



OWUSU-ANKOMAH

MICROCRON-KUSUMI

SECRET SIGNS - HIDDEN MEANINGS

MICROC
SECRET SIGNS

GERARD HOUGHTON: Tell me a little bit about your early years and how they might have influenced you to become an artist.

OWUSU-ANKOMAH: I was born in Sekondi in western Ghana. Although I come from a large family, I was quite withdrawn when I was young. Since Sekondi is on the coast, I'd spend time on the seashore by myself. I went there as if drawn by a magnet - even though I'd get punished if I were caught. I'd wade in the sea and eventually taught myself how to swim! Otherwise, I'd wander into green places, where I became fascinated by animals, by insects, by any living creature at all. I would climb impossibly tall trees, without fear, and felt completely at home in nature. I'd lose myself for hours in reveries, staring up through the greenery at the blue sky above, asking myself big questions like, 'Who am I?' and 'What are humans doing here?' I imagined all kinds of things, visualising tangible visions of possible futures. I didn't spend too much time with my family, because there

which are powerful symbols deeply rooted in the culture of the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana. In whatever situation they were portrayed - moments of agitation or active struggle - the signs cloaked them with mystery, rendering them resilient, and lent them an archetypal quality. The figurative *adinkra* emblems suggested a natural body of hidden knowledge encoded in the environment, which although aesthetically pleasing still remained ambiguous and was never completely decipherable. Lately, I've incorporated symbols from other times and cultures: Chinese ideograms, Egyptian hieroglyphs, medieval heraldic devices, ice-crystals, crop-circles and even a few designs of my own. By combining signs from many different cultures I want to emphasise the fact that there's only one symbol-making species on the planet - *Homo sapiens* - and to integrate this shared commonality in a universally accessible artistic language. Symbols are inherently mysterious, even 'magical' devices, yet the *adinkra* system of signs demonstrates that both simple folk insights and abstract esoteric wisdom can each be transmitted over time using a single coherent symbolic language.

GH: What does the introduction of this new colour palette signify - these brilliant blues, spots of red, white and yellow - do these colours also have symbolic overtones?

OA: Well, it's not the first time I've used coloured canvases - so this isn't a new direction in that sense, but *Microcron - Kusum* does mark the first time I've shown this new chapter of my work in London. This luminous ultramarine - quite a sublime colour - represents so many things. For me, the universe is not black - it's blue! Our home is 'the blue planet' because of the presence of water, which, as a liquid, appears slightly blue. The deeper the water, the bluer it becomes particularly when reflecting the sky, which seems blue because of the scattering of sunlight passing through. In fact, blue is the predominant colour of our world. The red and the white dots also have specific meanings - but that's not 'yellow' - it's gold! - which I use to imply everything the ancient alchemical traditions attributed to it: purity, perfection, that gradual transmutation of our base natures into something more profound. My paintings are about hope

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- HIDDEN MEANINGS

were so many other children at home. This is where my mum comes into the story - because my parents took in children from poorer members of our extended family. We kids were rebellious, always asking 'What are they all doing here?' But when I was more grown-up, I came to admire my mother so much for everything she was always doing for all those children. I realised, later, just how much she cared for us and loved us all - unconditionally.

GH: It's interesting you mention swimming. I've often thought of your half-visible figures as bathing in an ocean of signs that surround, support and somehow even define them.

OA: Well, those early black-and-white figures were covered in ritual markings against a matrix composed mainly of *adinkra* signs,

and the realisation of our true potential. I want these pictures to be a catalyst for change.

GH: You call *Microcron - Kusum* a 'new chapter of work'. Could you explain to me what the exhibition's title means?

OA: All human cultures hold some places as sacred. In the Akan language *kusum* refers to any sacred site involved in the performance of mystery rites. In the west, you have ancient barrows, stone circles, old temples built upon former hallowed sites, all perhaps aligned along 'ley lines'. In our language we call such things *kusumadze*: sacred, secret, mysterious places where we meet for ritual exchanges with whatever protective spirits guide our cultures forward. That's *kusum* - and it describes the arena of these canvases. The word *Microcron* defines another thing entirely: something I had to discover for myself. So, in 2007, I coined this word to describe it. The *Microcron* has always existed, but it's beyond the ken of most of us for much of the time, so we have no words for it. Each blue canvas portrays the *Microcron*, appearing symbolically as the circular ring of glowing spheres of white, red and gold that transfixed the attention of each lone figure portrayed. Whilst it exists as part of the individual's surrounding symbolic matrix - it takes on a concrete reality of its own once he perceives it, allowing him to interact with and, perhaps, actually, to realise it. Imagine each sphere or *Micron* as a complete universe which itself contains many lower-order constituent universes. Then the cirlet of differently coloured orbs, the *Microcron*, represents a higher-order aggregate of universes, giving us universes within universes within universes - what we might call a 'multiverse'. So the *Microcron* symbolises the entire sequence of spheres ranging from the sub-atomic 'micro' level right up to the 'macro' level of distant solar systems within far-flung universes of universes.

GH: You mean you've invented a symbol that signifies absolutely 'everything that exists'?

OA: Exactly! The *Microcron* is the symbol of symbols: and it's reflexive and recursive too! It's also multi-dimensional, containing anything visible to an electron microscope right up to everything detectable in the most powerful radio telescope we possess. And, since science describes a 'space-time' continuum the *Microcron* necessarily includes all possible pasts and futures too. It contains much that we can never know or understand - mysterious or 'magical' knowledge, if you will - but the point is, that without having a signifier for it we can neither conceive of it nor discuss it. So we humans need this symbol to develop our innate possibilities of evolving into whatever currently lies within us. The *Microcron* is crucial for us to imagine a way to progress towards that future we ultimately shall create for ourselves.

GH: I see where you're going; so that in the *Thinking the Microcron* series, where the seated figure - who reminds me of Rodin's *The Thinker* stares intensely at the glowing orbs before him, it's as though he were dreaming them into existence.

OA: Exactly! Just remember Rodin's original figure - representing the poet, Dante - is staring down from the top of *The Gates of Hell*, in mute horror at the sight of all the suffering souls he sees below. This *Thinker* is seen in a moment of epiphany, looking up to the *Microcron*, transfixed by a rapturous insight into the infinities unfolding before him. We catch his first glimpse of the dawning realisation that we ourselves are an indispensable part of the fractal ground of being; we're part of the *Microcron* that we create and that again is found within us. If we pursue this logical sequence, then not only are we deeply implicated in our universe, but we become co-creators of it - we are IT! This jolts us back to ourselves: What are humans doing here? What is consciousness and beyond it the unconscious, those coupled constituents comprising our world? Modern physics tells us a 'wave-particle' only manifests when there is a conscious observer. So, it's all about consciousness! This, to me, is where science and spirituality come face to face, and potentially interact with each other. The reason I use symbols in my work is because these signs reach down to awaken the unconscious. Using symbols it's possible

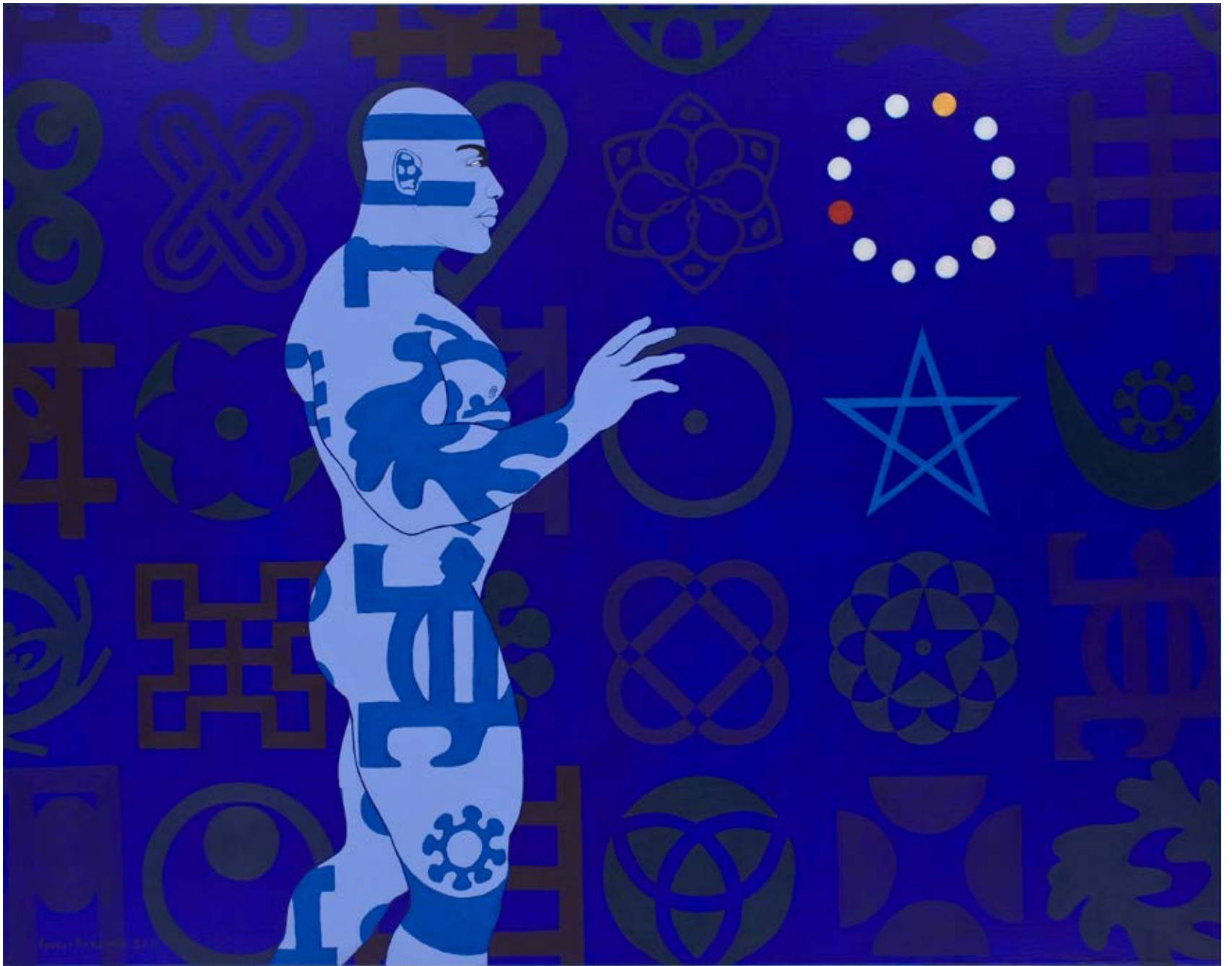
to talk - even indirectly and with only partial understanding - about things of critical importance: about the blue planet, about the oceans, about the future of our species. The paintings in this series provide templates for others to reconnoitre in advance the critical questions of the present time. I hope they act as catalysts to prompt new insights, blueprints from which to construct new paradigms.

GH: Obviously, the white spheres disappear against a white background, so in these new black-and-white canvases, are those red and black circlets also *Microcrons*?

OA: Yes, it's all one series: the same big questions - the fundamentals don't change - they're just addressed differently. It's worth noting that, here, there's a plurality of players. Since man is a social creature, we move from individual to interpersonal consciousness, focussing first on interactions between the figures and then on their relationships to their shared environment. Here, the environment has also developed, enriched now by more complex signs. I've borrowed intricate shapes from nature: the complex hexagonal structures of ice-crystals which remember the element of water; geometrical symmetries both inorganic and organic; diagrammatic maps that link the infinitesimally small sub-atomic scales with solar systems and star clusters; even, some quite ethereal designs taken from crop-circles, which some suggest might argue for the existence of other intelligences that share our cosmos. Again, these are fractal fragments from which to infer a larger whole. The black spheres bespeak unknown realities, which the figures will only be able to access once they realise their expanded selves through the love they share. Earlier, I mentioned colour symbolism. Here, red implies passionate love, a deeper red denotes compassionate love, whilst deep purple is reserved for that highest attribute of any advanced culture - unconditional love. My paintings deploy a symbolic language that we all (perhaps unconsciously) understand. Anyone can read the canvases, if they open their minds to them.

© Gerard Houghton, October Gallery, August, 2011





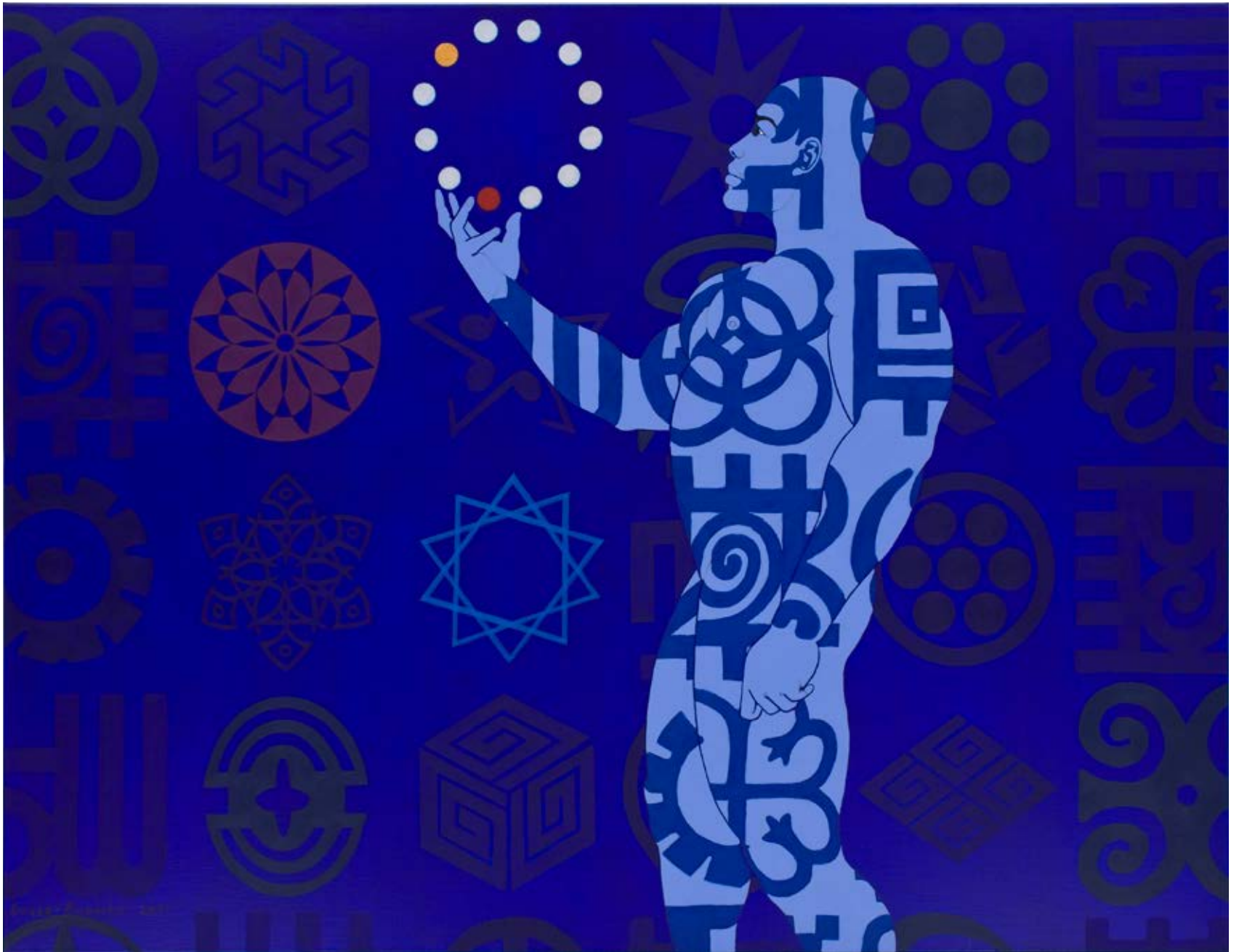
Microcron - Kusum No.1, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 135 X 170 cm



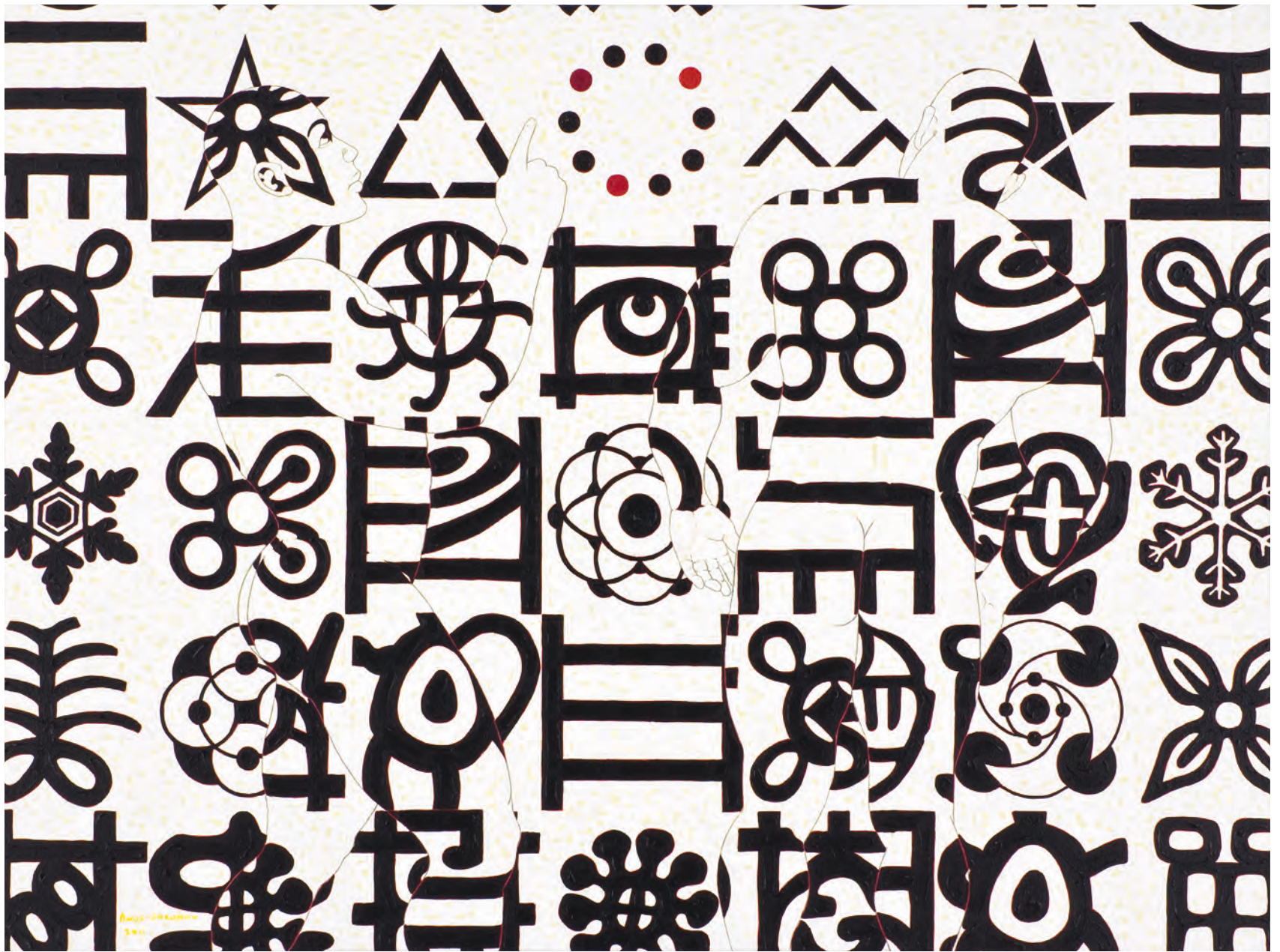
Microcron - Kusum No.2, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 140 X 170 cm



Microcron - Kusum No.3, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 135 X 175 cm



Microcron - Kusum No.4, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 135 X 175 cm



Microcron - Kusum No.5, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 150 X 200 cm



Microcron - Kusum No.6, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 150 X 200 cm



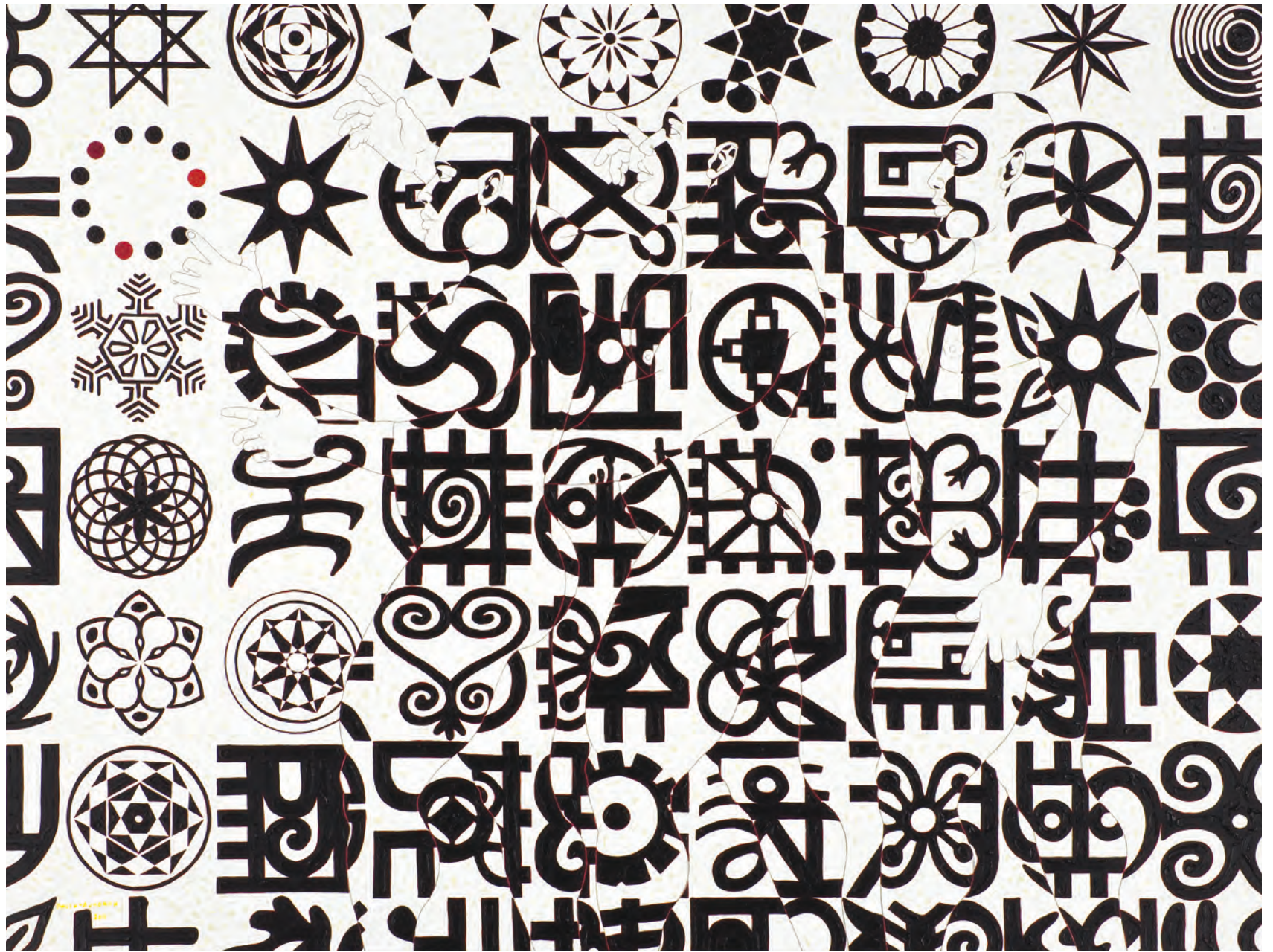
Microcron - Kusum No.7, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 170 X 200 cm



Microcron - Kusum No.8, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 190 X 190 cm



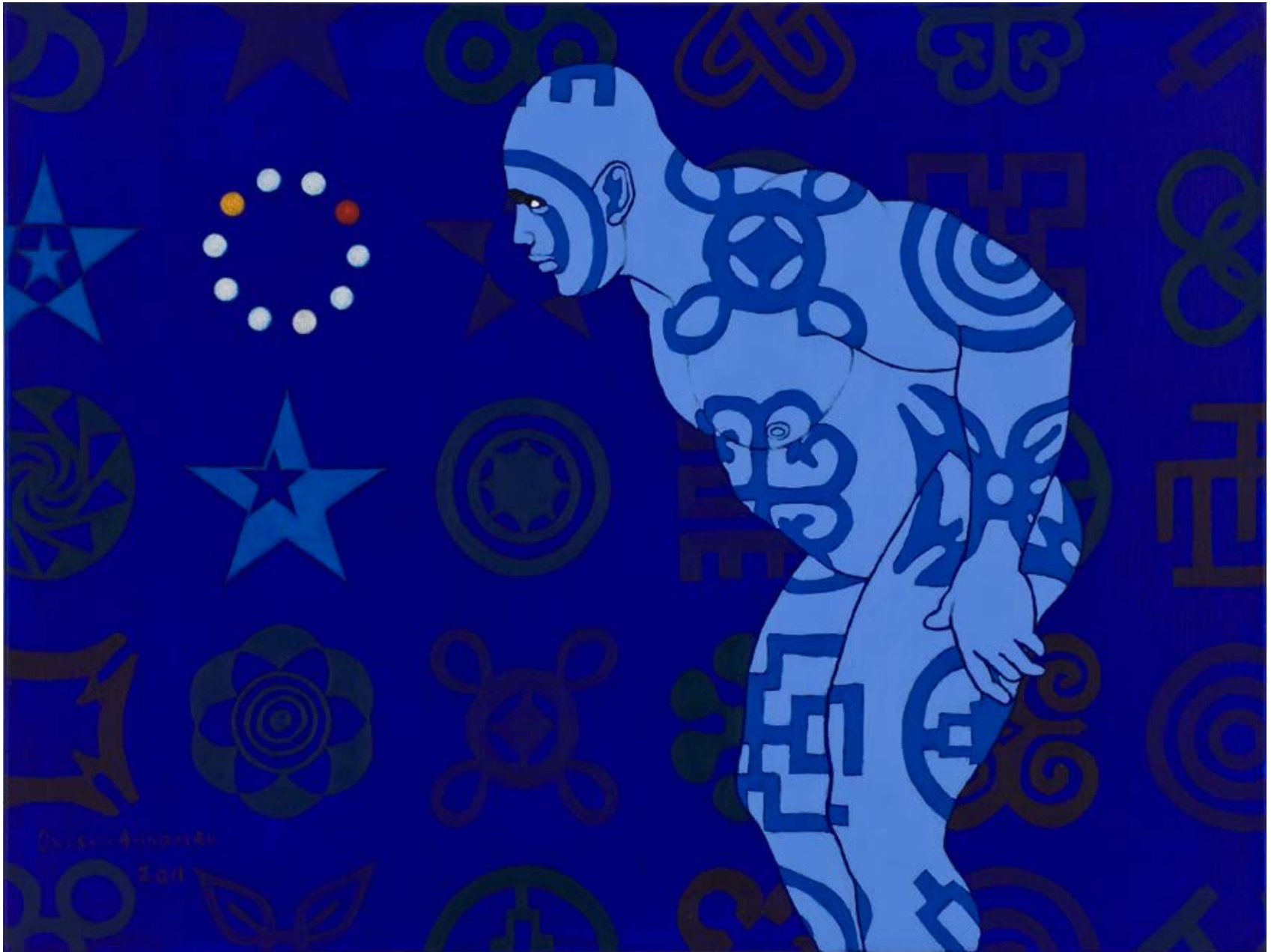
Microcron - Kusum No.9, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 190 X 250 cm



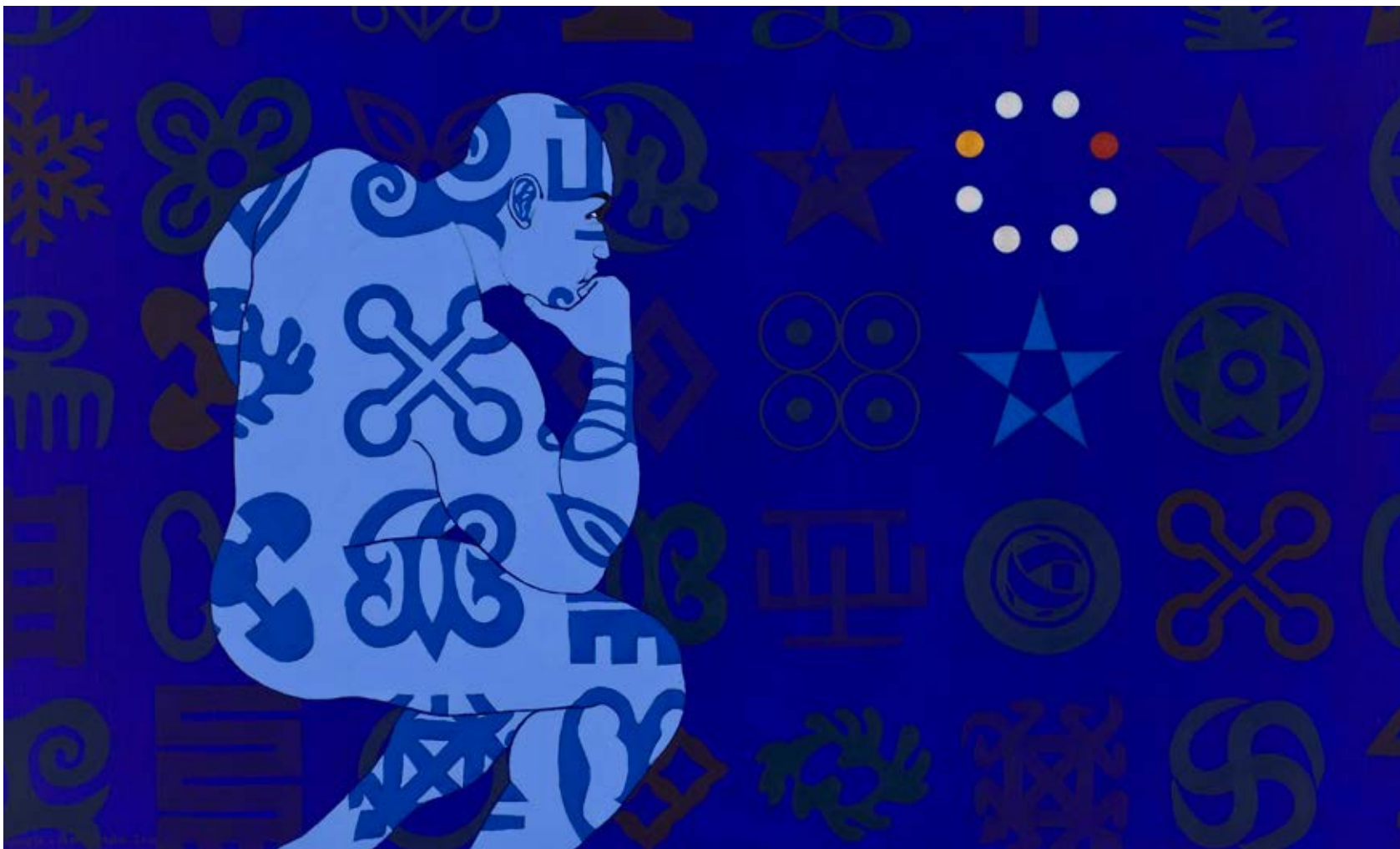
Microcron - Kusum No.10, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 190 X 250 cm



Microcron : Kundum - Kusum - No.2, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 60 X 80 cm



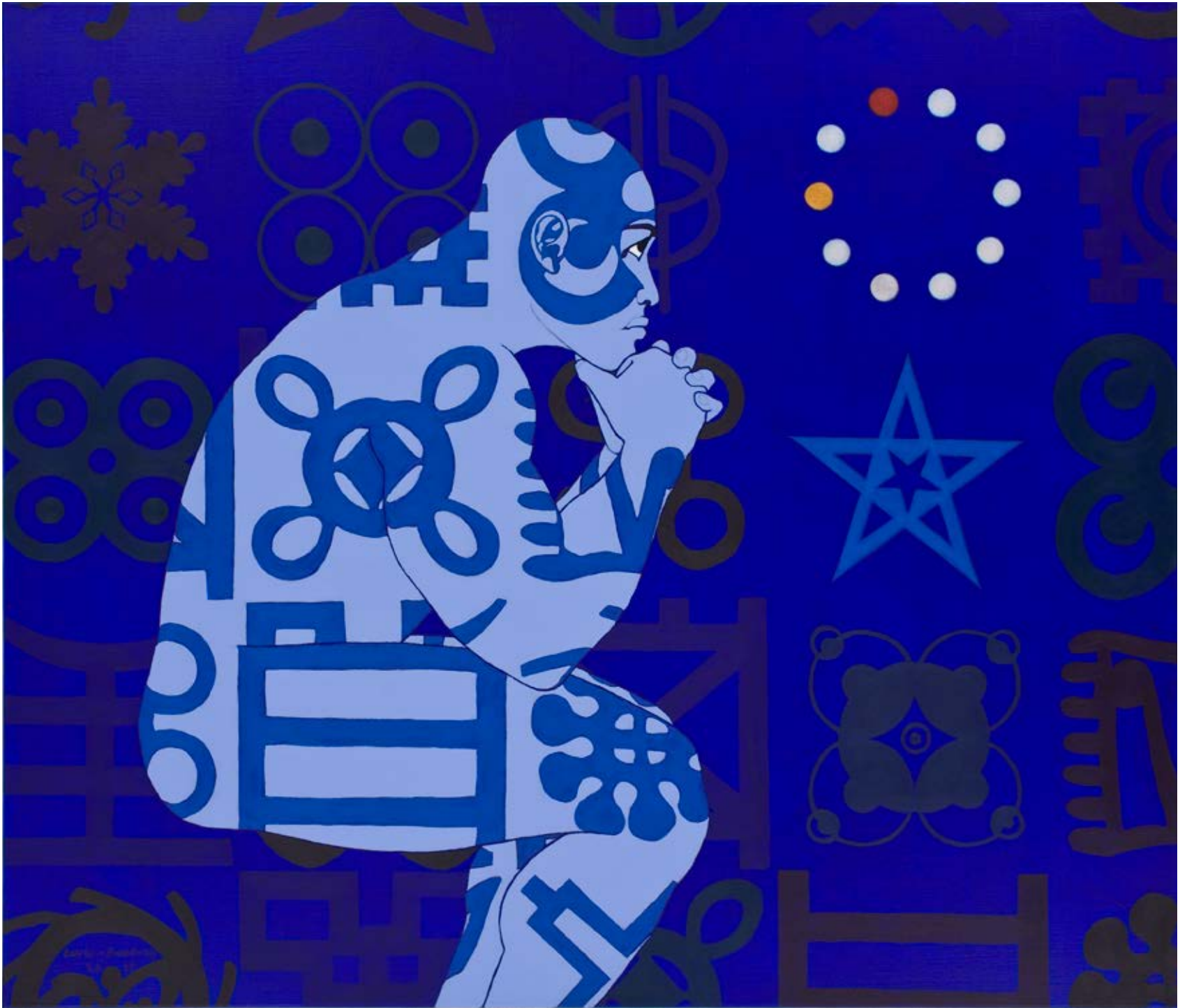
Microcron - Kundum No.4, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 60 X 80 cm



Thinking the Microcron No.3, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 85 X 140 cm



Thinking the Microcron No.2, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 85 X 140 cm



Thinking the Microcron No.1, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 120 X 140 cm

OWUSU-ANKOMAH BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1956, Sekondi, Ghana
Lives and works in Bremen, Germany

EDUCATION

1971-74 College of Art (Ghanatta) in Accra, Ghana
1979-85 Study trips to Europe

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Microcron - Kusum: Secret Signs - Hidden Meanings*, October Gallery, London, UK
Owusu-Ankomah - Prelude to the Microcron, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany
- 2008 *Stepping Out*, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany
Body & Soul, Nomad Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
- 2006/7 *Traces of the Future*, Iwalewa-Haus, Bayreuth, Germany and Gallery Simoncini, Luxembourg
Future Track, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany, touring to European Kunsthof Vicht, Stolberg-Vicht, Germany; Skoto Gallery, New York, USA (2007); Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Trier, Germany (2007); Art Association Aalen, Aalen, Germany (2007)
Owusu-Ankomah - Paintings, Kunstraum, Potsdam, Germany
- 2005 *Crossing Over*, Jörg Heitsch Gallery, Munich, Germany
- 2004 *Heroes, Sages and Saints*, Ghana National Museum, Accra
Human Nature, Film Museum, Frankfurt, Germany
Owusu-Ankomah, Walu Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2003 *Africa Festival*, Galerie écart, Osnabrück, Germany
Paintings, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
Artificio, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain
Unison, Jörg Heitsch Gallery, Munich, Germany
- 2002 *Movements*, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Movements, Kühn Gallery, Lilienthal, Germany
- 1999 Kronacher Art Association, Kronach, Germany
Skoto Gallery, New York, USA
- 1998 *Kusum III*, The Arsenal Gallery, Bialystok, Poland
- 1997 *Kusum II*, Steinbrecher Gallery, Bremen, Germany
Klappe - die zweite, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany
Root Signs, Jörg Heitsch Gallery, Munich, Germany

- 1996 *Dance on the Volcano*, Steinbrecher Gallery, Bremen, Germany
Kühn Gallery, Lilienthal, Germany
- 1995 University St. Gallen (former Hochschule St. Gallen), St. Gallen, Switzerland
Kühn Gallery, Berlin, Germany
- 1994 Peter Herrmann Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany
Apex Gallery, Göttingen, Germany
Art Association Salzgitter, Salzgitter Germany
- 1993 Savannah Gallery of Modern African Art, London, UK
Galerie im Hinterhaus, Wiesbaden, Germany
- 1992 Wildeshausen Gallery, Wildeshausen, Germany
La Trastienda del Arte, Madrid, Spain
- 1991 *Kusum*, Steinbrecher Gallery, Bremen, Germany
Art Association Wiligrad, Schloss Wiligrad, Lübstorf, Germany
- 1989 *From Sharpeville to Soweto*, Übersee-Museum, Bremen, Germany
- 1988 Gallery of Forum Bomlitz, Bomlitz, Germany
Carl Duisberg Society, Essen, Germany
Roche Gallery, Bremen, Germany
- 1987 Villa Ichon, Bremen, Germany
Grünspan Gallery, Ottersberg, Germany
City Library, Bremen, Germany
- 1981 Art Centre, Accra, Ghana
- 1977 Art Centre, Accra, Ghana
- 1976 YMCA Hall, Accra, Ghana

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Transvanguard Now*, October Gallery, London, UK
Art Dubai 2011, Dubai, UAE (October Gallery)
Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg, South Africa (October Gallery, London)
Africa, Book and Art, Open Art Gallery, Borken, Germany
Ancestral Space, Translated Identities, Mojo Gallery, Dubai, U.A.E.
- 2010 *Art Dubai 2010*, Dubai, UAE (October Gallery)
Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg, South Africa (October Gallery, ARTCO Gallery)
Fine Art, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany
Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Africa 2.0 - Is There a Contemporary African Art?, Influxcontemporary, Lisbon, Portugal
- 2009 *Transvanguard*, October Gallery, London, UK
... aus Leidenschaft, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany

- 2009 *Unbounded: New Art for a New Century*, The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey, USA
Homecoming, Ghanaian expatriate artists' exhibition, Artists Alliance Gallery, Accra, Ghana
Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg, South Africa (October Gallery, ARTCO Gallery)
Art Multiple, Herzogenrath, Germany (ARTCO Gallery)
- 2008 *Angaza Afrika - African Art Now*, October Gallery, London, UK
Input, National Museum, Luanda, Angola
Lend Me Your Ears, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Dialogue, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany
Einen AUGEN-Blick, bitte!, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg, South Africa (October Gallery)
At Eye Level, City Gallery Viersen, Germany
- 2007 *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, California, USA
From Courage to Freedom, October Gallery, London, UK
Tapping Currents: Contemporary African Art and the Diaspora, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, USA
Have a Good Nose, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Africa Select, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany
Artists Alliance Gallery, Accra, Ghana
The World Bank Collection, World Bank, Washington DC, USA
In and Out of Africa, Museum Haus der Völker, Schwaz, Austria
Art Cologne, 41st International Fair for Modern Art, Cologne, Germany (ARTCO Gallery)
- 2006 *Body of Evidence (Selections from the Contemporary African Art Collection)*, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA
Allstars, Jörg Heitsch Gallery, Munich, Germany
Dialogue of Positions, Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim, Germany
Focus Africa, Kunsthau Viernheim, Viernheim, Germany
The Elephant, Kühn Gallery, Berlin, Germany
7th Dak'Art, Dakar Biennale, Senegal
Distant Relatives - Relative Distance, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
Art Cologne, 40th International Fair for Modern Art, Germany (Jörg Heitsch Gallery)
- 2006 *All our Tomorrows*, Exhibition Space University Lüneburg, Germany
Salon d'art Contemporain Africain de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
- 2005 *Back to the Future (Retour au futur)*, Collection Elmer, Abbaye of Neumünster, Luxembourg
Groß und Quer, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
Visualized Rhythms, Waschhaus, Potsdam, Germany
Hand in Hand, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
- 2004 *Africa Remix*, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Germany, touring to: Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2005); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (2005); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2006); Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (2006/07); Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), Johannesburg, South Africa (2007)
Bocca della Verita, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Fifteen Years Peter Herrmann Gallery, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
Artiade, Olympics of Visual Art 2004, Tavros-Athens, Greece
Africome, Stadthalle Oelsnitz, Oelsnitz, Germany
To Be: Human Rights through Art, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland
The Africa to Come (L'Afrique à venir), Art Association Ostseebad Kühlungsborn, Kühlungsborn, Germany
- 2003 *Journeys and Destinations*, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA
A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA; Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, Houston, Texas, USA (2006)
Ghana Yesterday and Today, Musée Dapper, Paris, France
Post Border Land, Stichting Beeldende Kunst (SBK), Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Espacios Mesticos II, International Contemporary Art Meeting, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain
Retrospective 2003, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
The Rest of the World, Alexander Ochs Galleries, Berlin, Germany
Dialogue, Gegenwartkunst in Südbaden, Galerie im Alten Schloss, Wehr, Germany

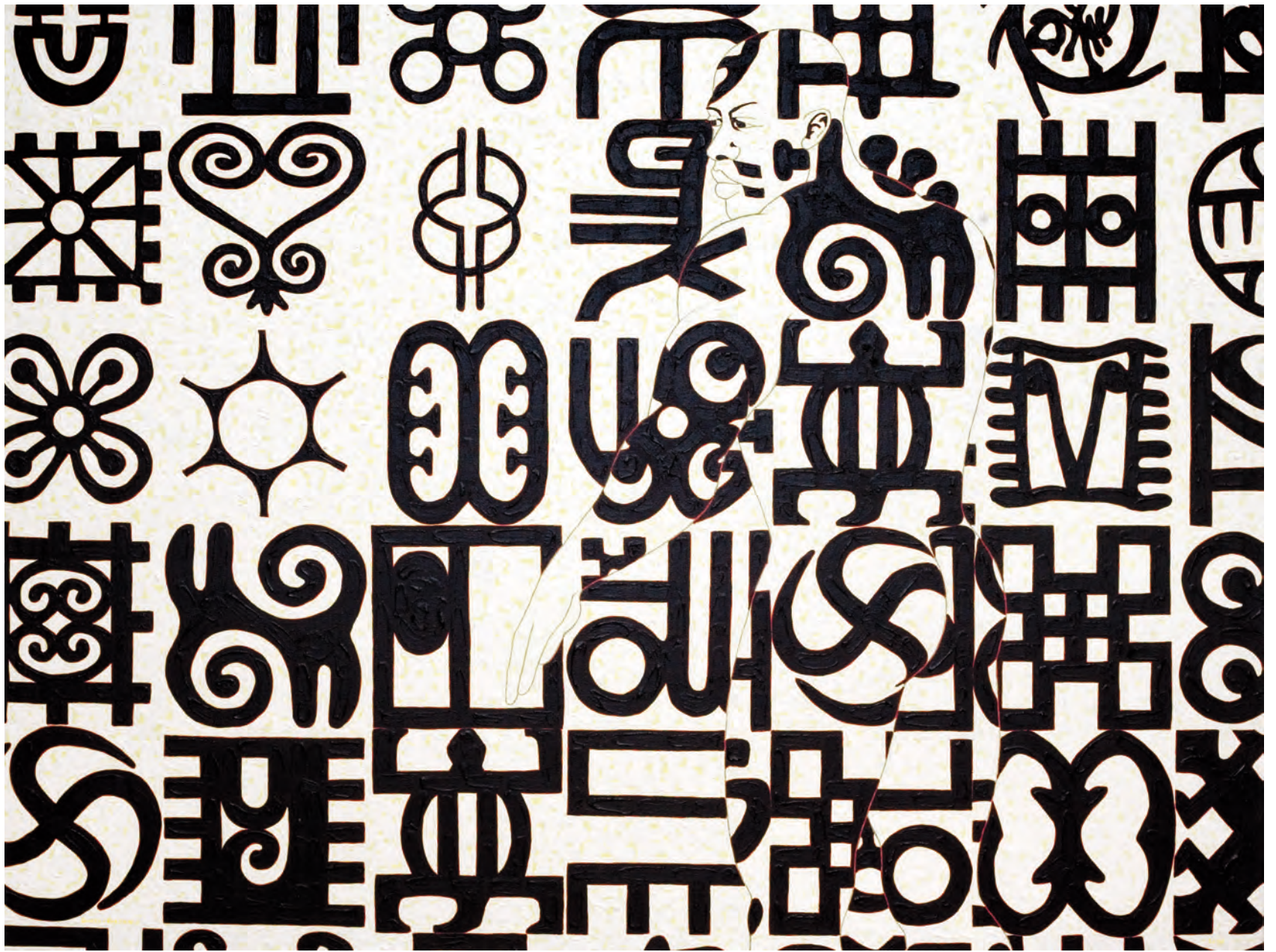
- 2003 *World Art Series VII*, a collaboration between Klinger Gallery, Görlitz, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, and Holger Wendland of Edition Raute, Dresden, Germany
Art Cologne, 37th International Fair for Modern Art, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Cologne, Germany
- 2002 *African Night*, Paul-Löbe-Haus, a Peter Herrmann Gallery exhibition at the German Parliament, Berlin, Germany
Visual Art and Sculptures, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
- 2001 *It Flies and Flies*, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
- 2000 *Artists of the Day*, Flowers East Gallery, London, UK
Art from the Homelands (Heimatkunst), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany
Ark (Arche), Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Overview, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
Paradise Zero, Eventa 5 Biennale, Uppsala, Sweden
EXPO 2000, Hanover, Germany
Transafricana, Bologna, Italy
Three Way Conference, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany
In the Colours of Africa, Mission 2000, Lille, France
The Insect, Kühn Gallery, Berlin, Germany
- 1999 *Transvanguard*, October Gallery, London, UK
From Scarab to New Beetle, Art Association Bad Salzdetfurth, Bodenburg, Germany
Five Continents One City, International Salon of Painting, Museum of Mexico City, Mexico City, Mexico
- 1998 *Body and Soul*, Staatsgalerij Heerlen, the Netherlands
The New Spirit of Africa (Der Neue Geist Afrikas), Art Association Landshut, Landshut, Germany
Multiple Echo, Peter Herrmann Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany
Aids World, Le Monde du Sida, touring to: Geneva, Zug, Zurich, Bellinzona
- 1997 *6th Biennial of Havana*, Havana, Cuba
Polarisation, Jörg Heitsch Gallery, Munich, Germany
Exhibition of the Fourth International Conference of Visual Arts, Vancouver, Canada
- 1996 *2nd Dak'art*, Biennale Dakar, Senegal
Africana, Sala 1 Gallery, Rome, Italy
Art Project African-European Inspiration, Pedakondji, Togo; Alsdorf, Germany
- 1995 *The Right to Hope*, Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), Johannesburg, South Africa, touring to: Cairo, Amman, Gaza, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv
Absolute Ghana, Accra Contemporary Art (ACA), Accra, Ghana
An Inside Story: African Art of our Time, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, touring to: the Tokushima Modern Art Museum, Tokushima; Himeji City Museum of Art, Himeji; Koriyama City Museum of Art, Koriyama; Marugame Inokuma-Genichiro Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Gifu, Japan.
- 1994 *Around and Around*, collaborative and touring exhibition: Achim Kubinski Gallery and Peter Herrmann Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany (1994); Espace Doual'Art, Douala, Cameroon (1995), Achim Kubinski Gallery, Berlin, Germany (1999), Peter Herrmann Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany (1999)
Kunst im Landtag, Rheinland-Pfalz, Mainz, Germany
- 1993 *Art Multiple*, Düsseldorf, Germany
- 1991 *Bremen Art Show*, BBK Bremen, Bremen, Germany
Artists of Bremen, Roche Gallery, Bremen, Germany
- 1988 Exhibition Award for Visual Art Bremen, Weserburg, Bremen, Germany
- 1987 *Paintings 87*, El Patio, Bremen, Germany
Museum of Modern Art, Bremen, Germany
- 1986 *We Live Here*, El Patio, Bremen, Germany
- 1985 *Artists for Human Rights*, Übersee-Museum, Bremen, Germany
- 1981 Group Show of Ghanaian Painters, Oakland, USA

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan, USA
MTN Art Institute Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA
National Museum of Ghana, Accra, Ghana
FirstRand Bank, Johannesburg, South Africa
Standard Chartered Bank, South Africa
Renaissance Capital, Moscow, Russia
Collection International Finance Corporation, World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA
Übersee-Museum, Bremen, Germany
Espacio C de Arte Contemporáneo, Camargo, Spain



On My Knees, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm



Looking Back into the Future, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm



Starkid, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 240 cm

Microcron-Kusum artwork photographs by Joachim Fliegner

This catalogue was published on
the occasion of the exhibition

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