

PRESS RELEASE

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JOHN AKOMFRAH: FUTURE HISTORY OPENS AT THE SEATTLE ART MUSEUM MARCH 5, 2020

SAM's first special exhibition dedicated to video art features three works by celebrated British artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah



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SEATTLE, WA - The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) presents *John Akomfrah: Future History* (March 5–May 3, 2020), the museum's first special exhibition exclusively dedicated to the medium of video art. Transforming SAM's galleries into immersive theaters, *Future History* brings together three video works by John Akomfrah, the pioneering contemporary British filmmaker. The three works present a provocative vision of the past, present, and future, exploring issues such as climate change, slavery, colonialism, migration, and technology. Akomfrah's uniquely personal and poetic visual language seeks to open a dialogue, rather than impose one truth.

Future History was curated by Pam McClusky, Curator of African and Oceanic Art at SAM. "This presentation challenges the notion of what an exhibition can be," says McClusky. "Instead of seeing many artworks, you're sitting down to experience three that have incredible depth. The title of the exhibition speaks to the artist's aim: to present crucial moments of history from different perspectives so that not-yet-imagined futures can emerge."

The artist will travel to Seattle for the opening. "In this exhibition, you'll explore three moments from the last 500 years of history," says Akomfrah. "My work offers an experience that pushes against this era of small screens and isolation. Amnesia is the sea we all swim in; *Future History* invites you to gather in a collective act of witnessing."

The exhibition opens with *Vertigo Sea* (2015; 48:30), a three-channel work presented in a massive space that envelops the viewer. Combining archival footage, footage from the BBC's Natural History Unit, and scenes staged by the artist, it lyrically explores the sea's sublimity in our current moment of climate crisis. Lush imagery plays alongside footage of human brutality, including the whaling industry, polar bear hunts, and migrant crossings. Visitors will see various historical and literary references, including Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Heathcote Williams' epic poem *Whale Nation* (1988). *Vertigo Sea* debuted at the 2015 Venice Biennale.





In the next gallery, visitors encounter an earlier work, *The Last Angel of History* (1995; 45:07), filmed at the dawn of the internet. A hybrid of narrative and documentary forms, the video follows the quest of a “data thief,” seeking keys to the future through the Afrofuturist ideas of Black artists and explorers such as George Clinton, DJ Spooky, Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Dr. Bernard A. Harris Jr., and Nichelle Nichols. Splicing interviews and archival footage, this influential visual essay anticipates the digital age.

Also in this gallery is a zone for reflection and conversation, “The Last Angel Lounge.” Rather than the typical brochure or gallery guide, visitors can curate their own collection from 30 illustrated sheets that explore the various audio, literary, and cultural references and visual prompts found in Akomfrah’s videos. This invitation to become a “data thief” reflects the artist’s ethos of taking what you want from the images and ideas presented.



In the final gallery is *Tropikos* (2016; 36:41), which uses elaborate staged scenes to convey displacement and encounters between the British and the people of Africa in the 16th century before the slave trade began. It was filmed in the Tamar Valley and Plymouth, England—the location of the first British slaving excursion to Africa. In voiceover, passages from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and contemporaneous first-person accounts of seafaring echo over the dramatic tableaux.

Finally, adjacent to the galleries will be a viewing area for *A Herring Opera* (2017; 26:55), a family-friendly vision of aquatic life in Alaska. The video is by Ellie Schmidt, a visual artist and commercial fisherwoman living in Sitka.

RELATED PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

SAM will present programs in conjunction with the exhibition. Highlights include a free community opening celebration on March 5, a conversation between John Akomfrah & DJ Spooky (also held March 5), a free curator lecture on April 3, and Kitchen Sessions, an evening of conversation presented in partnership with the Central District Forum for Arts & Ideas on April 24.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

For each major exhibition, SAM convenes a group of advisors from the community to participate in planning. The *Future History* advisory committee is Saheed Adejumobi, Philip Attipoe, Erika Dalya Massaquoi, Jourdan Imani Keith, Simba Mafundikwa, Zola Mumford, Brandon Vaughan, and Wei Ying Wong.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Akomfrah (born 1957) lives and works in London. An internationally renowned artist and filmmaker, his works are characterized by their investigations into memory, post-colonialism, temporality, and aesthetics. He was a founding member of the influential Black Audio Film Collective, which he started in London in 1982 alongside the artists David Lawson and Lina Gopaul, who he still collaborates with today under the collective film and television production company Smoking Dogs Films.

Notable recent solo exhibitions are Vienna Succession, Vienna, Austria (2020); ICA Boston, MA (2019); The Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia (2019); Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, Norway (2019); The National Museum, Warsaw, Poland (2019); Imperial War Museum, London, UK (2018); New Museum, New York, NY (2018); Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (2018); Nasher Museum at Duke University, Durham, DC (2018); SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA (2018); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain (2018); Barbican, London, UK (2017); Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, UK (2017); The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia (2017).

His participation in recent international group shows has included: *Our World is Burning*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2020); Ghana Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Italy (2019); Prospect 4, New Orleans, LA (2017); *Restless Earth*, La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2017); *Unfinished Conversations*, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY (2017); *The Place is Here*, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK (2017); *The 1980s: Today's Beginnings?*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2016); *British Art Show 8* (2015-17); *All the World's Futures*, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2015).

His work has screened at international film festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, Utah (2013 and 2011) and Toronto International Film Festival (2012).

TICKETING INFO

Entrance to *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstract Variations* (March 5–June 28, 2020), on view in the museum's third floor galleries, is included with *Future History*.

Museum Hours

- Closed Monday and Tuesday
- Wednesday 10 am–5 pm
- Thursdays 10 am–9 pm
- Friday–Sunday 10 am–5 pm

Daily Prices

- \$29.99 Adult
- \$27.99 Senior (65+), Military (with ID)
- \$19.99 Student (with ID), Teen (15–18)
- FREE for children (14 and under)
- FREE for SAM Members

First Thursday Reduced Ticket Prices

- \$9.99 Adult
- \$7.99 Senior (65+), Military (with ID)
- \$4.99 Student (with ID), Teen (15–18)
- FREE for children (14 and under)
- FREE for SAM Members

Special exhibition ticket prices are reduced by more than 65% on the first Thursday of the month. Tickets to SAM Collections and Installations are free.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

The exhibition is organized by the Seattle Art Museum. Support for this exhibition was made possible by contributors to the SAM Fund.

Image credits: Video still from *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, John Akomfrah, three channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Video still from *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, John Akomfrah, three channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Video still from *The Last Angel of History*, 1995, Black Audio Film Collective, John Akomfrah, single channel color video, sound, 45 minutes 7 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery. Video still from *Tropikos*, 2016, John Akomfrah, single channel color video, 5.1 sound, 36 minutes, 41 seconds, © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and rededicated as the Asian Art Museum in 1994, and it reopened on February 8, 2020 following an extensive renovation and expansion. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2017.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM's collection of approximately 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures, and time periods.