

Alakija's artistic journey on canvas

AFTER traversing the artistic landscape of England, Nigeria and South Africa in the last few decades, Polly Alakija, painter, muralist and illustrator remains richer and diverse by the day. Though he did not take conscious decision to become an artist, the England-born wife of a Nigerian, who trained at the Oxford Polytechnic finds art as a means to celebrate life. From abstract to figure and landscape paintings, she paints what she loves.

Last Sunday, she opened her eight solo art exhibition, *Here and There* at the Wheatbaker Hotel, Ikoyi, Lagos featuring 62 works that comprise of etchings, pencil sketches, chalk and charcoal drawings, as well as limited edition prints. The exhibition will run till December 15. *Here and There* is a retrospective show telling her artistic journey since she arrived at Ibadan.

Alakija has spent the last 24 years creating rich, predominantly figurative artworks, which are inspired by quotidian life in Africa. In 1990, Alakija moved to Nigeria, where she married. Her canvasses are replete with fuller images, narrative paintings of people, cultures and poetry, especially those of Gabriel Okara and Ben Okri. Importantly, her paintings are reactions to the environment around her in pictures of scenes of everyday life in rural environment, friends and family. Paintings such as *Mother and Child*, *Mother and baby*, *Cow Herd and Conversation piece*....tell the story.

Her other works include dances inspired paintings which the artist created during frequent visits to a dance studio in Cape Town. Alakija's corpulent classical dancers fly through her canvases in personal space that is dynamic motion frozen in colour, exuding an intense vibration through bold reds and blues. There are strong shapes whose elegance and grace are unmistakable as they ex-



• Alakija's *Mother and child*

Stories by Ozolua Ukheme
Assistant Editor (Arts)

VISUAL ART

press both strength and individuality.

well as market and *bukka* scenes.

However, responding to the aesthetics of her environment was not easy when she got to Ibadan. "When I got to Ibadan, I found it difficult to respond to the aesthetics around me, perhaps because of my European background. So, I started painting lots of images in response to Ibadan. Then, I did architecturally inclined paintings and they reminded me of Picasso's cubism," she said.

Renowned South African curator, Barbara Lindhop, describes Alakija: "Polly is, particularly, interested in the human form and its portrayal. Her architectonic figures languish within their laconic environment, and a timeless serenity seeps from the canvas. The painterly canvases depicting gentle giants of nature, their energy conserved in a permanent lethargy, contrast with the rich colours and dynamic brushstrokes creating texture and energetic line."

One unique piece at the exhibition is the installation- umbrellas and vehicles of mass transport (*Keke-Napep*), which the artist painted highlighting the Nigerian green and white colours. The painted *Keke-Napep* tricycle is displayed in front of the Wheatbaker Hotel restaurant, thus becoming a thought provoking piece of art.

Also striking in the collection on display is the painting of portraits and family clusters on Volkswagen Beetle cars that serve as artistic platforms on which she carefully chronicles poetic stories that possibly reflect the lives of passengers who once may have used them.

At the hotel lobby, Alakija also presents an installation-three large umbrellas she painted a Poussins inspired agrarian landscape, depicting wheatfields. "This installation is a link to the history of the Wheatbaker Hotel, which was originally built by Amos Schakleford, a Jamaican businessman who started the first commercial bakery in Nigeria. I have painted a wheat field in rural Nigeria on three market umbrellas typically used by bread sellers all over Nigeria," she said at a preview session.

For her, art should be fun. "I have always wanted to demystify art by making it accessible to most people at affordable cost. Let's have some fun with art and still have its messages," she added.

Unlike many artists, Alakija is reluctant at accepting commissioned portraits from clients. Reason: Often time, clients her forms, so she reject such.

Here and There is sponsored by Renaissance Capital, the Wheatbaker, Global Energy Group & Arra Vineyards, who bottled a special limited edition SHIRAZ and VIOGNIER wine in Stellenbosch with a wine label designed by Alakija.

Also, her portraits are strong representations of life in rural and urban settings ranging from children to the aged, including a recurring theme of mother and child images. During her many years in Ibadan and while travelling across Nigeria, she created lots of works inspired by rural Oyo and Kaduna, as