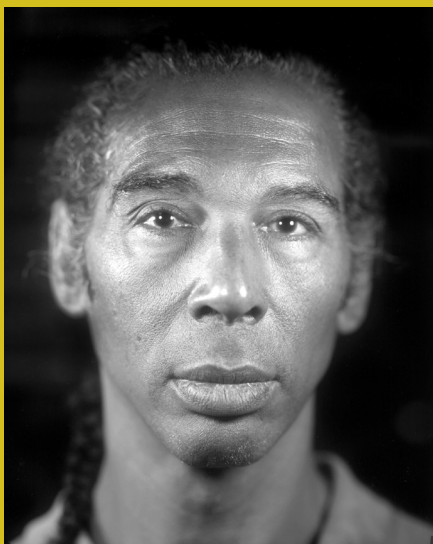


Artist Interview

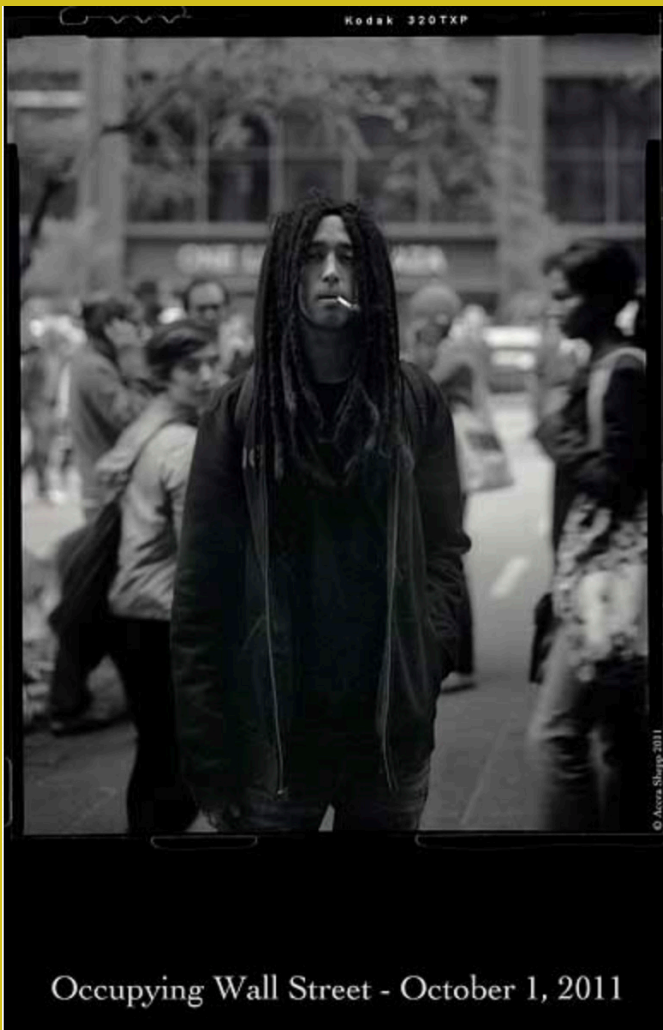
Accra Shepp



world, who understand that poetry indeed does tell us things about the world that maybe their own specific discipline in science cannot.

CONVOKE I know you mentioned studying under Emmet Gowin, I realized that his work is that famous photo of the woman and her kid. Who are some of your other influences/inspirations? Artist or photographer or anyone/thing else.

ACCRA Yeah, so Emmet was fantastic. At first, I didn't even know that he was there. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know that being a photographer was possible. So that's where I got introduced to working with medium format and that was actually the first camera now that I think about it. I had a 35mm camera that I owned, but the first non-35mm camera was my Rolleiflex, which was my medium format camera.



from *Occupying Wall Street*

a container for the human figure. There's this dialog, this discourse between the figure and the landscape. As human beings, we don't exist outside of our context. We often think of ourselves as singular, but human beings have this kind of exceptionalism that we invoke when we speak of ourselves as a species - that we are uniquely and innately endowed with magic powers on par with Harry Potter and Superman and we stand so far apart from every other part of the universe. And it's like, not so much. We are part of everything. Without everything else, we can't exist.



from *Islands of New York*

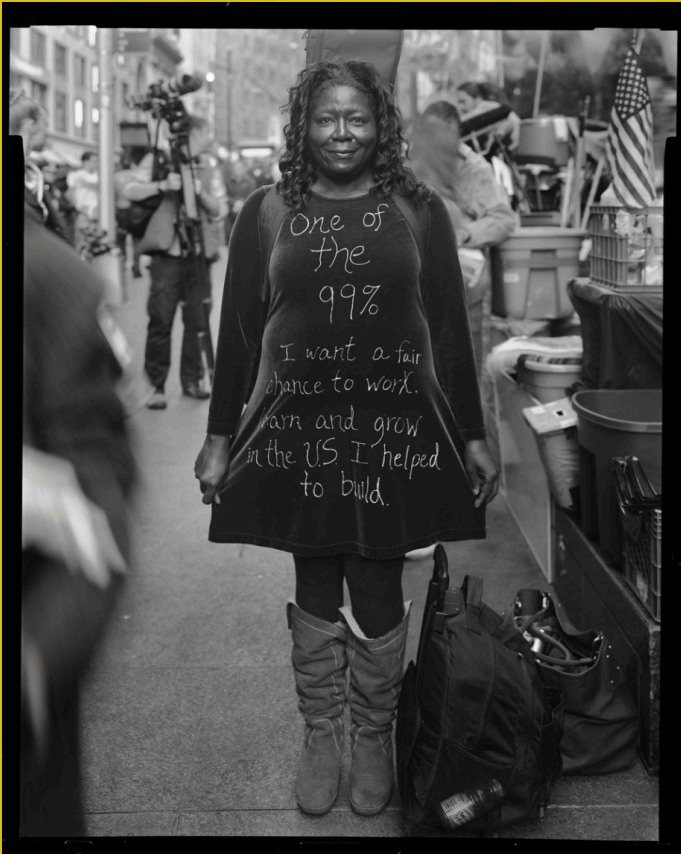
CONVOKE Everything is related.

ACCRA Not just related, but connected - I mean microbiome. They say that there are more cells in the body that are actually unique species other than our own cells. I don't know if that's really true, but I heard that. But that's insane.... And when scientists look to see how they develop, the mitochondria, which are the energy cells - those used to be independent living organisms that were absorbed by early life. They evolved separately, which is why there's mitochondrial DNA, separate from the DNA in the nucleus of the cell.

Because in fact, they're their own life form. In order to create life, we have these symbiotic relationships. That aspect of our world I think is hugely important and often overlooked because if you listen to the script, if you pay attention to what we are supposed to think, we are so special. We are so unique. We are so wonderful in the universe. I mean, there are people who believe that we are actually the only intelligent species in the universe! And I'm thinking, "You don't know how big the universe is..."

CONVOKE Tell me a bit about your process and approach to Occupy Wall Street.

ACCRA When I started the project, I saw Zuccotti Park was a little dark. It was a very forlorn little dark park with no light. There are all these immensely tall buildings around it. In the spring and summer, the sun is able to angle in for maybe an hour or two and in the fall and in the winter, sometimes not at all. So it's a place with no real strong light. Color is meaningless. So I knew the project had to be black and white right from the get-go.



from *Occupying Wall Street*

And with the choice of format, I knew I wanted to see it as clearly as possible so I chose the 4x5 because of the wealth of information. When you scan a 4x5 negative, if you choose the maximum settings for everything, you can end up with a file that's maybe in excess of 3 gigabytes. It's very information rich.

CONVOKE You chose the feminist writer and activist Salamishah Tillet to write the forward for *Radical Justice*. Tell me a bit about her, your relationship, and why you chose her for this particular book.

dark. For years, before 2016 even, I have been feeling the impulse to do cyanotypes. I have to do cyanotype. I have to do it. So when I started, I was working with some older negatives of people who had these guns, so I worked with those because I was doing some other work, and I was just stunned, so when I got to the end of it, it was like, “I guess I have to make more pictures.”

This idea that I had to make the cyanotype came from that little voice that tells all artists what to do. And I say to my students, “that little voice has a name. It’s called the unconscious mind.” And the unconscious mind by definition is without ego. The unconscious mind does not want to be known. It doesn’t speak with a voice like the conscious mind, the unconscious mind is never going to reveal itself, not directly. The unconscious mind speaks to us through dreams and reverie in the daytime. It speaks to us through association. We will see something and an idea will pop into our head like, where did that come from? And it’s like, well, you thought of it! You think they come from the outside world, but it’s the unconscious mind at work. Artists have to cultivate a relationship with this part of themselves.

And the unconscious mind is able to interpolate hundreds if not thousands of inputs simultaneously. It’s understanding culture. It’s understanding current events. It’s understanding moods and feelings. Unlike some computer algorithm which spits out a numeric response, the unconscious mind returns emotional responses that guide us in our action which is way more useful than a numeric response.



from *Gunners*



from *The Covid Journals*

CONVOKE Honesty and vulnerability in your subjects are essential to your portraits and are what make them so intriguing. How do you approach capturing honesty and vulnerability in people who are often strangers to you?

ACCRA When I photograph, because I'm so big (I'm 6'7") and I'm working with large cameras, cameras that are bulky or slow or unusual - there's no hiding. I'm not really interested in images where the person is unaware. I have done that. That can be fun. But in general, that's not what I do. I'm much more interested in having the person compose themselves and present themselves. I want to see them clearly. I want them to feel comfortable so that they can give me that bit of themselves - the self that they know when they wake up in the morning, the self that they know when no one else is around. I want that version of them, not the masked version. For some people, it's a literal mask. Perhaps they use contouring makeup and they craft a mask out of makeup. Sometimes the mask is clothing and an expression so that they are a certain version of themselves that they feel other people will accept or that other people expect. But I'm not interested in any of that.

CONVOKE Right. I feel like the protest space, to some extent, is where people are less likely to be "masked." I feel like that's why there's such a saturation of protest photography.

ACCRA When people are protesting, it's a funny place to be because you leave your home and you enter a space and you're asking people to look at you, you're asking people to hear you. You want to engage people. It's not something that we do lightly because in a city, we are not asking to engage passersby, strangers - that can invite danger. But in a protest, which is a special condition,

