Joan Kjaer: Hello and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. Tonight our topic is Art and the Afterlife. I'm Joan Kjaer. We're happy to have you with us here in Merge in downtown Iowa City. For anyone watching our Facebook livestream right now or listening to the podcast, thank you for joining us. Our program tonight will be an exploration of the interplay between art and cultural expectations about death and the afterlife. It will also bring us face to face with an internationally renowned artist and his extraordinary creations, one of which you see just next to us here. Fantasy coffins is the name we're using. I understand that our guest sometimes likes to use design coffins as the term. But we'll learn all about them in our program tonight.

Joining us are Eric Adjetey Anang, an artist from Ghana in West Africa widely known for his fantasy coffins and, as I've just mentioned, what you see here is a fantasy coffin that has been brought for your enjoyment tonight. We'll learn about its final destination perhaps from Eric. Eric has spent this semester at the University of Iowa as an artist in residence. Just next to me is Cory Gundlach, the curator of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the University of Iowa Museum of Arts. Thank you Cory. And thank you Eric.

Cory, you're sort of responsible for bringing Eric to our campus. You and Isabel Barbuzza, Christopher Roy on our campus have also been working with Eric this semester. Tell us a little but about not only Eric's appearance but really the larger collection of African art and beautiful artifacts that you have at the museum.

Cory Gundlach: Sure. I think I'd like to preface that introduction to the museum collection by saying that the original impetus for working with Eric began with the commission opportunity in building the museum collection. In looking at the collection, which is extraordinary and world class in terms of what people recognize in terms of quality and historical significance. In the Stanley collection in particular, there are no fantasy coffins. In seeing that absence, I thought, well, this is a great opportunity to add them to the collection and to create a dialogue with the Stanley collection in particular, which is primarily traditional in terms of style, with objects from the late 19th and early 20th century. To bring in art from Africa that generally begins in the mid-20th century. My interest in particular was to bring in a young artist that's making these things today that could be a part of the project and to have his voice as part of this general opportunity.

With that, in terms of its relationship to the museum collection, I'd like to start with an image of the installation of Eric's work, which you see on the screen now up through this Sunday. There are six of Eric's fantasy coffins, commonly what people used to refer to them as you mentioned. Again, in creating this dialogue between the Stanley collection and Eric's work, I've emphasized a sort of qualitative reference with Eric's work as contemporary. It's the first sentence that you read when you come into the exhibition space. I'd like to elaborate on that today in terms of what that means with Eric's work.
The fact is the University of Iowa Museum of Art hasn't hosted an exhibition of contemporary African art since 1996. As you see here, that was an exhibition of painting by Tinda Limba, a Taba painter. The fact is there is no consensus on exactly what this means to be contemporary. In looking at Eric's work today, I can provide my understanding and my interests in using this word with respect to Eric's work. It just so happens that the last exhibition of contemporary African art in 1996 featured an image of Mami Wata, which is in the current exhibition of Eric's work, and it also featured a depiction of coffin makers. There is a bit of irony there that was not intentional but it does speak to the nature of Mami Wata as a contemporary image in African art. Then also coffin making appeared to be consistent subjects for contemporary African art.

In explaining this, I have a few approaches I'd like to discuss. The first of which is: Is Eric a contemporary African artist because of the fact that he has three workshops, two of which are in Ghana, one of which is in the U.S. As we see here, those workshops are at Teshie, his hometown, another in Atadientam, near Kumasi, and in Madison, where you are currently. Is it the fact that he participates in artist residencies around the world? Some of which you see here at Milan, in Denmark, in Madison, here in Iowa-

Eric Adjetey Anang: Italy, yep.

Cory Gundlach: Definitely a global presence for Eric. Also the fact that his own grandfather is widely recognized as the inventor of this form, if not the leader. That began with a major exhibition at Paris in 1989, Magicien de la Terre. You see here an installation of Eric's grandfather's work lined up alongside other widely recognized contemporary artists such as Oldenburg, Richard Long, etc. It was definitely a new way to look at these objects alongside contemporary artists from around the world.

Another thing that is very interesting about Eric's work in terms of the contemporary perspective is its multiple functions. Here we see images of fantasy coffins and their artistic precedents in multiple contexts. In the upper right you see a chief in a palanquin that is the artistic source for fantasy coffins as you see them today. Directly beneath that you see the same motif, the eagle in a coffin that Eric created for the Chazen Museum of Art at Madison. Immediately beside it, one of Eric's coffins in an actual burial during a funeral. There are multiple functions for these objects, which in fact is commonplace for African art in general. So it's not something that we can say about his work that qualifies it as contemporary.

In relation to the Stanley collection in particular, the fact that these objects historically began as coffins for burials fits quite well with the fact that many of the objects in the Stanley collection have to do with concepts of the afterlife such as these two objects here from the Stanley collection. A calm mask on the far right, worn by members of a royal kingdom of calm in Cameroon worn during funerals, and beside it, a femba figure from the Democratic Republic of
Congo placed on the grave of the deceased. There's definitely a shared focus on interests in the afterlife and funerals.

Also here in particular ideas about status and class. These two objects from the Stanley collection are specific to royalty. This shoe coffin, created by Eric, has specifically to do with, frankly, class and personal aspirations that Eric's discussed in terms of things he aspires to. From a sort of functionalist perspective, this type of object might be designed for a shoemaker, a cobbler. As an art object for Eric, he has talked about it as a sort of icon of aspiration in terms of his own personal goals in terms of style and class and such. In that respect, it relates to other objects in the Stanley collection that have nothing to do with the afterlife but objects that are particularly destined for a European audience or any sort of patrons outside of Africa. These objects you see here were created in the late 19th early 20th century by artists in central Africa for European patrons or, in other words, white people like me not from Africa.

In this exhibition we have now, it's important to recognize that these objects weren't made for funerals, they were made for an art museum. These objects made by artists in central Africa were made for European patrons. There's another interesting relationship here in terms of art for the afterlife and art for people outside of Africa to demonstrate status and class. One of Eric's own personal artistic aspirations with this shoe coffin in particular.

With respect to Eric's personal style, I think there have been cases in which people try to make an argument that contemporary African art conforms to a particular style. I don't necessarily espouse that idea. In looking closely at Eric's personal style, it is a fact that more recently he's begun to use reflected light in his coffins. In this image we see here, his pepper coffin, he's actually painted areas of reflected light rather than allowing spotlights within the exhibition spaces to reveal that naturally. It's something that he's adding to the object. That's exclusive to Eric's work in particular. It's something that I haven't seen among other coffin makers in Ghana. What you see here is a before and after when I first started working with Eric. In the beginning of this year, you see the former state of the pepper coffin below, and above its present state with reflected light. That's a particular stylistic characteristic of Eric's work that's important to recognize.

Also his realism and his departures from it. Here we have [inaudible 00:10:21] or in other words, 'even the one who worked for it is gone', referring to his grandfather Kane Kwei and I'll talk more about that in a moment. But this coffin is obviously based on Ghana Airways. This airplane. While we look at these objects and we can tell this is definitely an airplane, with closer scrutiny I think you can see things like the fact that Eric's airplane coffin has five turbine engines, which has no counterpart in reality. So that type of fictitious departure from realism I find so much joy in because these are creative objects, created by this artist that's not merely representing reality surrounding him but shaping it in new ways. With the inclusion of text on that is an explicit reference to the Ga term for these objects, abebuu adekai.
Eric Adjetey Anang: [inaudible 00:11:12]

Cory Gundlach: Receptacles of proverbs. Here you see a proverb, in particular reference to his father, his grandfather excuse me. Kanekwei. There's also a personal relationship here with his grandfather's innovation and using this motif. Back in 1951 for his grandmother, then also his position in relation to his family currently in Ghana with the workshop in Teshie, and changes that have happened recently in terms of where Eric's work is going, where his family's work is going. It's incredibly important piece for Eric and a very successful object.

I think it's also important to recognize the contemporary nature of Eric's work in terms of subject matter. His recent work has increasingly focused on ecological crisis in terms of dwindling populations among things such as insects. This bumble bee points directly to that and the fact that he US Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Services have designated the rusty patch bumble bee as an endangered species. Eric's calling attention to these ecological issues is definitely part of a broader trend among artists not only in Africa but contemporary artists. That definitely positions him in that practice. He's been doing this for a while and as you can see here, a fish that he created in Philadelphia commenting on plastic pollution and its effect on fish belongs to a broader context of contemporary African artists commenting on ecology and pollution. You see here on the right [inaudible 00:13:06] and [inaudible 00:13:07] in an installation environment and objects that were held at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College focused exclusively on ecological crisis among a number of contemporary African artists. Eric is a part of that interest.

In addition to ecological crisis, I think that Eric's work also speaks to issues of gun violence and racial inequality not only in America, but here beside a work by Sokari Douglas Camp commenting on violence in the Niger delta, Nigeria, related specifically to oil exploitation and the violence intention caused by that exploitation of natural resources. Whereas Eric's gun on the right is speaking directly to violence in Madison and racial inequality and tension.

Eric Adjetey Anang: In the colleges too.

Cory Gundlach: Yes. And specifically his use of colors in black and white, speaking to racial tension in America. That sort of racial politics is very much a contemporary concern for Eric and other artists. Going back to our African collection at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, we do have a small number of contemporary works here. On the far right, work by William Kentridge, El Anatsui, and Mansour Ciss. Again these issues of looking at basically colonial encounter, specifically with William Kentridge in representing a general with this particularly Prussian or German style high collar and monocle. It is a fact that during World War I over 75,000 Namibians were massacred by Germans. That colonial history and trauma and racial tension in contemporary African art is something that Eric's work speaks to. El Anatsui's work in terms of carving up the nations of Africa during the colonial period. Mansour Ciss' representation of
new forms of currency featuring portraits of Leopold Senghor, who was very interested in developing a sort of Pan African identity resisting European oppression of African peoples.

It does fit within a number of works currently within the museum collections such as these. It’s also important to recognize that this isn’t something that can be cordoned off in terms of style. What I brought in here are examples of bogolan cloth. On the upper right, an example from the Met, from the late 19th and early 20th century. Directly beneath it, a hunter’s tunic in our museum collection that maintains the same style but was created in the early part of the 21st century. Immediately beside it, a work by a Bamana artist using the same technique in the last 20th century. There’s an overlap between style and conceptions of contemporary African art that you see in these examples.

Moving ahead with Eric’s Mami Wata coffin, we do have an example of a Mami Wata in the collection. So Eric’s work does speak to this broader context of cultural exchange and the fact that the spirit is believed to be from overseas. Again this idea of cultural exchange that already exists in the museum collection. Eric is very much a part of that.

Joan Kjaer: I think we should just hear a little bit from-

Cory Gundlach: Sure, sure.

Joan Kjaer: From Eric too. He’s seen some of this, of course he’s seen all of the presentation you just made and has been here on campus for this semester. I’m sure you’ve seen a good number of the elements of the Stanley collection here. But you’ve also been kind enough to bring one of your own beautiful creations for us to look at here in the room this afternoon. Thank you Cory for giving us the background and some context for this.

Why don’t we start off by having you tell us a little bit about what this fantasy coffin, which to me looks like a fish. Someone told me it was a red snapper. What was this design all about? Was it commissioned or was it something that you just decided to make on your own?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I mean we both decided on that. Initially we had plans of building something that would represent Iowa. We thought of John Deere, like a tractor. Then a notebook, because of the college. Cory wrote back to me and he was like, ‘Maybe we should allow you to decide something.’ So I got back to him and we talked about a fish, something that represents where I’m coming from. The fish is something, one of the coffins that is commonly used in the southern part of Ghana. I talked to him about it and he was actually okay about it. So we made that.

The second piece, which was the firefly, I gave him the story of while I was growing up in Teshie, and how we used to play with all those insects and stuff.
All of a sudden, everything has disappeared and that's through open, how do you call it? Globalization and stuff. I was actually worried about that. I did talk to him about it. I actually made the suggestion of building these two coffins. You know?

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. These will remain here at the University of Iowa?

Cory Gundlach: Yes. Actually it's the plane and the-

Eric Adjetey Anang: The fish.

Joan Kjaer: Plane and the fish.

Cory Gundlach: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Wow. So tell us about the process a little bit. We're gonna learn a little also from sculpture professor Isabel Barbuzza. You were working with her and her students this semester. So we'll hear a little bit about how all that went in the second segment. When you conceive something like this, what's the process for turning it into what we see?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I basically came in with my wood and the boards, an inch thick and a foot wide and eight feet long. I just started cutting. I basically worked with only hand tools while I was working-

Joan Kjaer: Hand tools?

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah. It actually took me two to three weeks to build this.

Joan Kjaer: My goodness.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Wow. If this were to be used in a funeral in Ghana, someone would have presumably requested this from your shop and...

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah. The family would come and as soon as the person passes away. Before, they have the chances of choosing what they want. They would say 'Oh, we want a fish.' But this time when they come I would give them many options and that also puts me in a different angle to build more a different species and stuff. They would tell me the guy is a fisherman. What I'm going to ask them is what species of fish is he fond of catching? Or where does he do his fishing? In the lakes or in the ocean or something? To that I would build something that represents him.

Joan Kjaer: Sure. I understand, Cory mentioned this also. You grew up around this kind of creation because your grandfather was very famous for making these. Now you
have these three workshops and you employ a number of people in Ghana and I suspect also in the United States creating these things. I think for many of us in America this is just an amazing and wonderful concept. I think that it was certainly new to me when I learned about these. Do you find us in this country very lacking in creativity when it comes to the way we send ourselves off into the next space?

Eric Adjetey Anang: No.

Joan Kjaer: No?

Eric Adjetey Anang: No. This is actually a good question. This is something which was found only among the Ga. As time goes on, he started to grow up among the ... I mean he grew up in Ghana so we had the [inaudible 00:21:53] and the other tribes becoming part of it. That was one reason I moved to build my new shop in Kumasi, which makes it easier for them to transport to their burial's home. In Ghana, the southern part of Ghana, we celebrate our deceased relatives so it's a form of giving them ... What I would say is once you've been taken very good care of, I mean truly professional your appearance, the only way you could celebrate them is giving them a befitting burial. Part of that is the coffin.

Joan Kjaer: These coffins... I've seen some of the city demonstrations or celebrations that would be held with people gathering around and the coffin carried through the town. Then it is actually buried? It disappears-

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah. Also the reason why you see people carrying that and celebrating and dancing and stuff is because most of the people that have been buried in these design coffins are people who have lived a life well lived. I would say somebody who is 50 and above.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Now when you're working both as a coffin maker for the people who have traditionally used these, and then also as an artist who's very much in demand both for residencies and then for works that are bought by galleries and individuals and so on. Is there something in your work on the coffin or your conception of the piece, is there something that's different with those two end results? One going to be an individual person's coffin and the other going to essentially be an art piece that will be viewed in a gallery?

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah. Working back home in Ghana, when a customer arrives and commissions a coffin, first of all I buy a bottle of Schnapps and I perform the rights. That has to be done. When I come here, I like to work with students because the only way I also get to learn from them. It's like a 50/50 thing. My goal here in the United States is mostly to work with students.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Do you live here throughout the academic year and then you return to Ghana in the summer?
Eric Adjetey Anang: I would say I live part in the United States and then part of my life in Ghana.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah.

Eric Adjetey Anang: It's going to be like Ghana and Madison.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Wow. Well can you tell us anything in particular about the fish that we have here?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I mean I have my type of fish I build. Cory sent me a photo because I talked to him about the fish. He saw one from Silvia but he wanted something very different from what I have already done. That was why actually this took me like three weeks. Because I really have to take my time and also with the finishing. The painting, this is a new paint I’m kind of still learning on how to use it. I have to repeat the painting process for four or five times before putting the final details.

Joan Kjaer: So Cory was explaining that on the chili pepper, you added a certain kind of sheen to certain areas. Have you done that also on this fish, because it is very reflective but it's also right under a light so I can't tell...

Eric Adjetey Anang: This is not so reflective. But with something like the chili, it's a flat color so I just don't want to make it the flat color. I want to put an effect to it.

Joan Kjaer: Could you give us four or five different versions of your most popular standard coffin options for someone who comes to your shop back in Ghana?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I would say the fish, and the cocoa pod. I mean we’re still struggling with [inaudible 00:26:20] process of cocoa. We have a lot of cocoa farmers so that's one coffin that actually goes a lot. We have the mummy truck because we have a lot of people, before 1992, they used to go on apprenticeship to learn how to drive. That's like a profession that was existing. Now it's a little there, only a few people. So we have the truck. The bible. It's also another thing. When I started in 2005, it wasn't so common because the Christians believe being buried in a designed coffin is against their religion.

Joan Kjaer: No, I see.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Because it goes with pouring of libation, sacrifices of animals and stuff. They actually didn't like the idea but in recent time. I would say in a year I build between 15 to 20 bibles.

Joan Kjaer: Really? Wow.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah.
Joan Kjaer: Yeah, wow. So I know we'll have a chance to talk to you again in one of our later segments. I think we've come to the end of this first segment so I want to say thank you very much Cory and Eric.

In this next segment, we're going to learn a little bit about concepts of the afterlife in various parts of Africa. We'll hear about University of Iowa sculpture students worked alongside Eric for this past semester, understanding some of his techniques and applying them to their own work. If you would like to hear this program later, all programs are available as audio podcasts on iTunes, the Public Radio Exchange, and the International Programs website which is international.uiowa.edu.

I'm Joan Kjaer and for UI International Programs, thanks very much for joining us.