



International Case Study

Branding & marketing

Michelle Peterkin-Walker – Akoma Arts

Liverpool, UK

Akoma Arts creates frame art, greetings cards, t-shirts, key rings, light boxes, and bespoke art using positive images of Africa and its diaspora.

AKOMA ARTS



Unique Framed Art
Cultural Greeting Cards
Bespoke Light Boxes
T-Shirts

Michelle is a digital artist, community activist and creative social entrepreneur working across artforms from filmmaking, photography, graphic design, and community arts projects. She is active across a range of grassroots creative and community change organisations in Liverpool including Granby Four Street, Granby Winter Garden, Aspen Yard Studios and METAL Liverpool. Born in the UK of African and Jamaican heritage, currently living and working in Liverpool, UK

What type of creative entrepreneur are you?

I call myself a digital artist. I use video, photography, and design to make my art. My background is in film, my first love is film. I am just coming to the end of a month-long remote residency with METAL Liverpool, to develop two films: The Meet Me At The Spring and Your Lens on L8 films. As a freelance artist I do documentation, workshops and other creative projects including Politics of Plants. I do design work sometimes but not so much now.

How does the range of creative projects link to the business side of what you do?

All the work that I do acts as promotion activity for me gaining further work, one project builds onto the next. Because I freelance, I am mainly trading with cards and arts via markets, stores as well as selling online through a variety of platforms including my own shop, coming soon.

The Your Lens on L8 film project is about me going through the film archive in Liverpool since the mid-1990s to build on the existing sense of community, celebrate, remember and honour people who have passed and have fun. Both films are about connecting people with each other, for our black people and African Caribbean communities and diaspora. I want the films to go further than Liverpool, to Africa as they are going to be put online. Our cultures are connected.

The Meet Me at The Spring is about the local spring within the grounds of the Anglican Cathedral. It started out about connecting locally, meeting local people, the energy, and positive encounters with random people and this reflected our shared humanity. The spring is in L8 and there is a particular dynamic down here and I want to show this in the film. I have had small pots of funding to get this off the ground.

I like to capture these interactions and how the history of the grounds relates to local people; it is more of a passion project. When we were lockdown, and I couldn't go to the shops to buy water it made we re-think what I do about water i.e. I then remembered the spring from when I was a kid so I started going there to collect water. All the conversations that I started to record came about during the collection of the water and were so interesting, intergenerationally and intercommunity, all ages, races and backgrounds. This very much reflects what Akoma Arts is about.

What made you start up?

I truthfully was going through a difficult time in my life, I was feeling low and started a bee keeping and photography course.

I did the courses through Blackburne House, Liverpool and I got back into photography and this changed my vibe and it really helped me to test out if I could sell the cards, and this allowed me to get away from the workforce. I took some time thinking about what I had gained from the course and my cousin supported me to test my idea for selling cards out. Initially the cards did not sell as much, and I started going art prints which I found sold more. I found I enjoyed freelancing and working off my own back, not having a cushion. It was key to representing myself positively as an African person from the diaspora. It gave me freedom to express myself. Key people helped me to develop including Pauline Myers via a retreat for black women which helped me to embody my own self, own voice, my own narrative, not seeking validation. I am now comfortable in this zone. My friends and family have helped me in so many supportive ways including spiritually, financially and physically. It has helped to keep moving.

How do you define your personal brand?

I do not really know, although I do see myself in the business. Everything is a facet of me. I sign my work as 'reklaw3' as this represents me (Walker back to front). I do talks with Blackfest on women and celebrating African women. I am always branching out as a creative person. Even making films now must be connected to and links to me. I stopped doing purely commercial work because I know am not a fool and take up work from all over. I now want to drive the projects I create and be selective about who I work, which is a good place to be. Before I used to be working on the African Village Market and it still has potential, but previously doing freelance and Akoma Arts and the market was too much. So now I am settling into a new studio space in a bigger complex called Aspen Yard in Liverpool. Having this is giving me a powerful base, space mentally and I now I can work away from my home. I have a space to make my work, to sell work from, people can drop in and meet with me. It has already been so beneficial already before even networking with the other people in the units. I have proposed a market here so I am hopeful can happen in the future.

It is key for me to navigate this world as a black woman on my terms and not suffer within institutions of racism. So, when people come to my store, my spaces people have to take me on my terms or pass me by. I am glad to be free of more institutional work and the embedded racism away from the everyday pressures, micro aggressions this creates,

What is being in Liverpool like for you as a creative?

So there is a may dynamic, that even exists here in Liverpool whether it is colourism or our own issues created by the white supremacist institutions, conditioning and propaganda. Even with new people from African coming from the continent to Liverpool people will treat you differently, and even more negatively. Which is the same with the colourism in the city people are very friendly but according to the colour tone of your skin people will still get treated according to that. Having an accent, being a Scouser, being born and not being an African born here, with the accent you will see the dynamic change. If I put on an African head wrap and walk out some people will give me that African respect, but for Scouse people I have seen how they switch, not be so nice or are rude, that covert racism as I call it.

However when I reply back, and they get shocked when they hear my accent the dynamic plays out differently and this happens all too often. Even within our own black community there are these separations rather than the unity; where you are born, what your heritage is and whether you come from a black or mixed black family plays out. Africans coming over they still find it hard. My friend through the Granby CLT, a white woman, told me that it is obvious that the blacker your skin the worst you get treated here in Liverpool, and I have seen this. Even as Africans and we all have black skin people do delineation, so the struggles are not easy. There are community groups here to help this is why I like to have things so when people do come here they can feel part of being here. I like to share the collective information around how you can connect and reconnect i.e. different group such as a the Eritrean society and so forth. There is also something for me to gain from connecting with Africans who come here so I have my networks I like to use so I can still be in touch with the new communities.

Its important that we really re-build on because we used to be much more unified in Liverpool and there is real potential now to re-unify in many, many ways. So if what I do plays a small part in the reunification as a black community working together to build better platforms, building better economics for us which will lead to a better outlook, that is what I am about. And being about being happy, making some joy in our lives. Right now I am in my happy bubble with things working really well.

How do you define Akoma Arts as a brand?

A cultural arts company that produces art celebrating people of Africa and the African diaspora.

What makes you different, unique?

There is no one else on the planet like me, I have come to respect and appreciate this in myself, I appreciate us all as unique, and I recognise myself as valid. I love me and I am in the space to push every facet of this through every different way my creativity comes up, I mix and mould it so it comes out of me. I am letting this be and speak now whereas in the past I might have stifled it and second checked it. I let how my creativity comes and the networks I have allow these ways to flourish. I am nice to myself and I like to spread good energy, and touch people with my positivity, and upliftment; this is what makes Akoma Arts unique and why do what I do. I want people to feel this from me and take inspiration from me. I may have taken me the time is has to come to this now at this time of my life, but I am ok with that. I am happy where I am now as my journey is my journey and I have had so many roads to travel and I would not want to take back those experiences. I am about reconnecting with the African continent. I plan to tour all countries in Africa called my African Tour. I started with the Gambia and have land in the Gambia. This where home is for me as I want to build my home there. I have learnt that everything I have ever done has comes from the African experience and it gets mixed and melded into my UK experience. At the core of who I am, I am an African. So whether I am an African with Jamaican heritage, or Black British, UK, Liverpool heritage this is what makes me who I am. When I touch back with Africans from the continent, I get to actually see me, see the changes in but also what makes me unique, and African.

So much has happened historically with the Slave Trade, the middle passage and the horrific crimes against humanity and so much has been lost. But even with this loss I am able when I reconnect with people from the continent, I am able to reforge those forgotten things such as experiencing the culture, the language. So, every time I reconnect I start to get more back from each experience which is so good. It is my purpose to embed myself in this for the rest of my life, the UK will be what it is, and I will make this triangular journey back to Africa.

How do you stay true to your values, keep authentic?

I try to be honest with myself. Who are you when I am alone is important to reflect on. It is important to stay true to myself, I take ownership of my life. I make change if I notice I am uncomfortable with decisions I am making. I have decided not to be a puppet or pawn.

I am about not working in the white system, and I ask myself what type of system do I want to feed? I ask myself if “Am I being a coon?” to anyone when looking at what and how I do it. I am not about feeding that system and not getting it for my own self - living “coonery” (Michelle’s own word); the racist term or concept of describing a black person who exists solely to entertain white people. There is context about using this as my own descriptive for this concept/terms comes from Dr. Kehinde Andrews¹, Black Radicalism² and links to ways of being and a psychological state of mind. It is not used to just slur people it is more about the state of mind, a state of being. This is my personal way as a Black woman of looking at this, my way to make my voice heard and use my own descriptive. I choose to identify as an African and I chose to relearn about how I am, to learn about the history of my heritage. I want to reconnect and know my culture. This one of the things about relearning myself as an African all these things that were taken away our culture, the ways to live, religion, philosophy and our own spirituality it is still all there. I have learnt through having to relearn about who I am, and even Africans on the continent are not all completely familiar with it. We learn about the Abrahamic faiths, the Egyptian faiths, Kamet spiritual systems, even right down to Ethiopia and the fathers of civilisations. But when people say civilizations what do this truly mean? Being an African outside of Africa I have the choice now to look back, and look in. But it helps to look back, and for people like me I crave all things African, I want to find ways to delve back into the history not just going there as a holiday. The networks I am making and the fact Liverpool city has an African core this has helped me. If anything the world is playing catch up with what Africans are, and all that Africa is, how the world is owing to Africa. Winston Churchill is claimed to have quoted that Europe would be nothing without Africa and it is true that Europe owes so much to Africa. Finally the world is catching up with how long Africa has been feeding the world. There is a cynicism around that, but I know how great Africa is and I know I come from this. Knowing this makes me rise up in a big, big way. This is something that can never be taken away. It is hard to see how badly people and the wealth in Africa is still be so abused. My question is how do we change that? This is the task to support change in Africa and help Africa grow – most importantly economically.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kehinde_Andrews/

² Andrews, Kehinde. *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century*. 2018. Blackness in Britain. Web.

Africans outside of Africa have a consumer power and when we reconnect with Africa there are things all of us can do, there is a real ground swell of this coming. People are doing this more and more, these independent ways of working, freelancing and doing things on your own terms. My aim is to build my work this way working in a triangular way in the UK, the Caribbean and mostly with Africa.

How have you built up a customer base and loyal community following?

That has been the graft from the beginning through the trading and the market with Granby CLT. I became self-employed (freelance) in and made networks via fairs, festivals. This was hard work, expensive and time consuming. I needed to learn from this about what worked and stay connected. I did physical and online marketing and I made it personal, giving out leaflets, selling my art wherever I go. Sometimes I have cut the fee to support people to take art home with them on the day and do freebies to help people know about me. I have a website, social media; the website is a valid space to promote my business, my own shop front

I sell my work not just Liverpool, by doing markets I made it in London, Birmingham and Manchester; making links with Manchester and still have these links. My personality has really helped, its key, having common courtesy and manners is important.

What do you consider when planning your marketing?

The information has to be clear and concise; the platforms have word counts; I always try to use a visual. I am evolving more to share more visuals of me doing things in the community, me speaking, a video a photo of me. People connect with the human, my story. I have had to grow and develop this as I used to not think about it much. Being on the School for Social Entrepreneur North West (SSE NW) social entrepreneur Start Up course really helped. Being self-employed if I don't push I don't sell. So it is a journey.

How important are partners? Business, community etc

This is extremely important for me as a freelancer/soletrader. I work closely with Granby Community Land Trust (CLT) as a board member and local artist, especially bringing ideas to them. My work with them acts a credibility and validation through this two-way street partnership. I really got involved with the Granby Winter Garden, this linked to METAL Liverpool who showed my video. When I applied for the Politics of Plants these collaborations helped. I did a lot of this volunteering and this can be unpaid. But it has a knock-on effect that has really helped me. I don't take, take it has to be for myself and other partner. I am not guilty to get my 50% back as I give my 50%.

How do you use social media for your business?

I am learning to like it; I am more old school. Marketing and promotion is needed, I need to learn from other people especially young people.

I learn first and lean into other people who know more than me. Live chat is great - but it must be real, authentic and true to myself. I only post when I want, and I am not constrained by the platforms. I am getting a lot of feedback and interaction from Instagram. I test my comfort levels out and pitch the ones with most return

How has marketing allowed you to reach a more global market?

It opens up new markets, I can sell more abroad especially in the US. I do trade with Europe but more via the face-to-face events like fairs and festivals. My framed art sells more in US. For me market trading still is key i.e., at Slavery Remembrance Day at the Museum Liverpool most of the buyers that day were international. This is why we need more events like this to be developed to get more African products for sale in the central and tourist areas of Liverpool.

What needs to be considered when trading beyond the UK?

It is the costs of delivery and export/import costs I take into consideration. I want to make my art affordable and accessible, so I make art that addresses this i.e. buy, shop and have it in their homes. It has to be 'right' or as close to 'perfect' when it is packed, especially when shipping. My standards are already high, and I do extra checks when sending abroad as it returns are harder, so I make sure there are no breakages, cracks.

What advice can you give an aspiring creative entrepreneur?

- ✚ Believe in yourself. You are your craft. Whatever story you want to craft or communicate it is valid, it is real. And it is equal to anything else out there, you just don't know it yet.
- ✚ It is a journey; I know people say enjoy the journey, really do try to enjoy the journey because it is not just about achieving the final goal at the end.
- ✚ It is what and who you meet as you go only your path. These paths are all there, and you start stepping down one path, coming back around again and there are branches are the part of the journey of these experiences. Let yourself be.
- ✚ Do something that makes you happy is always key, and then turn it into your income - this then can be your perfect life. I hope you can see that this kind of happiness is available to you. Start with what brings you joy, alongside finding ways to feed your family.
- ✚ Make a clear statement that you want this kind of life and work towards it. Allow yourself to have this life for yourself.
- ✚ You can make it; this is a reality. Do not just believe you can make, know you can. You already have the knowledge, listen to your instinct, listen to your truth. You make your own reality, put it own there and walk your path, keep walking.
- ✚ Be flexible.

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Liverpool African Village Market www.facebook.com/Afrikanvillagemarket/

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