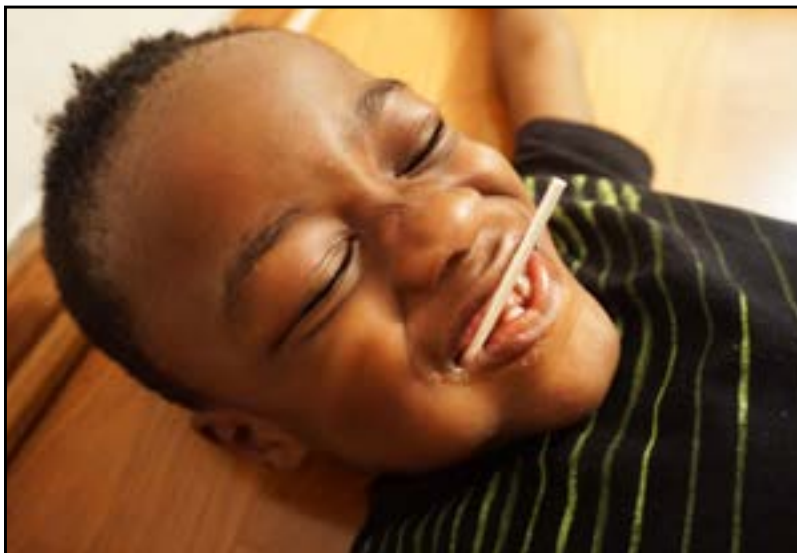


KWAME BOAMA MENSA

"The people we love define who we are; I'm an artist."



Top: Kwame sits at home in Woodridge, IL with his wife Esther, elder daughter Yaa and youngest Kwame Jr.
Bottom: Akwasi, 5-year-old middle child, rolls on the ground playfully as his parents look on from the couch.



Kwame Boama Mensa, lives in Wodridge, Illinois with his wife Esther and three young children. They met in their hometown of Kumasi, Ghana and began dating as soon as Esther had graduated high school. Kwame reminisces, "When I was young, we were 10 boys in the house. We would compete to see which drawing the elders thought was best. That is when I started having an interest in art."

By Ariana Poe

“Art is me and I am art. Because it’s something that I enjoy doing, I would do it every day even if I wasn’t paid. When people see me, I want them to see art. It’s my life.”



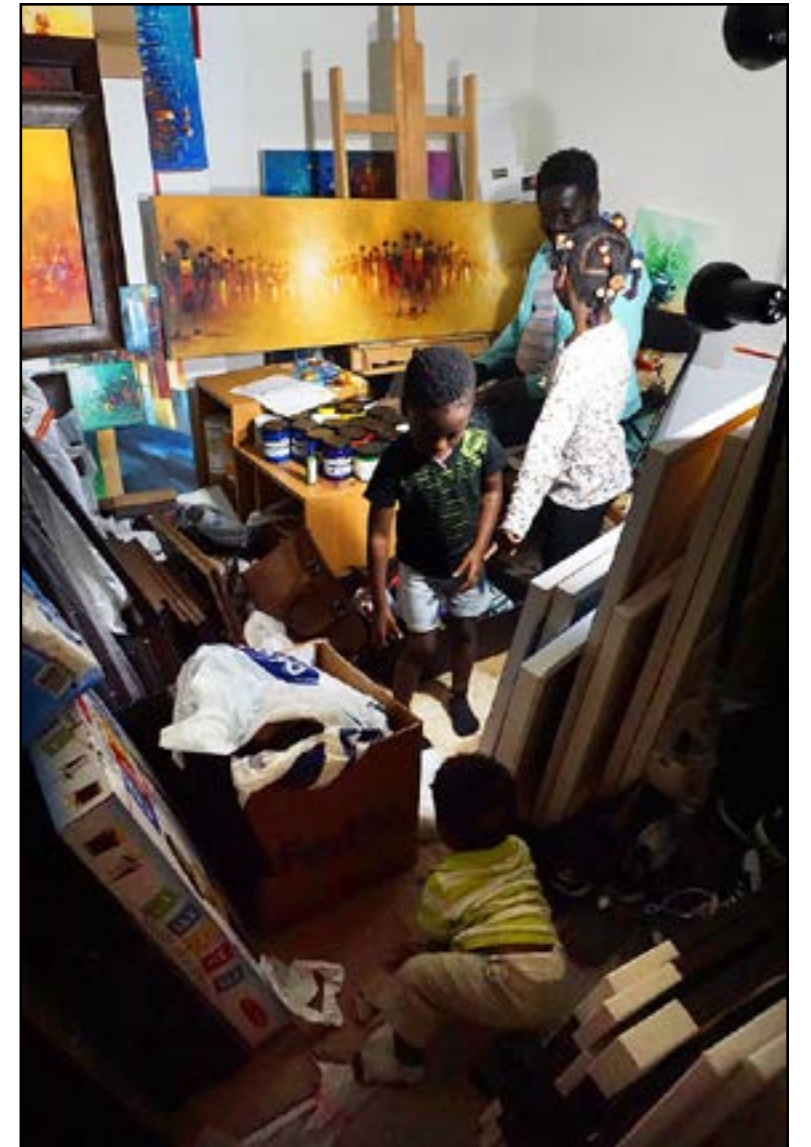
Esther and Kwame sit at home and share a laugh on a Saturday afternoon, after she has just arrived from a long day of finals at the College of DuPage campus.

Kwame attended the College of Art and Industry in his hometown of Kumasi, being the first in his family to professionally pursue art and graduated in 1999. While in school, due to his uncle working at the Cultural Center, Kwame was able to begin exhibiting and selling his works in their gallery. He started making friends at the Kumbasi Cultural Center, and always found himself going there spending a lot of time at shows and art fairs. He exhibited anywhere possible to showcase his works, and said yes to all opportunities, “Every year we were doing shows, every summer from June to September.”



Kwame Jr. just woke up from his nap and sits on his father’s lap, as Yaa kisses her mama after not seeing her all day. Kwame hasn’t been feeling well and is battling a fever, but must be on dad duty as mom attends College of Dupage as a full-time student pursuing nursing.

The art industry in Ghana is very challenging; art is pricey and considered a luxury that only the very wealthy can afford. According to Kwame, “it means you have to do extra to convince people to purchase a painting from you.” Kwame however, was committed to making it big, every day he could be found creating new art in his studio and he did a lot of research about the art market. Soon, Kwame became a well known name in the Ghanaian art world and his pieces were in high demand. In 2009, while his art business began to grow, together with his wife Esther they decided that she should move to the U.S. to pursue job opportunities. During the time apart, Kwame found himself bored and wishing to be closer to his wife and family in the U.S., so he decided to spend all his waking hours creating and pursuing success in his field. Esther would travel back to Ghana to visit, and during that time they married and had two beautiful children. Kwame, could no longer see himself living apart from his wife and children, so two years ago he moved to Illinois to be closer to his family. Leaving a successful career behind in Ghana was hard financially on his family but being together was priceless.



Kwame’s three children pay a visit to his Woodridge studio, one of the bedrooms in his three room apartment.



“In Africa, it’s like you live together and you do everything together. But when I came to the States it was like, it is you and your family and nobody else. It seems like, people don’t help people and everyone is busy doing their own thing and they don’t care. I don’t know if that is how it is, but that is how I see it. Living 40 years in Africa, people are helping each other but here you are living in a whole new world. It was quite challenging to get used to America.”

Mother's play a large role in Ghanaian culture. All sons must provide for their mothers and care for them after graduation. Kwame and his brothers were raised by a single mom, who took them regularly to the local market where she worked. Ghana doesn't have free public education, so parents will do whatever they can to make it possible for their children to receive schooling. Kwame's mother put all her sons through school without help from their father. Kwame's inspiration and passion for art stemmed from a deep rooted desire to want to provide for his mother. He explains, "I paint to appreciate the effort of my mother, and for people to see what she did to make a living to provide for us. That is why you see that my paintings depict women going to the marketplace. I want people to mostly appreciate the women in my country, the mothers who work hard for their children to have the lives they deserve."



"Where I come from a lot of people don't see possibilities in life because of their circumstances. People are brought up it to think that there are no possibilities. I use my paintings to show people what is possible, that what you allow in your mind determines what is possible."

Top: Kwame Boama Mensa sits his son Kwame Jr. on his lap as he adds some finishing touches to his latest work.

Middle: Kwame Jr. affectionately touches his father's face as they share a tender moment in his dad's studio.

Bottom: Kwame rests his eyes as he tries to explain and describe his latest artwork. He has been suffering from a bad flue that one of the children brought home from school. He just had a long day caring for his three children at home, while his wife attended nursing classes at College of DuPage.



Top: Acrylic Painting "Ladies go to Market" recently accepted to exhibit in the yearly African American show at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.



Middle: Acrylic on Canvas "Market Drums"

Bottom: Kwame proudly talks about his artwork "Market Drums", and his memories growing up as he accompanied his mother to the market. Musicians would sometimes play their drums and strangers would join in song and dance in a united effort to inspire workers.



“Family is everything to me”, explains Kwame empathically, “when I first saw Esther, it was like I knew that I wanted to go through the stages of life with her.” He believes that choosing the right wife is very important, and he values the partnership immensely. His mother plays a substantial role in motivating and inspiring Kwame to paint every day, to pursue art, and to never quit

no matter how difficult breaking the U.S. art industry has become.

In 2019 Kwame was accepted into the Museum Science and Industry’s yearly African American art show, where he won 3rd place while competing with 100 artists. Through the show he has made new connections and sold the award winning piece. “It was a great experience, going to the show for the first time,

after knowing that a lot of people try to enter the show every year and are not accepted. Being accepted at my first attempt was very encouraging, specially winning that award.”

Esther talks about her husband and shares that Kwame never wanted to disappoint his mom, “That is something that made him focus, he saw what his mom went through, and he felt ‘I have to make it.’”

“I want an art village, where I come from we don’t have that. I was thinking of building a whole art village, that people can come and learn. The young ones who are interested and don’t know where to go, they can come and learn whatever they want to.”

Kwame’s inspiration and creativity stems from multiple sources, “what I know is that so many things can lead to creativity, and sometimes when you are sad you can also get something out of it, and when you are happy you can get something out of it. Even from challenges, you get something out of it.” Kwame believes that through art people learn what exists in the world; art creates a moment of awareness, “There are so many things that people don’t see.” Kwame wants to help people see outside of their comfort zone, and catch a glimpse into the lives Ghanian mothers.



Kwame beams as he talks about his future dreams, to establish an Art Village in his hometown of Kumasi, Ghana. Currently he works the night shifts at a warehouse to make ends meet, he stays at home with the children during the day so his wife can attend school.