George Kyeyune: Art in Uganda in the 20th Century

Abstract

This study examines the major trends and transformations in Uganda's modern art practice since its inception at Makerere in the 1930s by Margaret Trowell. In the early stages of its development, Trowell was driven by her belief in an African aesthetic. She introduced a curriculum that subordinated technique in favour of subject matter derived from local themes. However differences in opinion soon emerged between herself and her assistants. By the 1950s, Gregory Maloba argued that modernisation had been advantageous; hence it was unnecessary to cling to the mythologized past, while Sam Ntiro was a confirmed disciple of Trowell. The Slade supervised diploma, which came into being in 1953 confirmed Maloba's point. When Cecil Todd took over the Art School in 1958, Makerere's emphasis was already shifting towards a detailed consideration of technique and art history as an academic discipline, which Todd encouraged. However, this trend was criticised, as Uganda had just achieved independence in 1962; the intellectual climate resounded with debates about indigenisation. Against this ideological backdrop of cultural renewal and discovery, some artists returned to a version of Trowell's philosophy of Africanising of art education. The promising political climate of the 1960s was soon replaced by repression and the civil war between 1971 and 1985. These conditions led to three important developments. Firstly, artists continued to create overtly political images, which expressed disgust for leaders. Secondly, new media like batik, better adapted to economies of scarcity, proliferated. Lastly, with shortage of imported materials and tools, artists investigated local materials under the influence of Francis Nnaggenda. Ironically, an art that utilised local themes and resources arose from the adversity of the 1970s, rather than the favourable climate of the 1960s. This can also be seen as the revival of the experimental art education pioneered by Elimo Njau also an early student of Trowell. The stability of the 1990s freed artists from investigating political issues and interest in the general themes of technique and design were revived. Fostering international links, and survival in a competitive art market, are pressing current concerns.