

Kobina Nyarko

by Ama de-Graft Aikins

The sea has great symbolic and material prominence in the everyday lives of coastal Ghanaians: as a source of food, wealth, adventure, moral sanction, serenity... This prominence is reflected in the

largely non-artistic – family and the collective disinterest appeared to have curbed any childhood aspirations.

At age 24, Kobina took a sign



Worship 110x55 inches

works of contemporary portraitists, who find artistic inspiration in themes such as fishermen bringing in the catch. It is interesting then that until Kobina Nyarko, no Ghanaian artist had sought to move beyond the ways people live by and off the sea, to explore what lives and thrives beneath. Against this backdrop of absence, Kobina's choice of aquatic life as artistic subject takes on a profound significance.

Kobina Nyarko came to formal art relatively late. He was born in March 1972 in Takoradi, a coastal town in Ghana. The fifth child, on his father's side, he lived for much of his childhood with his father in a neighbouring coastal town, Cape Coast. Kobina recalls an obsessive 5-year old self who "loved drawing more than eating". His father recognised budding artistic talent in his son and often come home bearing relevant gifts: crayons, coloured pens and pencils. However, there was little recognition of his talent by his broader – and

painting job, branding stock for the multinational Cadbury's. Sign painting is a vibrant genre of commercial art in Ghana and possibly the premier training ground for young artists-in-the-making. Trainees and professionals apply eclectic methods to produce massive advertising billboards, discrete signposts, Hollywood blockbuster scenes for video clubs, and touch-and-go images of world leaders amongst several socially relevant or socially embedded visual artefacts. This period of sign painting rekindled Kobina's interest in art. He applied to study Fine Art at the College of Art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. He was accepted for Industrial Art. Slightly disappointed but resolute he accepted the offer and pressed on with his degree.

Industrial art covers metal work, carving and ceramics. Kobina chose to major in metals, fabrication (sculptures, furniture, conceptual/practical art) and jewellery in his penultimate and final years. For

African Encounters

Contemporary modes of expression

his final year he produced a metal table with an elaborate centre-piece: a village scene constructed in metal and encased in glass. Conceptually he aimed to, critique unsustainable use of wood as furniture in Ghanaian homes and make a case for alternative modes and models of interior décor. He graduated in 2003, with a 2i in BA in Industrial Art.

The prospects for an industrial art graduate in Ghana are bleak. Kobina observes: "Industrial art students end up not using their degrees; there is no finance to set up studios or businesses". Some go on to postgraduate degrees, others abandon the field. Kobina, fired up by robust training and artistic zeal wanted to set up a factory, but he required capital to do this. So for a time he painted and created metal work to generate capital. Then he began national service with the Ghana Tourist Board where he was immersed in varied art projects and where he, finally, decided to prioritise painting.

There is a parallel story to this chronology of formal events that introduces the unusual, but



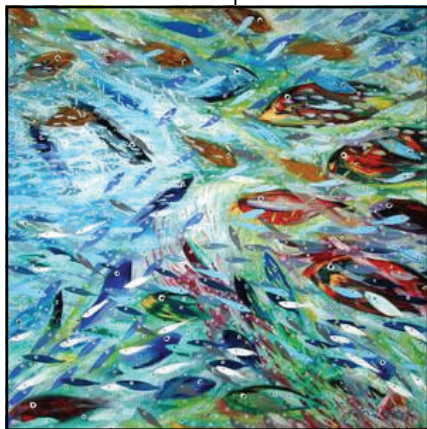
Turning Point 40x40 inches

strangely apt, choice of aquatic life as artistic subject. Although he was made to train as an Industrial, rather than as a Fine, artist, Kobina continued to paint prior to and during his university stint. In 1997, he was actively involved in local exhibitions, meeting his wife Shirley, at one

of these events. "Painting got me my wife" he reveals, laughing. In 1999, the year he begun his degree, he sat in his bedroom thinking about a subject to paint. It was a fallow period; he thought for almost an hour. "The idea to paint fish came out of the blue" he says. But did it? Because once the decision was made he completed his first fish painting in one session. Within a week he had found a buyer - a tourist - who was so enamoured with the purchase that he returned to buy another work, going to great lengths to find Kobina's new address. This experience gave Kobina encouragement on his new artistic direction. It also struck him, almost immediately, that none of the artists on the contemporary art circuit was painting fish: "everyone was doing market scenes and things like that". He could make his mark.

Aquatic life has been the focus of Kobina's painting since the period of epiphany and rush of first sales. Using mainly blues, indigos, slates, and silvers of the ocean, he captures the mass and velocity of shoals of fish as they inhabit and use their habitat. At times he switches colour to palettes more suited to land, to illuminate overlap between marine and land life. On 'Harvest', my favourite painting, he asks me to imagine a har-

vest of maize: I imagine a riot of colour, mustards, yellows, oranges, and so on. He observes that similarly when one casts a net one usually gets different shoals of fish: herring, red fish etc. This painting, he says, captures the notion of abundant, mixed harvests.



Harvest 56x56 inches

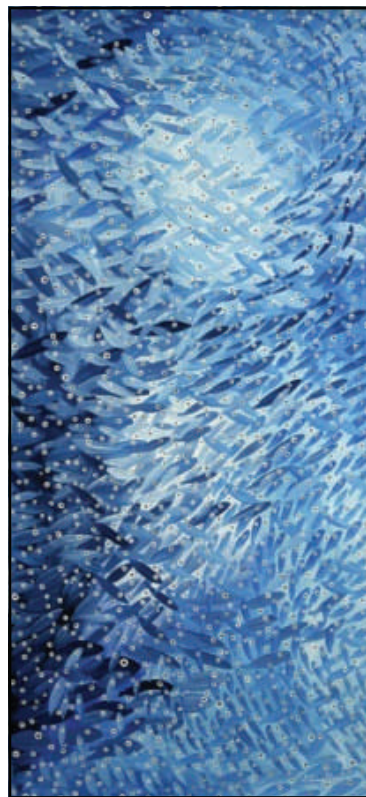
Kobina's mode of painting follows an identical pattern to the way

the very first fish painting was produced. Inspiration comes, there is frantic activity, then calm when he evaluates and titles the piece. Sometimes the title is informed by the mix of colour, other times it is the movement of the shoal. This mode of creative surrender often turns up interesting results. For example a few of Kobina's paintings feature fish without eyes. I asked whether this was deliberate, whether there was hidden meaning to these anatomical differences. He laughed and said no. The differences arose out of error. He finished a painting and realised some fish had no eyes. But the error ushered a train of thought: "could some fish be blind?"; "there's possibility of blind fish."; "fish are related to human life. If there are blind people then there are blind fish." These questions led to the conscious incorporation of anatomical difference in subsequent paintings.

Despite the aura of unpredictability, there are interesting clusters of themes in Kobina's work. Kobina describes 'Wise men' as a visual representation of the biblical three wise men and the star. 'Breakthrough' tells a shipwreck story for fish: the "fish [are] escaping [an] attacker and have found a doorway through submerged ship". Two inherently different themes it

seems. But after some discussion we agree that in both 'Wise Men' and 'Breakthrough' there are folk-philosophical undertones of recognition (of the divine) and liberation (through faith and perseverance): in both the subjects move towards a source of light that draws them towards a welcoming unknown or away from the terror within the familiar.

We discuss what he intends to do with inadvertent overarching themes such as this. He acknowledges the need for greater reflection of a conceptual core for his work. Activities are being planned and strong ideas are brewing. "In real life I like the shark" he admits. The next stage of his work will involve exploring the nuances of aquatic life through the eyes of the shark. The juxtapositions are exponential. I cannot help drawing parallels with the image of a young artist with fresh ideas making his mark in an increasingly competitive world of contemporary art.



Songs 26x56 inches