



circle art gallery



SHABU MWANGI
THE STATELESS

26 September - 20 October 2017



“The metaphors I use tell a tale of a broken inner silence, where faces and bodies do not need any narrative interpretations. The importance of these works proceeds from personal experience and emotion. These are shades of light and dark; a path through strength, weakness, and pain. These works put the viewer in my mind, and serve as a constant reminder that to question our existence is our most important and fundamental trait.”

Shabu Mwangi

Lawrence ‘Shabu’ Mwangi is an artist in search of individual and collective healing. Struck by the inequalities in our society, his art delves into the human psyche, attempting to discern the motives behind our interactions, the source of our forgetting, and the loss of one-ness. In *The Stateless*, his first solo exhibition since 2015, Shabu recalls his interactions with asylum seekers over a period of five months whilst on a fellowship in Berlin. Listening to their accounts of the journey to Europe and life as stateless people, these works narrate the experience of transitioning between cultures, losing one’s sense of place, and struggling in a country that does not always recognize their humanity. *The Stateless* includes a soundscape created in collaboration with Johannes Helberger, a Berlin-based composer.

Lawrence ‘Shabu’ Mwangi in Conversation with Don Handa



Child has a Shield, 2017 , Mixed Media on Canvas , 93 x 91.5 cm

Don Handa:

In our very first conversation about this body of work, you said you were thinking about people who make the decision to leave home, and about your own life – having grown up in a slum, and until now, never choosing to leave – and you wondered about what it is that pushes people to take that risk. Could you talk a little bit about that, and your own experience of movement?

Shabu Mwangi:

Growing up in a slum, and then getting the opportunity to work with asylum seekers, for me, one important thing I’ve found is that there is a fear to overcome before making that decision, before one takes that risk. Fear is what keeps us in our comfort zones – these aren’t necessarily comfortable, but they’re familiar. So, the driving force for leaving has to be both about an unbearable situation at home, and an image of where you’re going, the future, being better than where you’re coming from. Because that is one of our biggest challenges as humans, approaching a change whose outcome is unknown.

I think the media also contributes in a big way to that image of the future, because what we see of Europe – most of the people I was working with, were seeking asylum in Europe – does not match the actual experience of being there. My interest, with this work, is to try and understand the person and their motivations – because this journey comes with great risk – and, perhaps, try and think about what can be done at home to reflect the realities of this journey.



Lifeless, 2017 , Mixed Media on Canvas , 97.3 x 63.5 cm

Keeping with this aspect of telling their stories, does each of the portraits correspond to a specific individual, or are they amalgamations of the stories and characteristics of various people with whom you interacted?

In the time I spent with these people, we formed a kind of team. The thing about being in a team, is that through your interactions, you get to understand more about your teammates. There are people with whom I grew so close, and we continue to communicate even now, on Facebook; and there

You talk about trying to understand these people, and I notice that when you speak about these paintings, the portraits in particular, you refer to them as you would people. Assessing the progress, you say “(s)he’s not yet dry,” rather than “it’s not yet dry.” What can you say about that?

I have done work concerning migration before, but this earlier work was based more on my conception of, or projection of migrant bodies. Previously, I had not spent an extended period of time with people termed ‘stateless’. This body of work grew out of my exchanges, and interactions over a period of five months with people with no state. It is my experience, and their stories.



Yellow Zone, 2017 , Oil on Canvas , 94 x 63.5 cm

in painting.

So, do you think that there's an aspect of collaboration in this work?

In this work, I am here merely as a narrator, telling the stories of people with whom, in our time together, we became a family. Perhaps, in future, I could arrange for a situation where I present portraits of them accompanied by their stories, as narrated by them.

Could you talk about how space operates in this work? There are certain spaces that are depicted – bus stops, waiting rooms – but there is also a use of line to demarcate spaces, areas, rooms within the paintings themselves.

The portraits are stories of the people seen through their faces, their expressions. In the larger works, I'm dealing more with the journey and places where these people interact with this new culture that they are entering. Here you have individuals trying to integrate into a different culture, and you find that one body has to be naked, in a sense, so that it may

are others whose personalities touched me, just once, and it was enough to make me want to capture that in my painting. Others I only got to know about through those around them – they had, for any number of reasons, difficulty expressing themselves.

I initially had the idea to make recordings of my subjects telling their stories. However, one of the people I was working closely with, an artist, told me that there had been no one else with whom they had connected as they had with me, and so to attempt to record them telling their stories, would introduce a distance between us. Instead, he advised that I should paint, try and capture as much as I could of them

integrate into this new culture. So, many of these paintings are about this interaction, and the feedback as well – the responses they get to their attempts to integrate. I'm looking for simple ways to depict these encounters. You'll find, for example, an image of a person in water, hands bound behind their back.



Bus Stop, 2017 , Oil on Canvas , 97.5 x 59.5 cm

To return to lines, and how you use them to mark out spaces in these paintings, and the colours that you use to demarcate, and also highlight spaces. How did you end up using certain colours, specifically red and yellow?

In the places where you see red and yellow, these are dealing specifically with refugees from African countries. Aside from simply being a refugee, there's also the aspect of being black, and seeing decisions being made about your asylum status, and relating that to your being black. Red, for me works two ways, dividing but also uniting – the red lines refer to the division along racial (and national) lines, but at the same time the red alludes to blood, which is

These are also places marked by transition, aren't they? Places where one is as they wait for something coming next.

Transition, yes. Once you arrive in Europe, and you don't have papers, you're always moving from border to border. Most of these people don't even leave home aiming to reach Europe; they are simply looking for means to improve their situation at home, seeking work, for instance. But as they meet others along this journey, as they pursue better opportunities, that's where a kind of collective shift in thinking occurs and a journey that could have started with someone looking for employment in Libya, for example, turns into a journey to Europe.



Stateless Portraits I - XII, 2017 , Oil on Canvas , 40 x 30 cm (Approx.)





Homo Sacer II, 2017 , Mixed Media on Canvas , 97 x 96 cm

something that remains constant across racial divides. In the latter case, the red also symbolizes hope.

Yellow, I use for being marked as not belonging to a place – the same colour is used in the camp to designate refugees from African countries. Here I'm thinking about the difference between being a native and being a national of a country. For these people, because they aren't native, and because they are not seen as being of this new place, their

claim to nationality is questioned, if not altogether rejected. If you're not native then you do not, cannot, belong.

And that connects to this thing you said, where the people you spoke to compared arriving in Europe to being born again.

Yes, it's a kind of new beginning. You have to adopt this new culture – the new culture will not adapt itself to you. You can only claim to belong if you integrate, and to integrate requires letting go of who/what you were before. A work such as *Homo Sacer I* explores this notion of being removed from society, of having one's humanity questioned, or denied (the title, *homo sacer*, is borrowed from this figure in early roman law who is set apart from society, who can be killed by anyone but, cannot be used for a religious sacrifice). It is also about having to be naked so that you can put on a new attire, take on this new identity. Also important to me – you see this in the way the subject's body is a screen – is the idea that in this new culture, you lose control of the ways in which you're identified, categorized; the body is a TV monitor, with someone else holding the remote, controlling what plays on the screen.

We looked through the sketch book you kept as you developed this work, and much of what is in there are these very quick, provisional marks, sometimes with a few accompanying notes. What is your process as you create your art? Do you visualize the complete work, or do the images emerge as you work?



Waiting Room, 2017 , Mixed Media on Canvas , 97 x 93.3 cm

Art, for me, is heavy, very heavy. I have to feel what I'm doing – I can't force it. The sketch you see is something that's very clear in my mind; and even when it isn't totally clear, I know the forms, the arrangement of figures; I don't have the colours, but I know how it's going to work, I've seen it in my mind. So, before I can be confident in showing work I have to feel that it is speaking, communicating, to me. I have to see that there is life in this thing that I have made. That painting which you see I've left over

there, it doesn't have life.

It's interesting how with a piece such as that one, you've set it aside, even moved it away from other paintings that you're working on. You say you've wrestled with it, and left it alone. When you set out to paint, is it an idea, an image, a feeling... What is it?

That work is lifeless. It does not have (a) life. And, it's tiring when I fight with a piece. More so than when I feel... "Okay...". It guides me, that's how I would put it; painting guides me. Once it has life, it leads me. It's a feeling, more than anything else; and then a situation. This situation, that's growing from this feeling, how do I give it a background? The background is the home that will accommodate the figures. Backgrounds are very important to me in my work; if the background isn't comfortable then I end up fighting with a painting. They have to balance, the background and the figure who will eventually occupy that background.

That fighting, struggling, have there been times when you've felt that you've lost? And, if so, what then?

Yes. When that happens, I give it time. That piece that you see, the one I've put aside, that's one of the very first works which started this series. It was among the first, and it has refused, over and over again, and it has been changing forms. Some works prove difficult.



Marriage to Stay, 2017 Mixed Media on Canvas, 96 x 98 cm

there.

You've mentioned that at some point you used to make realistic paintings. How did you evolve from that to working into your current style?

There were classes I used to take at the former Rahimtullah Museum of Modern Art, learning from Tabitha Wa Thuku. During one of these classes, she gave us pieces of paper and asked that we simply paint whatever we were feeling at the time. She praised the painting that I made, and that's when I first considered working in a more expressive mode. That painting was actually sold at an art sale soon after. I gradually started drawing heavily from my community and my environment, creating work that was informed by my community work, and the feelings that that provoked in me. I was also responding to the different conflicts taking place in Kenya at the time.

I also started looking inward, exploring my identity, love, pain, death, really digging deep. I'd point to the work that came out of this process, which I exhibited at One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, as the moment when I broke decisively from realistic painting.

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When you leave a painting alone, do you ever come back to it? How?

There are those that I leave alone, then stumble upon much later while cleaning up.

Do you start anew, or do you try to pick up where you left off?

I start again. I treat what is already there as a background. Some of what is already there may or may not show up in whatever new thing I put on



Displaced, 2017 , Mixed Media on Canvas , 78 x 93 cm

Did you find that you could do more with this way of working than you could with realism?

It was around this time that I was diagnosed with a tumour, and the truth is that painting was healing. I don't know that I would be where I am today if I had not been making art during that period. It was through art that I was able to endure the pain. Previously there was

nothing in the work that was coming from within me, I was simply reproducing images, but now, it comes from inside, I put myself in my work, and it helped me cope with pain.

There is much in your work that is painful, in the way you're dealing with the politics of migration, and personal identity, and alienation, from oneself and/or one's surroundings. One gets a sense that your subjects are working in and through circumstances that are undoing them.

Presently, the line I'm walking, the path I am following in my work is the path of reality. Reality, for me, means both sides, the good and the bad, happiness and sadness. My work, my paintings move into those zones that people don't like. Most solutions aren't found in happiness; it is a painful process. You cannot solve anything without facing the pain. When you're happy, people gather around you, but once you're sad, you're alone, and you alone know your sadness. I want to approach that space of pain, and loneliness. I want to make work that can help us confronts that, because without this, there can be no healing.

This conversation between Shabu Mwangi and Don Handa took place at the artist's studio in Mukuru, Nairobi, on 11 September 2017, amidst preparations for 'The Stateless' at Circle Art Gallery.

Biography

Shabu Mwangi, Kenyan, b. 1985

Mwangi has been a practicing artist since 2003. His studio is in Mukuru, an informal settlement in Eastern Nairobi, where he is also the founder and director of the Wajukuu Art Project. Mwangi's art is rooted in social commentary, focusing on social and cultural differences and the interactions of people across these divides. His work has been included in various solo and group exhibitions, with shows in Nairobi, London, Essen, and Washington DC.

In addition to his work with the Wajukuu Art Project, Mwangi has worked as an art teacher and workshop facilitator with organizations such as HOPE Worldwide and Art2Be in Nairobi, and the Waende Suedost Project in Essen, Germany. The work that makes up *The Stateless* was developed during a five month IFA fellowship at Schlesische (S27) in Berlin. This is his first solo show since 2015.

Gallery hours:

weekdays 10am – 5pm

First Thursday of the month we remain open until 8pm

Saturdays 12pm – 5pm

By appointment outside these hours, closed on Sundays and public holidays

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Front Cover: Homelessness (Detail)

Inside Front Cover: Journey to Self Search (Detail)

Back Cover: Homo Sacer I (Detail)

Inside Back Cover: Stillness of Lacking Home Identity (Detail)



Catalogue designed and executed by Mwini Mutuku

