

Paa Joe and Elisabeth Efua Sutherland *Akɛ yaa heko || One does not take it anywhere*

21 November 2017 – 12 January 2018



Elisabeth Efua Sutherland, *Sui Generi*, taken at Chale Wote Street Art Festival, Jamestown, Accra. 2015. Photo by Desire Clark. Portrait of Paa Joe courtesy of the artist.

This November, Gallery 1957, Accra presents a collaborative project between renowned fantasy coffin maker Paa Joe and performance artist Elisabeth Efua Sutherland, running from 21 November 2017 - 12 January 2018. Coinciding with Paa Joe's 70th birthday (and marking his 40th year in the coffin trade), the exhibition considers traditional funerary customs in contemporary Ghana.

Exploring specific funeral practices of the country's Ga and Fante communities - coastal societies to which the artists belong - the exhibition focuses on the fictional passing of a young girl. Presenting death as a journey, mediated through water, the works consider the trisection of the worlds of the unborn, the living, and the dead.

Paa Joe, aided by his son and apprentice Jacob Tetteh Ashong, will present six of his fantasy coffins, each inspired by the seascape. The works will be activated by Sutherland's practice, bringing together twelve performers in traditional funeral costumes to re-enact elements of Ga and Fante funerals, alongside video projections featuring conversations between the performers, Sutherland and Paa Joe. Intertwining Sutherland's contemporary practices with the idiosyncratic woodworking discipline of Paa Joe, the exhibition builds on current movements within Ghanaian contemporary art which champion interdisciplinary and multigenerational collaboration, whilst challenging traditional and structural definitions of fine art. The work also explores the implication of objects in rituals of memory, commemoration, identity, and self-realisation.

Also included are banners inspired by the 'frankaa' or 'Asafo' flags for which the Fante are known. Visual markers of position and power used by the Asafo warrior groups, the banners depict people, boats, plant forms and animals alongside geometric patterns. Here, Sutherland presents banners displaying deconstructed shapes and symbols - visual metaphors for the dissolving of traditional identities within contemporary Ghana.

The practice of making fantasy coffins traces back to the Ga community of the Greater Accra region, where figurative, custom coffin designs accompany the deceased into the afterlife. The coffins are an unusual feature of Ga material tradition; arguably more minimalist in aesthetic in comparison to Fante (or other Akan ethnic groups), the coffins stand apart from these communities' elaborate material traditions, which range from textiles like kente cloth, to practices of carving and metalwork.

The title, taken from the Ga proverb "akɛ yaa heko" ("*one does not take it anywhere*") describes limits of wealth and power, highlighting the human inability to carry worldly possessions to the afterlife. Presented in contrast to these figurative coffins, the proverb highlights the artists' joint interrogation of the attitudes and motivations behind material culture and ideas of transition among the Ga and Fante peoples.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication.

About Paa Joe

Born in Akwapim, Ghana in 1947, Paa Joe is one of the preeminent coffin makers in Ghana. His 'fantasy coffins' depict objects which encapsulate the lifestyle of the deceased, ranging from wild animals to mobile phones. Paa Joe's coffins have been exhibited internationally, including the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2012); V&A, London (2011); and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (1989). His work also forms part of museum collections worldwide, including the British Museum, London.

About Elisabeth Efua Sutherland

Elisabeth Efua Sutherland (b. 1991, Accra) is a performance and visual artist who lives and works in Accra, Ghana. She is also the Founder and Artistic Director of The Accra Theatre Workshop. Sutherland has shown internationally including: LUMA Foundation Zurich (2017); The Lab, Google Cultural Institute, Paris (2016); Chale Wote Festival, Accra (2015); and the Dakar Biennial (2014). She has also worked in arts education with theatre-based programs for young people in Accra, Indiana, Seattle and New York, and was a theatre major at De Pauw University, Indiana, before achieving an MA from Brunel University, London. During 2016, Sutherland was artist in residence at the Google Cultural Institute, as part of the 89plus project curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Simon Castets. In 2017 she has residencies at the Villa Empain Brussels and the Harn Museum of Art.

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Exhibition: Paa Joe and Elisabeth Efua Sutherland

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