

Alex Tavares

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East Africa's only master of surrealism

by S.I. Clerk
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East Africa's solitary surrealist artist, Alex Tavares, is holding a one-man exhibition at Paa ya Paa. The 14 monumental paintings are basically his reflections (some may find them to be violent) on society.

The colours--the brown skin against the blue sky and the lush green land--accentuate the symbolism. Thanks to the colours, here is something not in the least horrific, that one could enjoy living with.

The immediate impression on the viewer is that of the artist's utter sincerity and high sensitiveness. Right through the apparent weird fantasies, his canvases bespeak human tragedy, hope, failure, success. Thanks to his mode of painting, his appeal is universal.

One may, in passing, warn the cynic that the artist's deeply Catholic traditions of Goa and Spain would never permit him to be a sham or an imitator. To the best of my knowledge, none of the paintings on show is for sale. Of course, they are not meant to "decorate", and many might find them disturbing and well nigh impossible to "live with."

Now, so what? In a way, this impossibility and the distancing quality of theirs enhance their real value. After all, the history of art is full of instances where an artist's creations have been more appreciated not by his contemporaries but only by future generations.

Alex Tavares' paintings are unique in the local art world. The gallery deserves praise for doing what is more or less love's labour only.

A look at the most outstanding of the paintings gives an insight into the sensitive soul of their creator.

"Portrait of a Girl" is a bold composition out of a pavilion-like shape standing on the terra cotta on its nose and some black pavilion-like lines. The repetition of the lip form on the earth in the foreground and the hanging earring on the right handside give an added terrestrial basis to the fantasy.



"POLITICAL EXILE" 1968

"Graduation", a group study, is the artist's satire on our puffed-up so-called educated persons who think too much of themselves and look down on their less fortunate brethren. The depiction of graduation caps makes the point and the climax is reached in the artist's offering of a pedestal to each of the figures.

"Political Exile" is a reflection on the sad fate of the person who has fled from his motherland, either as a protest against authority or as an escape from death or imprisonment. The painting expresses the futility felt by such an exile in his efforts to "rectify" his country's political conditions.

It also expresses hopes of a better future and a return home, represented by the weird forms in the sky.

By omitting the face the "figure" is given a universal appeal. The background, a "cityscape" representing the exile's vision of his homeland, has a Gothic architectural beauty.



"The Valley of Seclusion and Ideas" is deeply personal, expressing the artist's intense desire to live in a secluded ivory tower to enable him to carry on with his creative work instead of frittering away his time and energy.

This third Nairobi exhibition by the artist is useful in revealing his further evolution. One feels his maturity, a greater self-confidence, and notes a more varied palette.

"THE VALLEY OF SECLUSION AND IDEAS" 1968