

## Ghana Freedom: Ghana at the 58th Venice Biennale



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *The Hours Behind You*, 2011

Modern Forms talks to Nana Oforiatta Ayim about her curation of *Ghana Freedom*, Ghana's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

One of the most anticipated exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, *Ghana Freedom* showcases the work of six Ghanaian artists who span three generations, in an exhibition display designed by architect Sir David Adjaye. The show includes large-scale installations by El Anatsui and Ibrahim Mahama; representation and portraiture by photographer Felicia Abban and painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; and a three-channel film projection by John Akomfrah and a video sculpture by Selasi Awusi Sosu. A gallery of work by the exhibiting artists is presented in the slideshow above.

Named after *Ghana Freedom*, a song composed by E.T. Mensah on the eve of the independence of the new nation in 1957, the pavilion examines the legacies and trajectories of that freedom.

**Q:** How has the fact that this is Ghana's first pavilion at the Biennale effected the curation ?

**A:** Initially I wanted to do a solo show of a young artist and do a more conceptual show but Okwui Enwezor, our strategic advisor said, 'Nana, this is Ghana's first national pavilion, you need to come out all guns blazing, arrive with an explosion', and that's kind of what we did. We have so many artists of Ghanaian origin that are excelling and I wanted to see what would it be like to get all them all in the same room and have all their work talking to each other... I think people have very vague notions of Ghana. They don't really know about it as a country or about its cultural output. I think it's going to be a very intense introduction...

**Q:** You are showing six very different artists. Does the curation place the works in dialogue? Or are the all presented separately?

**A:** Well the work of each artist is presented in its own cellular structure, but they are all interconnected. There are no straight lines in the space. The design, by David Adjaye, is inspired by West African vernacular architecture and uses soil shipped over from Ghana.

**Q:** What would you like viewers to feel or think having seen the pavilion?

**A:** I want people to be surprised. We're taking the show to Ghana afterwards so obviously Ghanaian viewers will have a very different response to the typical art viewer who comes to Venice. I want visitors to the biennale to be surprised by the plurality and mastery of expression and representation on show. I'd like them to be quite wowed and be like, 'What is this place where all this incredible work is coming out of?'

**Q:** The legendary curator Okwui Enwezor, who passed away last month, was involved in the pavilion. Was this role?

**A:** It was a blessing to have him as a guiding light. I spent hours and hours on the phone with him discussing everything. We described him as our strategic advisor. He was, of course, a past artistic director of the biennale so he made things easy for us that would have been much more difficult otherwise, like easing our way with the bureaucracy in Venice, bringing us some of our team members, helping with the catalogue... He put his network, his knowledge and his brilliance at our disposal.

**Q:** Curating *Ghana Freedom* is only the latest of many cultural projects you're undertaking in or involving Ghana. In a recent talk, you said 'We don't live in a post anything moment' describing this historical moment of intensifying revisionism as one in which narratives can be radically redefined for individuals, groups and even nations. To what extent are your cultural projects about creating new narratives about Ghanaian identity?

**A:** I think that everything I do is about creating these new narratives. Whether it's the book I'm writing, the films I'm making, the cultural research projects I'm doing; the cultural encyclopedia or the mobile museum project or this Ghana Freedom project for the Venice Biennale, or the museums work I am doing at Pitt Rivers in Oxford or the Osu Castle museum project in Accra, all these different projects are about creating multilayered, pluralistic new narratives. Sometime I question why I am I doing so much on so many different layers, but if you're trying to create a whole new world, you have to do it in lots of different ways.

**Q:** So what narratives or lack of narrative are these new narratives replacing?

**A:** The reason in said that we are not living in 'We don't live in a post anything moment' is that... and I don't want to be too reductive obviously but in terms of the Ghanaian and wider African historical narrative, is one of kingdoms, city states and empires, giving way to the colonial period and then modern nation state history. Before the colonial period we had our own ways of historicizing which I am really interested in. Then the colonial period came and there was a kind of brainwashing and redaction of our culture, memory and ways of being. Then I feel like the nation building era was a reaction to the colonial era. Even the fact that that period is described as '*post-colonial*', I find deeply problematic. I think that if you look at the writers in the generation above me, the Wole Soyinkas, the Chinua Achebes, the Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ayi Kwei Armahs and to an extent the artists and filmmakers of that period, a lot of their work was a reaction and retaliation even to the colonial erasure. They were creating a new national idiom and they did it by looking to the past to dignify the present. It was a deeply necessary project and one I am deeply grateful for but to an extent my generation and the one that is following has greater freedom because we don't have to do that anymore. And I think that you see that sense of freedom in this exhibition.

**Links:**

Ghana Pavilion: [www.ghanainvenice.org](http://www.ghanainvenice.org)

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/ghanainvenice/>

Nana Oforiatta Ayim:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nana\\_Oforiatta\\_Ayim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nana_Oforiatta_Ayim)

<https://www.instagram.com/nanaoforiattaayim/>

ANO: A non-profit organisation founded in 2002 by Nana Oforiatta Ayim, to uncover and create new cultural narratives of the African continent; connecting and supporting development through culture:

<http://anoghana.org/>