

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying welcome to "Arts and Africa". The Zimbabwe High Commission building in London is only down the road from the "Arts and Africa" studio in Bush House and now that it's open for business once again I've got a great deal of pleasure from the beautiful exhibition in its windows. It's a selection of the contemporary Shona stone carvings that have become one of the finest expressions of Zimbabwean art. The Director of the Zimbabwe National Gallery in Salisbury (or Harare as it's now called is Christopher Till and he's been telling us about the special role the National Gallery is playing in the new Zimbabwe.

CHRISTOPHER TILL

It's fairly evident that very little is being done towards the promotion of contemporary art within Africa, or the study of contemporary art within Africa, or the study of contemporary art. I think that the National Gallery in Zimbabwe has the role to look at what is being done on the contemporary scene and become a centre that one could describe as the expression of Africa. We wish to see ourselves as developing into a centre where the arts of Africa can be studied and researched and collected, not along an anthropological or ethnographical line, but rather to see what the artistic pulse of the country is. Firstly in this country and then the surrounding countries and then to what is happening in the rest of Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The long years of war in Zimbabwe affected the lives of most of its citizens. This was especially true of people living in the countryside where two communities of sculptors had been founded. The workshops at Tengenenge and at Virkutu had both closed down. What has happened to the artists?

CHRISTOPHER TILL

I think the difficult years thinned the ranks considerably and left a hard core of artists who, right through the difficult times, produced work and brought work to us. People who were at Virkutu moved into the towns. Tengenenge closed down and people moved into the towns. From that hard core of artists a definite pattern was established in their own work and in the work of what has been known as Shona sculptures, Zimbabwean stone sculpture. It is our aim to set up a workshop not within the confines of the Gallery but in an area called Highfields where

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we can provide the facilities and the materials for artists who continue the exploration of this phenomena, this contemporary art phenomena, if you like. I feel that after the war here, the emphasis would possibly change, There are a lot of young chaps who we are hoping to interest and see what influence they might have on the art of this country. I am sure there will be an influence coming through and it's for us to, I think, put our finger on that. Also, within the Gallery, we have a facility where artists can come and work. But I think it is the intention for us to involve as many people as we possibly can in the arts of Zimbabwe, in the craft work and in the art work, not only sculpture but painting, weaving and other types of craft work, and to make sure that the cultural identity of Zimbabwe is preserved firstly, and second, is presented for other groups of people including Zimbabweans, of course. To see it, it is very evident that some of the younger children who have been born in an urban context, are rather divorced from some of the artifacts and so on which are produced in the rural areas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Christopher Till of the Zimbabwe National Gallery. And we stay with Zimbabwe for the rest of the programme, - and with the idea of communicating without words. That's what Chaz Davies is doing. He isn't using the techniques of the sculptors - blade on stone - but photography and printing. I first saw his work long before I met him. An illustration by him was on the cover of a book I was reviewing - "Tales from Mozambique" - an arresting line drawing of people merging into animals. Chaz who's studying for an M.A. at London's Central School of Art first went to art school in Zambia, at the Evelyn Hone College of Applied Arts, but he comes from Zimbabwe and he's looking forward to going home when his course finishes.

When he came to the studio recently to explain what it means to be a communications designer he brought along several examples of his work for Florence Akst to look at. One of them - a poster - caught her attention and she asked him to describe it for us.

CHAZ DAVIES

I'd call it a photomontage which I've, what we call, 'separated' into different segments and painted different colours on it. What it is is basically a picture of someone who's really in anguish and I've cut out a square where the heart is and I've placed in a picture from Southern African with some caveman paintings of some people with bows and arrows. This picture came about as a result of our independence in Zimbabwe and everybody was very happy and everybody, to a certain extent for a little while, had forgotten about South Africa and my poster is entitled: "The Struggle Continues", which to me is a vital part of the way I see art.

FLORENCE AKST

Did you take the photograph of this naked torso, the head and back streaming with sweat and exhaustion? Did you take this photograph or was it someone else's photograph?

CHAZ DAVIES

No, I used someone else's photograph. What I have done is just painted in things in the background, touching up in a way. Of course I have changed the colours completely to give it a very hot feel. Not that the photograph wasn't warm itself but I have tried to bring out more of the warmth that this type of situation demands.

FLORENCE AKST

And then something quite different, this drawing, this obvious drawing, not a photograph, put on top.

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

In fact, what you are doing professionally is trying to get a message over. This poster is just one aspect of your work.

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes, that's just one aspect of my work. I'm really a communication and information designer, if you want to use that word. Posters are something I feel very strongly about and which I do in my spare time but as a profession I hope to be employed as an information designer. Somebody gives me some information that they want explained to somebody and I have to use all the graphic devices and communication devices I know in order to make the audience understand the message that whoever is trying to transmit it is conveying.

FLORENCE AKST

What sort of message would this be. It sounds rather like advertising. Is that what you mean?

CHAZ DAVIES

Em, well it can be said in advertising but personally I'm not in to advertising. Mine is more to do with design for need, for instance we have here in front of us some prescription inserts to help people to use medicines properly because it's found that a lot of illnesses are caused through people not using medicines properly. What I have done is design a symbol system to help people use medicines properly. I can't guarantee it works but I have to try and see the possibilities of helping people through my graphic design.

FLORENCE AKST

What occurs to me as you're talking is that most art work is the artistic expressing his own ideas, what he himself wants to communicate. In fact you're having to absorb other peoples ideas and intentions, I should think pretty thoroughly and then communicate them to a third person.

CHAZ DAVIES

Right. Design is a very responsible job as you are never designing for yourself, you're always designing for a user whereas art might be something you like and if somebody doesn't like your painting, you don't care but in this particular case it's almost like designing a bad car - someone has to buy it and use it and someone could make an accident with it and it's your fault. I don't see why that responsibility doesn't lie in simple things like leaflets or even text books for children to learn how to read. The designer has a responsibility to help the student comprehend (together with the ability of the author) the kind of material that is being conveyed in the book. The reason for me doing an M.A. in graphic design is so that I can get a better understanding of communications, how to analyse it, how to draw from the kind of lessons we've learnt and create images which will get this message across and that's my main purpose for studying.

FLORENCE AKST

I know you're looking forward to getting home to Zimbabwe to help its development. How are you going to use your skills?

CHAZ DAVIES

For instance like in lots of developing countries we notice that you have always an illiteracy problem to start off with. Illiteracy is something that you can try and convey messages to by using images because everybody understands images. We live in a visual world where we see things all around us and we can use that to break down illiteracy. We have agricultural problems. We have to explain to many people how to cultivate the land and do certain things with it. I just see myself in a position where an agricultural expert would come to me and say: "Well, we do have these problems, is there any way you can help us convey a certain message?". And I would say; "Well we possibly need some posters which will say how important it is to cultivate the land and we need some booklets to show people how to use simple tools, how to make their own tools etc. That is how I see myself working in that situation. I'm not a specialist in any particular field, I just see myself as an information designer.

FLORENCE AKST

That sounds rather a cold, uncreative job but infact one of the designs you've brought in is the sleeve for an Osibisa record. I believe it's for sale?

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Now I'm used to the flying elephant image that Osibisa have so often. This isn't quite the same, it's an elephant coming full charge towards me with its huge ears flapping, standing out aggressively. You've used the left-hand ear to make the outline of the bulge of West Africa and then you've continued up the right-hand side to make a map of Africa and it merges into the photograph of the elephant on the right.

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Now this, to me, is an art form. How do you see yourself as an artist?

CHAZ DAVIES

It is an art form because I am really at an art school and we must remember when I say I'm a designer, I mustn't take these things in isolation. I'm not clinical, somebody who just uses cold logic to convey something. I still have to put in a certain amount of my creativeness and my intuition. That intuition is where my artistic so-called talents would lie. For this, I spoke at great length to the band involved and we talked about their image and how their first album incorporated the flying elephant and how they possibly needed to change a few things around. We said to leave in the elephant and incorporate Africa somehow. So I went through all these kind of briefs in my head and I took them away and came up with some kind of drawings because I saw that the ear of the elephant was like the outside and the rest of it, if you look even closer, you could possibly make a map of some of the shapes. Shapes are to do with art and the colours reflect the liberation colours and I merged all these together in a kind of montage, put them on a screen and played around with it until I got something attractive as well. So I've also to get something attractive. The album is called 'African Flight' and I'm sure lots of people are aware of it. That was again the main purpose because I wanted to get this Africa, tried to get some movement across. Unfortunately you are restricted by the size of the album cover, if I had a longer cover I could probably get him streaming across the album.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - PATA PATA - OSIBISA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The unmistakable sound of Osibisa and "Pata Pata" with Chaz Davies's elephant moving across the sleeve of the record. Chaz Davies was talking to Florence Akst and what he had to say was, for me at least, literally an eye opener. On this occasion Osibisa have the last word after a quick goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

GRAMS

PATA PATA