

The Pattern Giver

The paintings of Ato Delaquis

Ato Delaquis is here again. The first time we saw him here in London at the *Africa Centre* was when two of his paintings were included in the exhibition of contemporary Ghanaian art in 1984. The expectations that he aroused then are now happily fulfilled. Apart from the odd abstraction, a hangover from his earlier days, most of the work joyously celebrates colour. Blocks of blues, yellows, reds and mauves are added to make up scenes from the urban life of Ghana. It is a genre that Delaquis is most familiar with, being born and bred in towns, and one that allows him to display his talents to the fullest extent.

To the chaos of the market place or the lorry park, he brings his own immaculate order. First he positions himself some 200 metres up in the sky and then delineates the life beneath into flat horizontal layers with blocks of colours. In order to prevent *rigor mortis*, some diagonals are introduced as in *Lorry Park*, where a few lorries are allowed to break formation. From such a position, the sky is virtually invisible or at the most occupies a fifteenth of the painting – and even then, it is a grey sky.

This order, however, has its variations. In *Market Overview* rows of sheds streak diagonally across the tall canvas. Not many painters would have the courage to allow two-thirds of a painting to be dominated by corrugated iron and the brown earth in between. When observing *Pineapples*, Delaquis dissects the different cuts and means of display, an exercise taken to its extreme with *Avocadoes* where the fruit is laid out on horizontal shelves.

But when he turns his attention to his birthplace, Cape Coast, the rigorous order is apparently softened by the sea. The horizontal layers of the sea, the beach with its boats and multitudes of people, the buildings and the sky in *The Catch* look as if they have always been so. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we are used to viewing and using the seaside in such layers. *The Cove* however breaks this pattern by dividing the canvas vertically.

Delaquis reduces everything and everyone to their essential colour which, in fact, lies only on the surface. Boats are clean, shirts are blocks of blue or yellow... the layers of sweat and dirt are dispensed with. At first glance he may appear to be a realist but actually he is more of an analyst, a giver and seeker of patterns. Delaquis himself readily admits to being influenced by Kente cloth patterns and the catalogue hints at his studies of the powerful force lines of traditional sculpture.

Perhaps the most extreme example and one where he stretches and exposes his inclinations is in *Yam Mounds* where orange and lilac cones fill the foreground with a solitary tree offset in the background. Here he is close to pure abstraction, a preoccupation of his earlier works and a direction which would be interesting for him to pursue in the context of his environs, now that he has found his source material.