

# Arts and Africa

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## ARTS AND AFRICA

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### ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to Arts and Africa. At the moment an exhibition of sculpture is being shown at the Institute of Education here in London. The central theme is 'freedom of the spirit', and the 100 works on show depict various types of oppression on the individual. Figurative works showing people under torture are side by side with works by school-children, describing oppression by loneliness. This is done purposely to illustrate the organisers' belief that oppression can also be caused by an inhospitable environment and not only by physical brutality.

Well, the exhibition is sponsored by Amnesty International but is the brainchild and creation of two people; the sculptor Naomi Blake, (who incidentally is a survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp), and Yvonne Craig. I asked Yvonne Craig why they decided to put on the exhibition.

### YVONNE CRAIG

We decided to do it because we believe that people need to see, expressed in art-form those things which are essential to the maintenance of human values. And sculpture has always been about affirming human values, whether it is the Greek sculpture of the past that showed man at his highest, (as indeed some of our modern sculpture does today) or whether it is representational sculpture like that of Paul Wright, whose prisoner, tortured and degraded, reminds us of the oppression that we afflict on our brethren. Art and sculpture are about showing people life in its heights and its depths.

### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, for an exhibition like this to really make the impact you intend, it must be seen in more than one country. Are you thinking of organising a similar exhibition in other countries?

YVONNE CRAIG

Alex, we would love it to go to other countries, but the vast cost of this exhibition in this country has only been paid for because Naomi Blake and I have worked voluntarily for a year; paid our own postage, our own telephone calls. The sculptors have paid all their own transport and all their own insurance, and voluntary workers have come in and stewarded. We have received no support from our own British Arts Council, no financial support from any establishment body. And we don't even know, unless some of the bigger works are sold, that we will even have money left over to put into our "release of prisoners fund". So how we could pay for this exhibition to go overseas, I don't know.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yvonne Craig. Well one of the exhibitors is a man who has been with us on Arts and Africa before, just after he had been released from detention in Swaziland. He is the South African sculptor, Pitika Ntuli, who has 2 pieces in the Amnesty show. I asked him how he came to be involved with it.

PITIKA NTULI

Some friends got me in contact with Yvonne Craig, and Naomi Blake, and informed me that there was an exhibition by Amnesty International, 'freedom of the spirit', which was being organised. And then I looked to make my contribution to this Amnesty show, as I am a living example of the work of Amnesty in that I have been freed from the death cell in Swaziland.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well of course that was right down your line. What in particular did you sculpt?

PITIKA NTULI

I did two pieces for this Amnesty show, their titles are 'Despite', and the other one is 'Even Though'. 'Even Though' is made from a breeze-block for building, which had been discarded, and there are four people that are trapped inside it. They represent the 4 people who were detained with us in Swaziland and that is the base - On top, these four people are beginning to show up. There is one with an elongated body who resists oppression. On another side, on the person that is rising, part of the buttock is a hand, and part of the elbow on the other side is also a hand. So the ambivalence of these symbolises that there are people who sit on their buttocks while other people are using their hands to execute their tasks. In 'Even Though' therefore, the base is of the still-imprisoned. And the effort of these people is to defy suppression and to move out into the new and free world. It is said in the great book that the stone which the mason rejects becomes the corner stone. I was hoping that this stone that has been rejected, this breeze-block that has been rejected, should become the corner stone of the struggle to liberate other people from various forms of political oppression. I have to carve directly into this block, to remove that which isn't the people trapped in it, to reveal the people. So at the same time the people there become part of the block in itself and the block is rejected. Those represent the people who have been

PITIKA NTULI (cont.)

rejected by society for various reasons, but more so because they cannot live with their conscience, watching what is happening to their fellow men without opening their mouths or lifting up their hands to shout peace and harmony.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Your past sculptures have been done in wood, in bronze; is this the first time you used concrete?

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, I haven't used any breeze-block before, but having been in solitary confinement for almost a year where I was compelled to make bread sculptures, which I ended up eating; using soap which I ended up washing with, (what a very cleansing moment)!!! So it wasn't very difficult for the mind to take a leap to make use of any other material. Working in breeze-block presents special problems as it tends to be brittle. You must be in harmony with yourself and with the piece itself to come up with this very delicate thing. That in itself is very symbolic of the world in which you live. You have got to be very much in harmony with the surrounding world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well since your contribution was not priced, and those works which are not priced probably have a special significance for the artist. Could I ask you why you consider your works particularly special to you?

PITIKA NTULI

You see this piece here has been worked under very very precarious conditions. Here I was without any definite place to live, least of all a place to work (which is almost the direct opposite of the year I spent in prison where it was solitary confinement, a very narrow space with all the time in the world). Now I come into a free world but I don't have that very small space for me to work which I had for the whole of last year. So I has to work on those pieces right in the street, the pavement. As I was working these pieces, people came to take very great interest in what I was doing, so that those things now had this tendency to be no longer a property of mine, but the property of the people who were standing there as these pieces were made.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about this other piece, what is it made in?

PITIKA NTULI

It's made in the same material as "Even Though". Again, the bottom part is also a block of four faces, but very different from the other; more stern, the people are not crushed. And also on top, it is simpler than the other. The other one was very loud, but this one is simple. A squatting figure with powerful shoulders and a hand coming and the shape of the arm as it comes over to the side of the head, if looked at very closely, is a map of South Africa. And the eye is looking up to the other side as if this man cannot be crushed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, when you came here last time you had some poetry with you. Have you been writing poetry in addition to this sculpting?

PITIKA NTULI

Yes I have been writing, and one of the main poems that came up is related to the two pieces of sculpture. I have stated earlier on that one sees the buttock and the hand. It's a hand - it's a buttock. So you could see these multi-visions are symbolic of the multi-vision that one has a free man. So part of the poem that deals with this multi-vision, goes this way.

PITIKA NTULI RECITES HIS POEMALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's marvelous, that is very very nice. What is the title of it, by the way?

PITIKA NTULI

Multiple Vision.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you found somewhere permanent to live?

PITIKA NTULI

No, I am still very much a drifter, I haven't yet got a fixed place. Also I have been trying to get to my family, my wife and son, to come over. Efforts are still going on and Amnesty International are helping me to do this. Ironically I haven't seen my four and a half year son for the whole of last year and also this year, during the International Year of the Child.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It must be very difficult working under such conditions.

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, it is quite difficult, because I cannot just sit down and be relaxed enough to be able to do anything. Not that one wants to be completely relaxed, because there must also be the tension for the tension to be reflected in the work. But I would rather it becomes a tension of my creation rather than a tension by default.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now that you started working in concrete who knows what you will be turning your hand to next.

PITIKA NTULI

I have been making up a series of exhausted figures using exhaust pipes and saucepans. Look at a twisted exhaust pipe; it looks like a ballet dancer you see, and if you take that twisted figure and you put a saucepan and then just weld some hands, you get a very good "exhausted ballet dancer".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So this is a new field you intend to go in.

PITIKA NTULI

It's a new field altogether.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that's not going to last very long. I mean if you have exhaust pipes probably they are already rusted.

PITIKA NTULI

Exhaust pipes have been having this whole heat from the engine and I have been having this heat from political engines, and I have survived. So there is no reason why they couldn't survive.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well no wonder, Pitika, you are a poet as well as sculptor! All the best wishes to you. Pitika - thank you.

And that's all from Arts and Africa for this week, we'll be back in seven days time when we hope you can join us again. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.