

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The current exhibition of photographs of Popular Art in Sierra Leone at the *Africa Centre* in London will be of more than passing interest to European artists, some of whom, depending on their inclinations, find similarities in the juxtaposition of aesthetic elements, vivid colours and distortions of perspective, with their own work. Not only do they seek inspiration from such art forms but the latter (popular art) in turn also feeds on them. And if the symbiotic nature of established relationships is anything to go by, this trend will continue.

The photographs were taken by Ben Oelman as part of his doctoral thesis in 1979, recording the work of 23 commercial artists who earn their living from producing signs or decorative murals for what is usually termed the 'fringe sector' – carpenters, tailors, record shops, etc.

Their inspiration and influences are apparent both from the content and the forms used. Rejecting traditional art forms but not the spirit, they offer a heady blend of comic strips, graffiti, advertisement art, cheap movies and American soul music sprinkled with their street wise philosophy.

All surfaces are worthy of their attention. Scooter and bus mud-guards are blazoned with Kung Fu characters or hands optimistically clasped under the legend "OAU". Trucks fervently hope to be spared from the influences of their drivers – "Save Me O God". A sign for The African Tailoring Enterprises states that: "We live in Africa to purchase valuables" and then goes on to sell "Yankee outfits".

Sometimes their work is simply illustrative. Different tailoring styles hopefully give credence to the skills of the kiosk owner. A sunglassesed customer having a haircut advertises a barbershop.

But their main victims are bar and disco walls. Aretha Franklin, Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley and Johnny Nash in bell-bottomed trousers held above the ground on platform heels decorate men and women. Guy Robertson states that: "You are Mine Jane, I am Yours ... Houses, Cars, Money, what more? Stop kidding and enjoy with me honey". Women in various stages of undressing epitomize the state of desire in these haunts.

Often the murals are advertisements that are a parody of adverts in magazines. A temptress suggests that "Reality is an illusion caused by the lack of alcohol. Well I think I must take one star to avoid it. OK". All this can be regarded as subversive art but really these artists, who frequently appear in the photographs in poses reminiscent of their creations, are working in their realm. They actually believe and live their art. They are, as the exhibition notes state, "participants as well as commentators on modern life".

The art of the "modern life", a mish-mash of the flotsam of various Western ideologies and art forms is really the art of the lumpen.

Perhaps we should be grateful to them for reducing these strands to their essential crudeness. Whether it is regarded as art or not, the exhibition is well worth a visit for a glimpse of that which is usually neglected by galleries and critics.