SUMMARY

"Umbilical, the connection that never disappears. An exploration of the connecting forces relating to or affecting. The supply line. The nurturing link between the maker and what is made, a bond. These works investigate the constellation states of reality. The interconnected chain of creation from the belly of ancestral lands to equatorial lines, Caribbean archipelago, and America. Kwesi Abbensetts is an Intuitionist. His process of creating is led by an intuitive and unconscious calling. It relies on waiting, spontaneous inspiration and feeling. It places trust in randomness, moments, and happenstance instead of trained formalities of art making and practice. His work relies on memory information and the confluence of space and environment to create and influence his work, a call and response.

Kwesi Abbensetts’ work is tightly bound to his identity and consequently the work and subjects become a rendered celebration of his culture. His work is concerned with what he calls, “Revisionary Self Appropriation.” It is a work that seeks to build new context and representation of self and not relying on direct posited contemporary references. It relies on “blood” memory, invention and experimentation via the process of intuitive force performance.

FEATURED ARTIST

Kwesi Abbensetts (b. Guyana) is a New York based multi-disciplinary Artist and 2016 NYFA Fellow who hails from South America off of the Corentyne coast of Guyana. He is a self-taught artist
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF UMBILICAL?

The exhibition title, Umbilical, refers to the artist’s exploration of the interconnected chain of being between his artistic practice and his homeland, his mind and his canvas.

Left image is titled Punctuations the Spirit by Kwesi Abbensetts, acrylic paint, collaged paper, and found object, 59” x 71”

KEY TERMS

**INTUITIONIST:** a term created by Abbensetts to describe the spontaneous approach to his art work. He does what he feels in the moment instead of relying on plans and sketches.

**REVISIONARY SELF APPROPRIATION:** another term coined by Abbensetts which refers to his resistance against relying on contemporary references and instead building upon his own concepts and visions

**CALL & RESPONSE:** the succession of two phrases. Often, the first phrase is said by one person or group of people, then the second phrase is said by a different person or group of people.

**ANCESTRY:** an individual’s origin or background, often in relation to the location in which their family is from

**CULTURE:** the traditions, arts, institutions, and achievements of a specific group of people

**MEMORY:** the process of storing and processing information
QUESTIONS

1. How can artists successfully honor their ancestry within their work?
2. What are new, innovative ways to reimagine where we come from?
3. What is the relationship between intuition and abstract art? How “thought out” is each element, consciously or subconsciously?
4. How does the use of multiple materials/mixed media tie into the idea of spontaneity?
5. What is the “interconnected chain of creation” in relation to the artistic process?
6. How does the lack of “trained formalities” within Abbensetts’ works relate to and influence the meaning of the works?
7. What is the relationship between culture and the physical act of creating? What traditions or “cultural norms” within the Caribbean influence the artistic techniques used?
8. What is the relationship between the mixed media works and Abbensetts’ films? How does the medium change the delivery of the message?
9. How does working as a self taught artist differ from working as a trained artist? How does this influence the process and the final result?
EXHIBITION THEMES

1. CARIBBEAN CULTURE & ANCESTRY

Abbensetts was born and raised in Guyana, a Caribbean country in South America. Abbensetts represents his connection to his native land through his use of found materials, intense pops of color, and lively shapes. These aspects reflect the connection between maker and craft rooted in his upbringing.

2. THE CONCEPT OF “RANDOMNESS”

Abbensetts describes himself as an “intuitionist,” meaning he does what he feels in the moment. Many of Abbensetts’ works feature a plethora of found photographs and objects as well as the use of paint, markers, and crayons. His style of mark-making is erratic and abstract, a nod to his many inspirations and ideas.

3. CALL & RESPONSE

Relationship between viewer and work - relationship between artist and work - relationship between artist and viewer - 2 phrases, one after another. Call and response often involves at least two people, possibly groups. Abbensetts thinks of his paintings as acts of call and response, both in terms of the process and the end result that is seen by various viewers.

4. DETERIORATION/DECAY

The rips and tears that accumulate within the piece over time reflect the “intuitionist” nature of the works, allowing the work to naturally transform itself without the intervention of the artist. For example, Green Grass (shown left) is painted on a vinyl surface, which deteriorates quicker than more traditional surfaces such as canvas.

5. FABLES AND BIBLICAL STORIES

Jacob’s Ladder

Jacob’s Ladder is a biblical story from the Book of Genesis. The story is found in Genesis 28:10-22, in bible patriarch Jacob sees an image of both ascending and descending angels on a
ladder. This dream occurs while he is fleeing from his Brother Esau who is determined to kill him for taking Esau’s birthright.\(^1\) At the top of the ladder, he sees God. God says to him “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15, ESV).\(^2\) Jacob then devotes himself to God and makes a vow to him. In some religions, the ladder is thought to represent the “straight path” one should follow to a holy life. The ladder can also represent the connection between heaven and Earth. This narrative is present in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and is often used as a reference in multiple films, movies, artworks, etc.

**The Dog and the Bone from Aesop’s Fables**

The Dog and the Bone is about a dog who finds a bone and keeps it in his mouth. The dog is very protective over the bone. The dog goes to a river and sees its reflection in the water and mistakenly thinks it’s a different dog. The dog wants the other dog’s bone, but doesn’t realize that the “other dog” is actually just a reflection. The dog jumps in the water, drops his bone, and loses what he has. The story is a lesson on greed - we can lose what we already have by seeking the possessions of others. This story is used as direct inspiration for Abbensetts’ mixed media painting titled Dog an Deh Bone, pictured right.

**2. MATERIALS: MAKING USE OF WHAT ONE HAS**

**Found Objects**

Abbensetts’ exhibition relies heavily on the idea of makeshift - making use of what’s available at the time. The artist uses flip flops, glitter, rice, vinyl, vintage photographs, coffee bags, and more.

**Pink Slats**

The pink slats surrounding each work in the exhibition are meant to evoke the feeling of found wood - the idea of making use of what one has. As Abbensett’s explains, in the Caribbean many people do not have access to pre-cut wood and housing materials so they fix their homes using pieces of found wood and found materials. Because of this, many homes are built with different types of wood and different colors of painted wood. Abbensetts uses these slats in replacement of traditional gallery frames as a nod to his home, Guyana.

**Rice**

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\(^2\) Ibid
Rice is a staple in Caribbean cuisine. It’s used as the base of the dish often paired with more vibrant flavors and textures. Similar to an artist’s canvas, rice operates as a blank slate to add to. It is plain on its own but can be added to with other flavorful ingredients - building upon one another. This can be compared to the way that art is made. An artist often starts with a white canvas and builds on it with various materials to “spice” it up. Abbensetts uses actual uncooked rice in many of his paintings to recognize the importance of rice in his culture, but also the relationship between creating a dish and creating a work of art.

4. PHOTOGRAPHS

Historical Figures

Abbensetts work features images of historical figures such as Marcus Garvey and Ray Charles. Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican political activist and President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. He is known for his ideas regarding Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism, the idea that people of African descent should start their own community separate from white influence. Ray Charles was an iconic musician who was unable to see, but learned to master piano through intuition and feeling. This relates back to Abbensetts “intuitionist” mindset that there are no rules when it comes to creation, only feeling.

Photography by Abbensetts

Abbensetts also works as a photographer, often in the vein of editorial, fashion photography. He incorporates these works into his abstract paintings through collage. He honors black power and black beauty through creating photographs that show Black people in noble poses and dress. The glossy editorial look of Abbensetts’ photography juxtaposes the abstract, erratic style of his painting work.

INFLUENCES & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FILMS

- *In the Mood for Love*

In the Mood for Love follows two main characters, one male and one female, who find out that their partners are cheating on them with each other. The film follows these characters navigating how to handle the situation and whether or not they should start having an affair in order to get revenge. The film is known for its stylistic qualities such as deep colors, soft lighting, and beautiful costumes. Abbensetts is inspired by the colors of the film, each evoking a different mood as the plot progresses.

- *Rockers*
Rockers is a 1978 film about Horsemouth, a Jamaican drummer living in Kingston. Horsemouth sells records to make extra money and rides a motorcycle to deliver his goods. One day his motorcycle is stolen and he devises a plan to get it back. The film features many tropes of the Robin Hood myth. The film also features a cast featuring several famous Reggae musicians. The film is filled with colorful scenery and outfits, many of which influence Abbensetts style and dedication to exploring his Caribbean lineage.

- **The Black Godfather**

The Black Godfather is a 1978 Blaxploitation film that centers around gangster J.J. who is struggling to remain control over territory in the midst of conflict with heroin cartel leaders. The movie deals with the theme of racial conflict. Abbensetts is interested in the representation of Black people in positions of power, as seen in his many photographs of black people, particularly black women.

**BOOKS**

- **In Search of Satisfaction** by J. California Cooper

In Search of Satisfaction by J. California Cooper follows the story of a freed slave named Josephus who has two daughters, Ruth and Yinyang. Ruth and Yinyang have different mothers. These half-sisters, one of mixed ancestry and one with two black parents, work to come to grips with their father’s legacy. Themes of this book include the quest for money vs. the quest for spiritual satisfaction and how these two elements sometimes do not coincide. Within Abbensetts works, he deals with

**MUSIC**

- **Lee “Scratch” Perry**

Lee “Scratch” Perry is a singer, producer, songwriter, and inventor from Kendal, Jamaica. He is known for his innovative remixing of reggae tracks as well as pioneering the dub style of music in the 1970s. Dub music is electronic music derived from reggae which often involves remixing existing tracks to emphasize the drum and bass sound, echo, and reverb. Lee “Scratch” Perry and his dub style of music greatly influence Abbensetts experimental artistic practice. Similar to the remixing of songs, Abbensetts “remixes” materials through giving them new contexts. For example, in one of Abbensetts’ works he uses a flip flop, taking the item out of the sole context of a shoe and turning it into a work of art. Abbensetts takes existing objects and gives them new meanings, allowing the viewer to view the object in a new way.
● Peter Tosh

Peter Tosh was a reggae musician who gained notoriety in the group the Wailers and later as a solo musician. Many of his songs contained political messages. A fellow Caribbean, Abbensetts uses Tosh’s music to inform the subject matter and visual elements of his work reflecting his upbringing in the Caribbean.

● Miles Davis

Miles Davis is one of the most infamous jazz musicians of the modern era. Jazz musicians are known for their ability to layer various instruments and come up with sequences on the spot instead of writing music beforehand. Much like Abbensetts, jazz requires a sense of intuition - to know which sounds mesh well together on the spot.

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MoCADA
80 Hanson Place Brooklyn, NY 11217
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