

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. Today we're looking at an exhibition of prints, drawing and gouaches which has been showing at the Commonwealth Institute in London. It's the work of Nigerian artist Uzo Egonu, who now lives in Britain. His interest in art started early - at thirteen he won first prize in the Junior All-Nigeria School Art Competition - and since 1953 he's painted continuously, illustrated books, designed book-jackets and has also been involved in printmaking - etching, lithography and screen-printing, hence the gouaches in the exhibition which are, in fact, water colour studies for his screen prints. Producer Anne Bolsover went to see the exhibition and first asked Uzo Egonu if there was any particular theme.

## UZO EGONU

Not at all because the works really are a mixed bag you see and, for instance, the prints are works from '74 to '81 and two of the prints are based on African religion which was an early theme of mine. The others too are more or less a mixed bag, and the gouaches, the drawings are the same, so there is no special theme at all. So they are just on various subjects.

## ANNE BOLSOVER

Has spending so long outside Africa made your approach towards African art very different?

## UZO EGONU

I feel that being away from Nigeria for so long does help a bit, funnily enough, when I say helps a bit, I mean that the nostalgic feeling towards my homeland really made me go into all the aspects of its cultural life, its religion, etc., and, for instance, I did research on African ancient and modern art which really took me as far back as 500 BC.

## ANNE BOLSOVER

How would you describe your style as an artist?

UZO EGONU

Well, this is a very interesting question because to ask an artist to describe his style is fairly difficult. For instance, naturally when I finished my studies just as any other young artist, I was more or less carried away by nature, representing things as they are, but now, of course, there is the question of my imposing my will, the beauty lies in the forms; it is no longer my being enchanted by, for instance, the beauty of the rose and trying to express the same colouring, the form of the leaves and so forth. But it is a question of utilizing the form of those things to satisfy, express what I want to express. So in short, the style, I really don't know what to say my style is; I'm not an abstract artist, I use form a lot to express myself. I can only use line to express exactly what I want to say, and by doing this it is like entering a sitting room and you see all the furniture there and you feel that is a beautiful sitting room because there is a discipline in it. But if, say, a removal van just emptied the sitting room of furniture and then you arrived and there was nowhere to sit you would say, "Oh what a hell, where can I sit?" So that's how I look at it. At the moment I feel my work is disciplined in a way because there is something I am searching for; there is a new discipline to try to reach my goal. Now I have shifted you see, which is not a question of my wishing to shift, but suddenly my work is going to change and probably it will be chaos, if I can use that word!

ANNE BOLSOVER

So your going maybe from discipline now into chaos?

UZO EGONU

Well that's right yes. From discipline to chaos, but still my idea of beauty is not discipline as such, funnily enough. Take for instance in winter, I don't know if you have ever looked at a tree when the leaves have all been shed and the bare trees - the branches and so forth, look as though they are all mixed up.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Would you say your painting is realistic or representational, or symbolic?

UZO EGONU

The painting is symbolic, so what I was explaining to the gentleman downstairs, who asked me a very interesting question: A woman before a mirror, the woman had a blue dress and in the mirror it showed a red dress. So I was trying to explain to him that all the forms, I suppose, from time to time, show themselves differently, and sometimes one may feel downhearted and you look at the mirror and you feel as though you see someone else, that sort of thing, and that's why I use these two colours, which may seem rather crazy for a person wearing one colour, seeing herself wearing something different in the mirror.

ANNE BOLSOVER

When you paint for a print or for a silk-screen, do you approach it very differently - is it very different from actually painting in oil on a canvas?

UZO EGONU

Oh yes it is, quite a bit different indeed because, let me put it this way, because with print this sort of work preparing a print involves much more discipline than painting on canvas. You see it is not like painting on canvas, you may be carried away and painting away and so forth. With screen prints it has to be exact, what I mean by exact is, for instance, I will give you an example, transferring the actual study into a transferring film, it has to be exact so that if it is, say for instance, six or ten colours for the screen print, one film has to tally with another film so that one colour blends into another colour, it goes like that.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Can you perhaps describe for me your favourite exhibit here?

UZO EGONU

There is a print here, "Lone Eater". Lone Eater is my impression of a woman, eating alone, probably it was in a restaurant, or it was at home, but I don't think that really matters, and also I think this is very symbolic because loneliness comes into it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nigerian artist Uzo Egonu. Now you may remember that at the beginning of the year we covered a highly successful play "Egoli" by the Soyinka Black Theatre from Soweto in South Africa. Well one of the actors involved John Lebwaba has just been taking part in the annual Edinburgh Festival, probably the biggest international festival of arts and music held in Britain and a good starting point for young talent. John Lebwaba's choice for the Festival is "Vuka" a one man show based on a long poem by Matsemela Manaka. Mark Ralph-Bowman asked John Lebwaba what the play "Vuka" is about.

JOHN LEBWABA:

Firstly Vuka is "awake". It means "wake up", it is from the Zulu language. The story of the play is about the life of a fellow South African, his life experience up to his death. He is still in a spirit form that is meeting other spirits; his parents or African ancestors telling them the whole story of how he died and in a way reflecting the day-to-day experience of the oppressed people in South Africa.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

And how does he die?

JOHN LEBWABA

He dies like many of our heroes or our leaders or people who take initiative to really try and contribute towards our long struggle to kill apartheid, who disappear in prisons.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

The text of "Vuka" is really a sort of long poem, how did you come to turn it into a play?

JOHN LEBWABA

The poem itself was written by Matsemela Manaka and in a poetic style, it just suggested situations which I had to explore on my own, right to the end of the poem. So what I had to do was read the poem myself and really explore the situations and make them more lively, and I was able to do that from the experience I have of those situations he wrote about and which are, in a way, obvious situations which I only see at home. I really expanded the poem to give it an element of theatre, and I think so far I have succeeded in that attempt.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

It's a one man show, you are the only actor in it and you take a number of different roles and each of those roles is really explored through improvisation and only suggested by the poem.

JOHN LEBWABA

They are only suggested by the poem, and any actor who's doing it has to get into that himself, create all those situations suggested by the writer.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

Have you had an opportunity to work with the writer, has he seen your performance and what you've made of his poem?

JOHN LEBWABA

Yes he saw it when I did it in South Africa, and even parts of it when I started, because he was around here and then had to go back, but what I have now, at the present moment he hasn't seen.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

So it's changed a lot from the South African performance?

JOHN LEBWABA

Yes, it has changed a lot I think. In South Africa it was more, a play focusing itself on the black nation, that is, the class in society which the South African government wants to create. They are engaged in a situation whereby they are creating a heavy black middle class and the attitudes of black people towards each other, the tribal conflicts and so on, most of which is the responsibility of apartheid, the play was more on that originally, but now here, it still has that element, that is showing the tribal factions and the misunderstandings, but even going beyond that, showing the involvement of the multi-nationals in our struggle. We are not only oppressed by the Afrikaners, but it is also the responsibility of the multi-nationals and the powerful nations, I think.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

Obviously Vuka is going to be compared with Egoli, because Egoli was such a massive hit. Why did you choose to do this after Egoli, does this do different things from what Egoli did?

<sup>D</sup>  
JOHN LEBWABA

In a way I think it does, Vuka is giving me some nice experiences which I couldn't get with Egoli. In most cases, like when I have been travelling with Egoli, going out of South Africa we have been so much into established institutions and working very much like business men, you know, busy actors, always on the road, so with Vuka I'm having a slightly different experience. Here in Britain I work mostly at community centres and I really get a chance to understand and to know the British people in all their different classes.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

What has been the response of people in the community centres?

<sup>D</sup>  
JOHN LEBWABA

Different. It occurred to me that they are not very versed with the South African experience, what they know is things on the surface, like there is apartheid in South Africa black people carry passes, black people are unemployed, black people sleep in ghettos, but not really knowing anything more than that, which I think Vuka provides for them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Lebwaba of what has now been re-named the Soyikwa African Theatre. And we should be hearing a lot more from this company as they are planning a British tour of two new plays "Imbuba" and "Pula" in the spring. And that's it from Arts and Africa for today. Until this time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.