

Arts and Africa

ALS4/5/5/2/24

BBC

AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

First Broad'st: 10.6.84

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. In today's programme an English artist goes to Malawi and a Malawian artist comes to Britain. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to this week's Arts and Africa.

MUSIC (Robert Fumulani and the Likhubula River Jazz Band)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From Malawi Robert Fumulani and the Likhubula River Jazz Band. Malawi is a southern African country rarely featured on this programme, so I was particularly interested to attend the opening of an art exhibition by the leading Malawian painter Witness Kay Chiromo. Kay Chiromo lectures in fine art at the University of Malawi and has spent the last year here in Britain on a sabbatical at the Edinburgh College of Art. His new work is now on show at London's Africa Centre and it certainly makes for unusual viewing. Although some of his paintings such as his portraits of women or dancers, rely on a conventional naturalistic style, others combine this naturalistic approach with a western cubist style. In his painting 'Sounds Ancestral' two traditional musicians are depicted with angular, box-like limbs, and torso, whilst their heads are represented in almost photographic detail. It really is a most unusual combination of styles. Kay Chiromo told Nick Barker how his artistic career began.

CHIROMO

Well, first of all I went to school, a secondary school, that was the first time that I started learning art formally and before that there was nothing formal at all in terms of training. Then after the secondary school when I went to college to study art education - I was doing art as a subject that I would go out and teach - that was the first time I was really exposed to art.

BARKER

At what stage did you decide that you wanted to become a professional artist?

CHIROMO

I think when I was in college training. It's when I realized that art is a profession that I could embark upon.

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BARKER

Now you currently have an exhibition at the Africa Centre in London, and these are all paintings which you have completed whilst you have been on a sabbatical to Edinburgh University. I was very interested looking at these styles: your paintings take as their subject matter dancers, water-carriers, violin players, now some of these are executed in a very naturalistic almost photographic manner, there's rather a romantic quality to them. Other paintings though, have adopted a sort of western cubist style, perhaps you could tell me what you are trying to achieve in these paintings?

CHIROMO

Yes. One reason I'm trying to practise my art in that particular way is that I have got two kinds of audience. There are some that really don't enjoy the modern approach to art and if I have to communicate my feelings and share my art, I have to do it in a way that they'll understand and the naturalistic approach seems to satisfy that particular aim. But then there is this other group of people that wants to see something fairly more modern than just naturalist. So this is why I put myself in two different channels in style.

BARKER

But who are these two different audiences that you are addressing yourself to?

CHIROMO

Well, these are most of the local people who would rather go for the naturalistic whereas most tourists and maybe people from the Western world would rather see the modern approach to art and that's what they seem to enjoy more.

BARKER

Now one of your paintings called 'Sounds Ancestral', is I think one of the most extraordinary pictures I have seen in a long time because it is a picture of two musicians and the two heads of the musicians are painted in this very naturalistic fashion yet the bodies, the legs, the arms, the torso, look as if they have been carved out of wood, there's this extraordinary separation between the two styles. Now it seems to me that you are trying to marry these two styles but haven't worked out possibly the most satisfactory way of doing it. Would that be a fair criticism?

CHIROMO

It is quite fair and I really accept it. What I am trying to do is to marry the two to see if I can come up with a hybrid of the two, one that will satisfy both the naturalist lovers and the modern lovers. But, it's an experiment that is very hard but I am working on it. I'm sure I will be able to come up with an answer.

BARKER

Why the interest in western cubism, what has it got to offer you?

CHIROMO

Well, western cubism, I don't agree that that is totally western cubism because cubism is a form that is not necessarily western. It would be there, here in the west, but originally you find quite a lot of aspects in the local African culture that are totally cubist, not in painting form of course, but in sculpture. So what I am trying to do is to use that kind of approach in my paintings. I don't agree with you that it's really western cubism, no.

BARKER

Now when I look at your paintings I have the feelings of a world very much at peace with itself. It is very much as if you see motherhood and the water-carriers through a very romantic lens. Are you a romantic person?

CHIROMO

I think I am yes. I like to look at things that way, the peaceful way that things go on in every day life.

BARKER

Now you lecture at the University of Malawi. Could you tell us a little bit about art education in Malawi?

CHIROMO

To start off with, in the University one very important role that the university is doing about art education is to train teachers, art teachers. These are the teachers that will go into the school and teach the pupils art, so, that is a very major role that we have to do because it's quite a changing role. We have to offer as wide a spectrum as possible of different forms of art and make sure that when these teachers go out into the field they actually perform those roles properly.

BARKER

Now what are those roles?

CHIROMO

Well, we teach them how to teach drawing, painting, ceramics and sculpture in general and of course we also teach them some performing arts, dance and they have just introduced in the second year now, music as well. So, the idea is to have these put out into the schools so that pupils learn more about their own art and their environment.

BARKER

To what extent are the Malawian artists dependent on the tourist trade?

CHIROMO

Tourists form a very important role to art in Malawi as such because they are a major buyer for the Malawian art work. So, in a big way they depend quite a lot on tourist influx into the country.

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BARKER

Now what effect is that demand having on the type of work that's being produced?

CHIROMO

Now the effect it has is that the artist has got to produce things that he thinks the tourist will like and of course, this has got it's own negative aspect in that the artist is in a way governed by the demands of the tourist, but they manage quite OK that way.

BARKER

So does it mean that artists are being very repetitious in terms of the images that they are producing, the sort of carvings that they are making?

CHIROMO

In terms of the curios yes. It's more of a craft than a real art really. They are repeating most of the things but this is what the tourist wants so they are providing just that.

BARKER

But you presumably don't feel threatened by this. Are you conscious of making your work for a particular market?

CHIROMO

What I like to do is just to do what I like to do, whether somebody likes them or not I don't really mind. If I make a piece of art work and nobody likes it, I don't really mind so long as I have produced what I want to do and I think in that way you enjoy the work better than just producing for the public.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, whilst Kay Chiromo has been busy experimenting with western modern art, the English artist Alan Bond has given it up as a result of his experiences in Malawi. Before visiting the country in 1981 and 1983, Alan Bond's artistic style was primarily abstract. This all changed however following the visual impact of his African experiences. His new work, now showing at London's Commonwealth Institute employs the naturalistic figurative style which Kay Chiromo has sought to escape from. Alan Bond's main interest is the colour and exuberance of urban life. His large brilliantly coloured canvasses reveal his fascination with the gaudy consumer goods on sale in Malawian towns and the visual impact of brash western advertising in an African city. he told Nick Barker how he came to find himself in Malawi.

BOND

On the first occasion I just went for a holiday. Someone helped me with an air fair, I had an opportunity to go. I wasn't a figurative painter, it just made a very strong impression on me.

BARKER

You say it made a strong impression on you, were you mainly in urban areas?

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BOND

I was travelling around the country, I was given a car while I was there, I was given a lot of freedom whilst I was there, but I was based in a town and I think certainly in terms of my paintings, the towns had a stronger impact.

BARKER

You say that before going to Africa you weren't primarily a figurative artist?

BOND

No, not at all. I think I'm just a fairly typical product of the English art school system. If you can categorize artists I suppose I was a South-West regional artist doing relatively abstract pictures, occasionally getting a South-West arts award, showing in group shows with people like myself, but the African experience changed that totally. I don't feel any relationship to what I was doing then; I don't think about those kind of things; I just think about what I saw and the need and the wish to describe my sensations which is quite a different approach to the one I formerly took.

BARKER

Now what was your method of working when you were out there, were you taking photographs, were you making drawings?

BOND

Well, the first time I went to Malawi I wasn't immediately aware that I was going to become a painter of what I had seen. I was just excited by what I was seeing, I enjoyed it. I did take lots of photographs and when I came home to my studio I had no idea of how I was going to deal with what I had seen, I had no real kind of figurative experience behind me anyway, I didn't really know how it was going to turn out so I didn't do any work in preparation for what the paintings were going to be. So, when I went out the second time I obviously had done some paintings of Africa and I was more prepared for what I was going to see and I took photographs again, but the photographs I took the second time were much more specifically for information. I think the paintings are about 'recall' and the strong impressions that remain, rather than trying to be very specific about a moment in time and the actuality of something.

BARKER

The exhibition is entitled 'High Street Malawi Revisited'. Are there any plans to visit that high street again?

BOND

Well I'd love to go to Africa again, not necessarily Malawi. I mean it was just a chance thing that it happened to be Malawi and I very much enjoyed being there, and of course, it was a very beautiful place. I would love to go somewhere else in Africa next. I am very enthusiastic about the paintings that I have done. I'm aware from a painter's point of view, of the failings and weaknesses in them but I am very glad that that's the area which I am working in. It interests me and I want to continue working in that area and that would not be possible if I did not go back to Africa.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that brings us to the end of this weeks Arts and Africa. I hope you will join me again at the same time next week. Goodbye.