

CONTEMPORARY EAST AFRICAN ART

The problem with exhibitions that aim to provide an extensive survey of parts of the continent is that they dutifully refuse to live up to our expectations. *Sanaa*, the exhibition of contemporary art from East Africa at the Commonwealth Institute in London is unfortunately no exception; unfortunately since art from that corner of the world is little known abroad or in other parts of the continent (some may add that it is not well known even in East Africa).

Most of the established artists are represented, albeit inadequately. The younger ones, like Msangi, who whet ones appetite, are sadly under represented. More of their works and less of the student juvenelia and businessmen's hurried sketches would have made the exhibition more of an eyeopener.

Elimo Njau, the Tanzanian born artist who is classified as a Kenyan (probably because of the frequency with which he commutes between the two countries) literally occupies the centrepiece of the exhibition space with his sketches for murals executed at Fort Hall in Kenya. In these sketches, episodes from the life of Christ are Africanised. The landscape is Kenyan as are the peasants. Mount Meru forms the backdrop whilst the stable is a thatched round hut surrounded by banana trees. Christ is here walking on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. The subject reflects the positions of the church as one of the important patrons of art in East Africa (especially in the 1960s) – the same church that was responsible for the destruction of art works in the early part of this century.

These sketches date from the early 1960s and one wonders what has happened to Njau's brushes since, though he still runs the Kibo Arts Gallery on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro and the Paa Ya Paa Gallery in Nairobi.

Sam Ntiro can be considered to be one of the leaders of East African painting. He, too, is misrepresented even though *Arriving at the Market*, where women in horizontal bands place bundles of bananas in a market, gives a hint of his tendency towards strong ordered compositions. But one wonders why some of his best works are left hanging outside the gallery... these are the essential Ntiro. The patterns are more complex. People returning from work form a chevron file within a stylized landscape where isolated clumps of trees dwarf them and the earth is left bare so as not to interfere with the frozen figures. Peasants at work or at the market – Ntiro's subject is the life of his people. Like Njau, he too seems to have laid down his brushes. His style has been imitated by countless pavement artists partly because the almost surreal feel for landscape and the static composition, where even moving figures turn to frozen twigs in order to become part of the landscape, is easy to copy.

Both Ntiro and Njau taught and studied at the Makerere School of Art in Kampala, the home of Jak Katarikawe, a former taxi driver. His portraits in oils and crayons contrast scratched surfaces with the smooth rounded features of his subjects. *The Couple* has a torso filling the picture with another profiled face in the background. Their smiles are as ambiguous as the slightly skewed composition so that we know that they possess a secret which they are unwilling to share. The same obliqueness extends to *Family Group*, a portrait of a woman with her two children. Here the presence of the strains on contemporary family structure is made manifest by the absence of the father.

Another Ugandan, Ignatius Sserulyo, chronicles the history of his country by etching *Punishment* and *Criminal Charge*. Quick wiry lines like short hairs describe a man strapped to a wooden stake being carried off by two bearers or being faced with a drawn bow and arrow. Sserulyo is currently head of the Makerere University School of Art; he also paints murals and uses paint though none of the paintings are on display. He is one of the artists who should have had more space.

The Tanzanian Francis Msangi is another young talent who is set to pick up the mantle from the older generation. An artist of diverse styles, this exhibition only shows him working in one. In *Terror*, swirling bloody paint forces the screaming figure into a corner. Is it the terror of everyday life...he is the only one to peer outside the borders of his country. In *Apartheid*, skeletons and bleeding masks are thrown together in turmoil whilst an inscription proclaims that '*Apartheid – to ensure continuity of western democracy and xtian civilization in Africa*'.

Portrayal of the present day difficulties and traumas of the continent is still a relatively new genre in the history of East Africa painting. Most painters concentrate on the well established genres such as the market scenes, the village life (women plaiting hair or pounding maize), dancing, portraiture and religious themes. What is surprising is the near absence of abstract art; one or two pieces try to imitate the well espoused strictures of cubism and of these, one is really an attempt to utilize traditional patterns.

The printmakers from the Nyumba ya Sanaa gallery in Dar Es Salaam are perhaps the most successful of the village life school that easily appeals to the tourists who are now the main patrons of East Africa art. Coming from the same stable, it is difficult to distinguish between Edward Kiiza's *Hair Plaiting* or Gerald Matamwe's *Mother and Daughter* where the subject(s) encompass the whole area of the print. They are primarily pattern makers and all objects, be it a tree or a corn cob, are reduced to their essence in order to marshal them into an overall scheme. -----

The Tinga Tinga school of painters, founded by Edward Said Tinga, brings a welcome breath of tropical colours. They are also essentially decorators but their subject are birds, animals and plants painted in vivid colours on squared hardboard and their lines are more sinuous just as their blue is bluer than the sky. It would be easy to classify them as naive painters since none of them have any formal training but their compositional skills outweigh their use of the stylistic conventions of naive painting.

Margaret Otenyo's *Crucifixion* is part of the new tradition of religious painting where the bible is visually Africanised – presumably to make it more acceptable. Where the painting breaks with tradition is that in this case the African Christ is angry, as are his followers; it is as if he does not accept his fate – unlike his portrayal by most European artists. Besides Katarikawe, Eli Kyeyune seems to be the only artist who seriously tries to grapple with portraiture. His two sisters in blues and browns are somber and strong. Otherwise there is the obligatory portrait of President Moi and President Nyerere appears half heartedly in *The Torch* – the figure only bears a distant resemblance to him. At least the torch, Tanzania's independence symbol, can be clearly made out.

Village life seems to occupy most of the artists but there are a few that have torn their gaze away from the imaginary idyll to paint slices of life in the towns where at least 40% of East Africans will be living by the end of this century.

The Kenyan Mangeli Mwange, a teacher at Nairobi University, is a talent to look out for. Within the gloom of a warehouse, a worker who has just lifted a sack onto his back stares at the artist. Another is sewing up sacks in the background. It is a rare picture in that it is the only one that pays tribute to or at least acknowledges the sweat and toil of the urban worker. The absence of rhetoric adds to the dignity of the worker; the painting is aptly and simply titled *Labour*.

The small buses and cars that form the basic transport network in East Africa are the subject of Kaigwa's *Matatu* and the life of street kids is Gikonyo's concern. Although he studied painting it is evident from this sappy work that he is really an illustrator.

In such a collection there are bound to be many artists who have been omitted but what is inexcusable is the absence of sculpture. A few tawdry pieces are scattered about but these do not even give an indication of the enormous talent that resides in these countries. The Makonde sculptures – both the contemporary *Shetani* style and the earlier realist tradition are missing as is Mwariko, the Tanzanian sculptor whose work possesses enormous power and strength. Such omissions detract from the success that this exhibition deserves in bringing together for the first time works from the three countries. And the exhibition could have been better organized. There seems to be no particular order: no.7 appears next to no.99 and no. 14; artists from the same schools are scattered at different ends – but these are minor gripes.

What this exhibition manages to show is that art is well and alive in East Africa despite the tortuous conditions under which it has to exist. The artists have the same concerns as those in other parts of the continent or the world – pretty pictures for the dining room, the occasional social comment – and they continue to work in different styles and within certain genres. Most of the latter tend to be determined by market forces, by the distortions inherent in the fact that most of the buyers tend to be foreigners. What the new generation of painters needs is a new type of enlightened patrons. Only then will the tentativeness with which they seem to be extending their boundaries become an established area.

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