

Art, Matter, and Memory: Allan Kyakonye and Frederick Ebenezer Okai in Dialogue



Violet Nantume ¹  & qarî'kachä seid'ou ² 

¹ UNDER GROUND Kampala, Uganda.

² Faculty of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the material-driven practices of Allan Kyakonye (Uganda) and Frederick Ebenezer Okai (Ghana), and how they work with ordinary substances to think with memory and history. Methodologically, it combines close readings, exhibition analysis, hands-on curatorial fieldwork, and side-by-side comparison. The study focuses on Kyakonye's medallion-and-cameo portraits—egg tempera on fire-scorched tinfoil—and Okai's sculptural reworkings of indigenous pottery and alchemical clay experiments staged with immersive digital technologies. The study rests on three simple theoretical commitments: matter bears memory (Bachelard); African material cosmologies, such as those of the Dogon, remind us that substance and spirit meet in things; and the human and the nonhuman share the same ground (Meillassoux). From this vantage, materials in both artists' work act as mnemonic agents rather than neutral carriers. Kyakonye stages the fragility of collective memory by pairing sacred iconography with marks of heat, abrasion, and decay. Okai unsettles linear heritage narratives through imagined crossings of cultures and forms of spectatorship that ask the viewer to move, linger, and look again. Together, their practices signal a turn in contemporary African art toward material poetics and make visible the exchanges that link East and West African scenes. The broader claim is straightforward: materiality is not a backdrop but engine—capable of reanimating history, opening futures, and proposing new sites of world-making.

Correspondence

Violet Nantume

Email:

violetnantume@gmail.com

Publication History

Received: 12th May, 2025

Accepted: 6th October, 2025

Published online:

27th November, 2025

To Cite this Article:

Nantume, Violet, and qarî'kachä seid'ou. "Art, Matter, and Memory: Allan Kyakonye and Frederick Ebenezer Okai in Dialogue." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 6, no. 12 (2025): 3187 - 3203, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202561222>.

Keywords: Materiality, Memory, Contemporary African Art, Experimental Ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 20th century, when international exhibitions of African contemporary art began to be held on the continent, there have been increasing exchanges between artists from different regions of Africa and their diasporas. Initiatives like the Dak'Art Biennale for Contemporary Art, inaugurated in 1996 in Dakar, Senegal, and the enduring legacy of *South Meets West*, the 1999 exhibition and workshop project held at the Ghana Museum in Accra, were some of the key moments that laid the groundwork for connections between previously isolated artist communities in Africa.¹ For years, Africa's regions, fragmented by colonial legacies, racial and class divides, infrastructural challenges, and disparities in information access, engaged in little or no dialogue about international contemporary art. In recent years,

¹ *Dak'Art* was first established as a biennial for literature in 1990 and then for visual art in 1992. It changed its focus to Contemporary Art in 1996. Besides *Dak'Art*, other homegrown and international scope biennales, art institutions, and art initiatives that foster exchanges in African contemporary art have emerged. These include Bamako Photography Biennale (since 1994), Johannesburg Biennale, Cairo Biennale, CCA Lagos, Raw Material Company, Kampala Biennale, *Kla'Art*, and Stellenbosch Triennale.

however, a shift has occurred. Revitalized efforts, visions, and tendencies enable artist communities of different regions on the continent to bridge these gaps, extending impacts and conversations even to African and non-African communities abroad. These exchanges are reshaping what African art signifies today.

Presently, homegrown institutions and alternative art spaces in Africa are collaborating extensively to explore the potentialities and consequences of these intra-continental encounters of contemporary art.² The recent East-West collaborative exhibition, *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking* (2023), held in Masaka, Uganda, is one such contact zone.³ The exhibition, an outcome of a four-year collaborative research, identified “material hacking” as a distinctive aesthetic and political tendency noticeable in different contexts and communities of African contemporary art, and hence brought together 29 artists of the millennial and Gen Z generations, exploring the subject independently from their bases in Ghana, Uganda, DR Congo, and Rwanda. In unravelling the concept of “material hacking”, the co-curators referred to the artists’ political investment in “exploring a plethora of diverse forms beyond the traditional painting and sculpture inherited from colonization, which largely informs the background of most artists from the continent”. In the artists’ praxis, they “pursue no limit in forms and content” as they embrace a multiplicity of materials and means, including “installations using local materials, and alternative media we cannot even taxonomize easily.”⁴ The two artists under review in this paper, Allan Kyakonye based in Kampala, Uganda, and Frederick Ebenezer Okai, based in Kumasi, Ghana, of the millennial generation, were participants in this exhibition and its extensive cultural programming that included studio visits across several cities in Uganda, art talks, critique sessions, and publication project.

This article presents a dialogue between these two artists that is both imagined and lived. What brings the two artists together in this dialogue is twofold. First is their set of conceptual affinities and shared approaches to materials, proposing new artistic production systems and generating hybrid forms that resist categorization by being neither strictly painting (Kyakonye) nor strictly pottery (Okai). Secondly, despite geographical distance, both artists have engaged in mutual artistic exchanges that have taken each artist to the other’s geographical or cultural base. Both artists utilize everyday materials—tin foil and clay, respectively—not just as surfaces or containers, but as conceptual tools, form generators, and active spaces for artistic and cultural enquiry. Through their material-based investigations, Kyakonye and Okai deconstruct and reshape historical and canonical narratives, challenging linear timelines and providing alternative expressions of African artistic experiences.

Kyakonye’s medallion-and-cameo-style portraits, executed on fire-scorched aluminium tin foil using egg tempera, hover between sacred iconography and ephemeral decay. His work probes the precarity of collective memory, placing iconic figures within vignettes with compositional structure reminiscent of framed Renaissance medallions or heraldic devices. Kyakonye’s portraits make the time signatures of ancestry and lineages manipulable, compelling the viewer to excavate obscured monarchical and colonial histories of Uganda and the rest of Africa, rendering memory as a collaborative and iterative act of reanimation. In contrast, Frederick Ebenezer Okai’s sculptural installations reimagine clay, a material laden with anthropological resonance, as fractured assemblages and immersive virtual environments. Drawing from Ghanaian pottery traditions, his formal training in ceramics, and his forays into digital technologies, Okai puts together montages that collapse and layer plural temporalities, cultures, and

² A recent example of exhibitions exploring exchanges and encounters between formerly isolated regions on the continent is *Notes on Friendship: Breaking Bread* (April to July 2025) organized by the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), Tamale, Ghana, and the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI). The exhibition features 21 artists practicing across generations and disciplines and explores shared experiences and artistic vision, aiming to bridge geographic and temporal divides between Ghana and Kenya.

³ Sacia Bailer et al., *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking* (Masaka: Under Ground, 2023). “*Silent Invasions*” was a group exhibition held in Uganda, co-curated by Sascia Bailer, Julia Gyemant, Violet Nantume, Tracy Naa Koshie Tompson, and Tristan Tani Zitoni Kayonga. The exhibition event was a culmination of a Uganda-Ghana Exchange: an education and research program enabling mobility and transregional engagement in Africa through excursions. Once every year, a group of artists embarks on a trip to engage in cultural tours and art visits to different African Countries. The program prioritizes art practitioners in East Africa travelling to exemplary art schools, art scenes, and artists-led projects on the African continent. The 2023 iteration was collectively organized by UNDER GROUND Contemporary Art, Vodo Art Society and Lab, Weaver Bird Residency, and blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

⁴ Bailer et al., *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking*.

spatialities.⁵ For Okai, clay becomes a medium of simultaneity and paradox: fragile yet enduring, ancestral yet futuristic—where "the one is the many."⁶

Method and Theory: Bachelard meets Meillassoux at the Dogon Forge

This study is anchored in experimental ethnography and comparative visual studies, joining close reading, immersive curatorial fieldwork, and exhibition-making and analysis. The authors follow Allan Kyakonye and Frederick Ebenezer Okai through studios, workshops, and exhibition settings in Uganda and Ghana, gathering fieldnotes, long-form conversations, process photographs, audio transcripts, and installation sketches.⁷ The aim is simple: to let the work speak in its materials and settings, and to learn how those materials hold memory and open futures.

Three theoretical commitments guide the article's method. First, with Bachelard, the study treats matter as a bearer of memory: surfaces, densities, burns, glazes, and seams do their own remembering and prompt acts of imagination.⁸ Second, drawing on Dogon teachings about the vitality of substance—metal, clay, water, earth—as bearers of force and history, the study approaches the artists' workspaces, materials, equipment, and processes like a forge or granary where transformations are social and cosmological at once.⁹ Third, following Meillassoux, the study grants clay, foil, pigment, code, hand, and the human viewer the same ontological footing; no element is merely a tool for another.¹⁰ Taken together, these theoretical commitments shift the guiding question from "What does the work represent?" to "What does the constituent matter remember and make possible?"

A comparative reading of Kyakonye's *Egg Portrait Series* and Okai's assemblage for *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs* highlights a shared material poetics in which decommissioned or humble substances become sites of cultural and metaphysical significance. Positioning the works within medium interrogation and experimental ethnography, the paper argues that both artists mark a shift in contemporary African art toward speculative pathways. Their practices unsettle canonical hierarchies of representation and advance material-centered ways of engaging memory. They also register the exchanges that link the West and East African art scenes despite geographic distance.

Further, the study traces how each artist develops a poetics of materiality that repurposes mundane, discarded, or devalued matter as carriers of cultural, political, and metaphysical force. Though their material lineages differ, both foreground impermanence, recombination, and the agency of substances. Matter is not background; it is a site of inquiry where the medium becomes both constructor and conduit of memory. In this sense, their practices challenge established representational modes and open new material frameworks for thinking past, present, and future. Through this lens, we place their work within broader conversations on medium profanation, experimental ethnography, and speculative materialism. What follows from method to practice, tracking how foil and clay, fire and glaze, reflection and touch, shape the memory-work of two artists and reorganize the viewing encounter.

⁵ Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, "Curatorial Statement, Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs" (2022).

⁶ k̄r̄i'k̄ach̄ā seid'ou, *Introduction to Giles Delueze: Post Script Societies. [Pedagogical Performance by K̄r̄i'k̄ach̄ā Seid'ou]*. (Kumasi: blaxTARLINES KUMASI, 2025).

⁷ Violet Nantume co-curated the *SILENT INVASIONS: The Art of Material Hacking* group exhibition, and organized the *Travel Somewhere Nice* educational trips, artist residencies, and exchange programmes that brought artists from Uganda to Ghana and vice versa. k̄r̄i'k̄ach̄ā seid'ou was the artistic director of Frederick Okai's *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs* exhibition project and the project advisor of the *SILENT INVASIONS* exhibition.

⁸ For more on the creative relations between matter and memory, see Gaston Bachelard's philosophical reflections; Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983); Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988); Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2011); Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Kenneth Haltman (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2002).

⁹ Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1965). This publication is a foundational account of Dogon cosmology gathered through extended dialogues with the Dogon elder Ogotemmêli. It details creation (Amma), the water figure Nommo, the earth ancestor Lebe, and ritual-technological knowledge

¹⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

Material within Memory, Memory within Material

In the practices of the two artists under review, Allan Kyakonye and Frederick Ebenezer Okai, materiality is both a medium and a philosophical ground through which memory, history, and being are interrogated. Both artists deploy their chosen materials not as inert substances, but as epistemic instruments charged with the affective and the symbolic. For Kyakonye, the egg functions as a painter's medium, a stylistic device, and a cosmological signifier of genesis and renaissance.¹¹ His work further explores the latent potential of decay, offering a metaphor for the fragility of memory and the mythic overtones to portraiture. His use of fire to scar and discolour collaged tinfoil speaks to a broader logic of transformation, wherein the valueless is re-inscribed with meaning through autobiographical and historical layering.¹² Conversely, Okai locates his practice in the transformative potential of form, where clay becomes a vehicle for examining his relationship to it as a living being. He is preoccupied with how the material manifests in the production of objects that become part of our cultural symbolism.¹³ Oscillating between the ephemeral and the permanent, the archival and the speculative. His work traverses disciplines—blending sculpture, immersive technologies, and ethnographic inquiry in order to investigate the politics of cultural production and the relational ethics of materials. While Kyakonye excavates collective memory through portraiture and salvaged matter, Okai constructs immersive ecologies that confront the viewer with the unstable boundaries between artifact, environment, and narrative. At the heart of both practices lies a commitment to the philosophy of process: an attention to how materials carry and reshape meaning, and how artistic labor itself becomes an act of critical storytelling; one that is as much about unmaking as it is about invention. Okai reflects on his means and thoughts thus:

My work largely focuses on Indigenous pottery practice. I am studying the aesthetics and acquiring knowledge in its production processes and materiality. I merge it with my training in studio practice to create vessels with value beyond utility purposes. I do not rank either Indigenous pottery practice or studio practice as superior to the other. Rather, I find freedom to choose between a rich array of techniques and processes for my work.¹⁴

Both Kyakonye and Okai engage in material experimentation that reclaims memory and interrogates systems of value, employing radically different yet conceptually resonant practices. Though rooted in distinct traditions, Kyakonye, within the contemporary portraiture and collage, and Okai, within an expanded field of sculptural and immersive digital media, both artists turn to materials with embedded histories to construct layered visual languages.

For Kyakonye, tinfoil serves as both a medium and a metaphor. Repurposed and often charred, the tinfoil embodies acts of remembrance and forgetting; it is a site where collective memory is both obscured and illuminated. The tinfoil's reflective and unstable surface becomes a terrain for blurred identities and fragmented recollections, amplifying the ephemeral quality of memory itself. In a parallel gesture, Okai works with clay—earthbound, malleable, and charged with anthropological resonance. Clay, like foil, straddles temporality: fragile when unfired, permanent when transformed. Okai plays the role of a pseudo-ethnographer, moving across several communities specialized in pottery in Ghana and learning from women engaged in its production. He collects pots that are culturally still in use, then he fuses the collection of works with theirs to create new forms. Okai's approach to clay includes cutting, piercing, stacking, and joining, underscoring how history and culture are formed and fractured over time. His use of familiar, often organic or domestic imagery is transformed through experimental processes, also signaling an investment in the material as a bearer of cultural residue and human contact.¹⁵

Thematically, both artists engage with overwritten or occluded histories. Kyakonye's ghostly portraits speak to the mutability of the representation of collective histories. At the same time, Okai's sculptural installations and new media works explore indigenous pottery production through the lens of critical anthropology and geography, offering alternative narratives that are speculative, poetic, and at

¹¹ Julia Gyemant, *Curatorial Notes on Allan Kyakonye's Egg Portraits*, Museum of Selves (Berlin: Unpublished, 2021).

¹² Bailer et al., *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking*.

¹³ Violet Nantume and Frederick Ebenezer Okai, *Conception of Solo Exhibition "Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthrough*, 2022.

¹⁴ Violet Nantume, "Redefining Pottery," *ContemporaryAnd*, 2022, <https://contemporaryand.com/en/c-and-magazine/texts/frederick-ebenezer-okai-investigates-the-possibilities-of-clay>.

¹⁵ Bailer et al., *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking*.

times ironically playful. While Kyakonye's technique centers around collage and painting, his use of tinfoil mimics sculptural topographies, suggesting landscape and relief. Okai, while grounded in ceramics and sculpture, extends his work into multimedia experiences. In both cases, play and experimentation are essential: Kyakonye blurs faces to provoke ambiguity and curiosity; Okai reconfigures everyday objects and materials to open up new interpretations.

Material Practice and the Poetics of Surface in Allan Kyakonye's Portraiture

Kyakonye's approach to portraiture reflects a profound material intelligence, where the act of painting is as much about recovery as it is about reinvention. His work combines traditional media—such as charcoal, acrylics, and egg tempera—with unconventional surfaces of discoloured aluminium tinfoil, resulting in mixed-media paintings that straddle the line between canonical art history and experimental material culture. This deliberate hybridity repositions portraiture within contemporary African practice as well as subverts the formal hierarchies long embedded in the medium's Western lineage.

Kyakonye's material process begins with the assembly of irregularly shaped supports, typically comprising crumpled, layered tinfoil fixed onto canvas.¹⁶ Kyakonye started collecting these tinfoil sheets when he was nine years old. They are scorched with fire to create a rich and unstable ground, marbled with oxidized hues of bronze, rust, silver, and gold. Each tinfoil canvas emerges as a palimpsest—a surface whose corrosion and patina metaphorically signal both archaeological depth and sovereign decay. The artist's decision to continue gathering tinfoil speaks to his intuitive sense that disregarded matter holds latent historical and symbolic potential. As curator Julia Gyemant observes, "sometimes the material gives glimpses into the future... its story is not yet written."¹⁷



Figure 1: Detail, Egg Portrait I (2018), Egg tempera on tinfoil, 175 x 275cm, Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye

¹⁶ Julia Gyemant, *Museum of Selves - Portraying Becoming* (Berlin: Unpublished, 2021).

¹⁷ Gyemant, *Curatorial Notes on Allan Kyakonye's Egg Portraits*, *Museum of Selves*.

Upon this fractured base, Kyakonye applies egg tempera of his own making—a traditional medium derived from pigment and egg yolk, historically associated with sacred icon painting in Byzantine and early Renaissance art. The use of egg tempera introduces a conceptual tension: while the egg evokes themes of birth, potential, and cyclical renewal, it is also a delicate substance prone to spoilage and decay. This echoes the artist's interest in impermanence and fragmentation, a theme mirrored in the fugitive, haloed backgrounds of his cameo-style portraits and in the aged, foil-bound skins of his canvases. The egg, as both medium and form, thus underwrites Kyakonye's philosophical framework, wherein history is not fixed but constantly ruptured and reborn.

Colour in Kyakonye's work is deployed with restraint and intentionality. His portraits often feature monochrome renderings (Figure 1)—graphite or charcoal depictions of non-idealized sitters, set against backgrounds saturated in ochre gold, burnt sienna, moss green, or dull crimson. These chromatic fields, produced by fire or pigment, oscillate between iconic luminosity and weathered erosion, creating an emotional register that is simultaneously reverential and melancholic. The use of gold and ochre borders, for example, serves to canonize the sitter, drawing from the visual language of religious iconography within symbolic frameworks of sanctity and heroism (Figure 6).

The form of the canvas itself is equally significant. The oval, egg-like shaped vignette—a recurring compositional element in Kyakonye's *30 Egg Portrait Series* (2018-2023), functions as both a visual motif and metaphysical vessel. The oval recalls Renaissance medallions, used historically to immortalize royalty and nobility. The egg was also used as a cosmogonic symbol found in mythologies across the world, the most recurrent one from Africa being the Dogon primordial egg whose cardinal elements, earth, water, fire, and air, also form the ultimate material base of Kyakonye's process.¹⁸ This shape governs the spatial logic of the portraits: subjects are often enclosed in the oval, surrounded by repetitive spiral or floral motifs (Figure 2), suggesting ancestral lineage, fertility, or divine geometry. In some works, smaller medallion portraits orbit the central figure like a constellation, conjuring the idea of an extended family tree or spiritual genealogy.



Figure 2: *Egg Portrait VI, Dejazmatch Alemayehu* (2019),
Egg tempera on tin foil, 100 x 150cm. Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye.

¹⁸ Harold Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology: The Mythmaker as Storyteller* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

Kyakonye's figuration is both quasi-academic and symbolically rich. The sitters, often based on figures culled from royal archives or obscure historical photographs, are depicted in formal dress—suits, headdresses, regalia—rendered in a frank naturalistic style that emphasizes poise and presence. At the same time, these figures are inflected with surreal, almost dreamlike elements: cosmic headdresses, floating hands, eyes embedded in clothing, and shadowy, non-linear backdrops. These symbolic insertions function not as clarifications, but as clues—fragments that refuse closure, pointing towards suppressed parts of stories, myths, or alternate readings of the archive.

In Kyakonye's later portrait explorations (Figure 3, 4), the use of textured and patinated tin foil becomes increasingly dominant, progressively enveloping the entire bust of the figure. This formal shift not only gives the portrait an Expressionist touch but also intensifies and foregrounds surface over anatomical precision. The background, in contrast to previous works, is rendered stark and vacant, punctuated only by recurring motifs of numerous smaller figurative medallions and eggs. These elements previously integrated with the figure now appear displaced, suggesting a symbolic fragmentation or externalization of the portrait's identity. The accumulation of foil and symbolic detritus may be read as a meditation on memory, cultural sedimentation, or the erosion of individual agency under the weight of collective histories.



Figure 3: *Forbidden to Touch* (2023), Acrylics, Egg tempera, canvas and tinfoil, 45 x 54cm. Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye.



Figure 4: *The Cheddar Man* (2023), Acrylics, Egg tempera, canvas and tinfoil, 45 x 54cm. Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye.

The material and aesthetic dualities at the heart of Kyakonye's practice—decay and devotion, realism and iconography, found objects and sacred symbols culminate in a body of work that invites viewers to reconsider the visual grammar of memory. His portraits do not propose a single authoritative version of the past; instead, they offer what Achille Mbembe might call an "aesthetics of the trace"—a poetic system in which presence and absence cohabit the same visual field.¹⁹ Through this, Kyakonye positions the portrait not as a fixed likeness, but as a ritual site of inquiry, where the viewer becomes a co-participant in the excavation and reanimation of history.

Reimagining Historical Portraiture: Museum of Selves - Portraying becoming

In December 2021, Allan Kyakonye facilitated a two-week youth art workshop centered on self-portraiture, aimed at prompting young participants to reflect on identity and its fluidity during a critical

¹⁹ Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002).

moment of personal and social transition.²⁰ The initiative culminated in the *Museum of Selves 2021*, a pop-up exhibition held at Afropecene StudioLab in Kabalagala, Kampala, Uganda. The event featured both the workshop participants' self-portraits and Kyakonye's own Egg Portrait Series, marking the artist's first major public exhibition.

On monumental (Figure 2), foil-treated canvases, Kyakonye presented layered portraits that interweave ancestral symbolism, historical referents, and subtle inscriptions of his own personal biography. These works formed the conceptual and material backbone of the exhibition. Alongside Kyakonye's portraits, eight emerging artists—Cika Moureen, Kagoya Rashida, Mulukusa Steven, Catherine Nakato, Babirye Caroline, Nambozo Charity, Yawe Hashim, and Ashemeza Elizabeth—produced compelling visual reflections of the self, drawing freely from their preferred materials and aesthetic vocabularies. The collective output reflected a diversity of voices unified by a shared investigation into self, family memory, and the body as archive.

In his own contribution to the exhibition, Kyakonye reclaims and reconfigures the visual language of historical portraiture through his distinct medallion-shaped compositions. These works reimagine royal portraiture not simply as a genre, but as a site of intervention—where form and medium are both transformed. Drawing on archival research sourced from royal libraries and digital repositories, Kyakonye reconstructs images of historically significant royal figures—kings, queens, and leaders—whose significant and controversial legacies hover at the thresholds of rumour. These figures (Figure 5) are often depicted with a striking frontal gaze and iconographic composure that echoes 19th-century bourgeois portraiture, particularly in their composition and regality of bearing.



Figure 5: Detail, *Egg Portrait XVII* (2020), *Egg tempera on tinfoil*, 110 x 150cm. Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye

²⁰ Gyemant, *Museum of Selves - Portraying Becoming*.

However, what distinguishes Kyakonye's practice is his deliberate material departure from the canonical traditions of oil painting on canvas. Rather than embracing the permanence and prestige of oil, Kyakonye opts for egg tempera, a medium historically rooted in religious iconography but here imbued with fragility and decay. This choice resonates symbolically with the egg itself—a universal emblem of beginnings, cycles, and latent potential.²¹ Coupled with this is his use of crumpled aluminium tinfoil, fire-scorched and weathered, which he once collected with hopes of trade, but now repurposes as a tactile ground for historical excavation. His work subverts the valorization of permanence in classical portraiture by emphasizing impermanence, material ephemerality, and socio-economic marginality.



Figure 6: *Egg Portrait V* (2019), Egg tempera on tinfoil, 185 x 285cm, Photo credit: Allan Kyakonye

Kyakonye's portraits, though rooted in archival sources, are not fixated on factual recuperation. Instead, they offer symbolic reconstructions—medallions of ambiguity—where historical subjects are surrounded by cryptic visual codes that suggest hidden narratives or unspoken truths. For instance, in Figure 5, the central figure is adorned with celestial and regal motifs while flanked by purple and yellow hands, signs whose meanings remain open to interpretation. These motifs act as mnemonic devices and poetic distortions, suggesting that history is never singular, but always refracted through layers of interpretation, omission, and speculation.

By enlarging the traditionally intimate scale of the medallion, often reserved for personal devotional or commemorative portraits, Kyakonye engages in a radical upscaling that emphasizes monumentality (Figure 6). The works channel the conventions of Victorian studio portraiture but on tactile, fragile grounds. In other instances, the figure is posed formally (Figure 2), reminiscent of early colonial photographic portraiture, yet framed by a field of textured foil stained with earthy ochres and browns. In doing so, the artist dislodges the authority of the historical portrait, presenting instead a speculative image-space in which multiplicity and fragmentation challenge the fixity of the archive.

²¹ Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).



Figure 7: *Lady in Blue* (2021) Egg tempera on tinfoil, 110 x 150cm. Photo credit: Wasswa James

This approach reveals a broader philosophical concern with the limits of historical truth and the instability of memory. While Kyakonye references known figures, he simultaneously undermines the illusion of objectivity in portraiture by embedding these representations in contingent material histories—fire, decay, rupture, and reconstruction. His work aligns with post-structuralist views of history as a series of narratives rather than an absolute, engaging a counter-monumental strategy that affirms subjectivity, absence, and contradiction.²²

Ultimately, Kyakonye's practice not only deconstructs the aesthetics of traditional portraiture but also interrogates the ideological apparatus through which monarch memories are preserved and performed. In this sense, his use of nontraditional materials and symbolic lexicons functions as a conceptual rejoinder to the politics of representation—foregrounding not only what is remembered, but how it is remembered and by whom.

Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs: Form and Fiction

With two studios in Kumasi and Sunyani, Frederick Ebenezer Okai keeps an active studio practice, but to constitute a spatial and conceptual inquiry into the epistemologies of pottery, the ontologies of clay, and the mutable boundaries between artifact and art, the artist held a solo exhibition *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs* at the Gyamadudu Museum in Kwabre-Heman, Ghana.²³ Curated by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, the exhibition drew from both autochthonous and industrial systems of pottery production. Okai did not merely present objects but assembled a constellation of forms, ranging from video, sculpture, and sound installation to immersive VR—that foreground the layered entanglement of geography, memory, and form.

²² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

²³ Ohene-Ayeh, "Curatorial Statement, *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs*."



Figure 8: *Obi Ara Ho Hia*, (2022). Hand-built and collected pottery objects, galvanize mesh, and light, 746.8c x 789.9 x 355.6cm. Photo credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai.

The title of the show—*Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs*—signaled a critical tension between rootedness and rupture. The “earthy” suggests origins, groundedness, materiality, and tactility. “Breakthroughs,” by contrast, invokes intervention, transformation, and unpredictability.²⁴ These two terms capture the essence of Okai’s practice in this exhibition: to ground speculative futures in the sediment of historical material practices, while enabling them to break free of categorical containment.

The works are experiments in the strictest sense of the term. That is to say, beginning a process without preempting the outcome; or embarking on a journey on which the artist must learn from his creation at every moment in time so as to understand where it may lead; that at any point in the process the works simultaneously exist as complete and incomplete things, always espousing the potential of becoming more than what they are at any particular moment (complemented by the artist’s preference for biscuit-firing all the clay objects on display). It is this experimental value adventurously finding expression in the works— simultaneously incorporating traditional and institutional (modern) pottery methods— and striving beyond them, which signifies their breakthrough from conventional limits....²⁵

At the heart of the exhibition is material hybridity. Okai combines locally sourced ceramic vessels with imported ceramic wares—cups, bowls, jars—from Asia, Europe, and North America. These objects, often fractured and recomposed, enact a politics of assemblage: broken shards are not repaired but reassembled into post-functional sculptures (Figures 9, 10). Okai’s mosaic-like process and the anthropological layering of time and region. They articulate a new, contingent material vocabulary in which historical and contemporary meanings interface.

²⁴ Nantume and Okai, *Conception of Solo Exhibition "Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthrough"*.

²⁵ Ohene-Ayeh, “Curatorial Statement, *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs*.”



Figure 9: Recollections, (2019) HFBK - Hamburg, Germany. Sculptures mounted on white wooden plinths. Photo credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai.



Figure 10: Amachiaa, Yaa Kyem ne Yaa Asinaa (2024), Cone 1 fired, earthenware body, metal wire, polyurethane, manganese, and smoke, 91.44cm x 89.4 cm x 125.7 cm. Photo credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai.

The pieces are not merely reconstructed in formal terms but re-imagined in conceptual space. Vessels collected from regions like Bawku, Sirigu, Afari, Bonakyire, Jejeti, and Fesi carry with them deep local histories and traditional practices dating as far back as the nineteenth century. Okai's quasi-ethnographic approach unearths these histories only to fracture, question, and recompose them, producing a critique of linear heritage narratives.

The exhibition's site, the Gyamadudu Museum, was itself an architectural experiment composed of interlinked earthen domes that enhanced the spatial logic of the works (Figure 8). Okai activates entrances, ceilings, floors, and wall-scapes, echoing indigenous kiln designs, rural architecture, and pottery cemeteries.²⁶ This integration of form with space transforms the museum into a fictional, inhabitable structure—a kind of ceramic cosmos. Installations, as seen in Figures 11 and 12, merged with and activated the architectural environment. The audience did not just view the work; they encountered and moved through it, turning spectatorship into a contingent, relational act.



Figure 11: Fie, (2021) Ceramic sculptural installation. Photo credit: Edem Dedi.

²⁶ Ohene-Ayeh, "Curatorial Statement, Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs."



Figure 12: When the Gods Speak Heaven Listens, (2022) Sculpture installation – Ceramics, wire, light, 211 x 202 x 442cm, Photo credit: Frederick E. Okai, and Edem Dedi

Significantly, Okai mobilizes not just sight but the aural and haptic registers. In site-responsive sound installations, material forms were extended through acoustic textures that echo clay's fragility, echo, and resonance. Okai's integration of digital media and his cross-temporal, cross-sensory approach included VR and immersive spatial experiences (Figure 13), further complicating how memory and touch operate in digital environments. Through these modes, Okai makes tangible the paradox of clay: its capacity to be at once permanent and perishable, real and speculative.²⁷



Figure 13: Efi Kesiem (2022) - Extract from VR - Photo credit: Akwasi Bediako Afrane.

Underlying his installations is the idea of forging fiction, not as deception, but as creative fabrication, a mode of re-imagining history through sculptural invention. In doing so, Okai aligns with

²⁷ Besides the susceptibility to ephemerality and permanence, Okai also draws on clay's profound plastic possibilities of clay. Bailer et al., *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking*.

Afrofuturist and anthropological frameworks, yet maintains a playful, ironic distance from strict disciplinary boundaries. The works are as much about process as they are about form: stamping, welding, breaking, shifting, and ultimately transforming utilitarian and ritualistic objects into poetic, often disorienting forms.



Figure 14: Nsasaawa (2024), *Cone 1* fired, earthenware body, metal wire, polyurethane, manganese, and smoke, 500 cm x 222 cm x 152.4 cm. Photo credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai.

In *Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs*, Okai extends ceramics beyond craft, beyond sculpture, into a plural domain that incorporates ritual, debris, memory, and digital speculation. His work through material forms; a gesture toward re-worlding African art practice—rooted in clay, yet open to contingent possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Converging Frameworks

The dialogue between Allan Kyakonye and Frederick Ebenezer Okai rests on their deeply conceptual and materially embodied approaches to medium profanation, format transformation, and recalibration of spectatorship. Despite working in distinct geographies and through divergent material vocabularies—Kyakonye through aluminum tinfoil and portraiture, Okai through clay, spatial installation, and immersive digital media—both artists articulate a shared philosophical framework rooted in the poetics of materiality and the politics of remembrance. Their practices converge in the belief that materials are not passive supports but active agents capable of encoding, distorting, and reanimating history.

Kyakonye's use of aluminum tinfoil, fire, and egg tempera interrogates the sanctity and fragility of archival memory. His surreal portraiture renders the ephemeral sacred, transfiguring discarded materials into monumental artifacts and subverting canonical hierarchies of representation. Likewise, Okai's manipulation of clay—cut, fractured, and recomposed—alongside immersive technologies, destabilizes linear narratives of cultural continuity. His installations transform the gallery into a living archive, where memory unfolds through spatial, sonic, and tactile encounters. In dismantling and remixing anthropological forms, Okai constructs alternate cultural cartographies that resist essentialism.

What binds these practices is a mutual investment in materiality as both site and method of epistemological and speculative inquiry. Both artists employ unconventional, affect-laden materials to explore the socio-cultural afterlives of subjectivity, displacement, and transformation. Their conceptual frameworks position materials as mnemonic agents—vessels that carry both personal and collective residues. Processes of fragmentation and reassembly become not merely formal strategies but epistemic tools that foreground historical discontinuities and invite speculative engagements with the future.

Ultimately, this imagined dialogue reveals how contemporary African artists are renegotiating the intersection of material and immaterial heritage. Through localized yet analytical, expansive practices, Kyakonye and Okai pose urgent questions about temporality, memory, and cultural persistence. Their comparative relevance lies not in stylistic affinity but in their shared capacity to theorize matter as memory—rendering visible the often-unseen architectures of the past.

Both artists position artistic labor as deeply entangled with ritual, process, and transformation. Their works function as open texts, visual and spatial layers through which viewers are invited to traverse the unstable terrains of identity and historical remembrance. In doing so, they disrupt normative modes of historical representation and assert new, material-driven frameworks for encountering African pasts and futures. This study underscores the necessity of situating contemporary African art within broader discourses of material philosophy, speculative history, and experimental form. Kyakonye and Okai, despite geographical distance, share conceptual affinities and material approaches that transcend conventional artistic categories, using everyday materials as conceptual tools to collaboratively challenge historical narratives and offer alternative expressions of African art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachelard, Gaston. *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988.
- . *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority*. Translated by Mary McAllester Jones. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2011.
- . *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Translated by Kenneth Haltman. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2002.
- . *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Translated by Alan C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- . *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Translated by Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983.
- Bailer, Sacia, Julia Gyemant, Nantume Violet, Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson, and Kayonga Tristan Tani Zitoni. *Silent Invasions: The Art of Material Hacking*. Masaka: Under Ground, 2023.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Griaule, Marcel. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1965.
- Gyemant, Julia. *Curatorial Notes on Allan Kyakonye's Egg Portraits, Museum of Selves*. Berlin: Unpublished, 2021.
- . *Museum of Selves - Portraying Becoming*. Berlin: Unpublished, 2021.
- Mbembe, Achille. "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits." In *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton. Dordrecht: Springer, 2002.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. London and New York: Continuum, 2008.
- Nantume, Violet. "Redefining Pottery." *ContemporaryAnd*, 2022. <https://contemporaryand.com/en/c-and-magazine/texts/frederick-ebenezer-okai-investigates-the-possibilities-of-clay>.
- Nantume, Violet, and Frederick Ebenezer Okai. *Conception of Solo Exhibition "Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthrough"*, 2022.
- Ohene-Ayeh, Kwasi. "Curatorial Statement, Earthy Structures and Contingent Breakthroughs." 2022.
- Okeke-Agulu, Chika. *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Scheub, Harold. *A Dictionary of African Mythology: The Mythmaker as Storyteller*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

seid'ou, qarî'kachä. *Introduction to Giles Deleuze: Post Script Societies. [Pedagogical Performance by Kari'kachä Seid'ou]*. Kumasi: blaxTARLINES KUMASI, 2025.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Violet Nantume is an artist, curator, writer, and the founding director of the contemporary art space UNDER GROUND in Kampala, Uganda, since 2015. As a cultural producer, Nantume has worked for thirteen (13) years with artists and curators in Eastern Africa, Ghana, South Africa, Angola and Germany. She is a regular contributor to ArtForum and Contemporary And publications; in 2022 she was the elected speaker of the Okwui Ewenzor Distinguished Lecture at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. Nantume has curated *BULUMA: AMAKOWOLA! (The Return)* a solo exhibition by Buluma Ochungo Mordecai. She co-curated exhibitions; *Silent Invasion: The Art of Material Hacking* at Amasaka Gallery in Uganda, *We Will now Go to Kpaaza: The work and legacy of modernist Uche Okeke*, at the Iwalewaha Bayreuth, *That Those Beings Be Not Being*, at the Alpha nova & Galerie Futura in Berlin. She curated; *Muntu Maxim*, an experimental web residency with Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart. *Close*, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, *Indulgence* at Goethe-Institute Nairobi, *Being Her(e)* in Luanda, *Zikunta: Gale of Human, Heart of Darkness, Cast a Light on Prejudice; A Photography Exhibition*, in Kampala. She chaired the curatorial committee of the KLA' Art Festival in 2014.

karî'kachä seid'ou (formerly Edward [Kevin] Amankwah) is an artist-intellectual, poet, mathematician, and educator. He is Ghana's key figure in non-proprietary art and the architect of the "Emancipatory Art Teaching Project" that transformed the fine art curriculum of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi. He is a co-founder of blaxTARLINES KUMASI, an art incubator and open-source community inspired by his non-proprietary art practice and pedagogical projects. karî'kachä seid'ou has mentored an impressive number of artists, curators, collectives, and writers of the millennial and Gen Z generations. He prefers to work silently, incognito, and only within Africa. He is the current Dean of Ghana's renowned College of Art, now the Faculty of Art at KNUST.