



OWUSU-ANKOMAH

MICROCRON-KUSUMI

SECRET SIGNS - HIDDEN MEANINGS

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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 Although I come from a large family, I was quite withdrawn when I was young.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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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

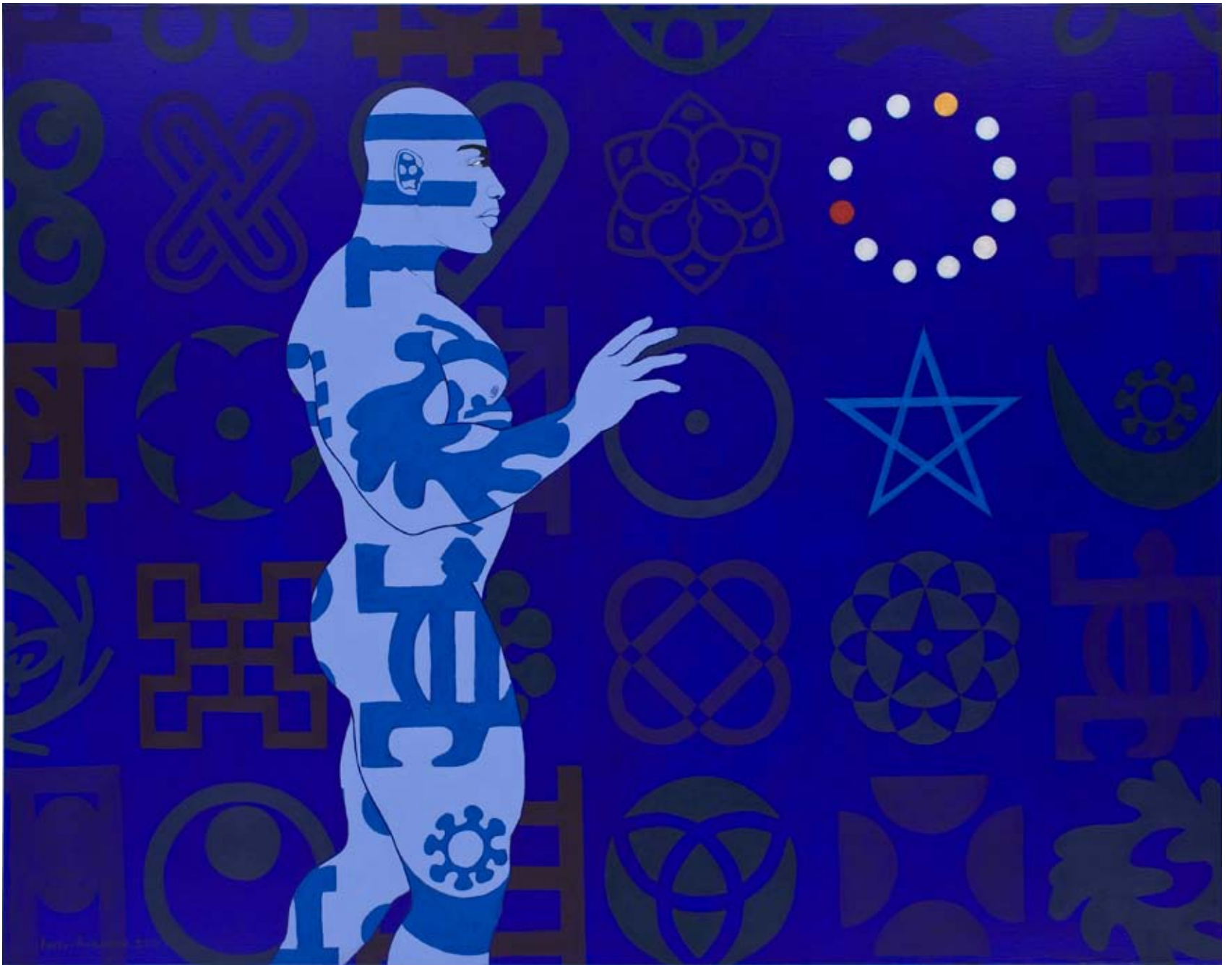
to talk - even indirectly and with only partial understanding - about things of critical importance: about the blue planet, about the oceans, about the future of our species. The paintings in this series provide templates for others to reconnoitre in advance the critical questions of the present time. 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.