

INTERVIEWS

AKOSUA ADOMA OWUSU

May 03, 2019 • Akosua Adoma Owusu talks about triple consciousness

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us*, 2019, Super-8, color, sound, 9 minutes.

The Ghanaian American filmmaker Akosua Adoma Owusu blends whatever she needs to make her point—including found footage, narratives, and pop culture—into films that are by turns surreal and confrontationally explicit in their meditations. Below, Owusu looks back on the first decade of her career, a milestone marked by two upcoming projects: “Between Three Worlds,” a screening of her work at REDCAT in Los Angeles on May 6, 2019, and “Welcome to the Jungle,” an exhibition at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, which will be on view from May 9 through July 27, 2019. The show will feature four of her films—Me Broni Ba, 2009; Split Ends, I Feel Wonderful, 2012; Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us, 2019; and White Afro, 2019—combined into a cohesive installation for the first time. She will also screen her films at the SF Cinematheque on May 11, 2019 at 2 PM.

THIS SHOW marks a new territory for me because I've always made films for theatrical settings, and this will be my debut adapting these works for a gallery, which is exciting. The show is titled “Welcome to the Jungle,” not just as a reference to the Guns N' Roses song but also to Kobena Mercer's great collection of essays on black cultural production. He talks about the cultural practice of black hair styling in a text that informed my practice early on. I've always worked with a by-any-means-necessary vibe, wherein I don't really think about the end result or how the piece is going to end up. I just produce the work and then allow the film to be. The end result doesn't matter so long as I'm just enjoying the process of producing. That's been my path to making these series of films. I work from a personal space, and my art is really about my anxieties of being.

My parents are from Ghana. I'm a first-generation Ghanaian American. I wasn't planning on being a filmmaker. But filmmaking found me at a time when I was at a crossroads in my undergraduate degree in Virginia, struggling with the identity of being the only one in my family born in America and making work both in the US and in Ghana. That anxiety, that existential crisis, instead of being a burden, was what I used as a generative space to produce work. It was an anxiety of not feeling that I was in a place I could call home, of not being able to connect anywhere. I've always felt in Ghana that I'm too American and in America that I'm too Ghanaian. That in-between space—which a lot of people wrestle with, whether via queerness, feminism, or in other ways—is something I call a “third cinematic space” or “triple consciousness” as a way to flesh out these anxieties. It's a concept that expands on W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness into a cinematic space where I am able to be playful. I think of my films as childlike renderings of the political issues of our time, because I believe if you approach heavy and loaded issues from a childlike perspective, universal audiences can grasp or understand them.



Then I went to CalArts for my MFA, and shortly after I graduated in 2010, the writer and curator Dennis Lim invited me to take part in the Robert Flaherty Seminar. I didn't know what it was. I was so young. It's a top-secret summer camp for scholars, writers, and archivists at Colgate University. He put me on a platform with renowned international filmmakers such as Lisandro Alonso, Michael Glawogger, and Eugenio Polgovsky. I had just come from making these short little films and was developing a language by shooting between Ghana and the United States. Dennis really opened the door for me. From there, my filmmaking career just took off.

My most recent film, *Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us*, was shot last summer while I was an artist-in-residence at the Goethe-Institut in Salvador, Brazil. It was the first time I was alone in a space that was familiar but unfamiliar. I allowed myself to shoot every day and to wander. Being inspired by the mundane and seeing everything the way a child would permitted me to practice shooting. I developed confidence in myself to trust my abilities as an author because I was alone. *Pelourinho* is inspired by a letter that Du Bois wrote to the American embassy in Brazil in 1927. He was having difficulty traveling to Brazil because the Brazilian government thought that it was a plot from Washington, DC, to colonize their country. Pelourinho is also where Michael Jackson shot his music video "They Don't Really Care About Us" with Spike Lee. There's a store there called the Michael Jackson House where he shot the video. You can sense his presence there. I've never seen so many Michael Jackson impersonators in my entire life. It was just so interesting that he has had such an effect on the culture there, even still today, while Du Bois had trouble even getting there.

— *As told to [Grant Johnson](#)*

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