

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with a report on art in Nigeria and music from The Gambia.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

In today's programmes Florence Akst talks us to an exhibition of Nigerian art she visited in Lagos during FESTAC and Florence talks to AGBO FOLARIN, a Nigerian artist and sculptor, who's a lecturer in art at the University of Ife.

FLORENCE AKST:

This is the Nigerian Police Headquarter Band warming up the crowd before the arrival of the Head of State to open the Arts Exhibition offically. This is in Tafewa Balewa Square.

MUSIC: From the Nigerian Police Headquarters Band.

FLORENCE AKST:

Just about a week after the beginning of Festac there was another opening and this time of something stricly Nigerian. The opening was again by H.E. The Head of State and this was a display scattered over various parts of Lagos, of aspects of Nigerian art, Nigerian art over 2000 years. There was a big display of traditional and ancient art, some of going way back into pre-history, at the National Museum, very well presented, spaciouly, some it out of doors. Then there was the launching of a book on the subject and around this area was another display, the main part of it being rather stylised but in which were many many domestic exhibitions. There was a display of tradtional food and the visitors were invited to teste and find out how the dishes were made.

There was a distribution of recipes, there were the sort of things one finds in the kitchen that the housewife uses to prepare meals. There were lots of calatashes, some decorated. There were carved ladles, there were sieves, there was a display of cosmetics and a very large display of photographs of hair-dcs: about 50 photographs I should think, most of them

traditional ways of doing hair from different parts of the country and for different occasions. There were one or two modern styles, one of them called "puff-puff" which more or less describes what was seen and another couple were amusingly called "right-hand drive" and the strands of platted hair all fell over to the right, the way people now do in Nigeria.

Another aspect of interest especially to women, or perhaps not specially for women, was the display of dressing by Nigerian ladies. a fashion display of traditional and modern wear given by society ladies of Nigeria with a few invited ladies from The Congo and from Guinea and from one or two other countries. They had all been well coached, they walked across the platform as mannequins should, they courted to His Excellency, who was watching from across the area and some of them were quite spectacular, marvellous fabrics.

As well as displays of general craft, there was another small exhibition in another part of the National Museum of Musical Instruments, that's traditional Nigerian instruments, and after opening this ceremonially with bands and the National anthem and all the ceremony that goes with it, the Head of State was whisked off and so was his entourage, across the bridge from Lagos island to Victoria Island and immediately the other side of the bridge there was another display, this time of strictly visual art and most of it modern. This was in the Lagos State Arts Council Hall. It was a very big display indeed of paintings, textiles, sculpture. I walked around and saw some of the exhibits, not all there just wasn't time to stand in front of everything. It would take a day or two I think.

There were portraits in oil there were abstracts, there were drawings, there lino-cuts, batiks of course, some of them splendid, but even more so I thought, were the printed cloths. There were one or two which were extremely vivid and has designs which really seemed to be active, as if there was movement on the cloth. I found these very exciting. The sculptures were mostly modern, though some were quite representational and I had a chance to speak to a Nigerian artist, Agbo Folarin and here is what we talked about.

AGBO FOLARIN:

This particular sculpture "Betrayer" as you can see, illustrates two people holding each other, but actually it is not to embrace but to betray. It is Jesus and Judas and it speaks for itself.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, you say it speaks for itself, but how am I to look at this. Perhaps I had better describe it for listeners. It is life size though perhaps the figures are rather thinner than human beings ...

AGBO FOLARIN:

that's true ...

FLORENCE AKST:

and they are symbolic, they are not a literal

AGBO FOLARIN:

exactly

FLORENCE AKST:

.. the features are just represented, they are not full heads. It is almost one body but the two shoulders and the two heads bring them very close together. They are talking together, I think, perhaps you can correct me? Now can you explain why this conveys that they are not friends?

AGBO FOLARIN:

Well, they are not. You can see the opening of the mouth here and the expression of shock that registers on the other man's face. He has been betrayed and it is there. He is opening his mouth saying "well master" or something like that and he is surprised at saying this, he has been betrayed. The little part of his mouth shows well sort of registers the horror you see.

FLORENCE AKST:

And the mouths are very close together, the faces are almost touching.

AGBO FOLARIN:

They are very close together, but one mouth is more open than the other.

FLORENCE AKST:

You liken this to Judas betraying Jesus, but I can also

AGBO FOLARIN:

It's there in a sort of symbolic form and in fact one can see it is not naturalistic representation which need not be. I don't see any reason why one should do this sort of thing the natural way.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, I find it quite powerful.

AGBO FOLARIN:

It says Jesus is not here to stand for me nor Judas so why should I make it natural.

FLORENCE AKST:

And you are in fact portraying any betrayal between two people.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, exactly.

FLORENCE AKST:

And for betrayal, they have to be very close in the first place, this is why you have them coming almost out of one body.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Exactly this is the thing. It also shows that anybody can betray. This is the point of the whole thing.

FLORENCE AKST:

Can you tell me what the material is, because it looks like plaster to me ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

White wood but sprayed with cellulose you know, to heighten the chastity which goes with Jesus and his disciples at that time because they wear white material. You can recognise who is who amongst them anyway.

FLORENCE AKST:

It's a heavy white gloss.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, it is white cellulose.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now I have seen two other pieces of yours much nearer the entrance than this is. I wonder whether we could just move off and have a look at them ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

Of course.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now this one is metal.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, this is a metal sculpture and it is called "Brotherhood". You will notice the two heads are close but the bodies again are joined together, you know, signifying the closeness, the brotherliness, that exists between all human beings.

FLORENCE AKST:

They are in fact shoulder to shoulder.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, and they are joined at the legs as you see.

FLORENCE AKST:

Ah yes, there are only three.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, instead of four legs there are three. The body you could say, forms here are quite different to the ones in the white wood "The

Betrayer" one. You see the geometric shapes.

FLORENCE AKST:

It's angular.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST:

Why is that ? Because it's metal ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

Well, because it's metal and because the form I'm trying to exploit its differences. I could be done in wood in that form too, but with metal I suppose one can make it angular you know, when one uses shears to cut and bend. It's quite an exciting piece.

FLORENCE AKST:

It's dramatic, it's resting to look at and I noticed it as soon as I came in. Did you choose metal specially because you had that sort of design ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now I also want to look at another piece of yours which is very near by. This is rather like the first we saw, again in fact all your pieces are two human beings communicating.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST:

What is this piece ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

This piece is done in mahogany and it is called "Friendship" There are two people embracing, registering their friendship between people.

FLORENCE AKST:

Again, it is not an exact representation of two human beings, it just suggests two people.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, but all the same you can still see the feeling, the feeling is in the words you see. If you look closer at some of the expressions you can still see the expression of joy and happiness.

of seeing one another.

FLORENCE AKST:

Also, it looks as though they are listening to one another,

AGBO FOLARIN:

Exactly.

FLORENCE AKST:

And listening is a mark of friendship.

AGBO FOLARIN:

It is.

FLORENCE AKST:

Rather than talking perhaps,

AGBO FOLARIN:

Right. You can listen to each others heart.

FLORENCE AKST:

Yes, I like the way their heads are bent and their shoulders slightly so you can tell that their mouth is to the persons ear.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Exactly.

FLORENCE AKST:

It's also not a very polished finish. The first piece "Betrayal" had a high gloss and was very rounded. This is quite rough.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Well it was heavily textures with gouches. I wanted the texture on this particular sculpture to heighten certain qualities of the wood.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now what quality ?

AGBO FOLARIN:

The quality to suit this particular wood, this particular expression, this particular form of sculpture. I use gouges to get this sort of texture.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now I know this is only a small sample of your work. Do you do pieces of other sizes, because these are all about the

same height I notice. They are human size.

AGBO FOLARIN:

Yes, I do some small bronzes and even naturalistic ones, brass and copper.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Agbo Folarin, a Nigerian artist and sculptor and lecturer at the University of Ife talking to Florence Akst in Lagos about his work.

And now let's recapture the scene with Florence at Festac when the Gambian National Dance Troupe performed at midnight in Tafewa Balewa Square, Lagos.

MUSIC: Gambian National Dance Troupe.

FLORNECE AKST:

This is the Troupe from The Gambia and there are 3 men, each playing one stringed fiddles, with calabash resonators. One of them is singing now and there are three young girls clapping, dancing, wearing rather plain white costumes, whereas the men are much more gaily dressed and have helmets on their heads with something like horses manes, great white plumes coming out of the top, just like from the top of a horses head.

MUSIC: Gambian National Dance Troupe.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The scene described by Florence during Festac when the Gambian National Dance troupe performed in Lagos's Tafewa Balewa Square.

And that brings us to the end of this weeks programme. Join me again at the same time next week for more Arts and Africa. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with the sound of an electric kora introduced by Florence.

FLORENCE AKST:

And now a well know instrument from The Gambia, the Kora. The player is Dembo Conte (phonetic) and he comes from a long line of grios or minstrels. His instrument is an electric kora and listeners might like to know that his plane ticket is still attached to the top of the instrument and is waving as he is playing it showing that he has just flown in from The Gambia to Lagos.

MUSIC: Electric kora music by Dembo Conte.

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