

# 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**



**Fill her up... but not just yet:** Kenny Schachter's specially commissioned coffin, designed by Ghanaian artist Joseph Ashong, AKA Paa Joe, in the shape of a 1973 Porsche 911 2.7 RS in baby blue

# This is about death, cars, outsiders 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 specialising in what he calls proverbial caskets, one of which I had commissioned.

In the West, we buy Warhols to display wealth and status; in Ghana, they get buried in a Mercedes. They are crafted according to the station in life of the deceased (or soon to be departed): the Mercedes would be for a businessman; corn, tomato or onion for a farmer. There are also mobile phones, Coke and beer bottles, crabs and so on. One is more colourful, cartoonish and kitschier than the next. For the hedge funder, there's a smart lace-up brogue and I have seen a *Bible*-shaped coffin, the interior of which was fully illustrated. Paa Joe calls them "intriguing imaginations of helping to convert the departed in a flamboyant manner to the world of the unknown while providing him/her a royal ride into the next world". Perhaps, as an art

dealer, I should have gone for a giant Duchampian urinal; instead, my coffin will 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 owns 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 die 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 house. 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?" Er, 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 burning 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.

We started by sightseeing, picking up a guide along the way to take us to the fishing shantytown at Jamestown harbour. It was like a pulsating, 3-D Hieronymus Bosch painting come to life, exposing raw, unspeakable poverty with bodies thickly and chaotically strewn about. Next, our off-the-cuff guide asked us if we'd like to venture into the fishing village itself. In doing so, we encountered a sometimes-hostile group of inhabitants screaming and hissing their displeasure at our intrusion. There were bands of youths, many with weeping eyes from drink and drugs, variously threatening and cajoling us. We felt like bait, boldly protected by our fearless guide. Sadly, the

**Meet thy maker (clockwise from left):** The author with the artist, Paa Joe, at his studio outside Accra, in Ghana; the Porsche coffin being crafted; two of Paa Joe's eight children with Adrian and Ilona Schachter at the studio; the finishing touches to the coffin creation, such as the signature on the number plate; and the final product, ready for shipping to the UK





**Roaring trade (from top):** Paa Joe's lion coffin, before it went on display at the V&A; the pink fish coffin from his recent show at London's Jack Bell Gallery



**Underground art:** Paa Joe's extraordinary coffin artwork embraces all areas of life – and death – from a Ghana Airways-inspired casket (top) to drinks bottles and animals (above); Paa Joe puts the finishing touches to the Mercedes coffin (right), in which Holala Nortey will be buried – he worked as a driver his whole life and will lay in his favourite car for eternity; Paa Joe's nephew Colose Dadson (below) gestures, saying, 'Final respects'



history of the port included a fort where slaves were unceremoniously led from underground tunnels to awaiting ships, surely an atrocity worse than death. Fitting then that this trip was about a coffin.

The only gallery in Accra is in a disused seaside hotel with all manner of wares, from purely folk and decorative art to Paa Joe and other contemporary, more conceptual practitioners. The Artists Alliance Gallery, free of art-world conceit and snobbery, was refreshing, accessible and priced at a third less than the London counterpart, and priced about 20 per cent less than the art purchased directly from the local artist studios who could see us suckers coming for miles.

When we finally made it to the studio of Paa Joe, whose nickname originates from the fact that his studio is apprenticed by a handful of the eight children he has sired, they 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 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 slightly off, as they do with most Ghanaian coffins, but it's all part of the attraction and, unwittingly, probably contribute to a virtual feast for bugs when these things are put into actual use. Come to think of it, Paa Joe never asked, nor did I, for a fitting, but my eight-year-old couldn't resist jumping in one of the finished items and taking it for a test drive.

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

After our visit, and having purchased some more small pieces, Paa Joe took pity on the taxi driver and shared some of his spoils with him prior to our departure. Not content with this largesse, our enterprising taxi driver tried to extort a further sum of money for the ride. After only two full days, the otherworldly, heartrending squalor had taken its toll. So I called the travel agent from our roped-off lounge chair on the roped-off beach and planned our retreat.

When I got home, I cried. The total experience made much of my life seem rather absurd and futile; the realisation that half my obsessions revealed themselves as obscene was less than flattering. Maybe contemporary art is not quite nutritious, but thirst-quenching nonetheless – a bright-pink Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture might seem about the most irrelevant and frivolous thing in the world, but I could understand how it might brighten things up a bit.

In truth, in the past I never thought much about visiting Ghana, or Africa for that matter. After my trip, its colours are all I think about and I can't wait to get back. I only hope I don't end up in my 1973 Porsche 2.7 RS coffin before I get the chance to.

Then the eagle finally landed – after nearly a year in progress, it arrived, albeit a bit banged up after the long trip from Ghana. But it's a car – what can you expect? Not many people can say they welcomed, looked forward to even, such an unveiling. It's a car that drives you to the next world, yet with my sense of direction, I will probably manage to get lost. I posted a casual phone picture on Facebook and I was asked about the head peering behind the steering wheel but, strangely, in the real article, there is nothing (or no one) inside the passenger compartment. It's an eerie apparition...

### 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 appreciating in line with the car it was inspired by. And Paa was beginning to sound less like a hokey outsider and more like a middle-aged, aspirant YBA. [GO](#)

Joseph Ashong's lion coffin is on display at the V&A as part of *The Power Of Making* exhibition until 2 January. To see Kenny Schachter's collection of cars and future art exhibition information, visit [rovecars.com](#)