

whitewall

Jems Koko Bi's Wood Sculptures Are History in the Making

By Eliza Jordan

The 54-year-old artist **Jems Koko Bi** was born in Sinfra, Côte d'Ivoire. In 1992 while studying at the **Institut National Supérieur des Arts** in Abidjan, he was introduced to woodcarving by a German professor who taught sculpture.

In 1997, Koko Bi won the DAAD scholarship and traveled to Germany. After he joined **The Kunstakademie Düsseldorf** and studied under **Klaus Rinke**, he settled in the country permanently. In 2000, he received a prize at the **Dakar Biennale**, and in 2008 he received the Francophonie prize for his work *Darfur* at the eighth edition of **Dak'Art**. Koko Bi has also participated in many international exhibitions, such as the **Havana Biennale** in Cuba, **Documenta** in Kassel, and the Ivorian pavilion at the Venice Biennale on three occasions

Koko Bi is renowned not only for his sculptures but for his respect for nature. Rather than cutting down trees to make works, he creates from fallen trees. Typically, his monumental sculptures are made from chiseling burnt wood, offering them a new life. As a means to tell important stories, his works explore topics like migration and power.

A few weeks ago while Koko Bi was still isolated in Germany due to COVID-19, he spoke with *Whitewall* about staying connected to nature, being inspired by permaculture, and embracing a new way of life.

WHITEWALL: How are you doing?

JEMS KOKO BI: I am doing well, thank you, I hope you are too. I am currently in Germany in an agricultural area, so I am not that worried about catching this new plague.

WW: What are you listening to, reading, watching?

JKB: Right now, I am listening to birdsong and the sounds of foliage caused by the wind blowing. I've stopped reading, and throughout the day, I watch the peacefully changing and regenerating landscape.

WW: What are you cooking?

JKB: My current home is surrounded by farms. My cooking includes a variety of potatoes, spring onions, asparagus, aubergines, leeks, and tomatoes, which allows me to make a delicious vegetable sauce to accompany duck. The next day, I invent another dish inspired by everything I can find at my neighbors', the farmers, with the hope that I'll soon be able to eat my own home-grown vegetables.

WW: How are you staying connected?

JKB: At the moment I am not using the Internet much and I haven't ever really watched TV. Sometimes I check my emails. I stay connected to the outside world as little as possible as long as no one will tell me the truth about what is currently happening in the world. I stay connected to the trees that surround me; they keep me informed. Only the trees, the birds, and the insects, through their reactions, know more about what is happening at the moment. So, I remain connected to them.

WW: How are you staying creative? Are you able to make work at this time?

JKB: As I've said before, I'm staying closer to the ground right now. I have chosen a part of my garden to make mounds for my vegetable patch. I am currently planting shrubs and flowering plants.

Artistic creation is the kind of work I have done the least of so far. I don't have any ideas for new sculptures at the moment.

WW: Where are you finding hope or inspiration?

JKB: My present green environment gives me hope and inspires me to improve and strengthen it by planting more trees and growing my vegetable patch. I am learning permaculture. I am rediscovering myself and I am convinced that the new world that is coming will inspire me intensely. At the moment I am letting myself be carried by this new existence and I do not want to rush it by forcing myself to be an artist and create work. I am in the process of living my life wholly.