

## arts and culture

**Beverly Andrews** pays tribute to one of Nigeria's finest artists, Gani Odutokun, who died in a tragic accident in 1995. An exhibition in Gani's memory, *Accident and Design* is now touring the world.

# Accident and design

**T**he late Nigerian artist, Gani Odutokun, was one of the most respected artists to come out of Africa this century. Not only was his work internationally acclaimed but as head of the Fine Arts Department of the renowned Ahmadu Bello University, he has been responsible for shaping an entire generation of artists.

His tragic death in 1995 was a major

blow to the Nigerian contemporary art scene. But many of those who had the good fortune to have worked or studied with this extraordinary man were determined that something positive should come out of this tragedy.

*Accident and Design* is the result of their efforts. It is a beautifully retrospective show (mounted at London's Brunei Gallery until 17 March, and now on international tour) which not only presented Gani's most

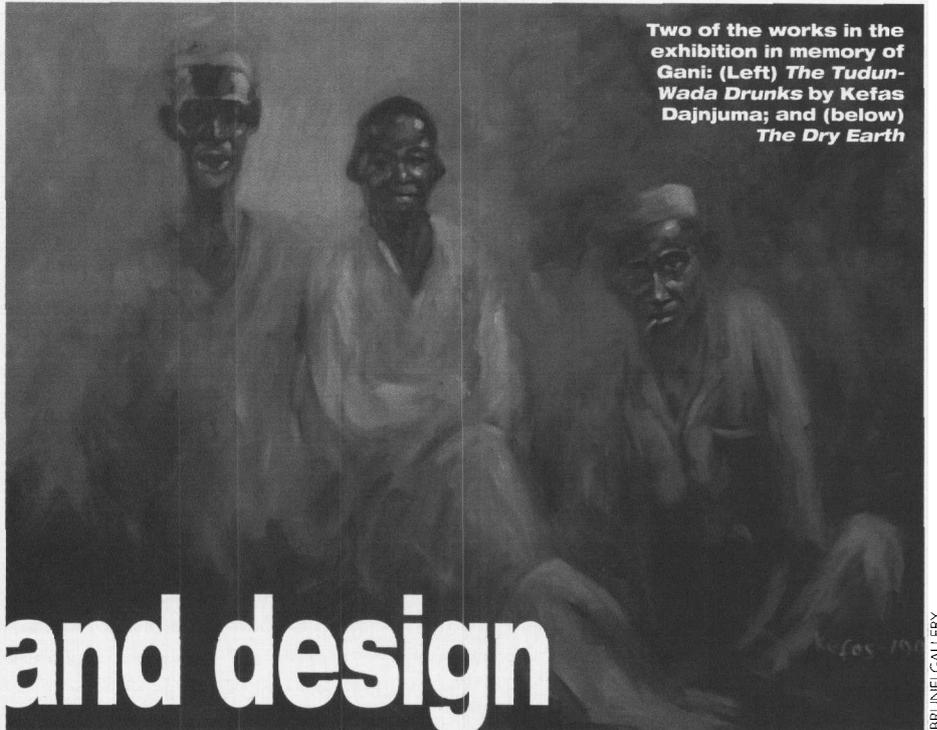
famous work, but several stunning pieces from many of the artists who cite him as their chief influence.

Annabello Nwankwo, one of the show's curators states: "I think anyone who was lucky enough to have met Gani was changed somehow by the experience. Beside his extraordinary talent which was obvious to anyone who had contact with him, we were all struck by his quiet humanity which seemed to inform everything he did. To me, it seemed like his love for mankind spilled over into every aspect of his busy life."

That unquestioning love and kindness which Nwankwo speaks of, is instantly apparent in Gani's work. Be it his touching portrait of abandoned children, *The Orphans*, or his disturbing depiction of a mind at war with itself in *Man Surrounded By His Dreams*, what comes across most strongly to the viewer is Gani's sympathy for his subjects. It is one of the most outstanding aspects of his work.

That and his extraordinary technique which shows his ability to paint in almost any style, from the wild, sweeping lines of *The King, The Queen and the Republic*, to the surrealistic simplicity of *Segregation Even at 12.01*, Gani had an almost uncanny ability to adapt his work to any style.

He was, in fact, best known for his liquidised paintings — a technique in which



Two of the works in the exhibition in memory of Gani: (Left) *The Tudun-Wada Drunks* by Kefas Dajnjuma; and (below) *The Dry Earth*

BRUNEI GALLERY



BRUNEI GALLERY

he allowed paint to flow down the canvas until it naturally found its form. This unusual technique formed not only the basis of much of Gani's work but also a life philosophy that out of accident came a useful design, be it a visual manifestation or some life changing event.

But although Gani's unconventional technique was immensely popular, he resisted the temptation to use it in all his work and in many ways appeared to reject Western categories which he felt confined artists to certain styles or techniques that made them famous.

This desire for artistic freedom was something that he felt very important to pass on to his young students. Nwankwo states: "He always wanted his students to find the style and technique which best suited them. He was often criticised for not producing artists who painted exactly like him. But that was very much against Gani's principles."

He was also very concerned about the pressure on African artists to conform to the demands of the European art scene. He felt that this imposed parameters and had the power to destroy artistic creativity, which in turn caused artists to produce soulless work,

devoid of meaning. Gani felt that it was absolutely crucial for an artist to remain true to his or her own vision. Only by doing this would they produce quality work.

### His life

Gani was born on 9 August 1946 in Ghana to Nigerian parents who originally came from Offa in Nigeria but went to live in Ghana at the height of Ghana's cocoa boom. Gani's father made a comfortable living in Ghana until the government decided to nationalise the cocoa buying business. With that came the collapse of his father's business. It was also around this time that Gani's mother died.

As his father's fortune and health deteriorated, the family was forced to return to their native Nigeria.

Gani's first job was as a clerk at the Nigerian Breweries. He might have remained there were it not for his passion for drawing. Friends and colleagues recognised his talent and encouraged him to study art. This he did eventually, attending the University of Nigeria the year of his father's death, and then going on to the legendary Fine Arts Department of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Gani flourished at Zaria and eventually received a first class degree.

It is easy to see the key events of Gani's early life as a chief influence in his work. His mother's early death, his father's economic difficulties and the family's forced relocation seemed to instil in Gani a sympathy for the dispossessed.

This compassion also extended to his students. One of them tells a story of being sent for by Gani after he had seen the student's most recent work, which was unrelentingly bleak. Gani became immediately concerned about the student's state of mind.

Although the student tried to reassure Gani that he was fine, Gani made a point of keeping an eye on him, and eventually recommended him for a teaching post at Ahmadu Bello after his graduation. The student states: "To this day I'm sure he did this just to keep an eye on me and make sure I was OK."

Walking through this stunning exhibition, you can't help but be overcome by a feeling of sadness for the loss of such a great man. But you also feel grateful for having an opportunity to see such breathtaking work. **NA**

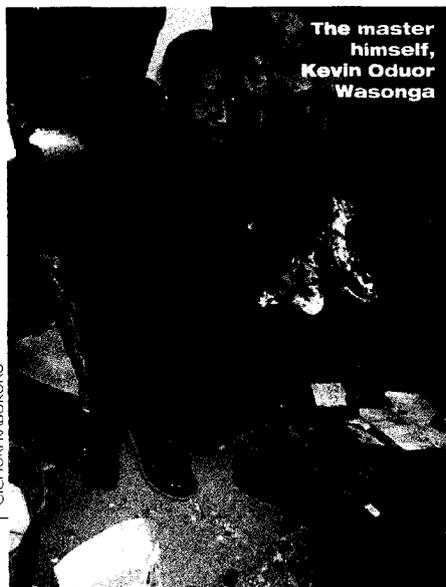
# Single-handed, but a sculptor par excellence

Gichuki Kabukuru writes about the one-handed man who is dazzling Kenyans with his marvellous images.

**K**evin Oduor Wasonga is not a beggar. Unlike many of his ilk — the disabled — in the streets of Nairobi, he is a seasoned worker and moulder par excellence. So high is the quality of his work, that few believe he is single-handed.

Without exceptions, all of Kevin's sculptures reveal his great finesse and artistic versatility. All his exquisite figures boast of such an extra-ordinary presence of strength, character and liveliness — a feat that few of his contemporaries equal. His is a skill and deftness that leave the beholders enchanted.

Born in Nairobi, Kevin was a normal boy at birth with all his limbs. Little did the mid-



GICHUKI KABUKURU

wife who helped deliver him contemplate the rare profession that an odd twist of fate would lead him into. Neither did Kevin's loving and caring parents. None, it seems, had even the vaguest idea that soon he would lose the thread of his right hand.

The misfortune hit in 1974, when Kevin was a standard five pupil at the Dr. Aggrey Primary School. "We were travelling upcountry from Nairobi," Kevin recalls the unforgettable day, "then, somewhere along the journey the vehicle was involved in a tragic accident."

Kevin, who shuns sympathy, does not tell more — leaving the gory details to the listener's fertile imagination.