‘Dreams of Overcoming:’ A Profile on Multidisciplinary Artist, Adelaide Damoah

By Zoë Goetzmann

She came. She saw. She persevered (even through the year 2020).

Adelaide Damoah is a multidisciplinary artist who resides in London, United Kingdom. With a career spanning 16 years, it is without question that Damoah has seemingly cemented her status and position in the international art world.

Growing up in Britain during the 1980’s and 1990’s, Damoah reflects on her parents’ reservations towards the arts: “My parents were of the opinion that, as a black child, growing up at that time, they didn’t want me to be just another ‘performing black person’ on [the] T.V. Their opinion was that in terms of ‘entertainment’ and ‘seeing black people’ on T.V., [this] wasn’t necessarily as ‘respectable’ as doing something ‘professional.’”

Raised by immigrant parents, Damoah is the eldest of three sisters. In 1999, she graduated from Kingston University, Surrey with a degree in applied biology. After graduation, she took a job in hospital and pharmaceutical sales. As a result, Damoah continued down her ambitious path, desiring to reach, as she describes, “the top [of her] field” in the “corporate” sphere.

Yet, life had different plans for Adelaide in mind:

At the age of 22, Damoah's endometriosis diagnosis led her back to her original artistic passions. Although she had dealt with this affliction since she was, "17 [and/or] 18," she says, it was not until she suffered a near collapse on a work trip that doctors provided her with a proper diagnosis.

"I had to take off seven to 10 days [of] work every single month because I was just in complete agony," Damoah recalls. However, with encouragement from friends and work colleagues, she decided to resume her former creative interests and pursuits.

As she reflects, "Painting is something that I had fallen back on. I had discovered Frida Kahlo at the age of 14 through a school project in my art class and fell in love with her way of expression.

"Subsequently, through that art project, I started to learn to express myself in a similar way to what she did." Ironically, Frida Kahlo's art career began after she had incurred injuries from a traumatic bus accident, taking up art as a part of her recovery process.

Flash forward: Damoah showed her first art exhibition in 2006 entitled Black Brits at Charlie Allen's Boutique in London, United Kingdom. As Adelaide explains, "I made the conscious decision that, 'I am an artist' and this is what I want to pursue.

"I did that [without knowing anything] about the actual art world, [as] loving drawing and painting doesn't necessarily make you a professional artist."

In 2015, Damoah began to experiment with the artistic tradition and practice known as 'body

printing.' As she recalls, "I used to record myself in the process of making [these initial] works on my phone, [and] in that process of recording, I came to the conclusion that, despite the fact that there was nobody [in the studio], but [myself], this was still a performative act.

"I felt that the next stage of my [artistic] evolution was to do performance art. I felt that to do a performance of what I was doing in the studio, [it] would be much more impactful and much easier for me to get across what I wanted to say."

In her performance, This is Me. The Inconsistency of the Self. (2017-2019), Damoah takes direct inspiration from Yves Klein's 1960's performance, Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue through which, the artist could be seen applying his signature blue paint directly to the figures of his nude [Caucasian] female models, instructing them to lay their bodies on large sheets of white paper in order to produce this specific painted series. Contrary to his previous work, Damoah employs a similar body printing technique, creating a feminist subversion to this male-driven artistic narrative as a way to explore her own self-identity and black body.

"The first time I [performed] this work, literally everybody in the room was white." So, you [as the audience] have this black woman, walking out onto a white canvas covered in blue paint to make [a] point about what Yves Klein was trying to say in 1960 [and] you cannot ignore that."

She continues: "In thinking about the body in performance, [more] specifically a body that is 'non-normative' – so to speak – [or] 'not what you would expect to see in a country like the U.K.,' you can really 'hit [this] point home' and make much more of an impact."

Such a statement highlights the critical importance of Damoah's performance work (especially in these pressing times of 'Black Lives Matter' and 'MeToo'). Whilst people of color, women of color and women in general have been conditioned throughout history to 'stay silent' or to 'take up less space,' Adelaide's work takes on an opposite approach, creating a literal, "visceral," as she describes, experience between the artist and her audience, inciting key conversations, through which, Damoah expresses, are able to "transcend language, time and space."

In her most recent works, Into The Mind of The Coloniser (2019/2020), Dreams of Overcoming (2020) and Revaluing The Self (2020), Damoah continues to investigate this ongoing dialogue, using her body as a way to confront and to explore subjects related to black identity, personal identity, spirituality, ancestral heritage and colonialism.

Into The Mind of The Coloniser (2019/2020) was created through Damoah's discovery of 17th and 18th century books and manuscripts providing detailed firsthand accounts on the colonization of Africa and its people.

The performance – available via Adelaide's website: www.adelaidedamoahart.com – shows the artist standing in a dimly lit gallery space. Dressed in traditional black and red Ghanaian funeral attire – or, as Damoah refers to it - "[a] kaba and slit [dress]," the artist begins the performance by reading excerpted passages obtained from these manuscripts. Post recitation, she invites audience members towards her, providing silent instructions to the viewers to cut a piece of her garment off with a pair of scissors. After the audience finishes this process, the artist lays her body on the ground, imprinting her 'bloodstained' painted figure and clothing onto copies of the manuscripts positioned on the floor.

The performance was shown in three different international locations from London, New York to Oslo. Interestingly, when Adelaide performed this work at Fridman Gallery in New York early last year, she recalls that "she did not anticipate" the reactions held by American audiences. In particular, Damoah cites a man, who, she recalls, "threw" the scissors, as she describes, "against the back of the room" and "broke down in tears."

In response to his outburst, Damoah found the man after the performance and engaged him in conversation. Through their dialogue, the man – who, she speculates was of Asian or Filipino descent - expressed to her that he felt as if the performance was "a personal attack on [me, the artist]," as he was unable to view her as "an abstract" or even "[as a] physical representation of Africa [or the] African people [as a whole]."

"This is the interesting thing about art," Damoah admits, "regardless of what intention I have toward[s] the work, I have no control over how people receive it. Once we can start having these honest, upfront conversations, it's only then [that] we can begin the process of [even] thinking about healing [ourselves]."

After each performance, it should be noted that Adelaide saves scraps of these pieces of discarded clothing (which she says, once belonged to her mother) as a memory of both her artistic and familiar legacies.

In this current pandemic, Damoah's work continues to question the self and its place in the world.

Dreams of Overcoming (2020) was a post-lockdown solo exhibition staged last summer by Boogie-Wall Gallery in Mayfair, London, created as a part of a larger work entitled, Reembodying the Real (2020). In this mythopoetic work, Adelaide produced 10 intimate cyanotype prints including images of the artist's great grandmother ['Ama'], Ama's parents as well as an image of the artist's grandmother [named 'Adelaide'] as a child sitting on Ama's [the artist's grandmother's mother's] lap. In her accompanying, later performance Revaluing the Self (2020), produced by Halime Özdemir, Damoah recalled these former pieces in her work, enacting a Ghanaian 'call and return' ritual – a tradition used to address the ancestors in order to project "a new [and perhaps better] future."

"At this moment in time, I was intentionally sitting with everything that happened in the past," Damoah reflects, "everything that happened in 2020 and putting that all into [a] work in order to be able to move on and [to] grow."

For, as she expresses, "if you don't understand the past, you're doomed to repeat the same mistakes." This phrase not only represents a further crux of Adelaide's work, but, as she says, refers to an ancient Ghanaian term, "Sankofa," a philosophy linking the knowledge of the past as a way to build a better, stronger future.

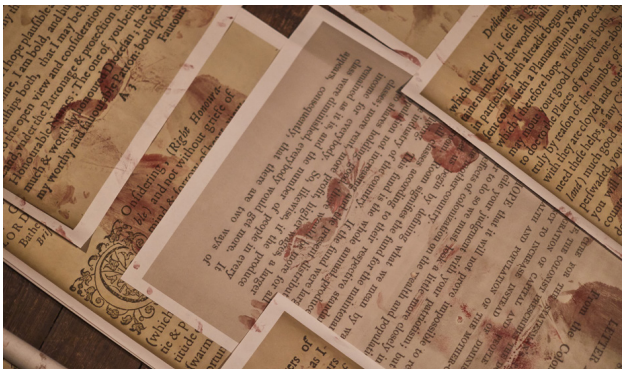
Damoah's commitment to her own 'legacy' (as well as her commitment to helping establish the careers and 'legacies' of other artists), represent an integral component to her life and career as a professional working artist.

"I've always said, [that], since I [first came] into 'the art game,'" Adelaide says, "if you're

not written about, you're forgotten about. So [we as artists] need to find intentional ways to become written about."

Damoah is the founding and co-founding member of two female-led art organizations: Black British Female Artist Collective (B.B.F.A.) and the Intersectional (INFEMS) Feminist Collective which seek to provide exposure and visibility to the works of black and female artists in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Art Discussions (@art.discussions) is another art platform, launched by Adelaide in 2011, through which she conducts one-on-one interviews with fellow artists and other art world contemporaries via Instagram and YouTube (@Adelaide Damoah).

With female artists making up, as Artnet reported in 2019, "just 2%" of the art auction market, such groups and outlets are necessary in order to help to mitigate this slightly daunting statistic.[1] At present, TAFETA Gallery in London, United Kingdom represents works produced by artists belonging to the (B.B.F.A.) Collective.

"Ultimately, I believe, that for me, to get to the place where I need to get to, I need to [adopt] a '360° approach,'" Adelaide states. "I have to have relationships with galleries, I need to understand what my pricing is, what my place is in the market and I need to have my work collected institutionally."

This year, Damoah has already a major feat, as her works are currently being displayed at VOMA - the first virtual art museum founded by director Lee Cavaliere. The exhibition, entitled, Reclaiming the Body includes artists such as Sandro Botticelli, Artemisia Gentileschi, Peter Paul Rubens, Huguette Caland, Trulee Hall, Luciano Garbati, Ana Mendieta, Michael Petry, Ilona Szalay and Frida Kahlo. Thus, Damoah's career has clearly come full circle, showcasing her work and legacy alongside at least three of her own personal artistic heroes.