

THE ART THAT SURVIVES

The Makerere School of Fine Art

Idi Amin Dada, the former president of Uganda, took a great interest in the arts. When he commissioned a self-portrait from the Makerere School of Fine Arts (the only art school in Uganda) he sent round all his self-afflicted decorations to the school in order to make sure that the details were correctly portrayed. Once, he argued with an artist about how his stance had been portrayed until he understood the finer point of perspective. Ali Darwish, then head of the school, was woken up by Amin who cancelled the portrait of Adolf Hitler that he had earlier requested.

"If the phone rang after midnight, it had to be him", says Darwish, a former student and later teacher at the school. This then is how some of the artists there remember the most brutal dictator in Uganda's history. But most of the artists (students included) saw his regime for what it was. And they were not afraid to put pen to paper, or rather brush to board. The work produced during and after the Amin regime forms the dominant part of the exhibition at the Africa Centre. Fittingly titled *The Art That Survives*, the exhibition shows over 73 works in two parts.

As in other group exhibitions of this nature, most of the genres of contemporary African painting are present. There are animals (wildlife), scenes from the urban and rural settings, the ubiquitous village dancing, banana groves and, naturally, religion. Whether or not it was careful selection or the fact that Makerere produces fine artists, nearly all the works imbue their themes with a vigour that is rarely seen. The brutality of the Amin regime has been well documented elsewhere, but these works record the terror that stalked the land with a ferocity and power that has not been equaled with words.

Often the artists record the horrors with a wry sense of humour or symbolically use various objects. J.P. Opolot's locust emerges menacingly from the undergrowth to fix the viewer with an unblinking stare whilst the moth excretes saliva over a helpless victim caught in its jaws. In the corner a man screams. The darkly etched birds bound with rope in *Trussed for Slaughter* could be people. A laughing skull gorges a hand in S. Mwanga's *She Eats Herself*. This can either be read as a sarcastic comment on the regime's denials (*she was not slaughtered she ate herself*) or as a comment on the nature of the regime. After all it was not only Amin alone who gained from his coup – his advent to power was at first popularly acclaimed as Walube shows in his linocut *Beast Acclaimed*. Crowds in a street acclaim a beast; it is night, but the beast which towers statuesquely above the crowds is illuminated by a shaft of light not unlike the light of revelation in religious paintings. The soldiers are not forgotten either. In *Gangsters of the Night*, a soldier with a cigarette in his mouth stands proudly in the street with captured loot at his feet. Another lies waiting in the background with a gun. The colors are muddy, the style quick as if Kasumba was actually painting whilst witnessing the whole scene. In *Murder*, a soldier spears a man whilst another hacks a man to death with an axe. Behind the lit doorway, relatives scream.

Ignatius Sserulyo, the present head of the school, is one of the better known artists on show. His earliest work in the exhibition, *Prison Graduate*, dates from the 60s when he was a student. The umbrella carrying, smoking, polka suited figure with a bowler hat bears more than a passing resemblance to the forerunner of the dreaded security police who have always been evident in Uganda since independence. In fact his species, though their occupation may vary, can be seen in most African cities. A visit to Britain prompted Sserulyo to paint a snow covered suburbia with tropical foliage that arcs and weaves in front of the houses. Unfortunately his lithoprints which starkly portray the brutalities with equally brutal lines are not shown. Perhaps his best work on show is *Politically Infancy*, a barbed comment on the nature of mass ideology. A man leans on his bicycle to chat to a seated woman by the road. Her companion steals a

frightened look to one side. . . is he being watched? In the background, a procession led by flag-waving cheerleaders chants and sings while grasshoppers larger than life alight upon the scene. The symbolism is clear. The blind follow the tyrant without foreseeing the political consequences; or as Sserulyo puts it, the grass (hence the grasshoppers) bends with the wind.

Musani Musiwa, an exceptional young talent, also probes beneath the surface to reveal *Greed, Envy and Opportunism*. Painted during Amin's famous economic war, the image of three men greedily devouring at the dinner table hints at the forces behind Amin's enthronement and the initial euphoria that greeted his coming to power.

Makerere was, and still is, the most important repository of art in East Africa, though naturally most of the works are by Ugandan artists. The present lack of funds and the need to revitalize the school gave Jonathan Kingdom, who taught there during the 1960s and 1970s the idea for an exhibition in London which would not only help to raise funds but also give an historical focus and coherence to the present community of Makerere artists. The school agreed and Kingdom (who still acts as an external examiner) came to England with as many works as his baggage allowance would allow. The size of his suitcase and the length of his arms then determine the size of what is on show. It also accounts for the absence of sculpture.

A preliminary look at some of the works sufficiently impressed the gallery organizer, Tony Humphries, to hand over the gallery space for two months and to produce posters and a catalogue whose value will be more than just a record of the exhibition.

It is hoped that the exhibition will travel within Africa. If this happens, it will not only give courage to other artists in similar conditions but also show them that reality is much more powerful than style and that paint can also be a weapon.