

Lawrence Mwangi [Shabu]

Shabu Mwangi is a 25-year-old Kenyan artist living in Mukuru slum. He is one of the founders of the Wajukuu art project that provides Art classes to children in low incomes areas. Deeply rooted in his community, Shabu has always worked as an activist and artist, he also collaborates with the organization Art2Be working with marginalized groups using artistic and therapeutic methods to fight stigma and discrimination.

Most of his activities as an artist and as a community worker are derived from his view that a lot of inequities and frustrations deeply affect his society. Art for him is the only tool for him to see his dreams come true despite the circumstances and that gives him self confidence and a hope that better understanding between ethnic groups can improve our world.

"My work speaks from deep down my heart and is what I see and feel about our surroundings. My work involves a political view in one way or another and also shows how people relate to each other despite the border between rich and poor, immigrants and citizens, able and disabled. It is about reaching new means of communication. In my work I try to show how we can go back to when we used to live as one community. It is my way of going back to childhood; I paint often with the eyes of a child. How do we approach life after what happened in 2007, how do we live now with different views and experience without forgetting that we have a common origin and the same belief in a better future".

Shabu Mwangi gives us a tale of the inside, a broken silence where the faces and the bodies do not need any narrative interpretation. The obscurity of this painting proceeds from a personal experience and from fundamental emotions. Like an incessant path between strength, weakness and pain, this work put us in the place of the artist and the viewer, a constant reminder that our existence is very fragile.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest
sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Paul Onditi

Paul Onditi was born and grew up in Kenya but left after college for Germany where he joined the Offenbach University of Arts. He sees his ways of expression as a combination of African nature and a European acquired knowledge in Arts.

His paintings take us to strange places. They would almost look scary, but in fact, an odd quietness hangs over them, a kind of dead calm that disturbs and attracts. For a long time, he has sought a way to express the human condition and its inherent conflict, deeply affected by the tragedy of the soul in the Christian tradition. His use of black and white refers to good and evil, the confrontation between light and dark, our inner conflict: *"That is the reason I paint and sculpt. I do that to capture moments and happenings in my own life, my own self"*.

Uncertainty is at the core of his practice, the loss of control is an integral part of his work, his mental maelstrom does not have any grip on the rational, are we in a dream or in the lab of a crazy alchemist trying to alter our mind with his hallucinogenic vision ? These dreams are like fantasies; these nightmarish visions show that painting can still be mysterious in Kenya.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Xavier Verhoest

Xavier Verhoest was born in Boma (DRC, ex Zaire) in 1964. He lives in Nairobi since 2001 where he works as an artist and art curator. He is the co-founder of Art2Be (www.art2bebodmaps.com), an organization aiming at bringing positive living and social changes in the society with the use of Art.

After finishing his studies in cinematography and editing, Xavier has worked between 1992 and 2003 as a non medical volunteer for Medecins Sans Frontieres.

Since 2003, he has shown in Nairobi, Paris and Brussels. He is preparing his second solo show in Brussels at the Roots Contemporary gallery in January 2011.

Xavier Verhoest is not attached to a given, historical place in a romantic way, rather he creates new places by means of his work. His work does not invoke a particular sea or sky; it is the wider concept that a painting does not represent a place, but becomes an inner landscape, filled with memory and duration.

Most of his work is inspired by a personal experience linked to a larger context (some of the clouds shown here are images taken in the sky of Nairobi during the post electoral violence of 2007 or the seascape- not shown here- is related to his experience in the Gaza Strip). His paintings have an impact at two levels; they call for a solitary monologue that he wants to share with us, an illusory attempt to break the silence and at the same time they represent an obsessive landscape using the painterly tradition- horizontality, light effect, depth. This is a place that we are all aware of, somewhere, a place of silence and distance where there is a shift between what is real, remembered or imagined.

Dale Webster, ex-lecturer of Art Theory at the University of Leeds (UK):

The first of Xavier Verhoest's images that I encountered were in a small exhibition space in Nairobi. They were large pictures which seemed to resist the confinement of the gallery space and expand into a picture space which was both figurative and abstract, the figurative elements providing access into to a deep internal space dominated by blues and grays, a sort of atmospheric perspective of the mind. One in particular suggested an open sea stretching to a distant horizon crossed by breaking waves, but strangely, this "seascape" did not present openness and vastness, the usual characteristic of such a construction, but rather enclosure and containment.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

It is this apparent visual contradiction which is a theme running through much of his recent work, a theme which is at once unsettling and quite beautiful at the same time.

It's not easy to write about Xavier's work and the layers of visual metaphor. If it were, I guess the images would be redundant. They certainly have an initial visual impact, and this belies the intricacies of small detail and thoughts, often expressed in written phrases which weave from the surface, where they should be, into and around elements in the picture space, sometimes fading as if rubbed out by the weather they encounter. Thought integrated into the fabric of the picture. And the thoughts, the metaphors, seem consistently to focus on our inability to break free, from oppressors, taboos, clans, and in the end ourselves. Hence the contradiction in the painting of the wave. It originates in Gaza and a people contained, where the sea seems to offer an escape, but in reality it is of course another barrier, a further constraint. The metaphors expand. It's as if we are led by these small details of tree or petal or stem, always natural elements, into a Rothcoesque internal space which by its very incoherence is quite repellent. There is no peace here. This is not a safe place. It is the place of the dispossessed and the displaced of the world.

In his most recent work these same ideas have been transposed into three-dimensional objects, sculptured forms, which whilst losing the abstract imaginary space of two dimensions, are made concrete in forms suggestive of a helmet, a miniature prison room or a faceless head set into the ground of a white cubic cage. One feels that these objects express something much more personal, much closer to the artists own experience of displacement. Through the very intimacy of these solid forms we are presented with the idea of a personal and cultural alienation from a world falling apart, a world in which he has spent his working life helping to reconstruct.

So, we have in these strangely sterile personal objects and apparently benign and beautiful images of sky, sea, flowers and trees, a powerful reflection on the nature of the human condition in its social, political and personal manifestation, and we are left with the contradictions with which we started, and which are at the very heart of the matter. The truth in Xavier's work, the final extension of the visual metaphor, is that we cannot but be a part of, and yet we are of course, all of us, **displaced**.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Selection of exhibitions

Shades of Memory: exhibitions in Rahimtullah Museum Of Modern Art, Nairobi, Kenya (2003)

Exhibition at French Cultural Centre, "Peace and War", Nairobi (04-05/2004)

East African Biennale, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania (11/2004)

Solo show, Saint Job Art gallery, Brussels (04-05/2005)

Solo show, private, Paris (06/2005)

Solo Show, Espace Marcadet, Paris (09/2006)

Solo show, Le Rustique Art Gallery, Nairobi (03/2007)

Solo show, Alliance Francaise, Nairobi "JMG Le Clezio et autres mots" (03/2009)

Solo show, private, Paris (06/2009)

Solo show, Le Rustique Art Gallery, Nairobi (03/2010)

Solo show, Alliance Francaise of Nairobi (10/2010)

"Des traversees, des songes", project with writer Jerome Lafargue (1st part)

Solo Show, Rahimtullah Museum Of Modern Art, Nairobi (12/2010)

Alliance Francaise, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia (04/2011)

"Des traversees, des songes", project with writer Jerome Lafargue (2nd part)

Solo show at Roots Contemporary Gallery, Nairobi (05/11)

"La Terre nous est etroite"

In January 2012 "I have only what I remember" at Roots Contemporary gallery, Brussels

Works on display at Libre Cours Art Gallery in Brussels (www.librecourseu.com) and Roots Contemporary gallery, Brussels (www.r8ts.biz)

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Miriam Syowia Kyambi

Syowia's current project "Fracture (i)" was showed for the first time at the *ARS 11* exhibition part of the Kiasma Museum, a project curated by Johanna Vuolasto at the **Kouvola Art Museum** in Finland.

The work is an installation/performance piece: a narrative about the past, identity, the preservation of cultural heritage, and contemporary lifestyle of a woman striving for middle class status. The loss of knowing one's self and ultimately falling apart, creates an opportunity for the character to go through a process of mourning acknowledging the impact of Christianity on her nation's heritage, allowing for catharsis.

Syowia earliest moments with art was painting with wax and water colours at Teresa Musoke's (established Ugandan artist) house. Her parents had acknowledged and promoted Syowia's talents from an early age. During her high school years she was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate course for Art and Design and was taught by Liza Mackay, however her most favored memory was working with Kenyan sculptor Morris Foit under the schools artist in residency program. Not realizing that her passion for art would become a career, she enrolled in a liberal arts college in New Hampshire U.S.A. There she explored painting, theater, and art history in specific looking at photography, the feminism movement in America, revolutionary artists of Mexico in the 1920's as well as the works of Samuel Becket, William Burroughs and Francis Bacon. As she craved to broaden her horizons she transferred into the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (S.A.I.C) in 2000. Chicago offered Syowia a connection to a variety of students and interesting professors who were active in Chicago art scene.

At S.A.I.C her primary departments were that of sculpture and printmaking although she dabbled with the fiber section, which today has become her prominent medium, creating mixed media installations and performances. It was during the last year of her stay in the U.S.A that she developed the first transitional/transformational installation work, *Todes Atem (Deaths Breath)* in 2002 - 2003. The work relates with the pre-terminal loss of self, the concluding period of an individual and the remnants of that life.

During this time, Syowia was also working for the school's international trips to Germany researching "History, Memory and the Holocaust" as a result of her experiences with (mostly Jewish American) the art student group and her own

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

background of having German lineage, she created a series of works titled *Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Rosewood U.S.A* and *Untitled* upon her return home to Nairobi in 2003. These works created parallels between North American history and World War II holocaust and were featured at the UNESCO Promotion of Arts award hosted in Bamako, Mali in 2004.

The next transitional work for Syowia started in 2007 and its process completed in 2009. Around the same time she was commissioned by the National Museums of Kenya creating "*Infinity: Flashes of the Past*" which was installed at the Nairobi National Museum and is part of its permanent collection. The work is a photographic installation with an octagon shaped mirror, small chains and scanned archive photographs framed in wood. Going through the museums archive and revisiting her childhood experiences allowed Syowia to create *WoMen, Fraulein, Damsel and Me*. The documentation of this installation & performance work was translated into video format in 2010 and was featured in *SPace: Currencies in Contemporary African Art* at the Museum Africa in Johannesburg, South Africa. Thembinkosi Goniwe & Melissa Mboweni curated the exhibition. This installation work was initially exhibited in 2008 at her solo exhibit *Gender, Power & the Past* at the Goethe-Institute in Nairobi. The work was a personal process that allowed Syowia to engage with her own entrapment by the effects colonial history had on her family, later becoming a defining moment in her professional development.

In 2009 Syowia received a research scholarship from the Mexican External Affairs Ministry. Her experience in Mexico City was another important turning point in her career. This experience accumulated into a solo exhibition titled *Permiso : Excuse Me (2010)*, curated by James Muriuki at the Nairobi National Museum. The work was based on identity and the flux between traditional and modern lifestyle. Syowia worked with a variety of media ranging from digital video, installations, digital photography as well as mixed media collage works and block prints.

In Mexico, Syowia created the first of a series titled "*Between the Doors*", the first of which showcased at an exhibition *Cross Cultural Connection (2009)* at La Casa de San Fernando in Mexico City.

The second, "*Between the Doors (ii)*," created in Nairobi is now permanently part of the Kouvola Art Museum's African Art Collection.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

William Wambugu

William is still a young artist who has had little exposure but has great creativity. He was trained at art and design school and followed workshops and extra art lessons where he forged his truly personal style. He lives through his art instead of just practicing it. He explores his personal world and perceptions like the kaleidoscope of human kind. Out of each detail he deduces a universal comprehension of the world he is living in.

William is a meticulous observer who talks about the people of Kenya . More precisely about the objects that surround them. Each object with its own means depicts the changes of the fast growing society. He uses black ink on paper or cardboard to trace delicate lines. The objects depicted are either real or shadow, it depends from which point of view you see them.

For his second group show, William has made an "Anthology" of the tools used in the rural area of his homeland Nyeri. Like the "Madeleine" of Proust, he records and carefully draws each of them not to be forgotten by future generations. The representation is delicate and simple and at the same time it has strength. The drawings are like a page of an Encyclopaedia or an Anthology explaining and describing a entire group of people by their habits and traditions. As they are gathered on the wall, one could surprisingly wonder about the possible transformation of these quiet tools into weapons.

William was born in 1983 in Nairobi where he lives and works. He will be having his first solo show in Brussels in the early summer.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Gor Soudan

Gor Soudan would rather not be called a visual artist or an art writer. 'Tags are stifling extensions of the artist... they act as tethers, limiting the scope of expression'. Written and visual languages are a means of recording and expressing his thoughts and emotions. 'How I choose to express myself should not define who I am'. By using crows he expresses something that is different from what he would put into his work using people "... I can put more nonsense, more satire and fantasy into the birds..." His current works; ***people as crows and crows as people***, investigates the subtleties of contemporary culture by mirroring similar qualities in birds and people.

Born in 1983, He trained as an artist on the backs of school exercise books, walls at home and dirt on the fields. He has a B.A (Philosophy, Sociology) from Egerton University, Kenya.

About the works on display:

"Murder: People as crows and crows as people" is the artist's curiosity of how crows and people mirror one another. A murder of crows, as a family of crows is known, will savagely attack strange ones who stray into their midst, or kill a dying member. They are also somewhat Kinky, letting ants run up their feathers. Their traits and intelligence are disturbingly human-like; no wonder they are considered pests.

"An old letter found in the trash addressed to A.N Other": I found this old scarred letter, addressed to A.N. Other in the trash. Even though the words have long faded, and the paper brittle from age, I discovered that, somehow, I could make out the words NATO, A.U, Gaddafi, Oil and Sovereignty by holding up a mirror to it. As it turns out, just a lot of old things on paper.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

Peterson Kamwathi

Peterson Kamwathi is currently one of the most internationally acclaimed artists from Kenya.

Working here in charcoal on paper he delivers an intelligent piece inspired by the Bill of Rights of the new Constitution.

"Fundamental Freedoms" examines minorities' rights with a naked male of non-African descent progressing through the field of view surprisingly and hilariously unconcerned, or perhaps unaware, as to his condition. He is as unselfconscious as to be standing in the queue at the local supermarket, a reminder of how the customary to one may appear freakish to another. This is a wonderful sketch of a patchwork of complex social, political and visual contrasts.

He held an exhibition in Germany last month, was winner of the Paul Klee residency in Berne the previous month, held a solo show in London last year and attended a four month residency at the Rijksakademie just following that.

Other honours include residencies at Bath Spa University, The London Print Studio and winner of the prestigious Ruth Hunt Wood residency at Kentucky University.

Kamwathi's 'Sitting allowance series' was recently purchased in its entirety by the Robert Dervereux collection, London. 'The Fundamental Freedoms' follows a similar format.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

James Muriuki

James came across photography as another tool for practicing artistry when he joined the university to study design. He started making experimental snapshots once in a while when he could manage to get the negatives printed. After the university he worked for some years at RaMoMA-Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art in various capacities. In 2004, he was asked to create a body work to be included in the "KenyaArt" exhibitions showcased in five galleries in New York. For the first time, he was challenged and confronted by the idea of consciously creating a theme. Since then, James has created numerous works that have been included in many important and seminal exhibitions, workshops and projects.

A recurring subject demonstrated in many forms, is the transition and a record of the urban space and its many attributes. Living in Nairobi makes it his primary observation space and this extends to other urban spaces. The works are an illustration of a confluence of inter-dependent happenings in an ever-changing landscape. Some work from this series was included in the exhibition Snap Judgements: New positions in Contemporary African Photography, curated by Okwui Enwezor at ICP in New York. This exhibition is one of the landmarks of photography generated from and influenced by Africa which toured many museums. Architectural forms and constructions are another of the visual elements that are evident in his work as a metaphorical symbol. The forms brew numerous questions of a society and its interactions. Some of these works are presented as solid forms and lines, elevating themselves very sculpturally. This work was part of his solo exhibition at Goethe Institute, Nairobi curated by 3Collect (an artists collective engaging the curatorial practice of which he is a member). It was also part of the exhibition Mwangalio Tofauti, first exhibited at the Nairobi Gallery, National Museums of Kenya. Other works that are predominantly architectural have been selected for inclusion in photographic exhibitions on Africa and won an award in the pan-Africa photography contest in the Taarifa Africa Film Festival in Spain.

At present, he is experimenting with motion, video and alternative ways of using photography and combining it with other media - ultimately exploring photography as a medium and a process of making art. He has collaborated with artists from different countries on new works over residencies and workshops as well as on a personal edict.

James lives and works in Nairobi and his work has been exhibited in Kenya, South Africa, USA, Denmark, Spain, and Germany among other countries.

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com

In Transition

This exhibition presents James's work in progress. It is his engagement with a city and by extension a country in transition. A transition that has been expected for long. Recent strides in business opportunities with the east, consumer spending, inflows of currency from the Diaspora and other factors fueling it.

Many streets and neighborhoods in Nairobi are being transformed every day by its shifting architecture. In the last few years road infrastructure set the pace for expansion and land prices sky-rocketed as developers and speculators go for every available square foot. There are many that are left out relegated to spectators. They hear and read about development statistics, and work on the very spaces that generate the statistics.

Many of those left searching for hope, console themselves as having found it in the Pentecostal phenomena, which is not left behind in the rush for growth and expansion. The church leaders quest to conquer new grounds in the sprawling peri-urban and rural landscapes. They wear smart and flamboyant attire oozing confidence in the name of Jesus and rebuke the spirit of hopelessness and despair from their followers, who are only required to make a generous contribution to the work of God.

The new youngsters have their space too. It is a generation that is highly connected to the rest of the world as it has grown knowing the mobile phone and the internet. Alternative attire and apparels have been coming from China and style found common ground in the public transport. The ever vibrant Matatu (aka ma-three or matt e.t.c) has had its internal metamorphosis, each stage claimed by its generation. It has become an icon, at least to many in Nairobi, of an urban culture and identity.

This photo, Untitled 90x60, is part of the exhibition "In Transition" at Roots Contemporary Gallery in Brussels. The exhibition will be open until 22 January 2012. For more information see www.r8ts.eu

Beyond Black On White

An exhibition at the Residency of the Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi

November 2011

Curated by Samantha Ripa di Meana and Xavier Verhoest

sam@r8ts.eu and info@xavierverhoest.com