

**The Representation of Womanhood in Kenya's Contemporary Painting:
Mukabi's *mama kibanda*/ Representação da mulher na pintura
contemporânea do Quênia: a *mama kibanda* de Mukabi**

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ABSTRACT

A look at contemporary painting in Kenya exposes the palpable cultural distance between international scholars and the art producing community. It also provides a plausible explanation for the conflicts between the naïve/abstract style on the one hand and the realistic/representational ones on the other; a position that hampers aesthetic appreciation and self understanding. Therefore, Patrick Mukabi's paintings, with their commonplace *everywoman* (*mama kibanda*) form the substance of this paper. Intended as a contribution to the discourse, this critique concentrates on one of the themes tackled in today's paintings. Previous discussions were anchored on style. While these helped fetch high prices in the global art markets, they contributed little to furthering the construction of a home grown aesthetic. And the obtaining situation is somewhat comparable to language: foreign debates about a language fail to improve it for the native users and in like vein foreign debates about Kenyan paintings do little to improve Kenya's aesthetic. The portrayal and consequent aesthetic of womanhood comprises the main argument, centered on the ordinary, commonplace woman because she reflects the society appropriately, displaying the everyday with ease, according to Mukabi. Further, Mukabi's portrayal of woman is compared to that of his contemporaries. The place, attitude and appreciation of woman is analysed and, as the figure is quizzed, it emerges that Mukabi covers the four Aristotelian causes that lead to possessing knowledge. Themes in contemporary paintings, like the *mama kibanda*, resonate with current narratives in Kenya.

KEYWORDS:

Contemporary painting, everywoman, everyday aesthetics, naïve art, international scholars, style, theme.

1 Introduction

Historiography on Kenyan contemporary painting has so far been the work

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of international scholars like Miller, Agthe, Deliss, Kasfir, Arnold and Court² *inter alia* who have done a commendable job. However, because of their cultural distance, they have emphasized style with little mention of the content of these paintings.

This article, from a local scholar, deliberates on the content of Patrick Mukabi's paintings. He is an established artist whose depiction of womanhood is compared to that of his contemporaries, Michael Soi and Mary Ogembo, in an effort to demonstrate Mukabi's unique aesthetic.

The article highlights characteristics used by Mukabi to signify womanhood; the iconic apron or *lesso*, wrapped around her figure as she works to feed her family and larger society. The feeding is both literal and metaphorical.

In conclusion, the general possibility of expressing a Kenyan aesthetic through contemporary painting is considered and a more engaged discourse, on visual art, from local scholars is encouraged.

2 Who is *mama kibanda*?: meaning and significance:

Mukabi has based his paintings on an unmistakable theme –woman. He has been doing so for the last 30 years (c. 1986 to 2019) He depicts the everyday woman who commercializes home-making chores; the blue-collar workingwoman, in a sense *everywoman*. (cf. figure 1, 2 and 3)

Thang'wa, J. and Swigget, M.(THANG'WA, 1998) have integrated Mukabi's work into their evaluation of contemporary culture though none has dedicated a monograph to him. Unlike their integrated approach, the present distillation centres on Mukabi's painting of the figure and idea of woman.

Mama kibanda loosely translates to the woman of the kiosk. She is

²Miller, Judith von D. *Art in East Africa: A guide to contemporary art*. F. Muller, 1975.
 Agthe, Johanna. *Wegzeichen: Kunst aus Ostafrika 1974-89*. Vol. 5. Museum, 1990.
 Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Africa explores: 20th century African art*. Museum for African Art, 1991.
 Deliss, Clementine, and Catherine Lampert. "Seven stories about modern art in Africa." (1995).
 Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. *Contemporary African Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.
 Court, Elsbeth. "Annotated Chronology for the Emergence of Modern Art in Kenya." *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 1 (2017): 105-112.

however, difficult to describe with accuracy! She is that person who carries out odd jobs to put food on family tables; a casual labourer, participant in the informal economy. Wholesome meals she provides to those of lean pockets. She may be found in homes sorting out laundry, doubling up as the nanny, the indubitable vendor of assorted wares in the marketplace; she is a permanent fixture in Kenya's urban life; she is equally a permanent fixture in Mukabi's paintings.

Mukabi represents her in her working context, surrounded by the tools of her trade and wearing a *lesso*. *Lesso* or *kanga* is an iconic piece of fabric, carrying significant history and culture. It has been used, for several centuries, along the East African coast like the language of similar origin, Kiswahili. It has gradually moved into the hinterland (BOSWELL, 2006). *Mama kibanda* dons a *lesso* as an apron for her work; she ties it loosely around her waist. (cf. figure 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7)

There are other ways of wearing this garment e.g. the double *lesso* covering a woman from head to foot which style indicates Islamic influence that obliges appropriate covering of women in public. And the style is prevalent along the Indian ocean coast where Swahili culture has imbibed Islamic traditions.

By dressing his figure in a single (not double) *lesso*, tied loosely around the waist, Mukabi emphasizes its apron-status, signaling the woman at work –not at a beauty pageant! The single *lesso* also confines Mukabi's figure to Kenya because neighbouring Rwanda, Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia do not use it as an everyday working garment. Tanzania does but tends to adopt the coastal double style. Thus with a few brush strokes, Mukabi recreates a working woman who is unmistakably Kenyan.

3 The Artist Mukabi: his theme and style

Mukabi had been advised by his father to study graphic design. Joshua Mukabi hoped to nudge his son into the graphics department of the Kenya Railways Corporation –a major economic pillar in the first eight decades of Kenya (1900-1980s). But Mukabi, the younger, after studying graphic design chose painting. He joined Kuona Trust, a foundation for contemporary artists and an offshoot of Gallery Watatu.

Mukabi took his early paintings to foreign owned Gallery Watatu; they were rejected on account of style. Foreign owned and foreign patronized art galleries, in Nairobi, stressed style above theme in selecting, promoting and selling Kenyan paintings.

Ignoring the gallery's advice, Mukabi went ahead to cultivate a representational style that creates an illusion of depth, perspective and realistic depiction of the human form. And, because he was unwilling or unable to adopt the recommended naïve style, Gallery Watatu directed him toward Family Planning Private Sector (FPPS) run under the USAID. A calendar for FPPS was being prepared and paintings carrying the relevant message were required; the theme was the AIDS³ pandemic. Mukabi remembers that he painted a woman in a nice *lesso* lying on top of a coffin⁴. He has since represented women in single style *lessos* as earlier mentioned.

A month later, he was announced the winner of the competition. The judges appreciated his message of hope amid the hopelessness of the AIDS story. Interpretation of the theme won the day over style. Perhaps because the calendar was being designed for local circulation not for the international art markets.

4 Depictions of Womanhood by three different artists

Although theme and style i.e. content and form go together, this critique is premised upon an intellectual distinction between the two. The figure of woman is considered the content or theme of the paintings. Mukabi's content is women as is Michael Soi's and Mary Ogembo's. The reason for including these two latter artists is to throw relief or give some context to Mukabi's art work. Both Soi and Ogembo are contemporaries of Mukabi.

The theme of woman is not a preserve of Mukabi's work (cf. figures 4 and 5) his contemporary Soi uses this figure as well. But Soi's choice is no *mama kibanda*; it is the woman of Nairobi's nightlife, the one who is often objectified or as some would label her, the woman of ill repute. Soi depicts her drinking in the

³ Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS)

⁴ Conversation with artist in his studio, Dust Depo in August 2017

public house; an activity that is frowned upon. And she is portrayed in toneless hues, giving an impression of 2-dimension (cf. figure 4)

Soi's woman is not the main figure in his compositions. She is ancillary, abetting man's vice, the fallen Eve, if you like, not the protagonist of the primeval story but one who leads Adam into sin. In addition Soi's style is at variance with Mukabi's. Where the latter's is rounded, fully formed and realistic, Soi's is as flat as the woman's questionable moral substance, deflating her very image.

The figure in Soi's painting is as visually flat as is her virtue (cf. figure 4). There is little to admire in her. Her portrayal lacks the realistic 3-dimensional visual illusion that suggests robust volume. Mukabi's woman, on the other hand, is as morally robust as Soi's is feeble. One set of woman (Mukabi's) suggests real life while the other (Soi's) is mere travesty.

Ogembo, another of Mukabi's contemporaries, does not paint caricatures of fallen Eves like Soi. In her thickly applied oils, she alludes to the substantial, both physically and morally, in the Kenyan woman. She depicts aspects of womanhood that command our gaze. The intricate hair dos are a case in point. Again, Ogembo's chosen subject, unlike Mukabi's, is not full figure. She renders portraits of women in well worked earth colours while Mukabi's acrylics display seemingly unfinished sketches or preparations for more complete work.

The subject in Ogembo's paintings commands a detailed gaze upon herself, her hair do, her pose etc. Where Mukabi indicates simple hair dos while concentrating on the full figure and her activity, Ogembo painstakingly, through one brush stroke after another and in pattern like fashion, reproduces the plaiting process culminating in an intricate interweaving of the plaits –a hairdo to behold (cf. figure 5).

Ogembo compels the viewer to enter into the *persona* depicted, to undertake the chore together with this *persona*. Using rich oils, Ogembo paints her figures –sections of the human figure since she rarely paints the full figure– solidly with no suggestion of a quick gestural sketch; Mukabi's are the exact opposite. He captures the telling gesture of *everywoman*. His acrylic sketches reproduce the archetype woman (cf. figures 2, 6 and 7).

At one time these three, Mukabi, Soi and Ogembo, worked in the same studio space, courtesy of the GoDown Arts Centre⁵. They have exhibited and sold their paintings both locally and internationally despite staying away from the naïve/abstract style. They all offer comment on womanhood in contemporary Kenya, more through the theme and less through style. They use style to amplify the character of their respective subjects.

Mukabi stands out because he was one of the first to defy foreign owned gallery styles and trends. He developed and refined the figure and character of *mama kibanda*, the commonplace Kenyan woman. He chose to use her as his main tool of composition. Although other artists paint women, Mukabi's distinction is his use of the full figure and his continued and consistent application of the same, now for a little over three decades. It is interesting to note that Mukabi always paints the same woman, a stylised figure, as if Kenyan women are a standardized, fixed size. He renders this *mama kibanda* in different mediums, in acrylics as well as in oils. He compels us to (re)view the role of woman as we gaze at her painted figure.

5 Pertinent Questions about Mukabi's painting

Using the image of woman, Mukabi draws our attention to what merits a closer look. In his own small way, he is helping shape the Kenyan worldview and salient questions therefore, emerge about his *mama kibanda*. What does the artist want us to notice in Kenya's urban life? What ideas does he have about women, about this particular type of woman? These and similar questions were posed to Mukabi. His answers are reported as they were given. (cf. figure 7)

Questionnaire and responses

Q1. Your paintings often have women. What are your ideas about women?

⁵ <https://www.thegodownartscentre.com>

A: Women reflect better how a society lives: through their mannerisms, wealth, poverty, discrimination etc. All these are very visible in women – first.

Q2. What do you think about using the human figure as the main composition tool in your painting? Why not paint abstract images?

A: I am fascinated by the way the human figure can be posed, stretched and its many gestures. The effect of light and shadow, drapery is always fascinating...

Q3. What approach do you have toward the human figure? Are you critical, appreciative, questioning, explorative... say anything you think fits best.

A: My approach to the human figure is appreciative, I have a fascination with it. My approach is to also explore the human figure.

Q4. Why do you depict *mama kibanda* and not the super model, slay queen...?

A: That ordinary person I meet, everyday in the street, doing what they do, everyday, has for me, more to tell.

Q5. Who do you imagine as the main 'viewer' of your paintings? Kenyans, the international community... or it doesn't matter who wants to look at them?

A: I paint for all. I do not want to have a particular audience.

Q6. Why paint? For money, for pleasure, for expression.... all of these or only some of these?

A: The reasons have varied over the years. In the beginning, I painted for the pleasure of it, for fun and for fame. But with more responsibilities, I am now sometimes motivated by money.

Q7. You can add any other info that you want to.

A: The need for business, financial knowledge has become important. Branding and constant visibility in the industry is also important. Planning is necessary.

Mukabi does not flatter or beautify his woman –he doesn't depict her for sheer emotional admiration. Instead, this woman is working, she is absorbed...

she is far from posing as a beauty model. She is commonplace –the type of woman one expects and meets in the streets of Nairobi. She is neither a prostitute nor picturesque in any obvious way yet still stands out. She is a candidate for representing the Kenyan woman without mistaking her for a beauty pageant ‘miss Kenya’ –she is instead a *mama Kenya*.

The underlying reason for posing these questions is to better understand the *raison d’être* of painting or creating images as Muthuma discusses elsewhere (MUTHUMA, 2016).

6 Womanhood and the Aristotelian Principle

A drawing up of similarities and contrasts between the depictions of womanhood by Mukabi and his contemporaries show different attitudes. Soi censures the woman he depicts. He paints her in 2-dimensional single tone hues. Woman is not the main figure in his compositions but rather ancillary. Soi depicts what is wanting in woman, her bad habit, her lack of moral substance, in short a travesty of woman. Soi decries what a woman should not be.

Ogembo, on the other hand, is involved in her subject. She paints portraits of woman as if to unravel what her subject is thinking. Ogembo depicts a *persona*, a self absorbed figure. The portrayed woman is as solidly involved in self as the brush strokes applied to recreate her on canvas. The emergent representation is unapologetically about herself. The viewer’s gaze is directed to her and her alone.

Conversely, viewers of Mukabi’s paintings gaze on the figure of woman-in-action not in contemplation. She is in a gestural position, caught in some action or other. Mukabi paints her in toned hues, giving a feel of 3-dimensionality. He also gives her centre stage in his compositions. The viewer is led to assume that her full volume implies an equally bold moral substance. His suggestion is a real, flesh and blood woman carrying out tasks that go beyond her immediate, individual needs. She is a figure-in-relation to others. Mukabi appears appreciative of this woman.

In a sense, Mukabi’s approach embraces the influential Aristotelian principle, ‘whereby we only possess knowledge if we have grasped the why of a given entity (FALCON, 2006), i.e. its causes. These are considered fundamental

and comprehensive approaches to any subject and they are: the material, formal, efficient and final causes.

For Mukabi the material cause –or substance– of his paintings is the Kenyan woman. The formal cause or perspective from which she is viewed is home-making chores, performed both within and without the confines of her own house. *Mama kibanda* is *mama* (mother) to all Nairobi. Her *kibanda* (kitchen-cum-restaurant or market stall) is open to all; it serves vast numbers.

The efficient cause is somewhat tricky because it addresses the exemplar, the standard to be aimed at or the ideal. This standard is womanhood with its underpinning tenets. And, it can be inferred that the figure in Mukabi's paintings portrays ideal womanhood because of her chosen profession –going to market, cooking and feeding her family both literally and metaphorically. *Mama kibanda's* family comprises most of the urban inhabitants. Nurturing the human family i.e. building up a community, secures and buttresses the identity of womanhood in Mukabi's estimation.

The final cause, the 'what for' or 'so what' question has been addressed as well. In pointing out the relational activity of *mama kibanda*, Mukabi's paintings draw the viewer to consider the relationship, perhaps causal, of woman and her type of work. *Mama kibanda* is neither being censured, like Soi's figure nor asking for admiration in her self absorption like Ogembo's. Instead Mukabi is asking the viewer to notice and appreciate *mama kibanda*, giving her due respect since she nurtures and sustains the community. And, she does so by providing daily sustenance; she does so, in her painted representation, by providing imaginative and spiritual ingredients to the making of our common aesthetic. He asks viewers to notice and think about identity, relationships and specific tasks in today's Kenya.

7 Conclusion: Expressing Kenya's aesthetic through painting

Painting in Kenya is genuine artwork that engages today's life using materials, subjects and debates that resonate with the here-and-now. Its rich variety renders it irreducible to a singular style –foreign owned galleries vainly attempted this reduction.

The hopes, fears, joys, ambitions and concerns of individuals and society, animate contemporary painting. Wakhungu-Githuku compiled the work of 57 Kenyan contemporary artists summarising their work as 'vibrant, edgy and growing. [This work] is not the traditional images of masks, tribal figurines, bucolic scenes showing landscapes and wild animals'(WAKHUNGU-GITHUKU, 2017) which were collected and termed 'art' for an international audience; they were curated by collectors from other cultures. In contrast, today's paintings display art's vital role in documenting the social, political and cultural experiences from the perspective of the art producing community. Kenyan paintings register the changing tastes, styles and narratives. Mukabi's *mama kibanda* series documents a contemporary, shall we say 'live' narrative.

Although some critics (Quartz magazine, <http://qz.com>) are of the opinion that the East African Art scene is modest compared to South and West Africa's well-established scene e.g. Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal, whether the critics refer to the more modest and quieter tempo of life in East Africa, is an open question. Perhaps the measurement alludes to the exuberance of artistic output, with its consequent commercial hubbub, as witnessed in South Africa and in Nigeria. It could also reflect government support (or lack of it) for the fine arts given that 2017 was the first time the Kenyan pavilion, at the international Venice Biennale, showcased artwork from Kenyans rather than from Chinese or other foreign nationals.

What the measurement cannot possibly testify to is the absence of paintings in Kenya that reflect today's society; paintings that defy vague emotion to arouse thought, like the *mama kibanda* series. However, historiography and academic debate about visual art in Kenya is wanting.

Historiography on Kenyan painting by international critics comes laden with challenges; aesthetic expectations of the critics may be far removed from the artists' and their community's. The foregoing critique is from a scholar who forms part of the artist's community. Its chosen focus was a (re)viewing of the representation of *everywoman* as painted by Mukabi. His work was compared to two of his contemporaries and Mukabi stands out because of his bold rejection of

the naïve style. He chose to paint the urban woman in her ordinariness using a realistic, representational style. His painting is typical of ordinary working women; it captures the everyday aesthetic in the urban space.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Title: karibu Lamu (welcome to Lamu)

Artist: Patrick Mukabi

source: artist's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/the-PATRICK-MUKABI-ART-GALLERY-238020307896/> access December 22nd 2019



Figure 2: Title: Everyday Chores (c. 2010)

Artist: Patrick Mukabi

source: artist's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/the-PATRICK-MUKABI-ART-GALLERY-238020307896/> access December 22nd 2019



Figure 3: Title: at the Market (c. 2010)

Artist: Patrick Mukabi

source: artist's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/the-PATRICK-MUKABI-ART-GALLERY-238020307896/access> December 22nd 2019



Figure 4: Title: Night life

Artist: Michael Soi

source: artist's facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Artist/Michael-Soi-studio-188021591260258/> access 22nd December 2019

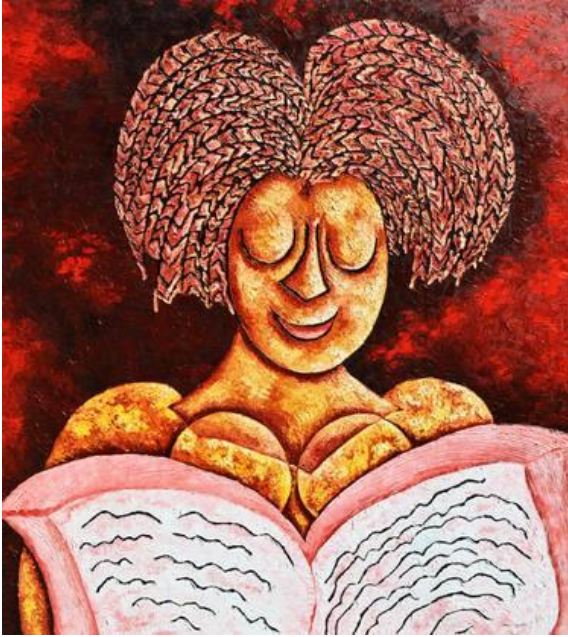


Figure 5:Title: Reading

Artist: Mary Ogembo

source: artist's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/theArtofMaryOgembo/>
access 22nd December 2019

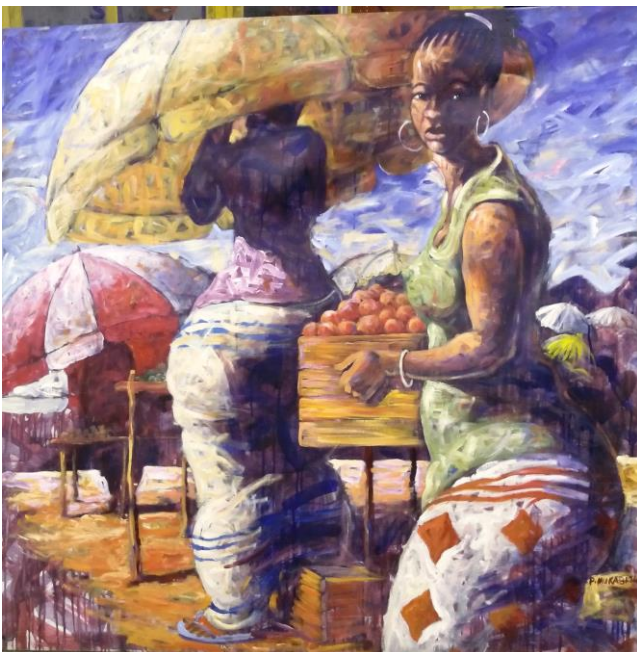


Figure 6: Title: To Market

Artist: Patrick Mukabi

source: artist's facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/the-PATRICK-MUKABI-ART-GALLERY-238020307896/access> December 22nd 2019



Figure 7

Patrick Mukabi next to one of his paintings from the mama kibanda series. His message to Kenyans: find your identity and stay true to yourself.

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