

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And to begin this week's "Arts and Africa" here's one of the best known voices from Uganda - Jimmy Katumba's. The title of this song is "Tube Bafumbo".

MUSIC: "Tube Bafumbo" by Jimmy Katumba.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The romantic and very relaxing rhythms of Jimmy Katumba. But neither of those words can describe the rest of today's programme. We're going to be hearing from two people who've been to see an exhibition that's called "The Art that Survives: Uganda 1960's to 1980's".

When you think about it, that period stretches from independence up to the present day and in that time Uganda has experienced some traumatic events. Perhaps a better prelude to the account of the art exhibition is part of another Jimmy Katumba number. It's called "Give Me Back My Freedom" and it's the plea from a prisoner held in one of the notorious death cells that saw such terrible violence in the late 1970's.

MUSIC: "Give Me Back My Freedom"

TETTEH-LARTEY

That musical flashback to the last days of the rule of Idi Amin echoes some of the pictures on display at the exhibition "The Art that Survives" that's been showing at the Africa Centre Gallery here in London. It's been a big exhibition, so big that it's been shown in two parts and all seventy or so paintings, drawings, lithographs and lino-cuts are the product of the School of Art at the University of Makerere in the capital, Lusaka.

Florence Akst has been to see both parts of the exhibition for "Arts and Africa" and she was struck by the wide range of works on show - a variety of techniques, a variety in scale and a variety of subject matter. John Berry taught design, and the history of art at the Art School in the first half of the 1970's. He's been back since then, twice as External Examiner in Art, and he has been a consultant to the arrangers of this exciting and disturbing exhibition.

When Florence and John Berry met she asked him whether variety was a

trade mark of the Arts School or whether it had a distinctive characteristic.

JOHN BERRY

My experience there - both when I was working there and going back as an Examiner - was that even in some difficult times the range of work, quality of work and the different types of work was maintained; and at the same time if one could point to a particular characteristic it would be a great vitality, vibrant colour, brilliant drawing - I mean by brilliance a very, very active drawing.

FLORENCE AKST

Even when it is pen and ink, black and white?

BERRY

Oh yes, yes. Great observation, perception - liveliness in a word - about the whole of the work produced there.

AKST

Is this an aspect of the way people are taught at Makerere or is there something, a quality, about the people who come there as students?

BERRY

As a teacher there I'd like to think it was something to do with the way they were taught but I think they were well selected. I think that the schools in Uganda did do a very good job, some of them particularly, in bringing up the students who were well trained in art for starters.

AKST

But Makerere has always attracted students from beyond there as well, hasn't it?

BERRY

That is so, yes. Very fine artists indeed have come from Tanzania and from Kenya and from further afield. And they too were, I think, inspired by the place itself. I think Uganda was a very spirited place indeed - and still is.

AKST

The title of the exhibition is "The Art that Survives: Uganda 1960's to 1980's", that's the whole span of independent Uganda isn't it? What do you think are the main events that have affected art?

BERRY

I suppose independence itself was a very good strong starter. There was a sense of liberation in the art work, as far as I can see, at that time. It was fairly closely followed then by celebrations of the Uganda martyrs; the centenary of the Uganda martyrs.

AKST

Those are the Christian martyrs?

BERRY

That's right yes. This, in fact, provided some very rich subject matter for many of the artists to work upon. It also induced several to work on a very large scale for murals - that kind of thing; and the imagination was stirred at that time both by the Christian tradition and by further and further looking into African mythology - and this is very stimulating indeed.

AKST

Now that I would have thought was a positive event, an event that released certain creative elements, but the political events have been quite traumatic haven't they?

BERRY

Yes indeed. Even before the appearance of Idi Amin on the scene there was a sense, I think, of impending difficulties. There was of course the celebration when Amin arrived - a celebration immediately after his arrival....

AKST

The military coup.

BERRY

Yes, the military coup, but thereafter came the gradual realisation that things were getting pretty terrible in the country; and from that event until his removal there were of course some very difficult times indeed - and it hasn't been easy thereafter.....

AKST

Since the return of President Obote?

BERRY

I'm sure it's been very difficult.

AKST

We've heard so much particularly about the latter days of the Amin regime - what do you think has been the effect on artists and art students of that sort of deprivation?

BERRY

Well first in the physical sense the lack of materials: all sorts of materials are very much in short supply. One sees in the exhibition the small scale of most of the work there. And then the effect on that was on the subject matter that the artists were concerned with.

AKST

What sort of art materials were in short supply, what did people do?

BERRY

When I was there first of all in the beginning of the seventies a great deal of etching was done, a lot of ceramics was done. Sculptural work had become increasingly limited in the time that I was there because of the difficulty of obtaining the right materials or material for welding - things of that sort. In every angle of work the material shortage was pretty terrible.

AKST

The physical effects of living through tremendously cruel and fearful times - does that affect artists positively or is that an inhibiting effect?

BERRY

I think ultimately it's positive, particularly with those artists there, because, as you see in the work, very often there is something of the macabre, the grim, the very nasty, about much of the subject matter.

AKST

A lot of skulls and distorted faces.

BERRY

Yes, yes. All sorts of images of death, but as in other traditions of other cultures these can be stimulating in themselves to an artist's expression. Many of them were working on their own feelings which coincided with public distress at the time. And yet at the same time this was an exercise in vigour, and there was always an underlying optimism, a sense that things would get better ultimately, that there would be a recovery.

AKST

Does a particular picture from this exhibition come to mind when you talk in this way?

BERRY

Oh! Well I suppose one that really stood out for me the more I think about it was a work by Walube, the "Beast Acclaimed". In fact it's a lino-cut of a gigantic size, and I think it must have been one which probably consumed the whole budget for lino in that particular year, but it's a very fine piece of work. It has a very large ox or other type of bovine in the middle of the crowd. It's brilliantly illuminated from the left: there's a flaring light, and the use of light and dark is always one of the characteristics of these artists. And the crowd is milling round, almost as if in the biblical situation of the celebration of the Golden Calf, - it's got that kind of legend to it - yet anybody looking at it at the time of Idi Amin would appreciate that this is the crowd celebrating a particular gigantic - shall we say 'bullish' - leader of the people.

AKST

Yes I noticed it as soon as I went into the exhibition; partly because it's so big but partly because the contrast between the black areas and the lighted areas are so enormously vivid that it draws you in to see what the detail is.

BERRY

That's right. This happens with so many works in this show and I suppose this is one of the generalizations one could make about Makerere art as a whole - that there is that brilliance of colour and that brilliance of contrast between light and dark.

AKST

Yes because this is just black and white, there's no colour in that picture.

BERRY

Yes it is, but very attractive, compellingly attractive. And with so many of the others, even going to the other end of the scale, small jewel-like pieces of work where the colours are quite brilliant - when you go up to them, as you say, you find extraordinary details of observation and a delight in the way the work's been done. And I have a sense of the touch and the texture which must have been a delight to the artist to achieve even when, going back to your former point, he was representing something horrific.

AKST

I'd like to remind you of a painting that I thought was very interesting but also great fun, and it surprised me because it portrayed a woman, a young woman, an attractive young woman, laughing as she's dancing; but she's dancing with a skeleton.

BERRY

Yes, it's typical of many of that sort.

AKST

But it should have been frightening because the whole purpose surely is that she's taking risks, she's dancing with death. And this rather small skeleton, bright red, is quite evil in a way.....

BERRY

Yes it is.

AKST

..... yet the total impact was one of love of life.

BERRY

Yes indeed. Even in death there is life with these artists. It's extraordinary the vigour that they've put in and the sense of colour.

AKST

And humour.

BERRY

Humour throughout, even though it's a pretty grim humour: the sense of making a visual joke, time and time again - I think that's part of the tradition. I think there are many mottos and sayings that go back in the verbal tradition, in the oral tradition, that we can see visually represented in many of these works.

You've mentioned the dance scene picture and I'd remind you too of the fine pieces of work by Muyinga. One of them is "Greed, Envy and Opportunism".

AKST

Oh, the three men.

BERRY

The three men. An extraordinary sense of observation, of caricature, of the characters of three people, and the colour that's involved in these, and the texture. The whole thing is really very brilliant. There are three people sitting at the table and they've all got food before them. Each one looking at his neighbour with envy. So there's a series of glances exchanged across the picture. It's very typical I would say of some of the finest pieces of work that were produced at Makerere.

TETTEH-LARTEY

John Berry talking to Florence Akst. Well, with such talent and dedication in the past I see no reason why we can't expect Makerere School of Art to remain one of the dominant artistic centres in the whole of the continent.

MUSIC: "Mpulira Akoona" arranged by Jimmy Katumba.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And remembering what John Berry had to say about the optimism that survives in Uganda in spite of everything, we've chosen some cheerful Ugandan music to play us out. It's Jimmy Katumba's arrangement of "Mpulira Akoona" but that's certainly not Jimmy Katumba's voice. I wish the record would tell us whose it is. Now it's time for me Alex Tetteh-Lartey to invite you to join me again this time next week and for now to say goodbye.