

Wide Open

Child Drawing: Between Myth, Reality and New Models

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(Extract from the catalogue Wide Open:Ghana Through Children's Eyes)In seeing these images I cannot but remember my childhood in Akongo, a village in Cameroon where, with my parents and siblings, I lived until I was twelve years old. This was before my voyage towards the big city, which ended in my arrival in Italy. Back then I also adored drawing but what were missing were the sheets of paper, colored pencils and other drawing materials. I could not take advantage of the same paper sheets on which I wrote my school lessons. It was back then that with certain friends, almost unconsciously, we re-discovered the vast patrimony of space, material and alternative solutions that, in order to express deep emotion, Africa offers to her offspring . We would draw on the surface of rock, stone, on planks of wood and even on school desks. We would make use of any material to produce these forms but our preference was always for charcoal, which was never lacking.Reproducing a relational SettingAt that age we were determined to express something, against whatever odds. We were fascinated by the creation of form and movement,we tried to reproduce an image,the space in which are born social and family relations, real or imagined entities, the great personalities that were the fore-fathers and mothers of our people, narrated to us by the story-tellers.We also began to idealise and render more beautiful and important, those figures whose presence had been only 'felt'. And in this way we nurtured and fed our roots, learning a certain way of understanding inter-personal relations and those which tied us to natural entities.As is obvious, the few contacts with the city and its important economic and cultural models were not enough to allow us a clear idea of a life-style which filtered through via the radio, or through the tales of epic journeys of our parents (of airplanes,cars, televisions etc). But those stories had the power to feed our endless fantasy, which allowed us to produce surprising images; yet, simultaneously, we did not mind the reproduction also of more familiar aspects , which constituted the day-to-day fabric of life.North-South EncountersIn relation to my memories I perceive a certain evolution in the drawings of these children from Ghana. Most live in the city, are in contact with diverse cultural models and, fundamentally, they have access to art materials and have learnt how to manipulate them. They have learnt how to co-exist with their own roots and the new models which flow continually into Africa.These young artists also express the complexity of an urban reality where tradition and modernity cohabit. Tradition manifests itself through exaltation of memory and personal reflections on one's own origins, whilst modernity is shown in the movement towards new models. The true problem is often represented by the complexity of a colonial past which creates a case for a privileged emphasis towards local ways-of -being.Seen like this, these drawings reconstitute dignity and a true voice to the children of Ghana and of Africa - and not only to the children. They give back to Africa and to the rest of the world the very beauty and the contradictions of a continent whose ups-and-downs are frequently filtered. We all know that Africa is often portrayed as the exaltation of the negative: illness, dictatorships, conflict, a culture of death and certainly not of positive values.Here we become aware of a profound desire to communicate: a desire which should be nourished and aided, a desire which is Hope.

By Henri Olama Ollye'