

SAMUEL NORTEY¹

EDWIN K. BODJAWAH²

ROBERT AMOANYI³

sammynort@gmail.com¹

edwino4u@gmail.com²

bobamoanyi@gmail.com³

Faculty of Art ^{1,2,3}

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and
Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

Critical interventions in emerging Ghanaian contemporary ceramic practice

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Abstract

This article discusses Ghanaian ceramic art and the critical interventions that are driving an emerging contemporary ceramic practice. Ghanaian ceramic art, until a decade ago (from 2011), have had a stagnant traditional practice and has struggled to be seen, heard and valued within local and global contemporary art discourse. Reviews and reforms of art education have provided critical interventions to addressing this issue. Discussing the works of Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, Eugene Ofori Agyei, Frederick Ebenezer Okai, Alex Awuku and a few other Ghanaian traditional artists, we reveal how these young Ghanaian contemporary ceramic artists are navigating their path to creating new artistic identities and pushing the boundaries of conventional Ghanaian ceramics, questioning stereotyping and pigeonholing. These developments also point to the meaningful expansion of ceramics in contemporary art education more generally.

Keywords

Contemporary ceramics, critical interventions, Ghanaian ceramic artists, ceramic exhibitions, art education

1. Introduction

Ghana has seen an explosion in local concepts as well as contemporary Western art in the last fifteen years through the efforts of individuals and institutions who are contributing through exhibitions, site-specific installations and art interventions (Nagy & Jordan 2018, p.1). In the Western contemporary art world, little has been known of Ghanaian ceramic art. Whenever Ghana has to be discussed in any contemporary art discourse, ceramics seems to be receiving the least of discussions as compared to the other fine art practice such as painting, sculpture, textiles, and others. The Ghanaian representation at the Venice Biennale in 2019 did not include ceramics, speaking volumes of how the Ghanaian ceramic community has had little connection to the contemporary international art world.

African ceramics have largely been brought to public attention through a few publications developed in conjunction with major exhibitions and these stand as important markers in the field (Berzock 2007; Aidoo 2018; Adjei, Wynn & seid'ou 2020). Most of African artists failed to document their works or have them documented by art historians. According to Nortey, Bodjawah and Poku (2021), there were no or fewer Ghanaian art historians to assist in the documentation of artworks. In view of this, Onuzulike (2015) suggested that African artists must learn to sign and document their works properly and also track them through various provenances. Consequently, the few Ghanaian ceramic artworks that found themselves in museums all over the world are presented without much information on the artists or the themes presented.

Ghanaian ceramic artists such as William Charles Owusu, Kofi Asante, Daniel Cobblah, Kingsley Kofi Broni, Constantine Nicholas Kwame Kokroko, James Kwame Amoah, Joseph Kwame Nsiah, Parpah Senanu Kwawukume amongst others are very much tied to the traditions and history of Ghana, constructing identities and educating viewers through their works. Their works carry symbolic messages which are key to African identities, political and social issues, religion and beliefs. However, they have been underrepresented within African ceramic art and at the global level simply because there have been little publications of their works and inability to track their exhibition histories. Figure 1 shows William Charles Owusu's ceramic mosaic at the Kotoka International Airport, Accra, Ghana and the influence of minimalism and contemporaneity are vividly seen with the repetition of identical units, simplicity, and geometric shapes. Another example of minimalism, repetition and simplicity is Kofi Antubam's ceramic mosaic on Baiden Powell's building in Accra (see figure 2). The Ghanaian ceramic art movement that uses predominantly the principle of repetition to

create visual excitement in their works ought to have developed this practice, however, seid'ou (2015) reiterated that Ghana by unexplainable gaps could not capture practical lessons of eccentric, deskkilled and conceptual practices and this affected the development of art practice.

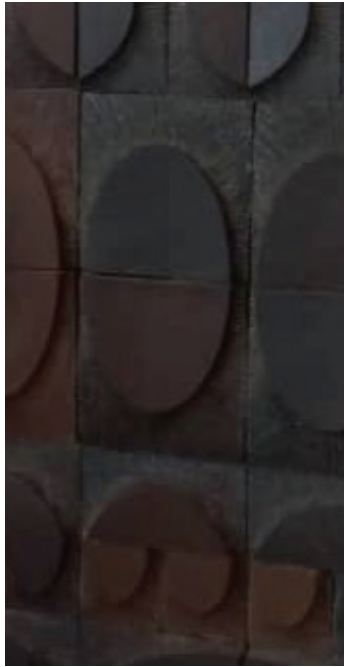


Figure 1: Owusu, W.C. (n.d). Mural [Ceramic], Kotoka International Airport, Accra
(Photo Credit: Samuel Nortey, 2023).



Figure 2: Antubam, K. (n.d). Mosaic [Ceramics], Baiden Powell Building in Accra
(Photo Credit: John Nii Marley, 2014).

Indeed, Ghana's art exhibition waned in the last decades of the 20th century with the inception of the neo-liberalisation of state institutions and economies (Woets, 2011). The approach to exhibitions in Ghana was based on the trade 'fair' flavoured salon style, that is, filling up commercial gallery interiors (seid'ou et al., 2021). seid'ou (2014b) observed that Ghanaian art education has certain colonial vestiges such as the hand and eye concept (drawing of what one sees) which were very antagonistic to the development of Ghanaian art practice. Built on industrial skills and manpower in a faux colonial industry, Ghanaian art training was limited to drawing feeble lines, something that limited creativity (Nortey et al, 2021). Ghanaian ceramic art has with limited exhibition histories, development of forms and material heteronomy. This study looks at a current shift in this history and how young Ghanaian contemporary ceramic artists are actively involved in local and international art histories (US and Europe), pushing traditional boundaries aided by globalisation and navigating paths to creating identities and referencing other materials for holistic higher and public education. According to Mason and Vella (2013), in a more holistic Visual Arts education system that resists traditional forms of instruction confined to acquiring only technical competencies based on a canonical set of criteria, there is satisfaction for the viewer and the artist. A case in point is Pepper's (2009) theory that living in the diaspora encourages emerging artists to appreciate where they come from and how they can incorporate artistic cultural practices in creating their works.

This article discusses the works of emerging Ghanaian contemporary ceramists namely Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, Eugene Ofori Agyei, Frederick Ebenezer Okai, and Alex Awuku, in terms of their development and impact in contemporary art context, and the critical interventions that influenced this development.

2. The Trajectory of the Ghanaian Contemporary Ceramic Art

Literature regarding the history of ceramics practice in Ghana is very limited; however, oral traditions reveal that it was formally practiced through an apprenticeship system in every household by women who were the matriarchs of this profession. With industrialisation on the rise from 1940, men joined the practice of ceramics in Ghana. According to Harrod (1989), Achimota School was established by the colonial government, to formally train artists. Herbert Vladmir Meyerowitz (Principal of the Art School in Achimota) promoted ceramics as a most suitable profession to begin the transformation of West Africa towards being self-supporting, turning traditional arts into new industries (p.14). Meyerowitz invited Michael Cardew, a British ceramist, to assist in

setting up ceramic factories in Ghana and this initiative led to the opening of several ceramic centres which started producing earthenware bowls, pots, and decorative pieces (Antubam, 1963).

James Kwame Amoah, William Charles Owusu, Kofi Asante, Kingsley Kofi Broni, among others, were few Ghanaian traditional ceramic artists who developed their hand forming techniques and created objects based on concepts of cultural backgrounds well as every day activities such as Amoah's *Lovers* as shown on Figure 3a. A side-by-side comparison of Amoah's *Lovers* and Vincent Frimpong's *Paradigm of Captivity* shows that the current contemporary practices from 2011-2023 are more of repeating identical units, engagement of other industrial materials such as fabrics, robes, metals, basketry whilst the historical traditional ones were of single installations such as Amoah's "*lovers*" (3a). Again, the current practice of Ghanaian contemporary artists is of large scales using industrial modes of production such as casting. An example is Vincent Frimpong's *power of captivity* in Figure 3b. Whilst the traditional practice used mostly slip oxides and creating finishes, the contemporary artists employ same oxides but include other materials such as fabrics, metals, robes and videos in creating effects on their works (see Frederick Ebenezer Okai's *Light Soup*, Fig. 8a). In terms of forms, one could see influences of the traditional artists' techniques on the contemporary ones. Both practices are able to create interesting forms such as Kingsley Kofi Broni's *Tea Bread* and Alex Awuku's *Bondage and Reactions* on Figure 4 (a & b).



3a



3b

Figure 3a: JK Amoah, *Lovers*, 1990, Ceramics, Slip Oxide Fig. **3b:** Vincent Frimpong, *Paradigm of Captivity*, 2019, Ceramic installation, manganese, rope, variables. Accra Jamestown Café (Courtesy of Vincent Frimpong).



4a



4b

Figure 4a: Broni, KK (nd.). Tea Bread, [Clay, glazed]. Home Collection. **Figure 4b:** Awuku, A. (2021). Bondage and Reactions, [Clay, Mixed Media], Located at KNUST Ceramic Studio (Photo Credit: Robert Amoanyi, 2021).

Ghana has very few art galleries to exhibit artworks. Currently, these contemporary artists create their own space for their shows. Before the turn of the 21st century, the traditional ceramic artists most times had to exhibit their works at the roadside or during traditional festivals. The explanation is that during colonial governance education, the hand and eye curriculum prioritised commercial marketability. This curriculum emphasised industrial and commercial work such as still life work where the intent was to reproduce exactly what one could see (Fowle 1847; seid'ou 2014a). seid'ou et al. (2021) explained that by the turn of the 21st century, "the default ethos of exhibition-making in Ghana was premised on the trade fair and salon style presentation; that is, filling up commercial gallery interiors with souvenirs contrived to appeal to the tourists' eye and pocket" (p. 38).

3. Critical Interventions

According to seidou (2014b), in 1952, the study of ceramics moved from the Achimota School in Accra to Kumasi College of Technology, now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (The ceramics section became the pioneer in the training of ceramists. After all these years, though the country made strides in the development of Ghanaian artists, little has been known of Ghanaian ceramics practice. Whilst Painting and Sculpture had students' exhibiting and making connections to the Art world and being part of Venice Biennale 2019) and Documenta 15, students of Ceramics were struggling to

find Master of Fine Art (MFA) opportunities and having a fulfilling practice. For example, Ibrahim Mahama partook in Venice Biennale in 2019 as well as Documenta 15.

A critical intervention became necessary. To do this, Nortey et al (2013) recommended art talks, and critiques for students of ceramics in Ghana (p. 215). In 2013, art history was intensified across the various academic levels. Books such as *Art History Dictionary*, Vasari's Book: *Lives of the Artists*, Rod Judkin's *The Art of Creative Thinking* spurred imaginative thinking and ideas. Before then, the concentration was on cultural issues. Concepts of exhibitions such as *The Other Story* and *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Venice Biennale*, *Documenta* were also reviewed to inspire students and their practice. The reviews also looked at expansion of materials for production, installation styles, deconstruction and recontextualisation of forms and industrial modes of production such as casting methods. The art talks, the introduction of critiques and curatorial guidance from faculty led to the organisation of conferences and exhibitions such as *Ahoɔden* (see Figures 5 & 6). *Ahoɔden*, which is translated as 'strength' or 'empowerment' was an exhibition held in Accra's Jamestown Café, curated by Jeannie Hulen (2019), a Fulbright scholar to the KNUST Ceramic Section, and Adam Posnak (Instructor of Ceramics and Foundations at the University of Arkansas, USA). This exhibition included ceramic students, faculty members of KNUST and students of the University of Arkansas, USA.

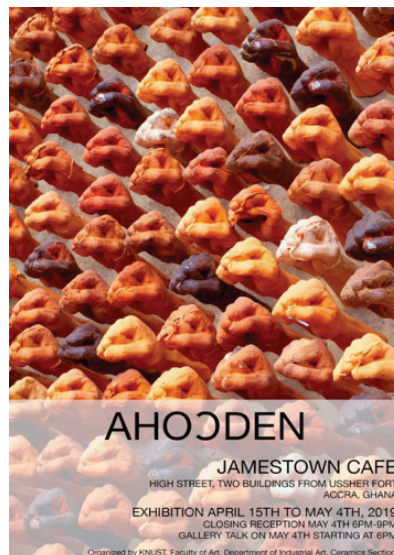


Figure 5: Ahoɔden Exhibition poster
(Photo Credit: Samuel Nortey, 2019).



Figure. 6: Jeannie Hulem and Adam Posank (Curators) in art talks with students at Ahooɔden exhibition (Photo Credit: Samuel Nortey, 2019).

4. Contemporary Ghanaian Ceramic Education

Within the last decade (2011 to 2023), reports from the Department of Industrial Art, KNUST reveal that there has been a positive stride in terms of ceramic students' enrolment in Ghana and students pursuing Master of Fine Art abroad especially in the US, UK, Canada, Norway and China. Most of the Ghanaian ceramic students are excelling in their graduate programmes and practice abroad. Critical interventions such as increased exposure to motivations to studying ceramics, emancipatory teaching, strengthening of art exhibition practices such as the *Ahoɔden* exhibition (Figures 5 & 6) are having positive impact on student and practice. Emblematic of the *Ahoɔden* show was Ghanaian artist Vincent Frimpong's (Sniper) *Paradigm of Captivity* installation as observed in Figure 3b, aptly calling for freedom of expression through dematerialisation, deskilling and democratisation of works. The jute material used in this work speaks the language of Ghanaian culture, referring to how the rich resources of Ghana such as cocoa were exported abroad in jute sacks. The use of these local materials allows the local visitors to feel connected to the artist and their rich culture. This finds relation with Dewey's (1916) submission that when materials within the culture are used in an artwork, the material becomes a language that functions as a link between the artists and the wider culture.

And just as seid'ou et al. (2021) put it "such exhibitions were not restricted to raising isolated issues in art but are meant to connect to the wider cultural, political, material, and techno-scientific substance of global society" (p.39), the *Ahoɔden* exhibition served as a bridge to connecting to the global practice.

Despite the lack of a supportive infrastructure for Ghanaian ceramic students, there are signs of development, and the dynamics of practice are changing. Students are beginning to keep updated portfolios as proof of their development, organising exhibitions, applying for residencies among others. Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997) affirmed that the portfolio in art education provides evidence that learning has taken place. There is increasing interest from students to complete their studies in Ghana, including more graduate programmes for students within Ghana. After these emancipatory efforts from faculty members and visiting Fulbright scholars, Jeannie Hulen and Adam Posnak, which culminated into *Ahoɔden* exhibition in 2019, there have been significant number of ceramic students who have gained admissions and funding to notable MFA programmes in the US and Canada such as the University of Arkansas, University of Delaware, University of Florida, University of Eastern Illinois, Wayne State University, Kent State University, Missouri State University, New Mexico State University, Nova Scotia College of Art, and Design University in Canada. This has not been the case in time past until within the last decade.

Ghanaian students abroad are reconfiguring Ghanaian ceramics and are using the medium to engage with a global audience. In November 2021, Ghanaian ceramic artist Michael Dela Dika curated the exhibition *The Medium is the Message-The African Diaspora Story* (see Figure 7a) pointing directly to the conceptual significance of clay. The exhibition explored how African ceramic artists are able to communicate their feelings in their new home. Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, Eugene Ofori Agyei, Eric Andre, Emmanuel Manu, Rita Mawuena Benissan, Yaw Owusu and Dufie Kuffour all alumni of KNUST Art programme participated in that show. Locally, Ghanaian ceramic artist, Frederick Ebenezer Okai also opened a solo exhibition on 13th October 2021 at KNUST and posits a speculative and explorative approach to ceramics. In Okai's installations (Figure 8a, b, & c), he unsettles the white cube exhibition strategy that prioritises the disembodied eye by conditioning a kind of presence that is conscious in more than one sense.



Figure 7a: Poster of Michael Dika's curated exhibition The Medium is the Message-The African Diaspora Story (Courtesy University of Delaware Department of Art and Design, 2021).



Figure 7b: Poster of Frederick Ebenezer Okai's Light Soup Exhibition (Photo Credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai, 2021)

The deconstruction of form is seen in Okai's *Light Soup* exhibition, where he uses pots collected from different ethnographic sites in Ghana and in addition to his own creations put up an immersive art installation. According to Okai, he paints some of these pots and creates patterns on the pots by creating cracks and recontextualise these pots. A brick wall is built to have a defined space for the exhibition. He adds sounds and videos to create an awe experience. This feature of the exhibition is notable for its connection to "the sphere of inter-human relations" and introduces a relational dimension to the form of the exhibition (Bourriard 2002, p. 43). The ceramic objects are not only displayed to be viewed but are also to be used, facilitating the conviviality of sharing a meal whilst having conversations.

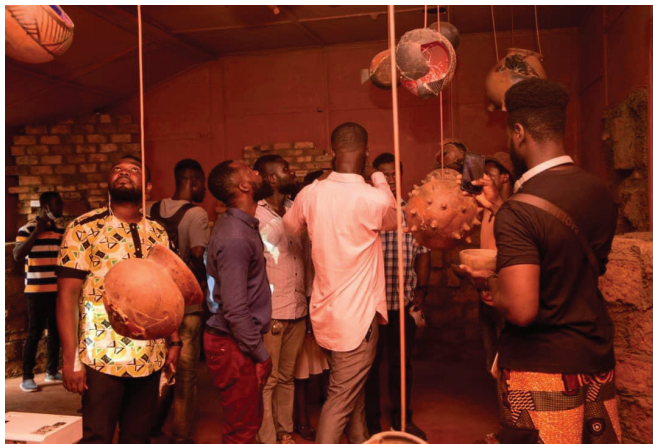


Figure 8a: Frederick Ebenezer Okai interacting with audience
(Photo Credit: Frederick Ebenezer Okai, 2021).



Figure. 8b: Hanging pot as an 'actor' in *Light Soup* (Courtesy Frederick Ebenezer Okai, 2021).



Figure 8c: Frederick Ebenezer Okai interacting with the audience
(Courtesy Frederick Ebenezer Okai, 2021)

Few of the emerging Ghanaian ceramic artists who benefitted from the ceramic curriculum review in 2015 and pushing boundaries locally and globally are Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, Eugene Ofori Agyei and Alex Awuku. These ceramic artists reference and use fabric such as jute, yarns and *kente* in addition to clay in making their works. *Kente* is a traditional Ghanaian woven cloth that has gained international recognition and is many a time used to adorn prominent international diplomats who visit Ghana. There are *kente* concepts such as the inextricable weaves of geometric shapes present in Asiedu-Kwarteng works as seen on *Negotiations* (Figure 9). It could be said that whilst Asiedu-Kwarteng is a practicing ceramist in the United States of America, his umbilical cord ties him back to his roots, Ghana. Asiedu-Kwarteng appropriates *kente* in exploring his identity in a new home whilst Agyei uses and references fabric such as yarns to engage issues of dual identities and background influence. The use of the *kente* cloth is very much tied to the rich cultural heritage of Ghana and has become iconic in almost every region in Ghana.

5. Interpretation and Education through Art

In *Negotiations* (2021) by artist Asiedu-Kwarteng (Figure 9), the artist transfers *kente* patterns onto a clay slab exploring how the clay material responds to a non-ceramic technique and pattern. The transformation of these *kente* patterns produces an astonishing look on a wavy clay slab. This demonstrates the interdisciplinary approach of this versatile young contemporary ceramic artist who interrogates patterns of lifestyle in the US. The use of technological and

industrial materials, repetition, pattern, reflections on life, issues of capital and politics have all become part of Asiedu-Kwarteng's expanded conversation (Krauss 1979; Stallabrass, 2004).

Asiedu-Kwarteng's work implies expressive movement and he manipulates his material beyond its limitations such as his work, *Picking the Pieces Together* (see figure 10), again inspired by *kente*, seeks to defy gravity. Obviously, a cloth cannot stand but must be draped or hung or it will be easily blown by air. However, a cloth in clay becomes stable and unwavering. The interconnectedness of materials makes it possible as a hanging installation and could be interpreted as standing for the connections we need with each other to survive; the importance of our interconnectedness. The interplay of colours and repeated geometric patterns on the clay create visual connections and confirm the relationship between the artist's ceramic works and *kente* cloth. For his survival in the US, Asiedu-Kwarteng's *Picking the Pieces Together* is an example of integration of clay and fabric, arrangement and organisation of something that one would need to survive in a new working environment. Benjamin (2008) argued that the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition (p. 220).

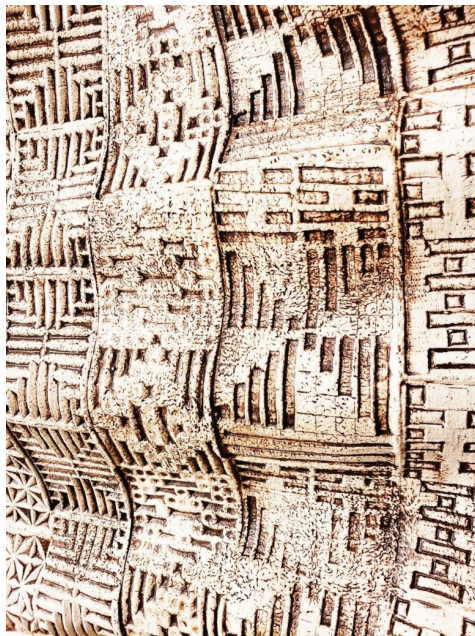


Figure 9: Asiedu-Kwarteng, J. (2021) *Negotiations*, Ceramic. 23" x 22" x 4", Illinois Chicago (Photo Credit: Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, 2021)

Similarly, Agyei's work *Sankofa* which literally means 'go back and get' (see Figure 11) is personified with self-reflection; 'is there anything I would need from Ghana to survive in my new space'? The conceptual message is to engage the viewer in using the past to positively influence the present. The *Sankofa* signifies the Akan ethnic race in Ghana and their principle of one reaching back to make positive progress in the future. Agyei's work *Sankofa* engages the importance of him reaching back to the knowledge gained whilst in Ghana and using same to improve his ceramic practice whilst abroad.

These young contemporary Ghanaian ceramic artists are navigating their path in a new environment. Their works are poetic, manifesting a sense of apprehension, and at the same time excitement, by using indigenous materials as a mnemonic to expand their cultural heritage and assimilation. Nortey (2020) comments that for Ghanaian ceramic art to remain relevant to global contemporary art and defy categorisation, there is the need to juxtapose the histories associated with African art and contemporary art, not only to give a better mutual understanding, but to help build on skills and techniques that can open new possibilities.

In *Sankofa* (Figure 10) Agyei builds his concept by using different materials (clay and fabrics) and presents the issue of possessing dual identities (Ghanaian and American) and living in dual worlds. Agyei connects his earlier experiences of a past world to his present reality as a form of memory preservation. The piece encompasses the architectural, geographical, cultural and social spaces we encounter as people of the diaspora. The works of Asiedu-Kwarteng and Agyei are indicative of their experiences – confusion, nostalgia, apprehension, joy, resentment, resilience, anger, hate, discrimination, and belonging, – experiences shared by people of the diaspora.



Figure 10: Asiedu-Kwarteng, J. (2020). Picking the Pieces Together, Ceramic and fabric. 23" x 18" x 15,, Illinois Chicago (Photo Credit: Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng, 2020)

Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng and Eugene Ofori Agyei interrogate their identities by choosing materials that possess dual identities such as African textiles and yarns that are used in making *kente* cloth; a rich complex history that begins with the yarn's manufacture in Indonesia and China, only later to be woven into cloth in Africa. To articulate this bold cultural fusion, the artist braids and drapes clay work, blending cultures into new objects.



Figure 11: Ofori Agyei, E. (2021). Sankofa, Clay, Clay and African fabric, 18" x 6", Gainesville (Source: Eugene Ofori Agyei, 2021)



Figure 12: Asiedu Kwarteng, J. (2021). Everything and Nothing: The diary of the one who leaves, Ceramic, mixed media, 76" x 30" x 30", Crocker Museum, California (Photo Credit: Samuel Nortey, 2021)

Asiedu-Kwarteng's *Everything and Nothing: The Diary of the one who leaves* (Figure 12) is a ceramic sculpture installation with structured texture, layered boldly with *kente*. He employs *kente* to drape over the surface and uses jute ropes as fasteners, materials that relate to Ghanaian societal status and stratification. Fosu (1994) explains that the *kente* cloth of Ghana has been a symbol of royalty and that the labour-intensive processes and costly materials used to make *kente* are too expensive for most citizens to buy. Only the most elite members of society can afford it. However, the jute ropes used to make sacks were used as clothing for slaves. These juxtaposed materials speak poignantly to these histories and social structures.

It is in the same spirit of material curiosity that Alex Awuku examines reactions to surveillance in his practice. Awuku works largely with clay, fibre and jute ropes. Awuku's large installations are personal interpretations of family reactions to slavery during the colonial era. His works are reminiscent of a tragic story he was told by his grandfather. He depicts scenes of slavery by contextualising and decontextualising clay with basketry and jute sacks, which were used in transporting the people of Xavi to their District capital, Akatsi in the Volta region where Awuku comes from. In his work *bondage* (Figure 13), Awuku showed how inescapable it was for his people to free themselves from slavery and bondage. Awuku manipulates clay in creating human-like objects and constructing basketry base for his works. He weaves bamboo and tree bark and integrates them into his works after firing his ceramic sculptures. His intentions are exemplified by the human figures whose faces express a stern look (Figure 13). This immersive installation navigates the socio-political history of his people who are seen within the culture of Ghanaians to be aggressive and warrior-like perhaps because of their numerous encounters with other ethnic groups. Awuku works with a series of similar concepts depicting restrictions on freedom of expression during the colonial era. According to Awuku, his work *Reactions* (Figure 14) is a facial expression of responses to his work *bondage*.



Figure 13: Awuku, A. (2020). Bondage, Clay, mixed media, 60" x 13" x 40", Kumasi (Photo Credit: Alex Awuku, 2021).



Figure 14: Awuku, A. (2021) Reactions, Clay, raffia canes, oxides. Varied installations, Kumasi (Photo Credit: Alex Awuku, 2021).

Asiedu-Kwarteng's *As a Results of My Responsibilities* (Figure 15) which was showcased at the *Medium is the Message: The African Diasporan Story* exhibition from 4th November 2021 - 4th December 2021 at the Taylor Hall Gallery, University of Delaware is a demonstration of the cultural responsibility of a Ghanaian man as head of the family. One's responsibilities become more intense with raised expectations when one travels abroad, especially to the United States of America. It is a commonplace perception in Ghana that being abroad, especially in Europe and North America, comes with material opportunities. Family members, friends and acquaintances often look up to the one who lives abroad. Asiedu-Kwarteng's ceramic mixed-media installation is conceptually driven and manifests a sense of responsibility to the family. The installation presents a traditional dining table set with four bowls placed in front of four chairs. The chairs represent the children, and the bowls the food. The adjacent arrangement is the cooking hearth of three tripod stands and the earthenware bowls and utensils that are used in cooking. The traditional dinner table set aside at the extreme left is for the father who is seen as the breadwinner, and therefore sits separately from the other family members. Asiedu-Kwarteng shows commitment to his family and the need to continue providing for the family. This conceptual installation was produced in 2020, a dark time in history when the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic. The installation shows how one can be far away, yet, near shouldering responsibilities.



Figure 15: Asiedu-Kwarteng, J. (2020). *As a result of my responsibilities*, Ceramic, Wood. Variables. Illinois Chicago (Photo Credit: Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng,2020).

Eugene Ofori Agyei's *Beauty Beads* (Figure 16), metaphorically, elaborate on the everyday use of beads in traditional Ghanaian ceremonies, or to celebrate matrimony and the rites of passage from infancy to adulthood in Ghana. Bead production in Ghana also provides an income and livelihood for hundreds of street salesmen and craftswomen who create beaded dolls, necklaces, anklets, collars and belts. This is very prevalent in the Eastern Region of Ghana where Eugene Ofori Agyei comes from. Within Ghanaian culture, beads also signify beauty, so it is understandable that Agyei qualifies his installation as *Beauty Beads*. The curvature of the ceramic sculptural form, the geometric female figure decorated with beads and the placement and arrangement of bricks draped with African textured cloth complete the reflection.



Figure 16. Ofori Agyei, E (2021). *Beauty Beads*, 2021. Clay, African fabric. 15" x 9". GFAA Gallery (Photo Credit: Eugene Ofori Agyei, 2021).

Agyei is again overwhelmed by the array of beauty around him in the US and integrates his African cloth with yarns to produce *Outside Beauty* (Figure. 17). This is a representation of Ghanaian cultural understanding of beauty which looks deeper into the character and rather not the beautiful facial look. The canons of beauty in the Western ideals are different from that of Africa. Agyei accepts the blend of cultures in his new working environment. Agyei grew up in a society where braids, scarves, and ways of dressing connote beauty and

indicate status. According to Agyei, he arranges the cut fabric in a collage-like pattern to articulate his notion of outside beauty. The yarns are passed through a perforated hole in the ceramic work and flows down like a woman's long hair. Different yarns collected from different ethnic groups are braided in a way that blends the culture together. The beauty of several cultures is seen in one piece.

Eugene Ofori Agyei's *Overwhelmed* (figure 18) exhibited in GFAA Gallery in Gainesville (23rd February – 23rd March 2021) and Alvarez Gallery in Stamford, Connecticut, 11th September 2023 -11th October 2023 is installation piece portraying his unspoken stories of beauty, migration and his cultural history. In an interview, Eugene Agyei intimated that through his *Overwhelmed ceramic* sculpture work, he explores hybrid psychological experiences of spaces between Ghana and US, using clay, yarns and fabric from Africa.

Another dimension to Agyei's *Overwhelmed* is the power of collaboration between people of diverse backgrounds. He brings hybridity to the fore and says that his hybridity is without voice yet they want to be heard. In an interview, Eugene Agyei remarked that "I want the viewer to see my work and to question the intricacies of decision-making, and to start reflecting on their own story of hybridity". As art educators, we must bear in mind that today's classroom is more diversified and therefore our teaching materials must be diversified. According to Page (2007), the power of diversity creates better and stronger classroom interactions and engagements.



Figure 17. Ofori Agyei, E. (2021) *Outside Beauty*, Clay, African fabric, Yarns. 50.3" x 11" x 36".
Gainesville (Photo Credit: Eugene Ofori Agyei,2021).



Figure 18. Eugene Ofori Agyei, *Overwhelmed*, Clay, 2021. African fabric, Yarns. 96" x 84" x 168", GFAA Gallery (Photo Credit: Eugene Ofori Agyei, 2021).

6. Possibilities for Art Education

The discussion so far has meaningful expansion for ceramics in contemporary art education. Notably, these positive developments have been realised due to critical interventions. First of all, the acceptance that there is the need for a review of the curriculum on teaching and learning is the turning point and this is very important for us as art educators. How much do we accept the need for periodic reviews? The promise of reforms and the critical interventions by the faculty is a vital tool for us who think about the value of education. Their works and making practices provide examples of how to blend tradition and technologies in art making processes as evidenced in the Okai's *Light Soup*. Their making process of pushing beyond just clay materials which was the local practice should be an exemplar for art education. O'Donoghue (2015) argues that art educators, should shift attention away from equating art education exclusively with art objects, and imagine other ways of the making processes. The conglomeration of throwing, hand building and casting processes are very evident in the making of art by these young artists. As art educators, we need to expand the trajectories of art education by involving alternatives to our making practices.

As Asiedu-Kwarteng and Agyei exhibited in galleries in the US, they present the Ghanaian culture to viewers and there is cross-fertilisation of knowledge. As Okai and Awuku put up shows locally, the dialogue on ceramics becomes

stronger and more positive and strengthens the ceramic local programme. The artist discussed in this article are adding to the dialogue of contemporary ceramic art education as Ghanaian ceramic art which struggled to be seen, heard and appreciated within global discourse seemed to be gaining global recognition. As educators, there is satisfaction and fulfillment seeing students enrolment increased in MFA programmes locally and abroad and seeing them rise to their full potentials.

7. Conclusion

The emerging practice of contemporary Ghanaian ceramic artists is driving a radical change in the study of art education in Ghana and beyond. Emerging contemporary Ghanaian ceramic artists are exploring new spaces and building on the rich traditional practices. Unlike previously where they were stacked to formats and forms, there is more freedom of expressions and selection of materials. They are using and referencing non-ceramic materials, deconstructing forms, recontextualising concepts in their works and communicating ideas that transcend traditional boundaries in experimental ways. Their work pushes the boundaries of conventional African ceramics, situating the medium of indigenous ceramic beyond expected forms with increasingly positive effects on Ghanaian ceramic practice and art education.

There is an expansion of material in art making within the current contemporary practice and consistent zeal to have exhibitions. What is missing in Ghana in terms of promoting ceramic practice is the provision of gallery spaces, and professional documentation of works.

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About the Authors

Samuel Nortey is an Associate Professor at the Department of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. Professor Nortey has also been involved in local and international exhibitions and curated the exhibition trilogy *Building Bridges*, *Tiny but Mighty* and *Women Only* between 2022 and 2023. He has been an advocate for critical interventions in Ghanaian art teaching pedagogies. Currently, much of Professor Nortey's projects are focused on women and skills development in Ghanaian ceramics and pottery. He is looking at identifying synergies between traditional and contemporary practitioners and the possibilities for cross-fertilisation within these areas. Professor Nortey is a member of the National Council for Education for the Ceramic Arts, USA.

Edwin Kwesi Bodjawah is an Associate Professor at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. His research interests include contemporary art and serial reproduction of African mask forms. He has an active studio practice and had several solo and group exhibitions. He holds an MFA degree in Sculpture and a PhD in Painting and Sculpture from the same university. Professor Bodjawah is a member of the blaxTARLINES, a contemporary art hub.

Robert Amoanyi is a Lecturer at the Ceramics Section, Department of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. He holds a degree in Ceramics and a PhD in Materials Engineering. Dr. Amoanyi's research interest is in the boundaries of ceramic technology and ceramic art. He is very skillful in the formulation of clay bodies, finishes (glaze calculations and processes) and forms. He has published a few times in art and ceramic science journals.

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