

James Cudjoe

by Ama de-Graft Aikins

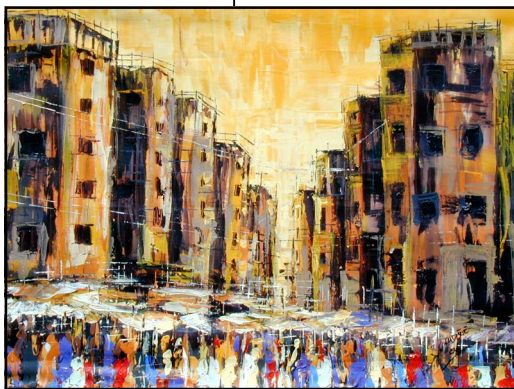
James Cudjoe, a new generation Ghanaian cosmopolitan artist, is going through a thought-provoking rite-of-passage.

Since his graduation from Ghana's private art college Ghanatta in 1996, James has participated in seven highly successful national group and solo exhibitions, and his work sells fast off gallery walls. His sure and steady rise as a prolific and bankable star-in-waiting is fuelled by a still-unfolding story art aficionados value but rarely get to follow: the mutual development of an artist's life and aesthetic vision. To get to the heart of this story, we must start from the beginning, as James did, when we discussed his life and work.

James was born in Takoradi, a lively seaport city in Ghana, where the first strains of the country's music revolution took shape and where many of Ghana's past and present musical greats originate. Accra, the capital city and hub of visual art innovation and exchange, lay 150 miles away to the east. Yet visual art, not music, became James's pre-ordained lot. He repeats his mother's tale, now family legend, of how his seer grandfather predicted an artistic future for the just-born baby James. In the sidelines, heredity was exerting its usual gale force: "art is a seed in our family", James admits when we delve beyond his grandfather's prescient vision. His father draws, as do many on his father's side of the family; his first memorable influence, a reproductive pencil sketch for primary school art homework, came from his older brother.

James's childhood memories of life and art are bitter-sweet. As a pre-teen he remembers

sketching, drawing and shading in his spare moments, reproducing pictures and attempting still-life, while nursing silent dreams of going to art college. His talent was unmistakable and his family was indulgent and supportive. But,

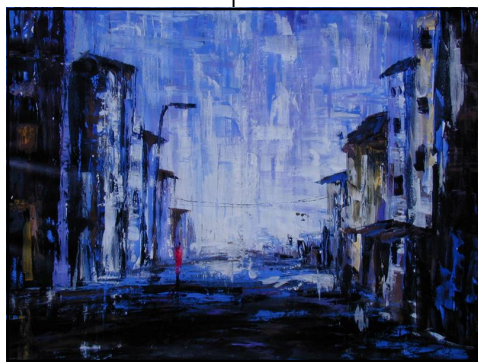


Hot Day 48x36 inches

he tells candidly, his parents' relationship was unravelling and family life was fracturing. By his early-teens the damage was irrevocable: his

father was performing perfunctory financial duties from afar, while his mother took on the role of sole nurturer. He, like his older siblings, had to work for their keep, selling small goods to increase a meagre family income, and to generate sufficient spending money for secondary school. James escaped the increasing destitution by immersing himself in art, observing and documenting life around him in sketches and shadings. Then he got a job as a trainee video poster artist, from a local art business, and his fortunes turned.

While completing secondary school, James learned the ropes of this informal functional art form, rendering reproductions of video release posters for local video halls and rental shops. He got promoted and helped run the business. With some financial freedom came time for formal exploration: he experimented with different art forms and media, constructing collages and attempting mosaics. By the time James won a



After the Rain 48x36 inches

place at Ghanatta in 1993, and made his way to Accra, he was, in his own words "more than ready for the experience". He is animated and full of infectious pride when he speaks of the three years in college, where he thrived on the intensity and competition of specialist work. His ability to pick up complex artistic styles and trends with relative ease earned him the moniker 'Wizard' and some envy along the way. He quickly established himself as the best student, broke his own academic record year on year, and graduated – unsurprisingly – top of his class. He sounds equally excited, and nostalgic, when he speaks of the two post-college years in Accra, when he negotiated the hectic cosmopolitan art scene, aligned himself with a variety of mentors and participated in exhibitions.

When he had learned enough, and tired somewhat of the relentless pace, he returned home to complete his rite-of-passage. This was the crux of our conversation: had self and professional development merged for James Cudjoe; was there a definitive thematic core underpinning his prolific oeuvre?

James's palette captures landscapes, cityscapes and people at work and leisure. These are common themes for Ghanaian artists. It would be easy, but lazy, to brand this work as

a simple representation of static people and places. Before we spoke what struck, as I explored James's paintings, was the almost novelistic juxtaposition of repetition and change. Two or three paintings, effectively narrated a story, of a happening and its aftermath, sometimes with a protagonist, sometimes without. The repetition was of place or person; the change mediated by the elements and the human

Contemporary modes of expression

spirit. For example, with 'Hot Day' and 'After The Rain', James paints two almost identical cityscapes: the former teems with people in vivid primary colours on a main street in daytime, the latter depicts the (same?) street empty but for a lone person in red, surrounded by the blues following a tropical downpour. He may have painted both days, weeks or months apart, but there seemed to be a compelling relationship between the elements and the social environ-



To The Market 48x36 inches

ment. Another pair, 'Happy Retire' and 'Daily Call', depicts two women at work; in the former, the woman seems old and is dressed in practical subdued clothes, in the latter the woman is unmistakably young, brightly dressed and fully accessorised. The core idea of the hardworking woman is clear. But was there a subtext on generational attitudes to work? Were they of the same woman, with spirit changed and aged by work? Then, there are the stand alone pieces, some of which narrate subtle traditional or contemporary polemics. Canoes moored on the shore on 'Tuesday' for example, highlighted the observation of Tuesday as a non-fishing day for the coastal Fanti and Ga peoples.

I was convinced that transformation underpinned James's people and places. To explore this notion I asked James about what inspired some of his key pieces.

We started with 'After The Rain'. "I had washed my car in the morning and gone inside", he said, "suddenly it started raining heavily and within half an hour it had abated. I was surprised at how quickly the atmosphere had changed. I wanted to capture this change."

What change was he trying to capture, I

pressed. He talked about 'new beginnings' post-downpours, after "every activity winds down, there is peace and everything is settled". We moved on to 'Hot Day': were they related? The paintings were related, because

both elements work in synchrony. He explained further drawing on local truism, which states that when the tropical sun beats hard and long, almost any physical activity can be disrupted. "When the sun beats so hard that you cannot do anything, you

need the rain to calm down the heat." James said. Both paintings are metaphors, he asserted, of a fast paced world of intense contrasts mediated by the elements: while the sun bears down on frantic action inducing lethargy, the rain calms human activity and paves the way for new beginnings. This was intriguing.

We moved on to the subject of the hardworking woman.

"What inspires this recurring theme?" I inquired.

"My mother," he replied simply.

Having just listened to his childhood memories, of his mother holding a fractured family together, the pieces started to fall into place.

He continued, "I love my mum so much, the way she behaves towards me, the kind of love she shows towards me. She sold her cloths to put me through school. There is nothing I do without her in mind."

"She must be very proud of your achievements."

"Oh yes." James replied. But then his mother, he said, never forgot his grandfather's

prediction. Much of the struggle she went through to ensure his education, often with little thought of her own self-advancement,

centred on her conviction that art was James's path.

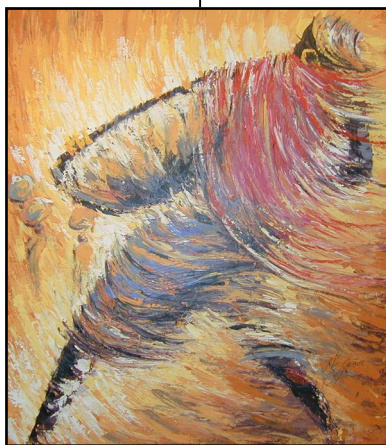
As we spoke on, it became increasingly evident that James's mother was not only muse to his artistic vision: her spirit embodied the lens through which James viewed contemporary womanhood in Ghana. He spoke passionately about the woman's role in maintaining family cohesion. "Women do very well" he noted, "when families break up, when fathers leave, women put up the family." More importantly, for James, women's worth was not restricted to the private sphere: women, in his view stood at the epicentre of socio-cultural life. This brief foray into gender politics was totally unexpected but a pleasant eye opener. It did not matter at this point that we discuss possible relationships between 'Happy Retire' and 'Daily Call': it was clear that James's progressive views on the contemporary Ghanaian woman constituted the aesthetic core over which a variety of feminised images were superimposed. What remained was for the potential viewer to explore and understand these images in terms of the spirit that inspired them.

One thing was obvious as we said goodbye: James was at the end of his rite-of-passage. It is a moment fraught with excitement at possibilities and fear of the unknown. The psycho-emotional tension propels the initiate forward.

James is at this place. His art and life mutually deflect each other. His aesthetic vision returns time and again to the elements and human spirit that mediate the social environment and social relationships. He is both participant and observer of what he paints. It will be fascinating to follow this artist as he further consolidates aesthetic vision and emotional connection with life around him into a powerful body of work that is uniquely his, yet speaks to us all.

Selected Exhibitions

- 2004—National Theatre, Accra, Ghana
- 2003—Golden Tulip Hotel, Accra
- 2001—LA Palm Beach Hotel.
- 2001—African Beach, Takoradi.
- 2001—Shangrila Hotel.



Good Returns III 42x48 inches