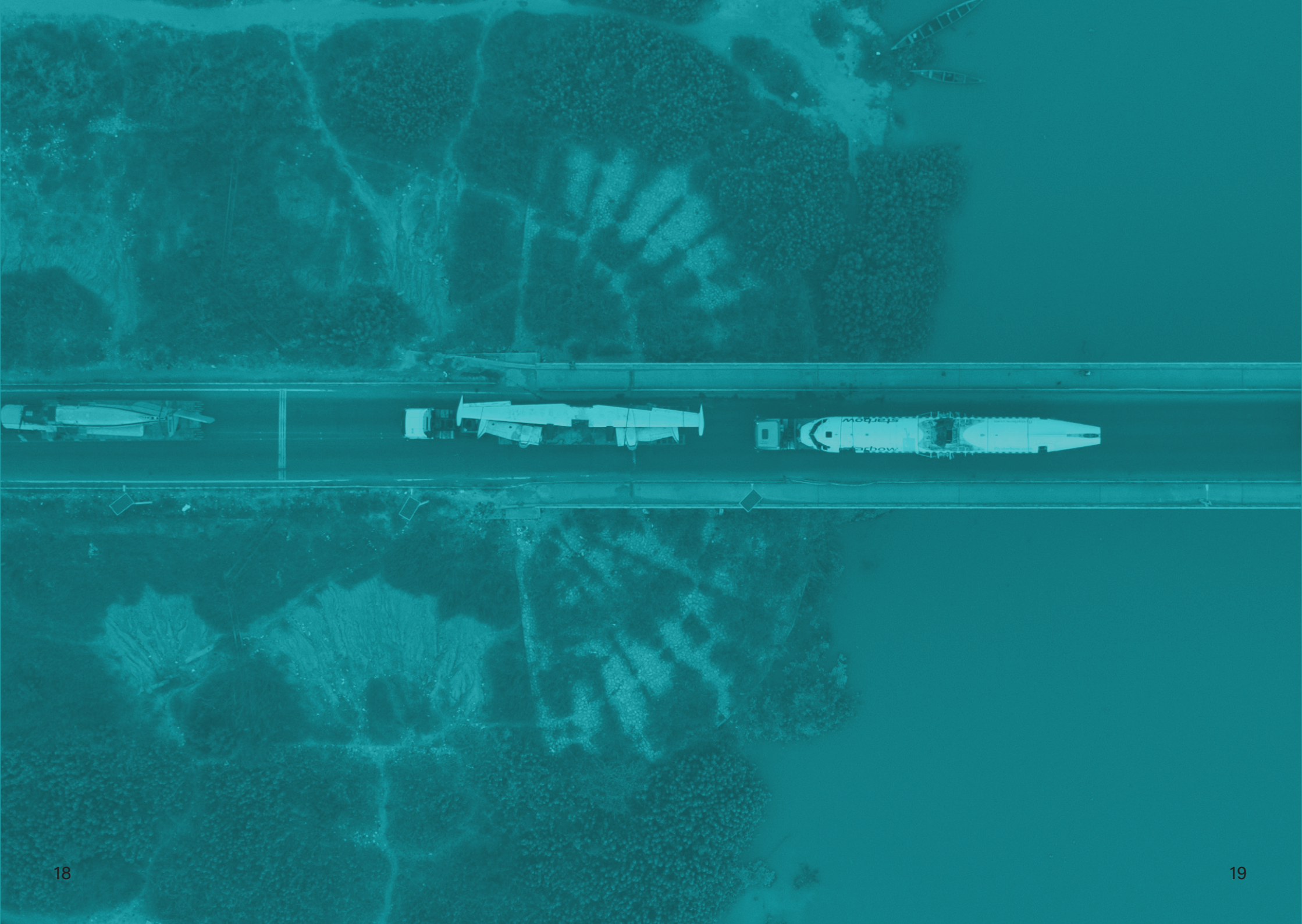
immediately present at the opening of the exhibition, while others will emerge as the exhibition stretches its lifespan.

## Curatorial Team

Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Adwoa Amoah and Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

## Endnotes

1. Dr. Sylvanus Kwami Amenuke entered the College of Art at KNUST in 1966 until 1970 when he completed his undergraduate training. He is the first student of painting to be awarded first class degree in the B.A. Art programme (which begun in 1964) in KNUST. He has rendered curriculum services in Visual Arts to the Curriculum Research and Development Division of GES from 1983 to 2007 and has made significant contributions to Education in Visual Arts in Ghana.
2. See Agyeman Ossei. (2009). Art and Autobiography: A Personal Narrative and National Identity. Article publication. *Irdiworld Journal of Humanities*.
3. In Nkrumah's 1963 speech to open the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, he notes that "education must be measured in terms of the soundness of [the learner's] judgement of people and things, and [their] power to understand and appreciate the needs of [their] fellow men, and to be of service to them".
4. In this sense Ossei aligns with another of his inspirers, Ayi Kwei Armah— a writer, poet, and novelist whose de-colonial and emancipatory ideas are articulated in his works. Ossei has occupied himself in recent years with translating some of the Armah's into stage plays.
5. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" is C. K. Ogden's 1922 German-English translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7, "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen". In the Routledge Classics edition, it is translated as; "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". See Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness]. London and New York. First English edition first published in 1922 by Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner.
6. See Ossei (2009).
7. A noteworthy example is epitomised by the works of artists who exhibited in the South Meets West contemporary art exhibition at the National Museum of Ghana in 1999. The exhibition featured artists from the southern and western parts of Africa and their diasporas who were working with post-media, deskilled, and dematerialised processes.
8. The exhibitions are 1. "The Gown Must Go Town" (2015) featuring 57 selected artists and inspired by Kwame Nkrumah's speech "The African Genius" made in 1963 when he officially opened the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. 2. "Cornfields in Accra" (2016) inspired by a poem of same title written by the feminist Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo ca. 1964-65. And 3. "Orderly Disorderly" (2017) which honored the lifework of Professor Ablade Glover and Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami.
9. The inaugural exhibition of SCCA Tamale (15th march-15th August, 2019) was a retrospective of Galle Winston Kofi Dawson. 'Galle Winston Kofi Dawson: In Pursuit of Something 'Beautiful', perhaps...' was curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson.



# Credits

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Savanna Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Tamale  
Red Clay

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 Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh  
 Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

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Napoleon Mensah	-	Nkrabea
		Twiritwie
		Crocodile
Kobina Hagan	-	Prɛkɛɛ Kwame
		Paga god
Jacqueline Ama Ansah	-	Sewaa
Lamisi Anabilla Akuka	-	Lady
Kingsley K. Okyere	-	Prince

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**Original Composition**

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 Napoleon Mensah  
 Kobina Hagan  
 Jacqueline A. Ansah  
 Lamisi A. Anabilla

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George Ackerson	-	Viola
Bright Afenya	-	Viola
Anthony Zonyrah	-	Cello
Felix Coblavie	-	Double Bass
Leonel Addo	-	Flute 1
Nii Djanie Kotey	-	Flute 2
Godways Dogbey	-	Oboe
Seth Duncan	-	French Horn
Addo Bekoe	-	Trombone
Patrick Ato Quayson	-	Percussion
Justice Turkson	-	1st Violin
Emmanuel F. Quaye	-	1st Violin
Hubert Boytsoe	-	2nd Violin
Enock Degla	-	Double Bass
Patrick Adu Darko	-	Percussion
Emmanuel Neequaye	-	Basoon
Victor Kudevov	-	Trumpet
Darlington Danwoel	-	Double Bass

Daniel Aryeetey	-	Flute
Kweku B. Frempong	-	Viola
Eric De-Graft Amoah	-	2nd Viola
Paul Ankomah	-	Percussion
Isaac Annon	-	Conductor

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Kofi L. Kudornu

**Documentation**

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 Bawala Studio  
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 Abdul Rahman Muhammed (Director, Youth Home Cultural Group)  
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 Alhassan Mohammed Asao  
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 Dawuni Ophelia  
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 Kasim Suraya  
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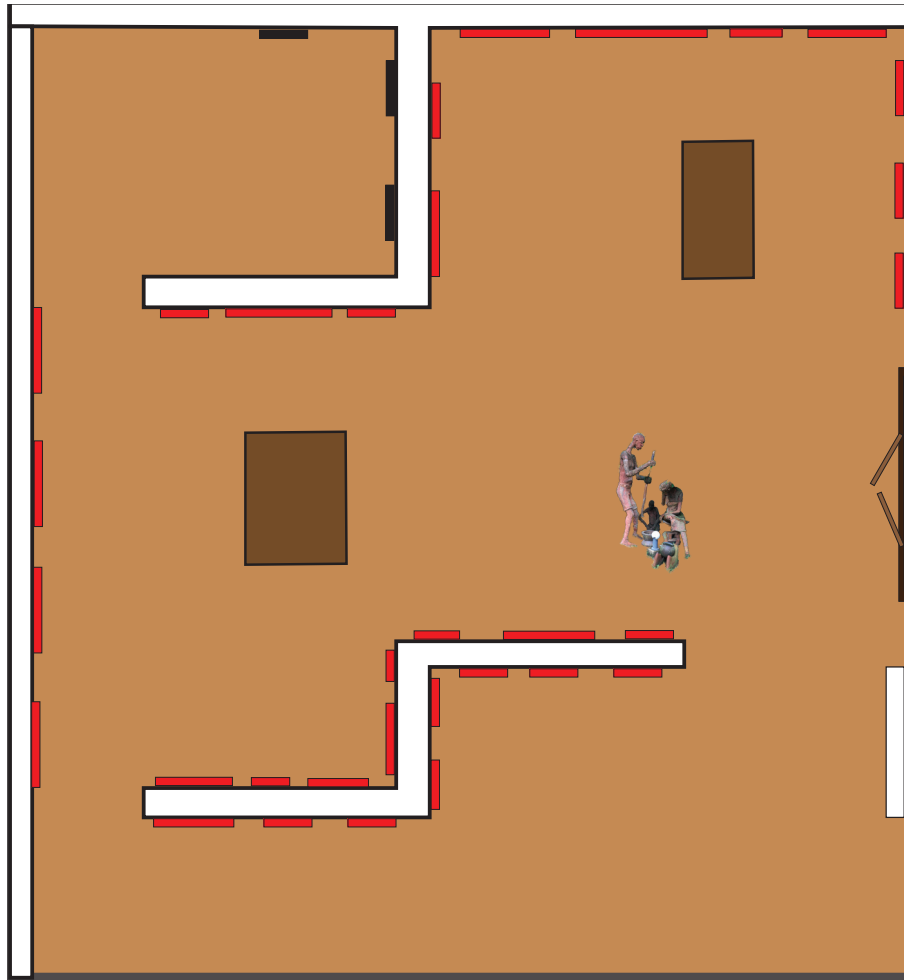
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Naa Adam Alhassan(Chief of Janna Kpenṅ)

**Special Thanks To:**

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Mohammed Issah Ibrahim  
Mubarek Mahama  
Mannan Sanni  
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Red Clay Construction Team

# SCCA Plan



# Red Clay Plan

