



Here &
■ There

Polly Alakija ■

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and to Ben Okri for his poem "To a friend in Africa", reprinted on page 8*

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Enchanting

Welcome to “Here & There”, an exhibition celebrating the artistic journey of Polly Alakija, a seasoned painter, muralist, illustrator and designer who has spent the last 24 years working in Nigeria, South Africa, and England, creating rich, predominantly figurative artwork.

When I first met Polly, I was amazed that this petite woman was creating such big bold work. Polly is filled with an energy that crosses borders, and merges differences. Her brush strokes bring you into a world of vibrant, powerful figures, contrasts and color. There is a saying in German, “klein aber oho”, which literally means something like, “small but WOW”. And that’s been my emotion every time I have met up with her.

I first visited Polly’s home in Ibadan in 2001 and was astounded. I felt like I had stepped out of a hot and dusty city, into an amazing world of quirky design, and tropical harmony -- a lush oasis of art hidden in a sleepy city of seven hills. I had come to discuss a mural she had agreed to do in my Lagos office, and to see how she had created the most enchanting children’s fairytale world under her staircase – a discarded space in which she painted the walls and transformed a forgotten corner into a wild and wonderful landscape, attracting any child like a magnet.

By painting the walls of my office over a long weekend, Polly was able to create an artistic landscape for my media company, Communicating for Change, which impressed clients and collaborators the minute they opened our front door and walked up the steps to our reception. And so my friendship with Polly grew, and I learned more and more about her amazing artistic breadth.

Fast forward almost ten years, and I am attending the opening of Casa Labia, an 18th century styled Venetian Villa built by the Count and Countessa Natale Labia in the early 1920’s in Muizenberg, a seaside town just outside Cape Town. My husband Joe and I were invited by Polly to attend the opening of an exclusive art show to celebrate the restoration of Casa Labia. After walking through the stunning private collection of the family on the first floor, we take in some of the best South African modern and contemporary art on numerous levels of this splendid villa. Polly’s art is also featured. She glides effortlessly through the diverse milieu of critics, collectors, the media, and visitors, making small talk, listening to operatic arias ▶

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- ▶ floating through the building from the court yard below. I am full of pride and admiration that my friend has gained recognition in the highly competitive South African art market.

Polly crosses over from East to West effortlessly. She is productive both here and there. She is a restless spirit whose keen perception is expressed in dramatic large canvases, as well as small carefully crafted sketches that expertly mirror the world around her. As she criss-crosses the globe, from rural England to populous vibrant Nigeria to South Africa with its spectacular landscapes, Polly interacts and infuses life in to her community. Whether working with inner city kids on a neighbourhood mural in Cape Town, or transforming the walls of a school to transport the minds of local school-kids, whether on a farm in rural Oyo, at the prestigious polo club, or at a noisy road side eatery “bukka” in Ibadan’s old city, we see deep into the soul of a multi-faceted and diverse continent through Polly’s work --a vibrant, deeply sensitive Africa.

Her portraits are poignant and direct. Thandeka, a proud South African middle aged woman dressed in blue robes sits alone with regal pose at a table with calabashes reminding one of French artist Paul Gauguin’s delicate portraits of large women from the Pacific islands. Polly’s portrait of Baba David, a sepia sketch of a mature man with wise weary eyes wearing a baseball cap has a soulful quality, as does the small portrait of a young girl whose face is surrounded by a white headscarf and whose deep gaze belies her youthful innocence. Polly’s portraits capture the essence and mood of her characters with a certain timelessness as they stare at you and through you. Her cool, languid characters are often in a state of rest, as if reposing from the hot African humidity surrounding them. There is a deep stillness in her characters, many with eyes closed -- women resting on their arms, lounging with their children, or simply in meditative repose.

Some of the iconic images of cultural life in south west Nigeria are captured in Polly’s canvases in an almost transparent visual language – whether through the woven agbada cloth that drapes across and through scenes like in indigo agbada or a mortar and pestle in the quiet corner of the Umar family portrait, or in her typical busy market scenes in the “phantom naïve” style illustrations for children’s books. In “Catch that Goat” you can literally feel the heat rising over the women roasting plantain and flying akara bean cakes, and taste the soft sweet bread stacked neatly for sale – populated scenes which remind us that this imagery has its roots in West African colors and history. On the other hand, her work of late south African artist Madi Phala, has an unmistakable southern African feel, with a different sensibility, dress and expression.

Polly’s corpulent classical dancers in her latest dance series fly through her canvases in personal space that is dynamic motion frozen in color, exuding an intense vibration through bold reds and blues. We see strong shapes in twos and threes whose elegance and grace is unmistakable as they express both strength and individuality.



Polly’s art is important because it shows us another face of Africa through portraits and landscapes presented not only on paper, canvas and on walls, but on unique and iconic objects of mass transport used to ferry Africa’s masses. For this exhibition, she has painted a canoe, one of Nigeria’s quintessential keke-na-pep tricycles, and a popular VW beetle, a fitting symbol of the German “Volks-Wagen” translated as “Car of the Masses”, which is recognized across the African continent, as the most popular mode of family transport in the 1960s and 1970s.

By painting portraits and family clusters on these vehicles, we see how Polly uses pedestrian objects as an artistic platform on which she carefully chronicles poetic stories that possibly reflect the lives of passengers who once may have used them. Polly’s floating Orphelias almost submerged with water lilies and leaves, looking out soulfully from their water soaked dreams are painted on two wooden canoes that float through a sea of text, telling their sad story of unfulfilled love.

A family portrait of a woman deep in thought hugging a toddler to her bosom adorns the roof of an old dilapidated VW beetle, while her two older children, one reading a book on his back while his brother stares dreamily across a rural landscape, complete with family dog and blue rusty water bucket, draws us into a world where we forget the vehicle and wonder instead about their aspirations and dreams as we follow their gaze.

And so, as we kick off Nigeria’s centenary celebration, I am delighted to present you Polly Alakija’s work as she shares her reflections on life in Nigeria and South Africa, the vibrancy and depth of the African essence, and her deep and rich artistic legacy. We hope you enjoy the paintings, mural, vehicles, and sketches that tell an extraordinary story of her life both “Here & There”.

I would also like to say a special thank you to our sponsors, Renaissance Capital, the Wheatbaker, the Goba Energy Group and Arra Vineyards, for supporting this exhibition and believing in this important visual story. We are particularly grateful to Arra for agreeing to bottle a special, limited edition, Shiraz and Viognier vintage wine with Polly Alakija dancers on their label to launch the exhibition. As always, the Wheatbaker has graciously provided their space to showcase this important creative narrative, and even offered its walls for Polly to paint. And our steady corporate supporters, Renaissance Capital and Global Energy, with long standing commitment to the growth of the creative sector in Nigeria, made sure we were able to cover our costs.

Thank you for coming to celebrate with us and we hope you enjoy Here & There!

Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio
Exhibition Curator



Bere, Ibadan, early morning | 1992 | Oil on board

POLLY ALAKIJA

“I hear your call! I hear it far away; I hear it break the circle of these crouching hills. I want to view your face and inhale your breath; or like the trees to watch my mirrored self unfold and span my days with song from the lips of dawn.” Gabriel Okara. The Call of the River Nun

I grew up in rural England. I moved to Nigeria in 1989. Nigeria became home. In 2005 I moved to South Africa with my four children.

Since 2011 I find myself based back in the same part of England where I spent my childhood. I moved from the landscape of Okara back to the landscape of Auden.

For a few years, due to practical and emotional pressures, I drifted away from my creative side. In 2009 I was sent, by an English friend in England, a copy of Ben Okri's poem “To an English friend in Africa”. This struck a chord that over time led me back to the easel, and to find the courage to “watch my mirrored self” once again, or as in Auden's words “to plunge your hands in water, plunge them to the wrist; stare, stare in the basin and wonder what you've missed”.

From a point where my work was almost totally abstract, I have over the years returned increasingly to the figure, inspired by the people and faces around me in Nigeria and South Africa. In an environment surrounded by such humanity it was the obvious reaction.

My work remains figurative: a reflection of those around me, family and friends. My settings are now divided: here or there; somehow torn between two places, but the same thread is there, whether I am in Nigeria, South Africa or UK.



Mokola | 1992 | Oil on canvas

To an English Friend in Africa

Be grateful for freedom
To see other dreams.
Bless your loneliness as much as you drank
Of your former companionships.
All that you are experiencing now
Will become moods of future joys
So bless it all.
Do not think your ways superior
To another's
Do not venture to judge
But see things with fresh and open eyes
Do not condemn
But praise what you can
And when you can't be silent.

Time is now a gift for you
A gift of freedom
To think and remember and understand
The ever perplexing past
And to re-create yourself anew
In order to transform time.

Live while you are alive.
Learn the ways of silence and wisdom
Learn to act, learn a new speech
Learn to be what you are in the seed of your spirit
Learn to free yourself from all things that have moulded you
And which limit your secret and undiscovered road.

Remember that all things which happen
To you are raw materials
Endlessly fertile

Endlessly yielding of thoughts that could change
Your life and go on doing for ever.

Never forget to pray and be thankful
For all the things good or bad on the rich road;
For everything is changeable
So long as you live while you are alive.

Fear not, but be full of light and love;
Fear not but be alert and receptive;
Fear not but act decisively when you should;
Fear not, but know when to stop;
Fear not for you are loved by me;
Fear not, for death is not the real terror,
But life - magically - is.

Be joyful in your silence
Be strong in your patience
Do not try to wrestle with the universe
But be sometimes like water or air
Sometimes like fire

Live slowly, think slowly, for time is a mystery.
Never forget that love
Requires that you be
The greatest person you are capable of being,
Self-generating and strong and gentle -
Your own hero and star.

Love demands the best in us
To always and in time overcome the worst
And lowest in our souls.
Love the world wisely.

It is love alone that is the greatest weapon
And the deepest and hardest secret.

So fear not, my friend.
The darkness is gentler than you think.
Be grateful for the manifold
Dreams of creation
And the many ways of unnumbered peoples.

Be grateful for life as you live it.
And may a wonderful light
Always guide you on the unfolding road.

Ben Okri - March 1991





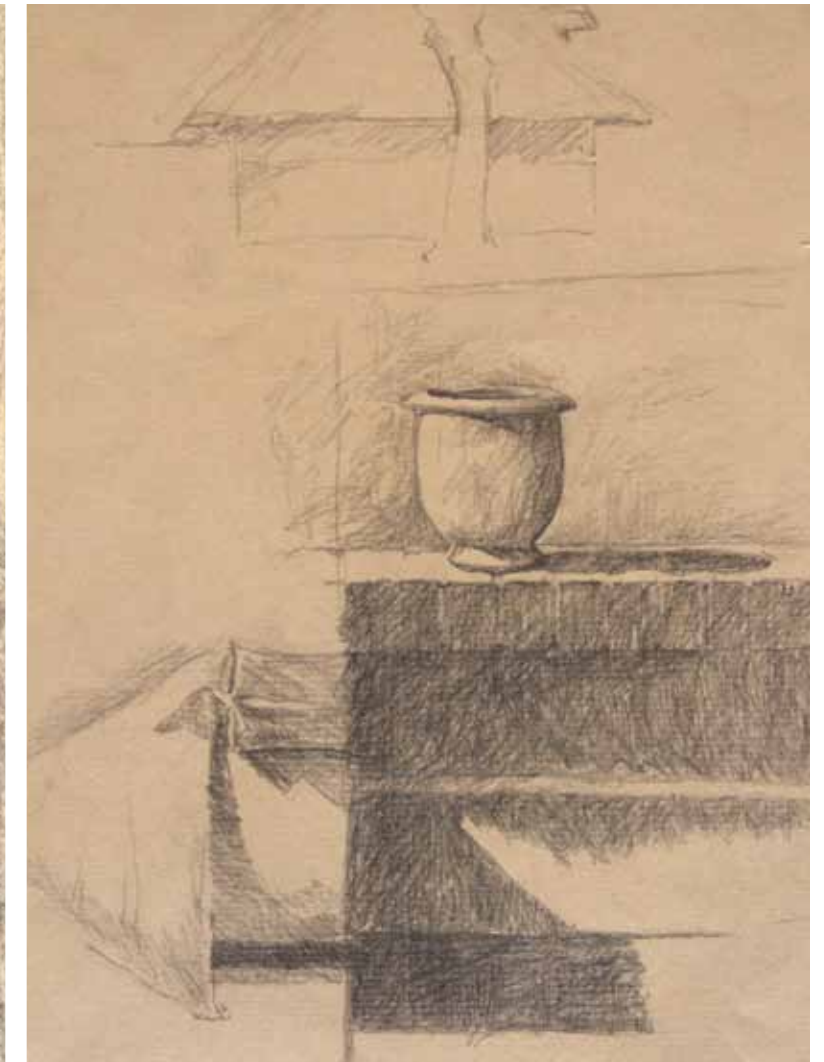
Sketches from an Ibadan buka | 1993 | Sepia chalk | 28 x 39 cm



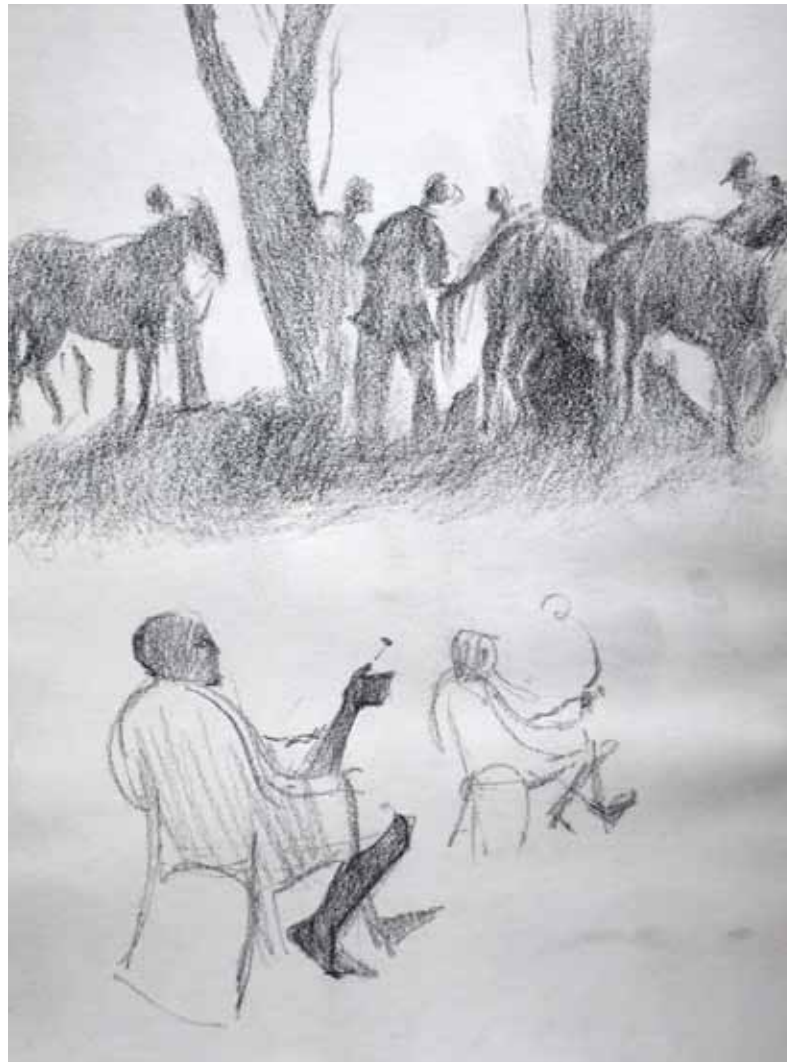
Sketches from an Ibadan buka | 1993 | Sepia chalk | 28 x 39 cm



On the Late Ahmadu Yakubu's Farm, Kaduna | New Years Eve 1990
Pencil drawings | 12 x 18 cm



On the Late Ahmadu Yakubu's Farm, Kaduna | New Years Eve 1990
Pencil drawings | 18 x 27 cm



On the pony lines, 1 | 2001 | Chalk | 21 x 27 cm



On the pony lines, 2 | 2001 | Chalk | 21 x 27 cm



Afternoon at polo | 2000 | Brush and ink | 29 x 29 cm



The polo lesson. Tomi Asuni on Mercedes | 1995 | Pastel | 39 x 29 cm



Stick and ball. Leye Ige | 1995 | Pastel | 39 x 29 cm



The stables | 2004 | Ink sketch | 18 x 14 cm

Visually Seduced



Conversation piece with Madi Phala. Greatmore Street Studios | 2006 | Oil on Canvas | 180 x 120 cm

I have known Polly Alakija since 2007, having sought her out after being visually seduced by one of her oil paintings. Polly is an artist of versatile talent and skill, with an inherent colour sense, enabling her to conjure compositions which both delight and beguile. Her painterly brushstroke weaves composition, colour, pattern and line into peaceful and serene artworks, which demand observation and contemplation.

Polly was born in 1966 in Malvern in England where she completed her A-levels, with art as one of her subjects. She continued studying art at the Oxford Polytechnic, and later completed a teaching diploma in the Montessori Method. In 1990 Polly moved to Nigeria, where she

married and subsequently began a family. Business interests called for the Akalija family to move to South Africa in 2005, and it was here that Polly focused on her South African artistic journey.

Impressed by her unique talent and professional skills, I invited Polly to allow me to show her work on exhibition. Since then we have worked together on a regular basis and developed a warm friendship, and I continue to admire her multi-talented creativity.

I am constantly impressed by Polly's passion for and commitment to Africa. As well as pursuing her own artistic career, she writes and illustrates children's books and involves herself actively in art-related community projects, giving of her time, energy and skills in order to boost others' well-being. She initiated a community arts project at Greatmore Art Studios in Woodstock, Cape Town, where she devised a programme to make a mural commemorating and celebrating the life of the hugely talented South African artist Madi Phala. Phala had been tragically murdered and, without Polly's dedication, his passing may have been overlooked by the wider South African community. The Greatmore mural exists as a permanent celebration of Phala's life and his rich personal contribution to South African art history. There are few South Africans who are prepared to offer their skills and expertise at their own expense, and to share these values with their fellow compatriots. Polly is a role-model of selflessness and energetic leadership, willingly sharing her time and artistic knowledge with those less fortunate and less experienced.

It can be said that the philanthropic spontaneity inherent in Polly's character also exudes from her canvases, where a tangible sense of innate benevolence exists in her somnolent giant figures. Polly is particularly interested in the human form and its portrayal. 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 colour and dynamic brushstrokes creating texture and energetic line.

Polly identifies with her adopted country, South Africa, as much as she clearly identifies with her adopted Nigerian roots. Her return to England as a result of familial tragedy has not prevented her remaining close to her beloved Africa, source of and inspiration to her art production.

While directly inspired by Western artistic traditions, Polly adds the tastes and sounds of her exotic African milieu, quick to observe idiosyncrasy and individuality. She seeks out the humanity of everyday life, often cajoling a model from the street to pose in her studio. These models from life are quietly transposed into other beings, colossi, tamed and calmed into permanent slumber. Her Dance paintings offer a bursting energy of acrobatic skill and physical vitality contained within a limited palette of soft beiges and pink and gold tones.

Polly Alakija has exhibited in France, the UK, Nigeria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Her work is included in numerous private and corporate collections in the USA, the UK, France, Nigeria and South Africa.

Barbara Lindop

Barbara Lindop is a South African Art Historian, Promoter and Curator. She represents many talented young South African artists. She has also documented the life of Gerard Sekoto in 1988, and published two books on this important South African artist. She secured two collections of Sekoto's art, one housed in the Witwatersrand University Museum (WAM) and the other in the Iziko SANG Museum in Cape Town. In 2004 she published the music of Sekoto in a cd The Blue Heads introducing the Songs of Sekoto and continues to run The Gerard Sekoto Foundation. Most recently, she curated an exhibition Song for Sekoto 1913-2013 celebrating the centenary of Sekoto's life. She has overseen the publication of Shorty and Billy Boy (Jacana) by Gerard Sekoto (a short story introducing art and its appreciation to the reader.) It has been published in 7 languages including English and French.



Portrait of the Umar family. The sister | 2008 | Oil on canvas | 175 x 175 cm



Portrait of the Umar Family. The Watchful Aunt | 2008 | Oil on canvas | 160 x 230 cm



Wheels 1 | 2013 | Limited edition inkjet print | 79 x 35 cm



Peace | 2003 | Oil on canvas | 154 x 111 cm



Charcoal study for "Peace" | 2003 | 39 x 30 cm



Sepia study for "Peace" | 2003 | 27 x 34 cm



Thandeka spinning | 2008 | Sepia chalk | 29 x 20 cm



Thandeka spinning | 2008 | Sepia chalk | 29 x 29 cm

Enfolding

I first met Polly in 1993 when I returned to Nigeria after having been away for fifteen years studying in the UK and working in the States. Polly married into a family that I had grown up with and by the time we met she had already been living in Ibadan for three years. Fifteen years is a long time to be away from a community such as the one I was raised in, with its close-knit families, particular rituals, and a very specific way of doing things. Polly provided a welcome and much needed transition back into life in Ibadan.

Polly took life in her stride. She had a deep-rooted curiosity about the culture she had married into. She made it her business to understand the rich Yoruba traditions and history – a culture which has remained central to her family life and has had a strong influence on her work as an artist.

I am a huge fan of Polly's art and we have collected several pieces over the years that are so evocative of my life in Ibadan and my African roots. When I look at Polly's work, they evoke emotions in me similar to those one gets from looking at treasured old family photographs.

Polly is one of my closest friends and is also Godmother to our daughter. I watched her raise four incredibly beautiful children with her husband Ade in their amazing home in Ibadan. Their home

was a meeting place for friends and family -- a place full of life, joy, and so much potential. I have watched with respect and admiration as she has carried on bringing up her four teenagers alone, following the sudden tragic death of her soul mate. I know somewhere close, Ade is celebrating with us.

I am so happy to see Polly's exciting and innovative new works. For me this represents the fourth stylistic phase of Polly's artistic journey – the architectonic, the book illustrations, the rounded floaty dreamlike series, and now her portrait series, many painted on unique artefacts and murals.

Alan and I, together with our network of immediate and extended family and friends, are very proud to celebrate Polly's amazing art with all of you. May her circle of influence and creativity continue to unfold and blossom.

Ekaba Davies

Ekaba Davies (nee Agha) is an accomplished architect, and currently Head of Talent and Capability Development, Corporate Real Estate Services at Standard Chartered Bank. She and her husband Alan Davies, Managing Director of James Cubitt Architects, one of Nigeria's most recognized architectural firms, have undertaken numerous interior design projects with the artist.



Left: Peace | 2004 | Chalk on Ingres paper | 28 x 39 cm



Middle Top: Girl with red head tie | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 50 x 40 cm



Middle Bottom: My breakfast companion | 2013 | Oil on canvas on board | 24 x 30 cm



Right: Baba David | 2013 | Sepia drawing | 29 x 39 cm



Wonder | 2007 | Pastel | 42 x 59 cm



Cow Herd. Oyo | 2013 | Oil on canvas on board | 30 x 40 cm



Portrait of a girl | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 78 x 100 cm



Top: Portrait of two sisters | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 78 cm

Middle: Ibadan garden with Carl | 2003 | Sepia crayon | 29 x 29 cm

Bottom: Ibadan garden, cane palms | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 24 x 33 cm



Above: Rita with budgerigars and gelede mask | 2005 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm
Right: Charcoal study of Rita with budgerigars and gelede mask | 2005 | 36 x 28 cm





Rita with a jack russell | 2011 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 70 cm



Rita resting | 2007 | Pencil | 28 x 21 cm



Rita and Gloria | 2006 | Sepia chalk | 38 x 29 cm



Rita with Thandeka | 2008 | Sepia crayon | 28 x 24 cm

Rael Salley ?



The dance paintings. "Café Cabaret" | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 150 x 120 cm





The dance paintings. "The Run Through 1" | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 150 x 120 cm





The dance paintings. "The Run Through 4" | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 40 cm



The dance paintings. "The Run Through 2" | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 150 x 120 cm

In Conversation

Sandra Obiago & Polly Alakija

Sandra Obiago: How did your artistic journey begin Polly? What are some of your earliest memories of creating art?

Polly Alakija: It's something I have always done. I can't remember not drawing, painting, making. I do remember the realization dawning on me that other kids didn't spend their whole time with a pencil or paintbrush to hand... becoming an artist was never really a conscious decision. I still find it strange to describe myself as such, because for me, it's something I just have to do. And, I think that this goes for many female artists, my artistic journey has had to play second fiddle much of the time. But it has always been there, with a studio a constant feature of how I operate.

SO: What most influenced your early style? Which artists "mentored" your artistic growth?

PA: If I think back to being a teenager, it was Paul Klee and Kandinsky who inspired me most, the artists of 'Die Blaue Reiter'. (My Mother being German I saw a lot of this work in Germany). Moving on I became interested in the Mexican muralists, especially Diego Rivera. To date however, if I have a visual conundrum, I turn to Titian and Picasso.

But as for direct mentors it would be a fabulous primary school teacher I had, a Welshman with a thick accent. He was called Walter Whittle, and he allowed me to doodle away through long division lessons, and as I left school, he told me to "be brave & be bold". We also had a regular visitor to our home, a painter called Maurice Field. He was an artist from the Euston Road School, a colleague of Auden, the poet. Maurice painted myself and my sister and we watched him at work, accompanied him as he drew landscapes and worked on portraits, a sketch book always to hand. He told me that I must strive to always be true to myself, and true to my subject.

SO: You came to Nigeria in 1989 – was there a change in your artistic focus?



Mother and child | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 75 x 102 cm



Mother and child (a hot Ibadan afternoon) | 2013 | Oil on canvas | 152 x 104 cm

PA: Yes, a complete change. It did throw me totally for a while. The direction I had been taking previously seemed totally irrelevant. In my early twenties I painted large abstracts, derivative of Mediterranean landscapes. In Nigeria I continued working on abstracted images, largely inspired by the urban landscape that now surrounded me. I would go out sketching in the centre of Ibadan, invariably with a throng of children around me. A far cry from painting in the vineyards of Southern France!

SO: How do you work? How do you prepare and create your pieces?

PA: I still carry a sketchbook with me everywhere I go. Sometimes I sketch on my iPad, which is a great tool as it's very discreet. Sometimes these sketches will grow into a painting but it's hard to tell. My paintings do grow very organically, painting in layers. I often completely obliterate an image whilst I am working on it. If I am too prescriptive I know there will be a lot more "knocking back". A painting works best when I let it speak to me, rather than trying to plan, to determine where it is heading.

SO: What inspires you?

PA: This is very hard to answer. I can never tell. I am moved to paint because I want to share the beauty I see around me. At the same ▶

► time if we are talking about the physical action of painting, there is nothing so satisfying as being free with paint, being part of allowing a wealth of colors tones and texture come to life.

The figure has become central to my art, the bonds between people, that tenuous thread that can hold us together. I paint what I am surrounded by, I paint what I love. I am not an artist that can paint disturbing images. For me my art is a celebration, and if I want to achieve anything through it, it is to be able to share the joy I experience.

I try to keep my mind and eyes open and images suggest themselves. It may be a certain way a shadow falls on a weathered wall, the way a mother holds a child's hand. Sometimes an image immediately jumps out at me. At other times I may be working on a subject that I love, portraits, groups of figures, and a movement, a certain pose will speak out to me.

SO: Your work is predominantly figurative. How do you prepare for your portraits and what do you try to always achieve?

PA: It's so important to really know your subject. A painting is not a photograph. This can take some time. It's not necessarily a question of getting someone to sit still. It's almost more important to see how someone moves, how they relax. They need to feel at ease with me. I always start with some lightning quick sketches. These first initial lines are so telling and usually the essence of the person is somehow within those early lines. The challenge then is how to develop those lines into a fuller image, without losing the spirit contained within those lines.

SO: Speak to us of your dance series.

PA: Of course I have always loved watching a well choreographed dance; it is visually the most stimulating experience. The more so because it is so fleeting. I have been so fortunate to be allowed access to the studios of "Dance for All", a dance program in Athlone in Cape Town. It's such a privilege to watch these young dancers at work. I sit in the corner of the studios and churn out pages of quick sketches which form the basis for my Dance paintings.

SO: How about your mother and child series – what informed these paintings, and what inspires you with this subject?

PA: It's a subject as old as time -- the mother child bond is intrinsically a part of us. The quiet co-dependency between a woman and a child. What so many of us search for is there. Trust, faith, love. Nigeria is the country of beautiful women, so it's very easy to be inspired by them and their bond not only with their own child, but the responsibility taken on towards all children.



SO: You have worked quite closely with architects for numerous years, notably James Cubitt Architects, and strong architectural strands run through your work – how did this come about, and what were you trying to express with this body of work?

PA: My father has always been passionate about architecture. I grew up on a diet of National Trust properties in England and road trips across Europe looking at architectural gems. Since I sketched everywhere I went this of course fed into my work from an early stage. But then came Nigeria with its total lack of architectural co-ordination and lack of visual order. This initially was totally confusing, but then the organic jumble that was Ibadan became exciting, and in a way much more real and alive than what I had experienced before.

SO: You have a very unique way of painting objects. In this exhibition we see your work on a mural at the Wheatbaker hotel, as well as on an old VW beetle, a used canoe and a keke-na-pep... If you could paint any object, building or edifice, what would it be?

PA: I am really enjoying painting objects. It de-mystifies painting. For some reason painting with oils on canvases comes with an intrinsic value, an immediate expectation that this is "real" art. Painting an old VW beetle is just fun! Which this project absolutely was. It became a family portrait, a lady who has posed for me over the years and her children. Her husband helped out with the logistics and by the end I had a whole team of "helpers" and the entire neighborhood (Challenge in Ibadan) watching the progress. At one point someone who was passing said "dis na real African Art!" which upset my viewers a little as they were so proud to have this white woman from "London" painting their Beetle.

I do love street art, murals, some graffiti art that I see happening. I enjoy the fact that it is ephemeral up to a point, that it can't be owned, framed, hung up on a wall. I am turning my objects and mural work into limited edition prints, but the original will never be "owned". The original will have its own life: it will go back on the road, the building will get re-developed.

I would love to find more iconic buildings to work on. There are so many stories that could be told in this way. An old building on Lagos Marina would make a stunning canvas, an old Brazilian house in Ibadan. It would be great to celebrate these buildings before they disappear due to much needed re-development.

SO: You have worked on book illustrations and have illustrated some award winning children's books. Tell us a little about this work, and what inspires you and motivates you as an illustrator.

PA: There is something very captivating about building a book, especially a book for children. A children's picture book should be like a box of magic tricks, full of hidden surprises. The greatest reward is to create something that makes a child smile, so my children's murals and books are an indulgence in a way. My first picture book was inspired by my children's school run in Ibadan. We always saw things that, to my eyes were quite amazing. I hope that through the books I have worked on, that children in Europe and the U.S. will see a positive image of Africa.

SO: Do you feel like an English woman in Africa or do you feel that you have taken on an African identity through marriage and close Nigerian affiliation? Speak to us of your identity.

PA: I feel like an Englishwoman any where I go, except in England, where I feel like a foreigner. At the same time, yes I have to say I probably have taken on an African Identity, something that has been made clear by being back in England. I just have to step off a flight in Lagos and feel the weight of the air, so heavy with humidity that it feels like a blanket, and I feel at home. My four children certainly do not see themselves as English. The openness, support and humanity in people that I have experienced in Nigeria and South Africa has become the norm for me. However I now find myself based a stones throw away from where I grew up in ►

► England, and whilst I enjoy the comforting familiarity, the beauty of the ease of the landscape - a big part of me looks for the friction, the soul that I feel in Nigeria and South Africa that has become my anchor.

SO: Do you think art has a place in the heart of a nation?

PA: Absolutely. It is a sign of a nation's health. It is a visual voice. It can celebrate, it can move people. It can relay a message. Whilst first and foremost any artist works as an individual, that individual is formed by both nature and nurture. So many art movements are inseparable from local political history. This can be a very conscious movement such as with the socialist muralists of Mexico, it can be an individual's journey, such as can be seen in the work of South African artist William Kentridge. However, keeping in mind the major sponsors to this exhibition, there can be no greater illustration of this than the Italian Renaissance with its celebration of the power of nation (states) that manifested itself in the visual arts.

SO: Do you think art can heal and restore? Encourage and inspire a people?

PA: Art can do this on many levels, and in different media. If we see art as a reflection of a nation's good health, it is also a reflection of a nation's turmoil, and this goes for the individual too. It can be part of the healing process. At times the wounds may be too deep to allow any creativity. Rembrandt was completely unproductive following a family tragedy, and it was a considerable time before he went back to the easel. At times looking and seeing can simply be too painful, but there does come a time when the escapism of shutting out the stresses of life becomes a therapy.

It is of course possible for art to direct and guide. The visual arts over the years are intrinsically linked to political history. For me however art is first and foremost a confidential conversation. I want to look at paintings, a visual image that speaks to me. I want to be uplifted, inspired, excited by what I see.

Art can also speak to a people. But for this to happen it needs to be made accessible. Art needs a public platform. This is not only the responsibility of governments, but architects, planners, and private individuals can help make this happen.

SO: how do you keep up the rigor of an artistic practice with a big family and multiple responsibilities? How do you juggle everything in your busy life and still have time to paint?

PA: There is always time for everything. You can always stretch yourself further. Having said that my incredibly forgiving and supporting friends make my juggling act possible. The hardest thing is to mentally put daily stresses to one side, to be able to clear my mind to let the purely visual take over.

SO: What is your advice to young artists?

PA: My advice would be to keep challenging yourself. Don't let yourself stay in your comfort zone. On one hand try to gain mastery and control, on the other, keep re-inventing yourself. When a new project or blank canvas ceases to be a challenge and ceases to ask questions of yourself, then something is wrong.

SO: In conclusion, tell us a little about your future plans, and what we should be looking forward to as collectors and art fans.

PA: I do hope that I can develop mural projects in urban centers not only in South Africa and Nigeria but also in other countries too. There is a side of Africa that the world needs to see and this may be a good vehicle for that message. August 2013



Biography



1966: Born in the UK | **1984:** Art Foundation Course, Oxford Polytechnic | **1986:** Montessori Teaching Diploma, London | **2006, 2008:** Artist in Residence, Greatmore Street Studios, Cape Town | **1989 – 2005:** Studio Work, Ibadan, Nigeria | **2005 – 2011:** Studio Work, Cape Town, South Africa

Exhibitions

1987: Solo Exhibition, Malvern Workshops, UK
1990: Solo Exhibition Alliance Francaise, Ibadan, Nigeria
1992: Joint show with Emily Nelson, Alliance Francaise, Ibadan, Nigeria
1993: Joint Exhibition with Maraba Pottery, Town and Country, Avant Garde Gallery, Kaduna, Nigeria
1994: Solo Exhibition, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan, Nigeria
1994: Joint Exhibition with Akin Alamu, Quintessence, Lagos, Nigeria
2004: Solo Exhibition, Games People Play, Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Davies, Lagos, Nigeria
2006: Solo Exhibition, We are such stuff as dreams are made of, AVA Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
2009: Solo Exhibition, The Dance Series, AVA Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
2010: Group Exhibition, A Dip into the World of Visual Arts in Cape Town, The Embassy of Spain, Cape Town, South Africa
2011: Commemorative Exhibition with the West African textile collection of the late Judith Appio, Akojo to Lewa, Casa Labia, Muizenberg, South Africa
2012: Solo Exhibition, The Hogarth Club, London, UK
Paintings in many private and corporate collections in Europe, Africa, and the United States

Writing & Illustration

1986 – 1989: UK: Projects included fabric design, greetings cards, hospitality stationary, textbook illustrations
1989: Nigeria: Numerous clients including UNICEF & the Ford Foundation
1998: Macmillans (UK). Illustrated Reading Worlds. Writer and illustrator: Termites, Busy Forest, Quiet River, Here Comes the Band, The Road to Market, Secret Striker
1999: Barefoot Books (UK). Writer and illustrator: Catch that Goat, winner of the Oppenheim Gold award
2010: Frances Lincoln Publishers (UK). Illustrator: A Stork in a Baobab Tree: An African 12 days of Christmas, short-listed for the SLA Information Book Award
2013: Frances Lincoln Publishers (UK). Writer and illustrator: Counting Chickens

Teaching

1986 – 1989: London Montessori Centre, taught art in West London, ran art workshops, lectured on teaching art in the Montessori system
2000: Part time Art teacher, The American Christian Academy, Ibadan, Nigeria
2003 – 2005: Part time Art teacher, Ibadan International School, Ibadan, Nigeria

Community Projects

Led various art workshops and did stage design for children's productions in the UK, Nigeria, and South Africa including:
2004 & 2005: Stage Design, Small World, Lagos, Nigeria
2008: Mural Project Mentor at Greatmore Street Studios
2012: Facilitator, The Garden City Literary Festival, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
2013: Facilitator, Hooked on Books, Eastnor Castle, UK

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Gerald Gultig

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Yvonne Ike

Barbara Lindop

Joe Obiagio

Alban Ofili-Okonkwo

Mosun Ogunbanjo

Renaissance Capital

Rael Salley

Dee Wentzel

The Wheatbaker

There are so many of you, too countless to name, who have been vital on my artistic journey. I am indebted to all of you who have been subjected to my brainstorming, my questions, my endless demands of support from helping to find canoes to paint, to working out projective art, to posing for me. For those of you who keep me focused, who challenge and drive me, my work is thanks to you.

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The Wheatbaker as part of the Legacy Hotel Group, has keenly supported Nigerian arts and culture since opening its doors in 2011. The hotel's commitment to celebrating the best of Nigerian creativity saw it dedicate its walls to showcasing exceptional traditional, modern and contemporary art. The Wheatbaker has hosted world class art exhibitions including The Collectors' Series showcasing Duke Asidere, Kelechi Amadi Obi & Yetunde Ayeni Babaeko (2011), Making History showcasing Ancient Nigerian Art (2012), Sequel 1a showcasing the sculptures of Olu Amoda, Billy Omabegho's metal and wood sculptures (2012), The WW Independence Series by WhiteSpace, featuring Tayo Ogunbiyi, Karo Akpokiore, Folarin Shasanya, Hakeem Salaa, Toyosi Faridah Kekere-Ekun (2012-13), Flow showcasing ceramic and mixed media sculptures and installations by Nnenna Okore, and Inner Worlds Outer Space, showcasing works by Raoul Olawale da Silva (2013).



Global Energy Group (GEC) is an Africa focused independent Energy Resources Corporation. GEC operates with a mission to explore, harness and produce a variety of energy resources in a sustainable manner that enhances the wealth of our host nations and the quality of life of the people. GEC as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility over the past two decades, actively supports and promotes Arts, Culture and People Initiatives in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. GEC aims to nurture, sustain and showcase the best of Africa's immense creative energy with a special focus on the visual arts, dance, drama and theatre.

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Situated in the heart of South Africa's Cape Winelands, Arra Vineyards enjoys an ideal location on the Simonsberg-Stellenbosch Wine Route, where we grow, produce, and bottle all our wines. The Klapmuts Mountain provides us with an abundance of water and shelters us from the Cape's south-easterly winds, while providing our vines with ideal soils and north facing slopes for ample sunshine. Using only the finest French oak barrels, our wines are matured for up to 24 months, while being constantly monitored to maintain their deep, fruit flavours, and creamy textures. At Arra Vineyards, we are also dedicated to ensuring that our wines reach maturity in the bottle before we release them for sale.



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For more information, please contact sandraobiago@yahoo.com



Here & There

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