

BEATRICE WANJIKU

Beatrice Wanjiku (b. 1978, Kenya) is one of the foremost Kenyan painters of her generation. For UNSETTLED she has created four new uncompromising works that waver between figuration and abstraction with a provocative rawness. Wanjiku's investigations into the human psyche result in captivating, haunting works that touch everyone.

In her practice Wanjiku examines the times we are living in. With ambiguous feelings, she senses the world is in a phase of self-combustion. Moved by social and political situations, both on a local as global level, her works interrogate their unsettling impact on our lives. Her paintings are not political, but reflect on our journey as human beings, and how we are forced to constantly adapt to navigate our social spaces. Wanjiku's paintings scrutinize the human experience, functioning as a mirror of who we are.

"To navigate these overwhelming times, the real self gets eroded. We adapt ourselves to fit in particular spaces and structures. The freedom to be yourself is an illusion, while we conform to fit in."

With her paintings, Wanjiku hopes we can return to our true selves, bringing back the completeness that we are searching for. Her work reflects this pursuit for meaning, to make sense of our constantly altering realities.

"My paintings are about hope, a mirror of who we are or who we aspire to be. They are an excavation of the soul to better understand ourselves and the spaces we occupy."

Exploring the 'condition humaine', Wanjiku displays who we are as human beings, in our genuine entirety. While being masters of our own destiny, she visualizes the duality of our inner selves, constantly battling between choices in a process of doubt while trying to reinvent ourselves. Wanjiku is inspired by the shared experience of the multifaceted persons we are, ever-changing and evolving. The motif of the gaping mouth, omnipresent in many of her paintings, is a metaphor for this constant and consuming search that alters us; it is an insatiable abyss. Wanjiku's portraits deliberately have a certain abstractness, not wanting to portray identifiable persons so they can function as a mirror to each. In the unsettling confrontation with her works, the viewer is challenged to re-evaluate oneself.

With her paintings Wanjiku expresses something that's within. She is on an elusive quest to figure out how our internal functions, trying to represent our inner selves by peeling away the layers of constituted social norms. Wanjiku goes straight to the core of our being. She bypasses the superficialities and dives into the common features of being human, like bones,



blood, veins and other guts. She wants to show the backbone of our human existence. While painting the physicality of the human body, it is our mental interiors she is trying to capture.

“I want to delve into the internal, like completely strip of the skin, go to the bones, the inside. It’s like I am trying to paint the soul in a way.”

A prominent visual element in the featured works is her anatomical deconstruction of the human body, especially the ribcage, protecting the body’s essential’s guts. For Wanjiku, human bodies are a metaphor for our mental frame of reference. Her art has a larger, more universal message – as our human condition it is shared by all, notwithstanding physical differences in skin color, gender, or age. Wanjiku prefers to work with darkened hues, building up her portraits with a layering of flesh tones and shades of dark blue. The final layer is so thin it becomes see-through. Underneath, a brightness of red hues emerges from a womb like shape – suggesting re-birth. The womb suggests a reclaiming of a life and hope, filled with energy and power. Pregnant of possibilities, her paintings are metaphors for new beginnings, a rebirth within oneself. To peer into a painting of Wanjiku is to lose yourself in questions of being, of belonging and of existence.

Beatrice Wanjiku lives and works in Nairobi. She studied at the Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts from which she graduated in 2000. In 2017 she was part of the exhibition “Personal Structures: Open Borders”, organized by the European Cultural Centre during the 57th Venice Biennale. Her works have been exhibited nationally and internationally. She had solo shows in Nairobi such as “Mourning a Memory” (2018), and “A Wild Infection of the Wildly Shaken Public Mind” (2021), and was one of the five artists selected for the group show “Kesho Kutwa” at the Nairobi National Museum in 2021. Wanjiku has been exhibited at international art fairs such as a 1:54 NY (2016), VOLTA NY (2017), and Expo Chicago (2022).

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 Mourning a Memory, One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2017 VOLTA New York, Invitational Solo Presentation Project Fair, New York, USA
- 2017 57th Venice Biennale, European Culture Centre, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy
- 2014 Beauty and Ugliness, One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2009 Beatrice Wanjiku, RaMoMA Museum of Modern Art, Nairobi, Kenya



SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2017 When the Heavens Meet the Earth, The Heong Gallery, Cambridge, UK
2016 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, New York, USA
2015 Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York, USA
2015 The African Tree, Ostrale Centre for Contemporary Art, Dresden, Germany
2015 KunstRAI, Edition 31, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2015 Creativity Gallery, Nairobi National Museum, Nairobi, Kenya
2014 BLOOM/ART FAIR, Koelnmesse, Cologne, Germany
2014 Africa III, Devearts, Utrecht, Netherlands
2014 Afrikadag, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2012 Funika-Fufuka/Cover-Recover, Belgian Embassy, Nairobi, Kenya
2011 Africa: The Mother of Us All, Columbia City Gallery, Seattle, USA
2010 Politics of Art and the Art of Politics, Kuona Trust, Nairobi, Kenya
2009 Artist without Borders, Triangle exhibition, Nairobi, Kenya
2008 Africa Now, World Bank Washington DC, USA
2006 Africa Within: Many Eyes One Soul, The Royal Commonwealth Society, London, UK

AWARDS

2013 UNESCO Aschberg Bursary, USA
2013 Lava Thomas and Peter Danzig Fellowship Award
2012 Dak'Art Biennale Moving Art Africa (Goethe Institut) Senegal
2011 Robert Sterling Clarke Foundation Fellowship
2006 Alliance Francaise's and Goethe-Institut's Most Promising Female Artist Award

EDUCATION & RESIDENCIES

2018 Art Omi Residency, New York, USA
2013 Djerassi Residency Artist Program, San Francisco, USA
2000 BFA, Buruburu Institute of Fine Art, Nairobi, Kenya

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