

Wiz Kudowor

by Ama de-Graft Aikins

Some contemporary Ghanaian artists draw on the nature of the landscape, of rural and urban architecture, and of people engaged in daily life to evoke a distinct essence and taste of cultural space and identity: let's call this group the cultural portraitists.

Others simultaneously draw on and push beyond fixed spaces and identities in a dynamic search for unbounded universal truths: they may be thought of as trans-cultural visionaries, those who imagine beyond culture. Wisdom Edinam Kudowor, aka 'Wiz', one of Ghana's premier and well-regarded contemporary artists, counts among the visionaries.

Wiz's art defies easy categorization. Since his graduation from Ghana's College of Art at the University of Science and Technology in 1981 with first class honours in Arts, he has steadily generated a formidable corpus of work, the majority of which have featured and sold in group and solo exhibitions in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. The accolades gathered from collectors and peers are reverential and understandably so. At first glance, his paintings have the unmistakable stamp of Africa. For some pieces the stamp is overt: they depict everyday social and cultural practices (see "Drum Rhythm") or call explicitly on ancient continental philosophy. Others reveal Africa in subtle ways through the cubist lines and angles that characterise much historical and contemporary African sculpture (see "Poets and Poetry II"). The browns and blacks of skin tone, the swirl of symbolic fabric (kente or adinkra) draped round figures, the mundane or extraordinary activities captured, whether in imagined still-life or abstract, leave no doubt about the specificity of place or people. The first glance may hold for a while, fixed as you



Poets and Poetry II 150x120cm

might be by the richness and unusual juxtaposition of colour, the solidity of form or the sheer intricacy of technique. This in itself yields adequate aesthetic pleasure, without need for further engagement. However, the second, more studied gaze reveals a more arresting complex subtext. Here, what appeared to be a collage of sculpted masks, say, becomes both figure and ground for social commentary about time and chance (see 'Thinkers II'); or voracious flames take altered form as lovers in embrace (see "Flaming Passions").

You wonder what came first and how on canvas: the immediate outer image or the message that speaks subtly beneath? You are struck by the technical accomplishment; then and more powerfully by the unusual vision underpinning the message - the way Africa and African-ness is captured as fluid context within and through which universal themes of

shared thought, feeling and action can be re-imagined. It is the transformation that takes place on canvas in one's mind upon second gaze, I think, that captures Wiz's artistic core and powers the reverential accolades he gathers from admirers.

When I catch him on a transatlantic phone call,

African Encounters

Contemporary modes of expression

Wiz is reluctant to talk about himself. I fully expect this reluctance. In an artist's statement in 2003 an instructive dynamic forewarns the potential inquisitor. Wiz notes unapologetically - and with more than a touch of the free spirit - of his work:



Flaming Passions 100x150cm

"I strive to satisfy my own whims first in all these attempts hoping eventually to attract mutual minds and interests. There is however room also for the viewer to transcend and relate to my work from his or her own perspective. In other words, I

expect the works to prompt and extract a response from those who come into contact with [it], even if negative."

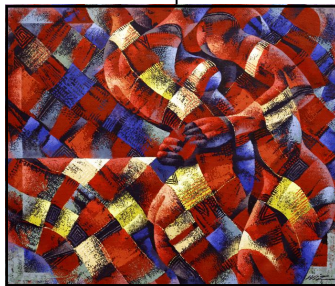
This does not bode well for the incisive profile interview our phone conversation is aimed at. But - I take a risk and read this excerpt to him as key questions, once we get going. To what extent are these whims entirely fuelled and consumed by artistic inspiration? How important or expendable is external critique to artistic development? Wiz responds with - some frustrating - consistency: "I don't expect anything from the viewer. I work to satisfy my own whims and caprices - to free myself from the stresses and strains of daily life. If the end product appeals positively or negatively, this is a bonus." This is said with quiet conviction but without arrogance or disregard for the collectors and critics that give his work widespread currency. As we talk further, it becomes clear that what underpins the excerpt and his response to it, is a basic truth that embodies Wiz's approach to life and work. For him the universal and particular are necessary and mutually influential segments of humanity's whole; in his work he seeks to capture that fluid contradictory space where both merge and transform. If what he does seems profound, it is because what drives his imagination - life - is profound. If what ends up on

canvas appeals to some and not others, this is to be expected: while we connect with like-minded, like-spirited others, we each after all live our unique lives.

Wiz was not always a free-spirited trans-cultural visionary. He too began his artistic career "painting market scenes, durbars and so on"; a cultural portraitist, interested in the tangible character of African identity and history. His epiphany came when he began his world travels. Meeting a spectrum of non-Ghanaian and non-African peers and collectors whose ideas and vision about art and existence resonated with his, freed him from the constraints of cultural portraiture. He recounts: "When I travelled out to exhibitions, it transformed me into knowing I could tackle other things and not feel guilty about it. You are a human being first, African second. When I freed myself from the trappings of being African, my work became more universal."

The difference between the two kinds of artist is significant, both in aesthetic and socio-political terms; but also significant, and sometimes unspoken, is the symbiotic relationship between them. Fundamentally, the cultural portraitist is in search of authenticity: this slippery search imposes a certain moral and political responsibility, which expects imaginative exploration, yet may – ironically – confine an artist to limited critique. The portraitist's canvas represents culture as is, or was, in collective memory in all its guises: this is an end to itself. The visionary takes this end as a necessary and critical beginning to question and explore human existence and will, within and beyond specific cultural boundaries.

The interplay of difference and symbiosis is clear, when one views the evolution of Wiz's work, and then listens to his reflexive thoughts about self and artistic development. The layered quality of his pieces yields multiple meanings: core to this is the elucidation and deconstruction of cultural and personal identity. This dual process is evident not only in the images, but also in the titles: "present transitions", "ambiguous expressions" "awakening". Wiz's reflexive account



Intimacy in Red 120x100cm

highlights the impetus for this recurrent dual process. His work is influenced by two key interests: the human form as transformational agent and ancestral wisdom as "aesthetic tools". Both are intricately linked to, and stand as metaphors for, self-growth. He speaks of "emotions, energies, feelings" some evoked from the everyday, others evoked from the "subconscious"; these "dictate at particular times" the nature and progression of his imaginative thinking and productivity. This is uniquely individual, much like the unique forms he depicts in transition or transformation. However, Wiz's self-analysis is not purely individualistic: he aligns himself with fundamental strands of African philosophical thought when he defines 'progression' in cyclical terms. When I ask how he positions himself within the contemporary art world, he acknowledges cross-cultural experiences as an important substrate for growth but asserts: "I haven't reached a point in my life or career where I can assimilate all energies into one linear form of thought. I don't particularly care about being accepted into the mainstream art world, which prefers linearity". Here too, as with his opinion of lay critique, the basic truth of lending equal legitimacy to the universal and particular, to cultural thought and individual imagination, comes to the fore. My recognition and appreciation of Wiz's 'basic truth' breaks the ice, it seems: our conversation turns eclectic and more light-hearted.

We discuss the genetics and metaphysics of his talent and gloss over the mechanics of painting technique. We delve into everyday concerns: the balancing of a self-confessed workaholic ethic with family life and expectations. We have a laugh over his vivid recollection of his first piece, age six, a colour pencil sketch of four racing dogs, which was bought by his father's friend and took pride of place on the living room wall for much of his pre-teen life. We touch - unexpectedly -

upon his collaborative work with African and African-American linguists and historians on projects tracing linguistic and cultural patterns between West African Akan society, Ancient Egypt and the Far East. As the interview winds down, I realise that I have many more questions that go beyond the remit of this profile.



Scrolls of Knowledge 80x100cm

I am still intrigued by technique: I know he usually "spreads one colour on canvas" when he begins painting, but how does he superimpose images to articulate his multi-layered stories? I

regret that the interview was not held face-to-face in his studio, where perhaps I could catch some work-in-progress or fully appreciate the impact of physical and social environment on his work. But in the end, the phone meeting was great preparation for an aesthetic and intellectual adventure. It is rare, and not a given, that the complex mysteries evoked by art are embodied within the personality of the artist who produced them. It certainly made me revisit Wiz's paintings with more clarity, and no less awe.

Selected One Man Exhibitions

- 2002—Ghana National Museum, Accra
- 1998—Signature Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria
- 1996—Ohio State University (Presidents Office)
- 1994—Artists Alliance Gallery, Nungua, Ghana
- 1993—"Images revisited" Golden Tulip Hotel, Ghana
- 1992—"Wiz, Wiz, & Wiz" British Council
- 1990—"The Wiz" National Arts Centre, Accra Ghana

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2002—Wisdom Artist Gallery, Chicago, USA
- 2002—Kuaba Gallery, Indianapolis
- 2001—Osaka Triennale, Osaka, Japan
- 2001—Forum Alstertal, Hamburg, Germany
- 2001—Fiaap, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire
- 1999—Galerie Xenois, Frankfurt, Germany
- 1998—Galerie Iki Mayum, Istanbul, Turkey
- 1998—Maison Descartes, Amsterdam, The Netherlands