

Alex Tavares

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A monumental painter of ideas

"The Prostitute"; "Sign of Times"; "Face of Tyranny"; "Fate Visits the Golden City"; "A Monument to My Enemies"; these are some of the titles of paintings by Alex Tavares included in the present one-man show at Paa-ya-Paa.

The paintings themselves are as much thought-provoking as the titles are; they are as large in size as the ideas depicted in them--the smallest canvas being about two and a half by three feet. Here is a powerful creator of bewildering images. His paintings are the result of strong ideas that have "developed after long thinking."

He tells me that in two years he did about 300 drawings and sketches while trying to develop the ideas in the present paintings. His studio is a closed verandah with a studio area about 6 ft. x 10 ft.

"FACE OF TYRANNY" 1965



Why then does he paint such huge canvases? His paintings are his inner explosions, personal experiences in the aloofness or the isolationism of the artist which he feels is essential to himself as an artist.

The subject matter of his painting is disarming in its candour. Our hypocritical smiles, our double personalities, our private or personal life is challenged here.

This is Alex Tavares' second one-man show in Nairobi. His first was at the then Chemchemi

Cultural Centre in 1965 and was opened by Dr. A.T. Porter (Principal of Nairobi University College) who also opened the present exhibition. In his opening speech he said the following words about the artist: "As in his one-man show in 1965, Tavares has again challenged our conservatism and our false sense of security by the message of his canvas. Oscar Wilde once said that 'only the auctioneer should attempt to appreciate all schools of art'."

Dr. Porter added that it was therefore not his intention to analyse the art forms depicted in the show and nor was he an auctioneer trying to sell each piece to the highest bidder.

"PROSTITUTION" 1967



by E.P. Njau
from *The Sunday Nation*; Nairobi, Kenya
17 December, 1967

"It is sometimes said," Dr. Porter continued, "that artists should help us get away from the harsh realities of this competitive world, by drawing attention to all that is beautiful, all that is serene, all that we would like this life to convey. Life, it is mourned, is grey and trivial matter."

"Art, for some, makes life worth living. Art should therefore be an attempt to create pleasing forms. But I am sure this is not the view of the Paa ya Paa Gallery and certainly not the view of Alex Tavares. The work of the artist is not to lull us into false slumber or to pamper us in our little foibles and make us feel even more complacent than we habitually are. Art should arouse emotions; should excite us; and if need be, challenge us," Dr. Porter said.

The exhibition has now gone on for nearly a week and will continue till December 23. People from different walks of life in the city have flocked to see this show. It is as if an elephant has come to town for the first time! This is a welcome sign of public awareness of what is going on in town. But why such a big crowd at this particular show? Is it because Tavares' paintings communicate more to people than has been the case with most other artists' work? Is it because Tavares is a popular artist? Or is it just because people are bored and just want to see something different?

All these questions lead to two things; namely understanding and communication. How much does the artist understand the audience or society he is addressing his works to, or does he not need to understand his audience?

How much does the audience or society understand the works of art, the artist, or the symbols used in his paintings? Some members of the public rely heavily on the art critic who answers all the questions about the artist and provides neat labels for the artist's style of work.



"SMILING MAJA" 1965

We must not forget that the artist is first a human being before he is anything else and as such he needs to be understood as a whole and not just in labelled fragments. Most true artists believe in life and not just the connected temporary "isms" of life. So when we look at Tavares' work we must not allow ourselves to be sidetracked by style alone.

We must try and get the meaning and associations behind the picture. His picture--"The Smiling Maja"--for example; what is she trying to say to us? It speaks of the hypocrisy that sometimes hides behind our smiles. But one thing I'd like to ask about the same picture. What would the artist himself feel looking at a loving smiling nude? Is a smiling nude always a bundle of hypocrisy? Is the "subject" painted the only one liable for hypocrisy in other words?

What about the artist in his aloofness and isolation; can't he be accused of misunderstanding? Dr. Porter said that there was an intensity in Tavares' painting which cried out for attention. Let the viewers ask themselves, what kind of attention is the painting crying out? Is it an attention to a prophet or attention to a wailing human being?

If the works represent the artist's view of society, what do the viewers as part of society think of themselves or the artist for that matter? We reproduce here "Sign of Times"--a badly fragmented being. We welcome your response and contribution to dialogue between the artist and his society.