

Returning home in *Here & There*, Alakija brings borderless art

By Tajudeen Sowole

FROM being born and raised in England, lived in Nigeria for 16 years and worked in South Africa, the artist Polly Alakija's palette mixes the diversity of human behavioural colours across cultural borders and melts her various sojourns into a 'homecoming' art exhibition.

Aside from a salon solo held inside the Lagos residence of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Davies, in 2004, Alakija's last major outing in the country was a joint show with Akin Alamu at Quintessence Gallery, Ikoyi, in 1994.

As guests visit the artist's current solo exhibition titled, *Here & There*, showing at The Wheatbaker, Ikoyi, Falomo, Lagos, ending December 5, the trajectory of Alakija's 24 years career is not hidden.

It's a combination of her recent and past renditions — 62 works in all — yet within the consistency of a peculiar signature. The exhibits include painting, etchings, pencil sketches, chalk and charcoal drawings, as well as limited edition prints.

Sponsored by Renaissance Capital, the Wheatbaker, Global Energy Group & Arra Vineyards, Alakija's *Here & There* adds to the recent of artists from the Diaspora as well as foreign-

ers showing in Lagos. In fact on the same Saturday's opening of *Here & There*, an American, but Cape Town-based artist, Gary Stephens was also showing in a two-man outing with veteran photographer, J.D. Okhai Ojeikere.

Largely, most of Alakija's works expose an artist with muralist traits, but who always confines her aggressive brush movements within an available space or context of a chosen theme.

More importantly, Alakija who is of European descent, but married to a Nigerian, returns to the Lagos art environment, perhaps, stressing that art appreciation within the dynamics of global context would not be stranded on the local art landscape. In fact, doubters of the growing contemporary Nigerian art should not miss Alakija's work as it appears like the ideal bridge or measurement to appraise art by placing the international and home art scenes in one space.

Except that every artist has an identity or peculiar rendition, Alakija's impressionistic opulence, in stylized figures, could have come from any of the leading names on the Lagos art scene, the familiar themes such as Ibadan metropolis and market sense notwithstanding.

For example, with works such as *Ibadan Mar-*

ket, a wide angle view surreal-like; *Mokola* and *Bere*, both streetscapes in cubism, Alakija flaunts her knowledge of the ancient city.

With similar energy exuded by the figures seen in another set of her works, the cabaret dance series, Alakija explains *Here & There* to selected guests ahead of the show's opening. She says the portraits among the exhibits are actually of "people I have known since the 1980s; extended family and friends of my late husband".

Her work, she boasts, "celebrates life". And the ideal outlet for her expression could not have come in better themes outside of the people she used to know. This much, works such as *Rita with Budgeriars* and *Gelede Mask, Portrait of Umar Family* series and *Mother and Child* series bring.

From one theme to another, Alakija keeps squeezing its way out, so suggest works such as the *Keke NAPEP* paintings and installation, two paintings on umbrellas dedicated to The Wheatbaker and *Wheels* series, a revisit of Nigeria's humble periods of the 1970s/80s



Polly Alakija's *My Breakfast Companion* from her current art exhibition *Here & There*.

when VW Beetle cars reigned on the roads.

Though she explains that the works are aimed at "making art accessible" for wider appreciation by demystifying creative contents, each of the works appear like large formats that are shrunk to fit the functional objects.

However, the technique or technicalities of presentation are no more important than the inspirations that bred the works.

The *Keke NAPEP*, which she presents in the actual installation of a tricycle covered in painting in addition to wall pieces of the same theme, she explains, connotes "small beginning that could grow".

To stress the growth and hope factors, young ones in silhouette are placed in the riders' seats. "It also tells us that indeed, the young shall grow".

In Nigeria where, suddenly, several values of the past that promoted modesty and prudence have disappeared over the last two decades, Alakija's *Wheels 2*, a revisit of VW Beetle trend in Nigeria of the 1970s through 80s reminds about modest behavioural pattern of the people. Although Alakija came to Nigeria in 1989, when VW Beetle was already fading out of Lagos roads, she still saw quite a lot of the cars being used as family automobile. "In Ibadan, families used VW Beetle a lot; especially on Sundays to church". Indeed, the VW Beetle automobile era serves as an analogy for a country that refuses to grow on a modest, humble and gradual line; there used to be a VW assembling plant in Lagos in the 1970s that succeeded in producing a Nigerian brand known as Igala (Deer). Over 30 years after, the country of 167 million people has slid into the bottom of development index such that it now depends on imported used automobiles known as *Tokunbo*.

As the exhibits in Alakija's *Here & There* spread across the rooms and nearly every visible space of the venue's ground floor, an installation of three umbrellas, with wheat fields painted on them welcome visitors in the lobby. Quite interesting, the work, she says, are dedicated to Wheatbaker Hotel. She links the works to the history of the hotel. "It was originally built by Amos Schakleford, a Jamaican businessman who started the first commercial bakery in Nigeria". While the wheat field paintings depict setting "in rural Nigeria", the umbrellas are "typically used by bread sellers all over Nigeria".

From South Africa where she lived for two years come the dance series inspired by "frequent visits to a dance studio in Cape Town". Still in the artist's stylized of swollen legs and arms, the figures radiate grace with aura of strength such that Alakija's visits to the dancers appear to have influenced her physical expression, so suggests the energy she exerts explaining her works during the preview at The Wheatbaker.

As an impressionist with African and European contents, Alakija demystifies "generalized labels". She argues, "all art must be true to the individual artist".

The curator of *Here & There*, Sandra Obiagio notes that Alakija's 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".

Alakija was born in Malvern, England, in 1966. She studied art at the Oxford Polytechnic, and later completed a teaching diploma in the Montessori Method.



One of Polly Alakija's works *VW Beetle*, showing in *Here & There*