

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa". I've just had a strange but quite pleasurable experience looking at pictures in an exhibition here in London. The artist is Johney Ohene from Ghana and in his paintings he manages to turn the world inside out. Or perhaps I should say upside down. What's particularly fascinating is that his paintings at first look as though they are telling a clear and simple story - children playing in a room and outside in a park; a beach scene with a family of fisher folk sitting indoors; or people weaving a carpet inside and people walking past outside.

But Johney Ohene is playing tricks with the viewer. As I've said, each picture is showing an interior and exterior but when you look closely the wall with a clock hanging on it and a ladder leaning against it must also be the ground that someone is walking on in another part of the picture. The artist seems to be telling us that our recognition of the dimensions in the space depends on our visual experience. When an artist paints a flat area it is what our eyes see happening against it that tells us whether the artist wants us to see a horizontal (a floor or the ground) or a vertical (like a wall).

All very intriguing. But the first impression as I walked into the exhibition was one of colour. We're always being told that Africans have a sense of colour and I got Johney Ohene to talk about his special use of colour which was very bright but not glossy or conflicting. Because he started painting when he was only five years old he says he has twenty five years experience of using special techniques and putting over his views on perception. He also has graduated from the Maidstone College of Arts and Design here in England and has a whole list of exhibitions to his credit. So, how about colour? Is it his main concern?

JOHNEY OHENE

I think I am concerned with three things, the figures, the colour and also the notion of space, and I want to actually define them clearly so everyone would see what I intend.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And the colours, do you have any special pattern in which you choose them? They seem to be colours of all sorts and yet they achieve one whole, they all seem to be complementary.

JOHNEY OHENE

Yes, I work by the nature of contrast, and, in fact, when I started the choice of colour was very, very difficult. But I think the Ghanaian instinct in me actually went for those particular bright colours of yellow, gold, greens, reds, which are basically colours which you see a lot in West Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you talk about reds and golds and so on, but these seem to be tempered, they are gentle.

JOHNEY OHENE

Yes. Before I went into colour I worked in tone and monochrome, in black and white, here again learning how to grade and be a very good draughtsman indeed. So in effect what you see there is how I've actually moved the pigments of the colour over the surface of the canvas itself and used very swift and very strong brush strokes on the canvas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well John here is a painting, a very forceful one, and rather typical in many ways of the others, a painting you call "The Carpet Makers". I can see at one corner people laying a carpet, but there are all sorts of other activities going on elsewhere. Why did you choose to call it "The Carpet Makers"?

JOHNEY OHENE

I think it was called "The Carpet Makers" just by accident in the sense that I encountered a difficulty in the previous painting, which was actually "Midday at Tamale", where I couldn't actually come to terms with the corner. Therefore, when I put in those two women working on the carpet, I needed to make some sense with the other figures in the abstract painting itself. Now we've got a few men in the foreground; you can see that they are in the room, but behind them is a green wall, which is also the green grass of outside. So, in effect, if there's a woman standing on green grass outside with a cart and there's a lampshade at the top of the roof upstairs just on top of the two men working, then you realise that it is very, very difficult if the viewer loses his point of perception. Therefore, the title and the women in that corner bring the whole painting together. I'm talking about what is in one's head, where you see what is outside and around you, you are conscious of the fact that they are all around.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it is very difficult for one actually to say that, where the woman is carrying a dish she is on grass. I see it as grass, plain grass. And yet it is also like a wall, but it is very difficult to see that it is a wall except for the fact that there is a doorway to the extreme right.

JOHNEY OHENE

That's right. We see what is in our soul and our spiritual world, what is in our mind. People do not see through walls, but in my painting I see through walls.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we move on to this painting. Well here we are looking at a picture called "The Fisherman's Son" and there's a lady in a vast doorway, with a lot of light coming through, carrying this little child and talking to a boy sitting on a box, and he is welcoming them into the house. And yet at the top corner we also see the sea-side, the beach with boats and palm trees, and you would have thought that the water would rush into the house if you just looked at it.

JOHNEY OHENE

Well here again my experience was drawn to the fact that I have some friends whom I actually work with here who come from Nigeria and other parts of West Africa. Now I won't mention his name but there is a very good friend of mine who is in a very influential position, and whenever I see him I say "here is the fisherman's son". So what I was trying to do was to depict these two worlds which he draws his experience from, the West African coast where you can see the sea, and also the Western environment where you can see the doorway and the light coming through. So it's an illusion of two worlds created together in a two dimensional frame.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And how about the corner there, where you have a ladder with a tin of paint sitting under it, and yet somebody, apparently the painter, walking away towards the beach.

JOHNEY OHENE

You create an illusion by putting a ladder against a wall. Now logic actually states that, if there's a ladder against a wall, you will see a shadow. So by actually painting an empty wall and placing that shadow on an empty wall you allow that plane which is also a ground, to become a wall. That is how I actually reinforce the fact that the man is sitting within a room. And what you see over there looking like a triangle is actually the window of a room in a house.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

My goodness you've got to take a lot in before you can understand. (Laughs) When you explain, it all makes sense. Now I want to ask you about a clock which I always see on the wall in your paintings. What is the significance?

JOHNEY OHENE

A clock can only hang on a wall and, therefore, if you see a clock horizontally on a two dimensional plane, it has got to sit somewhere. By actually taking away the line and making it sit in an empty space and reinforce the sense of a wall which is in effect a floor. Without doing that the painting wouldn't make sense.

When I started I concentrated on just the concept of point and line. Well if you extend a point it becomes a line, so you have a point of departure and a point of arrival. I've also thought about the time and space element over a period of about 18 years working on the dialects of my language on a two dimensional plane.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From what you have been saying it looks as if, before you paint anything, you think a lot about it. So do I take it that painting doesn't come naturally to you?

JOHNEY OHENE

I think it does, but everything has got a state of progression, in the sense that the paintings dictate what you should do next. The painting takes over, it has got its own questions, it has got its own demands. Paintings demand certain questions to be asked because they are original in their own sense, and I don't even know where they are heading. That's why I must follow their questions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you had any formal training?

JOHNEY OHENE

Yes I have. But apart from actually going to Maidstone College of Art for a year, where I learnt the rudiments of being a good draughtsman, the actual concept of my paintings from my own motivation and my own quest for originality.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But, John, with all these complex emotions and intellectual activities which go on in your head before you draw, how long does it take you to produce one painting? You were saying that you had to go through about 100 sketches before you produce one final painting.

JOHNEY OHENE

Oh yes, that's right. I think the 100 sketches, here again, are sketches and drawings asking and solving the problems relating to that particular canvas, and out of those 100 drawings one would then become a painting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well John thank you very much indeed. I was talking to the Ghanaian artist Johny Ohene

MUSIC

UGANDAN LULLABY.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There's such a rich vein of music for babies and small children all over the Continent that we are giving everyone a chance to hear the songs from other countries - we all know our own. This one, I can hardly call it a song, was recorded in Timbuctoo in Mali. I'm pretty sure that it must be one of those action rhymes. See what you think.

MUSIC

MALI LULLABY.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A very simple but effective lullaby from Mali. The next song could not be more of a contrast. The song originates from Lesotho but I think it must have been adapted for a wider audience.

MUSIC

LESOTHO LULLABY.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Still in Lesotho here's something fresh and unsophisticated from Pedi people. From the sound which is a bit like yodelling I suspect they live in the mountains.

MUSIC

PEDI LULLABY.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The music of Lesotho has brought today's programme to an end. You're warmly invited to join me at the same time next week for another programme of "Arts and Africa". Until then it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

MUSIC

CLOSING SIG. "LIMPOPO" by Jeremy Taylor.