

ARTISTIC TRIBUTE

The work of the Zambian artist, Henry Tayali

Twice before, first in 1981, and again in 1983, Henry Tayali's works were present at the only exhibition of substance of contemporary African art, at the Commonwealth Institute. The recent exhibition at the Africa Centre is really a tribute to Tayali, who died in 1987 at the age of 44.

Within this short time, he became the most widely known Zambian artist outside his country. Not only was his output prolific but he also participated in innumerable committees, organizations and juries. Lesser men would have been worn down by the tedium; but not Tayali. His output included prints, paintings and sculpture, although there is no example of the latter in this exhibition except for a photograph in the catalogue.

The exhibition includes a painting executed when he was 14. Tayali's artistic inclinations manifested themselves at an early age. In the then Rhodesia, Bulawayo City Council sponsored his first exhibition in 1958 (the first ever by an African artist). With the help of Frank McEwen, well known for his espousal of contemporary African art, he exhibited in Salisbury (now Harare) and then went on to spend some time in Uganda, at Makerere University, Kampala, a period which seems to have left its mark on his printmaking.

Tayali's concerns are evident in his black and white prints of the 1970s. His antipathy towards poverty and injustice, and sympathy with the trade unions, produced a series of prints on the theme of urban life that were not merely an addition to this growing genre, but a scathing comment on society.

People wait for taxis, workers walk to their night shift, dance the night away or while the time away drinking, as in the *Beer Party*. Although seated close to each other on benches, their shoulders are hunched. There is no conversation. Each figure seems to be lost in an alcoholic haze in a desperate attempt to forget the treadmill of material deprivation, as indicated in the print entitled *And There Was No Soap, No Rice, No Saladi and Life Went On..*

Workers in African countries have a first hand knowledge of the absence of such essentials, but very few artists depict it on paper, partly because the powers that be do not tolerate the depiction of reality. Tayali set it down. Interestingly, such social criticism is also a marked feature of the Makerere artists.

Tayali's concerns extended beyond the boundaries of his country. In *Death of a Comrade* a figure with a gun is about to topple over. The flag near him continues to fly.

Besides his social conscience, the prints also contain the seed of his later work. His technique of rapid cuts, frantic at times, results in a cacophony of black and white, which never lets the eye settle. Sometimes, this frenzy of black and white is played off against large areas of black, as in *Cigarro*.

This fascination with movement and surface became his primary concern in his later paintings. First, there are the screen prints where each incision of print block is replaced by a colour leading to a whirlwind of oranges, blues and yellows. And then, finally, to a set of paintings where quick strokes of Prussian blue are laid on smears of the same colour, lightened only by the occasional yellow. The effect, even when the title is *Storm*, is like breathing air newly washed by rain.

His other method, also developed in his prints, of viewing large crowds where the individual is indistinguishable from the mass, resulted in another series of paintings. Here, volumes of colour indicate figures.

There is a painting in the exhibition that is quite unlike any other. It is an imagined city square, surrounded by apartments, offices and factories with missile-like chimneys, somewhere in Europe. Everything that could happen within a whole city is concentrated here. Workers march with shovels and pick axes, strain at ropes, read papers. One clenches his fist. Others stroll in their fur coats.

This teeming – almost claustrophobic – square is really a representation of the European city. It is a pictorial summary of all the activities that take place in a European city in the daytime. Apparently commissioned, this is Tayali's attitude to Europe, a vision whose importance also lies in the fact that in the present age, Europe will have to come to terms with its being viewed by the very cultures that it has always considered it has the right to describe.

These different explorations could have synthesized into a powerful amalgam had Tayali lived longer. And it is this promise that makes one regret Henry Tayali's early death.

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