City Carnival (detail), 2014. Oil on canvas, 151 x 151 cm.
In a career spanning over five decades as an exhibiting artist, Ablade Glover has immersed himself in a richly detailed examination of the process of painting in oils. The milestone of eighty years is traditionally called the Oak anniversary, in recognition of those qualities of stature, strength and endurance that miraculously develop with time out of the concentrated potential crammed within the acorn’s miniature form. It seems only appropriate, therefore, in celebrating the artist’s 80th year, to sketch a panoramic overview of the life of this quietly determined Ghanaian, who has grown progressively over time, and now stands as a towering figure adorning the world of contemporary African art.

Ablade Glover was born, in 1934, in a poor slum area in the centre of Accra, the sprawling capital of the British colony of the Gold Coast. Lively and inquisitive by nature, he was first sent to live with his father before being packed off, aged fourteen, to a Presbyterian boarding school in an attempt to channel his effervescent energies. Without the means to pay for secondary education, simple economic necessity dictated Glover’s next step, as Ghana, in the early Fifties, moved towards self-determined Independence. The newly-elected Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, himself educated in America and Britain, set about recruiting thousands of teachers to expand the emerging nation’s educational system. Glover was amongst the first wave of young men to enter state-funded Teacher Training Colleges. It was at this time that the young Glover’s artistic gift first attracted the encouraging eye of one of his tutors. On certification, he duly entered the classroom, and worked as a teacher for the next year. However, the tedium of a daily routine rehearsing basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills soon weighed heavily. Glover therefore applied to a two-year course in Art Education at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, containing one of the oldest, most distinguished art schools on the continent, which was affiliated to Goldsmiths College, London.

One of his teachers at KNUST, was an English textile specialist, named Mary Kirby, from London’s Central School of Art and Design who, in 1956, had been appointed to a post in Achimota College, Ghana. Recognising his potential, Kirby encouraged Glover to sit the entrance examination for a place at the Central School. Without realising it at that time, Glover had made his first contact with a remarkable group of artists and educators from that extraordinary institution known simply as Central, which emerged out of the Arts and Crafts movement at the end of the 19th century. It was typical of the inspirational influence of someone of Kirby’s stature, not only that she should spend time in Ghana pursuing research into the history of textiles, but that she would also consider it part of her mission to identify gifted individuals whom she felt should be invited back

Cover: Market Intrigues (detail), 2010. Oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm.

MAKING HIS MARK
Celebrating the 80th anniversary of Ablade Glover
to participate in the ongoing development of a school which has had a lasting impact on the course of British art, design and education. With Mary Kirby’s help, Glover compiled his first-ever portfolio of drawings and paintings, and soon learnt that he’d been offered a place. Sadly, financial considerations again meant that he couldn’t afford to seize this chance and, on leaving KNUST, he returned, once more, to teaching. Later, on learning of a government initiative to develop a textile company together with Unilever, Glover went for an interview hoping to secure a grant given to support the training of young Ghanaians abroad. When asked what and where he wished to study, his reply, that he’d already been accepted by London’s Central School proved decisive: the interview was quickly concluded, Glover selected, and ample funding secured. As the Central School agreed to transfer his offer to the following year, November of 1959, saw the twenty-five-year-old Ablade Glover leaving Ghana for the first time, and flying to London. There, as a student majoring in Textile Design, but nurturing a passion to pursue his minor in Drawing and Painting, a new world of opportunity opened up before him.

Landing in London when he did, on the cusp of the ‘Swinging Sixties’, meant that Glover arrived at the Central School during an extraordinary period of development, overseen by its post-war Principal, William Johnstone. Johnstone, himself a painter, had gathered about him an outstanding group of motivated teachers and theorists amongst whom were counted some of the finest artists of the day: Victor Pasmore, Alan Davie, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi amongst others. Like many Central students, Glover recalls the sheer impact of that bustling institution; the excited cacophony of interdisciplinary conversations; the encouragement of experimentation and the ongoing cross-fertilisations between different Design departments, which he would later recognise had changed his attitude to so many things. Amongst those teachers whose influence he particularly remembers was Anton Ehrenzweig, an Austrian émigré lawyer, now working as a professional textile designer. Like Johnstone, Davie and many others at Central, Ehrenzweig was interested in the psychological roots of the creative process, and his book, The Hidden Order of Art (1967), remains a classic text of modern art theory. Another teacher was Gordon Crook, who gave Glover insight into the mechanical aspects of dyeing and invaluable guidance with his dissertation, Africa and African Textiles. Glover remembers Crook’s insistence that: ‘You cannot just put colours down on paper! Whatever you design, you must be able to interpret it. Any mark you make on paper, must survive going to the darkroom and, when it returns, being printed; it must carry through the whole process.’ The authentic overtones of Central’s insistence on the critical importance of ‘Basic Design’ still resonate strongly today. Glover continues: ‘That really impressed me! I realised that a teacher must be a practising person, not merely someone who just talks and talks. Central’s teachers were real people, and many instructors were hard-working professionals, who only taught a few days a week. You worked harder for them, because you knew they really knew what they were talking about. I remember Gordon Crook so well, because, when Gordon came to take class, everyone was very happy.’ Crook, himself a former textile design graduate of the Central School, also taught at the
Royal College of Art before emigrating to New Zealand, in 1972. There, he worked as an artist and designer in print, paint and tapestry. Today, he is still remembered as the first among New Zealand’s contemporary textile artists, with commissioned works on display in many of that country’s embassies.

On graduating with his NDD from the prestigious Central School, Glover returned to Ghana in November 1962, only to discover that the textile factory, where he was to have worked, had still not been built. He began to paint seriously again, creating a sufficient number of canvases to be offered a solo exhibition at the Art Centre in Accra, in 1963. In search of someone of influence to open his first exhibition, he sought the help of the American, Shirley Graham Dubois, wife of the great civil rights activist and pan-Africanist, W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom, with Nkrumah’s backing, had recently become Ghanaian citizens. Before agreeing to open his show, Mrs. Dubois, who became head of the Ghana television company (GBC TV), first asked to see the work. Glover felt embarrassed that his home was too poor for such a distinguished lady, but she insisted on visiting, and he was delighted when she finally agreed to open the show. She also offered to help find Glover a position within the GBC, but he told her that his heart was now set on returning to England, to study Art Education at Newcastle University. All he needed was to sell enough paintings during the show to be able to afford the fees and his airfare. One day, out of the blue, a car arrived from Mrs. Dubois informing him that the President wanted to see him immediately. Chauffered to the Presidential Lodge, in something of a daze, he was ushered into the presence of Mrs. Dubois, who stood casually talking with Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana. Following her introductory lead of, ‘Here is the young man I told you about,’ Glover, as though in a dream, chatted amicably, for a few minutes, with the great man, before he turned back to her, and said, ‘Well then, everything is arranged!’ He was next taken to see the Secretary, who gave him a letter from the Scholarship Secretariat for the High Commissioner in London, instructing that all his fees be paid whilst he was in Britain. After finishing the course in Newcastle, he returned to Ghana where, for the next seven years, he was content to teach Fabric Design and Printing at KNUST. Interestingly, one of the Fine Arts students at KNUST during that same time, was the young El Anatsui. Supported by his teaching position, Glover’s own art practice now began to flourish, and, in 1968, he realised a long-held dream of creating a gallery to show his art, by founding the eponymous Glo Art Gallery.

Ready for change once again, he seized the opportunity for more overseas experience, moving on to graduate studies in the United States. In 1971, he arrived at Kent State University, Ohio (a year after the fatal shootings) where he received his Master’s Degree, before proceeding to Ohio State University, where, in 1974, he was awarded his Doctorate, on Art in Education in Africa. The following two decades saw him put these
now extensive studies in textiles, design, painting and art education to efficient use, teaching at the College of Art in KNUST, where he eventually rose to become both Departmental Head and College Dean. Since Glo Art Gallery had foundered during his absence in the States, he next established the Artists Alliance Gallery, in Accra, to exhibit the work of contemporary West African artists. The demands of supervising this fledgling enterprise together with College administrative responsibilities left him precious little time to exercise his passion for painting. Only on retiring, in 1994, was Glover able to channel the pent-up energies of those intervening years into a sustained outpouring of creativity, resulting in the richly diverse paintings of the last two decades.

Glover describes his own work as developing from an attraction to certain kinds of disorder or chaos, a fascination with events that develop in ways that are unstructured or cannot easily be defined. This general statement makes more sense when looking at his recurrent interest in the subject of crowds, which examine the randomly chaotic, yet highly motivated movement characteristic of gatherings of people. These become the common theme of so many of his canvases, which focus on market-places, lorry-parks, bus-stations, beaches and city-centre scenes, in fact, anywhere providing all those unpredictable conditions of tumultuous, energetic motion that captivate his enquiring eye. Crowds display many different moods: the random browsing of city-centre shoppers; the excited activity of swimmers on beaches; the emotionally charged surges of political rallies; or the euphoria of fans at a football match. Each one suggests various aspects of the emergent behaviour of large groups of people, and all of them mesmerise Glover, proving an endless source of inspiration.

During the early years of the 20th century, artists, for the first time, began to grapple with the complexities of movement in an entirely different way. For centuries, the classical representation of people and scenery had been conditioned by the paradigm of a picture as encapsulating a discrete slice of time captured from a single place, which denoted the artist’s (and, by extension, the viewer’s) own perspective. The arrival of the modern camera in the 1840s and its continuing and rapid improvement had already begun to affect artists, some of whom, like Degas, were quick to experiment with the device, even as they continued their painting. The earliest cameras were totally insensitive to movement, their long exposure times ensuring that any moving thing remained invisible. Surprisingly, the first Daguerrotypes of Parisian scenes showed neither people nor vehicles, precisely because they moved, and were therefore not recorded. But with the improvement of film, the chronophotography of Marey and Muybridge and the arrival of the Lumiere brothers’ invention, movement became a subject in its own right, and the early 20th century saw artists beginning to take account of the new technology’s transformative vision of the world. Balla’s, Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash (1912) and Duchamp’s, Nude Descending a Staircase (1912) are both early examples of the reaction of the visual artists. Liberated from the restrictive constraints of single points in time and space, successive waves of artists reshaped the boundaries of these freedoms as the century progressed.