My other car... is a coffin

Inspired by the extraordinary Ghanaian tradition of flamboyant bespoke funeral caskets — and some forward-thinking — Kenny Schachter wanted to find the perfect coffin to celebrate his life in death. Here, the art polymath and Porsche obsessive goes on a road trip to Accra to secure the ride of his afterlife.

Photograph by Nick Wilson
This is about death, cars, outside art and the power of contemporary art to suck it all in and spit it all out. I took my wife and four boys on a whirlwind trip to Ghana to visit the Joseph Ashong (aka “Paa Joe”) Workshop outside Accra, a folk artist specializing in what he calls proverbial caskets, one of which I had commissioned. In the West, we buy Warhols to display shelf life before they are obscured forever, ritual prior to being buried six-feet under – a dead person owes his/her a roof to be in the form of a 1973 Porsche 911 2.7 RS in baby blue. Pointing out how these works of art are beyond any economic cycle, one of the leading lights of the trade in coffin-making, Kane Kwei, is quoted in Thierry Secretan’s Going Into Darkness, Fantastic Coffins From Africa (Thames & Hudson, 1995) as saying, “All a dead person owes is his coffin.” And according to its author, “For a Ga [the dominant ethnic community in the region surrounding Accra, the capital of Ghana], it is better to incur lifelong debts than to cut back on funeral expenses.” With my wife, incurring lifelong debt would be the cause of the funeral. But the funerary art form of custom coffins – by nature intended to be appreciated only for the brief period of a funeral ritual prior to being buried six-feet under – means that these objects of art have a brief shelf life before they are obscured forever, never to be seen again. Imagine doing that with your Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin? I first encountered the artist and his designer coffins at Jack Bell Gallery in Vauxhall, London. The dealer tried to get me to buy two Paa Joes, stating how much shipping and customs duties could be reduced with the addition of another coffin – to which I replied that I would only do once. At first it was little more than just another artwork among artworks that I thought would look rather cool plunked in the middle of my bedroom. But then it occurred to me that I might be tempting fate by putting a coffin smack in the middle of my bedroom. I guess I was enthralled by the notion of a bespoke demise, a final lap around the track. I must admit I was as nervous about the trip as I was about the macabre nature of what I was getting myself into – literally and figuratively. This would be life outside the comfort zone. From the get-go, my wife was none too amused with my holiday planning. The night prior to our departure, CNN posted a quiz before a commercial break: “What is to the east of the Ivory Coast, mired in civil war?” It, that would be Ghana. Then there had been visits to the vaccination clinic, for there were malaria, cholera and many other ailments to worry about. There were pills to be ingested before, during and after the trip and a plethora of shots to be had. The sensation of my three-course meal of shots was a buming pain that lasted for days. And did you know tsetse flies prefer blue? There went my wardrobe hue of choice. My family has never planned more than a few days in advance for anything so, needless to say, we didn’t come close to meeting the deadline for securing visas. Once off the plane, with no documents, already not speaking to my wife, I was aware that the dark clouds of divorce loomed. After about an hour of phone calls and haggling, it was agreed we could pay our way through – a good thing after two planes and eight hours of flying. My first impression on arriving at our hotel was how strange it was to be in a place with no art market. In fact, I don’t think this has ever happened to me before. How did I feel? I felt as if I were naked. But then it occurred to me that I might be tempting fate by putting a coffin smack in the middle of my bedroom. I guess I was enthralled by the notion of a bespoke demise, a final lap around the track.
Underground art: Paa Joe’s extraordinary coffin artwork embraces all areas of life – and Paa Joe puts the finishing touches to the Mercedes coffin (right) will be buried – he worked as a driver his whole life and will lay in his favourite car for (top)

Photographs

It’s a car to drive me to the next world. But I’ll still probably get lost

Epilogue

An e-mail message from Paa Joe arrived, explaining that an autumn gallery exhibition had been cancelled – a New York collector had purchased the latest body of work in its entirety and decided he didn’t want it shown. Then Paa implored me to “find him more collectors”. Though it honestly never occurred to me (a rarity, that), my coffin seemed to be laughing at us, but in a nice and disarming sort of way. Rather than work for money, the traditional craftsmen gain work experience in exchange for food, some alcohol, a goat, a pair of sandals, a roll of fabric, and a few quid. This relationship can go on for years until one breaks out on their own.

The workshop had no lights or electricity, there was mould on the studio walls that would make any Londoner proud and, although his marketing pamphlet alludes to sophisticated tools and machinery, these seemed to comprise of nothing more than hammers, nails and hand-operated wood carving tools. Rather than a negative, this constitutes the charm of the enterprise. And somehow, by hand-eye coordination and an intuitive response to the subject matter, they somehow, by hand-eye coordination and an intuitive response to the subject matter, they seem to get it just right.

My Porsche was taking shape nicely and was an amazing process to witness. Seemingly unrelated pieces of wood were nailed and glued to the frame, which initially looked nothing like the car I had commissioned, until, with no more than a hand trowel, the surfaces were smoothed into the familiar form of the 911 2.7 RS. Granted, the shut lines of the lid appeared more than a hand trowel, the surfaces were smoothed into the familiar form of the 911 2.7 RS. Granted, the shut lines of the lid appeared slightly off, as they do with most Ghanaian coffins, but it’s all part of the attraction and, slightly off, as they do with most Ghanaian coffins, but it’s all part of the attraction and, somewhat, by hand-eye coordination and an intuitive response to the subject matter; they seem to get it just right.

My sense of direction, I will probably manage to the frame, which initially looked nothing like the car I had commissioned, until, with no more than a hand trowel, the surfaces were smoothed into the familiar form of the 911 2.7 RS. Granted, the shut lines of the lid appeared slightly off, as they do with most Ghanaian coffins, but it’s all part of the attraction and, somewhat, by hand-eye coordination and an intuitive response to the subject matter; they seem to get it just right.

It’s an eerie apparition...