Joan Kjaer: Hello, I'm Joan Kjaer and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. This is part three of our program on Art and the Afterlife, and in this segment, we're joined by artist Eric Adjetey Anang and by the curator of African Arts and Cultures of the Royal Ontario Museum, Sylvia Forni. Thank you both for being with us.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Thank you.

Silvia Forni: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: I would like to have both of you converse a little bit about authorship and cultural authenticity.

Sylvia, as we know, Eric's fame is well-established, not just as a coffin maker but also of ... I don't mean that, not "just as", no, I mean, not-

Eric Adjetey Anang: That's fine.

Joan Kjaer: ... ONLY as a coffin maker of the first order, but also as an independent artist whose work is shown in galleries and is pursued by private collectors. Is the cultural authenticity of an object like this coffin, the one we have in our room, altered in any way when it's presented in a purely artistic context, as opposed to a funeral ceremony where mourners see the work as layered with personal meanings?

Silvia Forni: Well, that's an interesting question. I think what's interesting is why are we asking these questions. It really seems like many times, when we talk about African art, we continue to carry with us a whole load of categories that were really created by the market and by scholars in the West, that often have nothing to do with the process of making, and what African art was, and has been, for centuries. So, it is always interesting that this idea of authenticity comes across or has been a very defining element of African art.

I find that Eric's work and Eric's life somehow voids this category of its meaning and shows how fictitious sometimes it is to impose these categories on the arts of others. I actually was thinking about this when I saw a segment of a documentary that is being shot here at the University of Iowa in which Eric says, "I do not want to limit myself to only being a coffin maker or a carpenter. I'm moving the story."

So, Eric, I would like to start talking to you a little bit about, really, your practice, and how you define yourself, and what inspired you to experiment in different ways while drawing on this art form, and skill and ability that you learned growing up in your family, and how your recent practice ... Eric and I met the first time in 2009, so I've somehow been following Eric's artistic trajectory from a time in which most of your activity was in the workshop in Teshie to the time in which more and more you've become an international artist. So, what
inspired you to take on this trajectory and what were you thinking? How did this come about?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I took over this shop in 2005. I started working with my dad and, of course, before then, I don't know if any of the coffin makers had ever been out of Ghana to talk about the artwork. But what I know was, I knew my grandfather was invited, let's say, like in the '90s, and he refused the offer. He has his own reason for refusing the offer. So, what actually happens is when these coffins go abroad, there is nobody to tell the stories of the coffins. They end up in the museum with a big Ghana coffin with no proper artist name.

There was an artist by the name Nam June Paik who actually used my grandfather's piece, an airplane coffin, as part of his artwork. After the show, he named the piece, instead of giving credit to the coffin maker or the artist who made the coffin, he said "Ghana coffin" and I was actually not happy about that. So, one of my goals was to make a follow-up anywhere my coffins go, and then also to trace where my grandfather's coffins are, and bring the story to the people, and then meet the people directly. In the course of doing that, once you are here, you need to be doing something. You don't have to see and wait. And already, back home, people were commissioning coffins, bringing them here not for burials but for galleries and museums. So once I'm here, I have to find a way. Basically, I would say back home, I was already considered as an artist, but locally, people would call me a carpenter or a coffin maker.

So, once I get here, and then also, like I said, I love working with students. It is through the students, I sort of learned a lot of stories. That was how I started to put, like bring out the story of this bumblebee, the fish, and then the firefly, and the gun. So, that was how I sort of grew up, like going into all these colleges, and then meeting with the students, and then working with them, and then at the same time, also learning from them too.

Silvia Forni: What I find interesting also, the way you work. Earlier when Joan was asking about your life, you said, "I live part in the United States, part in Ghana."

Eric Adjetey Anang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Silvia Forni: You're still very much ... Despite the fact that you're here on a residency, you just opened your first solo show in the United States. So, clearly, being projected towards a career as a contemporary African artist, as Cory was highlighting earlier, you're still very much connected to your workshop and to the activity of a coffin maker. Why is this important for you? Why keeping, if you want this two type of activities across seven hours' time zone difference, and somehow different settings, going at the same time?

Eric Adjetey Anang: These coffins are so important to my people and the Kane Kwei name is already there. So, if people actually want a coffin, they would still go to the shop and making it easy for the people in Kumasi, that was why I did move my shop. Then
also, getting to this platform, I sort of have the possibility of putting a huge respect to my profession being a coffin maker back home.

I remember, growing up, I went to an orphanage, and the reason I went there was most of the kids in the orphanage, all the time, expect to be given something like in monetary terms or in clothing or food. I went there to share with them my art. "Let us build something. Let us work with wood," but my offer was rejected because they thought, I was a coffin maker and the children are not supposed to be working around coffins or something. So, I have to come back, work on myself, build myself up. They would still call me a coffin maker back home, but at the same time, they would see the reputation I've built for myself. And that would permit me to get into the lives of these children and let them understand what they can do with their hands. So, I really have a very huge connection back home and I only don't want to limit myself to only building the coffins, but also, being in the classroom to share with the kids.

I know you've been to Ghana a number of times and you've seen how furniture has disappeared. Nobody is buying locally-made wood stuffs. Getting wood also is not easy, but I think there is something that stays, and that is building the coffins. So, we have to make it stay. If I live here full time, I know some people are doing that already, but I still have to be there to help them make it.

Silvia Forni: That's great. What changes for you in your creative practice, in the way you approach the making of a piece? When you're doing it locally, for a family, that is there to commission a coffin, or when you're doing it, let's say, in Iowa, in the wood shop of the museum?

Eric Adjetey Anang: In both ways, I try as much as possible to make the decision on what I build. If you give the family the chance, they would stick to whatever that has been made all the time. Let's say like a coco farmer passes away, and the family comes, they would still want a coco plant for the deceased person, but being an artist, I have to stand firmly and let them understand, "We could do something and not only limit ourself to building the coco." So, in this case, I could build one of the tools, which has never been done before for the coco farmer. There was this woman who travels all the way to Burkina to bring tomatoes, and she passes away. We've made like 10 or 20 tomatoes, I mean coffin shaped ... They came in and I said to them, "I want a photo of the box filled with tomatoes," and through that, I've built something through the picture they sent to me. That was unique. And now, a lot of people are doing the same thing.

When I meet people like Cory also, I still try to make the decision, but also I hear from them what they have in mind before taking decision. So, in both ways, I try to make my voice heard louder.

Silvia Forni: A flip side of this, I know, I've seen you work in Ghana, and you work in a workshop. So, the making of a piece is yes, part you're the master of the workshop, so you're definitely leading, but often time, I remember you guys gathering and trying to find a solution, like the first tomato you built.
How do you build a coffin in the shape of a tomato is not necessarily, it's not obvious. It takes a lot of thinking, and also part of what Isabel was highlighting, thinking three-dimensionally, and doing it without sketching, or maybe sketching but without the technological tools that people would use in the west. So, there is a very collaborative aspect of the making that it's not necessarily present in your activity as a solo artist. How does the shape transform the way you go about making things? Which way is most satisfying for you and why?

Eric Adjetey Anang: Again, that's what takes much more time when I'm working here. I work alone here, so I have to do all the physical jobs, and then at the same time, I have to do the whole thinking also on how to build. Back home, if we don't understand something, at least one of the apprentices could show up and bring an idea, and we could figure out how that works. So, we could work within a week to build this all, like a couple of days to build this. But once I'm here, I work alone, so I wouldn't say a week, but I would say like three weeks or a month.

Silvia Forni: It's just the time issue.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yes, yes. And sometimes, my dad is still around, and that's one thing that helps a lot. I speak on phone with him and kind of ask for advice and stuff.

Silvia Forni: That's good. Another question that is a bit connected also to the title of this series and to the interest of what a colleague of ours and friend of ours, Roberta Bonetti, has also been working on, in looking at your practice and your career, which is the role of social media and the internet in projecting your career on an international level. Can you talk a little bit about how and why you introduced your Facebook page, you got a Wikipedia page, and how this transformed the way your career has evolved?

Eric Adjetey Anang: The first time I was introduced to the internet was in 1998 by a friend. In the year 2000, I went to the internet café, trying to learn something. I went on Yahoo and then I typed my name, like "Eric Adjetey Anang". There was like a topic that showed up about somebody I met in the shop and I told him the story of how the coffins was started and stuff. I was so happy. I was awake and I said, "Wow. So I can go really far."

I joined the shop fully time from I would say 2002 while I was in my senior high school, working with them sort of part-time, full-time. In 2005, I took over the shop, after my senior high school. I was working with my dad and I still don't have any connection with the internet but I knew something was there. I kept on speaking with friends who showed up in the shop, and then whenever I told them story, I also tell them about the internet and stuff. Until in 2008, a friend, [Jam Sharuse 00:15:36] offered to help me build a website. He sort of interviewed all the guys in the shop, and he put everything to pen and book. Upon building the website, we realized, a friend also suggested the Wikipedia. Now, we have the Wikipedia in English, and then we have the website. Any friend who shows up in the shop after speaking with them, especially when they
are journalist, I speak with them, and they would translate my Wikipedia in various languages.

All of a sudden, everything started to grow. I got an invite for the first time in 2009. I did this commercial for Coca Cola in Spain. This was shown in 2009 on Spanish TV for a whole year. That allowed them to give me a visa to travel to Europe, to make a follow-up to my coffins. Yeah, because anytime I apply, I am qualified to escape, not go and do the writing and escape and stay there. That was the idea. Anytime I applied, they refused. But through the commercial, they gave me the three months visa. So, I went to Spain, Italy, Belgium, Holland, just making a follow-up on the coffins. I came back home.

Right after I coming back, I got another invite to a festival in Senegal. I went to Senegal also for two weeks and then back. And then I got a very strange email, and the guy said, "Hey, Eric. We want all your coffins." I’m like, "I don’t have all the coffins. Tell me what you want." They said, "We want five coffins." I said, "Okay, tell me the designs and we could figure something out." He said they were from Russia. I said ... My friend helped me and we realized it’s not easy to take exotic wood to Russia, so we suggested to them, "Oh maybe I could come to Russia," not thinking of you know, Russia. They said, "Hey, you can come. We want you here." Then I have to make a research, what’s going on, and actually it was a crematorium so they wanted me to stay for six weeks to build coffins in a crematorium and speak with people. I was there, it was a good time. It was a cold, good time.

So, I made all these connections through this Wikipedia. That was the same way, I think Cory also found me.

Speaker 4: I found you in the Facebook page.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah.

Silvia Forni: There you go. It’s really interesting to see how these things really shape and transform, and really do have potential to also move beyond what you were saying earlier, the idea of a Ghana coffin or a Ga coffin, to a Kane Kwei coffin, or an Eric Adjetey Anang coffin. So, really creating this idea of authorship and ownership.

Maybe the last topic I wanna touch upon is something that, we started discussing in the gallery, when I saw the exhibition in October. I was looking at the Mami Wata "coffin" but I would also say the Mami Wata sculpture. I was thinking, as you evolve and continue to grow your practice internationally, also many of the slides that Cory was showing before, like the fish, or the bee, or increasingly your creativity and ideas are moving beyond the functionality of the coffin itself. Yet, you continue to call your work "coffin". Why is that? And why is this connection important? What is the meaning for you of continuing to call these works, these artworks "coffins"?
Eric Adjetey Anang: Most of what I still talk about is still related to death, that's what I would say. Something like the gun talks about death. Something like the fish, it's still about death, how we ... Though it's talking about waste, but it's also about death. The bumblebee and the firefly, the disappearance, so it's still related to death. I would say that's why I'm still stuck to that. But with the Mami Wata, it wasn't a piece that I actually chose myself. We actually talked about that. It was commissioned by the Education Department. We have two options: either we build a dragon or we build a Mami Wata. So, we finally arrived at building the Mami Wata, and he saw my work before making a decision on requesting for one. If I should build something without opening, it doesn't look like my work, I would say. Yeah, it's gonna be like a totally different thing to him and I don't wanna surprise him. Maybe I should have asked him in the beginning before deciding to open that or not but it wasn't-

Silvia Forni: But you could conceive a building, a sculpture without a door in certain cases, maybe?

Eric Adjetey Anang: Maybe someday.

Silvia Forni: Maybe someday, okay.

Joan Kjaer: Eric, I'd like to ask you....I read an interview that you had done at Wisconsin, at Madison. Among the topics for your work was Black Lives Matter. You said that you might like to create a piece that would refer to this movement. Tell us about your interest in that.

Eric Adjetey Anang: The piece was the one I built, the gun-

Joan Kjaer: The gun.

Eric Adjetey Anang: ... that I built. So, we had a couple of the Black Lives Matters there, and then we had a ceremony, and then we broke the gun into two. Now, we're planning on going on a parade because Tony Robinson, he's been ... They go on a parade every year for this little guy who was shot on Williamson Street. So, I'm still in touch with them and we're figuring out how we could parade on the streets with the gun.

Joan Kjaer: Do you intend to stay at Madison for some period of time? Is this going to be a second permanent home for you?

Eric Adjetey Anang: I would say it's like a second home. Maybe a first home or second home, yeah.

Joan Kjaer: You're used to the winter?

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Sylvia, tell us a little bit about your work with the museum in Ontario.
Silvia Forni: Well, I have a similar job to Cory's, but I work in a much bigger, larger institution because it's a big encyclopedic museum. I guess, really, the reason why I met Eric in 2009, which was at the beginning of my tenure there, was to introduce in the collection, really problematize the sense of African art as a "primitive thing", or complicate the idea of African art by really showing contemporary practices that are both artistic and culturally meaningful, and that was the first.

I don't have in the collection in Toronto pieces comparable to the Mami Wata, or the bee, or works that really go more in the direction of creative sculptural work, but what I commissioned then was a fish because I asked Eric, "What is the coffin that people buy the most now?" And it was a fish, and he was making four fish at the same time. The other piece that I commissioned, by another famous workshop, the Paa Joe Workshop, was a Mercedes Benz, somehow as a reference and a quote of the Magiciens de la Terre exhibition, in which Kane Kwei had a white Mercedes Benz, and then Paa Joe who went on to exhibit also in Africa Remix, that was done the year later in New York. There was a Mercedes Benz. So, it's kind of an iconic piece in African art, contemporary African art history. I'm very interested in these intersections and complications, yeah.

Joan Kjaer: We have had a few occasions to hear the name of your grandfather. Maybe you can tell us of who Kane Kwei was.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah. Kane Kwei was born in 1922, passed away in ... He became baptized in 1990 and passed away in 1992. He was succeeded by two of his children, that's Cedi, my dad, and Sowah, Benjamin Sowah, who also passed away in the year 2000. So, it was actually left with only my dad in his shop, and I sort of joined him in his shop to work.

Joan Kjaer: It means a lot to continue the tradition of your grandfather.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Well, it's a huge pleasure for us to have had you here tonight, you two. Sylvia Forni, Eric Adjetey Anang, thank you very, very much.

Eric Adjetey Anang: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: I thank all of you who joined us here in the audience and everyone listening.

All WorldCanvass programs are available on iTunes, the Public Radio Exchange, and the International Programs website. Our next world canvass is February 22nd, here in this room, again at 5:30. That program will be a preview of a series of events that will be happening in early March, the Provost’s Global Forum on the topic "Against Amnesia: Archives, Evidence, and Social Justice". It will be a very interesting program.
I’m Joan Kjaer. Thank you very much for being here and good night!