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| Nnaggenda, Francis (1936--) |
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| From an early age, Francis Nnaggenda knew he wanted to be an artist. Born in 1936, Nnaggenda was raised in rural Uganda where he became intimately connected with traditional life. He grieved over the way modernization was undermining the stability of African communities. Becoming an artist, he thought, was going to be the best and most practical way of raising his voice against a skewed development process that he was witnessing. With such strong opinions, Makerere Art School proved to be inconsistent with his aspirations. The School had at the time of the run up to independence abandoned the curriculum that was respectful of Ugandan art-making traditions which Margaret Trowell, its founder, had developed. Under Cecil Todd, Trowell’s successor (1958), Makerere Art School was instead reviewing its curriculum towards an emphasis on knowledge of world art, technique and skills acquisition. Elimo Njau and Sam Ntiro, Trowell’s direct and highly regarded protégés became Nnaggenda’s allies. The duo was opposed to Todd’s scholarly approach to art education and in the early 1960s, they prepared Nnaggenda for the daunting task of redefining traditional life along modern lines. In taking an alternative route in pursuit of an artistic career, Nnaggenda’s experiments in sculpture left an indelible mark on Uganda’s modern art landscape to which Makerere can lay no claim. |
| From an early age, Francis Nnaggenda knew he wanted to be an artist. Born in 1936, Nnaggenda was raised in rural Uganda where he became intimately connected with traditional life. He grieved over the way modernization was undermining the stability of African communities. Becoming an artist, he thought, was going to be the best and most practical way of raising his voice against a skewed development process that he was witnessing. With such strong opinions, Makerere Art School proved to be inconsistent with his aspirations. The School had at the time of the run up to independence abandoned the curriculum that was respectful of Ugandan art-making traditions which Margaret Trowell, its founder, had developed. Under Cecil Todd, Trowell’s successor (1958), Makerere Art School was instead reviewing its curriculum towards an emphasis on knowledge of world art, technique and skills acquisition. Elimo Njau and Sam Ntiro, Trowell’s direct and highly regarded protégés became Nnaggenda’s allies. The duo was opposed to Todd’s scholarly approach to art education and in the early 1960s, they prepared Nnaggenda for the daunting task of redefining traditional life along modern lines. In taking an alternative route in pursuit of an artistic career, Nnaggenda’s experiments in sculpture left an indelible mark on Uganda’s modern art landscape to which Makerere can lay no claim.  Nnaggenda pursued a French Diploma Course in Fine Art before seeking admission for a more robust training in sculpture in Germany (1964-1967). In Germany, he went through an apprenticeship system before he was formally admitted to Freiburg University, a highly competitive art academy. Freiburg offered a rigorous but flexible art training program but more importantly, it softened the ground for him to search for the essence of his ‘African spirit’. Ornamental arts, myths and legends abounded in Nnaggenda’s own cultural background, but, resonances of mask forms and masquerades were alive too in his consciousness. His own verbal and poetic, artistic environment, combined with emotional experiences allowed him to connect with the woodcarvings of West Africa. Nnaggenda believed that regardless of the vast distance separating the people of Africa, there was an underlying common characteristic all Africans shared and this formed the basis of an African intercultural cohesion. In his art, Nnaggenda adapted both the form and spirit in the mask objects he saw in German museums.  Upon completion of his studies in German, Nnaggenda returned home in 1967 and showed his sculptures and paintings at the Nommo gallery. The Kampala audience whose visual vocabulary had been colored by the work of Makerere Art School graduates where anatomy and color theory were of prime importance, were not ready for Nnaggenda’s innovations. The double face images and joining of metal and wood, for example, were unheard of yet in Kampala, though these were common practices elsewhere in the world.  In 1968, frustrated by Kampala’s inhospitality, Nnaggenda found a job in the neighboring Nairobi University in Kenya. The curriculum at Nairobi was more open than that of Makerere, even though Maloba, its new head had been a part of the Makerere staff since 1940. Furthermore, Nairobi had very little public art. This gave Nnaggenda the opportunity to make his mark. His large stone carving Mother and Child and a welded steel figure still grace the Kenya National Museum.  So impactful was Nnaggenda’s art in Kenya that in 1995 he was invited to teach at Indiana University in the United States. He also had a residency in Texas before returning to Uganda in 1978, at the most inopportune time. The war that ousted Idi Amin was raging and Makerere (now Makerere University) was at its lowest point, occasioned by Amin’s repressive regime (1971-1979), which, among other atrocities, cracked down on the educated.  File:WarVictim.jpg  Figure War Victim -- Francis Nnaggenda (1983-88).  Source: Photo copyright George Kyeyune (Photo taken in 2002)  A civil war broke out two years after Amin’s exit which further constrained Makerere. Nnaggenda’s working style of recuperating materials helped to revive Makerere Art School when imported materials became scarce. He forged metals bars and made sculpture carving tools. The best known of Nnaggenda’s work is the War Victim. Fashioned from a single *Mukebu* tree trunk and realistically presented (1983-1988) War Victim is a robust sculpture of amputated mutilated body standing on one leg. It is a tribute to the resilient spirit of the people of Uganda. In 2001, Nnaggenda retired from teaching. |
| Further reading:  (Calder)  (Deliss)  (Kingdon)  (Kingdon, Reflections)  (Kingdon, “Makerere Art School”, Interview with Wanjiku Nyachae)  (Kyeyune, Art in Uganda in the 20th Century (Diss.))  (Kyeyune)  (Kyeyune, “Uganda’s Visual Environment”)  (Ntiro)  (Kasfir)  (S. Sunanda)  (Sunanda) |