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Exhibition**




Baptized by Beefcake

The Golden Age of Hand-Painted
Movie Posters from Ghana

October 17–February 16, 2020

This exhibition contains information about how movies, economics, and religion mixed in the 1980s & 1990s to inspire larger-than-life posters in Ghana.

In 1957, Ghana became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from its colonial power, the United Kingdom. As the world's leading exporter of cocoa and provider of one-tenth of the world's gold, its economy was one of the strongest on the continent; however, the complex and unstable political climate that came after independence threw Ghana into decades of economic collapse. Government corruption and financial mismanagement caused established agricultural businesses to fail, and the currency was continuously devalued. Ghanaians needed new, creative ways to make money.



One surprising industry that emerged to meet this need during the 1980s and 1990s was an independent, unregulated network of video distribution that presented pop-up movie screenings in ad hoc movie halls around the country. Many of these spaces had also been used as open-air places of worship for decades. To introduce an audience to this new form of entertainment, posters were hand-painted by local artists on cotton flour sacks and traveled with the films across the countryside.

Baptized by Beefcake presents the work of 22 artists whose posters tell the story of how Western movies not only became symbols of modernity, but also vehicles for religious experience. Each artist's signature style reflects Ghana's rich tradition of painting, as well as the influence of Western commercial graphics portrayed on VHS and PAL box covers. The eye-catching, sometimes shocking graphics reference a hybrid of indigenous and Pentecostal symbology, where Rambo and the Terminator become messengers of moral ideologies in a larger-than-life mashup of pop culture and religion.



Exhibition Poster
D.A. Jasper, 2019

Special Thanks

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Fred Kyeremeh | Founder of the <i>Ghanaian American Journal</i> |
| Birgit Meyer | Ghanaian religious scholar, Utrecht University |
| Bright Ackwerh | Contemporary Ghanaian artist |
| Jeffrey Paller | Ghanaian political historian, University of San Francisco |
| Jennifer Hart | Ghanaian scholar, Wayne State University |
| Trevor R. Getz | African scholar, San Francisco State University |
| Val Crosswhite | Poster House Board President |

This exhibition is made possible through a loan from the Ernie Wolfe Gallery in Los Angeles.

#PHGhana

Painting As Signage

“Painting in Ghana is as old as wood carving, metalwork, or pottery.”
—Emmanuel V. Asihene, Art Historian

Prior to gaining independence, many Ghanaians moved from rural areas to more densely populated cities seeking work and the free-flowing money brought in by British soldiers. To attract European clients, businesses started promoting their services through outdoor murals, a practice that evolved from the multi-century tradition of painting the exterior of one’s home. Soon, even mobile businesses (trucks, carts, traveling salesmen) started commissioning portable painted signage which displayed their services. Ghanaian cities were now overflowing with graphic design.

Painting was a revered art form in the Ghanaian Empire for thousands of years. Homes and shrines were frequently painted, primarily by women, in the belief that something adorned is always better than something unadorned. In the 20th century, with the country lacking functional printing presses, painting became especially valued for its commercial use. As sign painters became known for a particular style or artistic touch, they began signing and dating their work.



Outside Accra
Ernie Wolfe III, 1996

Almost every artist in this show participated in a rigorous apprenticeship program with a master painter. Young boys, mostly from poor families, would be picked based on talent shown in primary school to study under a master for an average of 3–4 years. During that time, they would receive room and board for their work while learning traditional artistic concepts of color blending, composition, and lettering. They typically produced signs for businesses as well as “praise portraits,” images of celebrities or generic beautiful women that could be sold to locals and tourists alike. The British had also established European-style art schools in larger cities at the beginning of the 19th century, and most government high schools in Ghana taught visual communication arts to feed into the sign-writing industry.

By the 1980s, sign painters had developed a new iconography. Painted American flags blanketed entire buildings, and decidedly American-sounding names were used for cool, trendy products. This is best seen in signs for barbershops, which touted fades and flat tops with names like Ford, Boeing 707, and Wall Street. The West represented potential. If the USA could achieve such heights following its independence from Great Britain, why not Ghana?



Toxic Avenger, 1990
Leonardo (Edward Lamptey, b. 1960)

- Leonardo is one of the most prolific innovators of letterforms within Ghanaian posters, leaning heavily on styles derived from Kung-Fu and other East-Asian film genres.
- This poster does away with the lead figure's iconic mop, and instead adds two semi-naked women at his feet who do not appear in the film.
- More than just a campy parable of good vs. evil, the movie is also an environmental tale of caution wherein the earth fights back against pollution — a concept many Ghanaians found relatable given the country's failed attempts at switching from an agricultural to an industrial economy.



King Kong Lives, 1992
Leonardo (Edward Lamptey, b. 1960)

- While the majority of this poster is an exact copy of the VHS box cover for the film, the tank and woman in the ape's hands, as well as the addition of another guerilla and woman surrounded by flames in the lower register, is entirely created from the artist's imagination.
- As the upper and lower sections of the poster vary tremendously in detail but are by the same artist, it is reasonable to conclude that visual excitement rather than realistic precision was the dominant concern.



Predator, 1993
Leonardo (Edward Lamptey, b. 1960)

- Leonardo removed Arnold's T-shirt from the original film still, showing off more of his bare chest. He also replaced Arnold's gun with a massive serrated knife. The biggest addition, however, is the presence of a bodacious female nude held by the monster—an entirely nonexistent part of the movie.
- The three posters by Leonardo are all for different video clubs—a single artist would frequently work for multiple distributors.



Jason Goes to Hell, 1994
Alex Nkrumah-Boateng (b. 1954)

- Severed body parts were a frequent addition to Ghanaian movie posters. They reference the local superstition that modern-day businessmen only obtain their money and success through the purchase of body parts on the black market, which they would then have a witchdoctor perform rituals upon as part of the “occult economy.” Wealth was seen as a potential sign of evil and corruption during Ghana’s economic freefall.
- Few of the details in this poster correlate to anything which occurs in the film.



Freejack, 1992

Alex Nkrumah-Boateng (b. 1954)

- Boateng is famous for his extreme attention to detail, naturalistic expression, and three-dimensional perspective, as well as the zig-zag edges of his canvases created through the use of pinking shears to keep the poster's edges from fraying.



Children of the Corn 3, 1997
Charles Manu (b. 1971)

- This poster depicts two separate moments toward the end of the film, while also incorporating an entirely fictitious explosion.



Aliens, c. 1990
D.A. Jasper (Daniel Anum Jasper, b. 1966)

- This image and the lettering are an almost exact copy of the PAL box cover, the only notable difference being the addition of the alien overhead.



The Barbarians, 1995

D.A. Jasper (Daniel Anum Jasper, b. 1966)

- Jasper was an actual bodybuilder, resulting in a fascination with and celebration of extreme muscles in his posters. This over-the-top elaboration on the human form led to other artists copying his “muscles on muscles” style that became a hallmark of the entire genre.
- *Akofena* (crossed swords) appear in many West African motifs, meant to represent courage and valor, as well as state authority.



Ghost, c. 1990

D.A. Jasper (Daniel Anum Jasper, b. 1966)

- In Ghana, the concept of ghosts coming back for revenge is a powerfully-held belief. Dozens of locally-made films have been made promoting this idea since the mid-1990s.
- This is one of the rare posters by Jasper which does not replicate a scene from the actual movie.



Splash, c. 1990
Designer Unknown

- *Splash* is one of the few American comedies that found success in Ghana. This is primarily because the lead character closely resembles the deity Mami Wata (Mammy Water).
- While worshiped throughout Africa, Mami Wata in Ghana is typically depicted as a woman with a fish tail. She is thought to control a paradise under the sea, filled with exotic treasures that she can bestow upon her followers.
- Her face has been almost entirely worn away because passersby have touched it in veneration.

Going to the Movies

**“These movie posters represent
the arrival of video to village life.”**

—Deirdre Evans-Pritchard, Film Historian

After Independence, all large, modern movie theaters in Ghana were state-run. However, after another economic downturn in the 1980s, these theaters could no longer afford to import new films from foreign countries. In time, the ability to even show older films dwindled, as the equipment fell into disrepair. This gap in the marketplace was the perfect opportunity for a few young, industrious Ghanaian men to create an independent, unregulated cinema network of their own—a new industry that needed posters to entice the public.

In the absence of official importers, new movies entered Ghana through three major channels: the bustling port system where British sailors brought in an assortment of PAL tapes, expats sending VHS tapes from abroad, and satellite TV, where those wealthy enough to have such a luxury would record movies onto VHS tapes. Self-employed distributors gathered these films and created their own networks or “video clubs,” commissioning posters for each movie before renting them out as a set to mobile cinema owners. Those men would take the video and poster along a self-made trade route through small towns. In each, they would connect a TV and VCR to a gas-run generator, promote the movie through a prominently displayed outdoor poster, and screen it until interest ran dry before moving on to their next destination.



Outside of Winneba

Ernie Wolfe III, 1995

The success of this cottage industry relied almost entirely on the excitement created by the posters. For most of these artists, this was their first time creating compositions involving visual narrative as opposed to static product representation. In the early days, the images mirrored the PAL and VHS box covers that would have arrived with the video, but with additional flourishes and embellishments to make the film seem even more exciting. As the industry expanded and artists became more adept at visually translating plot points, however, more imaginative compositions were created that had little in common with the movies.

Because these posters had to be light and portable, painting them on the large wooden panels typically associated with outdoor signage was impractical. Using paper, however, would have rendered them too fragile. Instead, artists recycled durable flour sacks as canvases, painting on one single bag or two bags sewn together for larger imagery. The posters could then be rolled around a dowel like a scroll and unfurled at each new destination. Through sun bleaching, dirt, and weather, many posters were gradually destroyed within a few years and used as scraps to fix other posters or turned into sleeping mats. The pieces in this exhibition are all miraculous survivors of the golden age of hand-painted posters.



Terminator, c. 1990

Stoger (Benjamin Tawiah, b. 1972)

- This poster uses the box cover for *The Terminator* as its inspiration, but elaborates upon it by removing Arnold's sunglasses and exposing part of his metal skull.
- Stoger also adds a nude couple in the lower register, which could reference the only love scene in the movie; however, neither of those characters have black hair.



Gargantua 2, 1999

Stoger (Benjamin Tawiah, b. 1972)

- Stoger's action-filled posters are drawn primarily from his imagination, often resulting in creative expressions of scale based on importance level rather than actual size. This is best shown in this poster where a human is not much smaller than Godzilla in one section, but a boat is tiny by comparison.



Vampire in Brooklyn, 1996
Joe Mensah (b. 1966)

- More so than Mensah's other posters, this design draws from the official PAL box cover; however, he has replaced the New York skyline in the lower register with an image of Eddie Murphy in a coffin—a scene that does not appear in the film but which would be attractive to hanaians who participate in elaborate, multi-day funerary practices.
- *The Asanbosam* and *Sasabonsam* are vampire-like figures existing within Asante folklore in Ghana, which may explain the popularity of vampire films in the region.



Hundra, 1993
Joe Mensah (b. 1966)

- While Mensah was inspired by the triumphant female figure on the box cover for this movie, he made her far more muscular and aggressive in the poster.
- The upper register is filled by a male warrior who does not appear in the film, but who serves as a presumed villain or “bad guy” that Hundra will defeat.



Terminator 2, 1993
Joe Mensah (b. 1966)

- Mensah is best known for a vibrant color palette, lavish detailing, and heavy, voluminous figures. He also is credited with inventing dozens of imaginary firearms to bring excitement to his posters, some of which appear here.
- This is the most elaborate poster for *Terminator* in the show, celebrating extreme musculature and movement, and displaying the essence of the film rather than any particular scene.
- The ability to recognize a billed star was of little importance in most Ghanaian movie posters —if not for his name in the upper right, Arnold Schwarzenegger could be any action hero.



Invasion USA, 1994
Dan Nyenkumah (b. 1969)

- This poster draws heavily from the video box cover, but removes the U.S. Capitol building in favor of a generic cityscape, increases the fiery explosions, and makes Chuck Norris excessively muscular.



Rambo 3, 1996
Dan Nyenkumah (b. 1969)

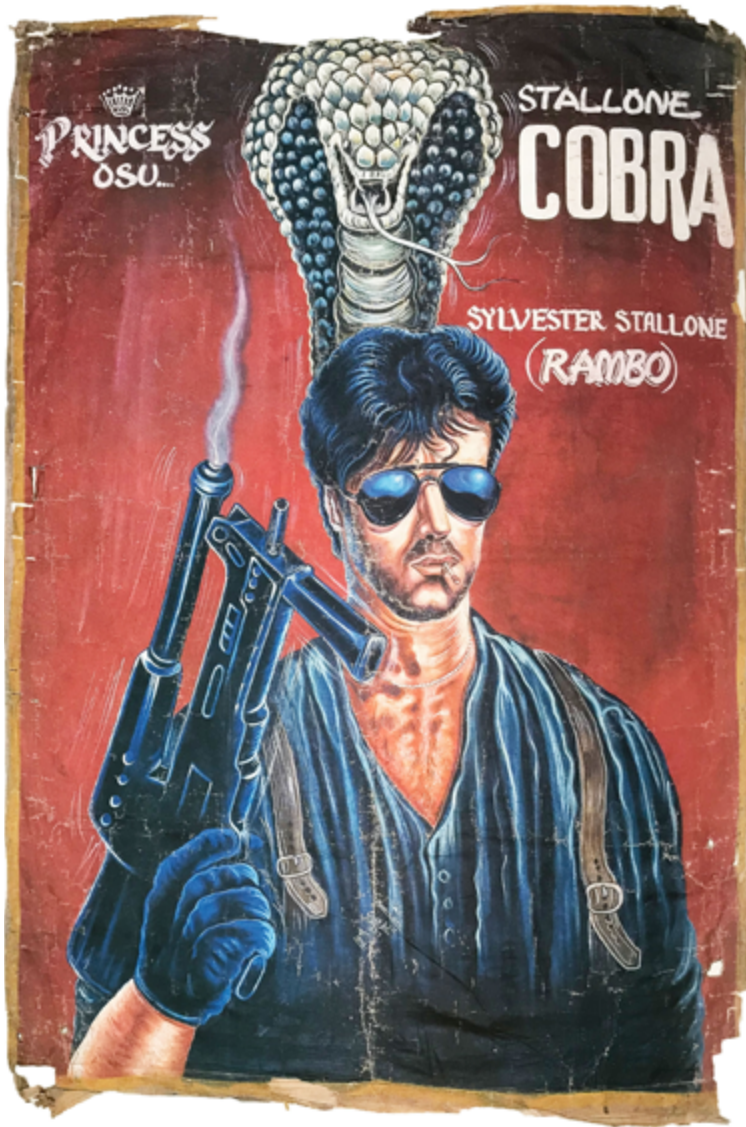
- Unlike *Rambo: First Blood* and its sequel, in which Sylvester Stallone plays an anti-establishment hero fighting for soldier's rights in the wake of the Vietnam War, *Rambo III* is a straightforward action flick in which the good guy fights against the Russians to save his friend.
- Rambo is styled like Jesus, with long flowing hair and an actual wound in his side that emulates Christ's on the cross. The artist has moved the bullet hole from Rambo's side to his chest, possibly the result of it fitting better within the composition.
- The poster is not drawn from any one image. Rambo's pose emulates that of the box cover of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, but the scene itself is taken from the final fight in the film when the two leads are in a trench with massive explosions going off every few seconds.



Robowar, 1994

Samuel Arts (Samuel K. Mensah, b. 1969)

- Samuel is especially famous for his use of electric blue and unrealistic, dramatic representations of fire, both of which are on display in this poster.
- The Italian film *Robowar* was never released in the United States, and is a low-budget knockoff of the *Predator* series mixed with *RoboCop*.
- None of this imagery appears in any promotional material for the film, most especially the giant, rippling arm of the robot in the foreground, which is always covered by armor in the movie.
- The female protagonist in the movie is only known as Virgin, an on-the-nose reference to what the viewer should find romantically desirable.



Cobra, c. 1995

Samuel Arts (Samuel K. Mensah, b. 1969)

- Snakes are an especially popular and loaded motif in West Africa. On the surface, their appearance can represent fertility or one's ancestors. There also exists a rural superstition in which practicing various rituals with a snake will lead to it vomiting money.
- While the image of Stallone is taken almost exactly from the movie box cover, the giant cobra is Samuel's own addition to the composition.



Basket Case, c. 1990
Samuel Arts (Samuel K. Mensah, b. 1969)

- Part of a popular series in Ghana, *Basket Case* deals with monsters, corrupt doctors, and an innocent protagonist being tempted by the sins of urban life.
- While the main composition is based on the PAL box cover, Samuel gave the male figure long, red fingernails and dramatic scratches on his face. He also completely changed the lettering away from the original, which was dripping with blood. The word “pussy” has also been removed from the background.

Media As Religion

Missionaries of various denominations came to Ghana in the mid-19th century, but those promoting Pentecostalism proved the most successful. The charismatic religion's love of pageantry through the incorporation of dancing, exorcism, divination, visions, prophecy, and spiritual healing, echoes traditional practices of many Ghanaian tribes. Some converts found ways to map their gods onto the Christian concept of demons, recasting rather than removing them. What emerged was a hybrid form of Christianity. In the 1980s, Pentecostalism gained further prominence as citizens relocated from their rural hometowns to big cities to find work, and looked to churches for a new type of community in an unfamiliar place.

"[Posters] offer viable entry points into understanding local expectations of films."

—Birgit Meyer, Ghanaian Religious Historian

Meanwhile, the role of churches was evolving. Before independence, the British Colonial Film Unit presented various forms of Western entertainment (mostly slapstick comedies) to locals. When Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah came to power in 1957, he nationalized the cinemas and banned Western movies as decadent remnants of colonialism. Instead, educational and religious programming proliferated in order to create what Nkrumah termed a "separate African identity" in mainstream media. Suddenly, religion was part of pop culture. Businesses began incorporating religious phrases into their branding, such as Almighty God Artworks, one of the sign-makers in Accra. Churches and open-air sites of worship became hubs of entertainment, hosting "concert parties" and movie screenings well into the night.

**Cape Coast**

Ernie Wolfe III, 1998

Up through the 1980s, religious film screenings were a deep-seated part of public programming, reinforcing Pentecostal morals through basic tales of good versus evil. When the black market brought in a surge of Western films during the 1990s, the public was already accustomed to seeing movies within that ideological framework. New distributors typically gravitated toward action movies and sci-fi thrillers in part because they showed a hero faced with modern-day conflicts of poverty, prostitution, alcoholism, corruption, and injustice—all standard fare in religious sermons. Suddenly Arnold Schwarzenegger is a proxy for Jesus, and there is neither irony nor sacrilege in that sentiment. Moreover, the sex, violence, and “sins” typically taboo within Ghanaian culture become a form of acceptable catharsis in these movies, but only because the outcome of good defeating evil is preordained.



House Party, 1990

Sowwy (Daniel Laryea Sowah, b. 1966)

- As one of the earliest posters in this exhibition, the image is a near-exact copy of the video box cover. Artists would take more creative license with posters starting in the mid-1990s.
- While action and horror films were the most popular in Ghana, this campy comedy was one of the first to showcase modern black affluence, a highly appealing subject for Ghanaians coming out of economic recession.
- The movie also works as a moral parable in that Kid, the protagonist, shuns alcohol and ends up with the “good girl” who does not have sex with him.



The Spy Who Love Me, c. 1990
Designer Unknown

- While the artist behind this poster is unknown, the presence of the video club's name indicates that it originated in Teshie, a coastal town just outside of Accra.
- It is interesting to note that several mistakes have been painted over, including the word "you" in the title, and the original placement of the video club's name, now covered by the head of a giant fish.
- The fish itself can be interpreted many ways, from being Ghana's primary source of meat along the coast to various Biblical references; however, it could also just be a decorative choice, not dissimilar from the way Ghanaians choose to incorporate their favorite hobby or interest in local coffin designs.



Commando, 1995
Gilbert Forson (b. 1975)

- Forson's signature starbursts are used to draw attention here to the giant gun as well as the knife.



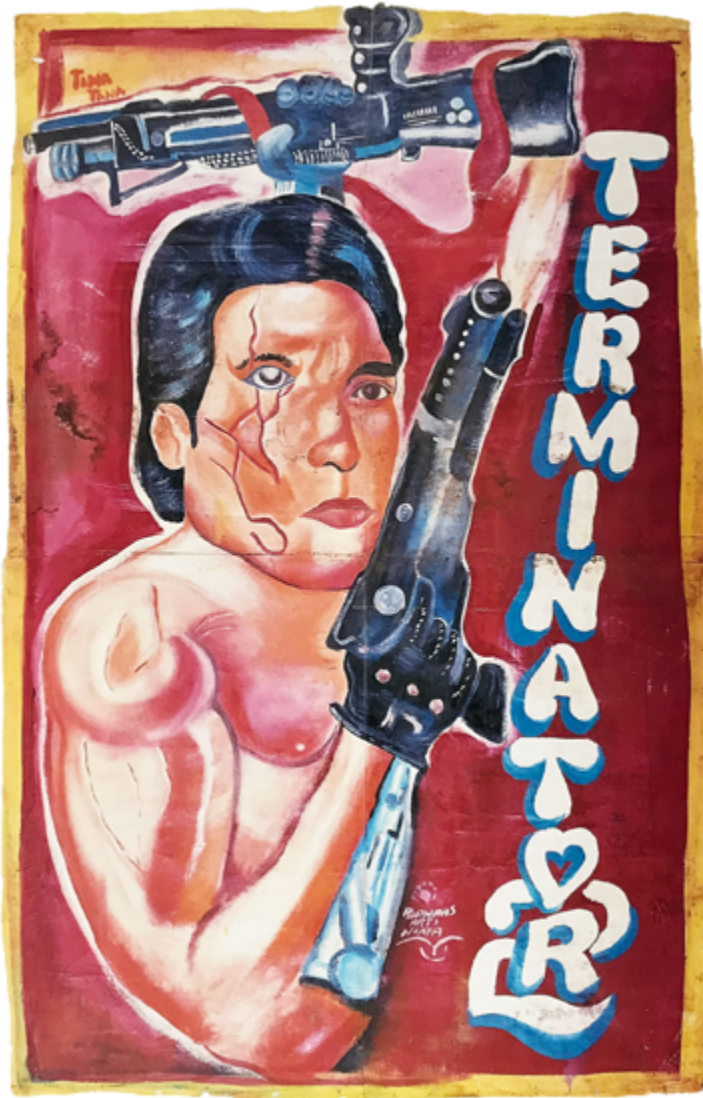
Basket Case 3, c. 1991
Death is Wonder (Kofi Kuwornu, b. 1969)

- Box covers for this film typically show the carriage holding three creatures. The artist has added the knife held by the baby, as well as three monsters floating above, all of whom appear in the movie but on none of the promotional material.



Evil Dead 2, c. 1990
Death is Wonder (Kofi Kuwornu, b. 1969)

- This design bears no resemblance to any promotional material for the movie, and makes reference to both imagined and actual scenes in the film. Most obviously missing is the lead's hybrid chainsaw-hand.
- This is one of the most complex and intricate posters in the entire exhibition, featuring incredible detail, lots of characters, and multiple artist-created vignettes.
- While also a comedy, the entire *Evil Dead* series emphasizes the existence of a parallel spiritual world that humans must fight to retain order—a common trope in many Pentecostal sermons.



Terminator 2, c. 1992
Ridwaas Arts

- This is the most imaginative poster for *Terminator 2* in the show, most especially because the “o” in the title is a heart.



Child'n of the Corn 3, c. 1993
Bright Obeng (D.A. Obeng, b. 1974)

- The entire *Children of the Corn* series is a perfect example of Pentecostal values being expressed through film. In it, the main monster is a false Christ figure who lures children to perform acts of violence on his behalf.
- The composition incorporates various moments from the actual film, as well as some characters, like a female priest, who did not appear in the story. It is interesting to point out that the three other figures, shown here as Caucasian, were African American in the movie. Neither of the two protagonists is shown.



Super Girl, 1999

Bright Obeng (D.A. Obeng, b. 1974)

- This British-made version of *Supergirl* was edited heavily by ABC before being broadcast on American television, so it is unclear which version would have been seen in Ghana.
- While the composition echoes promotional material for the movie, the New York skyline has been replaced by a generic cityscape.



Sheena, 1995

Bright Obeng (D.A. Obeng, b. 1974)

- Taking place in a fictional African country, this story follows the adventure of a white, blonde girl taken in as a baby by a local tribe.
- Sheena fights to protect the land from exploitation by those who wish to profit from its titanium-rich soil—a plot point which echoed Ghana’s own history of being used for its gold resources as well as, more specifically, its struggles under Rawlings who attempted (and failed) to change the economy from one of agriculture to one of heavy industry.
- The leader of the African tribe in the movie is played by the actual Princess of Tooro, a kingdom within present-day Uganda.

The End of the Golden Age

“Popular culture in Africa creates a hybrid space between the global and the local”
—Wendelin Schmidt, Ethnologist

The late 1990s saw lower worldwide commodity prices, an increase in television access, and the introduction of DVDs onto the global market. The Ghanaian economy was improving. Photo-offset film posters began arriving from the West, replacing painted posters in major cities, and mobile cinemas were pushed into more remote areas.

Meanwhile, local businesses started demanding digital collage-style signage as evidence of being modern. With less demand for hand-painted posters, most artists went to work as billboard or coffin painters. Some started creating movie posters for the tourist market, but these images lack both the intent and the authenticity of their predecessors, and aimed at appealing to foreign tastes instead of luring Ghanaians to the cinema. The years of traveling the country with a stack of tapes and a roll of posters had come to a close. The Golden Age was over.



The Expendables, 1998

Heavy J (E.A. Jears Oko Afutu, b. 1975)

- The central figure holding up his arms does not appear in this 1989 movie, but instead has been taken from one of the most famous scenes in *Platoon*. The other characters seem also to make reference to *Platoon*, in particular the red bandana worn by Charlie Sheen and the scarred face of Tom Berenger.
- By borrowing the most recognizable imagery from another blockbuster, Heavy J has created his own “improved-upon” interpretation of *The Expendables* —a practice utilized by many of these artists.



Poltergeist 2, 1995

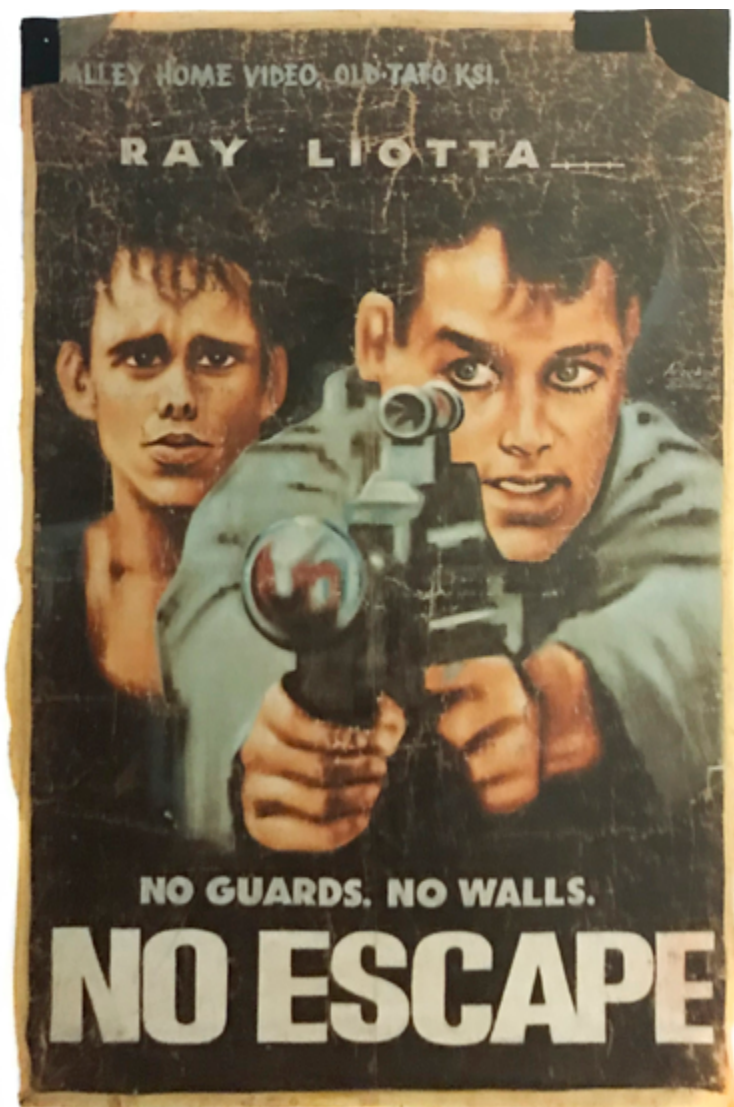
Heavy J (E.A. Jeurs Oko Afutu, b. 1975)

- The entire *Poltergeist* franchise would have been especially interesting to Ghanaians given its preoccupation with a parallel spirit world, a local belief pre-dating the arrival of Christianity in the country.
- This composition both references actual moments in the movie (a chain saw attacking a car, a bottle of tequila releasing a monster) with more imagined elements (the child in the film, for example, is known for her white-blonde hair).
- This is perhaps the most overtly pro-Pentecostal film in this exhibition, an exorcism leading to the destruction of the demon world and the salvation of a family.



Captain America, 1991
Lawson Chindayen

- This film was first released as a TV movie, giving Chindayen no printed material to draw from when creating this poster. He does, however, copy the film's tricolor lettering, presumably from the opening credits.
- Interestingly, the artist chose to make both Captain America and the villain, Red Skull, black, when they are both white in the film.
- The building in the lower right more closely resembles many of the Ghanaian Slave Castles—buildings along Ghana's coast where slaves were imprisoned before being shipped abroad—rather than Red Skull's Italian villa.
- There are three instances in this poster where the title "Captain Planet" has been written alongside the original title. Can you find them?



No Escape, c. 1994
Africatta (Kofi Nti, b. 1967)

- This poster takes elements from the tape box cover, but removes the African American actor Ernie Hudson from the composition.



Ticks, 1993
Francisco (Samuel Mensah, b. 1974)

- This is one of the most imaginative posters in the exhibition, capitalizing on the terror brought about by giant blood-sucking bugs rather than on any official images from the film.



Conan, c. 1990
Francisco (Samuel Mensah, b. 1974)

- This poster is an excellent example of the airbrushed style of the region, with the background and figures given depth and texture in ways distinctly different from those used in posters from the coast.
- The tableau of figures emulates a version of the tape box cover; however, the artist has curiously removed Grace Jones, the one black actor from the scene.



The Return of Swamp Thing, 1994
Muslim (Muslim Mohammed, 1967–95)

- *The Swamp Thing* series, like *The Toxic Avenger*, is more than just a good guy versus bad guy story, but also an environmental tale of caution—an interesting point given Ghana’s complex relationship with industrialization during the 1980s & 90s.



The Black Cobra, 1994

Muslim (Muslim Mohammed, 1967–95)

- Muslim had a great sense of skin tone and incredible realism, perhaps best displayed in this poster where the muscles and texture of flesh are almost tactile.
- *The Black Cobra* is an Italian blacksploitation version of the Stallone film *Cobra*, another popular film in Ghana.
- This poster is a near copy of the original box cover for the U.S. release, with various elements made larger, flashier, and more extreme.



Kick Boxer, 1994
Muslim (Muslim Mohammed, 1967–95)

- This composition is based on a later-release of the VHS tape, long after Van Damme became a household name.
- His giant hands and extreme, bulging muscles actually appear in the photo, making the colorful background the only aspect of the poster invented by the artist.



Kick Boxer, 1997

Babs (Abubakar Abdallah, b. 1975)

- The three portraits on the right are directly copied from the VHS tape; however, Babs has removed the middle image of Queen Latifah, turning her into the central figure. Her name has also been made larger than the rest of the cast's, and her pose and revealing costume are entirely artist-imagined.



Howard the Duck, 1989
Socrates Art (b. 1965)

- One of the most visually unique posters in this show, Socrates has created his own world of color and composition, referencing the titular duck only through the presence of a cracked egg.
- A hero who comes from an egg would have had added significance in Ghana, as all Akan chiefs are said to be born from eggs via the *Obaatan* (counselor to the King).
- Socrates loves to display white-hot explosions surrounded by tie-dye backdrops of paint, both of which are beautifully on display in this poster.





Press Reviews



The New York Times



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