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ABSTRACT

College students in art history courses study African art more frequently than in the past. Textbooks and videos, however, do not reflect the realities of creative expression today in Africa. Rather, African art dwells on the traditional arts of the west and southern regions of Africa. This paper focuses on eastern and southern sub-Saharan Africa and some of its key modern artists. The paper seeks to highlight the artists' lives, education, and working conditions and what they produce. In a larger sense, the paper discusses what contemporary life is like in certain African regions through the eyes of art education researchers who have lived and worked in those places. Questions the paper explores are: What type of art is most appreciated by Africans themselves? How does modern art get produced in Africa? Is an artist better off with a western education? What place does craft or traditional art have in the artworks of professional, contemporary African artists? Do these artists feel that they must produce a certain type of image to retain their voices in a world dominated by western aesthetics? These are some of the complex issues the paper discusses to shed light on the paradigms and paradoxes of contemporary artists in Africa. It intends to help a discerning audience to gain a better sense of the African visual experience in general, especially of those places which are often ignored in African art history texts. (Author/BT)

MODERN AFRICAN ART: GETTING BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL TO RECOGNIZE CONTEMPORANEOUS AESTHETICS

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Modern African Art: Getting Beyond the Traditional to Recognize Contemporaneous Aesthetics

Abstract

Currently, college students in art history courses study African art more frequently than ever before. However, textbooks and videos do not reflect the realities of creative expression today in Africa. Rather African art dwells on the "traditional" arts of the west and southern regions of Africa. This presentation/slides focus on Eastern and Southern Sub-Saharan Africa and some of its key modern artists. They attempt to highlight the artists' lives, education, and working conditions and what they produce. In a larger sense, this talk discusses what contemporary life is like in certain African regions through the eyes of art education researchers who have lived and worked in these places.

What type of art is most appreciated by Africans themselves? How does "modern art" get produced in Africa? Is an artist better off with a western education or not? What place does craft or traditional art have in the artworks of "professional, contemporary" African artists? Do these African artists feel that they must produce a certain type of image to retain their voice in a world dominated by western aesthetics? These are some of the complex issues that we hope to discuss to shed light on the paradigms and paradoxes of contemporary artists in Africa. We intend to help a discerning audience gain a better sense of the African visual experience in general, especially of those places, which are often ignored in African art history texts.

To understand contemporary art in Africa, is to understand and question the paradigm shift that took place when a prevailing culture was subsumed within an imported ideology brought about,

first by the iconoclastic influence if Islam and later by European missionaries (de Rachewiltz, 1966; Davies, Nandy & Sardar, 1993; Magnin & Soulillou, 1995).

When Columbus set sail across the Atlantic in 1492, he set in motion a trend whose repercussions have affected the lives of non-European/Western world. The discursive discourse of the time was dominated by words such as "us" and "them." These became descriptors of a political framework in which everything was polarized between the majority and minority. Thus, any one not conforming to the white Anglo-Saxon protestant mold was the "OTHER."

Columbus' journey made the Americas the "New World" and introduced the Europeans to cultures completely foreign to the citizens of Christian Europe. The ideas of the "Old World" crossed the Atlantic with Columbus and settled the fate of the "other" world (Davies, Nandy & Sardar, 1993).

In the early 19th century Africa was colonized. With colonization came change. This change manifested itself in civilizing the "savages." One of the ways this was accomplished was by obliterating all vestiges of the African culture and belief systems. The missionaries did not understand "the fundamental

difference between the spirits animating African art and Western art, that is between the creation of ritual instruments and of *objets d'art*" (de Rachewiltz, 1966, p. 150). The art forms created by Africans were a manifestation of the world in which life-affirming activities took priority over everything else. Thus, the transition from one state of existence to the next, the appeasement of negative spirits, healing, the sustenance of forces of nature and man, prestige and the simple pleasure of living provided the impetus for making art (Vogel, 1981). Art was a spatial testimony of their vision of the world—a tangible expression of their faith (Kennedy, 1992). Everything connected with nature, such as water, rain, thunder, forests and ancestral spirits was deemed primitive. Thousands of wooden masks, the main vehicle of rituals and rites, and other supplementary artifacts were confined to flames as unclean fetishes—artifacts revered by Africans for their preternatural power because they have been used in rites and thus consecrated (de Rachewiltz, 1966).

Physical nudity was regarded as sinful because of the new "morality" imposed on the converted Africans. The religion of ancestral worship, the chief source of inspiration for African art

had to be replaced by the religion of the "Savior" (de Rachewiltz, 1966).

Master craftsmen of the royal courts of Benin, Ife and other West African kingdoms were turned into factory style mass producers of bookends, caryatids and paper knives for European tourists. Where did all these changes lead? How did it affect art in Africa? In the mid-50s and 60s when African nationalism resulted in a move towards independence from colonialism and imperialism in Africa, a crisis occurred among the majority of artists. A rising minority of "lower middle-class," having been disenfranchised of its own identity through assimilation, emerged to re-define and re-articulate their voice in art forms that resulted in a synthesis of the home culture with western elements. To reject this course of action would have meant a repudiation of and resistance to the western cultural influences. In the 1970s and 80s African musicians, writers, poets and academicians gradually but surely examined their works to develop a national idiom in African art, poetry and literature to re-search an African identity. The names of Wole Soyinka (Africa's first Nobel laureate in literature, Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Ngugi wa Thion'go (Kenya), Okotp' Bitek (Uganda) and Ezekial Mphakhlele (South Africa) are etched (and I

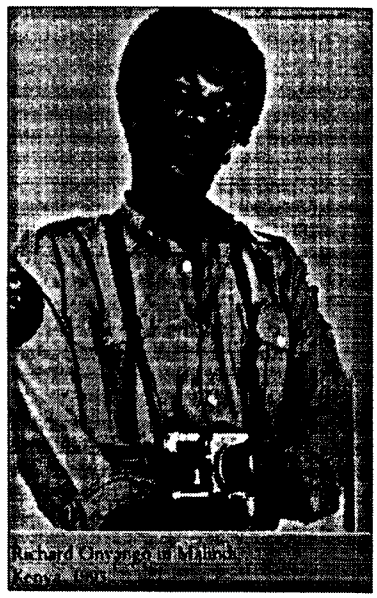
deliberately use an art metaphor) in African and world history for their contribution towards an African identity in the written word. Yet, for the visual artist, the process of establishing an African aesthetic has always been misunderstood and misinterpreted not just in Africa but also in the western world. The dichotomy between the past and present is a constant reminder to African artists of their struggle to recontextualize and re-identify their art and themselves (de Rachewiltz, 1966).

In the Kenyan context, like the art of sub-Saharan Africa, the visual art is a diverse mix of systems—traditional and contemporary—and styles. To the latter belong an increasing number of young aspiring artists who have acquired an academic, albeit western-oriented tradition. These "formally educated" artists inevitably get compartmentalized with labels such as Conceptual, Dada, Cubist or even Surrealist. Some of them have achieved recognition and fame. Yet their recognition has been slow in coming due to a lack of how the term "contemporary art" is applied to African art. Contemporary in the context of any artist's work denotes a certain degree of "institutional support" (Magnin & Soulillou, 1996, p. 10) through exhibitions and commissions. It includes a discourse, which invites an eclectic audience to compare

the "school, style, personality" of the artist with that of a famous figure in Western art, say, a Picasso. When "contemporary" is applied to such African artists' work, the West withholds its imprimatur that it grants to non-African artists through "participation in prestigious international exhibitions and articles in specialized periodicals" (p. 10). For the category of the self-taught, the so-called unschooled artist, whose work is the subject of this paper, the question of categorization is irrelevant. Despite many obstacles, these artists display a tenacity that bespeaks of a total commitment to create.

A syncretic approach that fused the elements of tribal pantheon, supported by the accouterments of daily life—material culture—and the worship of the Son of God freed the contemporary Kenyan artist from the influence of Western art traditions (Magnin & Soulillou, 1996). For the vast majority of Kenyan artists struggling to make their artistic vision a reality has always been a near-impossible task. The infrastructure to exhibit, let alone to have their work mentioned, that is a given for artists in the West is somewhat difficult and not readily available. Fortunately, for the artists I discuss success and fame have come but with some reservations.

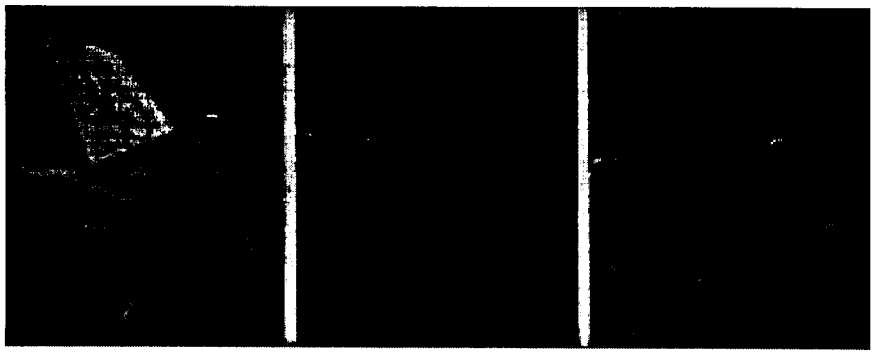
Richard Onyango: Born 1960 in Kisii, Kenya.



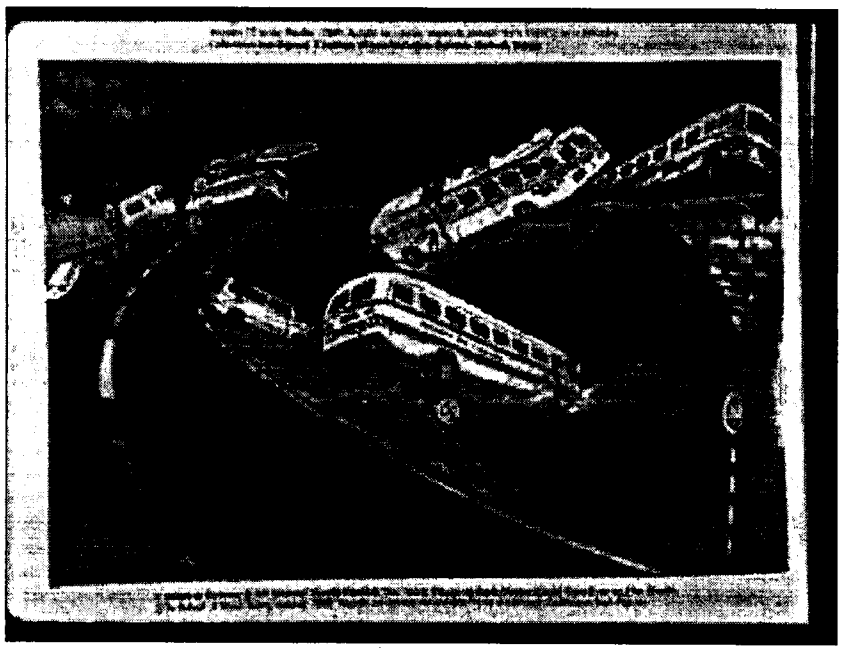
SLIDES:

The Day of Permission 1990. Acrylic on Canvas. 46 7/8" x 62½" Collection Jean Pigozzi.

Airport 77 in the Pacific. 1993. Acrylic on Canvas, triptych, overall 63" x 141¾" Collection Jean Pigozzi. Courtesy of Isaia Mabellini-Sarenco, Malindi, Kenya.



Caution to Drivers: If All "Drivers" Could Carefull "No" Such Things or Such Names Could Exist Ever On Our Roads (On Behalf of Road Safety Kenya). 1992. Acrylic on Canvas, 46 7/8" x 62¼" Collection Jean Pigozzi.



Onyango celebrates the landscapes he grew in. From a very young age he has been fascinated by machines and in order to retain their memory he would draw these and "whatever my eyes could see." He called these his "photo pictures," because he did not have a camera. Airport 77 in the Pacific and Caution to Drivers: If All "Drivers" Could Carefull "No" Such Things or Such Names Could Exist Ever On Our Roads! reflect his concept of the power of technology to create chaos. In 1992 he had his first exhibition in New York where critics pronounced his work "urban African kitsch and scenic stereotypes with perfectly observed details." Emmett Williams, the art critic counters that with "What kitsch?" Kitsch is pretentiously bad taste in art. Onyango's work is not intended to be anything of the kind. He is a very serious artist, and these so-called stereotypes that abound in his paintings are part of the landscape he grew up in and celebrates. Onyango's paintings portray a social conscience so that no matter where he is, his work will be African. Why should an artist not practice what seems natural and familiar to him/her even if it seems to belong to an outside culture? Western critics believe that the African artist who captures elements of the West practices a form of "Westernism." The same is true of artists in the West. Cubism appropriated non-

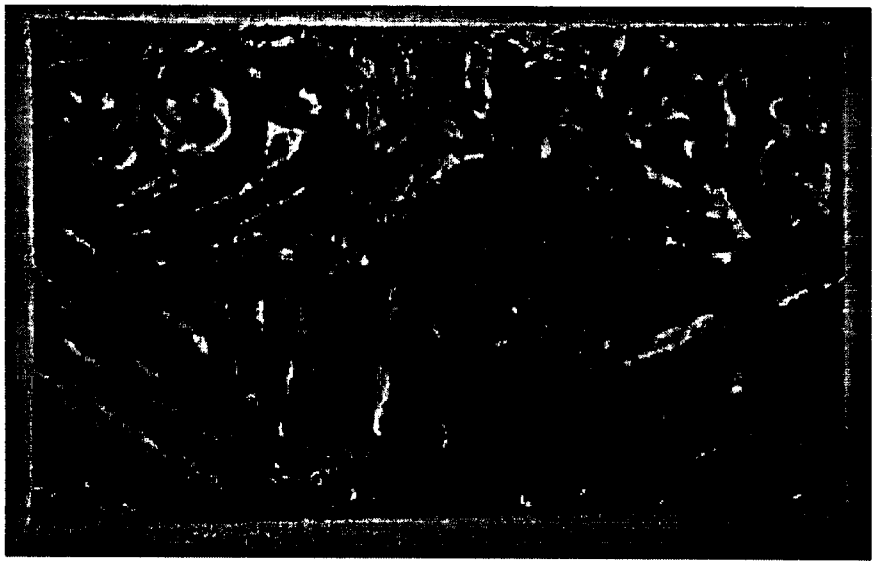
Western elements. So have Rauschenberg and Spoerri (Magnin & Soulillou, 1996, p. 14).

Sane Wadu: Born 1954 in Nyathuna, Kenya.

SLIDES:

Cyclist. 1991. Mixed mediums on canvas. 15 1/8" x 19¼" Collection Jean Pigozzi.

Thinking Man. 1990. Oil on Canvas, 19 1/8" x 29 1/8". Collection Jean Pigozzi.



Wadu's earliest works created much controversy and disdain. But ever an individualist, he adopted a new name "Sane" in response to accusations of being insane. He started out by painting with household paint on plastic sheeting and even on his own clothes. His subject matter has moved from Kenyan wild life to the rural farmer, herdsmen and self-portraits. In all these Wadu exhibits a propensity for introspection and search for something that in the final analysis is illusive, like fate itself. Though he has received no formal training, his creative impulses have led critics to classify his work as realistic, abstract, surrealistic and

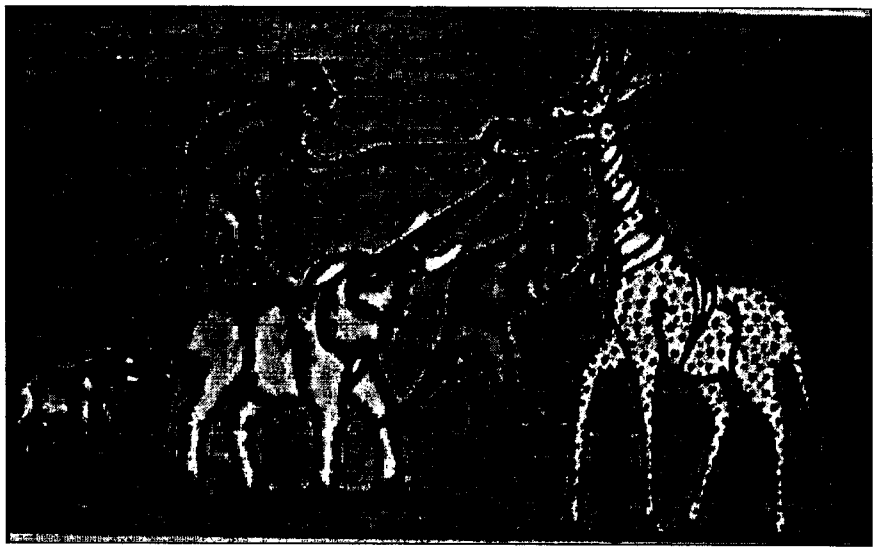
expressionistic. The paintings of the 1990s, display crowded canvases of the urban environment in which thick impasto, and rich colors lay bare the struggles of the crowded figures that seem to be bound to their surroundings, yet accepting of the human condition. Today Wadu is considered to be the master of oils on canvas in Kenya (French Cultural Center, 1992).

Kivuthi MBuno: Born 1947 in Mwangini, Kenya.

SLIDES:

Taabu (Trouble). 1992. Crayon on paper. 20" x 29 7/8". Collection Jean Pigozzi.

Wanywaji (Drunkards). 1992. Crayon on Paper, 20" x 29 7/8". Collection Jean Pigozzi.



Mutinda. (person's name, meaning "born beyond term"). 1992. Crayon on Paper, 20" x 29 7/8". Collection Jean Pigozzi.

Looking at MBuno's work, one might be easily led to label him a Primitive Naïve Painter. But, that would be misleading. Primitivism, in the African context is irrelevant and meaningless. Magnin and Soulillou (1996, p. 14) contend that the "primitive" is a making of Western myth about Africans. Primitivism describes that period in Western art at the beginning of the 20th century when European radical artists (Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani and others) used "primitive" art forms (from West African masks) to further their own artistic development. MBuno portrays the natural world in a supernatural manner—a hallmark of African sensibilities. His early travels into the interior of Kenya and Tanzania, as a chef on safaris, brought him close to the flora and fauna of East Africa. Thus, his paintings, always with crayons, ink and pastels on paper, drawn precisely, portray the animals of the plains living in harmony with each other, with endearing qualities of playfulness and joy that go much beyond the anthropomorphizing of Disney-world animals. Human beings too seem to display their more amenable characteristics living in a world in which the IDEA of nature rather than nature itself reigns supreme. Another feature of MBuno's work shows the intimate knowledge he has of the relationship of the material world with human beings. Artifacts of

the Wakamba people are as meticulously rendered as the people who use them. This connection between material culture and material world is a testimony to the inherent bond that exists in all African art even if not every African artist portrays it so accurately.

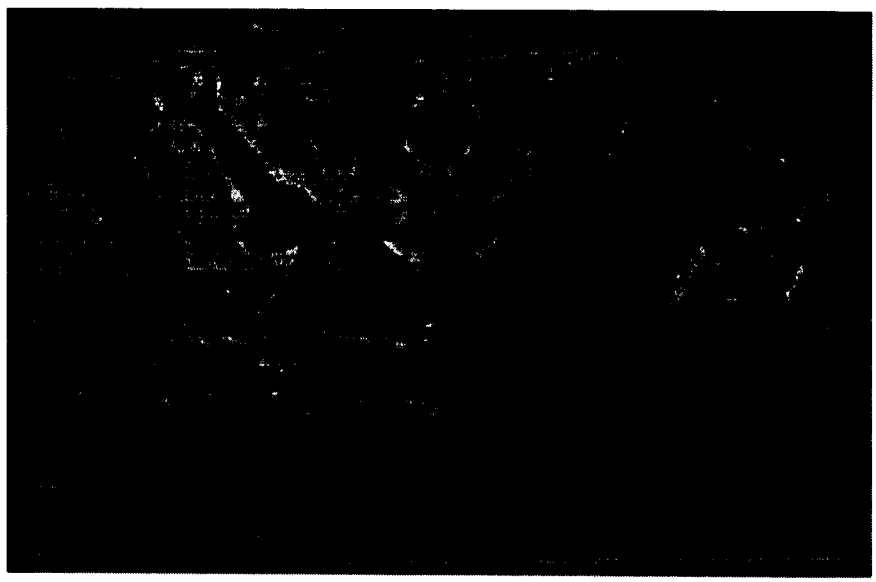
Meek Gichugu: Born 1968 in Ngecha, Kenya.

SLIDES:

What a Fight. 1992. Oil on Canvas. 19 5/8" x 25 5/8". Collection the artist.

Self-Elevated One. 1991. Oil on Canvas, 10 5/8" x 15". Collection Marc Van Rampelberg.

Nation's Fruits. 1991-92. Oil on Canvas. 13¾" x 15¾". Collection the artist.



Meek started to paint seriously in 1985 after hearing about Wadu's success as a painter. Meek sees a co-relation between human and animal behavior. He says, "sometimes people are like animals" (Burnet, cited in Magnin & Soulillou, 1996, p. 134). This results in unnerving and unintended (on the part of the artist) tensions that go beneath and beyond the calm, earthy tones of yellow, ocher, blue, red and green colors. The figures in his painting rise up like and fuse with trees with interlocking limbs (branches). The artist likens these to human goals—the rewards of all endeavors. Among Meek's recurring symbols are the "trees of people" with spherical unknown fruits. In *What a Fight* the viewer is confronted with eyes, both human and animal, staring fixedly. The collision of flora and fauna intertwined with long appendages and equally long limbs create a ceaseless motion in which fruits become bellies, and kneecaps and haunches. From being very impressionistic in his work, Meek's recent work shows much tighter and precise brush strokes with all extraneous details eliminated. Meek Gichugu is not concerned about being misinterpreted. He would rather that the viewer provide their own meanings by learning" what I am doing" (Burnet, cited in Magnin & Soulillou, 1996, p. 134).

Abdallah Salim: Born 1958 in Mambrui, Kenya,

SLIDES:

A Gor Mahia Soccer Player. 1992. Acrylic on carved wood, life-size. Courtesy of Isaia Mabellini-Sarenco, Malindi, Kenya.

Detail of *Dancing Masai Alphabet (N, O, D, F).* 1991-1992. Acrylic on carved wood, each 78¾" x 15¾". Courtesy of Isaia Mabellini-Sarenco, Malindi, Kenya.

Love and Indifference (Queen of Hearts). 1993. Acrylic on wood pane, 43¼" x 63¾" Courtesy of Isaia Mabellini-Sarenco, Malindi, Kenya.

Love and Indifference (King of Spades). 1993. Acrylic on wood pane, 43¼" x 63¾". Courtesy of Isaia Mabellini-Sarenco, Malindi, Kenya.

Salim's moveable installations imitate the realities of a village life. Men come and go, groups of women chat with each other, children scamper about amid goats and chickens adding a theatricality that is reminiscent of scenes changing on a stage. A sculptor from a very young age, Salim's life-size sculptures capture the motion and rhythm of a soccer player or Maasai dancers. *Dancing Masai Alphabet (N, O, D, F*). 1991-92 Acrylic on carved wood each 78¾" x 15¾". *The Gor Mahia Soccer Team and Love and Indifference* are all brilliantly colored installations—some very columnar harking back in style to the totemic sculptures of the Makonde of Tanzania. In *Gor Mahia,* Salim celebrates Kenya's most famous soccer team. Each sculpture represents an individual player identified by how he wears his uniform. The contrapposto posture is braced ready for action on a soccer field. *Love and Indifference*—an installation narrates the eternal love

triangle story. Yet the light colored faces and playing cards might suggest the alien nature of the game of love in the African context. All of Salim's sculpted figures display curvilinearity within a perfectly flat surface that energizes the geometrics of the forms (Garnier, cited in Magnin & Soulillou, 1996).

Rosemary Karuga:

Her early works were in terra cotta. The figurines in their realism bring to mind the qualities of a Kollwitz. The hands that have toiled the earth, cared and protected children and given up part of her life for her country. Now in her seventies, Karuga has changed courses and is at her best in a most evocative way with a medium, which is least permanent—papier colle. The ephemeral quality of her artwork reflects the "Black" experience and cultural expression.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined the context within which art forms of Africa have evolved. I have explained the term "contemporary" and have discussed how a specific group of Kenyan artists practice their craft. Kenyan artists like their counter parts in other sub-Saharan countries fall into the categories of the formally educated and the self-taught. The artists whose work I have discussed comprise the latter group. Although their work could be considered

elitist in so far as the exposure it has received, the subject matter and the context within which they work is predominantly Kenyan. These artists do not mass-produce their work for the tourist. But they are savvy enough to know that the eclectic tourist has an appeal for work that has the "stamp" of African-ness.

The artists I have discussed have all worked under the patronage of foreign cultural centers, and art galleries to achieve a measure of recognition extending beyond the borders of Kenya. They have been nurtured and given the freedom to paint (mostly) and have been exhibited in Europe and the United States. Today, an increasing number of young artists benefit from the support and tutelage of their older compatriots. The current Kenyan art scene is constantly changing and crossing boundaries. The fusion of the traditional with the contemporary—is being re-defined and in its wake an artistic idiom is emerging that refuses to abdicate their true identity. Kenyan artists who have found recognition in the West have become part of a larger art world in which there is no "global" or "international art." Rather their art is internationally recognized with or without the label "contemporary."

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