

Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng: Gently Dropping the Wonder

by Kendra Paitz

In Ghanaian poet B. Kojo Laing's "No needle in the sky," a weaver bird has only a poet's writing to use as material and process for making his Kente. The bird "weave[s] the vowels out of my words" ... "and every rock is a consonant." Laing continues, "Behold, down from the ironed sky with its steam of rain and birds, drops the giant Kente flagless, twisting and unfurling, unstitching the great words carrying the world, AND: gently dropping the wonder right back in the poet's lap."¹

Throughout the poem, Laing refers to *terrain* (gravel, earth, hill, stream); *textiles* (cloth, Kente, ironed, unstitching); *living beings* (bird, ants, poet, man); and *language* (words, vowels, consonant, literature). In scholar Joseph Hankinson's analysis, "perception and creation are simultaneous" ... and "the 'giant Kente' [is]—the product of creative labor."² He later summarizes, "Laing's writing consistently posits that the development of 'new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication' can serve to repair the damaging consequences of peripheral isolation, and inaugurate the 'new humanity of a new cosmology': one in which a collective, global subject could emerge."³ According to Hankinson, "the power of perception to change an object is compared to the power of poetic description to reimagine an object or action on new terms."⁴

Like Laing's poem, Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng's handmade artworks amalgamate terrain, textiles, living beings, and language in perceptive and surprising ways. The artist's works are deeply informed by his own experiences: growing up and living in Ghana, where he learned traditional methods for mining and working with clay, as well as the cultural history of Kente;⁵ residing across the ocean from his wife and two young children while he was enrolled in a three-year M.F.A. program in the United States (at Illinois State University); and navigating the continued difficulties of the visa process as he builds his artistic, professional, and familial life in southern Texas. Asiedu-Kwarteng's works share a personal story with a slight activist impulse toward relating the struggles of immigration. In his own words, he is "looking for something that transcends my experience."⁶

To do so, Asiedu-Kwarteng has embraced a call from artists and scholars Samuel Nortey and Edwin K. Bodjawah (faculty members at KNUST, where he studied), who argue that "Ghanaian ceramics practice has far too long been stacked with clay as the only material" and "must expand to include other materials."⁷ They push for a decontextualization, recontextualization, and decolonization of both materiality and forms,⁸ which Asiedu-Kwarteng has accomplished, in part, by bridging traditional techniques with contemporary practices and re-using found objects with rich histories.

Transition and migration are central to understanding Asiedu-Kwarteng's work. When the artist initially came to the United States, he was making ceramic works based on Kente, bringing together two materials from home. He built his clay forms so they would fold, roll, and (almost) billow in waves that alluded to fabric, and stamped and glazed the clay in colors that evoked the bold patterns of Kente. During the next three years, Asiedu-Kwarteng endured the isolation of being separated from his family during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. He began to incorporate actual Kente into his works, often putting the vibrant patterns in opposition to, or in conversation with, the graphic stars or stripes of the American flag. The longer that Asiedu-Kwarteng was in the United States, the more he referenced mentally being in two places but physically residing in one.

Are You a Citizen (2023-24), an installation of multiple wall-mounted sculptures made from Kente, jute rope, and wooden pallets, is titled for a frequent and threatening question. Poet and scholar Claudia Rankine writes, "There are two worlds out there; two Americas out there. If you're a white person, there's one way of being a citizen in our country; and if you're a brown or a black body, there's another way of being a citizen and that way is very close to death. It's very close to the loss of your life. It's very close to the loss of your liberties at any random moment."⁹ Asiedu-Kwarteng's shipping pallets—which may have already moved extensively throughout the world before their inclusion in sculptural objects—serve as the loom through which Kente strips are woven. The Ghanaian cloth and rope carefully wrap and wind around the bars of distressed wood, holding it together and combatting the precarity described by Rankine.

One Man Thousand (2024) addresses the vast number of visa-related forms and expanded sense of time related to their processing. Named for a Ghanaian dish of fried fish, and using Ghanaian materials of clay, Kente, and wood, the horizontal, corner-wrapping grid features more than 100 text-based components. Some are descriptive (GREEN CARD), and some identify specific visa documents (I20, H4, R1, K2, G041A). Through cataloguing these bureaucratic forms, Asiedu-Kwarteng makes new artistic forms. Time and again, the clay was stretched to its limit—folded, punctured, curved, bent, pressed, and torn, with letters and numbers cut from its body. Colorful Kente fills the voids and wounds, providing legibility to the texts. Each "form" is confined, isolated, and surrounded by its own shipping container. Asiedu-Kwarteng points out that "every document is tied to my visa and an expiration date. If it expires, everything else expires," including the ability to legally drive, rent housing, or access healthcare, and "I would have to prove why my stay should be extended."¹⁰ For the artist, *One Man Thousand* not only explores the process and complexity of moving from one place to another, but from one stage to another, particularly within one's own family.

Compound House (2024) comprises 30 vertical sculptures arranged into three groups of ten. According to the artist, “The heads of the sculptures have reference of *Lipombo* (head elongation), a form of body art practiced by the Mangbetu of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo,” while the “colorful grid patterns” acknowledge Piet Mondrian’s bold use of primary colors, in which Asiedu-Kwarteng finds an intersection with both Kente and his “own form of abstraction.”¹¹ In contrast to his earlier sculptures that questioned how one could find balance, this installation is permeated with references to holding everything together (nuts, bolts, washers). Although static, these assemblage sculptures explore movement and change. Among the stoneware forms, the artist included pipes, wiring, and heating coils that originally “carried something from one space to another.”¹² No longer serving their intended purposes, they “allude to the transitional state of materials and people.”¹³ Asiedu-Kwarteng added worn-out coils from kilns because when a functioning coil exudes heat, all the works in the kiln “feel that radiation, and they change state.”¹⁴ The rusty table-saw blades evidence marks from countless rotations of reducing the scale of materials. The cutting would have created smaller particles or dust—which linger and cause other effects—or even friction-generated transformation.

Asiedu-Kwarteng’s poetic collision of materials, processes, and lived experiences pushes toward the “collective, global subject” for which Hankinson argued. And in the artist’s stated goal to “use this voice to be the voice of the ‘voiceless;’ to share my story and importance of family; to highlight on the plight of being an immigrant/non-immigrant; [and] create a space of belonging and strength,”¹⁵ Asiedu-Kwarteng is “gently dropping the wonder.”

—Kendra Paitz is director and chief curator at University Galleries of Illinois State University, where she worked closely with Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng during his M.F.A. program, and later, as an exhibiting artist with artworks in the permanent collection.

¹ “No needle in the sky” was included in B. Kojó Laing’s poetry collection, *Godhorse*, published in 1989 by Heinemann as part of the Heinemann African Poets volumes. A full text of the poem is available online via *MovableType* at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8f1b7f26-d6e9-49ff-97f7-e3cc6a125a63/files/m3ef396dd3076362f3debd5554189a32>.

² Joseph Hankinson, “‘great words carrying the world’: Intercultural Translation in B. Kojó Laing’s ‘No needle in the sky,’” *MovableType*, 10 (2018): 55-56, DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.083.

³ Hankinson, 52.

⁴ Hankinson, 55-56.

⁵ For a history of Kente, see Doran H. Ross, Raymond Aaron Silverman, and Agbenyega Adedze, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (University of California, Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998).

⁶ Author’s studio visit with the artist, June 17, 2024.

⁷ Samuel Nortey and Edwin K. Bodjawah, “Ghanaian Clay Practices: A Rethinking,” *Journal of Art, Design, Art Education, & Culture Studies*, 7, no. 1 (April 2022): 27, DOI: 10.17977/um037v7i12022p18-29.

⁸ Nortey and Bodjawah, 27.

⁹ Claudia Rankine, “In ‘Citizen,’ Poet Strips Bare the Realities of Everyday Racism,” interview by Eric Westervelt, NPR, January 3, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/03/374574142/in-citizen-poet-strips-bare-the-realities-of-everyday-racism>.

¹⁰ Studio visit, June 17, 2024.

¹¹ Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, emails to the author, October 14-17, 2024.

¹² Studio visit, June 17, 2024.

¹³ Studio visit, June 17, 2024.

¹⁴ Studio visit, June 17, 2024.

¹⁵ “Meet Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng,” CanvasRebel, February 23, 2023, <https://canvasrebel.com/meet-japheth-asiedu-kwarteng/>.