



ABLADE GLOVER: SELECTED WORKS

*CELEBRATING THE ARTIST'S 75th YEAR*





The traditional arts of Ghana boast a long and distinguished pedigree, with - to name a few representative forms - Asante gold-work, Kente cloths, Adinkra prints and Asafo flags, all much admired and collected around the world. By contrast, the development of modern Ghanaian art stems from the introduction of western concepts and techniques by missionary teachers around the turn of the last century. There has always existed an undercurrent of unresolved tension between the two – an unspoken struggle pitting indigenous African art forms against acquired western modes.

Ghana became the first African State to achieve independence from Britain in 1957. In the years bracketing Independence, the first generation of indigenous modern artists flourished, with Vincent Akwete Kofi, Kofi Antubam and others assisting the newly elected Kwame Nkrumah in forging a modern identity for the emerging

mastered the western mode so completely that it began to generate novel variations of its own, thereby substantiating Africa's claim to being an authentic contributor to the development of the wider field of contemporary art today.

A student in Kumasi at the time of Independence, the young Ablade Glover took his emergent artistic talents abroad by accepting, in 1959, a scholarship to study textile design at London's prestigious Central School of Art and Design. On returning to Ghana, the factory where he was to have worked designing textiles had still not been built, so freeing him, after a two-year spell of teaching, to return to England again. Thus, in 1964, endowed with a new scholarship personally authorised and signed by Nkrumah himself, he again travelled to England, to pursue further studies in Art Education at Newcastle University. There followed another period of teaching in Ghana, after

## RHAPSODIC REALISM AND ECSTATIC ABSTRACTION

nation based on traditional *Akan* symbolism. Nkrumah tasked these artists with linking the nascent State of Ghana to a mytho-historical past of African tradition borrowed from earlier times of splendid kingdoms and powerful chieftains. Born in 1934, Ablade Glover – who this year reaches his seventy-fifth birthday - is a prime representative of the generation that followed those pioneers, working at a time when, before and after the fall of Nkrumah in 1966, the pendulum was swinging back in the other direction. As Glover's art developed he became a figurehead instrumental in exploring African urban subjects in a more realistic vein. Market places, lorry parks, shanty towns and other decidedly urban spaces crowded with real, ordinary people were depicted using western techniques and materials, and in the process he produced, to borrow Uche Okeke's felicitous formulation, an ever more '*natural synthesis*' of the traditional African and the modern western styles. Glover's signal achievement in balancing the disparate demands of these quite different traditions, marks a point of gathering confidence in the progress of modern African art, revealing a moment when it

which he seized the opportunity for more overseas experience, this time in the United States, studying for a Masters Degree at Kent State University before proceeding to Ohio State University, where, in 1974, he was awarded his Doctorate. Characteristically, he next put these extensive overseas studies in textiles, design, painting and art education to immediate use back in his native Ghana where the next two decades saw him teaching full-time at the College of Art in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), eventually rising to become both Departmental Head and College Dean. Professor Glover's long and distinguished career as an educator speaks for itself, being divided into testing periods away from home studying with some of the finest teachers in the western schools interleaved with time back home in Ghana where he sought to pass on to his many charges the rich insights and experience garnered from his many years of training in the west.

Besides his youthful dreams of studying abroad the young artist had also nurtured other dreams, chief amongst which was the



*Red Market II*, 2003, Oil on canvas, 102 x 152cm.

wish to create a gallery where young Ghanaian artists would work together to help and learn from each other, sharing the experiences and difficulties of the long path they trod in common to develop their art. The forerunner to this dream was to take shape as the Glo Art Gallery in 1968 – but this prototype soon folded as the chief

motivator and driving force for the gallery moved away to further his own studies abroad. A succession of galleries in different places helped him to hone the basic ideas and the more mature vision – the Artists Alliance Gallery eventually was established, in 1993. Despite the limitations of its location and the inevitable

difficulties with funding and support, the AAG soon established a reputation as the only major private gallery to exhibit the work of modern Ghanaian artists in the capital of Accra. The gallery's survival has never been automatically guaranteed and the struggles have been many and various, but in January 2008, a new purpose-built Artists Alliance Gallery was inaugurated in a beautiful three-storey building overlooking the Atlantic seafront in Accra. This latest embodiment, remains true to Glover's original dream of creating a space where young Ghanaian artists could exhibit their work and be seen – and acquired - by local and international audiences. In opening the new Artists Alliance Gallery at the Omanyeh House, ('Omanyeh' meaning 'Victory') the Former U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan called upon the coming generations of young Ghanaian artists to rise to the challenges laid down for them by the vision of previous generations of artists who had struggled to survive and be recognised internationally without the infrastructures now being made available to them.

The sheer amount of time required to nurture this artist-run gallery project together with the many administrative responsibilities of running the University art department had left Glover, over the previous two decades, with precious little free time to pursue his other single-minded passion for painting in oils. Thus, it was only on retiring, in 1994, that Professor Glover could channel the pent-up energies of those many years into a concentrated outpouring of creativity, resulting in the richly diverse oil paintings of his mature period.

Though some have observed links between Glover's work and the repeated designs in primary colours common to many Ghanaian textiles, any obvious similarities have long since been subsumed, and the dominant features of his canvases relate to *textural* rather than to *textile* qualities. The paint is applied boldly as a thick *impasto*, which, worked by deft strokes of the palette knife, accumulates weight as it builds, in repeated planes, into a thick carpet of glowing lights and shade. Almost every single painting reveals a double aspect, being at once an abstract epiphany of colour and a detailed rendition of a

reality closely observed. Which of these two contradictory aspects, abstraction or realism, most dominates at any given moment depends upon the viewer's precise distance from the canvas itself. Seen close-to, the paintings are explosive constellations of seemingly random shapes restively restrained within the frame – an abstract ecstasy of colour. As the viewer moves back from the picture plane, however, a point arrives where the inchoate array suddenly resolves into startling focus, the abstract shapes unexpectedly transformed into a sea of faces, a flock of birds, a market scene or townscape captured under particular conditions of light and weather. Once glimpsed, the illusion holds and the realist rhapsody becomes available for even closer inspection. But not too close! Passing a certain point, the eye again loses track of the total vision, which dissolves back into a painterly sensation, a vivid swirl of primal shapes and colours where abstraction once again holds sway. Interestingly, this subtle *trompe l'oeil* technique also indicates the way in which the artist achieves his bi-focal effects when applying paint to his canvas, constantly returning to an observation point at a fixed distance from the canvas from where he can judge the effect each additional daub, applied at close quarters, has upon the whole.

The magic of these sudden shifts in focus is predicated on a western perspectival effect that represents each subject as though perceived from a position overlooking the scene – as if from an elevation halfway up a neighbouring hillside. The reiterated shapes, enlarged near the bottom of the canvas, gradually shrink in size towards a virtual horizon beyond the frame's top edge. This classical system of representation, in which *distance* determines size, differs radically from indigenous African devices, where size is a function of *significance*. To the western eye, this construct defines a planar space, seen from above, that stretches away into the middle distance. Once this spatial logic is perceived, the interpretive faculties assign specific co-ordinates to each wedge of colour, first of distance then of relative size, so revealing, say, bustling market stalls under the glare of a noonday sun through the centre of which snakes an exuberantly colourful crowd. Amazingly, the effect is repeatable, as, expert in pattern recognition, the mind's eye engages with the



Left:  
*Accra Floods*, 1992. Oil on  
canvas, 102 x 102cm

Right:  
*Market Lane III*, 2008.  
Oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm.



process of discovery to ascribe ever-finer nuances to the coloured shapes, painting in the disorderly details of the constantly shifting scene.

Glover's fascination with the restless dynamics of the market-place, that chaotic space of human interaction and exchange, mines a subject capable of endless exploration. Pulling focus back from all particularities of

time and space, his paintings locate that point where the disorder of discrete events blurs to reveal a higher order of unpredictable yet definite beauty: the isolated house blends into the village, the individual disappears into the crowd and the endless flux of the present is revealed as an intense instance of eternity. Technically Glover's sublime skill with oil and canvas belongs as part of the developing western canon of modern oil painting, being



*Blooming Reds*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 102 x 102cm.

closest, perhaps, to the work of another master of the art who likewise toiled at the boundary between expression and abstraction, Jack B. Yeats. Yet they are also much more than that alone; being a brilliant natural synthesis of western techniques with an African sensibility, whose subtleties confirm the artist's own powerful conviction, that oil-painting belongs, with Kente cloth and Adinkra prints, as one of the contemporary arts of modern Africa.



*Yellow Forest II*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 102 x 102cm.

October Gallery has been exhibiting the work of Ablade Glover since 1982. Since that time contemporary African art has become some of the most sought after in the world, creating a dynamic and thriving art market. The output from this continent has restored the artists' role in the shaping of current perception. Glover is a pioneer in making this possible and, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, we salute his extraordinary achievement.



*Lorry Station*. 2007. Oil on canvas, 102 x 152cm.



*Cock Fight*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 46 x 137cm.



*The People II (with detail)*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 102 x 127cm.