

It's in the blood: An artistic inquiry into the concept, materials, and works of Samuel Baah Kortey

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Abstract: Contemporary art transcends a lot of areas of interest and also highlights a lot of artistic narratives. There is an enthralling array of potential expanding conversations on how every aspect of art production and distribution is marked by diversity. It comes from everywhere and strives to conceive the world as a distinct yet inextricably linked totality and the variety of modern art is its defining feature. This qualitative biographic study that craftily utilizes Feldman's method of art criticism and Panofsky's iconography in art historical writing sought to explore the concept, materials, and works themed 'It's in the Blood' by the Ghanaian contemporary artist, Samuel Baah Kortey. The study investigated the philosophical ideologies, materiality, and artistic narratives that his works evoke. His creative works reveal the dichotomies within the scope of the contemporary Ghanaian art scene and their twists and turn on religion, spirituality, and popular culture. The uniqueness about Kortey is how he deliberately works on projects that are provocative, testing boundaries of art and its ethics. The study revealed that Kortey theorise blood as synonymous with life; giving life to and spiritually cleansing every cell in the human body. His art concept and practice reveal that although humans have been oriented to conceive blood in biological terms, blood has immense spiritual importance. His art practice interrogates sacredness in human thoughts, religious concerns, folklore, and explores issues about animal cruelty. Kortey's art practice is a revelation of the apparent commercialization or cheapening of religious iconographies in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Bloody art, Contemporary art, Ghana, Religious iconography, Samuel Baah Kortey

1. Introduction

Samuel Baah Kortey is a vibrant young contemporary artist from Ghana who is currently based in Frankfurt Germany. Kortey grew up in Kwaadaso a suburb of Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region. His interest in drawing was harnessed at the formative stage in primary school. He used to represent objects exactly the way he sees them just to pass away time. Kortey grew up in an era where signwriting, banners, and artists commissioned to paint movie posters were very common. According to him, all these ongoing activities pushed his mind and interest towards the field of art.

Kortey's drawing skills and painting technique development became much more outstanding during his apprenticeship with two roadside artists who were twins in Kwaadaso popularly known as "twins art". Coming from a home where it was difficult to get the coolest stuff as a kid, he most often did football jerseys with name printouts from stencils for kids for football matches and charged them a fee for it. This was usually the means Kortey used to raise funds to get any cool thing he wanted as a kid. From time to time he developed an interest

in screen printing which he explored to the fullest. He ended up in the Kumasi Anglican Senior High School where he studied visual arts. Kortey's curiosity in art continued to grow as he explored lots of materials ranging from acrylic paints, oil pastel sticks, screen printing, and canvas.

Kortey informed me that it was during his senior high school days that he understood the art of picture making with the help of his teachers at the time. He furthered his education at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology where he ended up offering fine arts in painting and sculpture from 2014 to 2017. During our conversation on July 20th, 2021, Kortey mentioned the fact that lecturers such as Dr. Bernard Akoi-Jackson and Professor Kari'kachä Seid'ou, really shaped his line of thought in terms of how to exactly approach his art practice. After taking his art history lessons and readings seriously, Kortey started to use art as a tool to question his curiosity about the society he finds himself in and to also respond to his Ghanaian community and how Kumasi as a whole presented to him what the effects of colonization have placed as Africans.



Figure 1: A portrait of Samuel Kortey Baah, September 24, 2020, Apeadu-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the researcher.

Kortey works with animal blood and in his early stages as an artist, he was interested in drawing and representing objects exactly the way he sees them. With his early subjects and themes, he focused on renaissance and classical art, trying to appropriate them by drawing his fantasies, collaging, and painting them. The quest of trying to understand where he is coming from has shaped his line of thought since he always revisits his already made works based on experiences reworks them as new things will emerge. Kortey currently considers himself as a third-generation African living with the residues of colonization. Kortey in an interview stated that he is "Samuel" because his first identity is coming from a Christian home and that both first and second names are all considered as borrowed cultures and that they have travelled through many spaces. As someone who was raised in a catholic home, his artworks examine a wide range of topics such as holy beliefs, religious subjects, folklore, and animal abuse issues. Kortey works with animal blood on plywood collected from the Kumasi abattoir popularly known as *Mayanka*. His works refer to the alleged commercialization or cheapening of religious iconographies in contemporary culture. He is fascinated by the symbiotic connection that occurs

between animal life and death. Kortey believes in reincarnation and regards his work as a process of transferring lives into other forms. His paintings are an amalgamation of imaginary characters made out of animals, humans, and things. His blood and resin casts challenge the prominence of Christian crucifix symbolism in Kumasi's urban landscape.

2. Methodology

This study examines Samuel Kortey Baah and his artworks from a biographical standpoint. Feldman's system of critique aids in developing a deeper understanding of the relevance of his beautifully created paintings made out of animal blood collected from the abattoir and how they depict the narratives on animal abuse, pop art, and religion. A series of personal conversations with the artist provided the primary data for the research. During the interviews, an online zoom recording method was also used to acquire the essential data from the artist. In addition, there was a video graphics tour through the workshop of the artist since he is currently based in Germany, to view his works. The three phases of the iconographical analysis proposed by Erwin Panofsky were adopted (Abdullah, Ibrahim, & Halid, 2020). Other perspectives, including those of professional Ghanaian curator Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, were gathered. In Kortey's art-making process, he employs the watercolour technique of painting by layering different tonal values of the animal blood. He also produces sculptural installations by using a mixture of resin casts and animal blood. A list of works from Baah will be looked at. The analysis will be specifically focused on the formal and cultural contexts, interpretations, and judgment. The five selected works are listed below.

1. Chris-sis (Figure 2a,2b)- Sacrifice
2. Sacred wounds (Figure 5 and 6)- Religion
3. Offending a God to Advance a God (Figure 7)
4. Revengers Finite War (Figure 10)
5. Sardine (Sudden) Break (Figure 11)

3. Results and Discussions

Chris-sis

A variety of Christian teachings and doctrines have been at the centre of a lot of Baah's work. One of his approaches is to question how religion generally tends to glorify death. This idea of the glorification of death is not only seen in the lives of Christian martyrs, but it ultimately culminates in the context of Christ's death and resurrection as how the world gets a universal redeemer or saviour. In religious, especially Catholic iconography, this death is emphasized by the depiction of the body of Christ as a person suffering on the cross. This crucifixion has both hands spread out and nailed and the feet also nailed with blood oozing all over, and a piercing from the ribs. This need for the use of images of the suffering Christ in the common practice of a lot of Christians who particularly adhere to the catholic conviction has enabled a lot of artists (who may or may not be adherents themselves), to push and capitalize on this rather compelling Biblical narrative. This attitude has led to the eventual perpetuation of Christianity's fixation on the use of iconography. The symbol of the crucifixion in the forms of paintings or sculptures has undoubtedly occupied artists for generations. In recent years, however, despite a notable move away from the dependence on religious iconography and devotional paintings,

especially in the wake of widespread Pentecostalism or Charismaticism, for instance, artists have continued to produce images of the crucified Christ - a recognizable and generally known symbol for martyrdom and human suffering. Whilst Baah could also be seen as one who investigates religious iconography in his work generally, his interests focus largely on those imported icons like different types of rosaries, plastic crucifixes, plastic sculptures or figurines of the Christ or the Virgin Mary, to name but a few. His interest is in those versions that have made an appearance in the Ghanaian cultural sphere some fifty years ago. For the work “Chris-is”, the main iconic references he selects as the target for this particular critique are the crucifix and the body of the crucified Christ. These may occur as a unit or the body and the cross may exist as two separate objects. Baah’s work constitutes cast bodies in resin, mainly hanging head down on a wooden structure that resembles a gazebo, referencing some sort of church architecture.



Figure 2a and 2b. “Chris-isis” by Samuel Baah Kortey, Blood and resin cast hanging on wood, size variable, 2021. Courtesy the artist’s collection.



Figure 3: “Crucifixion of St. Peter” (Joinian, 2014)



Figure 4: hanging of slaughtered meat (Chaves et al., 2017)

This resin, animal blood, and fibreglass sculptural installation offer socio-cultural commentary on Kumasi as a place that accords the crucifix in its many forms, whether as actual objects, paintings, or even stickers, hyper-visibility. One can argue that the crucifix can be seen everywhere in Kumasi, especially in bus terminals and “trotro” stations, taxi ranks, supermarkets, and stores, or even as storefront signage, etc. The crucifix also occurs in pop culture, in the form of dressing accessories (necklaces), emblazoned onto T-shirts. They may function as fashion statements or simply as a symbol or expression of peoples’ beliefs.

Baah’s artwork seeks to question the prevalence of these iconographies in our present society. (Baah, personal communication, 29/7/2021). The manner in which he approaches the work’s title is noteworthy. He names it “Chris-sis,” a sort of allusion to his concern that “Christ is in crisis”. Baah believes that part of the crisis lies in the fact that the figure of Christ that is mass-produced and commercialized puts the religious symbolism of the crucifix in jeopardy, especially to devout Catholics. He shares his thoughts about the continued use of the crucifix that, “if you love someone, you would not love to celebrate him or her in pain”. He further suggests that if the crucifix were just to serve as a remembrance of Christ’s saving of the world, then its value becomes lost when it is abused as iconography, simply because the emotion and reverence that needs to be felt may no longer be present when they are seen as a ubiquitous object or image.

Since Baah has professed his interest in life and death, and life after death, his reference to Christ as a sacrificial lamb is protracted. The imagery features quite repeatedly in a lot of his pieces. Spaces such as the abattoir, mortuaries, cold stores, churches serve as sites of inspiration and influence in this work. The “Chris-is” installation is made up of multiple cast sculptures of a crucified Christ with arms wide open. One large Christ figure hangs right-side-up in the centre, whilst other resins and blood casts hang upside down around the central figure. The wooden structure references parts of a church or cathedral.

According to the artist, the very ropes that the casts are hanged with in the installation are the same as the ones he has gathered from such sites as slaughterhouses. These nylon or jute fibre ropes are used in hanging slaughtered animals in the abattoir in Kumasi. The repeated hanging of the casts is influenced by how slaughtered animals are hanged in the abattoir to allow the blood to drain out of them. In the religious context, however, it also references the crucifixion of St. Peter the disciple of Jesus Christ. Baah’s critique shares resonance with such artists as Andres Serrano, whose “Piss Christ” (1987) was created using the image of Christ on the crucifixion subversively to critique the excesses of religion.

The Sacred Wounds

"But he was pierced for our trespasses, beaten for our iniquities. The penalty that gave us peace was on him, and we are healed because of his wounds." Isaiah 53:5.

This piece of Christian scripture from the book of Isaiah in the holy bible of the Christian faith served as the reference to the piece titled “The Sacred Wounds” (Figures 3 and 4). In this work, Baah once again, demonstrates how his catholic background continually influences the aesthetics and conceptual underpinnings of his work. What we prominently see in the painting is a reference to the mark that is said to have been left in Christ’s palms by the nails that were hammered into them onto the cross.

The Romans who are said by biblical accounts, to have crucified Christ were notorious not just for their overuse of capital punishment, but also for their ability to torture individuals. As these symbolic gestures are mostly remembered by a lot of orthodox churches, they are often used to reaffirm both Christ's suffering and

the reality that he rose victorious from the dead. Jesus was subjected to the full force of the legal system of the Romans. The reference Baah makes with this work is to what Catholics refer to as “the five holy wounds, also known as the five sacred wounds.” These were suffered by Jesus Christ during his crucifixion, according to Christian doctrine. The wounds have been the subject of certain acts of worship and artistic inquiry for decades. Most Christians believe that, as a result of the pains Christ suffered and symbolized by their depiction, we, as a sinful populace, are healed of all our infirmities. These five wounds which encumber the body of Jesus Christ according to most orthodox Christians, are illustrious marks of Christ’s love for humans..



Figure 5 and 6: Sacred wounds of Christ by Samuel K. Baah, Cattle blood on ply-wood.244cm x 366cm, 2019.
Courtesy collection of the artist.

Offending a God to Advance a God

According to Kortey, this particular work was influenced by constant unconscious cultural and religious appropriation from India through his artistic inquiry into religious iconographies. The Ghanaian space has constantly been influenced by Hindi movies and other series aired on our local TV networks. A conscious effort to provoke viewers and raise emotions from different perspectives. This art piece is influenced by a famous god from the Hindu religion known as “Hanuman”. Hanuman is a semi-divine being with a monkey-like form that represents the god of strength, courage, wisdom, devotion, and self-discipline (Debroy, 2012). Historically in the Hindu religion, there are varying beliefs about cattle in some regions. In most states of India, the slaughter of cattle is prohibited and their meat may be a taboo or haram (Gopalakrish-nan, 2018). So to think of using a cattle’s blood to paint a god of strength and discipline was kind of offending another god just to please another one (Samuel Baah Kortey, personal communication, 20/8/2021).

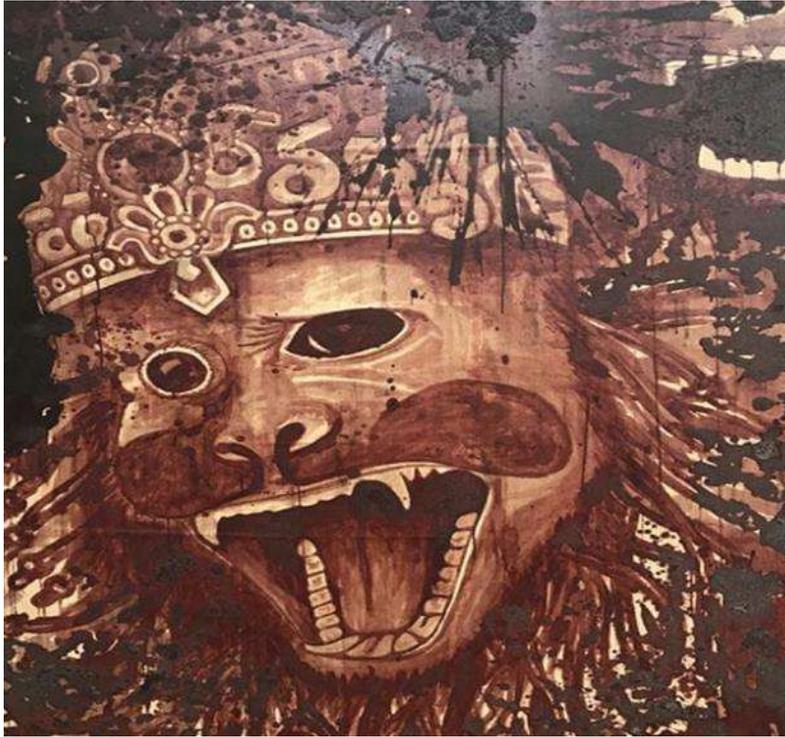


Figure 7: Samuel K. Baah: *Offending a God to Advance a God*, Cattle blood on plywood, size:122cm ×182cm, 2018. Courtesy the artist's collection.



Figure 8: Hanuman (Sanjay, 2021)



Figure 9: Sacred Cow (Noah, 2021)

Revenge (Finite War)

Posters serve as a significant supplementary source of public conversation on local and worldwide phenomena as well as how they are handled, complementing other media such as television, video films, and the daily newspaper (Shmidt, 2005). This work was influenced by the 2018 movie poster of 'Avengers infinity war'. With this particular artwork, Korteay was looking at very tough or dangerous animals in nature.



Figure 10: by Samuel Kortey Baah: *Revenge (Finite War)*, Cattle blood on plywood, 244cm × 488cm, 2018.
Courtesy the artist's collection.



Figure 11: *Avengers Infinity War* (Movie poster), (Mendelson, 2018).

He was trying to look at animals who can defend their kind like how superheroes do in movies. To look at how animals are constantly being slaughtered in the abattoirs, this artwork seeks to try and see how these animals can defend their kind. So to him, the slaughterhouse ends up being the world in crisis for animals and the dangerous or tough animals tend to represent superheroes ready to defend their kind. Some strong animal characters from movie culture like 'kai' from 'Kung-fu Panda' were also borrowed alongside animals with strong survival attributes selected to take the positions of the original movie poster with superheroes of 'Avengers

infinity war'. Some of the animals represented in the painting are a buffalo taking the position of Iron Man, 'Thanos' re-placed by a gorilla, a viper, etc. According to Kortey, these animals were carefully selected for the artistic composition based on their attributes such as their defence and attacking instincts coupled with their body mass which to him represents strength and superiority.

Sardine (Sudden) Break

This artwork was influenced by the famous movie series 'Prison Break'. The work was titled 'Sardine Break' because of the 'sudden' way these animals are packed into a container making it look like a prison. It was also influenced by this local statement usually made when we see a group of prisoners or items arranged in a tight space 'ya pack wɔn te se sardine' which translates in English as "they have been tightly arranged like a pack of sardine in a tin". In the painting, you can see a reference of sardines packed in a tin, a turkey, etc. All the deliberate mutilation that Kortey expressed in his painting signifies the suffering and uneasiness animals go through.

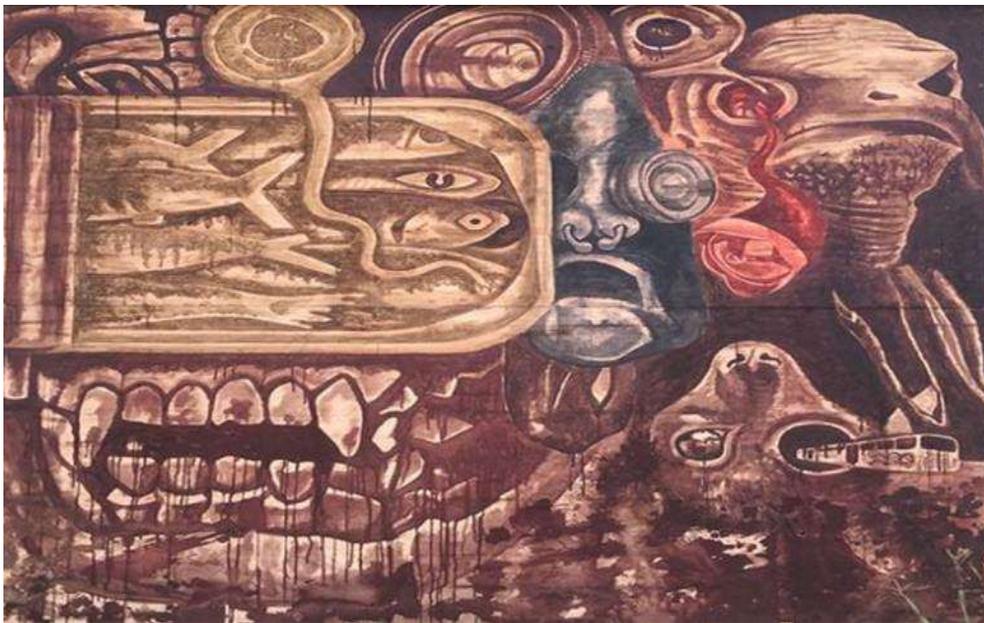


Figure 12: Samuel Baah Kortey: Sardine (Sudden) Break, Cattle blood on plywood, 488cm × 488cm, 2018.

Courtesy the artist's collection.

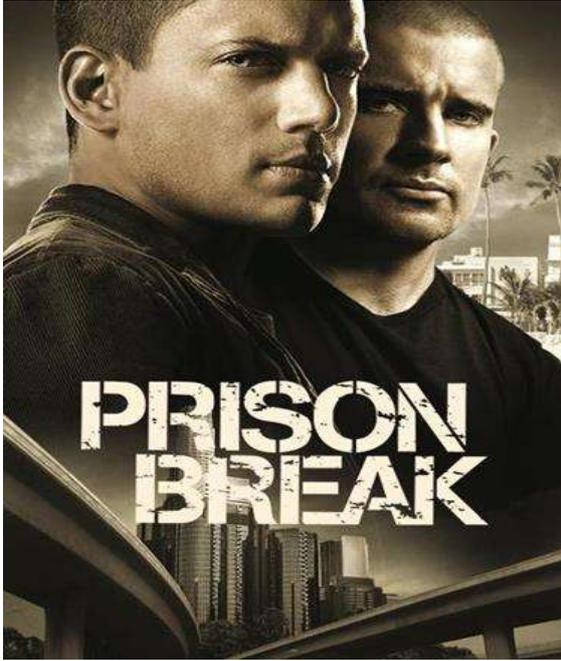


Figure 13: Prison Break, Movie Poster (Wallpaper Safari, 2018) Figure 14:Packed Sardine. (istock by getty images, 2021)

4. Of Kindred Spirits: How other artists influence Samuel Baah Kortey's practice

Samuel Samuel Baah Kortey explores widely diverse themes including sacred ideas, religious subjects, folklores, and issues concerning animal abuse and cruelty. Kortey believes in reincarnation and considers his practice as a process of transferring mostly the lost lives of animals into different forms. His works tend to be configured as an assemblage of fictional characters composed using animals and objects. Kortey's influences cut across a myriad of professional artists from Ghana and the rest of the globe. The mention can be made of Damien Steven Hirst who is a well-known English artist, art collector, and entrepreneur. Hirst's artworks are dominated by the idea of death. He rose to prominence for a series of works in which dead animals such as a cow, sheep, and shark are being preserved in formaldehyde, occasionally dissected Hirst (2018). Evidence of this concept in Hirst's works can be seen in Kortey's masterpieces such as *Chris-sis* and *Sacred wounds of Christ*. The installation titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* in 1991 by Damien Hirst is well regarded as an iconic installation in popular culture. This magnificent work consists of a tiger shark which is about 13-foot and submerged in a formaldehyde solution. In totality, this work weighs about 23 tons. The title, according to the artist, was a statement derived from his idea of what death is. The artist further makes statements like how we try and avoid death but it's inevitable (Mayer, 2015). The glorification of death and the various narratives that surround the sculpture is uniquely portrayed in it. This I must say is a conduit for an exceptional inspiration Samuel Baah Kortey taps lots of inspirations from.

Another iconic figure that influences the works of Baah Kortey is Anselm Kiefer. Anselm Kiefer is an accomplished German painter and sculptor. Kiefer's whole collection of work debunks the past and discusses taboo and contentious themes from recent times. Nazi-era narratives are prominent in his production; for example, his painting *Margarethe* (oil and straw on canvas) was influenced by Celan's popular poem titled

"*Todesfuge*" ("Death Fugue"). *Margarethe* (Figure 16) is a symbolic landscape painting having a rich materiality that reflects historical accretion: branches, concrete, books, ashes, Lead, and clothing which is frequently burnt or exposed to acid. All these materials are highly valued by Kiefer because of the "spiritual connection" with the materials, which he feels by using denotes a way of extracting the spirit already residing inside them (Karen, 2006). This same philosophy is used in works that allude to Paul Celan's post-Holocaust poetry, the Black Forest, Nazi architecture, and a variety of other subjects. One of Kiefer's notable painted works is *The Hierarchy of Angels* (2007), this artwork greatly inspires Kortey to bring out the established feeling of connectedness with the materials he deals with, harnessing the energy that already resides inside them. Kiefer places a high priority on the harmony that exists between order and chaos in his work, claiming that if there is too much order, the work dies and if there is too much disorder, it fails to cohere (Karen, 2006). Furthermore, he is highly concerned with the environment in which his works are shown. He claims that if his creations are placed in the incorrect places, they "lose their potency totally".

Kortey's art pieces such as *Offending a God to Advance a God and Avengers Infinity War* aptly represent the philosophy espoused in Kiefer's works. Furthermore, Bright Tetteh Ackwerh is a Ghanaian comic artist who uses street art, painting, popular art, and illustration to speak and chronicle his opinions. He has regularly shown his works in Ghana and West Africa, carving out a position for himself as a rising modern Ghanaian artist in the West African art community. Both Kortey's and Ackwerh's artistic styles are situated within a satirical representation of Ghanaian's socio-political and religious issues that provoke conversations, spark debate and elicit a response. Kortey's *Sardine Break* exemplifies the way of using humour to show the congestion usually experienced from the poor conditions of Ghanaian prisons. The expressive scenes depicted in his painting (*Sardine Break*) signify the suffering and uneasiness animals and human beings go through in the course of their lives. *Where de Cho dey* (2018) (Figure 17) is one of Ackwerh's fascinating pieces which plays on controversial narratives in a satirical manner. The title which is a pidgin language is coined out of the English language to mean "where is the food". His works as we all know constantly are focused on investigating pop culture as a medium which he also explores as public posters. Thus it is based on such thought-provoking explorations that Kortey taps into for inspiration.



Figure 15: "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", 1991. 2170 x 5420 x 1800 mm | 85.5 x 213.4 x 70.9 in Glass, painted steel, silicone, monofil-ament, shark, and formaldehyde solution, By Damien Hirst.

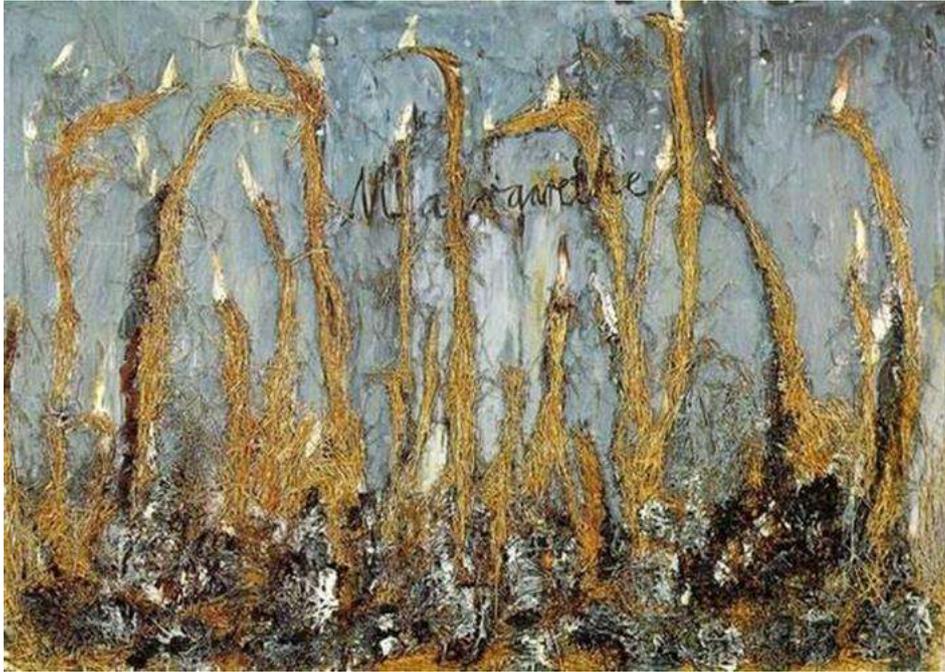


Figure 16: By Anselm Kiefer: "Margarethe", 1981 Oil, acrylic, emulsion, and straw on canvas 110 1/5 × 157 1/2 inch. 280cm × 400 cm.



Figure 17: Bright Ackwerh "where de Cho dey" (Simbao, 2017).

5. Conclusion

According to Kortey's biographical research, his primary creative inquiry is to visually examine the commercialization of religious elements, folklore, popular culture, religious iconographies, animal brutality, and

other personal experiences. His thematic inspirations shape his artistic approach and the nature of the artwork he intends to create. In his painting compositions and sculptural installations, Kortey emphasizes realism and semi-realism. In his artworks, Kortey generally attempts to skillfully examine pop culture and contemporary trends using abstraction, semi-abstraction, and realistic painting techniques. The works of Kortey usually speak about appropriations of his fantasies by juxtaposing images and painting them. But in the quest of trying to understand himself, he often revisits his artworks to understand them more through the recycling of ideas from the past in order for new works to emerge. The significant effect of his works, as well as their worldwide recognition through multiple exhibitions and private and public collections, makes him a noteworthy artist in the Ghanaian contemporary art landscape. The paintings and installations of Kortey clearly show the great impact of the Ghanaian art space and the major roles of how religious symbolisms and animal brutality as a form of social commentary influence Ghanaian culture.

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