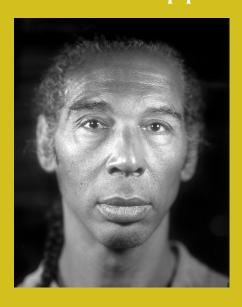
Artist Interview

Accra Shepp



CONVOKE How and when were you first introduced to photography? Specifically, medium format photography? What about the medium intrigued you, as opposed to another form of art or another medium of photography?

ACCRA If there were multiple starts, I was a little kid in junior high, back before they called it middle school. The art teacher showed me how to develop film and print images and developing film seemed impossible, but printing images seemed like it would be really fun to do. When I got to high school, I took some books out of the library because I figured, "Yeah, I could probably make images as good as what the drugstore made, or everyone," back in those days. I taught myself how to develop film. It didn't turn out to be as impossible as I thought. I was working in my high school dark room and the only other person, not people, the only other person, was the person in charge of the yearbook. He was only in there now and then, so it was basically a private dark room. It was fantastic. I figured out how to develop film at home pretty quickly so I could do that at home. And yeah, so I got to college and I was studying engineering and I thought, "Wow! Well, maybe I should take a real class and really get to know this thing."

CONVOKE Do you have any formal training in photography or are you mostly self-taught? Did you study it at all in school, if so, where?

ACCRA I went to Princeton. I studied with someone named Emmet Gowin - that's kind of like being Charlie Bucket and opening the bar of chocolate and finding a golden ticket. Emmet was - he is from the South, so he's got this Southern storytelling thing, this William Faulkner thing going. Being in class with him was just amazing. People would just hang out forever after class just wanting to hear him talk. From him, I understood how you might make images as your life's work, and I changed from engineering. I gave engineering two good years but in the end, it was like, I should be liking it more. These Ivy League schools are very expensive and I thought, "What am I doing studying something that I only kind of think is OK? It should be rocking my boat."

But, I did study a lot of science. And the world is really amazing - the world is one of the craziest places on this planet that you could ever imagine. Do you know there's this thing called the xenophyophorea? It has got two x's in it, which is really crazy. It's a single-cell organism that lives at the

bottom of the ocean. They're like 5 centimeters across. It's a single-cell organism that you can see with the naked eye. This is a really crazy planet! Not all of it is nice, some of it is like bolo which is crazy in its own way, but some of it is friendly.

CONVOKE How did your upbringing/childhood in NYC, specifically the LES, influence your work? I know your father was a jazz musician, do you feel that his musical pursuits influence your work at all?

ACCRA I know the Lower East Side for some will seem – I mean it wasn't as exotic then as it might seem now. The Bowery, where we lived on Bowery and 5th Street, was most notable for bums who would be passed out asleep in their own pee. There were slap houses and there were restaurant supply houses. What I didn't know from back in the day was that in the '30s and the '40s, there had also been a number of theaters down there, which may be why the bums were still there because there was some weird historical memory of drinking and passing out. The bums are still there. We didn't call them homeless then. We just call them bums - nothing quaint. It's unfortunate, but when you're a little kid, you just want to steer clear of them because they weren't kid-friendly, definitely not. So that's kind of – it was a real place. There's some film footage I'd share with students occasionally, the Robert Frank's film Pull My Daisy. He lives on the Bowery just a little bit farther down from me. His footage is maybe from the '60s but it looks like it's from the late '50s. So it's a little bit before my time, which is mid and late '60s. But it gives you a sense of what the Lower East Side really felt like at the time.

I have memories - Bread and Puppet Theater who founded Bread & Puppet Circus, his Bread & Puppet Theater, not Bread & Puppet Circus, Bread & Puppet Theater. He's an artist, his children have gone on to do great things. One of his kids founded the bookstore Printed Matter. I remember seeing giant puppets from Bread & Puppet Theater marching through the Lower East Side. This was all very normal. People – it was the '60s, up until about '72 when we moved, but it was a place where there was a certain – I mean remember Helen Levitt said something very profound when I was an undergraduate. She came to visit, and she was talking about making all those really phenomenal images up in Harlem and she said, "There was a time," and this was the '80s when she said this, "... when people lived their lives partly in public, out on the street. They would pull out a chair. The kids would play outside and the out-of-doors would be part of their homes, like an extended living room." And by the time the '80s rolled around, we had Game Boys. They were not nearly as sophisticated as what we have now, but people were focused on indoor spaces, on

indoor activities and people were not outside in the same way, and she lamented that. I guess when I grew up though I did not feel I lived outside in that same way, life was conducted partly out-of-doors like that and I experienced that. I like people. I like hearing people's stories. And so, it was a place where that was possible. If I had grown up in a suburban context, it might have been less possible there.

And for being the child of a musician, my father was a very big influence but not in ways that would be immediately apparent. For most people, when they go away to college, the idea that they might become an artist might seem really foreign and their parents might be very upset. But my father was already an artist and I've grown up knowing that it might be difficult, but it was entirely possible. I knew there were some things that I would need to plan for and other things that were just unknowable. It was a major decision to focus on the arts, but I went in with my eves open.

Beyond that, it was funny, when I was studying whatever instrument I was studying at the moment (I played a couple of them growing up) the music teachers would all be like, "Oh, you should try to improvise. You should try to play jazz." And I had no idea where to begin. It was so funny. I felt rather like a failure in that regard. And then around the time I turned 30, it kind of snapped into focus - some of the things my father had always said. Making work whether it's visual or aural as they say - A-U-R-A-L, auditory is a better adjective because it's easier to say - no matter what work you make, it's all about sharing ideas. Ideas in and of themselves have no physical form. They are electrochemical traces in our brain. I think Noam Chomsky has talked about it, but I believe it's his idea - where he talked about how the actual formation of language allows us to create, from feelings and motivations, the world of ideas. So language is the first layer of clothing that the idea wears in order to be in the world. That's the flesh of the idea. That part of Genesis, "In the beginning was the word and the word became flesh" - that's kind of what it's talking about. It's not so much a matter of religion and God. It's talking about how we know the world. It's very theological. And there are other ways for ideas to take on that flesh, and one of them is through the visual arts - that includes the plastic arts as well as photo and painting and drawing. And music and dance, these are other ways of encoding these ideas. The dancers like to say "embodying ideas." I love that term because everything is embodied when you dance.

And from my father, I gained this ecumenical view of the arts where I understood, "Oh, now I know how I might be a musician and I know how I might improvise." But I thought, "I'm 30 years old now

and I'm not going to start at the very beginning. I'm already weighted to photography, so I'll just stay here. I'm happy here." I don't need to follow through people's expectations about what the son of a musician should or should not do. So that's one of the biggest gifts that I got from growing up as a son of a musician, understanding what it means to be an artist and the relatedness of all of the people who work in that arts and how it touches upon the larger world.

There was a moment in history before science and art diverged, so before the 1400s, before the Renaissance, arts and science were very closely related. The idea of understanding the world and knowing the world was the concern of both. But as science emerged from other labels of myth and magic and defined itself with a method of inquiry, of causality, it pulled away. People began to think of art and science less and less as coming from the same vine and being somehow distinctly different. But ultimately, science is obsessed with understanding the world whether it's the observable universe or the bodies.

CONVOKE As are the arts.

ACCRA Yes, and the arts are just consumed with understanding the world, understanding it in ways that science does not talk about. I believe it was Gauss - Gauss was like Newton, one of the first people to describe light - the physical properties of light. I believe there's a quote attributed to Gauss who talked about - he talked about light. He said, "The equations that I have that describe light go only so far. They do nothing to describe what it means to experience light as it falls across an object, whether beautifully or not." You realize where the two are entwined, they are not in conflict. They are actually concerned with the same thing but you can't use the same tool to address the same issue. It's like people who joke around, "If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Science is great but it's not going to help you understand many things. You can't unpack dreams just with a scientific method because dreams speak another language. They speak a language of cultural heritage, the collective unconscious.

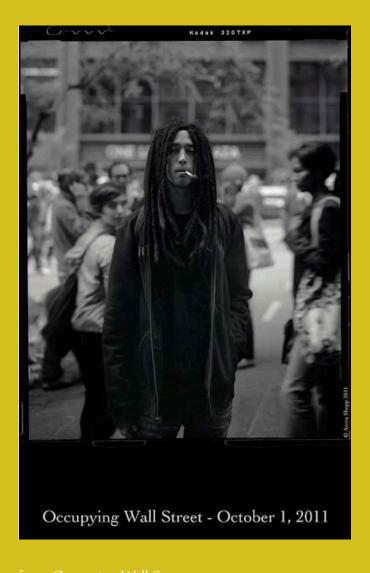
CONVOKE We have yet to understand dreams on any scientific level. No one does...

ACCRA And dreams like you said, they still allude in the scientific community. Unfortunately, many scientists exhibit a level of hubris that keeps them from understanding their field with any kind of completeness. And there are other scientist, and they are the ones who win MacArthurs and the Nobels typically. Not always, but they're the scientists who understand the relatedness of the

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.





And then for this body of work [The Covid Journals], August Sander. He was on my mind when I started making the work because I knew I wanted people from head to toe and thought it would have been nice to work with my 5x7 because that format is slightly better for photographing individuals than the 4x5, which is a slightly square rectangle. I thought the 4x5 would be great, portable, easy. And August Sander was right there in my head because he was trying to document the German people. So, that was a major, I don't know if I would say influence, but he was someone who was on my mind. I knew that his work was – it was different. He wasn't responding to a specific event. He was trying to record his nation, but I understood that I could borrow some of what he had done and be the better for it.

CONVOKE Your early work, The Islands of New York, focuses on the landscape and humans' relationship to them. Your later work, Occupy Wall Street, Gunners, and the Covid Journals, focuses on people and their relationship to the society they're living in. How and why did your practice shift from landscape photography to portraiture? How are the two practices similar and/or different and how do they influence one another?

ACCRA Well, it's never as clean as that. But you're right, I thought it was very interesting the way you had phrased the question. No, I was like, "Wow! You saw [Islands of New York] in a whole different way." I actually was very appreciative because from the outside, things always have a different appearance - that's how it can look from the outside. There are times when I need to be in the landscape. So Islands of New York was about looking at New York City, looking at how many islands make up the city, and being from New York, I had never known that - there's like 40 odd islands that make up New York City! And it's like, where do they put them all? So I wanted to see them. And then all these things happened with climate change and hurricane Sandy and it seemed to me that it was terribly important to know where we live, what the land looks like, what shape it has, because how can you think about moving forward in such a historical period unless you have the basic facts? And you don't have the basic facts. So, that was part of what I wanted to do with the Island of New York. And I did want to include the people who I found at the waterfront, but mostly it was about the waterfront and the landscape.

And it's something that I will return to. I did not finish doing all 40 odd islands because it's very expensive to get to the islands. I need to hire a boat. I did that for a time, but I realized I couldn't self-finance after a while. So I'm actually going to finish some of the islands. There's another project, the Leaf Work, where I'm printing human images on leaves. It's about how the landscape is

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.



trom Islands of New York

CONVOKE Everything is related.

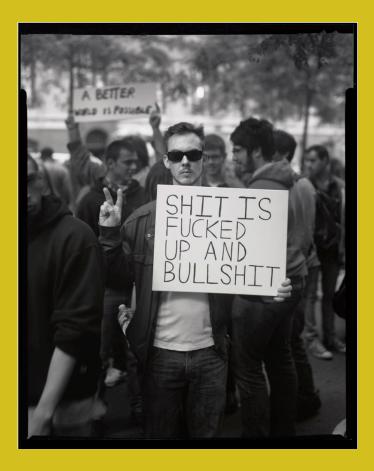
ACCRA Not just related, but connected - I mean microbiome. They say that there are more cells in the body that are actually unique species other than our own cells. I don't know if that's really true, but I heard that. But that's insane.... And when scientists look to see how they develop, the mitochondria, 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.

ACCRA I solicited ideas about writers from various people. I did a residency at MacDowell and the President of MacDowell, Philip Himberg, very graciously gave me a few names, including Salamishah. I knew right away when I read some of her works (some of it I had read before in the Times) that her voice would be fantastic because she was interested in culture, she was interested in arts, she was interested in politics and race and these were all the threads that I wanted to make claim with in the book. I wanted the book to explore the text to open the conversation up and let people know that it's ok to name these things and say that yes, this is an image addressing race, or addressing politics, or culturally what's possible, or what's understood or received. She really did that and her writing was beautiful. It had a lyricism but it was also very clean, in a way that journalism is clean, and I definitely wanted the writing in the book to be accessible. The idea of the photograph being a democratic medium that's accessible to everyone and the idea that Occupy was a protest about democratic ideals. I wanted the writing to reflect that interest in democracy, not to be writing where you need to have studied art history or politics in order to understand it. I wanted it to be accessible but I wanted it to be smart as well. She can do that.

CONVOKE That's a very special skill. It's a fine line to tread on...

ACCRA Yeah, especially when it comes to an art book. When it comes to an art book, there are many, many wonderful writers but they're going to be using words like "problematize" - I think it's a very awkward word and it's not useful. We can speak of things being problematic. We can speak of the problem. But to problematize something... She wasn't going to use that kind of language. Because when you use language like that, people's eyes glaze over. I wanted the book to have a wider audience.

And the fact that she is a woman. I was so thrilled. It was like, "yeah, I'm a guy and I speak as a guy" and that's good, but it's not everything. So then I get to have this other voice that understands the world from a different point of view.

CONVOKE In your series Gunners, you use medium and processing as methods to redirect the way in which your views digest the information in the photograph. Tell me more about your decision to print these photos in an alternative medium to the traditional silver gelatin and what you hoped to achieve.

ACCRA Well, that was a case of the unconscious mind sneaking up on me and mugging me in the

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.



trom Gunners

CONVOKE I see, so you were hoping to unlock that with the medium. Speaking of medium, shooting people on large format, or even medium format, can be quite the process and is very different from the traditional digital snapshot that people are used to nowadays. How do you feel that the process of photographing on large format affects your relationship with your subject and the final image that you create together?

ACCRA People understand photography in a particular way. So right now, I'm working on the vaccination portion of the COVID Journal. I just started, today was day 2. It took a while to get everything in place with the public clinic I'm working with in Bushwick. For the vaccination, I couldn't just photograph people on the street, I needed to be working with a partner. I found a very willing one, which was fantastic but scheduling is always difficult in New York. We finally got underway. I chose to work with medium format for the project because I needed a large negative and unlike Occupy, which was initially a stationary protest, I had to be able to move and go from place to place, so 4x5 [large format] was going to be too unwieldy.

I love what a twin-lens reflex looks like. For me, they're beautiful to look at and they also give you an in when photographing people. You're in the street photographing people with a twin-lens] reflex and they automatically think you're insane. They automatically think, "what is this? Is that real? That's so cool! Oh my gosh! That must be really old." All of these things come to their mind kind of at the same time. And they know in that moment, you can't mean them any harm. No one who is up to no good would have something so ridiculous.

I love my 4x5, but I also love my 8x10 and I love my medium format. I had just kind of rediscovered the square. I really was in love with the square as an undergraduate and then I fell away from it. And it's a very strong shape and it dominates an image, you have to be ok with that. Suddenly, as the 2010s gave way to the 2020s, I was really feeling that square format come back to me and I pulled out the medium format in advance of the pandemic, in the late 20210s. I began to reuse it and I was in love with what it was doing. Now, I'm kind of in the middle of that and probably when I'm at the end of this, I'm maybe done with this square again for a while. I don't know, I'll just have to see where I am.

CONVOKE It is a very specific frame.

ACCRA Yeah, the square is a very strong shape, so there's a reason when you use a square. It's got

a lot of meaning built into it. So I was feeling that and then the pandemic started and in March, when the lockdown orders came right after St. Patrick's Day, I was in my studio like so many other artists in New York. I was trying to figure out what am I supposed to be doing? What am I supposed to be saying? I know it's something, but I didn't know what.

CONVOKE And that's what the Covid Journals began?

ACCRA Yeah, after about a week or so, it occurred to me. I felt rather slow actually, like, oh, I'm a photographer. Oh, I live in the neighborhood that has been hardest hit by COVID. I live seven blocks from Elmhurst Hospital, which was the first hospital to fill up and was the epicenter of the epicenter, because New York City was an epicenter. So I put on a mask and gloves and I walked the seven blocks. I didn't have to violate the orders of the lockdown to go photograph. I photographed people in the neighborhood. I photographed some people who are involved with transit. There's a big transit hub near the hospital.

Then, the pandemic shifted after a while. In May, I started hearing about all these people who were out of work and without money. They were going hungry. And people were donating to food pantries and people who are working at these food pantries boxing food and they were food lines and I was like, "food lines in 2020?" This was part of the narrative too. So that started another chapter called Hunger. So the first one was Contagion and then there was Hunger. And then when George Floyd was murdered at the end of May and people just didn't know what to do and they just poured out into the streets to protest - it was incredible. And I looked at the images [of the protests] and realized, "oh, there's still a pandemic." These protests unfold within the shadow of the pandemic, so the Justice portion of the COVID Journal began that way. The Justice portion took me all the way through Election Day and decision day when we actually knew who was president. And then after that, the vaccine rollout happened and I wanted to do that but I didn't quite know how. I'll just have to see how that goes. Hopefully, that will be the end of the pandemic. But obviously, we don't know how it's going to end. It's kind of nutty.

CONVOKE How long had you been living in Jackson Heights when covid hit the community?

How had living, working, and participating in that community influenced your work pre-covid?

ACCRA I've been living in Jackson Heights for 13 years and I never did anything in the community before this, not concentrated, so it's been an exciting process and journey.







from The Covid Iournals

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

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,

that's exactly what people are doing. And in a sense, I'm completing the process by photographing them. They've invited people to look. They've invited people to listen. And so, I will look and listen. And the level of attention I give them is not casual. The kind of seeing I do, you might consider an "official" kind of seeing because the photograph is something that lasts longer than a person's gaze.

CONVOKE You said that you prefer not to photograph people who are unaware of you photographing, which is interesting based on what you said because I feel that in my own experience as a photographer, if I ask to photograph someone, they become aware of me as the photographer and the fact that I'm making a photo of them, and that's what they put on some sort of facade for the purpose of appearing a certain way in the photograph, rather than if they didn't know they were being photographed at all. But you seem to feel the opposite in your practice, which is interesting.

ACCRA Well no, they can do that. But the protest is not a space where people will do that. They are there and they've got a purpose. And the purpose, in a sense, almost overrides that impulse to dissemble with another version of yourself. But also, I'm very focused in my efforts as a photographer to make people feel comfortable because what I'm asking them to share is not a small thing and I'm very, very grateful when that happens. It's complicated. So when I see a person and they are visible fully and ready to be known in that complete way, it's so beautiful. I think, "thank you very much for sharing that," because that's not something people do casually.

But anyway, what really helps is that I like people. I like talking to people. I like hearing what they have to say. And so, even if it's brief, the photographic encounter, it's meaningful and it's not trivial. It's not, "oh, you look cool. I want to photograph you." It's, "oh, can I take your picture please?" And with the view camera, there's this period of setup and the camera itself helps me put the person at ease because you open the shutter and close the shutter several times before you are ready to make the picture while focusing. People think the picture is being made any number of times until they are so confused when we put the film holder in and we actually make the picture, they are utterly themselves. They've lost track. They can't keep count. And it's a big camera and it's very, very close to them. So it's like that focusing, that framing, the measuring of the light, all of that, gives them a chance to take my measure, to understand the process, to be good with it, to be comfortable with it.