

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. In today's programme we look at the work of the Senegalese artist, Iba Ndiaye, which is currently on show at the African/American Institute in New York. Ndiaye is probably the best known artist to have emerged from French-speaking Africa, and over the last 20 years his work has been exhibited widely in many parts of the world. He was born in St. Louis in Senegal in 1928. As a young man he went to study in Paris where he worked with a famous French sculptor called Zadkine. Later he went on to form a new art department at the National Institute of Art in his home country, Senegal. And in 1969 he was made Head of the Department of Iconography at the Museum of Man in Paris. But for the last 10 years Ndiaye has devoted himself exclusively to his painting and drawing. Producer of Arts and Africa, Nick Barker, recently visited his show in New York, and is in the studio with me now. Nick, what did you make of the show?

NICK BARKER

Well I was very impressed with it, I had heard a lot about Ndiaye. I'd seen some of his paintings exhibited in London before but I had never seen a one man show, so I was delighted to see it at the African/American Institute. I think his work is difficult to pigeon hole, it's difficult to assess and I think for two reasons. Partly because of his very strong involvement with France and his involvement in the School of Painting that existed in Paris after the Second World War and it's also difficult to assess him because of the breadth of his artistic skills. Now to take the first point I think that Ndiaye's involvement with France typifies a phenomenon of French-speaking Africa. This is the extent to which the Franco-phone elite has become emersed in French culture. Ndiaye was trained in Paris, he's worked with Parisian artists, he's taken Western skills and so he does raise a problem. Is he really an African artist or is he a French artist? The other thing is the breadth of his artistic skills. He paints well, he uses water colours, he also draws extremely well and so it's very difficult to work out where he succeeds the best.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what did the exhibition actually consist of? You mentioned paintings and drawings. What actually was there to see?

NICK BARKER

Well there was a very good cross-section. There were forty eight works altogether. There were drawings, water colours and paintings. I was, I think, most struck by the paintings, mainly because of the techniques that he uses. There's one in particular called "Tabaski, Ritual Sacrifice of the Lamb" which is the Ramadan Festival and the painting shows two lambs who are about to be slaughtered. They look extremely vulnerable, they look very white, they look very pure, they are clearly symbolic. And they are set next to a lamb which has been slaughtered. Its guts are spewn all over the canvas, it looks as if real blood has been splattered on that canvas, a very, very powerful painting. Also the technique is so interesting because what Ndiaye does is he builds up the layers of paint, he mixes paint with varnish and so creates this translucent effect and we see this particularly clearly in another painting called "Portrait of Anna" which is a picture of a seated woman in a dark hazy, smokey atmosphere and she's extremely blurred. Because the pigment and the varnish have been mixed, there's this incredible inner glow, there's this warmth coming out of the canvas, a very unusual effect. His water colours are also very interesting. They mainly consist of landscapes, again they refer back to Senegal and also to the Dogon country of Mali and in these water colours we can see his interest in texture. After he has applied the water colour with great fluidity he then embosses and scratches the paper, so he creates this very interesting texture. And finally the drawings. There's no doubt about Ndiaye's facility as a drawer. He is quite magnificent with a pen or with a pencil. Most of the drawings in this show are drawings of African sculpture and African heads. What particularly interested me was Ndiaye's interest in sculptural form. When he draws something, he doesn't try and draw light and dark, but he tries to contrast the solidity of an object with the space within it and the space around it. This is a very unusual approach to drawing I felt. There's one in particular which I liked which was a drawing of a child's head and the child is screaming. You see this vast, gaping open mouth. But, of course, although the child is screaming - the picture is called 'Cry' - one is struck by the immense silence of this head. This cry will never be heard. All in all I think it's an extremely impressive show and I think the African/American Institute should be congratulated for putting it on. I spoke to Marie-Therese Brincard who's the woman in charge of all the shows at the African/American Institute and I spoke to her about Ndiaye's work and I asked her why she chose this particular show.

MARIE THERESE-BRINCARD

There was an important show of contemporary Senegalese artists which toured the United States. Looking briefly at this catalogue, since I could not come and meet all of those artists, certainly one of them who struck me was Iba Ndiaye. Probably because his technique was extremely different from the other artists and the trend that he was depicting also were quite different. It was easy for me also to try and see his work since they were in Paris and some of them are here in New York collections. The second reason - by showing Iba

MARIE THERESE-BRINCARD

Ndiaye is to see what an African artist who has had the possibility to be trained in an academic school could produce and to finally discover through his art that, yes, he has been influenced by Western art and by Western techniques yet it seems to me that he proves his identity as an African primarily, I would say, in his water colours. That is the reason why I did chose Iba Ndiaye.

NICK BARKER

After speaking to Marie-Therese Brincard, I decided to find out more about Ndiaye's work, so I went to see Lowery Sims, Associate Curator of the 20th Century Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Lowery Sims is a great admirer of his work, and wrote the introduction for his exhibition catalogue. I asked her first how important she thought the expression of Africaness was to his work.

LOWERY SIMS

I think it's very important. He might deny it because of course being in Paris and being involved in the sort of market there, he thinks it might be a problem to identify it. But looking at his work, clearly everything from the specific techniques he uses in his water colours and the subjects that he uses in his larger painterly compositions have been inspired by memories, his memories of Africa. They might be more fresh than we suppose because for a long time he's gone back and forth between Senegal and Paris.

NICK BARKER

He still goes back?

LOWERY SIMS

Yes, indeed. Because his wife is a Curator at the Musée de l'homme. Her speciality is African art and, in fact, I think she's doing a dissertation on contemporary African art so the involvement with the Continent, particularly the French speaking Continent is quite close still. But the market women that he talks about and also the Tabaski paintings which are representations of the lambs that are sacrificed during Ramadan - the Moslem sort of penance period - are very much indicative of his interest in Africaness. Then the models he chooses. It's really quite amusing because they are all Africans that he has met in Paris, you know, both male and female. Then another interesting part of his work are the sketches of heads that are clearly inspired by African sculpture. Then these in turn inspire more generalised heads but the approach to the plane and the stockness of the black/white contrast in the drawings are definitely, I thin, inspired by African art.

NICK BARKER

It's interesting, his use of shading because he tends to stress the contrast between solidity and void rather than the head being receptacle for light.

LOWERY SIMS

Yes that's an interesting point and I think it refers to his technique also in using the transparent glazes and the paint. It's a very curious kind of dichotomy because in the painting which is in the opaque impastoed areas which are comprable probably to the darker areas in his drawings, there is an implication of a high degree of sculptural approach to form and then this is very successfully mitigated and even denied through an overlay of glazes which not only wash over the painted areas giving them a much more ethereal quality but then also when they are put in juxtaposition with these areas on the canvas and sort of stained it in a kind of post-war European/American manner. So what it does is at the same time you can see that he has a very firm grasp of the sculptural quality, he does manage to mitigate it at the same time. I think if one refers it back to his roots and his childhood, being a Wollof and raised basically as a Moslem, clearly in Senegal there was no sculptural tradition so I find it intriguing. Perhaps this special quality is due to that fact. But he does talk about, particularly in the water colours, his experimentation in textures and colours which were inspired by textiles. He remembers the women at St. Louis where he grew up. What they would do is do a basic modelled textured dyeing and then after the fabric was dry, they would over embroider with vivid colours so that you'd have a very active push and pull, back and forth movement, visually.

NICK BARKER

And this fits in with his water colours. He applies the paint and then he sort of scratches it?

LOWERY SIMS

He scratches it or some of them. While the paper is still wet from the immediate application of water colour, he presses in texture. In the show when I was in Paris looking through his studio I was able to include for the show some interesting works that he did in this kind of negative/positive way where he's obviously doing a kind of splatter technique by placing down an object and splattering the pigment around it so that object itself which should be the physical prescense, becomes the negative void in the composition. He uses lace and different things, that was such a surprise to me. He was very shocked when I chose these pictures because he said that these were just experiments and I said: "Yes, but this really helps to clarify all the formal and compositional aspects which you've been involved with for the last couple of years.

NICK BARKER

One of his most important themes is music. Jazz in particular. Now what's all this about?

LOWERY SIMS

Well he loves jazz, he loves jazz musicians, I think he knows every black American jazz musician that's come through Paris and when you talk to him I mean he will spend lots of hours talking about his encounters with different people. I think this was the way when he came to Paris. I mean that's the way he could meet kindred spirits because everybody was sort of relegated to the jazz clubs. For me, as

LOWERY SIMS

a black American, it's always interesting to go to Europe and places like Japan because the interest in jazz is so much stronger than here in the States. The jazz pieces get back to the point you made before. Although he sets up a very sort of sculptural situation, he does bring over a more ethereal quality, in the jazz paintings in particular. He talks about the fact that he works with the glazes in addition to the pigment to set up a kind of reference to the space that one has in smokey clubs. I'm sure all of us have been in a smokey half-lit club where you have the performer on the stage with just one spotlight coming through and everybody smoking and it gets real hot and steamy and murky, if you watch the smoke it never does a direct line and it even seems to bend the light beams as they come. So when you see these representations of musicians, what he's done is capture, visually, the kind of sensation that you see where just the prominent planes of the human face and maybe the edges of brass instruments would be seen or sort of highlighted in this situation. So again it is as if the smoke and the light almost dissolve the mass that has to be there, at the same time bringing out the most salient features of the mass.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nick Barker was talking there to Lowery Sims about the work of Iba Ndiaye, and we'll be hearing more from Nick in coming weeks about some of the African events he discovered in America. In the meantime this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.

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