

ATTA KWAMI

An Artist's Sense of Place: The World of Atta Kwami

Some of Africa's most familiar visual imagery originates in Ghana—akua'ba figurines, kente strip woven cloth, and the stamped patterns of adinkra cloth. Much less familiar are the paintings of artists associated with the art schools and commercial workshops of Ghana's cities. Over the last fifty years, these artists have been responding to the realities and shaping the futures of the communities, the nation, the continent and the world in which they live and work. Atta Kwami is such an artist who has recently appeared on the global stage as not only a remarkable artist but also as a scholar of modern and contemporary art in Africa.

Atta Kwami grew up immersed in the arts—his mother was a well-known visual artist and art educator, his father a musician. He studied painting with Ato Delaquis at the College of Art at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). After completing his first degree he spent several years in southeast Nigeria teaching art before returning to Ghana to assume a position as Lecturer in painting and printmaking at the College of Art, KNUST. In addition to producing his own paintings and prints, Atta has been studying the work of other Ghanaian artists in Kumasi and Accra, the nation's capital, as well as the paintings of commercial artists working outside the academy in Kumasi.

Anyone familiar with academic art of the last fifty years in Ghana will recognize that Atta Kwami stands out as a truly exceptional artist. Most of this art is figurative and narrative; Atta's paintings and prints are abstract and represent responses to the visual imagery and soundscapes encountered while living and working in various places—Senegal, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Great Britain, and of course Ghana. The most important source of inspiration has been Kumasi, a dynamic cosmopolitan city that is arguably the country's artistic hub. It is the site of the country's premiere school of art, the College of Art at KNUST; it is also supports what is arguably Africa's most exciting and robust commercial "street" art tradition.

Atta Kwami's paintings are informed in large part by the visual experiences he has had over the years. The play of shape and color encountered in Atta Kwami's abstract paintings is sure to resonate with anyone who has experienced Kumasi. In 1998, Pamela Clarkson commented:

All around in Kumasi I see the forms and colours of Atta Kwami's paintings: the kiosks, lock-up shop fronts, corrugated roofs, stacked crates, wooden scaffolding, workshops, market stalls, taxi queues, timber trucks, iron gates, traffic jams, tracks and pathways, laterite and rust, bush fires and tall trees, rubbish tips, baskets, mats, clay pots and brightly coloured plastic buckets, the cloths people wear, the rain, the dust, new white houses, old faded paintwork and yellow light.

But as art historian John Picton observed, Atta Kwami's paintings reveal more than a sense of place rooted in isolated views of the city; rather, the artist has collected a world of visual environments that he accesses and references in his creative process: The result is not so much a documentary as a fictional reality, a series of interpretations ...

Atta Kwami, on occasion, has bemoaned the scarcity of viable venues for exhibiting art as well as the paucity of critical discourse on contemporary art in Ghana. Like a number of other African artists who have worked in similar settings, Atta has taken it upon himself to create spaces for displaying art and has been writing about art since the 1980s. Indeed, he has taken this mission quite seriously. Recently, he decided to pursue a PhD in art history at

NICOLAS KRUPP

Nicolas Krupp Contemporary Art
Rosentalstrasse 28, CH-4058 Basel

Gallery +41 61 683 32 65
Mobile +41 79 342 94 06

www.nicolaskrupp.com
galler@nicolaskrupp.com

the Open University, Milton Keynes (UK). In 2007, he defended his dissertation, which will soon be published under the title, *Kumasi Realism, 1951–2007: An African Modernism*.

Based on many years interacting with artists at KNUST and on the streets of Kumasi, Atta challenges a long held perception that differentiates academic from commercial "street" art as two exclusive domains of art production. He argues that in Kumasi the perceived boundaries between the academy and the street are blurred and permeable.

Atta Kwami recently resigned his position at KNUST to devote all his time to art making and writing about contemporary art in Africa. He is a cerebral artist who possesses a keen sense of place and who successfully translates his experiences of place into paintings, prints and words.

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Professor, History of Art and Afroamerican & African Studies
Director, Museum Studies Program, University of Michigan
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