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How to See the Exotic

Does much of the contemporary art shown in the Ghanaian capital of Accra amount to 'willful exoticism'?

BY MOSES SERUBIRI

The moment you land at Accra's Kotoka airport, it's clear that the luxury industries have taken hold of the city's urban development. The skyline is peppered with striking buildings such as the plush Villagio apartments, designed by the London-based architects Allford Hall Monaghan Morris to resemble Ghana's signature kente textiles. Nearby the old Hotel Shangri-La is now marked as the site for yet another swish venture to sit alongside the new Accra shopping mall and an impressive butterfly flyover.

In the absence of a contemporary art museum or a national gallery, hotels have become the main patrons of visual artists and venues for the display of their work. For example, the Golden Tulip hotel has for several decades had a pivotal role in the Ghanaian art scene as a space for exhibitions. This close association with the tourist industry has had the unfortunate effect of making artists conform to foreign visitors' taste for the exotic or apparently tribal, overshadowing the multiple rich and

diverse artistic practices that can be found in Accra.



The Labadi Beach Hotel, Accra

To counter this model of hotel patronage, in 1993 the painter and educator Ablade Glover established the Artists Alliance gallery. As its name implies, the gallery was intended to put artists back in control of the making and display of their own work. Glover's career had taken off in the 1980s with solo exhibitions at venues such as London's October Gallery. His prominent position as part of an older generation of artists doubtless helped lend authority to his initiative.

Having moved venues several times since its inception, the Artists Alliance gallery is now located close to the beach, appearing from the outside like a small museum in its pink, two-storey building. In a fitting echo of the dominant role the tourist industry has in the art scene, the gallery is overshadowed by the large Labadi Beach Hotel.

The current show at Artists Alliance embodies the gallery's mission to 'provide art connoisseurs with authentic African Art.' The question here is what is meant by authenticity? Is it authentic in the sense of showing what is being made by Ghanaian artists now? Many of the exhibited works in fact date much further back than the historical emergence of contemporary African art and are shown without clear and concise contextual information to identify the work or curatorial intent. Is it not enough to

show Glover alongside other artists currently working in the capital, such as Ato Delaquis and Kofi Setordji? What is the intention behind the recent pairing in the gallery, of Glover's paintings with vernacular art forms such as wooden masks and fantasy coffins? The inclusion of the latter objects would suggest that the kind of authenticity at stake here is commercially minded.



Ablade Glover, *You Lie Bad*, 2014, oil on canvas, 1 x 1m. Courtesy: October Gallery, London

As fascinating as Glover's paintings of crowd scenes are, more intriguing were the nearby funeral caskets, shaped to resemble blood red crabs. Fantasy coffins such as these first emerged in the 1960s in Ghana as an elaborate and functional design for human burials. However, they have gone on to be publicly exhibited internationally in contemporary art contexts, including at the Centre Pompidou in Paris during the 1989 'Magiciens de la Terre' (Magicians of the World) exhibition. It was the inclusion of his fantasy coffins in this show that kickstarted the international career of artist and woodcarver Paa Joe. In a recent *Art Africa* article, Joe traces the origins of the coffins back to woodcarver Ataa Owuo who made a sedan chair in the shape of a cocoa pod for a Ghanaian king. The monarch died before he could ride in it so the chair instead became his funeral casket.

But these coffins are both an invention which arose after the end of colonial rule and, like the Asafo flags also on show in the gallery, are in dialogue with modernity. Rooted in the material culture and symbolism of the 1900s, the Asafo flags – hand-sewn war symbols for the Asafo army groups – are evidence of the cultural flows between Ghana's coast and Europe, most clearly in their incorporation of the United Kingdom's Union Jack flag. Fantasy coffins were made for a local post-Independence elite already immersed in the modern international world. The unexplained positioning

of these objects, which belong to important episodes in Ghana's past, alongside Glover's recent paintings, collapses very different contexts and times as if they belong to the same moment, thus denying a clear reading of developments in local art history and, in figuring them as signifying the authentic, instead conforms to the same interest in the exotic past as the work favoured by the hotels.

The willful shift towards exoticism in the Ghanaian art scene also includes the various procession-based festivals, such as Jamestown's famous Ga Harvest festival, Homowo, and the twins festival, both of which occur in July. These local cultural events have grown into big tourist attractions that attract foreign visitors and have been redefined to meet their tastes. Thus the tendency towards exotic spectacle seems to have become pervasive across the region's visual and performing arts scene.

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Ousmane Sembene, *La Noire de ...* (Black Girl), 1966, film still

According to art historian John Picton, during the 1995 Tenq workshop in Dakar – a precursor to that

year's Whitechapel Gallery exhibition 'Seven Stories of Modern Art in Africa' – one of artist Yinka Shonibare's assistants scolded him for wasting the wax print fabrics he uses for his sculptures, because much of the unwanted material was still fully functional and could be used to make clothes. Picton argues that the popularity of Shonibare's work in the Western world can be at least partly attributed to the very exotic spectacle that the artist seeks to critique, as he relies upon theatrical staging and the dramatic effects of unfamiliar materials. The anecdote goes further in insisting on the differences between the ways in which a West African woman views the wax print fabric and how an London based art audience might read it.

The ways in which differing contexts shape aesthetic choice and understanding has long been the subject of African art making: they are, for example, explored in Ousmane Sembene's 1966 feature film *La Noire de ...* (Black Girl) which shows how a young Senegalese woman's choice of dress differs as she moves from Dakar to Paris. Whereas her fashion choices in Senegal tend towards the bold and striking, in the French capital her aesthetic is subdued by the dull and neutral clothes available there. The material culture of a city like Accra ranges from open-air *kente* weavers in the neighbourhoods of Achimota and East Legon, to wax print factories near Jamestown. It is in the diversity, and visual intensity, of textile production that Ghanaian contemporary artists such as Serge Attukwei Clottey find inspiration for their work.



Serge Attukwei Clottey, 'My Mother's Wardrobe' (detail), 2016, installation view, Gallery 1957, Kempinski Hotel, Accra. Courtesy: the artist

Attukwei Clottey's recent solo exhibition in a luxury hotel, curated by Nana Oforiatta Ayim, amplified the stories the artist's work: in particular the biography of his mother, which was told by reconstructing pieces of her wardrobe. The artist turned yellow gallons — plastic containers used to package oil — into relief sculptures arranged to imitate the weave of kente textiles. But this subtle attention to lived experience risks being undermined by the venue: in collaborating with and exhibiting in a luxury hotel, Attukwei Clottey positions his work and his engagement with local fabrics within the tourist industry's history of exoticist display.

But keeping in mind Picton's anecdote about wax fabrics, what would Attukwei Clottey's mother and women of her generation see if they went to the exhibition? Would they read his sculptures as symbolizing the exotic, or rather as referring to a material so common in their everyday life as to be somewhat mundane? This is not to question the value of engaging with the everyday, but rather to encourage more reflection on the ways in which contemporary Ghanaian art is viewed both locally and internationally. How much of what is presented in Accra's hotels is willful exoticism? And, if much of it is, then how does it speak to a local audience? More needs to be done to counter the influence of the hoteliers upon the arts, both within their own venues, and across the cultural sector.

Main image: Ablade Glover, Jubilation, 2012, oil on canvas, 1.5 x 1 m. Courtesy: Tasneem Gallery, Barcelona

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