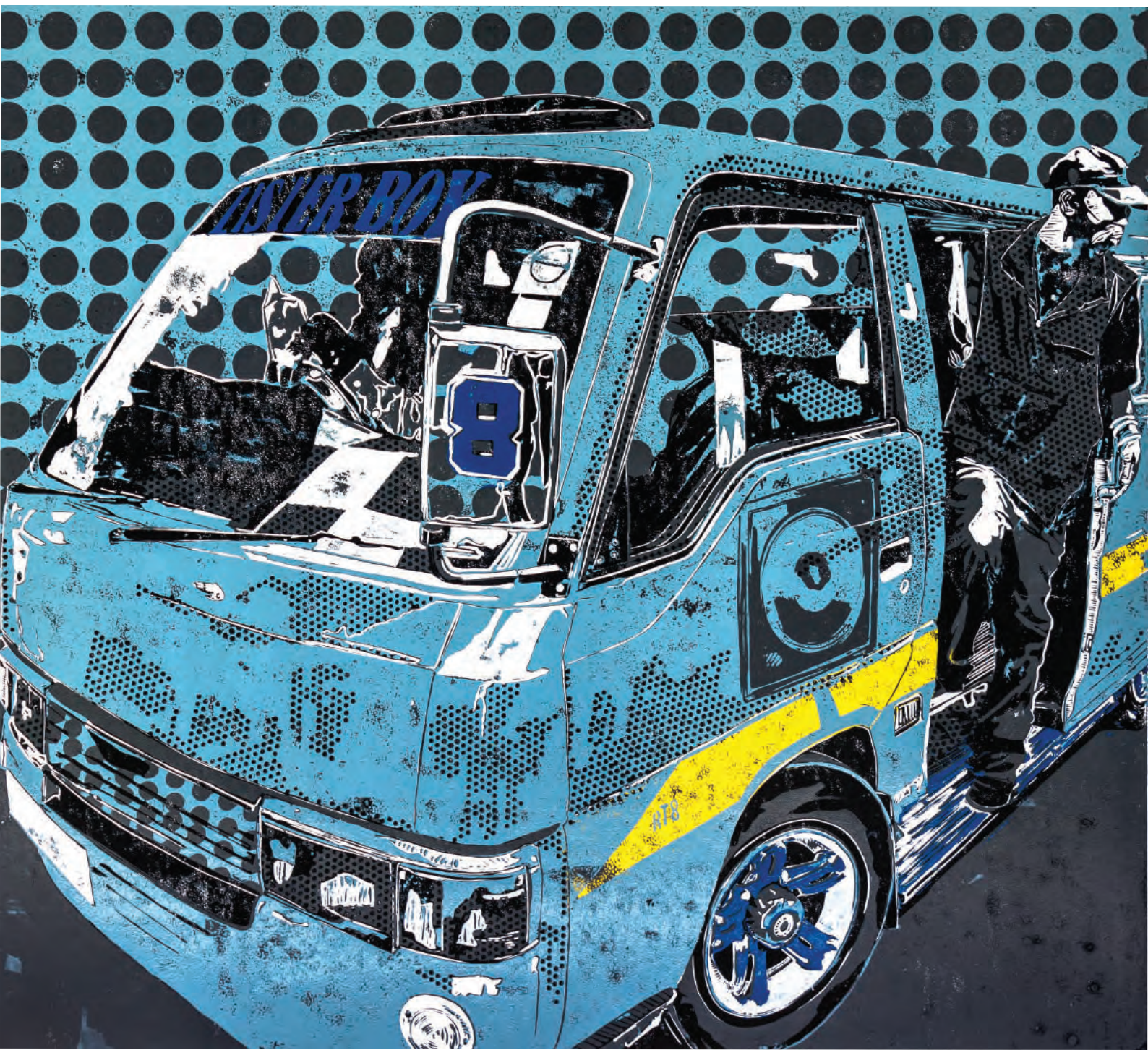


circle art gallery

DENNIS MURAGURI

29 June - 23 July 2016



Dennis Muraguri

Biography



Dennis Muraguri (b. 1980) in Naivasha, Kenya is multimedia artist working in painting, printmaking installations and sculpturing. Muraguri lives and works as an artist in Nairobi, Kenya. He has been a resident artist at Kuona Trust in Nairobi since 2005. Muraguri graduated from Buru Buru Institute of Fine Arts with a diploma in Painting and Art History.

Muraguri has been working as an artist for 13 years and is mostly recognized for his body of work inspired by 'matatu' (Kenyan minibuses and vans that are the main mode of public transport). In this work, Muraguri explores urban culture of contemporary Nairobi. In his sculptures Muraguri works with recycled wood and metal to create a representation of the industrialization in Kenya.



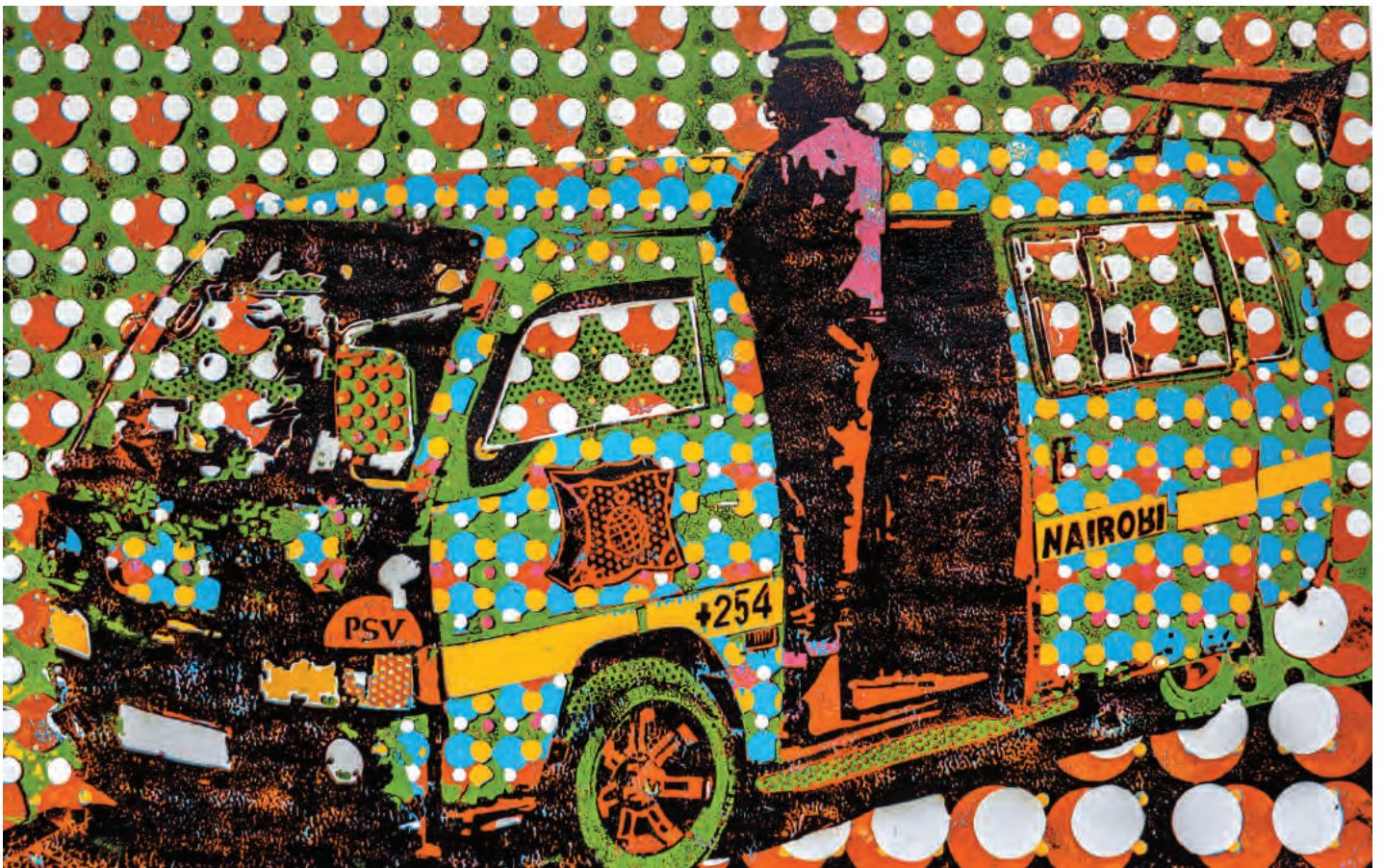
Matatu
2015
Woodcut plate
122.5 x 215 cm



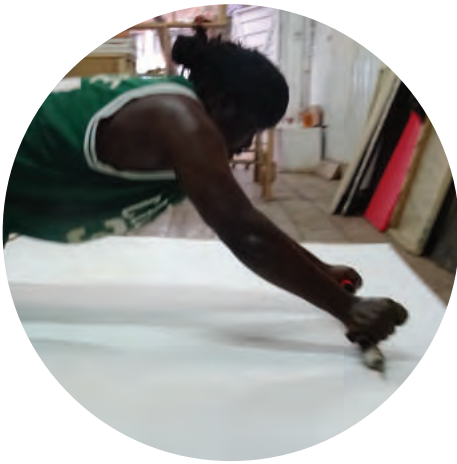
Matatu
2015
Woodcut print on paper , Edition 2/2
122.5 x 215 cm (print dimension)



Tin Tin
2015
Woodcut print on paper , Edition S/P
67 x 122.5 cm (print dimension)



Matatu Dots
2015
Woodcut print on paper , Edition 2/2
84 x 122.5 cm (print dimension)



Process Pictures

These Aliens and their Rapper (Detail)
2016
Mixed media
80 X 22 X 25 Cm (approx.)





These Aliens and their Toy Soja
2016
Mixed Media
94 x 56 x 37 cm (approx.)



These Aliens and their Queen
2016
Mixed media
77 x 41 x 40 cm (approx.)

JACKIE KARUTI INTERVIEWS DENNIS MURAGURI

I sat down with Dennis Muraguri whom I share a studio with at Kuona Trust. To chat about Dennis' art practice and his upcoming solo exhibition at Circle Art Gallery. The exhibition is a presentation of Dennis' new work in different media - prints, video, sculpture and installation.

Jackie Karuti: Tell us about your work/practice in general and where you are now.

Dennis Muraguri: One of the earliest memories I have is my uncle drawing a matatu for me & I loved it. I lived somewhere near a bus park and even for him the influence came from that. He wasn't an artist really but he loved drawing. He snapped at me one day when I asked him to draw for me & so from then on I decided to do it myself. Those are my earliest memories. Movie posters that had childhood heroes like Rambo & Kung Fu masters also intrigued me. I was fortunate enough to go to a high school that had art as an examinable subject. This messed up my other studies as art took precedence over everything else.

JK: You ended up going to one of the only art colleges in Nairobi at the time, yes?

DM: Yes. However, this wasn't my initial plan, I had always wanted to be a pilot, but it would be a financially heavy burden on my mother. She asked me what I wanted to do and I said art, this is when I enrolled at the Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts (BIFA). It was a four-year course and I ended up graduating top of my class. Going to college solidified my belief in art.

JK: Structured education can sometimes leave little room for self-expression. Was that a concern of yours when you were studying?

DM: Yes, I hated someone telling me what to do. And felt like I was constantly rebelling against the system but it gave me skills that I'd otherwise not have known.

JK: Is this how you got into painting?

DM: I was already selling paintings and began looking for new places to take my work like the now defunct Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (RAMOMA). I sold all my work at one show and was asked for more work, this gave me validation.

JK: And then how did you transition into sculpture making?

DM: I wanted to explore another mediums other than painting. At the time there was a lot of construction near my studio. Charles Ngatia, a fellow artist was always repurposing found objects and transforming them into art, he really influenced my way of working. The resulting sculptures were rebellion against traditional African masks that were still considered art from Africa.

JK: Was the progression into sculpture natural?

DM: No actually. The first people I knew were a cobbler, a shoemaker and a tailor. The level of concentration I saw in them fascinated me. I used to watch the guy who fixed clocks, especially the mechanical watches and I'd try to put together parts he'd throw away, that's why the first sculpture I ever did was a clock this was around 2008. It took a while before I did another sculpture, I was still painting but gradually I started enjoying sculpting more and with time I became deeply immersed in this process.

JK: Lets talk about your printmaking, which is now what many people know you for.

DM: I few years back artist Peterson Kamwathi did a woodcut printmaking workshop. That was the first time I ever made a print but even before that, I had decided to focus on matatus. I used to take photos of them and even though I didn't know how I would use these pictures, I kept them. I would eventually take up printing seriously in 2013. I enjoyed the process so much that I even set up a workshop at home but the fumes from the paints became too much. When I learnt the process we did not have a large printing press so I had to learn to press with my hands and this would sometimes end up being a real work out.

JK: Lets backtrack a bit. Why the fascination particularly with Matatus?

DM: I was born near a bus park in Naivasha. I grew up seeing matatu touts and drivers everywhere going about their business and as child it was very fascinating. The agility they possessed jumping in and out of the matatus, the crazy driving skills, hanging on the doors...it was all very acrobatic, these guys were performers in my eyes. I'd come to Nairobi to visit family and I'd find the matatus here very different from those back home. I loved travelling in them, It was the height of the Manyanga era.

JK: What does Manyanga mean?

DM: A manyanga is a pimped matatu. That was the popular term used back then. One could also call it Nganya, mboko...and other names derived from sheng. Manyanga is actually a traditional musical instrument that makes a high-pitched noise when shaken. They had names like Street Legal, Junior Mafia, Street Justice... I would choose which matatu to travel in based on its coolness.

JK: That was most of us at the time. Your credibility depended on which matatus you boarded.

DM: Right. In college in Buruburu, the estate had the best matatus. The process of pimping a matatu is heavily influenced by popular culture with things such as music, football fanaticism & celebrities both local and foreign taking centre stage.

JK: Was there a sense of freedom would you say? I know I felt it whenever I rode in one. The speed and carelessness exhibited was such an addictive high. It felt like a rebellious act that we enjoyed and relished.

DM: Yeah. Riding in a matatu is not just about moving from point A to B. It's immersing oneself in a moving theatre. It is performance. Everything from the language used, to the interaction between driver, tout and passengers. Matatus were and still are the distributors of sheng. The first time you'd hear a word of sheng back then was in a matatu. The first time you'd hear a new song or watch a new music video was in a matatu. Young boys especially would drop out of school to become touts.

JK: So, tell us about what you've been working on and what you're choosing to show for this exhibition.

DM: It's a selection of work I've been making for the last few years. I've never had a solo show with my sculptures so this will be a good opportunity to re-introduce my other work as well as some large matatu prints and video work.

JK: You mentioned earlier about the physicality of the process and how you connect it to cycling.

DM: I had to fashion my own roller due to the lack of a large press and I must have lost so much weight just printing. It's a very physical process. I cycle to relax. I love that we've taken up cycling especially as artists here at Kuona, like you for example. It's a physical but also mental process, just like the making of art. I prepare for a big project by cycling every day for two weeks before I get to work so that the fatigue doesn't take its toll on my body. Afterwards I'll start working which continues the workout.

JK: I sometimes see students from the university working in your studio under your tutelage. Is mentoring young upcoming artists something you always thought about? Could you also comment about the sad state of art education here in Kenya and how western influences have corroded the discourse?

DM: At school we were often not taught in interesting ways. We'd do odd jobs not even related to art just to survive. I don't teach. I guide. If somebody wants to learn, I tell him or her to look at what everyone else is doing and be free to choose what area they want to focus on. The sad thing about school is that some teachers lack adequate knowledge and do not understand the concept of studio practice but continually base their teachings on theories influenced by the west. It always feels like an insult when a white man decides what is African. To be an artist is to be inventive and innovative.

JK: It is an insult, period. So you ask, you experiment and you fail but you end up learning something new?

DM: Exactly. And this is how most of us learnt. But I still try to push them to learn even more from other people. This is because somebody was once kind enough to teach me. Gakunju Kaigwa taught me how to use different tools and so I feel like I need to give back. Although I hate the word 'giving back'. It feels like settling a debt.

JK: Who buys your work?

DM: Anyone who can afford it. I'm not responsible for every piece I've sold so sometimes I don't know. Foreigners are frequent buyers but Kenyans also buy art. Let's not discount that. Actually my biggest sale to date has been to a Kenyan.

JK: What/who influences your work?

DM: At college my favourite artist was Salvador Dali because I had no knowledge of anybody else in the art world at the time. Right now though most of my influences are the artists around me. We have artists like Charles Ngatia for his approach to material, Peterson Kamwathi for the woodcut printmaking process... internationally I admire Takashi Murakami. I like his way of working and how he can venture into both the commercial and gallery space. I'd love to do that and I'm actually working on some fabric designs inspired by local motifs. We don't have our own original Kenyan motifs but we have what is called an African print which is ridiculous. For example right now I'm wearing a shirt with an image of an American flag. Why? I think we have a lot of interesting imagery around us that is exciting.

JK: So what would this motif be?

DM: The first will be the matatu motif. There is actually a T shirt out already. I started working on this process myself but it's too time consuming and expensive especially for commercial consumption so I outsource. I design and the ones that are available so far are from my woodcut prints.

JK: This leads to my last question. Any future plans? Exhibitions, collaborations, projects?

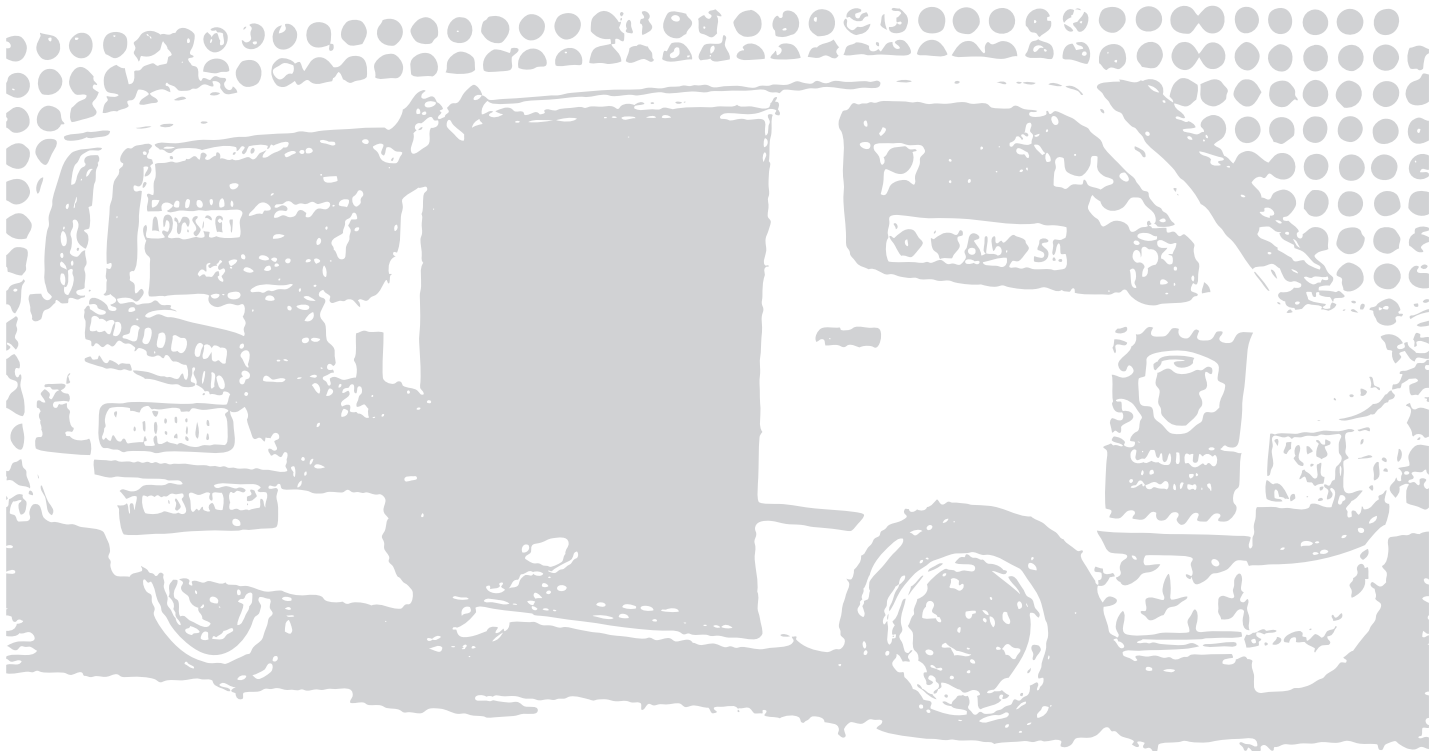
DM: I like the spontaneity of not planning. But I'm always working. There are some collaborative projects on the way. I want to animate some of my sculptures because some already look like they're on the verge of doing something.

JK: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish?

DM: Yes. I'd like to explain a bit about what art is to me. You see man is an animal. He survives on food and water. First, one eats to survive then after you're fed, that's when you think of how good the food tastes. That's when the art comes in. Art is anything that is not for your survival. When all these things are taken away...what remains is art. The rest of it is always art.

JK: So art is not a need?

DM: No it's not - it's the curious part that comes after the need - that's what art is to me.



Name:
Title:
Medium:





Circle Art Gallery

Circle Art Gallery aims to be the foremost exhibition space in East Africa. We exhibit carefully curated, challenging and thought-provoking contemporary art, and provide a venue for presentations from local and international artists, curators, art critics, collectors and academics.

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Opening times:

weekdays 10am – 5pm, weekends 11am – 4pm

or by appointment outside these hours, closed on public holidays