

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And let me assure you that you are listening to "Arts and Africa".

TAPE

ACTUALITY

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The sound of machinery? Yes. Electrically run machinery? Yes. At an art exhibition? Well, yes again. And very much part of the exhibition because it's a series of tiny motors that make large sculptured figures dance. The sculptor says of her homeland: "Our first art is dance" and the aim of her recent exhibition here in London was to convey the spirit of dance through her creations of wood and paint and cloth.

Beside each piece was a footpedal with a cable running to a socket in the wall and when a visitor stepped on the pedal the sculpture would rock or sway or twitch rhythmically. And the bigger the sculpture, the louder the noise and some of the sculptures were big!

TAPE

ACTUALITY

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

These swaying shapes were formed by Sokari Douglas Camp who comes from the Delta region of Nigeria. At the moment she's a third year student at London's Central School of Art and Design and before that she was briefly at the University of Ife in Nigeria where she had the opportunity to work under the famous Nigerian sculptor, Lamidi Fakaye. But it was the Alali Festival, down among the many watery mouths of the River Niger that she gained her inspiration for the work on show at her exhibition at the Africa Centre, here in London. But in place of stone or metal or wooden women dancers, there were representations of the spirit of those dancers captured in long, narrow strips of wood, bound

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

together and sometimes partly clothed in scraps of fabric. Some have the tops of their bodies thrust forwards and their hips and bottoms thrust back. On some there were brilliant patches of paint - one is almost like a human body fashioned out of stockinette, bright blue and with the enormous head-dress of a gelede masquerade dancer. Others were much more abstract, like the biggest, a great composite structure, mostly of wood in the centre of the exhibition hall. It was beside this work - Sokari had given it the title "Water Spirit" - that the established South African sculptor, Ptika Ntuli began his conversation with her.

PTIKA NTULI

Now this sculpture here, the Water Spirit, it's quite a big piece. What material did you use?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Most of this came out of the school skip - which is a large waste paper area - and I used mostly pine wood which people in all departments use in the school.

PTIKA NTULI

And this white, net-like material?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

That net material has a characteristic. It's the same sort of weave that they use for longjohns. Longjohns are things that people wear as underwear. A lot of masqueraders wear that to cover their whole body and then they add other things on top. I like that quality as it reminds me of other woven materials which Kalabari people wear. I cut it out and tied it in different patterns on this particular piece of work.

PTIKA NTULI

Now I would like you to tell us briefly what you had in mind with this piece. It looks like a very big dinosaur but at the same time it looks like various people dancing. And there is no meat, just bones.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, not realising that all the pieces did look like bones when I was making it, I was actually thinking of muscle and thickness and thinness in my patterning and my use of material. So I stuck several pieces of wood together to make thick muscle in certain areas a massive concentrated area of flesh I was thinking of actually in some areas and then going thinner in other areas, just because that sort of patterning is needed for my whole design. I put three separate figures in this particular construction because I'm trying to describe someone leaping forward - the whole piece is leaping forward. That's why it can't stand on its own, it's held up by three threads in the centre and it's leaping forward.

PPIKA NTULI

You speak in terms of one figure. But when one looks carefully, one sees a series of figures joined together.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Well I'm trying to describe something in solid material which you only see in film when you have a blurred film and you see about three people moving along but it's actually one person and the film is slowed down. It's a very effective way of showing movement.

PPIKA NTULI

Now when I came in here I lay down on the ground in order to look up at it. I saw that the hind legs do look like figures, complete figures too. Was that intentional?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

The hind legs? Those two legs look like figures?

PPIKA NTULI

Yes, because if you look here you can see the knees here and this hand seems to be tied and then you just come right up to the top...

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Oh my God! (Laughs) Well I've never seen that before! That wasn't intended but it's rather nice that it's there. (Laughs).

PPIKA NTULI

Now Sokari there is this Tooseki (phon) bottom dancer.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Tooseki.

PPIKA NTULI

Oh Tooseki. That's how you pronounce it?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes.

PPIKA NTULI

When you stand from this side here, this figure looks like an animal.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes, it does, it looks like a porcupine.

PTIKA NTULI

I see this dancing figure which at the same time looks like a porcupine. I see that these sharp points go right up the back and they go down towards the buttocks. Now what's the relationship between a dancing figure and a porcupine?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, a porcupine I guess, when his spikes point up he's aggressive. They stand up. And how actually these points came about is that to harden the material in this position, I had to pull the material, tie it up and let it harden in a porcupine shape. This particular material has holes in it, it's stockinette again and it's stretched and pulled into shape.

PTIKA NTULI

You're dealing with very traditional concepts but in a modern fashion. You also incorporate the use of electricity. Shall we hear just how it moves and the sound it makes?

TAPE

ACTUALITY

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

It does sound like an engine doesn't it? But it doesn't seem to matter because visually it's doing something very, very human. It's doing Tooseki which is a bottom-shaking dance. You do get a great emphasis on one's back because, visually, when you watch a dancer doing Tooseki, you see their back and actually sometimes all you see is their bottom.

PTIKA NTULI

What I also find very striking is that there is a cloth like the sort from Scotland.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

This particular cloth is called Injeri and Kalabari people consider it to be their traditional material, even though they got the idea from Scotland. We're traders, we pick up all sorts of things from the Portuguese and everywhere, rather like the British I think. (Laughs) This is how this cloth came about. Kalabari men and women wear it round their hips. So when I want to describe someone's lower half in my construction, I put it there just because it's very satisfactory. It's just like putting a leg where a leg ought to be.

PTIKA NTULI

I find this movement very continuous with a suggestion of continuation.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes.

PTIKA NTULI

So could we turn around? Just round here we see the dancing figures. It's called "Women Dancing with Handkerchiefs on Them" and it's just pieces of planks very thin, many of them. I think, around here, there must be a hundred of them. It looks at the same time like a net for fish but it's people. Is it because you come from a delta region?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

I am influenced by ordinary things that people use in the Delta area like lobster nets which are made out of thin strips of wood and tied into a cone shape object that catches lobsters.

PTIKA NTULI

The handkerchiefs, what do they symbolise?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, they symbolise the way Kalabari people end their arms when they dance. When we dance, we dance with handkerchiefs because they finish off the arm movement, the tips of one's fingers. These ladies are flicking handkerchiefs so they are all pointing in one direction and they're made with a collection of very thin strips of wood.

PTIKA NTULI

Sokari, I should like us to go back to the sculpture we saw first. After careful looking, I can see that I was wrong when I spoke of a skeleton. I can see the muscles around. How big is this? It looks about eight feet high and about ten feet long?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes, it's a very large piece of work.

PTIKA NTULI

And is this your central piece so to speak?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

It's my latest work and it was inspired by a festival I went to see in the Delta. The performances I saw was performed by a Kalabari priestess called Amonia Hosfall. She was possessed by lots of water spirits, that's why this particular sculpture is called Ome (phon) which means Water Spirit.

PTIKA NTULI

Water Spirit?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes.

PTIKA NTULI

Now, say we were to take this piece back into your own area. Would the people who believe in this spirit be able to recognise it?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes, I think they would be able to recognise it. I think it is a sort of blasphemy for a woman to make this sort of work because it is to do with water spirits and carvings done of water spirits of the ancestors aren't meant to be seen by women.

PTIKA NTULI

What do you think this running quality is in this work of art that can bring out that response? Can you put a finger on it?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, there are recognisable elements in the work because the work is about dancing and it is figurative so people can read that very easily. Also, because it's in a gallery and it is about dancing people, it seems very like performances which Nigerians know an awful lot about because our first art is dance in Nigeria and a lot of people know when something is dancing, I think. (Laughs)

PTIKA NTULI

So, in short, you have combined two forms of art, dancing sculpture and painting? Because some of the sculptures I can see are yellow, blue, red, etc. And at the same time there is this electricity that runs up charging them. Now from here the final question would be, what next?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

What next? A post graduate course I hope (Laughs)

PTIKA NTULI

I'm not talking about a post graduate course! Sculpturally?

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

Oh sculpturally! I hope to make figures and sculptures that people can climb on so that they can perform themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Student sculptor and painter Sokari Douglas Camp of Nigeria talking to the South African sculptor Ptika Ntuli about her dance figures that have been on display here in London. And I hope one day they'll be seen by the people of the Niger Delta whose art of dance she's been attempting to convey in her work.

Next week at the same time I'll be turning the spotlight on other features of the arts of Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping you'll join me then. For now it's goodbye.