

CIRCLE TRIANGLE SQUARE

Opoku Mensah is a research artist, creator and speculative designer. He has a contemplative practice and spends much time thinking and investigating, before creating conceptual performances, audio recordings, and texts. He presents his output to the viewer as an experiential learning process.

Mensah graduated from École National Supérieure Beaux-Arts in 2017. He has since participated in the Post Graduate Residency at the Van Eyck Academie and been a guest lecturer in the department of sculpture at the University of Chiang Mai. He has taken part in numerous group exhibitions, notably the 1st Lagos Biennial for Contemporary Art Living on the Edge, Afriques Capitales at La Grande Halle de la Villette, and the Biennale of Dakar, International Exposition for Contemporary African Art. He had his first solo show Incantations Encounters at Chiang Mai University Art Gallery in 2018. He is represented by Circle Triangle Square art platform.

Early Works

Mensah's early works questioned his being. In his solitary, absent body, locked into space-time, he sought to understand the facets of singularity through collective entity, human identity and relations. Performing an inquiry into his own representation, relative to his past and his current environment, he identified himself through elements of the world which made an impact upon him - such as the taste, the smell and the texture of food.

His path towards inner happiness was in his creative endeavours, which ascertain warmth and hospitality. His craft was ceremonial, hovering over movements, gestures, and incantations. Using memories to unfold stories, he touched on psychotic reality, dreamlike portraiture and moments of discontentment in his work, which gave a sense of beauty to his most obscure thoughts. He fed on the positive meaning which arose from the idealised importance of struggle and suffering. Through these recollections, he was able to manage his human relations better and conjure alternate life experiences.

Mensah used his practice as a tool to transform the hurdles of his life into a form of artistic expression in which he could imagine possible ways out of his reality.

These early work bring attention to the past and the actions and feelings of ancestors who came before us. He studies the position of those who exist in the present, and how their contemporary experience is affected by those actions and feelings of the past, especially those who have been marginalised and discriminated against. Photographs which at first glance appear to echo the paintings of hundreds of years ago, on further inspection contain details and recurring themes which give away their recent production. The human figure is ever present within these photographs, and is also present in sculptural works such as Head, made from bee's wax and cast with the remains of human facial hair, and the life-sized figure Nkaa Man, made from orange peel. There is an interest in food and its ability to unify the human experience, but food is also used to demonstrate ideas which go far beyond the act of eating. This is apparent in many works, notably in the Fooding performance/ video which is exemplary of the work produced in this period. There is table laid with consumables, in the centre is bushmeat lathered in butter; people stand around, eating and drinking, and wipe bread against the body of the bushmeat so that they can feed on it. Looking up at the camera, with an orange in the mouth, a recorded voice speaks and the video cuts to a blank screen:

“Too long have we kept quiet in our position, a position of society, a construction of our society demolished, of our self-entity we long, [...] they are clustered and motionless, they are kept, motionless, upon the friction of our nation without pause, breathless, forced, caught, lost, bought, tracked, stranded, fight, lashed, bashed, streaming, dealing, breathing, beating, squealing, streaming, freezing, fleeing, leaking. The black man airs on the street, on ... on the street of his imperial nation, like no other man has aired before.”

This powerful work brings the viewer into Mensah's experience of the contemporary world at this moment in time, his feelings as an other, degraded and humiliated.



Nkaa Man, 2015, Orange Peel and Glue, Life Sized Model



Birthday Party, 2015, Photograph, 59cm x 84cm

Progression

Sometime after these works were produced, Mensah began to push his artwork in a new direction, focusing his attention on the medium of installation, a medium which would allow him to explore the more intimate elements of his past.

Resting Place, produced while a resident at the Van Eyck Academie and displayed at his final show at the École National Supérieure Beaux-Arts consists of a rectangular shaped room, made from a skeleton of rectangular aluminium tubes mounted on joints, with façades of recycled cracker wrapping paper hanging, carefully sown and joined to create a patchwork which waver beside the motion of passengers. Subdued lighting brings ornamentation to the closed exterior space in which the installation sits. Rays blast from an intense spotlight to illuminate the interior and redefine its strong presence. Visitors are able to navigate the outside and the inside and they are invited to enter the space through an open rectangular vent, which operates as an outlined door. Inside resides the demarcation of the floor with soil. Three elements of furniture reside in the space which brings curiosity. A night table covered with chewing gum, chewed by passengers Mensah encountered on his struggles seal and protect the object and the intimate treasures of his past. A curtain embraces the rectangular window's opening, carefully woven from synthetic afro-hair whilst he waited many years to meet his mother again. A substance left over from turpentine, distilled from resin; covers a stool plastered over with colophony. The stool emits spoken words told from the perspective of his mother. The tale of the Golden Stool is recounted: the battle story of Queen mother, Nana-Yaa Asantewaa.

This is a habitat in which the space breaths, and engages comfort and intimacy. A special place for meditation and a place for memory.



Resting Place, 2017, Mixed Media Installation, 270cm x 456cm x 264cm

Recent Works

Mensah's most recent works have focused on performance. *Armageddon* starts in a dark room. The sound of Mensah's pre-recorded voice is heard.

“Inside the space and time continuum, through composition and fiction, aspired by darkness and dark matter, in the pit of the hole, Poku produces explorations. With introduction and interaction of man and woman, to share experiences in the construction, he collects memories.”

As the lights gradually turn on, his voice continues and an audience gathers. The space contains many of the sculptural elements from previous works, notably from *Resting Place*, and a selection of foods spread out on a picnic blanket. Mensah enters the space in a red morph-suit and turns on two bright spotlights, which he then stands between. He begins to move purposefully, as if dancing, positioning himself in vigorous stances. At different points, his voice stops and he stops moving, to shine a torch at different places around the room while another voice is heard, shrill and difficult to distinguish.

He tells a story of the outside world, nature and his interaction with it, his body and his soul, his physical desires and his thoughts. As Mensah exits the room, the viewer is left with the feeling that they have just witnessed something ambitious, expansive, emotional, personal, and undefinable.

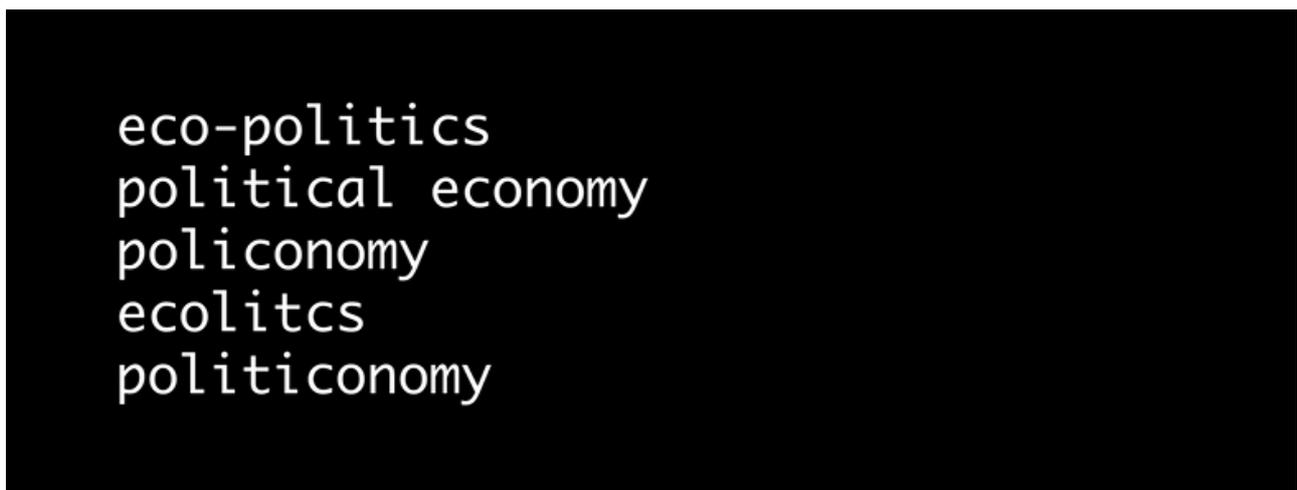


Armageddon, 2018, Performance, 10 Minutes and 40 Seconds

Incantations starts with Mensah's voice reading from the book of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* by Yuval Noah Harari, while a text is displayed on the screen, relevant to the spoken words. Mensah continues to speak, stating the date and time of the recording "Friday 3th of August, 6.39PM, 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand." The voice-over stops, and the interior of a building appears on the screen. The *Nights Table* sits within this space and is viewed from several different angles, both in the space, within a bedroom and outside. Pieces of chewing gum are placed upon it by a gloved hand. Again, the screen turns black, and a text is read from *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* and text is displayed upon the screen, which describes the similarities between the Sumerian Gods of the past, and the corporations of today. Whilst this plays, a conversation between Mensah and an unknown individual plays out, arguing about the benefits and disadvantages, similarities and differences between chain stores and local stores, one owned by international corporations and the other owned by an individual. The video continues along this theme, quoting segments of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, alongside text which outlines elements of economic theory. This is spliced with video footage of *The Nights Table*, and the unidentifiable figure with the gloved hand placing chewing gum upon it.

Halfway through the video, 12 minutes in, a bell rings, before Mensah repeats the words "We are taught that corporations have a soul", and then "The corporation is a spirit." A recorded audio clip of a conversation between Mensah and a few unknown people (perhaps from the University of Chiang Mai) in what seems like a party setting plays out. They discuss their perceptions of ghosts and why they exist, referencing people's souls, imagination, collective energy and the physical act of painting as an analogy to explain their reasoning. This leads to a discussion about society and the effect that neo-liberalism has had on society and on the individual, and how a change in beliefs has increased the power of international corporations. As a viewer listening to this, one is unsure about how the recording was produced. Was it planned and acted? It certainly makes sense within the context of the video, but this is also a conversation which has undoubtedly happened many times over around the world and will continue to be discussed in the future.

It is clear from this work that Mensah has moved beyond making singular, individual objects, and is focused on exploring ideas which affect society on a macro level: belief systems, economics, the individuals' position, the power of the corporation and the power of the union. At the same time, there is a very personal element; there is repeating footage of *The Nights Table*, an artwork of great importance to Mensah as an individual. Is it his gloved hand who places chewing gum upon it? Mensah is positioning himself and his artwork within the macro-structures which affect each and every one of us, whilst acknowledging his own humanity, within this vast and sometimes difficult world.



Incantations 2018, Screenshot from Video, 25 Minutes and 01 Seconds



Incantations 2018, Screenshot from Video, 25 Minutes and 01 Seconds



The Nights Table, 2017, Chewing Gum on Wooden Furniture, 50cm x 30cm x 25cm

Future Plans

Over the last 7 years, since starting at École National Supérieure Beaux-Arts, Mensah has explored many of the traditional mediums of artistic output and is starting to incorporate his knowledge and understanding of the artistic field into the much wider realm of reality. This is a considered approach that will integrate previous ideas with a more social practice. He seeks to question his being in relation to his history and his representation in relation to his environment, whilst incorporating the needs and aspirations of others through his artistic practice: art which can produce social change, community interaction, cultural awareness and shared experience.

One project Mensah is working on aims to explore the use of head wears, through an investigation into how the balance of the body plays a role in sustaining a harmonious relationship with any items carried on the head. *Sac-à-tête* (head-bag in French) considers the implications of the development and expansion of populations across the globe through the changing nature of how goods and products are transported. Also incorporated are religious ideas surrounding the beliefs associated with the wearing of a yarmulke (the wearer of a yarmulke is in duty to the vast gulf of power, wisdom, and authority that separates God from mankind) and notions prevalent in Buddhism; where heads are not hierarchically organized but rather, regarded as one of the most important parts of the body - representing the vast wealth of knowledge one possesses. *Sac-à-tête* aims to raise awareness of the issues of sustainability, specifically enhancing the RRR strategies (Reuse, Recycle, Reduce) with a focus on the recovery and valorization of plastic within local communities. With such a material, Mensah aims to conceive sculptural head apparatuses, create performances which will be recorded, and in turn, provide people with the tools and methods to reinterpret and engage with the new realities of their environment by ascribing the elements of the East Asian Lan Na style architecture, the local Shanghai skyline and deities' crowns to the *Sac-à-tête*. Balancing an object over the head in order to transport goods asks the question of the process required to maintain change in a balanced fashion. When speaking of sustainability, Mensah believes that it involves designing systems in a flexible and reversible manner and adjusting our individual lifestyles to conserve natural resources. In the case of *Sac-à-tête*, it involves bridging the gap between the natural phenomenon of goods transportation and the ergonomics of a bag which is carried on the head. *Sac-à-tête* offers an opportunity to discover the properties of materials and stimulate the creation of networks and opportunities among artists, businesses, territories, and citizens.

Mensah also has a long-term goal of helping to develop the creative scene on the mountain of Santo Antão in Cape Verde. Connections will be created between Cape Verde and the international community in a project which will alleviate art and culture and nurture the becoming of a hub of people, goods, and information, which will be distinctive to its location, but in conjunction with the rest of Africa's contemporary art scene. International artists will collaborate with residents and engage with the natural landscape. Together, they will contribute to the enrichment of the environment with the creation of site-specific structures, art forms, and social sculptures.

Mensah is currently studying on the research program at the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts at Pudong University and is in the process of applying to residencies at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel residency, the DAC Artists in Residency, the SAM Art Project, as well as other projects in Vienna, Cape Verde, and mainland China.



Sac-à-tête, 2019, Digital Image From Proposed Project