

# THE ART of ALMIGHTY GOD

## in HIS OWN WORDS

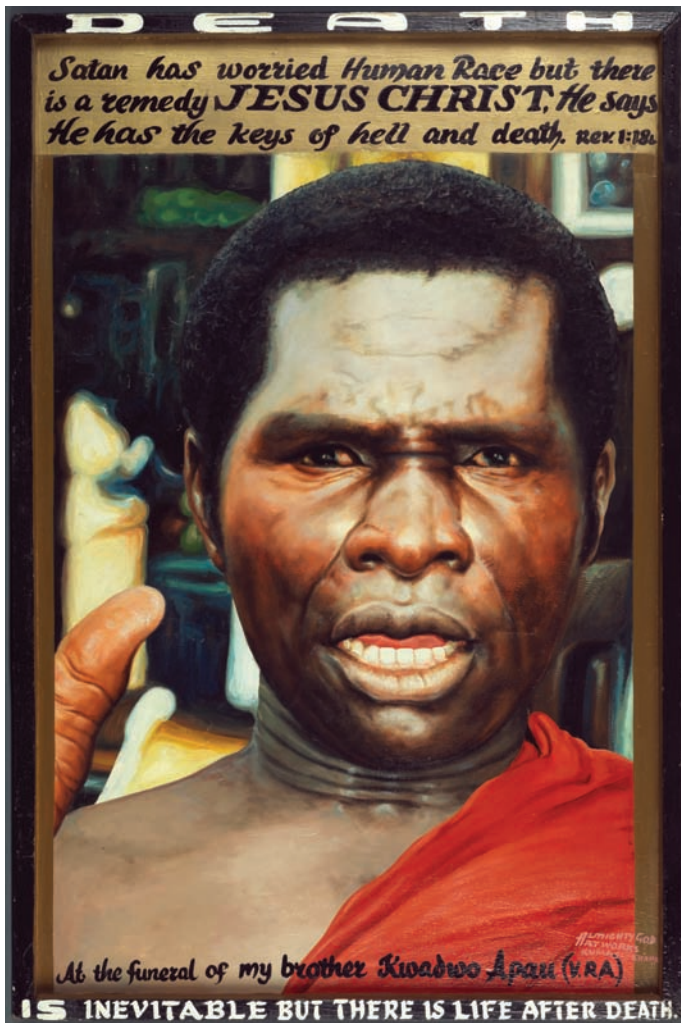
Doran H. Ross

**K**wame Akoto (Fig. 1) is the prolific master painter, educator, chorister, evangelist, and proprietor of Almighty God Art Works in the Asante capital of Kumasi in central Ghana. He was born of Asante parents Opanin Kwadwo Appau and Madam Yaa Bema (Sarah Pippin) on November 25, 1950. He completed elementary and middle school in the city, showing an early interest in drawing even before he started his formal education. Akoto has lived in this large metropolitan city for virtually his whole life, although he has traveled to Europe on several occasions. On many levels he is one of the most celebrated contemporary artists in West Africa. He appeared in the pages of *African Arts* as early as 1980, unidentified along with three of his works, in 1978 photographs by Christine Kristen (1980:38–41) and since 1995 has been included in at least thirty exhibitions of contemporary African art outside of Ghana, including Italy, Poland, Netherlands, France, Denmark, Portugal, and the United States.<sup>1</sup> He has been the focus of two substantial catalogues (Mascelloni and Ryan 2003, Marignoli et al. 2007) and has a significant presence in several others (Barlow et al. 2002, Falgayrettes-Leveau 2003) in addition to a very thoughtful place in Rhoda Woets's exceptional dissertation (2011).<sup>2</sup>

Akoto signs his own and indeed all the studio's paintings with the block printed signature "Almighty God Art Works." He is generally addressed as "Almighty" by his friends and acquaintances. He runs an open air studio/workshop/training center (he personally calls it his "shop") just off the Suame roundabout, a major junction in northern Kumasi near the center for car and truck parts and repairs.<sup>3</sup> With an initial focus on commercial art, over the years the local patronage of his studio has commissioned, among other staples:

- Freestanding barber and hair salon signs
- Signage on kiosks and other small businesses
- Slogans and names on taxis, lorries, delivery vans, and trucks
- Cloth banners for evangelical events
- Silk-screened memorial T-shirts for funerals
- Portraits on tin for grave monuments
- Small white signs with a red "L" indicating a driver in training (Learning)

These "commercial arts" are called "sign writing" by Almighty and by many other Ghanaians as well. Kirsten's 1978 photograph of Akoto was reproduced in the "Urban Arts" chapter of Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, where he was identified simply as "A painter from Almighty God Art Works ..." (1991:126–27). In this chapter Vogel interrogates the categories for defining the works produced by artists like Kwame Akoto. After dismissing "popular," and its connotations of "folk" and "naive" (one could add "street" and its corollary "wayside"), she argues for "urban" as a more inclusive and less derogatory appellation. While he wasn't one of the magicians in *magiciens de la terre* (Martin 1989), he did make the cut in the *Return of the Magicians* (Mascelloni and Sarenco, 1999:90–93). Other mistaken monikers for artists like Almighty include "untrained" and its partner "self-taught," both grotesquely in error for an artist who spent six rigorous years (1966–1972) studying as an apprentice for the master painters at Addai and Kobia Arts in the Mbrom area of Kumasi before founding his own studio in 1972. In addition to these labels, Almighty has also been referred to as an "outsider" artist, and presumably not because he has an open air studio. As for Akoto, he largely divides his work between "sign writing" and "creativity art," with a third unnamed category somewhere in between that includes the enormous range of



1 Self portrait of Kwame Akoto (2004)  
 Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 81 cm  
 Fowler Museum at UCLA, X2013.48.2  
 Photo: Don Cole

paintings copied from photographs in magazines, newspapers, books, and photographs given to him for individual commissions. Still, Almighty is rather fluid with his own categories and more often than not, “creativity art” includes virtually all work not intended as advertising. In more recent years, however, he has occasionally referred to some of his larger and more exceptional works as “fine art.” In addition, he has produced paintings that he has actually labeled “unfinished art,” “ancient art,” “naive art,” and “spoilt art.” As for me, I am going out on a limb and calling all his work “contemporary African art.”

Almighty’s “creativity art,” produced primarily for an international clientele, covers an astonishing array of subjects, ranging from Christian themes, celebrity portraits, and homages to Ghana to visual/textual essays on world problems, death and mourning, and visions of demons, the devil, and hell. Running across these categories and many more is an enormous series of self-portraits that are reflections on himself and the human condition at large.

## HOLY ENTERPRISES BUSINESS NAMES

GOD’S TIME IS BEST MOTORS  
 JESUS POWER INTL SCHOOL  
 OH MY GOD KEY SERVICES  
 GOD’S TIME WATCH REPAIRS  
 HOLYLAND PHOTO STUDIO  
 GOD’S GIFT RASTA HAIR DO  
 STILL SUFFICIENT GRACE ELECTRICALS  
 GOD IS ABLE COLD STORES  
 WISDOM FROM ABOVE SHOE CENTRE  
 THE LORD IS MY LIGHT LOTTO  
 GOD’S FAVOUR WIG AND COSMETICS  
 GOD IS ONE BATTERY CENTER  
 GOD OF WONDERS FURNITURE WORKS  
 GOD’S GLORY FOOD POINT  
 GOD BLESS ELECTRICALS  
 THE LORD COMMUNICATION CTR.  
 PRAISE THE LORD STORE  
 JESUS NEVER FAILS BUSINESS AND GRAPHICS  
 GOD’S WILL FASHION  
 GOD FIRST MACHINERY AND ELECTRICAL  
 THE HAND OF THE LORD BUSINESS CENTER  
 KING OF KINGS BARBERING  
 GOD’S GIFT HERBAL CENTER  
 CLAP FOR JESUS BOUTIQUE  
 GOD IS KING RADIATOR WORKS  
 JESUS CARES CAR AIR CONDITIONING  
 BY HIS GRACE COCA COLA  
 LET HEAVEN ANSWER TAXI  
 JESUS KEPT MY SOUL TIPPER  
 VICTORY IN JESUS FASHION  
 AROMA OF JESUS ENTERPRISES  
 BORN AGAIN TAXI  
 GOD’S LOVE AUTOMOTIVE  
 AMAZING GRACE CHOP BAR  
 HOLY DOVE BLOCK FACTORY  
 CHRIST THE KING HAIRSTYLE  
 JESUS FINGER FURNITURE  
 WELCOME TO ISRAEL GROOVY THEATRE  
 GOD IS KING BRAKES  
 JESUS NEVER FAILS MOTORS

## HOLY SIGN PAINTERS

KING JESUS DESIGNS  
 GOSPEL ART STUDIO  
 ST. AUGUSTINE ART & SIGN  
 DIVINE LOVE ART CENTER  
 JESUS NEVER FAILS GRAPHICS  
 SHALOM ART  
 GENESIS ART WORKS  
 ST ANTHONY ART AND SIGN  
 MIRACLE ART  
 RIGHTEOUS ART  
 HEAVEN ART CENTRE

## ALMIGHTY GOD'S VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1 (depicts Akoto and his two teachers). "When I was an apprentice under my masters Mr. Kobia and Addai at Mbrom, Kumasi, I saw a girl who used to pass at our workshop. Any time I told her I love her she didn't mind me. A fellow apprentice told me that if his brother comes to the workshop to visit him I should tell him about the girl. When the brother came, a man called Kofi Eshun, he said to me that there was no problem and that I should follow him." And elsewhere, "Don't "Dream to Come Across a cobra."

2 (with image of Akoto, egg, paper, and St. Anthony). "We bought one egg and two official papers, at night we went to Konaou Yiadom [at] School Park. Kofi Eshun spoke some words on the egg which became a boiled egg. I ate it, then he folded the official paper, spoke some words on it and red letters appeared on the paper, After reading the words I became a slave to St. Anthony and he named me Anthony." Kwame Akoto holds paper that reads "St. Anthony spirit world SSSSSSSS the great messenger of God SSSSSSSS Sinful World SSSSSSSS I am the great St. Anthony I am who I am. I am the great St. Anthony what is written it can never be changed any more, Anyone who will obey me will prosper in this world, I have helped many people some are dead and some are alive. If you disobey me I will kill you, I will guard you they cannot kill you, I will guard you from any danger. As for the girl you want no problem she will follow you like a dog."

3 (image of Akoto between two girls). "St. Anthony gave me Mammy Wata, as my spiritual wife but made me a womaniser when he gives me order to flirt with any girl who allows me. Sometimes he gives me order to flirt with prostitutes."

4 (interior image with Eshun sitting and Akoto standing). "The girl I loved followed me like a dog. When I opened my workshop at Suame, Kofi Eshun brought me a letter from Saint Anthony. The letter said that it was my turn to fight Satan with my money and to give it all to Kofi Eshun—I did it for 22 years."

5. (with image of Faustina and Kwame) "One day when I was going home I met a girl at Ash. Town, by name Faustina Appiah. I tried to seduce her but she rejected me and told me to give my life to Jesus-Christ. Six months later she came to my workshop in search of me and took me to church."

6 (image of Akoto reeling on the ground while pastor prays to him in tongues). "On Friday 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1991 I went to prayer – during the prayers I suddenly felt myself roll on the ground. I was sweating and became very dirty. Later I vomitted the leaves that Saint Anthony give me to chew 22 years ago! I was freed by Jesus-Christ."

7 (with image of the just-wedded couple). "Two years after deliverance from the powers of darkness, Kwame Akoto married Faustina Appiah." "KWAME AKOTO WEDS FAUSTINA APPIAH"



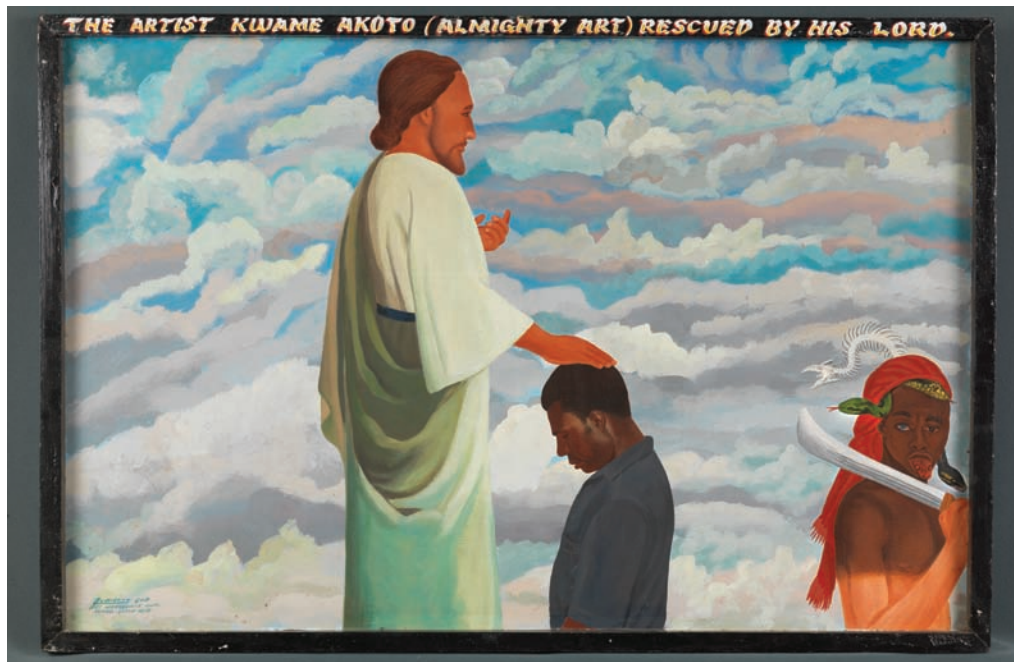
2 "DELIVERED FROM BEING A WOMANIZER" (1992)  
Pigment on plywood, 56.5 cm x 49.4 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA, X95.45.32  
Photo: Don Cole

Regardless of subject matter, Almighty rarely leaves the sign-writing part of his profession behind, and painted text(s), often extensive texts, may be found on most of his paintings. These often take a moralizing Christian trajectory, with written biblical quotations or references commonplace. A significant number capture the evangelical agenda of the House of Faith Ministries, a church not far from his studio that he vigorously attends.

There has been considerable misunderstanding over Kwame Akoto's naming his studio "Almighty God Art Works" and of his occasional use of "Almighty" as a personal name. Some true outsiders have considered this as an act of pretension and arrogance and others even as sacrilegious. But the inclusion of Christian religious references in business names in southern Ghana is at the very least common place. While being driven by my friend Samuel Adams around the southern half of Ghana since 1995, I have recorded well over one thousand such names. A representative selection in no particular order from these lists is included in the Holy Enterprises sidebar on p. 9 (not restricted to the Ashanti Region), followed by a shorter list specific to sign painters.

Given the attraction of various Christian phrases, there is a lot of redundancy in business names. This becomes a point of contention when the businesses are in relatively close proximity. In a painting discussed in the Self Portrait section below, Almighty recounts in the top and bottom frames the genesis of his own shop's name founded in 1972 (Fig. 18):





3 Self portrait with Jesus (2004)  
 Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 81 cm  
 Fowler Museum at UCLA, X2011.30.8  
 Photo: Don Cole



4 "Oh! Eve Why?" (2002)  
 Pigment on canvas, 70 cm x 96 cm  
 Collection of Betsy D. Quick  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross

Many years ago my name was Anthony Akoto but now I have eliminated the Anthony, before I wrote Anthony art works in front of my w/shop. An artist by name King Anthony art works was the first artist at Suame Matias Jun. The artist walked to my Shop and told me to change Anthony Art works, because he was the first artist to be at that area. So I wrote Almighty God Art. Later he also changed his Shop name to Mighty Jehovah Art wks.<sup>4</sup>

Due to Almighty's popularity and success, and much to his annoyance, a workshop in Techiman, a city north of Kumasi, changed its name to Almighty God Arts Centre in 2002.

#### FAUSTINA AND A NEW FAITH

Kwame Akoto has said many times to many people, and has documented in many paintings, that the two most important events and joint turning points in his life are his conversion to Christianity on December 13, 1991, and his marriage to Faustina in 1993. A necessary prerequisite to that marriage was his being born again as an Evangelical Christian. This story, which he calls "My Story," was articulated in a series of seven 4' x 8' paintings on plywood created in 1994 at the behest of Thierry Secretan, who encouraged Almighty to add more "originality" and "personal vision" to his art. In my first visit to the studio in 1995, I



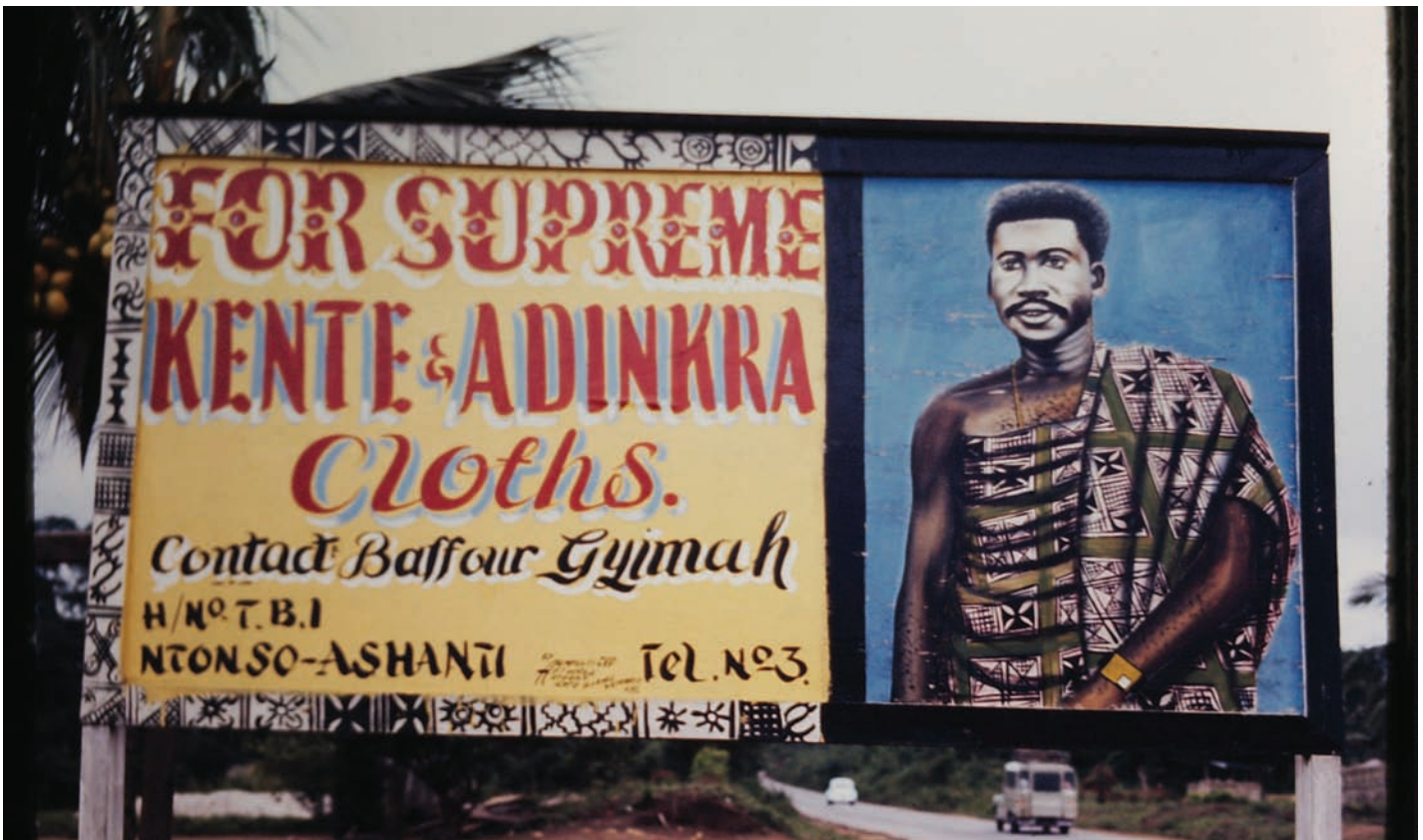


(clockwise from top left)  
**5** Almighty painting the presidents of Ghana overseen by his painting of the Hindu deity Hanuman  
 Photo: Christine Kristen, 1978

**6** Group of portraits at Almighty's studio  
 Photo: Christine Kristen, 1978

**7** Beauty salon sign near Wenchi market  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross, 1976

**8** Kente billboard in Ntonso  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross, 1976







9 "OH! GOD BLESS OUR KINGS" (2000)  
 Pigment on plywood, 118.5 cm x 68.5 cm  
 Fowler Museum at UCLA X2003.23.1  
 Photo: Don Cole

10 "Michael Jackson" (2013)  
 Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 60 cm  
 Ernie Wolfe Gallery  
 Photo: Alan Shaffer

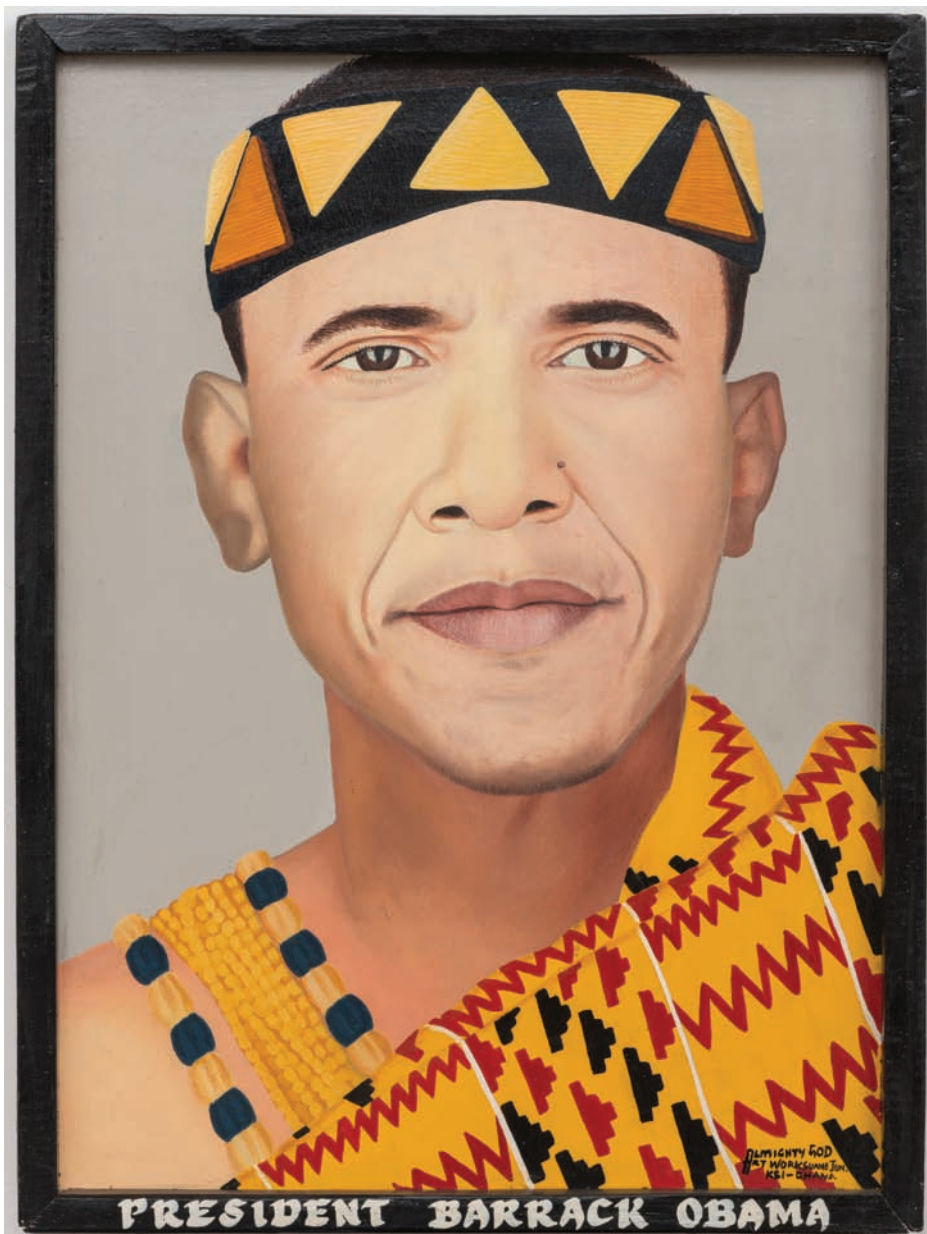
was not permitted to photograph the paintings, but I did record the extensive text on them (Almighty God's Visual Autobiography sidebar on p. 10). He repeated this autobiography in another, smaller set of seven paintings in 2000 with very much the same images and texts. These were collectively shown at three venues in the Netherlands that year and the next.

According to Almighty, in 1993 after his marriage to Faustina, Thierry Secretan, the photographer and author of *Going into Darkness: Fantastic Coffins from Africa* (1995, French edition 1994), was the instigator for this series and simultaneously the catalyst for encouraging him to branch out beyond the more conventional sign writing that had been the staple of his work-



shop. In particular he encouraged more narrative paintings about larger social issues and autobiographical self-portraits such as the above suite of paintings.

One of the earliest if not the earliest painting by Almighty documenting his transformation is a 1992 self-portrait with a woman's head emerging from his own forehead (Fig. 2). At the bottom of the painting is "DELIVERED FROM BEING WOMANIZER" and the phrases encircling the head include, clockwise from the lower left: "JESUS LOVES U TOO MUCH" / "REPENT!" / "ONCE A WOMANIZER" / "SEARCH FOR GOD." / "SAKRA WADWENE" / "SEARCH FOR HEAVEN!" / "I'M BORN AGAIN". "Sakra Wadwene." Two later self portraits expand on his encoun-



11 "PRESIDENT BARRACK OBAMA" (2009)

Pigment on plywood, 81 cm x 59.5 cm

Ernie Wolfe Gallery

Photo: Alan Shaffer

ters with Christianity. One depicts Akoto being blessed by Jesus with the Devil behind him (Fig. 3) with the text, "THE ARTIST KWAME AKOTO (ALMIGHTY ART) RESCUED BY HIS LORD." The second shows Almighty with Eve eating an apple with the artist asking "Oh! Eve Why? Exclaimed!! Kwame Akoto of the Almighty God Art works" (Fig. 4).

Kwame Akoto's conversion to a charismatic Christian church is, of course, only a small part of a much larger story about the expansion of evangelical/Pentecostal initiatives among the Christians of southern Ghana. This has been the source of extensive scholarship over the years, ranging from the scholarly to the proselytizing. While a detailed examination of these influences is beyond the scope of this paper, to say that Almighty goes to church "religiously" is to understate the case. He goes to choir practice once a week and never misses a Sunday service, at which he takes notes of each biblical passage cited during the program and revisits them when he returns to his studio and home. These subsequently stimulate and inform new works of art.

Perhaps 70 percent of Almighty's paintings have some form of text. In many ways his paintings speak for themselves as if in a conversation with the viewer or maybe more accurately a monologue to the viewer. Often text-heavy, they quote scripture, address world problems, comment on his own life, and identify individuals portrayed in the works. In the UCLA publication *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole and Ross 1977:9–12) Herbert M. Cole coined the phrase "the verbal-visual nexus" in relation to the almost ever-present relationship of the spoken word to the visual arts. Proverbs, folktales, and oral histories (among many other categories of conventionalized verbal accounts) are the subject matter of most Asante/Akan arts. For better or worse, as literacy was inserted into Akan culture, the oral was often converted into the written word. And the written word is at least as important in Almighty's art as the painted images: "You need to read to understand my art." The role of written texts in global contemporary arts has been a subject of interest for many years now. For Africa, various manifestations of surrounding issues were the





12 Kwame Akoto brushing his teeth (2000)  
Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 61 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2011.30.5  
Photo: Don Cole



13 "Kwame Akoto of Almighty God Art Work is Now Father Christmas" (2005)  
Pigment on Plywood, 105.5 cm x 81 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2013.48.3  
Photo: Doran H. Ross

focus of the exhibition and publication *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Kreamer et al. 2007).<sup>6</sup>

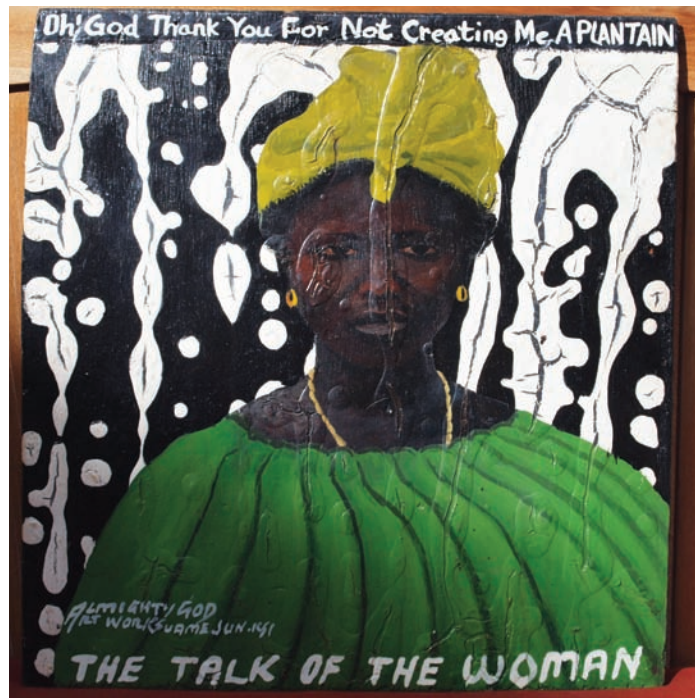
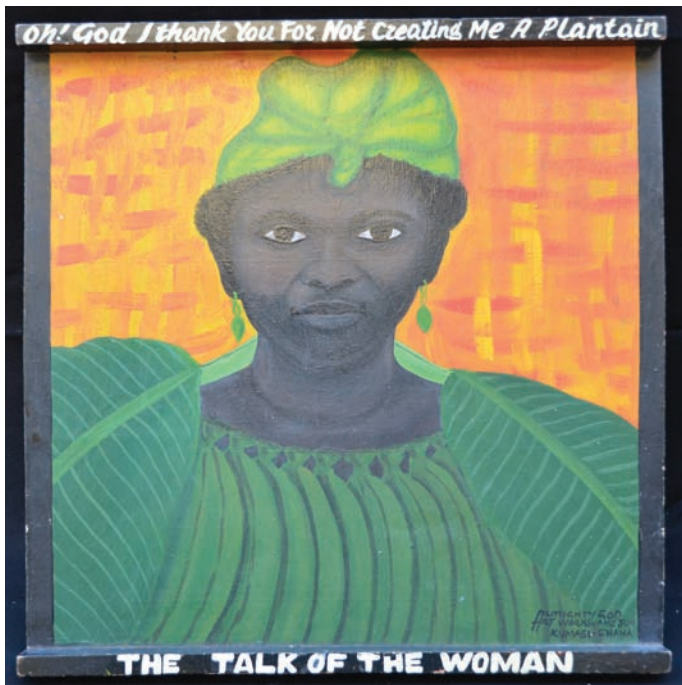
#### PORTRAITS, SELF PORTRAITS, AND SELF REFLECTIONS

Two of the key components in the formal education of “apprentices” at Kumasi studios are training in a wide variety of lettering styles and developing the nuances of color selection, shading, and the selection of key details that go into the art of portraiture. In Kirsten’s 1978 photographs, Akoto had clearly achieved a firm grasp of portraiture in his representations of the early leaders of Ghana and such international figures as John F. Kennedy, Bob Marley, Mobutu Sese Seko, and Jesus Christ, the latter well before Akoto’s being reborn (Figs. 5–6). Commenting on his works in the

studio in 1978 (when he was twenty-eight) and of her nine slides of those works, Kristen wrote, “I find him to be highly skilled at portraiture with a bold and clean style” (1980:38). The importance of portrait skills in commercial signs is clear from two early substantial signs for a hair salon and a kente store, both photographed in 1976, four years after he founded his own studio (Figs. 7–8). To sell the skills of hairdressers and barbers, convincing portraits with carefully articulated coiffures are especially important. To sell the skills of artists, convincing portraits are also necessary to advertise their abilities.

Portraits of local and international celebrities remain to this day a staple in both Almighty’s work and in the training of his students/apprentices. Otumfuo Asantehene Osei Tutu II and





his immediate predecessors have been painted perhaps twenty times (Fig. 9) and Pope John Paul II and Queen Elizabeth II exist in multiple iterations. And in 2013 he was still painting Michael Jackson framed top and bottom with “If I Were To Come To The World Again, I Would Have Become a Pastor” (Fig. 10). The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 and his visit to coastal Ghana with his family in July 10–11, 2009, led to an extended series of paintings, including several with Obama wearing kente cloth and a chiefly bandolier and crown (Fig. 11; see also Cosentino 2009:6 with an Obama quotation on the bottom frame: “We don’t want to be feared in the world, we want to be respected”).

As suggested in the self portrait “DELIVERED FROM BEING WOMANIZER” discussed above (Fig. 2), self portraiture plays a significant role in defining Almighty’s status as a Christian and in his declarations of being born again. In addition, these paintings serve as an ongoing exercise in Akoto’s thinking about his own place on the planet and what he can do to improve himself and those around him. This is a favorite painting subject of Almighty, whether the ostensible subject of the painting is garbage, food, Christmas, death and mourning, or teeth brushing, hair cutting, shampooing, or shaving. It would be easy to attribute these to a vaguely defined ego-driven impulse, and some of that may come into play here, but I see this as more of the direct opposite—rather humble statements using himself as an example for addressing key issues confronting the human condition, both considerable and inconsequential. Although I may be unaware of this genre, I know of very few artists (actually none) who have chosen to do a self portrait of themselves brushing their teeth (Fig. 12). In his own words Akoto says, “These are all my problems too.”

Almighty’s self portraits range from the whimsical to the profoundly serious. On the lighter side is “KWAME AKOTO OF

14 “THE TALK OF THE WOMAN” (2012)

Pigment on plywood, 61 cm x 60.5 cm

Collection of the author

Photo: Doran H. Ross

15 “THE TALK OF THE WOMAN” (2011)

Pigment on plywood, 42 cm x 40 cm

Collection of Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts

Photo: Polly Nooter Roberts

ALMIGHTY GOD ART WORKS IS NOW FATHER CHRISTMAS” (Fig. 13). Of course, Father Christmas is presumably a Christian and an easy persona for Akoto to embrace. Perhaps at the opposite end of the spectrum is the very carefully realized self portrait of Akoto in mourning dress “At the funeral of my brother Kwadwo Apau” (Fig. 1). On the top and bottom of the frame for this painting is “DEATH / IS INEVITABLE BUT THERE IS LIFE AFTER DEATH,” and on the painting proper, “Satan has worried Human Race but there is a remedy JESUS CHRIST, He says He has the keys of hell and death. Rev. 1:18.”

As part of the painting process, Akoto frequently includes textual commentaries on the process itself. Many self-portraits mention that he painted them while looking into a mirror. That explains why in those where he is wearing a wrapped cloth, the textile covers the right shoulder and exposes the left rather than the absolutely required opposite (see Marignoli 2007:63, 77). This in fact is the subject of a text on at least one self portrait, where he writes,

I looked through the mirror and drew myself. Many People ask why did I wear the cloth on my right shoulder, because according to Ashanti or Akan Customs Cloths are worn on the left shoulders. But I tell them it is true. But I looked through the mirror to draw it and this is exactly what I saw.





**16** "Oh! ALMIGHTY GOD ART WORKS" (2011)  
Pigment on plywood, 61 cm x 39.5 cm  
Collection of the author  
Photo: Doran H. Ross

**17** "I want to be at a gallery abroad" (2011)  
Pigment on plywood, 60.5 cm x 63.5 cm  
Collection of the author  
Photo: Doran H. Ross

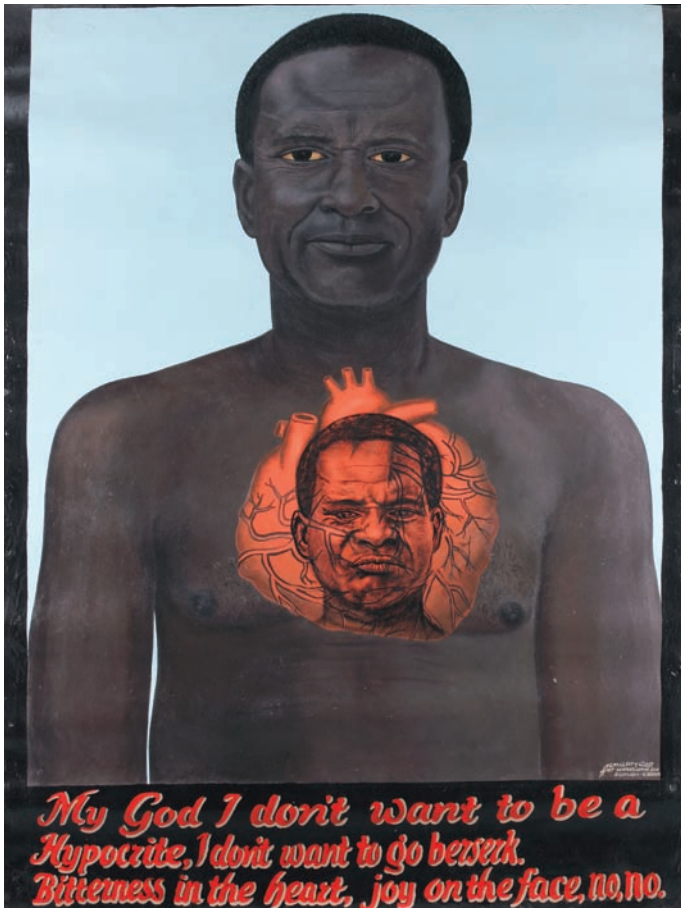
Another commentary on process is found on a portrait that ostensibly includes two of his daughters "BEATRICE AMPOOMAH and MARY AKYAA," as stated at the top of the painting, although the image is actually a profile of a single individual. The text at the bottom of the painting explains, "Beatrice my little daughter Posed for me to draw her but she could not be steady. So my second daughter was called to pose to make it whole."

The notion of paintings explaining themselves, or rather the artist explaining his own paintings, is an ongoing reality in Almighty's work. And the question of when a work is really finished is a recurring interest of Akoto's. A painting of the Asante Golden Stool seen in his studio in 2012 is inscribed, "Although the painting says finish me, it is finished." After asking Akoto when a painting is actually finished, he responded quite simply, "when it is sold." An earlier work of a bearded, bald, and crying white man is inscribed with: "Almighty God Art Works Oh! Oh!! Kwame Akoto Why have You Stoped Painting Me. Since You Stoped Painting Me, you have Completed Two hundred Paintings. I Think Is Sin. Please Complete painting me. WHY" The idea that the subject of a painting can converse with the artist in the abstract, i.e. out of body, speaks volumes about the dialogue between an artist and his/her "canvas."

One series of paintings that includes both self-portraits and images of others typically features a text that begins with, "I thank God for not being born a [whatever]." Perhaps Almighty's favorite maxim here is "I thank God I was not born a plantain" (Figs. 14–15), but there are numerous variations including, "Thank God I was not born a termite hill."<sup>7</sup> One work in this vein has the top half of a frontal face (hair, forehead, and eyes) as a self-portrait of Akoto and the bottom half (nose, mouth, and chin) of a tiger. The text reads, "The Artist Kwame Akoto (Almighty God Art Works). I Thank God for being born a human being not a tiger." A vertically split face of Akoto on the left and an elephant's head on the right has a similar inscription. In the same vein, but reversing the thrust and decidedly not a self portrait, is an image of a crying chimpanzee lamenting, "Oh!, I wish if you have created me a human being. Children tease me and say Look at its nose, eyes, mouth & ears, it's like a human being. But the face is too ugly. and the ears too are oversize."

Also in the category of the self-portrait is another series of paintings that feature his own image, in part or whole, while he reflects on the process of creativity, the nature of paint, the act of painting, and the selling of his art. At least two of these are considerations of the paint palette itself. One is an actual palette





**18** "My God I don't want to be a Hypocrite" (2011)  
 Pigment on canvas, 147.5 cm x 106.5 cm  
 Newark Museum 2012.47.8  
 Photo: Andrea Hagy

**19** Back of Figure 18

**20** "PORTRAIT OF KWAME AKOTO" (2010)  
 Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 81 cm  
 Collection of the author  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross

with a massive build-up of paint on both sides (Fig. 16) to the extent that the weight of the object (eighteen pounds) becomes part of the subject of the painting. "Oh! ALMIGHTY GOD ART WORKS KWAME AKOTO What have I done to you Please don't add more Paint unto me. I now weigh 18-lbs." Then around his self-portrait on the bottom right are the words: "WILL I DIE? Wood have spoken to me." The other palette painting is a more conceptual rendering of this vital, often contemplative tool, where Akoto's face is surrounded by carefully considered smears of mixed colors (Fig. 17). In this case the text on the top and bottom of the painting are the voice of the palette/painting itself: "I want to be at a gallery abroad, I dislike been a Palette, Oh! Kwame Akoto. But I believe one day an art lover will take me to gallery I will appear in books." In an attempt to ease this painting's angst, if not Almighty's, I have acquired this work as a promised gift to the Fowler Museum at UCLA.





21 "CALL GOD TO HELP YOU" (2002)  
 Pigment on plywood, 37.5 cm x 50 cm  
 Collection of the author  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross

22 "World Problems" (2002)  
 Pigment on plywood, 61 cm x 122 cm  
 Collection of the author  
 Photo: Doran H. Ross





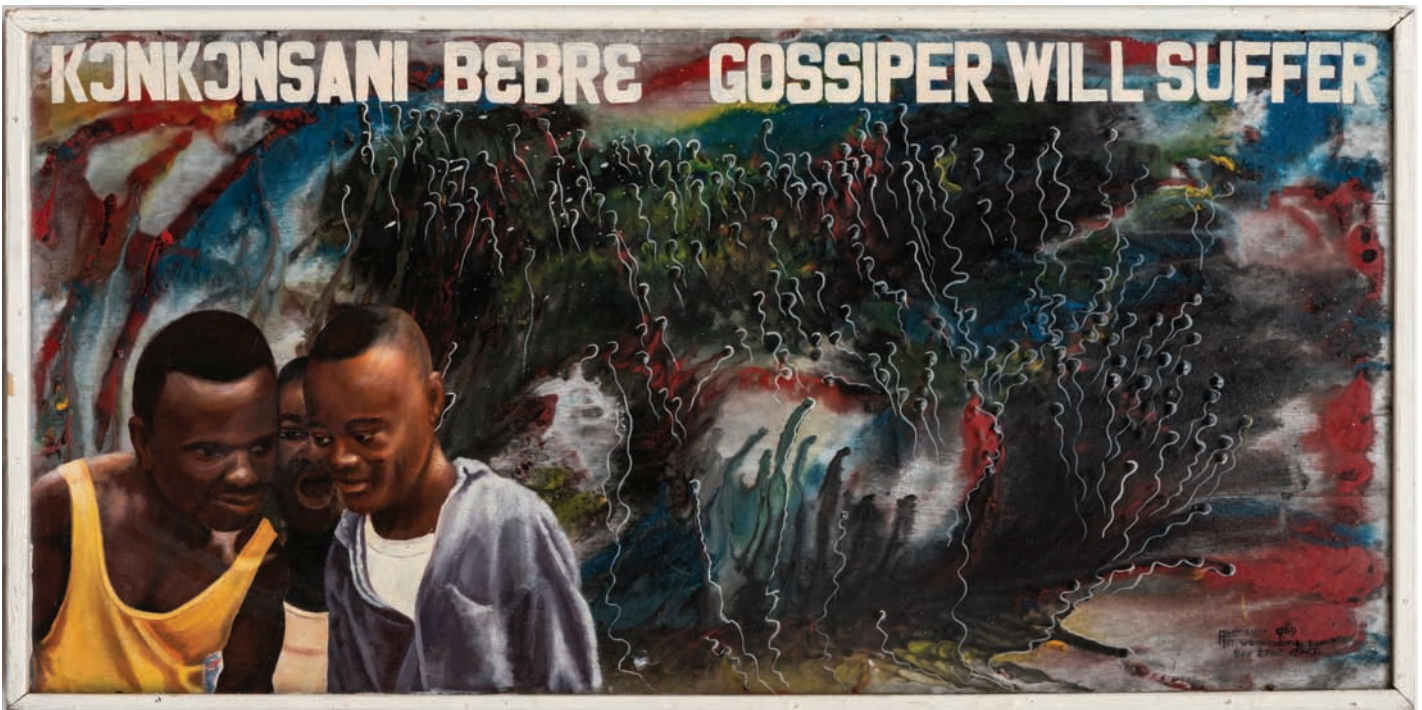


**23** "MY GOSSIP HAVE REACHED THE CLOUDS"  
(before 2005)  
Pigment on plywood, 111.5 cm x 80 cm  
Ernie Wolfe Gallery  
Photo: Alan Shaffer

**24** "GOSSIPER WILL SUFFER" (before 2006)  
Pigment on plywood, 59.5 cm x 119.5 cm  
Ernie Wolfe Gallery  
Photo: Alan Shaffer

A third example of his contemplation of the properties and potential of paint is a two-sided canvas now in the Newark Museum (Figs. 18–19).<sup>8</sup> On what is ostensibly the front is a double portrait of Almighty. The actual head of the individual features Akoto smiling, while a second head positioned as his heart finds the artist frowning. The text on this side is another self-reflection: "My God I don't want to be a Hypocrite, I don't want to go berserk. Bitterness in the heart, joy on the face, no, no." When talking about this painting he added, "Everyone struggles between face and heart." The back of this canvas began as another painting with a "background of acrylic, designed to be thick." He went on to say, "When I saw it was nice I put colors. It was God who helped to get me this design." Again, the not-so-simple manipulation of paint is the satisfaction.

The physicality of paint and its build-up is something of a preoccupation with Almighty. A self-portrait from 2010 features fairly substantial, multilayered (as much as 1/8 inch) paint chips carefully positioned and adhered to the surface and then painted over (Fig. 20). At first glance this creates a rather unnerving image, with many casual viewers interpreting the face





25 "GARBAGE Will it Bury Us" (before 2006)

Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 59.5 cm

Ernie Wolfe Gallery

Photo: Alan Shaffer

26 "A FISHERMAN AT WORK IN LAKE CHAD" (2011)

CHAD" (2011)

Pigment on plywood, 61 cm x 108 cm

Newark Museum 2012.47.12

Photo: Andrea Hagy

as having a serious skin condition (never mind that the black background also has the paint chips). Akoto confirms that the paint chips represent a kind of "affliction" and relates it to biblical notions that to become a good Christian often involves some "pain and suffering." But he went on to say that this did not have to do with issues of health, but rather the struggle to produce original art. The text on the left and right sides of the frame acknowledges the source of his talent: Left: "PORTRAIT OF KWAME AKOTO ALMIGHTY GOD ART WORKS SUAME JUN. KSI." Right: "CREATOR OF HEAVEN & EARTH, THANK YOU FOR THE SPIRIT OF CREATIVITY." The extensive text on the top and bottom frames relate the story of the founding and naming of Kwame Akoto's shop quoted above.

Paint chips persist in another, relatively small series of paintings that Almighty calls "Sarah Pippin art" after his mother, who he also credits as a very nurturing influence in his creative life. Admittedly "experimental," one of these works features over forty substantial paint chips, each with an abbreviated face painted on it and "speaking" short pithy maxims (Fig. 21). With a header of "CALL GOD TO HELP YOU," many of the chips speak about God: "GOD IS ABLE"; "GOD IS MERCIFUL"; "GOD IS NOT MAN"; "WAIT FOR GOD"; and "GOD'S TIME IS BEST." Others voice admonitions such as: "DON'T SPOIL ME"; "HAVE MERCY"; "DON'T ENVY"; and "DON'T STAIN ME." When talking about this assemblage Akoto said, "This is what parents should say to their children."







27 "BLACK & WHITE ARE ONE" (2004)  
At Almighty God Art Works  
Photo: Doran H. Ross, 2006



28 "Marriage Is Hotter Than Pepper" (2005)  
Pigment on plywood, 65 cm x 62 cm  
Collection of the author  
Photo: Doran H. Ross

## WORLD PROBLEMS

"World Problems" is the title of at least three overarching paintings by Almighty (Fig. 22), with many others focusing on individual issues. In the present example, the man clothed in red has begun to itemize the problems on a scroll, "WAR, RAPE RUBBERY PROSTITUTION SMOKING GAMBLING ABORTION SUICIDE MURDER ADULTERY DRUNKENNESS PROUDNESS HIPOCRISY FORNICATION OH GOD HELP US." In addition to those itemized on the scroll Akoto scatters other "sins" across the painting including: "MURDERERS," "THIEVES," "THE PROFANE," "UNCLEANNES" .... These paintings serve both as a prolegomena and a framing device for looking at an enormous array of social, economic, medical, and political issues that plague the planet in general and Ghana in particular. Cigarette smoking may be at the top of Almighty's list in terms of number of paintings produced by the studio, but sex-related problems including infidelity, prostitution, and AIDS are probably a close second.<sup>9</sup>

On the milder side of the world problems issue, one recurring theme in multiple variations addresses gossip (Figs. 23–24). The first example here reads "MY GOSSIP HAVE REACHED THE CLOUDS AND IT BITES LIKE SERPENT." Serpents are recurring symbols of evil in Almighty's work and the serpent tongue needs little explanation. The second has the simple inscription "GOSSIPER WILL SUFFER." While gossip may seem to be one of the lesser problems of the planet, Almighty considers the spoken and written word (both potentially in the realm of gossip) to be of utmost

importance when considering human behavior. He frequently begins his sentences with "It is said," or "It is written." Much of this, of course, is on the biblical side of things, but as much is also rooted in the verbal and now written culture of the Asante (see above).

Perhaps more egregious are issues related to garbage, unlawful imprisonment, and a variety of environmental issues. In another self-portrait (Fig. 25) Akoto's head is surrounded by garbage with the query "GARBAGE Will it Bury Us?" Upon closer examination, almost all the garbage is electronic, including a cell phone, computer, calculator, and television. Commenting on this work, Almighty voiced concerns over the distractions of modern technology, but on a more fundamental note he commented, "Digital printing is ruining business." Akoto's series of jail and prison scenes includes one of a crying man behind bars (Cover) with "GOD KNOWS 'AM JAILED FALSELY. NOT I ALONE BUT MANY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD." And his "A FISHERMAN AT WORK IN LAKE CHAD" (Fig. 26) includes a long quotation about the "disappearing" lake as cited in the unidentified newspaper from which he copied the image and text to the extent of citing the author, "Valerie Noury."

Issues related to equality of the races constitute a wide variety of portraits titled "BLACK & WHITE ARE ONE." These frequently feature images of young people and often girls, since Akoto has three daughters (Fig. 27). In addition to depicting two individuals of different colors, Almighty uses the same title for a single person who is painted half black and half white (cf. Mascelloni and Ryan 2003:50, 51).





Another set of concerns are issues related to healthy marriages. Interestingly, he almost always sides with the woman's perspective. Included here are side-by-side portraits of a black-and-white painting of a frowning woman and a color painting of a smiling woman (Fig. 28). The text distinguishes the two: "Marriage Is Hotter Than Pepper" and "You Lie, Marriage Is Sweeter Than Banana, Even Than Honey." A remarkable painting in Rhoda Woets's collection depicts a woman with a toilet roll obscuring one side of her face. The inscription reads, "My dear husband am I not enough for you? Why do you treat me as a toilet roll?" On the other side of the coin is a painting of a woman beating a man with the text, "Mr. Nti Married a Second Wife Who Was a thief, who usually steals his money and

beats him always." (Marignoli 2007:104–105). Here, of course, he is also commenting on his disdain for men who have multiple wives, and perhaps those husbands deserve the abuse.

On the more extreme side of world problems, in addition to many apparently unique works about AIDS, the subject has led to two closely related series of paintings. The first is typically a 2' x 4' panel with an emaciated male and female couple. The writing varies considerably on these, but at least three say "STOP AIDS LOVE LIFE" with "STOP" in a triangle, "AIDS" crossed out, and "LOVE" in a heart. One of these three was printed as a promotional postcard to both signal the cause and promote the studio. In the second series, at least five paintings with six cells each depict the progression of the disease, with variations from a woman



29 "PITY A HUMAN DEATH IS PAINFUL," before 2006  
At Almighty God Art Works  
Photo: Doran H. Ross 2006

30 Five Women Mourners (2004)  
Pigment on plywood, 81.5 cm x 122 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2011.30.3  
Photo: Don Cole





**31** "Mami Wata is a Mermaid Spirit Who lives in the Sea" (2010)  
Pigment on plywood, 81 cm x 121.5 cm  
Collection of the author  
Photo: Doran H. Ross

**32** "Witches and Wizards Camp" (2012)  
Pigment on plywood, 113 cm x 81.5 cm  
Newark Museum 2012.47.10  
Photo: Andrea Hagy

walking down the street alone; meeting a man; the two sleeping together; one of them in a hospital bed; and finally displayed on a funeral bed. Remarkably, only one of the five known to me has any text and it reads simply "FEAR WOMAN" (Marignoli et al. 1970:32). Significantly, Almighty paints the disease as entirely heterosexual, even though he is quite attentive to both local and international news on the subject.

Perhaps the most individual of world problems are issues surrounding death and mourning. Funerals, whether Christian or otherwise, are among the most time-consuming, elaborate, and expensive events in Akan/Asante culture. In some contemporary accounts these have been criticized as excessive and in need of restraint, but the well-entrenched veneration of the ancestors that permeates much of Akan culture propels the ongoing respect for deceased elders. While the studio regularly produces silk-screened memorial T-shirts with images of the deceased to be worn at funerals and portrait paintings on tin to serve as part of cemetery headstones, Almighty's creativity art has resulted in numerous examples of mourning family members, including himself. Perhaps his single most visually accurate self-portrait depicts him in mourning dress at the funeral of his brother (Fig. 1). He also documented the funeral of one of his sisters with the title "PITY A HUMAN DEATH IS PAINFUL," followed by "Mourners At Sister Amma Nsuo, Kwame Akoto Almighty Art Sister's Funeral At ADUM PAMPASO KUMASI-GHANA" (Fig. 29).

One remarkable painting of mourners in the Fowler Museum is a "copy" of a very poor color photograph from the newspaper *Daily Graphic* of Friday, April 30, 2004 (Fig. 30). The caption in the newspaper caught Almighty's attention as much as the photo, "Madam Kate Barbara Berko, eldest daughter of the late Yaw Brefo Berko being consoled by other relatives after collecting the mortal remains of the father." Almighty was aware that he had greatly "improved" the photograph and when asked

why he did not include the text, he said, in this case, "The painting speaks for itself" (cf. Mascelloni et al. 2007:56 for another impressive mourning scene without text).





## DEMONS, THE DEVIL, AND HELL

Notions of dying and death are closely related to Almighty's visions of various demons, the devil, and hell. Concepts of evil in Almighty's work have a strong focus on the indigenous figures of Tatabuta, the foreign-influenced Mami Wata, the Catholic St. Anthony, and the Christian Devil. Mixed in with these four characters are various "Witches and Wizards" and an assortment of other unnamed demons. And then there is the Devil. The first three of these sometimes appear together in the same painting as a kind of unholy trinity (see Drewal 2008:66) and as the principal tormenters of Akoto.

Mami Wata may be Almighty's most enduring symbol of evil (see Drewal 2008:67, Mascelloni 2007:102). In many works he has referred to her as a "tormentor." He has painted numerous versions of this mermaid image, several with a large red X on top of her. Almighty says, "I cross out Mami Wata so people will know that I don't want to please her. I want to cancel her." In addition to many paintings of Mami Wata in a kind of classic odalisque pose on the beach or on top of the water, a recent painting of the tormentor depicts the mermaid in her "underwater mansion" (he also called it her "underworld palace"), complete with a classical column and staircase (Fig. 31). She is, as always, entwined with a serpent and here is feasting on her "favorite meal of banana, orange, pineapple, and milk." The text on the bottom of the frame affirms that, "Mami Wata is a mermaid spirit who lives in the sea. Don't search for her. She will ruin your life and you will go to hell. So go to Jesus Christ."

In one set of paintings of Satan, Akoto divides the Devil's face into black and white (actually more red than white) halves. Almighty explained the origin of this, "When African people come by my workshop they say 'Oh! Why do you paint Satan as a black man? When white people come by my workshop they say 'Oh! Why do you paint Satan as a white man?' So then I paint Satan as both black and white." The range of "Devil" paintings is enormous, including a number of "wanted posters." Several read with slight variations, "Wanted Dead or Alive SATAN \$500,000,000. The Devil Who deceived them was cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10)." A number of Akoto's paintings of demons are labeled "Witches and Wizards Camp." One particularly complex example has the demons selling a man in a coat and tie for 15,000 cedis (Fig. 32). Another text on the painting reads "The Destruction of Kofi Duro," and Akoto quotes Ephesians 6:12 about the "Rulers of Darkness" and "Spiritual Wickedness."

Although just as easily placed under the "World Problems" header above, one remarkable painting by Almighty depicts the stacked letters of A I D S as the Devil (Fig. 33) surrounded in the upper background by wrapped corpses and in the lower by suffering humanity, black and white, being clubbed (zapped?) by the profoundly evil bright red acronym. The



33 "AIDS Is a Killer" (2004)

Pigment on plywood, 121.5 cm x 74.5 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2007.12.10

Photo: Doran H. Ross





**34** "LIKE TERMINATOR LIKE SCHWARZENEGGER LIKE ERASER" (before 2006)  
 Pigment on plywood, 81.5 cm x 122 cm  
 Ernie Wolfe Gallery  
 Photo: Alan Shaffer

**35** Man Facing Owl (before 2006)  
 Pigment on plywood, 122 cm x 60 cm  
 Ernie Wolfe Gallery  
 Photo: Alan Shaffer

painting is boldly labeled "AIDS IS A KILLER." The upper frame reads: "AIDS HAVE KILLED 21 MILLION PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD, AND IS STILL KILLING." The bottom reads: "AVOID AIDS OBEY THE PRECEPTS OF YOUR GOD THE CREATOR." In 2006 he said, "This is my best AIDS painting."

One dramatic painting of demons is topped by the inscription "LIKE TERMINATOR LIKE SCHWARZENEGGER LIKE ERASER" (Fig. 34). Just below on the right is "The Witches & Wizards will destroy you. Will devour you. will terminate you, so give your life to God." And on the bottom right, "If You don't give your Life to God, the demons will break Your bones .... Pon!Pon!!Pon!!!" Hollywood, Bollywood, Jollywood, and Ghana's own Ghallywood have had a major presence in the visual culture of Ghana for many years, but film references are relatively rare in Almighty's art. While Almighty God Art Works has produced some movie posters in the past, they are not one of the major producers of these posters (see Wolfe 2001, 2012) In a more contemplative note, and less obvious as an image of torment and evil, is the rear view of Almighty confronting a rather mammoth owl (Fig. 35). Almighty said that the fact that the bird "lives at night" and has "large eyes that torment children" makes the owl more of a "witch" than any other bird.

The universe of themes addressed in Almighty God's art is constantly growing and his application of Christian maxims and biblical citations keeps pace with his expanding view of the world. The focus here has been on the principal subjects of his art, but there are



many other themes that have not been mentioned. Almighty's reflections on issues surrounding food is extensive. His copies and commentaries on a large corpus of Ghanaian newspaper tabloid photographs merits a paper in itself. The proliferation of eyes, ears, and mouths in multiple paintings with widely varied meanings is another preoccupation. While digital printing enterprises are supplanting the sign writing of studios like Almighty God Art Works,

Akoto's creativity art is prospering and attracting expanding audiences. The studio has become something of a tourist attraction in itself. And he remains prolific.

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## Notes

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1 Research on this paper and a forthcoming book was conducted during eleven trips to Ghana of varying lengths between 1995 and 2012, although I photographed a number of Akoto's works in various parts of Ghana on seven trips between 1974 and 1981 before first meeting the artist in 1995. The paper and book are based on an archive of nearly 900 paintings from the studio.

2 Also look for the forthcoming book by Atta Kwami, *Kumasi Realism, 1951–2007: An African Modernism*, and an important article by Rhoda Woets tentatively titled, "The Art of Quoting: Creativity in Handmade and Mass-Produced Pictures of Jesus in Ghana."

3 The ever-changing facade and walls of Almighty God Art Works are an essay on modern Ghana in themselves, cf. Marignoli et al. 2000:18, Ross 2004:74, and Barlow et al. 2002:11, 38.

4 All quotations from the texts on paintings maintain the spellings, grammar, capitalizations, and punctuations as written by the artist on the paintings themselves.

5 Assigning names to untitled works of art is always problematic. At the same time, the phrase "Untitled," often serves little purpose and is frequently self-defeating. In the works of Almighty God this is compounded by the often extensive text that frames the painting and occupies much of its surface. For the purposes of this article, I have largely relied on the most visually compelling text for the title.

6 A full chapter in the forthcoming book addresses the role of texts in African art in general and in Almighty's work in particular. From my perspective, art works with Arabic inscribed Islamic texts, often featuring passages from the Koran, have received a disproportionate amount of attention at the expense of their counterparts with a Christian orientation. The sole exceptions here are Coptic-centered works from Ethiopia.

7 The multicolored abstract backgrounds of paintings from Almighty God Art Works will also be addressed in detail in the book. These are not without substantial influence from modern and contemporary European and American traditions by named artists.

8 The art of Almighty God will be featured in a forthcoming K-12 exhibition of African art at the Newark Museum, "The Street and the Palace: Popular and Privileged Arts in Kumasi, Ghana."

9 The health issues surrounding smoking are a particular obsession of Kwame Akoto's and will be featured in an "Artist's Portfolio" in the next issue of *African Arts*.

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