

John Akomfrah: Purple

Barbican London 6 October to 7 January

Lone, anonymous, romantic figures stare out at disappearing or scarred landscapes. Totemic relics of industrial pasts jut out from the sea and receding glacial shorelines, which remind us of the interconnectedness and global nature of climate change. This is John Akomfrah's most recent project in which, across six screens, archival footage from, amongst other historical sources, the BBC arts series *Monitor* and 1960s dance films by Ken Russell thoughtfully intermingle with newly shot material. An artwork on a grand scale, *Purple*, 2017, invites viewers to contemplate the devastating effects humans are having on the world by ambitiously exploring the aesthetics of matter and its ecology. The film's magnetism lies in Akomfrah's ability to bring apparently disparate elements together in a masterful way.

It is impossible to view all six screens of *Purple* at once. This form of viewership perfectly suits the film's decentralised nature. The hour-long running time has a vague teleological arc, beginning with images of birth and ending with funeral scenes, but it is distinctly cyclical and non-linear, fading to purple and starting again. Focuses shift from one screen to another, sometimes by chance, sometimes out of curiosity, other times prompted by the sound of a stream or the characteristic tone of a bygone news reporter. Detached from any particular image but diverting your attention, these archaic voices force you to look for the links between them and their visual counterparts. Each screen's image appears to dance to its own tune; it is the task of the viewer to map their particular symphonic relationships.

Purple is the second in a planned quartet of films exploring the aesthetics and politics of the material world, as in the earlier *Vertigo Sea*, 2015, where the opening sounds of a running stream accompany the haunting images of plastic detritus in oceans marking the terrain of a shared global rubbish dump. *Purple*, however, is a more autobiographical film. Akomfrah grew up in south London, not far from Battersea Power Station when it still burned coal, produced electricity and pumped its noxious clouds into the atmosphere. Shopping trips down the King's Road took place in the shadow of industrial England's iconic chimneys, where hopes ran high and the future was up for grabs. It is from this viewpoint that the juxtaposition of images in *Purple* takes on a lyrical pertinence. Black-and-white footage of eager and

John Akomfrah
Purple 2017
video



energetic shoppers filling carts from fully stocked shelves of cans and the usually ignored aspects of industrial agriculture – such as caged animals being pumped with synthetic foods – sit uncomfortably, yet necessarily, side by side. Agricultural processes haven't changed drastically over the past few decades despite the technological progress that has been made over the same period. The use of archival footage in *Purple*, as with much of Akomfrah's work, is a future-oriented gesture. He is not interested in the past in a documentary sense, but rather traces its story to the present and then cuts a projected pathway into the future.

The use of purple filters over some of the recent footage can sometimes be too heavy handed. As an intermediate colour between extremes, it functions somewhere between the azure of an oceanic ideal and a blood-stained annihilation. *Purple* doesn't have an overt 'oh-dearist' standpoint despite these eerie, nightmarish passages. Far from making a hand-wringing spectacle of environmental problems, *Purple* manages to draw in and involve viewers rather than separating or detaching them from what could otherwise be a difficult subject. The acknowledgement of the impact Akomfrah's childhood had on the process of selecting the images, especially from the 1950s and 1960s, serves to animate and activate the footage from these decades, making them strangely emotive.

Akomfrah has said that he 'forces' images into dialogues but the tapestry-like texture of *Purple* never seems forced. Similar to the three-screen *Vertigo Sea*, where the Atlantic slave trade, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and the history of whaling were poetically braided, *Purple* doesn't weld together images in a didactic or jarring way. The beauty of Akomfrah's lens-based practice is that it allows actors (or as Akomfrah would say, actants) to enter and exit the stage. It doesn't have to respect the confines of conventional narrative histories that are restricted by temporal and linear expectations. Both in the conceptual space of *Purple* and in the physical space of the Barbican's Curve gallery itself, networks begin to emerge and connections are made that always existed but were never previously visible. ■

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David Panos: Time Crystals

Pump House Gallery London

4 October to 17 December

The battle for and against Postmodernism in art was partly fought over footwear. Frederic Jameson famously hinged his critique on the contrast between Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots*, 1887, and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, 1980. The former expressed the interior turmoil of their peasant owner and, by extension, the wider proletarian struggle, while the latter were affectless commodities, emotional depth and truth having been sacrificed to postmodern critiques of history and identity. But as Jennifer Doyle has been keen to counter, affect is often a play of surfaces and, far from estranged objects, Warhol's shoes were the sort worn by impoverished New York transvestites, a community not well served by ideas of the true and essential self.

It is therefore apt that for this exhibition David Panos has used subcultural fashion to unpick the relationship between