

Mwaki Nginya Evinda Enge

Exhibition by Kaloki Nyamai
Curated by Khanyisile Mbongwa



History Full of Traitors
By Enos Nyamor

When I first encountered Kaloki Nyamai's work – he was then based at the GoDown Arts Center, Nairobi – I was not only captured by the agency in his social commentary, but also by how his visual language, sprinkled with traces of expressionism, radiated an apocalyptic swing. It was 2013 and he was embarking on his artistic career.

By visual language, I am not merely referring to the organization of shapes and color tones. Rather, this is a speculation on the exchange between the viewer and the works, both in the process of decoding objects and applying memory. This random interaction generates vocabularies, by making one feel, and this congeals into a language. Here, the language is charged, and which is a notion denoting the effect imposed by a mixture of natural or organic elements introduced to an artifact, or even a painting.

Some of the organic elements in Kaloki Nyamai's work include sisal and, in case of his earlier oeuvre, the use of charcoal. In retrospection, it is these unusual or new materials that accords his work the "charge." Here, the experimentation with active compounds, which exist in our three-dimensional reality, can stimulate a reaction. And so, while serving as symbols, these motifs garnish a piece of art, forging a relationship with the viewer.

And, just as his visual language is visceral, it is also serious. What remains certain is that his language is serious because of the constant desire to radically shape and influence emotions, and which can thrust viewers into a series of mood swings. But it is also because his language, as a vehicle of tragedy, demonstrates that, in spite of the pain and failures, there is a room for improvement. Perhaps, through his work, owing to their seriousness, a viewer can develop an awareness of the complex, universal human experience. For memories of good times can fade easily fade away, but hard times can dominate every corner of human thoughts and emotions. And tragedy is an overbearing human condition, and those artists abundantly gifted with this sensibility – the capacity to filter human experience through a fine lens of loss and reinvention – can command emotions and thoughts, and often long after the initial encounter with their creations.

Even so, an examination of some of his paintings, specifically through his current oeuvre as well as his past series, unfolds tragedy in three layers, in terms of race, gender, and cultural identity. "I have always been interested with the fact of being a person of a specific gender within a particular space," he had told me during an interview, at his studio in Dagoretti, at the edges of Nairobi's Ngong' forest.

Influence of Space

Among the most striking features in his earlier series, was the way in which he captured and frozen the edifice of slum life. The “slum-scape,” as he refers to them, portrayed compositional setting what directed the viewer to an underlying chaos and a suggestion of an inevitable end, of an apocalypse. These paintings were charged and often painted with charcoal repurposed from scorched houses in Mukuru Kayaba slum.

From the center of Nairobi’s Industrial area, and if one can afford an aerial view, Mukuru Kayaba is a patch of iron-sheet structures, situated towards the north, and crisscrossed by a railway line and a murky river. It is an informal settlement that, even today, lacks basic sanitation services. But it was through Kaloki’s paintings that one could have an insider view, could reap from the benefits of reflections by a brutally honest visual commentator.

And the compositional settings he depicted are dominated by swaths of shadows and lined with a monotonous background of lurid color, mainly variations of red and yellow. It is the strategy of organizing the elements and radically distorting the setting that hurled Kaloki to the limelight. Somehow, the charcoal finishing in his work evoked a tinted reality, as if one is forced to stare at the agony of disillusionment, at people who have hit the rock-bottom.

While Kaloki’s earlier paintings reflected on the tragic dynamism in Mukuru Kayaba, and so inspired by slums, he subsequently drifted towards juxtaposing lifestyle between affluent and low-income settlements. His earlier slum-scapes were a form of documentation, as well as the preservation of the memory of particular sites that were undergoing constant change. The informal structures represent fragments of life for those who lived there, and any change, whether necessary or not, is an erasure. Fire accidents are regular in most slums, and every conflagration brings a hint of scorch-earth policies, as a way of landlords evicting stubborn tenants.

Transformation

The drift in the subject matter, from simply environmental awareness to one’s identity, although had been gestation for long, ostensibly transitioned after his 2014 exhibition “The Stranger in Me,” in which he explored the essence of weaving between slums and posh urban zones. “The more you learn, the more you begin to confine yourself to a corner,” he had told me. “It is just so sad.”

About three years ago, Kaloki Nyamai dropped the use of his first, given name, Dickson. “I have been interested with identity from 2013,” he said. “That’s when I transitioned from reflection on the space, to be a person placed within a historical

continuum. And my exhibition in Nairobi has been a work in process. I have always explored multiple notions, and some of the works I will showcase capture enduring issues on identity that does not fit popular narratives like, for example, migration.”

He has since been interested in making his work culturally significant and also in touch with his Akamba roots. He has been curious about his ancestry, and, in the process, each layer of discovery thrusts his expression into a new paradigm. For example, these days Kaloki exclusively titles his work in Kikamba. Although such an approach can appear as hermetic, shutting out those with limited or no understanding of Kikamba, it is also necessary, especially in making the work relevant to the local audience. The wave to satisfy a global art market have always compelled artists to not only align concepts with trends in the global north, but also focus on commercial guidelines, and which can be insincere.

While the contextual language might require interpretation, and through which pieces of meaning may be lost, the intention is solidly embedded in the visual organization of components and can speak to a diverse audience. In this instance, expressing the work’s title in a native dialect, in itself, is enough to engage beyond the typical art audience that constantly consists of critics, cultural producers, and diplomats.

In respect, it is important to acknowledge the artist’s transformation from a landscape artist to one whose work problematize identity and historical legacy of colonialism. The shift from compositional settings to an improvised canvas populated with almost surreal objects highlights Kaloki’s transformation. In early 2018, Nyamai Kaloki showcased at the Ebony Gallery in Cape Town, in an exhibition titled “I am Not My Father.” The show was a salient statement and captured the widespread attitude among millennials, across the African continent, on failures of the senior generations in the decolonization and deconstruction process, and, especially in tolerating imperial invaders and, later on, in perpetuating. “History is full of traitors,” he said.

Of course, the transformation in Kaloki Nyamai’s visual language demonstrates an evolution in his artistic process. As a mixed media artist, firstly, the shift has been through the improvisation with various materials. While maintaining the monochromatic essence, the artist works with layers of dust and cow dung, all mixed together with acrylic. Additional materials include strings, sisal ropes, and image transfer (with emphasis on images from pre-colonial and colonial era).

Another recurring object is the cow-head, specifically because the cow was, and still is, the main symbol of wealth among many African societies. The combination of all these motifs, become the charged elements and lend many of Kaloki’s work universal relevance. Each element is an association of abstract concepts, and almost

appears chaotic. But, through these components, Kaloki is also challenging traditions of fine arts, exploring with materials, and also resisting capitalism.

“I recently discovered the importance of sisal in pre-colonial societies. Nothing could be done without sisal ropes. It was like a currency,” he said. “In that distant past, there were no complaints of environmental degradation.”

Identity Education

There are topics that Kaloki Nyamai has investigated in multiple forms, and then there are those that almost appear at the periphery. Reference to urbanization, inequality, and decolonization are constant, but it is gender relations that have almost appeared as less prominent. Perhaps, more and more subjects in his works will take the feminine form. Men and children, who are androgynously depicted, have become central in his oeuvre, and this is a tendency he hopes to transcend.

But Kaloki, as an artist who is reflecting on our times, on the current epoch, is aware of the significance of gender activism today, given the imbalance generated, for instance, by a systematic oppression of women through violence. On the one hand, gender equality is inevitable. On another, there is perennial threat of disorder, invading and altering the core of gender relations, and which is the family institution. While gender equality is necessary, pitching men against women, in undertones of a “gender war,” is what Kaloki finds revolting. “Amidst the equality narrative, I find the obsession with affirmative action, of handing women special powers, to be a means of fighting women.”

Even so, discussions of gender equality, as propagated in the mass platforms, often begin and end with women rights. Yet gender equality is a universal issue and emanates from a pattern of social constructs and constant conditioning. “Some notions on gender are outrageous,” Kaloki said. “For example, men are expected to be unemotional, or that men are not supposed to cook. It is as if they have to adopt strange or foreign personalities. This is how a person begins fighting oneself.”

Discussing Kaloki's works within the lines of its connection to identity will be incomplete, if one does not mention the changes of his language from one that focuses on space, to a complex convergence of identity and space. Here, it is important to identify the distinction between concepts captured and the overarching reality, for some unpopular ideas cannot be readily inserted into some conversations.

Because some of his creations are even cryptic, they might require additional mediation. The first element of the process is to discover the rawness of his aesthetic. As an artist who can work with multiple forms of visual arts, including a series of performances and an installation, his capacity to pierce into emotions is indelible. Secondly, additional mediation is necessary when exploring the artist's

intention, especially in documenting changes with every item of rediscovery. Since embarking on the identity search, and which has, in part, consummated into the current exhibition, Kaloki has become critical of education systems, specifically in Kenya, in the first fifty years of independence.

“The education system in post-colonial Kenya begins with independence struggles, often make an impression that Africans, in general, were from a dark and uncertain past, and which leads to a dependency complex. For example, history classes exclude some of precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial era legacies,” Kaloki said. “The result is that the outlook shifts towards the West as perfect societies.”

Given that Kaloki has been practicing as a professional artist for only eight years, and that the richness of his imagery is intense, it is fitting to bridge notions of authenticity in his visual language, thematic variations, and stylistic transition. These become important components for the part of the public that, because of immobility or inaccessibility, is unexposed to his work. Owing to the depth of representation in his imagery, one can be certain of meaningful response from viewers. All complex issues addressed by Kaloki, both conceptually and ambiguously, should be included in every narratives. For Kaloki’s work does not intend to impress, but to transform and educate, and such discussions are necessary, today, right now, in the era of Afro-Renaissance.

Kuambelelia (Starting a conversation)
by Gor Sudan

Nyamai's paintings are meant to evoke an open conversation, confronting the tension between our recent shared colonial experience propagated by our binary education system and the discontinuity of it as presented in our daily psycho social dramas. His paintings seek to address the power of a ubiquitous abstract symbolic world over our daily personal dramatic experience by employing iconic images such as the upended chair, the cow, a red square and a box over the head inquiring about what role the dichotomy presented by our present way of acquiring knowledge about the world around us plays in conditioning our outlook in a post-colonial world.

Once again, the artist is draws from conversations with his grandmother in a painful memory exercise clearly meant to recall who he is in a world bereft of a cultural archive. The work is questioning the meaning of devices that have replaced the archival objects of his grandmother's era. When she narrates to the artist about 'kana kayua', a time of great hunger which occurred during her childhood, it seems she is talking about a period of hunger for and loss of knowledge; a disappearance of archival objects which are now being replaced by devices represented by screens connected through wires.

Nyamai's works contain a sense of protest against the patriarchal brand arising from the colonial period and questions its relevance in a postcolonial worldview. "Being a man", "Deception", " Man worship" are some of the phrases scrawled on some of the work, where the human and animal figures are suspended all the time in an unframed white space. Tensions created by the conversation between people, animals and abstract forms in the work is meant to provoke the sense of being a man in the world.

Mwaki Nginya Evinda Enge

The intimate relationship between colonial violence and Kenya's independence led Kaloki Nyamai to investigate what happens when fire is a form of familial erasure, through painting and performative installations. How do we imagine ourselves when precariousness defines our lived experience?

This body of work examines reparations through recollections of tragedy, and uses particular visual modalities to suggest healing, unification and preparation for a new start.

In Mwaki Ginya Evinda Engi, Nyamai is asking us to look again at the conditions of our humanity.

Curator's Note
By Khanyisile Mbongwa

A series of investigations, reflections, experiments and a leap into the creative abyss - rampage through the imagination to salvage something, anything begotten as the present melts quickly into history just like how the future has arrived today. So what will the fire tell us next time?

Kaloki Nyamai is a person placed on a historical continuum, working with the ancient and the new. He is no oracle, but he understands that the premise of his imagination rests on the details of history not catalogued. And so, he takes inventory by looking at what the fire has burnt and what the people have managed to salvage, then begins his journey of layering material...But Karl Marx reminds us that we do not imagine or create ourselves under self-selected circumstances rather under existing circumstances, given and transmitted from the past. So again, what will the fire tell us next time?

In my conversations with Nyamai, I often wondered whether we black Africans could ever rid ourselves of the colonized body, I mean – what would we need to do? For all the fires in African areas often ridden with poverty, have not burnt away any of the colonial question but rather turned to ashes the independence from colonial rule and perpetuate the precariousness of black lived experience. But this question persists! I see it everytime I look at Nyamai's work, I hear it when he walks me through his thoughts, and it is there in my subconscious like black noise.

Nyamai's canvas feels like some sort of rapture, a distinguished composite of loss and reinvention – a symbolic erasure and preservation of memory. What the fire erases, his canvases preserve as debris of memory. Like jazz music, his canvases are an improvised composition – spontaneous, extemporization, ad-libbing. Each brushstroke over continuously repeating cycles of stitching that alters the visual. He depends on the contours of the burnt and ripped canvas and the possibilities of the stitch's harmony.

The layeredness of his paintings make me think of Ezrom Lagae and Sydney Kumalo's sculptural formations, always capturing people who are desperately subjected to violence – with deep sensitivity and visual poetics. Each layer nostalgic, violent and healing. There's a certain level of vulnerability with layering, there are always cracks that need to be retouched – a signal that we are always in a state of becoming.

Moving on a historical continuum, the past, the present, the future merge - they talk to each other, agree and disagree. There is tension here, the past sometimes never leaves, you see it linger in the present, creeping into the future - welcomed and unwelcomed. Time, what will the fire tell us next time?

Nyamai traces himself through the maternal, his grandmother is part of his cultural archive, the reflective memory, a storyteller, a healer of his wounds, a mirror through which he can gaze at her world and then his new world as it becomes. Through her carvings, he layers his paintings - it's as if her voice is alive in every detail seen and unseen in his work. And so when she stopped singing in public fearing arrest, she became the black noise you see with each black spray paint line

running across his canvases – what he calls the mother board that connects everything and passes information.

In this body of work, we see the introduction of strings of burnt tyre as another layer of destruction, recollection and healing. Its ironic, that he uses the modality that destroyed to rebuild; that he called for the recreation of unity by using the depri of destruction. Nyamai always finds a moment to ask us, what will the fire tell us next time?



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Atoi Mena Kimeina
(*Neighborhood Wrangles*), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
196.5 x 94 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Ula Wekalile Kevela Ndakuoneka
(*The Invisible Sitter*), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
171.5 x 102 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Kana Kaa Munenei
(The Activist's Daughter), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
177.5 x 95 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Ndeto Sya Omaye
(Her Grandfather's Conversations), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
199.5 x 90 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Mboya Sya Mbua
(Prayers for Rain), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
160 x 91.5 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Two Vala Twambeiyé
(*We Are Back Where We Started From*), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
250 x 170 cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Kevela Kina Lima
(The Seat Has a Hole), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
400 x 243 cm cm (approx.)



Kaloki Nyamai, Kenya
Ng'ombe Ya Mbesa
(*Cash Cow*), 2018
Mixed media on canvas
400 x 243 cm cm (approx.)

KALOKI NYAMAI

Kaloki Nyamai's (Born 1985) painting practice entwines material investigation with a wide-reaching exploration of subject matter. Grounded in hidden narratives, uneasy stories of identity, environment and memory, offering fragments to be pieced together slowly. The lengthy, searching process employed in the making of the works is mirrored in the experience of viewing them.

In early works the artist documented the slum settlement that he grew up in. These charcoal pieces, are intended to capture a space in flux, to preserve an impression of these fragile sites. But they were also about adding complexity to widely held perceptions of such environments. Although his work has developed a lot since these pieces, Kaloki's subject remains closely connected. He continues to look around him, addressing the issues that arise from his environment and questioning the complicated tangle of self and setting.

In their very construction, the textured surface of his works reflect the struggle and tension of colonial experience and independence. Zig zag stitches deployed by Nyamai and his studio assistant Annet Chabeda, run on the surface of his paintings. Stitching symbolises a gendered labour role. Among images from pre- colonial, and colonial era photos (1940s, 50s) transferred on the work by means of photo transfer method is an image of an African woman, with the quintessential African form to question the process and context through which an image is produced and disseminated, and the role and power which this process and product contribute to the gender relation.

Controlled burning, along side the zig zag stitches on the paintings reveals the artist's intention to confront and transcend our collective traumatic experiences.

Nyamai explores the parallels between the past and the present through richly-layered, multimedia works. Drawing heavily on the stories of the Kamba people, the works explore how history and identity are intertwined and how this has informed the identities of people living in present day, post-colonial Kenya.

Imagery of urban architectural forms recur throughout his practice. Interested in the living quality of buildings, Nyamai considers the symbiotic relationship between structures and the people who build and live with them. Screens also appear frequently, sometimes containing human forms, symbolising the tension between us as individuals, and the roles offered to us as citizens, consumers and subjects. This idea of being held in balance is something Nyamai continually negotiates both formally and conceptually.

The artist describes how important storytelling is to the passing on of African history – in many of his paintings he imagines these passed on stories as boxes, symbolising the social, cultural, economic, political positions we are located in, or locate ourselves in. Texts are also used to highlight the power of language over our sense of identity. Boxes of red and yellow colours is used over the head of human to symbolise identity which guides our social and political decisions. He see it as representing self defining information, such as tribalism, nationalism, racism etc. This texts represents pervading information projecting a certain form of energy and taking a life of its own. Screens and stitched cables zig zag across the paintings to represent the transfer and acquisition, diffusion and infusion of information through present technology.

Nyamai's interest in the power of storytelling, and the flexibility of meaning is also shown in his titling. The works' titles are all in his Kamba language, reinforcing the importance of interpretation and perception in these paintings. His visual language is layered and implicit, allowing the works to reveal themselves gradually and offering potential for new connotations through each viewers translation. Amongst this investigation into the fluctuation and fluidity of place and self, memory has become important as both strategy and subject. Part of his approach has been an investigation into his own family lineage, including interviews with his grandmother, whose stories bridge generations, Kamba and Christian traditions and culture. He found her stories to be full of both contradictions against widely held perceptions of cultural roots and historical narratives, as well as reflections of current day happenings. He wanted to create works that express the complexity and contradiction as well as continuity and repetition inherent to human behaviour throughout history.

Precolonial era symbols; a three legged stool, prevalent in cultures all over Africa, is employed as a symbol of indigenous culture and to suggest the story and of vulnerability of native language and knowledge systems posed by current mode of seeing. A succeeding form to the traditional stool is an upended floating chair which symbolises an ever shifting geo-political power landscape. Sisal ropes were used in Kamba culture for land division, and given to the bride's family during dowry negotiations to suggest the number of cows to be given. Sisal in Nyamai's work is used as a symbol of the pre-colonial African economy. The cow was an important economic symbol in African culture, the dung was used in walling, the milk and meat for sustenance, and the animal itself is a means to trade. In his paintings, the Cow implies a symbol of economic power in indigenous culture.

Boxes of red and yellow colours defines is used over the head of the human forms are used to symbolise identity which guides our social and political decisions. It is representative of self-defining information, such as tribalism,

nationalism, racism etc.

Figures from colonial-era photographs inhabit these paintings – people from another time and context, represented through a colonial gaze are called into a new environment, reimagined by the artist. Cartoons and caricatures of black bodies from this era provoke Jim Crow, alluding to typecasting and a problematic narrative of African people as portrayed in media and entertainment. Controlled burning of the paintings is used by the artist to point to the ongoing debate on commercialization of black culture and its appropriation during the production of global entertainment.

Finally, the crown, from artist Basquiat's painting, is itself deliberately appropriated by Nyamai in his works to symbolise African Art within Art History. The relation and role of African art history and its influence on Art history and artistic movements such as cubism is examined by conjuring, through an icon of the crown as portrayed by Haitian born, Artist Michel Basquiat and his monumental influence.

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Kaloki Nyamai

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