

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa.

MUSIC - The Real Sounds.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that's the Real Sounds Band and we'll be meeting them later on and asking "When is a Zimbabwean band not a Zimbabwean band?". We begin today, though with an exhibition from the Seychelles. Peter Pierre-Louis is an artist who was born in Mombassa in Kenya in 1947. He trained in Kenya but since his parents were Seychellois he went to live in the islands some 10 years ago. He is now head of the school of Art and Design at the Seychelle's Polytechnic. At London's Africa centre he is now exhibiting a collection of his paintings which are marvelously colourful and vibrant. While being abstract in the sense of not being pictures of "objects" they are in fact full of shapes and squares and sunbursts and squiggles that look like Arabic or Chinese calligraphy. His paintings are also full of religious symbols such as crosses and crescents. And in fact as the names of his paintings suggest there is a strong spiritual and mystical content behind them. Consider these names for example: 'For Gilbert; where the Devas dance among the spiral forest', and 'The coming of the white Avatar at the end of the dark age'. When I went to talk to Peter Pierre-Louis I began by asking him about a painting which looked to me like four floor boards surrounding a shining yellow circle.

PETER PIERRE-LOUIS

To begin with I will tell you that my paintings are based on an interest in meditation and metaphysics - spiritual ideas. I try to convey these very abstract ideas by means of symbols. The painting that you are looking at here, for instance, is called "Tabernacle for the Initiate" it shows what looks to most people like a sun - a very bright yellow sun in the middle of something that looks like a cupboard or wood and this represents an inner sanctuary - which for me is the spirit of the soul of man within.

Meditation as I have experienced it is a means of contacting that inner self or that higher self or that spirit within man which is sometimes described in the Bible as 'The Kingdom of God within'. What you are looking at there is actually a representation of that inner light within the soul.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that painting looks very typical of all your paintings, let's look at another one. Now here is one which is diamond shaped: it has two diamond shapes - one very large, one with an inner one and what looks to me like Arabic inscriptions within.

PETER PIERRE-LOUIS

Well I use symbols, my work is based on symbols taken from many different sources, mainly from Eastern religions and this particular painting that you are looking at is called 'Song of Om'. 'Om' is a word which comes from Hinduism and it is supposed to represent the supreme consciousness or the ultimate reality or the unknown name of God and the symbol in the centre represents that. My inspiration comes from other sources as well, I am interested in old manuscripts, ancient secret knowledge, all to do with religion and mysticism. What I try to do in my paintings is use plastic emulsion paint which is ordinary wall paint, use it very very thickly on cloth and then I find something sharp like a nail or a comb - anything which is sharp and I use it to scratch not only symbols to represent these abstract ideas but I also use it to create decoration or ornament around the symbols. What you are looking at there is very close to what you could perhaps call Chinese calligraphy. Again this is to convey the idea of something which is old and ancient, a knowledge of God or the supreme which is mystical. This is the impression that I am trying to create.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Peter let's move along and whilst we are doing that I would like to ask you about your choice of colours. Many of the colours here look like the type of thing you find on the backgrounds of cloths in Africa. Some of the paintings actually look to me like cloth decorations. They are very beautiful and saying they look like cloth decorations doesn't attempt to take anything away from their beauty at all, have you any experience of cloth design?

PETER PIERRE-LOUIS

I did designs for fabric while I was in Kenya and I have also done tie-dyeing and batik. It is interesting that you ask me that question because my technique is very much like the tie-dyeing and batik process because my paintings are usually washed and scrubbed to create the effects that you see. If you look very carefully you will see some paintings where there are patches of white showing and that is created by putting it under a tap - or there is a river at the back of my house back home and I take it out there and scrub it with a sponge or something very hard to create these colours and this effect. If I am not satisfied with the colours I wash it out and add more and more colours to it.

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For instance, this particular one shows a lot of scribbles and scratches and a mixture of greens, browns and blues - dark subdued - and this was created by mixing many, many different colours - one colour washed and more colour added on to it then scrubbed very much like you would do for batik or tie-dye.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have lived in Kenya and you now live in the Seychelles, are these paintings very popular there - do people buy them?

PETER PIERRE-LOUIS

Yes, I have had exhibitions in the Seychelles and I have sold quite a few works there. They are mainly bought by people who are very interested in art because I think my work is quite difficult for most people to understand.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The artist Peter Pierre-Louis. We now turn to Zimbabwe and the music of The Real Sounds.

MUSIC - The Real Sounds.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

'Tsi Tsi Wangu' played by The Real Sounds one of several Zimbabwean bands currently enjoying great success here in Britain. Tim Judah has been finding out about them, Tim.

TIM JUDAH

Yes, Alex this is a band that sounds distinctly Zairean even though it is being promoted here in London as Zimbabwean. Now that might sound confusing and in fact only two out of the thirteen members of the band are Zimbabwean although the band is now based in Harare. This after a ten year sojourn in Zambia. Why has the band now taken root in Zimbabwe I asked one of the bands leaders, Gaby Mumba?

GABY MUMBA

The old saying is that if you can't make it at home you can make it somewhere else. As musicians we are like soldiers we move from country to country.

TIM JUDAH

Clearly The Real Sounds are a band with a sense of humour. But mostly they come from Lubumbashi the capital of the frequently troubled province of Shaba in Zaire's deep south. I wondered whether the band hadn't, in fact, left their country for political reasons. Gaby Mutombo is the band's other leader.

4.

GABY MUTOMBO

No, no, no, we didn't leave for political reasons, we left Zaire just because of the music!

TIM JUDAH

It is odd though - most bands in Zaire you would have thought would have gone to Kinshasa to record their music, why didn't you go to Kinshasa?

GABY MUTOMBO

Kinshasa is very far from the town which we come from because it is about 2000 kilometres from Shaba province. It is easier for people from Zaire's second town to go to Zambia or Zimbabwe to the south because it is very near and you can afford to pay your bus fee rather than pay the air fare.

GARY MUMBA

It takes a week to get from the second town to the capital by train and boat and it is very expensive by air. It is cheaper to go by bus or train to Zambia or Zimbabwe and even by air it is very cheap.

TIM JUDAH

Are there lots of other bands who started in Shaba who have ended up in Zambia and Zimbabwe?

GABY MUMBA

Not in Zimbabwe but there are a lot of bands in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and all parts of Africa but in Zimbabwe we are the only Zairean group.

TIM JUDAH

Why have you called yourselves The Real Sounds of Africa?

GABY MUMBA

Because we have got many things from the rich culture of Africa in our music.

TIM JUDAH

Gaby Mumba. I asked his partner and namesake Gaby Mutombo if he felt that being outside of Zaire meant that their music was changing.

5.

GABY MUTOMBO

Ya, we are changing our music because first of all we want to say that we are Zairean, that music is in our blood and that we listen to the radio a lot of the time to see how the rhythm is going - it is impossible for us to forget the rhythm!

TIM JUDAH

Are you mixing it with Zimbabwean music?

GABY MUTOMBO

Yes we are mixing it to get our own sound because we don't want to have the sound that other people in Zaire have got. We are called The Real Sounds and we have to get that sound better by changing the system of getting Western music, Zimbabwean music, Zambian music etc., so that we can make our own tune and then other people can follow that rhythm.

TIM JUDAH

Now the mention of the word "follow" led me on to ask the two Gabbys' about Tornados (or Caps as they're known) versus Dynamos - a song about the football teams they follow. Gaby Mumba.

GABY MUMBA

In that song the teams are Dynamos and Caps, or Dynamos and Tornados as the song says. The actual composer of that song is Gaby Mutombo. He did that song because we split it in two, there are some supporters of Dynamos and some of Caps so he made that song and then there was the question of the score so we made it 0-0!

TIM JUDAH

Which team do you support?

GABY MUMBA

I support Dynamos.

TIM JUDAH

And what about you?

GABY MUTOMBO

I support Caps. (chortles)

TIM JUDAH

And they support them to such an extent that for the stage performance of this song they all change into football kit and start kicking a football around. It's all great fun, but The Real Sounds are a band with a vision beyond the goal post. And it does not entail waiting until Zimbabwe gets to the World Cup finals before they get to sing their football song to the world. That's why, according to Gaby Mumba they're spending the rest of this year in Britain.

GABY MUMBA

We want to put ourselves in the position so that music from Zimbabwe can be heard all over the world like other music. We want to put it to everyone to know. Once you break the British market then you can go all over the world!

GABY MUTOMBO

Yes, we've got plans, that is why my friend Gaby is saying that if we make it in England it will be easier for us to go anywhere because England is the centre for this market of music. So our next plan for ourselves is that we are trying to go to Japan and America, it's already on the way!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Gaby Mutombo of The Real Sounds. Well that's it from Arts and Africa for another week and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey leaving you with The Real Sound's "Tornados versus Dynamos".