



Shabu Mwangi  
(UN)CONTAINED TURBULENCE

24 April - 25 May 2024



## (Un)contained Turbulence: A Rip through the Veil

Shabu Mwangi's third solo exhibition at Circle Art Gallery, *(Un)contained Turbulence*, presents nineteen new works made in oil on canvas and steel over the past eighteen months. Mwangi continues to survey the effects of structural violence in historical and contemporary contexts, and for this exhibition, zooms in on the devastation and grief brought about by the farce of democracy and globalisation. A throughline in Mwangi's practice is a rigorous engagement with the human condition under duress, particularly its conflicted emotional states, hopes, and aspirations. Formally, this is depicted in the considered symbolism, urgent and expressive brushstrokes and washes, expanded colour palette and introduction of geometric zones of colour in the backgrounds.

When Mwangi was younger, he proudly held close to his identity as a Kenyan, a sentiment he now feels removed from. Slightly disillusioned by the nation-state and its hegemonic entanglements, he finds himself more devoted to its people, Kenyans rather than Kenya, while giving ear to the dispossessed in his artistic practice.

"In the time of making this work, so much has been unstable, both internally and in society. There is evident repression in Kenya, and around the world that goes back years, and this unconsciously affects people's reactions, in some cases replicating the same cruelty and indifference. We are more programmed than free,

hardening instead of staying soft. It's so important to truly consider how we treat each other."

Mwangi didn't always think of himself as an artist, as it felt more like a natural inkling, accessible to him without much tension. Even so, in his two decades of sustained exploration and practice, he has reconciled this discordance by tapping into the artist's role as an inquisitor; to question and trouble conventional societal beliefs and envision anew. Here, in choosing to work in abstract expressionism, he extends these sensitivities to his audience seeking less a totality in the reading of the work, but rather opening up modes for multiple interpretations.

In *Space Within* (inside cover page), the first work created for the exhibition, Mwangi, strikes out with an introspective gesture; a lone figure in distressed brushstrokes of black, umber, ochre and grey tones on a teal background. The work's title, *Space Within*, and the solitary composition challenges the viewer to seize their capacity to feel, endure, and act. With this agency and quiet confidence, Mwangi develops other paintings that form this body of work. The focal point remains consistent; the abstracted human figure, either solitary, a pair (often of fused figures), or in larger groupings.

#### On conflicted states

In *We belong to the Land*, Mwangi considers the intergenerational trauma within Kenyan society resulting from forced removals

opposite: *We Belong to the Land*, 2023



and separation from ancestral land through settler-colonialism. The aftershocks still reverberate with many Kenyans aspiring to buy land as security. Living in the wake of this displacement into reservations, and the legacy of a rigged land ownership system, Mwangi reflects on his desire for self-determination through land stewardship.

“Pesa ya kwanza nilishika vizuri, nilinunua shamba. Land is freedom, you can grow your own food, and live at a relaxed pace. Whoever controls the land, controls you. Control of the land is control of resources.”

It is for this reason that Mwangi is critical of the recently passed *Affordable Housing Bill, 2023*, a government project that looks to impose a housing levy on an already overtaxed working-class population, with the promise of accessible housing options. Suspicious of the state’s intentions, he posits it’s more likely a smokescreen to capture already limited resources to institute long-term dependence, further robbing citizens of their agency for years to come.

In *Coercive State* (pg 7), one of his dual figure compositions, Mwangi captures a snapshot of imbalanced power dynamics; on the lower left of the painting, a crouched mangled body executed in densely interlaced brushstrokes is juxtaposed against a stern upright figure looking down on it. In choosing to use two figures, Mwangi

here also illustrates the modes in which oppression operates in smaller relational units such as within intimate partnerships. On a macro-scale, he alludes to the disposition of the ruling class to replicate the violence of colonialism and capitalist imperialism for domination rather than in service to its citizens.

#### On hope and endurance

*State of Waiting* (pg 8-9), one of the larger works in the exhibition, takes a turn towards a hope rooted in discipline and action. Mwangi adopts a brighter palette of opaque violets, yellows, greens and deep blues to frame the two figures seated side-by-side awash with grey tones, and softer pastel blues. His considerations for tone and colour aren’t illustrative and instead emphasise abstracted emotional and psychological inner states. Having lived and worked for most of his life in Mukuru, a low-income neighbourhood in Nairobi, Mwangi knows intimately the failures of the state in its responsibility to its citizens. It is for this reason that he remains deeply engaged with his community through the “Wajukuu Arts Collective”, an organisation he co-founded in 2003. Through his artistic practice and sustained commitment to his community, he transmutes the disappointments of a perpetual state of waiting into a radical hope.



*Loathing in Silence II, 2024*

**Loathing in Silence**

A cave in me where shivering carved my reality,  
with self-aberration comes a crack,  
with heedlessness even grander sparks of pain,  
but still we glow; with those who see our space,  
with those who share our humanity.

- Shabu Mwangi



*Coercive State, 2023*



*State of Waiting, 2023*



*Dining Alone, 2024*



*Emptiness in a Gown, 2024*



*Ciakorire Wacü Mügünda, 2023*





*Crippling State, 2024*



*Distortion in Global Politics, 2024*

## Lawrence “Shabu” Mwangi (Kenya, b.1985)

Shabu Mwangi’s practice focuses on the effects of contemporary and historical violence, and other forms of marginalization on individual and collective psyches. Mwangi’s mixed media compositions are an abstracted emotional reflection of societal and cultural fissures. His current body of work when faced with structural violence that affect the individual, community and society at large.

Mwangi has lived and worked in Mukuru, an informal settlement in Nairobi where he co-founded the Wajukuu Art Project in 2003. In 2023, he was a finalist for the Access Art X Prize in the Africa/Diaspora category. In 2022 Mwangi and fellow members of the Wajukuu Art Project participated in Documenta 15 in Kassel, where they went on to win the Arnold Bode prize. He also participated in the 13 Biennial do Mercosul in Brazil, 2022. Recent solo and group exhibitions include: *Self Addressed*, curated by Kehinde Wiley for Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, 2023; *Systems to Emptiness*, a prelude to Documenta 15, 2022; *A Never Ending Longing*, Circle Art Gallery, Cromwell Place, London, 2022; *The Sources of Our Seas*, Circle Art Gallery, 2021; *East African Encounters*, Cromwell Place, London, 2021. Other shows include: *The Man with Two Shadows*, Circle Art Gallery online, 2020; *Yawning for Power*, Tilleard Projects, 2019; *The Stateless*, Circle Art Gallery, 2018; *Freedom, Flight, Refuge*, Circle Art Gallery, 2017; *Art Transposition* Nairobi-Kampala-Hamburg, LKB Gallery, Hamburg; *Pop-Up Africa*, GAFRA, London, 2017; *Out of the Slum*, Essen, 2012.

Mwangi has participated in residency programs in Kenya, Germany and Italy.

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Gallery hours: Weekdays 10am - 5pm, Weekends 12pm - 5pm

Front cover: *Failed Coup II*, 2023  
Back cover: *Present Assertion*, 2024

