Charlie Michaels  
International Report  
Ghana: July-August 2009

During July and August this summer, I visited Ghana for my international experience supported by the school of Art & Design. While there, I kept a blog with some stories and photographs that can be found here: http://charliemichaels.wordpress.com/

My itinerary included:

A stay at Cross Cultural Collaborative or “Aba House” in Nungua, a fishing village outside of Accra. www.culturalcollaborative.org

Travel through Cape Coast, Elmina, Kumasi, Tamale, and Bolgatanga to visit historic slave castle sites and museums, basket weavers and house painters in northern Ghana, and markets galore.

A two week conference in Kumasi, “The Kumasi Symposium: Tapping Local Resources for Sustainable Education Through Art” at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology http://www.knust.edu.gh/

Billboards celebrating the Obama’s visit to Ghana

Unbeknownst to me until a couple of weeks prior to my departure, I was to land in Ghana only a few days before the Obama family would pay a short visit to the country. Arriving in Accra, I was greeted by numerous billboards featuring photographs of the Obamas along with John Atta Mills, the President of Ghana. “Akwaaba!” which means “Welcome!” in Twi was scrawled across the front of many of these billboards as well as “Welcome Home.” As the coast of Ghana was a major site of departure for slave ships during the triangular trade, people of African descent living outside of Africa are enthusiastically welcomed back to the land of their ancestors. I felt welcome too and almost instantly as soon as people found out that I was not only American, from “Obama Country!” but from Chicago, “Obama City!”
I spent about 4 days in Accra getting oriented and adjusting to both the time and temperature change. During these days I did a lot of wandering through Makola Market, visited the Ghanaian National Museum and other art galleries, and took drum lessons from two guys named Mustapha and Mula who make drums from wood, rope, and goat skin in a small wooden building that overlooks the ocean.

I soon moved on to Nungua, a small fishing village outside of Accra where I stayed at the home of Aba, an American woman who runs a non-profit arts organization called Cross Cultural Collaborative. Aba House, as its known in Nungua, is a place where artists, teachers, and others come from all over to work with local artists and children. The house itself is capable of hosting about a dozen people and features beautiful views of the ocean and delicious Ghanaian specialties prepared by a hospitable guy named Talk True. With the exception of the daily 4am rooster crow, I found it to be an incredibly relaxing and inspiring environment to be in.

Kids come to the yard just about every day to make paper from sugar cane that is grown in front of the house. The sugar cane is harvested, dried, cut up, boiled, rinsed in the ocean, and beaten into a pulp that is used to make beautiful sheets of brown textured paper. The older kids bind books with the handmade paper that are sold in the U.S. and in Accra. The money made from visitors to the house and the sale of the books is used to purchase school supplies for the kids that come to help. For almost two weeks, we all worked together under the canopy of a beautiful tree whose branches have been supported over the years as they grow to create a ceiling of
leaves over the red dirt yard. I was taught the extensive process of making paper from sugar cane using no machines and led the kids in making a large Asafo style flag out of old fabric scraps.

Until this trip, I had only ever seen African art in the context of American museums and galleries. I’ve always had an attraction to the masks, sculptures, and bowls in these displays because of a love for natural materials and textures but also because unlike many western art objects they were not created to be placed on delicate mounts in glass covered display cases. Devoid of their contexts the objects cannot truly serve the purpose they were intended to, be it spiritual, celebratory, or functional in daily life. I am interested in objects like this that can at once be beautiful, functional, and symbolic. This is something I’ve struggled with in my own work. Often, the process of making something is meaningful for me, but the display of a static end product often feels unsatisfying and anti climactic.

Something I quickly came to appreciate while spending time in Nungua is the sheer volume of handmade objects and buildings that line the streets. Shops and kiosks selling everything from food to light bulbs to haircuts are fashioned of re-purposed industrial shipping containers or built from wood and painted by hand in bright colors. Local artists Mystic Art and Jasper make beautiful hand painted signs that advertise haircuts, food and other services. Down the road there is a fishing harbor where large pirogues (traditional west African fishing boats) able to fit more than a dozen fishermen are carved from whole trees using only the eye as a measurement tool and nets are mended by hand. Though beautiful objects like those that might be contained in the African section of a western museum are still created, I also found true creativity and ingenuity to exist in objects and structures made with care to function as a part of everyday life.

While staying at Aba House I was able to spend some time in the workshop of Eric Adjetey, a fantasy coffin maker. Coffins of the Ga people of Ghana are often carved into the shape of an object that has literal or symbolic meaning to the life of the deceased person. It’s a tradition that was started by Eric’s grandfather, Kane Kwei, many years ago when he made a palanquin for a chief in the shape of a cocoa bean and subsequently a coffin for his mother in the shape of an airplane. The coffins are ordered special by
the family of the deceased person and hand built and painted by Eric and his apprentices.

Eric took fellow Aba House resident Sylvia, a museum curator at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and I to a traditional Ga funeral that featured one of his coffins. We were interested in seeing the coffin perform its ceremonial function. The family of the deceased ordered a pirogue for their relative who had been a fisherman in Teshie for most of his life. The funeral ceremony was a daylong event that included pouring of libations to the ancestors, the slaughtering of a goat, and parading the coffin through the streets of Teshie to the final burial site. Recently, Eric’s coffins and family story were featured in a Spanish soda commercial that can be seen here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5-thb6AE4a4. The video is a great example of the celebratory nature of the funeral procession and was filmed in the same streets we walked through that weekend.

From Nungua, I moved on to Cape Coast and Elmina, two neighboring coastal towns with a strong history of colonial presence. Each is home to a castle once used to hold African captives while they waited to be put onto ships and ultimately sold as slaves. I was particularly struck by the picturesque views created by coastal castles surrounded by palm trees in contrast to the horrific events that once took place there. Divisions in space are particularly interesting as well. In both castles the various colonial inhabitants worshipped in chapels located directly above dungeons that held African men, women and children in chains. At Cape Coast castle visitors are able to walk through the “door of no return”, the last doorway people walked through before being herded onto the ships. Visitors then turn and walk back through the other way, a powerful and symbolic act for those whose ancestors were forced to walk out and never return.

The last leg of my trip was a two week stay in Kumasi, Ghana’s second largest city. I attended a conference titled “The Kumasi Symposium: Tapping Local Resources for Sustainable Education Through Art” at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). I was a participant in the “Curio Kiosk Project” which asked artists to complete projects that offered a means of exchange or engagement with local people. I collaborated with
Kwadwo and Rali, masters degree students at KNUST along with Rex, who teaches sculpture at Takoradi Polytechnic in the western region of Ghana. Our project developed out of my own curiosity about cell phone advertisements painted on homes and buildings in almost every street in central and northern Ghana. One company specifically, British based cell phone provider Vodafone, has really saturated the Ghanaian streetscape with their distracting red and white advertisements. Different from other hand painted advertisements I had previously admired around Ghana, these do not promote local goods and services but symbolize western capitalism infiltrating Ghanaian cities and villages.

Offended by what seemed to be a corporate takeover of community and family spaces, I wanted to find out what was behind the advertisements and what the benefit to the local community was. I recruited friends at the conference and ended up working with a passionate and talented team that this never could have happened without. While conducting interviews with Kumasi residents we found that everyone we talked to was promised money and cell phones in exchange for the company to paint the exterior of there home, but the promises were never fulfilled. Only free t-shirts (another form of advertising) were handed out, one per family. Enraged at advertising practices that take advantage of the economic and social status the people who live here, I planned a project that would intervene in this situation.

Rex and I designed a series of Adinkra symbols, traditional Ghanaian proverbial symbols, the size and shape of which mimic the Vodafone logo. With permission from Faisal and his family, who own a Vodafone branded home in Kumasi, we painted over the corporate logos and imprinted the building with our version. This act symbolizes the re-claiming of the home and street by the local culture. Photo and video documentation of the project was included in a closing exhibition at the KNUST museum.

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