

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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First Broadcast: 20.5.84

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to a particularly colourful Arts and Africa. Now I use the word 'colourful' because in today's programme the dazzling oil paintings of the Ghanaian artist Dr Ablade Glover come under our scrutiny. Imagine for a moment that you are standing on the top of a hill, looking down at a huge west African market jostling in the midday sun. You're standing quietly and alone and can just make out the distant fluctuating roar of the market. Try as it may your eye has difficulty in settling on the symphony of moving colour. No larger than ants, the teeming market people seem to swell and contract making every-changing shapes around the stationary market stalls. Now such is the experience when you view the canvasses of Ablade Glover currently on show at the October Gallery here in London. Urban Blues, Colour Symphony, Makola in Memoriam, Faceless Faces, all his new paintings take the Ghanaian market as their subject matter. The one big surprise in the show is the absence of the close-up studies of the market mummies which dominated his output a few years ago. Dr Ablade Glover trained both in England and in America and is currently Head of the Department of Art Education at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. Dr Glover, I'm delighted to have you back on the programme. I think it's two years ago since we last spoke. What have you been up to in the meantime?

GLOVER

I have been painting. I went back to Ghana and I continued painting. Of course, I was also teaching. The University was closed as you know for six months and I used that time painting. All I do is really paint. Sometimes I play billiards or something but otherwise I paint all the time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I noticed looking through this latest exhibition of yours that the market women who were outstanding presences in your earlier exhibitions were missing. I saw a market scene of Makola market which you describe as Makola In Memoriam but I couldn't see the market women as figures.

2.

GLOVER

Not really. They are still there. I see the market women, but, it looks like I have moved the focus of my attention I think. I am looking more remotely rather than closely. What I was doing before was looking at the intimate thing that goes on. Two women sitting down talking, rumour-mongering, talking about everything you know. I am now looking at it in a greater span. It's getting more and more interesting in that way I think.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Has it anything to do with historical reasons? I mean we have all heard about the smashing up of the Makola market and here is your newest painting which you call Makola In Memoriam.

GLOVER

Actually the titles I give to my paintings come after the painting has been done. They remind me of things. But I paint the market, particularly Kumasi market usually. It happens to be my favourite, And you know Kumasi, as you travel from one point to the other, you turn back and you see behind you a whole span of what you have left there and these scenes tend to generate the interest and when I go back to the studio I just settle down to work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And before, I hope I am right, the crowds were quite close to us, we could almost mingle with them? Although you have to view them with some distance to really appreciate their presence but now the feeling I had looking at these paintings of yours, was as if you were hung up in the air, somewhere from a helicopter or something, looking down on these great crowds and painting them.

GLOVER

I wasn't hung up in the air. (Laughter) I was painting it from a distance. Somebody made a remark during my first exhibiton about my not belonging to the culture and looking at my culture from outside. Now I think that is more evident now because when that remark was first made I was painting closely, in a close intimate situation. I don't know whether the more I paint the more I become remote. As it is I am getting more and more and more interested in the crowd and I'm getting into these textured surfaces which I'm doing which create certain images for me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, now you're talking about your technique practically, do you paint in a studio or do you paint from outside and do you actually when you select a scene, sit somewhere at a distance and view it?

3.

GLOVER

So many questions. (Laughter) I paint in a studio now. It depends upon what your idea of a studio is. I haven't got a studio, I have a verandah. From my living room I move onto a verandah. The verandah overlooks the whole forest behind my house. It is an open space. The place immediately gets me out of the house and immediately I'm alone. I sit out there and things begin to turn in my head and sometimes it ends up really as what I'm seeing in my head and sometimes it doesn't. The I put the thing away, the canvas away. But it's a process of getting into that space, being alone from the house and beginning to bring out what I've gathered in my head.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You don't use a brush when you are painting?

GLOVER

No I don't use a brush at all. I picked up the palette knife sometime ago. The advantage is with the palette knife, I find that normally, in the process of painting, I want to register these images quickly, as quickly as possible and see what I have got. The brush tends to be slow and soft and is not dynamic enough in my hands. The palette knife gives me an opportunity to register it on the canvas when I am pleased I leave it there and when I am not I just scrape it out.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How long does it take to dry, from when you actually put the paint on there?

GLOVER

Oh, the paint will take something like a week to dry so you can just come back and take the whole thing off. The other thing I do also is when I am very displeased with a painting I leave it to dry and then I work on it. The texture which has been created on the canvas itself lends some otherfeeling to the canvas and is a whole new ball game.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you say you 'register' the images immediately with a palette knife. but one tends to lose the actual figures when standing close to the painting, and one has to go back and then look at it and begin to see. Now how do you do it?

GLOVER

Now that's the process I do myself. I put on an image and go back myself and look at whether the image is right and then put it on again. That's all I do really. Put it on, go back, my day's work means walking to and from the canvas and so on until I arrive at a point where I believe the images give me the impression I want to create.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you mentioned two paintings which you particularly like in this newest exhibition of yours. But you couldn't tell me why you liked them.

4.

GLOVER

No. The first one, this is the Faceless Faces, this is just houses, in fact it's a scene from a Kumasi shanty town. You move to a place called behind you is this sprawling, sprawling part of the city. It was supposed to be a beautiful part before but now it has sort of gone low. When I painted the picture I thought I'd got the feeling I wanted to. That's what I wanted to depict and I got it right and I liked it. The other, the second picture is what we talked about. It's the Figurative Figures. It's really an exercise: it ended up as an exercise between green, yellow and black. I think the balance between the colour sensation tends to do the thing in you and these are some of the things we don't understand I don't understand, I don't try to understand, I do not try to put any academic explanations to these things. So far as I'm concerned, when I like it, I like it. I think my training has been like that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you are in charge of the Art Department at the University of Science and Technology and you teach the people there art. Are people following your technique or are they branching out in their own direction?

GLOVER

No. There are a lot of young artists coming up really in Ghana, very very talented ones but let me make a correction here, I don't teach painting there, I don't teach art at all. I teach young men who are anxious to return to teaching and when the students come to our faculty of art and they finish their degree, some are desirous to enter teaching. What we give them is exercises and ideas as to what to use to generate interests in the creative end of the classroom.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's been said that African art is primarily functional and it is not just there for inspection or mental enjoyment. You use the techniques used by Africans in making cloth designs and so on, that's a technique you use, how functional is your art?

GLOVER

It's very functional if it's exercising the mind. (Laughter) It is particularly functional. Again I did discuss this with another friend, that when my mother who hasn't had western education, looks at my work she only enjoys it by seeing it in the form of a cloth. That's how she sees it and she tells me I like this, if it's only in the form of a cloth, but maybe that is how one can look at this art from a traditional point of view. Western education has given us a perspective and I think that perspective is what we are working on. And then again, I originally trained as a textile designer. I moved from textile design into this. The textures I'm doing may have something to do with that background.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I know this is very dear to your heart, the establishment of an art gallery so we can trace the history of art through out culture up to now. Now as far as I know there is nothing of that sort. What are you doing in that direction?

5.

GLOVER

We artists are really fighting. We are fighting on this subject. Years ago Mobil Oil in Ghana started a collection, what they call a collection, in that they started buying with the idea that when a gallery was built that these paintings would go into it. Nothing has been built yet. I have had the occasion of being very unpleasant in meetings telling the authorities that it is about time they did something about it but you know that when you go on like that sometimes you create more enemies than friends. The question has become particularly unpleasant in some peoples's ears. The Arts Council is collecting, they do collect from time to time. When you have an exhibiton they do buy a couple here and there. I don't think that is enough. I think there must be some real effort , real effort must be made. Presently it is true, as the authorities will tell you there is no money. Of course there is no money, but there was money before and what was it all used for? I feel strongly again about it in the sense that we do complain of people who collected our old 'art', what we call traditional art. We say they stole it and all that. And we sit today and we see out present culture, today's culture which is our art today, because after all culture is a living thing and what our living culture is is what we are doing and nobody's doing anything about it. Anything that is being done at all is so small, its very insignificant. So I think a lot must be done, the present effort I don't think is enough.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dr Glover thank you very much indeed. And that's where we end this week's programme. I hope you will join me again at the same time next week. From me Alex Tetteh-Lartey its goodbye.