

RICHARD KIMATHI

CONFUSING SKY



Richard Kimathi  
2020







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## FOREWORD

We are delighted to present this volume on the Kenyan visual artist Richard Kimathi. Often described as an ‘artist’s artist,’ Kimathi has been steadily producing for three decades. Richard Kimathi’s caricature-like disconnected figures provide a compelling commentary with great empathy on his community’s disenfranchised, working-age population. The eerily quiet tones of his works and their titles haunt the viewer. Kimathi’s story also touches upon the many independent art spaces that have nurtured Kenyan artists. I was truly inspired by our visit to Richard Kimathi’s home studio and garden, which revealed a self-sustaining way of life entirely in harmony with nature and his community.

We are grateful to Richard Kimathi for accepting our invitation to participate in this project and welcoming Almas Art Foundation to his studio. We are equally thankful to Kimathi’s fellow artist and curator Thom Ogonga for contributing an insightful survey of Richard Kimathi’s career. Similarly, the multitalented writer, curator and artist Rosie Olang’ Odhiambo discussed how to access Kimathi’s themes and works through auditory cues. The beautiful photos of Kimathi’s works in this volume were captured by the wonderful artist James Mariuki.

I would especially like to thank Susan Wakhungu-Githuku, James Mariuki, Shine Tani and Kaloki Nyamai, who, acting together as our advisory committee, were instrumental in our decision to work with Kimathi as our first engagement with the vibrant Kenyan art world. I am sure we’ll have many returns in Almas’s future.

This volume exists in tandem with a documentary on Richard Kimathi, produced by Almas Art Foundation with the Nairobi-based filmmaker Nyaguthi Maina. I invite the readers to watch this film on our website.

It gives me great pleasure to see our list of collaborators and creative practitioners grow with each project.



As our aim to provide support for different stakeholders in the art ecosystem is coming to fruition, we are also proud to have our publications in a number of libraries and artist-run spaces as part of our educational outreach. I hope our readers enjoy this volume on Richard Kimathi and that this volume serves as a gateway to the rich art world of Kenya.

Farah Jirdeh Fonkenell  
*Founder and CEO, Almas Art Foundation*



## CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD KIMATHI

### Can you please introduce yourself?

My name is Richard Kimathi. I'm a Kenyan artist practising and living in Kenya. I'm a painter, I do sculptures, and at the same time, I make prints and drawings. I was born in Nyeri in 1971. My parents moved thereafter, and part of my childhood, I spent in Mombasa because my father was working at the coast. Then, we moved to Machakos County. I joined a school in Machakos County, for my primary and high school education. And thereafter, I moved to Nairobi.

### How did you become an artist?

My practising art began during my childhood. I was lucky to enrol in a high school where art was a very important subject. Even during my childhood, I could feel, I would get inspired and could do drawings. I think it's something that wasn't in my family, but it was in me. During my high school years, it became more prominent, and I performed well in the subject. We used to do prints and painting. After high school, I went to college in Nairobi, to the Creative Art Centre between 1994 and 1996. It doesn't exist anymore, but during that time, it was in the Nairobi business district and was very popular. I enrolled for a diploma in graphic arts, and along the way, I also did fine arts.

While I was in college, I was doing some small paintings and visiting the Watatu Gallery, which is in Nairobi along Standard Street. It was a very big gallery, responsible for most of the first-generation artists. It played a big role because I could visit even though I wasn't yet part of the group of artists who were showing there. But I could visit and get inspiration from seeing their works. It gave me motivation. Between college and visiting the gallery, I decided to do a few small pieces to try and see if they could be part of a group show. They used to have shows for experienced artists and other shows for young artists. I was able to secure a space for a group show. That's how I became motivated. When I went to Kuona Trust, I realized it was very friendly and conducive. And we were dealing with the artists of the same level.

### Can you talk about Kuona Arts Trust which helped launch the careers of many young artists?

I was able to join Kuona Trust in 1996. It had begun one year earlier. The main objective of Kuona Trust was to nurture young, talented artists. I was lucky because during that time, workshops were going on. They used to invite more experienced artists to work with the incoming artists. So, I met some artists in my age group, the second generation of artists. Artists like Michael Soi, Justus Kyalo and Simon Mureithi and others. When I joined, an artist called Chain Muhandi, a painter, was

conducting a workshop. Kuona Trust was a non-profit organization; the space was provided by the National Museum for some years. For a decade, we were able to work at the studios of Kuona Trust.

### **Do you remember your early shows, how you got your start?**

In 1997, one of the paintings that I did from a previous workshop won a prize. A competition came up, sponsored by the East African Industries. They later called themselves Unilever, responsible for household products. They organized a competition whereby the idea was to identify one of the most promising East African artists...Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, the East African region. I was lucky and I also got a chance to be part of an exhibition at the National Museum because the event was happening there. The museum provided the space for the show, and they purchased the works. It gave me a big motivation because I was the winner, and there was another guy from Tanzania who was the second. I remember his name was John Kilaka, from Tanzania. And in the same year, in 1997, I was also lucky to participate in another show at the museum. Things went well and the following year, I was able to participate in my first international workshop, the "Triangle Workshop." It took place in Naivasha, Kenya. We had artists from all over Kenya. So, in 1998 and 1999, I was able to participate in two workshops in the same venue, the same place. Then in 2000, I was in another competition, this time organized by the United Nations to celebrate the year 2000. I participated with three paintings, and I was lucky again one of my paintings was chosen by the United Nations to produce stamps. And it also came with a prize with money, recognition, and a catalogue. This was another big step for me.

The following year, in 2001, I got a scholarship, and it was an exchange program between Kenya and the University of Kentucky in the United States for young Kenyan artists. I was the first beneficiary of the project. The idea was to travel and go to the university, stay for like 4 or 5 months. And while there, you just interact with the university students, the professors and everybody in the art department. You get a studio and you work for those months. At the end of the program, I was able to get a space and showcase my work. Then the following year, 2002, I got an invitation from one of the students there to do another project at the same venue. It was very successful and ran for about four months. All this time, I was still at the Kuona Trust, working with the artists and doing group shows.

### **How did you get your first solo show?**

My first solo exhibition took place in 1998, courtesy of One Off Gallery because I had met the director Carol Lees, who was also in the art circle, back in 1997. She was doing 'ArtAffairs', where all Kenyan and East African artists showcased their work and sold at affordable prices. The first one took place at the Village Market. We became quite familiar and she offered me a space in 1998. Back then, it was a

very small space at One Off. I did my first show there. Then, in 1999, she gave me the chance to do another show. In the meantime, I was still at Kuona Trust, doing group shows there. Later, in 2004, I got a chance through a friend to travel to Italy for an exhibition to present my work and other Kenyan artists' works. We had artists from Kuona and took all the works to Trieste in northern Italy. And in 2006, I got invited by the Dakar Biennale. The Dakar Biennale is a big event. So, it was good exposure, and I managed to travel there.

In the same year also, the Triangle workshops invited me to Karachi, Pakistan. At that time, politically it was not very stable, but we had guidelines from the government and worked there. I remember we had artists from Asia, the United States and Europe. It was another big eye-opening experience. We also did a show in a small town called Gaddani, near the sea.

In 2010, I did another show in Madrid, Spain. It came through a friend of mine who owned a gallery called the Gazzambo Gallery. Before I could do the show, I had to make work so he invited me to his premises at the Kenyan coast in Mombasa for a couple of months. Most of the works I made there, went into the show.

In the meantime, there was another gallery called RaMoMA. RaMoMA came up from 2004 to 2008. The idea was to show Kenyan and other regional artists. Carol Lees was the director while RaMoMA was in operation. When the gallery collapsed, she moved back to her place and established One Off. And that's when we came together, and I became entirely represented by One Off. Every year, I've been having an exhibition.

Remember also, we were working at the Kuona Trust based at the museum. Later, the museum came and took back their space. The artists did not know where to go, or, you know, it was up to the artist to find and move to wherever they wanted. So, in the meantime, the GoDown Arts Centre came up. It was in the industrial area on the outskirts of Nairobi. We secured a space at GoDown. GoDown was responsible for visual and performing artists. We had dancers and acrobats, but we, as visual artists, secured small rooms for working. This was between 2003 and 2004. I worked there for one year and moved my studio back to where I was renting my house. I secured a small room and decided to work there fully, even though I was still keeping in touch with the Kuona Trust because that's where I had most of my contacts and other friends.

So, this was in Kiambu, which is in the neighbouring county to Nairobi. I lived and worked there between 2003 and 2013. All this time I was working there and doing shows with One Off. But in the meantime, more artists came and rented spaces there. We became another small community of artists. This went on for ten years. Then, I decided to move to the current place I'm living in now. I think when I moved to this space, it allowed me to be more creative. Because at that moment, I realised

I could use the space in so many ways. That's why I ventured into a bit of doing sculptures and metal work. Up to now, I have kept experimenting a lot. I work in experiments and take advantage of the availability of nature and found objects while doing paintings.

### **How would you introduce yourself as an artist?**

I'd say, I'm a visual artist and a painter. I do sculptures, make drawings, and, in between, also make prints. The prints were mostly when I was starting years back. I was making more prints than I do now. I remember when I was more focused as a painter, I had so many ideas to express myself through the brush. However, when I was starting, I used the palette knife. Before that, I was doing drawings and using coloured pencils, the cheapest things I could hold because I was very young and coming up. I realised the first time I approached the paint shop for art supplies, they were very expensive. And so, I came up with a plan to make myself relevant as an artist with the available, cheapest things I could find. I used crayons and I could use coloured pencils and cheap watercolours. And there was a practice when I started; I could make a painting using one colour with different shades, more like black and white. With working more and getting confident, introducing more colours came. I sort of started with watercolours on manila paper, these cheap, embossed papers that were available in downtown Nairobi. They were not the quality ones for a professional artist, but I realised they could serve me as an upcoming artist. And most of them, I would take to Watatu Gallery for whatever price they will put them on for. I didn't care how much money I could sell them for. What I wanted was to get exposure. Those were the earliest developments, and I was into drawing, crayons, and wax crayons. Only when I came to Kuona Trust was I introduced to acrylics, because those workshops could provide expensive, quality materials. You could get the quality watercolour paper, canvas, quality oil paints and acrylics, and that's how now I gained momentum as a painter. I wanted to venture into painting and establish myself with a style and see what happens. So, while in Kuona, I painted entirely, and my work started developing. I started with figures. My work really surrounds the people in the culture and the life. The struggle, people in their surroundings. They have social, political, economic interactions. I did figurative work, where you can get the impression of a figure. And most of them were not portraits, just from the imagination. The environment was mostly contributing to my work and developing what I was doing.

In between, we did prints. We had a rolling machine, rollers and woodcuts. I used to make prints with woodcuts and small chisels. In between painting and making prints, my style kept changing. There was a point where I also tried to move from figures to patterns to objects. It really helped me because, at the moment, I combine the two styles, from the figurative to very abstract. I have worked in such a way for a while. Then again, there was another moment when my work changed. I could do

a figure, but then, those figures went into fragments. I could paint in small boxes. One painting, with small different ideas in small boxes all put together. Along the way, I introduced myself to doing some sculptures, and I remember my first sculptures were metal sculptures, iron. They were more two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional. And most of them were sort of like imitations of what I was doing on the paintings. I could transfer that into a piece of metal and make a sculpture, which is more like a two-dimensional sculpture. And I could work on it, paint it, and do any available ideas I had. Along the way, I also tried to do stone sculptures; most of the works that I do are like small carvings. I would say the ideas that are in my paintings, I could find a way to translate them into a sculpture. It was really challenging, but at the end, I could capture what I want. So, my work has been a journey and very experimental. And it's inspired by the people. And fashion design also because I did graphics in college. There's that influence from graphics to painting at the same time.

Apart from the exhibitions that I have done locally and outside the country, there's always been a debate about my work. And sometimes the critics say that there's a sadness in my work but it isn't my intention to give that sadness in my work. It's something that is very unconscious in my work, and it's part of what I've been doing. I don't do my feelings most of the time, but I sort of see people and express what they are and what affects them rather than getting my emotions into my paintings. I see people, and I work on them because when I do emotions on my work, they don't give me enough space to develop. You can have some emotions for a period of time, and they change. When they change, then you might realise, it affects your work. But then, when I paint from my observations, it's a continuation and it's endless. And that's what my work talks about, the people and the culture, religion.



### **Can you elaborate on the paintings that tackled religion?**

I did paintings on religion. I've done very political paintings. There is a painting hanging at One Off with the image of a politician, and in the background, you can see some skulls, and the figure itself is very provocative. That's a painting I did some time back. And the story behind it was the politics of the day, you know, the politics and the perception of a politician.

There are a few ones I did on the church; I was sort of portraying the church as a business entity, whereby people make church and then along the way, it becomes sort of a business venture. In that painting, I had an image of an animal like a monkey or something tossing a church, and there was a little church on top, a small church hanging in balance. It was depicting how the religion is something not very stable. I did a few of them, but that's the only one I can picture very well. Then, on politics, I did paintings of people suffering due to the political game. In that particular one, I made a portrait of a politician, and underneath, you could see the people. The portrayal of the politician was that of an animation kind of thing because you realise that the figure is a figure of a man dressed in black trousers and a shirt with polka dots with the face of a beast and with a red scar, and these kinds of very sharp teeth, like Dracula. To me, I reflected who a politician is by my interpretation. On other social aspects, I've done paintings with people moving across the road interacting. I did a series of paintings portraying the youth, the life, the agony and the lack of jobs. I reflected the youth as a very unstable population.

### **Do you remember who or what inspired you to become an artist? Did anything special make you realise you want to be an artist?**

When I was young, I could draw. Sometimes I think when you grow, you realise those things that sort of played a big role. I watched a lot of movies, local movies. When I reflect, I can connect that with what I do. When I was in primary school growing up in the 80s, I could draw in school whenever they needed a drawing on the blackboard. We also used to watch movies back in the 80s in Kenya through the Ministry of Culture. There was the Kenya Film Board. They could bring cinema to the village, wherever it was across the country, and then there was a day set for the movie. After the movie, I and maybe other kids growing up could compete in making drawings. Most of these movies were cowboy movies. I think watching the movie, getting excited, and then putting it in a drawing made me enjoy expressing myself. Then, at my high school, when art was part of my subjects, that was another step because we made prints. We could do very simple things like potato prints, and we also did some tie-dye.

By the time I was through high school, I knew I wanted to be an artist and that's why I enrolled in art class back in 1996, even though being an artist has not been in my



family. It's my interest and my focus to be an artist that made me an artist. And then, it was cemented through meeting other artists at the right time. And then we could influence each other. In the meantime, we had this first generation of artists, you know, people like Jak Katarikwe, Sane Wadu, Ancient Soy, Francis Kahuri and Elijah Ogira. These people were there before we became artists. And once in a while, when visiting the Watatu Gallery, I could see their work, and it really played a big role and inspired me. There was that urge, maybe that feeling, to become an artist and to be a good artist. Also, I could check books while in college, and learn about artists from Europe and the US and all over. That's when you knew that there was an artist maybe one hundred or two hundred years ago who did something very impressive, and it sort of connects with what you want to do and what you want to be. So, also my time in college helped me to discover a few things, and my time at Kuona Trust played a big role because at that time we could share. We had self-taught artists, we had artists from the university, college artists and all that. Putting all these minds together could build anybody, whether you had some education or were self-taught. Are there any inspirational memories or advice that stuck with you? Or are there any artists that inspire your work?

When I was starting as an artist, everybody that was a part of the Watatu Gallery. Just being allowed and walking in there was a privilege for me. I found everybody amazing because if you could do your exhibition in the Watatu Gallery, and Ruth Schaffner, the owner of the gallery, accepted your work to be on display, then you must be good. And there are people like Sane Wadu and Chain Muhandi, who meant a lot to me. Back in 1997, when I did a workshop with Chain Muhandi, and out of the workshop, my work won a prize. He was there like an inspirational figure. Everybody knew what they were doing at that moment. I knew how to do colours, acrylic, oil paints... But him being there made us feel good. Those were some of the most very notable artists for me.

Gustav Klimt could do a painting very colourful and like a fabric. And then, at the top, you could see a beautiful finish of whatever he is doing. That was very catching for me for many years. Of course, Picasso influenced almost everybody, due to the name, stories and everything. I also enjoyed the work of Basquiat because I thought what he was doing was like graphic, graffiti. And at the same time, it became more popular and acceptable to the larger population. Those were some of the notable artworks I could see. And going through the books.

**Can you explain in terms of techniques and practices, how you make your work?**

What I'm doing at the moment is not very different from what I did a few years back, I work in a certain way, doing the same process. I come up with ideas for a painting and then make drawings on a piece of canvas. Once I make that drawing, I can cut

the outline. So, I produce something like a cutting, and I can transfer that cutting to another canvas. So, they look like relief paintings, two-dimensional but raised like a relief kind of a thing. But I'm also doing what I did some years back. What I'm doing are paintings with stories, very narrative, of groups of young men. Four, five, six, seven, eight figures at the same time. And what I'm trying to do is that these guys are having a conversation. It's not the usual painting whereby you do a painting, you finish, you give it a title. So, these ones have a theme, and I call them *Local Conversations, Lugha ya Mtaani*. Those people are talking and whatever they are, they're just being natural and talking about their day-to-day issues, what's affecting them, the conflicts. But this time, I'm not doing the cuttings. I'm going directly to the canvas and drawing. Once I draw, then I do the process of preparing the canvas with the white acrylic paint, putting a wash, like the way you do with watercolour on paper, but this time it's acrylic paint on canvas. And then, once I do the wash, I repeat the drawing, but the wash still reveals the drawing. Then, the next step will be to apply paint up to the moment that I feel like I've achieved what I'm doing. I enjoy making the stories because it is like taking that painting through another process where I can create a story, a conversation, and I think it's very important. That's what I'm doing so far.



**Who are the characters represented on the canvas? Are you ever represented in your works?**

I think most of my work reflects the struggle, the activities and the people, as I say, I'm inspired by the community. It doesn't have to be on one particular issue, like politics or religion, but the overall lifestyle of people. Being a Kenyan, I wouldn't say I'm not part of a Kenyan environment. I'm also part of what goes on and the struggle in Kenya as a country. My duty, I've always realised as an artist, is to observe and put it on canvas. So those characters, even though they are imaginary characters, for sure, they are part of the population.

**What do you want the spectator to think or feel in front of your work?**

I think first of all, I want to engage them. Once they get engaged, they can translate my paintings in their own way. And then it's my duty now to explain what I'm trying to do. My main objective is to transfer feelings to the viewer before I talk about my work.

**In your recent work, you seem to represent mostly men. Is there a reason for that?**

I think when I started painting some years back, the question was, why women more than men. Over time, I've come to do paintings with women and men, but recently, as you said, there are more men than women in my paintings. Part of the reason, I think, is that I realise making characters of men makes me freer. Because in that subject or the kind of interaction, you realise in some of those stories, they comment more on the way men talk. The men have some conflicts within and sometimes the conflicts come out like jokes that go beyond understanding. They throw fists at each other, they kick each other. It's very rare to see a woman talking to another woman and throwing a kick. But it's very common to see young men talking and another man kicking another man like a joke. So, those are some of the things that inspire me.

**Another observation is that the characters you represent seem to be sad or in a sort of discomfort, never looking at the viewer. Can you elaborate on that?**

Some of these characters I do are from my imagination and, of course being my imagination, then I realise I have a choice. So, sometimes I want to capture some element, a movement or an awkward position. And, when I capture it, I realize that it connects to my feelings and achieves what I want to do. I'll try as much as possible to make these people busy in what they are doing. They are not engaging with the viewer. You could see someone trying to walk fast and the other one asking them, "We are walking together, and you seem to be walking ahead of me; why?" The other character can say, "Something has come up, I'm busy. I want to go." Then you see



another step. You see another character lying on the ground. This character could be very weak or drunk. Then you see the other character trying to help him up. And the reason for that is for the conversation to go on. We are walking together, and you say you are tired, and I want to lift you up as a friend. So, that's what I want to do with those paintings, what I want them to portray. For reasons you realise that some of them could be sad or in a certain mood, and it becomes part of all projects that I'm doing.

**What sort of struggles and problems in Kenyan society do you talk about?**

I would say day-to-day life. Every time you wake up, you have a problem to solve. Maybe you're going to the market to buy something to eat. That's a problem. You have to solve it. You want to catch a matatu, a bus, that's the problem. But at the end of the day, you sit down and realise you are so tired. And that's when you see it as a problem. But you know, when you're doing it, personally, I will put them like the daily struggle before it becomes a problem. That's the main theme behind those paintings and those characters. Even though for many years, there's that aspect of sadness. I've done very close-up paintings. I could do one figure very close, and it's very easy to study the feeling of the figure because it's very close. And you can see the eyes, you can see the expression and all that. But these ones it's like taking a picture. From a distance, you see people moving, and even if you don't see those details very well, you realise there's something happening.

**You made a series called The Mamas and the Papas Series, talking about fatherhood deficiency in Kenya. Can you talk a bit more about this series?**

I was trying to portray the single father. I mean, you asked, why am I painting men all the time? I realised I can depict men taking on the role of motherhood. And I did a few pieces on those taking care of their kids, moving around with them and sharing the same struggle as normal mothers. At that point, I realised that, as a father, for a given amount of time, it's something that happens but it's not usual, like for the mother. It was just the men taking care of their children.

**Do you attach a meaning or special signification to colour in your works? Especially, in your recent work, we see this sort of blue quite often.**

When I use colour, I want to use it to the point that it impresses me. I'm trying to satisfy myself through the colour, rather than the viewer. If I am satisfied with a certain colour, I assume even the viewer will enjoy it. I've used blue for a long time, and I've also used white, shades of black and red, and all these together and yellow. I don't use flat colours. I try to mix them in a way that, they can make shades, they can impress me. I don't use a lot of thick colours. I can work with very light colours, and I think it's part of being influenced by my graphics background. I use a lot of lines and drawings. If you look at some of those drawings, you can realise there

is also some pen work across. And it's part of the colour, and it makes me more satisfied than just using thick and flat colours. Even though blue is one of the paints that has appeared in my paintings for a long time, it comes in different shades.

**Could you talk about your studio? Because your studio is also your home, can you describe how you live in it? And you have quite a special and substantial garden.**

My studio, since it's home-based, is not very much like a studio where you have to share with people. In those studios, I realised at Kuona, you need to arrange some things. In a place you share with someone, you don't want to mess with your fellow artists. But the home studio is more like home, and it's free access even for my kids if they feel inspired by anything. My wife, too. And it's also a place where any member of my family or even a neighbour can come, and we can sit and have a chat. So, it's very convenient in the sense that it's a working studio, but also, it's a place where a few other things can take place. But when I'm working, I make arrangements. I pick a spot, and when I feel comfortable, I can sit somewhere and work there until the last minute. If I'm doing a painting, I don't work on stretched canvas. I stretch it, and once I prepare it very well, then I remove it, and now I can place it down. I can put it on a table and work it there. That's how I do. My studio is more like a social place to socialize with friends and family.

There are also some structures we have done. If I want to get a different atmosphere, I can move to another structure or spot within the same homestead and work there. Along the way, we've been planting trees and growing foodstuffs, maize. We do grow beans and vegetables. The best is the fact that I work from home; I can also have enough time to do some extra activities, not just painting. It's a way of taking a break from painting to doing some gardening and all this stuff.

**Can you talk a bit about the fact that your artwork was selected to illustrate a postage stamp for the UN alongside artwork from Vermeer or Monet? Can you describe a bit that moment and how that affected your career?**

What happened is that first of all, they advertised the project. I decided to participate. It took almost one year, the whole project, the making of catalogues and announcing the winners and all that. At that time, I was at the Kuona Trust. But the idea was the millennium, the coming of 2000. When I participated with my work, I got a letter from their office in New York. There was a prize. And even the letter had information that it was special to have your work selected and they gave a list of other artists whose works have been used as stamps. It was really exciting. They made the catalogue and gave me a certificate. It was really a breakthrough in my career.

**How is it to work and live in the Nairobi region? How do you think that influences your work? And can you describe the area where you live?**

I first lived in Nairobi city and then I moved to Kiambu, which is almost next to Nairobi. It's a very different environment from the usual Nairobi environment. It's more like the countryside, even though later, the development came along, and things started changing. When I was there, I realised that I could move somewhere and work as an artist on my own. The same area where I was renting my apartment was the same area that I had a small studio in, and it sort of prepared me for what I'm doing now. A few years later, my fellow artists came, and they also rented in the area, and we became a community. Each artist was working in their own studio. I lived and worked there until 2013, when I moved with my family. I managed to secure this place and build a house. I could work within the space, even though there was no particular studio. But I could just sit somewhere and do my work. First, I made that shed over there, a small one. And it really helped me before I could make this other space. And it has sort of propelled me to a point where I can be very focused on what I do. I can wake up and, if I want to do some paintings, I can do some work. Maybe if I want to do some gardening, I can. It's always a choice. It's always a choice. Until the moment that you may have an appointment with someone outside. Or perhaps, I need to travel somewhere for a few days, and I can do that. Throughout the year, I'm always within the space and doing my work.

**Can you describe the contemporary art scene in Kenya, and is there a collaborative relationship in between the artists in Kenya?**

The art scene keeps changing. There was the first generation of artists and then, we came probably in the 90s. I would say most of the artists of my generation started from the 90s. Most of the artists from the first generation had the Watatu Gallery to sell their work. But more and more spaces started coming up, it became a little bit more vibrant, even though it was still not like it is right now. The art scene was a small community, and we knew each other very well. And it was sort of spontaneous, you would organize a group show and invite your friends; for a moment you would secure a space, maybe do a solo exhibition. It just kept changing. And then at the same time, there were shops. I'll call them shops, it's up to you if you want to do a painting and sell to them at whatever price they can dictate. It's not a gallery where they sell your work and give you money when they sell at a commission. They were not meant to develop your artistic journey. They were just commercial. Maybe a few still exist, but most like me were more focused on the kind of space whereby you deal with someone based on a good relationship, not money. That's what most of my generation did. You could approach places, ask for shows, and wait to make some money. Along the way, we started traveling around, securing workshops. The art scene has really changed up to the moment whereby most of my



*Bubbles*, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 130 x 140 cm

20 *Bubbles* was exhibited in the Kenya Pavilion in the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017



generation now they have their own spaces where they can work from their home. But we have also a new group of artists coming up. Maybe inspired by what we did and taking steps towards their goals.

**What do you think of the local contemporary art market in Kenya?**

I wouldn't say Kenya is one of the countries in Africa where the art scene is very on top. If you compare to, let's say, a country like South Africa, Nigeria, or even some West African countries. Maybe it's due to the fact that also the government plays some role in that, whereas in Kenya, the artists themselves had to work hard, you know to make it known, to build a name for the Kenya. I would say maybe during the 70s and 80s, the art market here was based on the curio, kind of popular art for tourists. I mean, the carvings, the souvenirs, the things that tourists come and pick for a cheap price. The market was still, until a few years back, touristic. Watatu brought some collectors, some serious people who could collect artworks, and also other people who were interested in art. Most of them were mainly European. But lately, due to the influence and hard work of artists, the locals are coming up and appreciating art, and purchasing. We have also local collectors around, even though the majority are the Westerners.

**Does the Kenyan government help in the development of the art scene and culture?**

From my experience, I don't think so. I think the Ministry of Culture is more into tourism. When it comes to arts, maybe music. Music can produce money quickly. In the fine arts itself and contemporary, people are realising that it's a good business, but the government itself doesn't play a big role, especially for the part of visual artists.

**What has been a difficult experience or period that you have experienced as an artist? And did that work itself into your art practice?**

Finding markets for what we used to do. Before you make a name, it's very difficult. You carry paintings along, and you need to find where to sell them. The 90s were not very impressive for artists at that time. By 1996, the proprietor of the Watatu Gallery, Ruth Schaffner, had died. And the dream of the artists who were depending on the Watatu Gallery for everything had been cut short. That was the time we, the second generation, were starting. What happened is that Kuona came up to help these artists. It wasn't like we would get money, but it was like a common studio. You just stepped in there with your art supplies, and do your painting or whatever you were doing. And then along the way, we had tourists visiting the National Museum and they could come in once in a while. Word was going around that if you want to meet artists, there's a place called the Kuona Trust.

A Scottish person called Rob Burnett was the coordinator from 1995 to 2000. After 2000, he went to work with the Ford Foundation because they were part of the funding of Kuona Trust. Then, we had Judy Ogana, who ran it until they moved to the GoDown. At GoDown, there was Joy Mboya. I think she still runs the GoDown and the Kuona Trust went under different changes led by different directors up to today. I'm not sure who is in charge now, but those were the institutions that played a big role in marketing. Even One Off played a big role because Carol could organize sales in between the year and put the work at an affordable price. And that was really very important to accommodate all the artists. It was difficult, but people are really trying hard to make it more vibrant.

### **What are your plans for the future?**

I think just to keep working and maybe keep being creative. I think creativity keeps anybody more relevant. Otherwise, if you don't come up with ideas, then, you sort of lose focus and motivation. I think creativity is the key to remaining relevant. So that's what I'm planning, to be more creative and produce more as we go on.

### **What would you advise young artists embarking on their careers?**

I would want to encourage young people who want to be artists to do so. When they do it, they shouldn't do it for the money, because sometimes money may come, but you will lose focus. Even though you might be a very good artist, if you want to make some quick money, then you can lose focus. The people that you work with, they may lose trust in you. It's a good career and I would like the government also to put in effort because the government sometimes focuses on other issues. I think art is a record. It keeps the record of events. You can get more visitors because of good culture and culture is part art. The government should focus on promoting art as a career. And not just waiting to tax. You know when you start making money, that's when you become important. I think that's my advice to the to the young artist. And share. We did share a lot, in terms of information, in terms of sharing canvases, paints and all that. At the end of the day, someone will mention you somewhere for being nice and being nice to them. That's my advice to the young artists.

This conversation was recorded between Richard Kimathi and Sinclair Benintende de Hainault in January 2024 in Richard Kimathi's studio in Malaa, Kenya.





## YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS' FAVOURITE ARTIST

THOM OGONGA

Kenyan artist Richard Kimathi forms part of what is often referred to as the 'second generation' of Kenyan artists. The term 'first generation' is commonly used to define the artists whose practice started before or around the country attaining independence (1963), and who went on practicing and getting recognition post-independence through the nineties and into the new millennium.

The second generation, therefore, includes artists born in and around the seventies and eighties, whose artistic practice started around the period of the renaissance of art from the African continent that was marked by what are still considered the two most pivotal exhibitions of works by African artists outside the African continent. Jean-Hubert Martin's *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth) exhibition at Center Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1989) and Simon Njami's *Africa Remix* (2004/2005) at The Hayward Gallery in London (UK), the Museum Kunstpalast in Dusseldorf (Germany), Center Georges Pompidou (Paris, France) and The Mori Museum in Tokyo (Japan) started conversations and arguments that define the African artistic practice to this day. And Richard Kimathi, like many artists whose practice started about then, is too affected this history.

Born in 1971 in Nyeri, central Kenya, Richard seemed destined for greatness from the onset. Raised by working-class parents in rural Kenya, he experienced village life and was early exposed to 'making things' as his father moonlighted as a craftsman renowned for making elaborate walking sticks, clubs, and wedding bands for the village folk.

Richard, affectionately referred to as 'Kim' by his contemporaries in the Kenyan art scene, pursued his formal primary and secondary education in what is now Machakos County, where Art and Craft was his favourite subject. He says he enjoyed the freedom that came with making and building things and would get lost in class, wondering when the next craft session would be. During the school recess, his elder brother ensured he had adequate art supplies that he would then use to make small drawings and paintings, which were quickly noticed by the father's employer - who would later persuade Richard's dad to enrol Richard into an art college in Nairobi, albeit with some resistance as he saw his son's future either as a policeman, or a white collar formal employee.

Richard enrolled for a diploma course in graphic design at the Creative Art Center in Nairobi in 1992 with an eye on securing employment upon completion, but painting remained his first love. Upon graduation and armed with his diploma, he continued making paintings and shuttling between galleries in Nairobi in a bid to find selling avenues while also trying to understand the dynamics and politics

of the Kenyan contemporary art scene. He also tried a few graphic design related gigs as a freelancer, and the experiences made the decision to take up painting full-time quite easy for him.

The Kenyan art scene then was quite conflicted and was mainly concentrated in Nairobi. The existing infrastructure majorly catered to the older, mainly 'self-taught' artists who were content with marketing their stock as naïve/primitive African Art. Then, there was a new crop of young artists coming in from universities and diploma colleges who were having problems getting absorbed into the system. These were mostly teenagers born and raised in cities and could not generate the rural/village paintings that the old order demanded.

Richard was one of the very few emerging artists who were able to get into the Gallery Watatu fold. Watatu, run by Ruth Schaeffner in downtown Nairobi, was by then the most prolific and commercially successful gallery in East Africa, and there was a lot of comfort in having your work there on consignment. This translated to a guaranteed cash payment every week. Around this time, Richard met the famed Ugandan artist Theresa Musoke who encouraged him to visit the Kuona Trust - Museum Art Studio, newly formed in 1996. The studios were set up a year earlier to provide emerging artists with free working space while offering free technical training workshops. These came in handy for young artists who were finding it difficult to fit into the existing network of spaces that were themselves also struggling to adapt to the challenges of how conceptual art was becoming globally.

It was during this period that I met Richard and a handful of other artists, with whom we have gone on to form long personal friendships and professional relationships. Our chance encounter came at a time when there was a lot of fuss regarding what was then billed as the biggest art exhibition of African art outside Africa (Magicians of the Earth). There were many conversations about the narrative being pushed by the exhibition globally, and this generated immense interest in African art by Western galleries, art dealers, curators, and historians to tap into the continent. This coincided with young African curators getting recognition in Western spaces, helping shape the narrative of what was considered African art.

The Museum Art Studios had an eclectic mix of young artists at different stages of their careers. Some older artists occasionally facilitated different technical training workshops that introduced us to various art-making methods. Tanzanian Robino Ntila taught us acid-based etching while Kenyan Elijah Ogira taught wood sculpting. Namibian Ndaasunye Shikongeni facilitated colour reduction printmaking. Much later, when computers became accessible, there were people who offered digital training ranging from word processing to web and graphic design. It is also here that older artists like Theresa Musoke & Yoni Waite would hire us as apprentices to run their limited edition prints for them. As a gang of about a dozen fresh out-of-

school lads, we would attend practically every exhibition opening to marvel at the quality of work and the prices, and enjoy the complimentary wine we could barely afford. It is also when we playfully started using the phrase “When I grow up...” to highlight our budding ambitions that looked so far-fetched then.

While most artists took longer to settle, Richard took it like a duck to water and appeared quite confident in the direction he wanted his practice to go from very early on. His astute technical ability, great sense of humour, and generosity endeared him to his peers instantly. Art materials were costly, and it was easy to run out of them from time to time. Every time that happened, one could be sure Richard didn't mind sharing his. Many artists there had not gone to art school, so we had a serious art theory and history deficiency. Richard was always available to explain and guide anyone through the processes. The first couple of years were chaotic and we were simply painting without a plan. However, having a studio at the Museum came with numerous advantages. Firstly, the large number of tourists frequenting the space translated to regular sales directly in the studio. It also gave artists direct access to activities within the then East African Contemporary Art Gallery, which allowed us to have small works in there on consignment. The only exhibitions new artists were eligible for were the Kenya Museum Society Arts Festival and the East African Industries Art Competition, which became the launching pad of the winners' professional practice as it was the most prestigious art competition in the mid-nineties in the East African region. Richard's hard work, brilliance and consistency saw him awarded the Most Promising Artist during the 1997 edition. Not only did this come with a financial reward, but also the recognition and validation that enhanced his reputation as a prolific artist with a great career awaiting him. With this award came the firm conviction that he could actually make a living as an artist, and from then, there was no stopping him. While most artists become larger than life from such recognition, this seemed to humble him more. He continued being the first in the studio and among the last to leave.

This is the period that I believe defined his career as it is when he started really enjoying his practice.

He became more carefree and bolder, and even his colour palette became richer. During this phase, he had what is still considered one of the most memorable solo exhibitions by an emerging artist.

In one of the numerous conversations with him away from work, he nonchalantly stated that he loathed interviews and stated that “He understood most people question the subject of his paintings and he knows that they can (sometimes) be quite provocative, but he has never been a character in them and his work is always in harmony with himself as the artist.”

The turn of the millennium heralded a dynamic shift in the local art practice - from traditional storytelling to more conceptual ground. Opportunities for artists were becoming accessible with activities like artist residency programmes, workshops, and travelling exhibitions being accessible to artists who had been previously considered up and coming. When Kuona Trust hosted its first international artist residency programme in Naivasha, it was Richard who got the first nod to work alongside the globally recognized visiting artists Claudette Schreuders (South Africa), Stanford Watson (Jamaica), Nitaya Ueareworakul (Thailand) and fellow Kenyan Jackson Wanjau.

Richard's rise has not only been meteoric, but very consistent too. This consistency has continuously kept him ahead of his contemporaries. He was also the first Kenyan awarded the Ruth Hunt Fellowship to participate in a three-month-long residency programme at the University of Kentucky (USA) in 2001. Following the winter residency, he came back a reinvigorated artist. While he had enjoyed critical acclaim as a brilliant painter and printmaker, this is where his journey with three-dimensional objects seems to have thoughtfully started. During the residency, he experimented with different clay sculpting techniques and processes, and it is from this period onwards, he appears to have found his niche as an artist who can meticulously express his thoughts using various sculpting media. Throughout his practice, he has remained in a small group of artists who have a deep understanding of their materials and are capable of manipulating them to great lengths. Primarily a painter, he has extensive bodies of work in different media; wood-cut prints, etchings and sculptures in metal, stone, clay and wood.

Richard, always the explorer, admits that his work is an inquiry into the space and activities around him and our relationship with other human beings. He says, "It is a response to his observation of human movement and interaction." He is a very benign artist, which is quite paradoxical considering the subjects that feature in most of his work. Most of his work is very dark - characterized by a lot of pain, suffering, toxic relations, insecurities, and other rather uncomfortable subjects and situations within human engagements. A very erudite artist, he has explored subjects ranging from racism, sexuality, and ethnic and gender bigotry among others - yet he can present these subtly, almost making them appear pleasant. A master of metaphor, Richard is quite philosophical about his practice and says, "My work has become more complicated in my continuous bid to become a better artist. A few years ago, I was content with saying that my work was figurative in a semi-abstract way. But over time, I have seen the figures split, then degenerate into forms, shapes and patterns. I am enjoying the use of colour, textures and lines. I have also found an understanding and respect for different media and how each respond to my thought process. My subjects have broadened, and my inspirations have become unpredictable. I have found freedom. The kind of freedom that I never had but always wanted. I am enjoying that freedom."



He is an artist for whom the technical application is as important as the message being conveyed. He has continuously refined his art-making skills while retaining his versatility with media. Richard admits that as much as he enjoyed art school and is constantly seeking knowledge, he enjoys bending the rules and the freedom and power that an artist has while staring at a blank canvas. “I don’t like following rules. I like spontaneous and imaginative work,” he says.

He remains unaffected by the superficiality evident in much of the contemporary art world and is content with just making art while disregarding the trappings that come with recognition. He is fascinated with works by European masters Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Paul Gauguin and Gustav Klimt.

Having carved himself a reputation as one of the region’s most important artists, and with the ability to offer us something new and intriguing every time his work comes out of his studio, his projects are always eagerly anticipated. Richard’s work has enabled us to critically look at taboo subjects while offering us everyday enjoyment. It has also made us look within and confront them in ways no other platform allows us to. He is in an elite group of artists from the African continent who are consistently producing museum quality work. Work that is innovative in nature, contemporary in content and context, but not tied to a frozen time frame, demographics, or region, as it addresses issues we continuously have to deal with globally.

In 2000, professional art supplies manufacturer Winsor & Newton organized The Winsor & Newton Worldwide Millennium Painting Competition. Over 22,000 amateur and professional artists from 51 countries entered paintings to the competition on the theme of ‘My Country’. Richard was one of the winners of the Kenyan national round. His work was exhibited alongside finalists from other countries in different venues including The Mall Galleries (London, England), The World Trade Centre (Stockholm, Sweden) and the United Nations Headquarters in New York (USA).

He was subsequently appointed by the United Nations to produce a painting for a limited-edition postage stamp as part of their Messenger for Peace campaign. Titled ‘Living Single’, it was reproduced as a stamp the following year. This placed him alongside elite artists like Marc Chagall, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Hans Erni, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Klee and Peter Max whose works are not only on display in the great museums of the world but are also depicted on United Nations stamps. Richard was part of the cohort selected to represent Kenya in Dak’Art 2006- Biennale de l’Art Africain Contemporain (Dakar Biennale), arguably the most important art event in the African continent that takes place once every two years in Dakar, Senegal.



Richard was also part of the team that made up the Kenyan Pavilion at the 58th edition of the Venice Biennale in what was Kenya's first official representation.

His studio practice is punctuated by several artistic interventions. In 1999, alongside other Kenyan artists, he co-facilitated painting workshops with refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya. The participants included artists displaced from home for various reasons and seeking refuge in Kakuma. The countries represented were South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somali, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. The workshop output was exhibited at the Tropen (Wereld) Museum (Amsterdam, Netherlands) to mark the following year's World Refugee Day.

In 2001, Richard was involved in a year-long project, making art with rehabilitated homeless children from numerous children's homes in Nairobi and its environs. In 2003, we decorated a dozen government-owned passenger service vehicles to mark World Environment Day in a bid to create greater appreciation of art locally. An artist of many firsts, Richard is probably the most respected and loved artist around town. With many accolades on his lapels, he continues to excite us with a consistent practice spanning three decades. He has participated in numerous workshops, symposiums, and residencies locally and internationally, among them the Wasanii International Workshops (Naivasha and Lamu in Kenya) and Vasl (Karachi, Pakistan), Spain and Italy. He, however, maintains that these are just landmarks. Like any other artist, he is continuously struggling with himself to achieve the personal satisfaction that comes with creating art and remaining relevant in the contemporary scene.

With careers spanning almost thirty years alongside each other, and heavily punctuated by friendship, I am awed by his calmness regardless of all he has achieved. I am intrigued by how he is able to process complex ideas, dissect them, then articulate them in ways that seem simple. How easily he makes us enjoy artworks talking about uncomfortable truths. How versatile he is with different materials. How one human being can accomplish so much and retain such modesty remains one of Richard's extremely rare traits.

Having access to his private life has allowed me many moments of Richard, the private person. The respectful and generous human being. A hardworking person who wants everyone next to him to excel. A compassionate person. Always curious about others' work, status, family, wellbeing etc. A happy lad, serious conversations with him are interjected with hearty laughter now and then as a distant memory from when we started our careers always crops up.

We have travelled far together and grown both professionally and personally. Along the way, some of us developed various habits and acquired different personalities. Richard, however, seems the same. He is, of course, wiser with age and life experiences, but his mannerisms and demeanour remain the same. His work ethic is unmatched. His constant quest for knowledge is unparalleled, his words measured, and his eyes still light up when he's up to some rare mischief.

He lives and works from his private studio in Malaa, about 40 kilometres Southeast of Nairobi.

© Ogonga Thom (2023)

Thom Ogonga is an artist and independent curator based in Nairobi, Kenya. He is the founder/artistic director of The Nairobi Contemporary Trust, a platform commentating and contributing to the discourse of the local and regional art practice and publishers of the Nairobi Contemporary magazine. He has exhibited widely, both locally and abroad, and has curated numerous artistic projects and interventions locally. He was awarded the 2nd prize in the painting category in the Elysee Treaty competition in 2006.





## LISTENING IS THE WAY IN ROSIE OLANG' ODHIAMBO

As an artist, Richard Kimathi is first a quantum listener.<sup>1</sup> He turns his attention to the sounds of daily life, nature, and music in relation to contemporary issues, history, and memory. With this sensibility, he responds in his ever-expansive artistic practice. While hearing happens involuntarily, listening is a voluntary process that, through training and experience, produces cultures.<sup>2</sup> The late composer Pauline Oliveros intimates that two modes of listening are available, focal and global, where focal listening garners detail and global listening brings expansion through the whole field of sound.<sup>3</sup>

“I listen to music that feels honest”, Kimathi says as we sit in his outdoor home studio, one late evening in December, and from this I glean the lens with which he approaches his practice: “It is the composition that matters, . . . in music there is something beyond being able to understand the language.”

Kimathi enjoys benga, with particular attention to strings alongside sufis and ghazals; he paints to the blues, rock and roll, reggae and Southern African kwela and jazz; he enjoys traditional Irish music and speaks of the melody of the Celtic language. He mentions a few names and alludes to many other sounds he delights in: Sinead O’Connor, Prince, Bob Dylan, Sean McGowan, U2, D.O. Misiyani, Burning Spear, Peter Tosh, the Dubliners, and Bob Marley. If it is composition that matters, and deep listening the substrate for his artistic practice, then Kimathi is tuned to the bellow and the hum, to give us almost three decades of steadfast study through his prints, paintings and sculptures.

It is now more commonplace to hear artists referring to their practices as multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or even antidisciplinary as a way to engage with the cross-fertilization between media. In a wonderful tribute to Romare Bearden in 2004, Toni Morrison wrote, “Separating art forms, compartmentalising them is convenient for study, instruction, and institutions. But is hardly representative of how artists actually work.”<sup>4</sup> In the same essay Morrison writes of her openness to getting ideas from painters, and her requirement for three types of information to complete and sometimes even start a narrative, “I need the structure, the sound and the palette.” This tripartite framework while applied for layering of meaning in literature, can be extended to think about the ways as part of an active art audience, one can read and decode the work of Richard Kimathi.

<sup>1</sup> Quantum Listening is a theory derived from the practice of Deep Listening and is defined as listening in as many ways as is possible simultaneously, changing and being changed by the listening. Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (London: Ignato Books, 2022), 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, “Tribute to Romare Bearden”, *The Source of Self-Regard, Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 289.

Born in Nyeri in 1971, Kimathi has lived through the regime of Kenya's five presidents, witnessed the transitions from a de facto to a de jure one-party state in 1982, and eventually to multi-partyism in 1992, and now what reads as a reversion to Moi-era suppression.<sup>5</sup> He has lived through shifts in the education curriculum that initially prioritised art and design and music as examinable subjects before dropping them all together and now applying a competency-based curriculum.<sup>6</sup> He has been a citizen, a student, a friend, a husband, a father, a farmer, a music enthusiast, and an artist amongst many other identities. At each stage, and in each of his positionalities, Kimathi is affected by his engagement with his physical environment and all life in it, which he then transmutes into new forms ingenious in their materiality, working methods and aesthetic strategies.

Since starting out professionally in the early 1990's, Kimathi has been clear minded about a few things: that school offers certain certifications which are important, but it is the imagination that is the true work, and that it is through experimentation that unconventional art forms emerge. In a text by Ali Zaidi for the publication *TheLathini: 30 Faces, 30 Facets of Contemporary Art in Kenya*, Kimathi is quoted, "I don't like following instructions; I like imaginative work. . . when I'm working it flows; there is no time I ever feel stuck, no going back and redoing it."<sup>7</sup>

Kimathi's interest and attention to image-making has taken up different permutations throughout the years, underpinned by a material sensibility of using what is available and working through limitations. Perhaps it is for this reason that he rarely feels stuck. Alongside more traditional paintings on canvas, (for which he has also restructured), Kimathi has experimented with other painting surfaces such as second-hand textiles and extensively with construction materials working with quarry stones, and galvanised metal sheets. While Kimathi's work doesn't fit neatly in a modernist tradition, engaging more closely with contextual concerns from his direct environment, some of the qualities in the work lend themselves to its principles such as a rejection of realistic depictions of subjects, innovation and experimentation with form (the shapes, colours and lines that make up the work) with a tendency to abstraction and an emphasis on materials, techniques and processes.<sup>8</sup>

Having received a diploma in graphic arts from the Nairobi Creative Art Center, Kimathi soon after began to practice as a fine artist at Kuona Trust Studios at the National Museum of Kenya in 1996 alongside artists Jimnah Kimani, Justus Kyalo,

<sup>5</sup> Carey Baraka, "The Political Education of William Ruto", The New York Review of Books, 2023, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/03/08/the-political-education-of-william-ruto/>

<sup>6</sup> Teresa M. Tipton, "Ethnographies from the Field: The State of Arts Education in Kenya and Czech Republic" International Yearbook for Research in Arts Educations, 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/41121342/Ethnographies\\_from\\_the\\_Field\\_THE\\_state\\_of\\_arts\\_education\\_in\\_Kenya\\_and\\_Czech\\_Republic](https://www.academia.edu/41121342/Ethnographies_from_the_Field_THE_state_of_arts_education_in_Kenya_and_Czech_Republic)

<sup>7</sup> A. Zaidi, *TheLathini, 30 Faces, 30 Facets of Contemporary Art in Kenya* (Nairobi: Kuona Trust, 2003), 119.

<sup>8</sup> "Art Term: Modernism", Tate Modern, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art-terms/m/modernism>



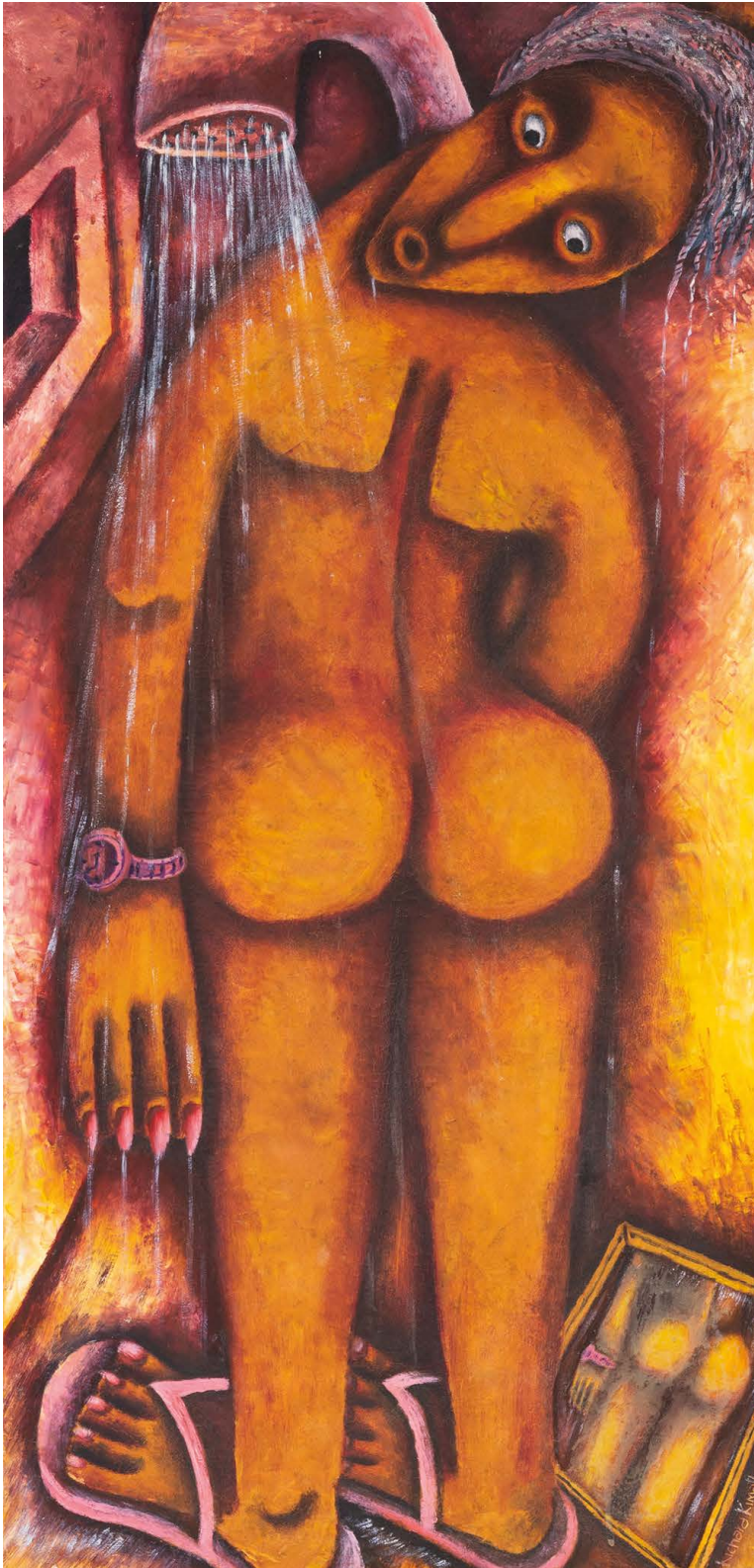


Jimmy Ogonga, Michael Soi, Simon Mureithi and later Peter Elungat and Thom Ogonga. Beyond being a workspace, the studios functioned as a social space where the artists shared at least one resource, if not more, in their cooperation; resources include studio space, materials and technical knowledge, access to patrons, and organizational skills.<sup>9</sup> Kimathi is often spoken about as being incredibly industrious, while also generous with his resources, time and expertise.<sup>10</sup> The artist Michael Soi and writer and artist Thom Ogonga quip that whenever Kimathi sold work in the studio, there would most certainly be lunch and a stock of new painting supplies to share.<sup>11</sup> At the time, Kuona Artist Studios provided an alternative space to the main commercial gallery, Gallery Watatu. At Kuona, artists could sell their work directly to buyers, alongside other programming geared towards artist development including technical workshops in painting, printmaking and sculpture, and international exchanges through the Triangle Network, both of which Kimathi participated in as a facilitator and artist-in-residence.

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Gerschultz, "Navigating Nairobi: Artists in a Workshop System", *African Art and Agency in the Workshop*, ed. by Sidney L. Kasfir and Till Förster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 207-229.

<sup>10</sup> Thom Ogonga, *Bare Knuckle Richard Kimathi*, 2018, One Off Contemporary Art Gallery

<sup>11</sup> Michael Soi and Thom Ogonga, personal communication, November 2023



## ON PALETTE

In early paintings on paper and canvas, made between 1998 and 2000, Kimathi primarily worked in earth tones in the spectrum of burnt umber, sienna, yellow ochre and bronze, something fellow artist Peterson Kamwathi refers to as Kuona's monochromatic phase where many of the artists in the studio worked with controlled colour schemes likely spurred on by what painting supplies were available.<sup>12</sup>

In one such early work, *Untitled (Woman Showering)* circa 1998, Kimathi cleverly creates a composition in which the central figure, a nude woman showering, sees herself, and we, the viewers, see her seeing herself, disarming the portrait of a passive gaze and instead arranging the picture plane to provide multiple points of view. It is in these two gestures, the positioning of the mirror at the bottom right of the painting and the waist-down reflection in it, and the oblique backward-facing neck turn, that make the painting potent. Considering the historical context of gazing at the female nude, there is a sense of agency in the looking for all involved. Kimathi is also invested in detail in this early work, with the mirror rendered in a way that appears streaked by water dripping from the hair. There is also the colour-pop of the pink flip-flops, watch and manicured nails as though to emphasise a statement of performative femininity. Easily dismissible at first as another nude painting of a woman made by a man, this work grows on the viewer the longer it is considered.

In another early work, featured in *Our world in the year 2000: the United Nations millennium art exhibition* and soon after chosen as a commemorative postage stamp, Kimathi presented a stylised painting, *Living Single* (1999), in which a woman in a red dress occupies the foreground with two children positioned under her arms (pg.32). The full painting conjures a protective gesture mimicking the posture of a mother hen with chicks beneath her wings. The other symbols in the painting are an orange sun and a compass, potentially signalling a new dawn and direction at the turn of the millennium. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Kimathi comments, "The painting is about life in my country and the fate of most women living single with their families, as a result of divorce or freedom. When I'm sick, I paint and then I feel okay. It was important to enter the competition to help myself convey my ideas through my vision because shouting about them was not enough."<sup>13</sup> Here we get a glimpse of Kimathi's working methods, first his commitment to translate an experience with nuance in the observation of living single as either a result of divorce or freedom, allowing for a more speculative entrance into the composition and the contextual conditions that inform it. Additionally, we get a sense of the role that art played in his life then, a salve when unwell, and finally, the place of art as a 'talking stick', an opening to express ideas in alternative ways.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson Kamwathi, personal communication, November 2023

<sup>13</sup> Our World in the Year 2000: The United Nations Millenium Art Exhibition, selected from the Winsor and Newton Worldwide Millenium Painting Competition (Suffolk: Sheeron Lock, 2000)

Kimathi has had three other major shifts in palette from deep earth tones: first to internal flesh tones working in reds, deep purples, browns and white (2005-2006); then a blue period incorporating other saturated colours as seen in his series *On the Outside Looking In* (2017) and *Bare Knuckle* (2018); and a more recently a gentle wash of greys with highlights of brighter colours in *Wounds* (2019). With these palette experiments, Kimathi is himself his first audience, working the different surfaces to the point at which they please him and tinkering further to establish the most effective strategies to clarify his intentions for the work.

## ON SOUND AND STRUCTURE

For the 7th edition of the Dakar Biennale in 2006 themed *Africa: Agreements, Allusions, and Misunderstandings*, Kimathi presented three paintings, *Stuff from Above*, *Speech*, and *The Lord's Prayer* (2005). All rendered in internal flesh tones, the three paintings respond and resonate with the Biennale's ambition of engaging in micro and macro narratives, where accounts from family circles, radio and television stations, sit beside narratives wandering between myths, legends and history to illustrate the complex relationship between humans and societies.<sup>14</sup>

Kimathi is critical of religion, particularly the manipulative rhetoric of several religious leaders in Kenya, and their proclivity for exaggeration and misinterpretation of religious texts. In the painting *Stuff from Above*, Kimathi refers to the Biblical story of manna from heaven where manna was the food the Israelites ate during the Exodus. Only in this painting, dry bones free fall from above on a skinny, solitary dog with its head hung low, a failed promise of provision of the basic need of food.

In *The Lord's Prayer*, Kimathi's mark-making of the text is largely an illegible palimpsest except for a few words in varying degrees of definition: "Our Father, who art in heaven, glory, Power, forever and ever amen." In the other half of the painting a dog, seated on his hind legs in an upright human-like posture holds a rosary, an ambiguous gesture for which it is harder to parse a precise meaning, but certainly an irreverence and criticism towards the Catholic church, its leadership, or congregation and its traditions.

It is in the paintings where the palette shifts primarily from reds and ushers in the blues that a bridge emerges for me to consider all three elements in building a narrative: palette, structure and sound, illuminating a fuller sensory experience for a relation beyond the visual, extending it towards the implied aural environments in the work. This reading carries through to his subsequent work, particularly the

<sup>14</sup> Yacouba Konaté, "Africa: Agreements, Allusions and Misunderstandings", Dak'Art 2006 7th Biennale of African Contemporary Art, (Dakar: Secrétariat général de la biennale des arts, 2006)

exhibitions *Wounds* (2019), *Outdoor Activities* (2022) and the ongoing series *Local Conversations*, *Stori za Mtaani* (2023). Black feminist theorist and scholar Tina Campt coined the term phonic substance to explicate the ways it is possible to listen to images:<sup>15</sup>

“I’m asking people to allow themselves to encounter images as if they were sound. For sound to actually resonate, for us to hear it, it has to make physical contact with us... I am asking people to do is open themselves up to the multiplicity of responses that images solicit from us. That beyond the thing that we think we are seeing, that we’re responding to an enormous number of stimuli memories”<sup>16</sup>

While this theory is primarily applied to still and moving images engaging with lost archives of historically dismissed identification photographs taken throughout the black diaspora, I find this lens generative in other artistic media for artists working on the African continent and lends itself to Kimathi’s practice as there is an implicit movement, quiet theatricality, and repetition in the structure of his work.

In *The Boss* (2009), Kimathi, in his illustrative style, paints a pig lying on its back holding a hotdog with two others suspended from above. The large swine rests leisurely on a black frame hoisted by four small mongooses transporting it under duress. Here, Kimathi alludes to the ways politicians represented by the pigs cannibalise their own, not only eating hotdogs but also exploiting the labour of the most vulnerable in society, as represented by the small mongooses distressed under its weight.

In experiencing this image as though it were sound, its quiet yet loaded stylistic nature is amplified, I find myself steeped in the sociopolitical context that makes this possible, the loud and empty promises of the political class, and the discontent yet potent whispers of the proletariat. The register of grief and grievance is a low and constant hum, with the occasional sonic boom, a pressure valve released and hissing loudly. When I allow myself to enter the painting with attention to other senses new information is revealed to me beyond the visual references, and I find a new attention to both what I can hear, and what I am not tuned into.

While it may read counterintuitive to use different senses to respond to images often thought of primarily as things we see, this mode of extending attention championed by Tina Campt, creates more intentional and affective contact with the work.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Phonic substance is defined as the sound inherent to an image; one that defines or creates it, that is neither contingent upon nor necessarily preceding it; not simply a sound played over, behind or in relation to an image; one that emanates from the image itself. Tina Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal”, *Women and Performance*, 2019, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt>.

<sup>16</sup> “Tina Campt”, *Helga: Conversations with Extraordinary People*, Helga Davis/WNYC Studios, July 28, 2021, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/helga/episodes/tina-campt>

<sup>17</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6-7.



## WOUNDS AND LOCAL CONVERSATIONS

“I wish to understand something about my country, one that murders the best of its own. What kind of nation gets terrified of a great imagination? What kind of people annihilate holders of a persistent and transcending dream?”<sup>18</sup>

In the 2019 exhibition *Wounds*, Kimathi invites viewers to acknowledge and tend to points of injury inflicted by historical injustice and the contemporary violence of the state, but also more closely, attend to interpersonal and individual wounds. The title here is appropriate in both its simple present verb tense and also when considered in its noun form. In his soft-spoken manner, Kimathi remembers with clarity a site of psychological wounding that is so commonplace and normalised among young men in Nairobi, disproportionately affecting those from low-income neighbourhoods. Kimathi connects experiences of police surveillance in his youth, with those faced by young people today. Back then, as an artist practising at Kuona studios at the National Museum, Kimathi recalls the anxiety of walking down Museum Hill Road, past the National Theatre and by the Central Police Station where at any moment, he and his friends could be accused of loitering with intent, maybe given an unwarranted search and with it the right to confiscate whatever they were carrying, sometimes straddling the risk of being charged for other crimes they weren't responsible for. In listening to his account, I'm reminded of the curatorial practice of the collective Najjographia, who in 2017, presented the exhibition and accompanying reader *Najjographia: A Play on Traveling Time and Place*.<sup>19</sup> In one of the texts Rose Jepkorir asks:

“So how do artists or writers participate in the invention of imaginative narrations or fabrications to a place and time? As opposed to facts instituted by the state, documented over time by various parties and as experienced by individuals. First for the questioning of how this place has come to be but more importantly to look at how ordinary people imagine themselves in a place. Such fictions may lead to other actions that are not necessarily concerned with the image of a city but of a people, which perhaps provides release from the morbid itineraries that one has to undertake in order to survive and to see again.”<sup>20</sup>

I am drawn to two aspects of this excerpt. First to look at how ordinary people imagine themselves in a place, and also how these fictions are concerned with the image of a people. Shying away from spectacle in his pared down and repetitive

<sup>18</sup> Kingwa Kamencu, “The Charming Paradox of Yvonne Owuor,” *Nation*, Jan 3, 2014. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/saturday-magazine/the-charming-paradox-of-yvonne-owuor--933590>.

<sup>19</sup> Najjographia is a curatorial collective consisting of Bethuel Muthee, Mbuthia Maina and Jepkorir Rose. Their practice uses Nairobi as a document bearing personal and collective memories by relating the spatial and metaphoric aspects of movement, places or objects of value and other phenomena in the static formal city and the ever-changing informal city. Rose Jepkorir, Bethuel Muthee and Mbuthia Maina, *Najjographia. A Play on Travelling Time and Place* (Nairobi: Goethe Institut, 2017)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

compositions on canvas and galvanised metal sheets, Kimathi assembles crowds of young men congregating in single files in what is now his characteristic style: comparatively similar in their dressing, round expressive eyes looking at and away from each other, and small illustrative noses and mouths. The economy of the line in defining the features makes the emotional charge behind the work even more impressive in its range. What first reads as a fear expressed in the eyes and the distorted hand gestures is more nuanced: uncertainty, discomfort, confusion, suspicion, overwhelm, vulnerability, and withdrawal. While he depicts physical manifestations of wounding with circular lesions, Kimathi also weaves in gestures of repair with images of band-aids, sutures and patchworks on the garments they wear.

His working methods in this series are slow and repetitive, and in some cases such as *Confusing Sky* (2019) and *Heaven is Dry* (2019), Kimathi paints each of the stylised men who form the crowds individually first, before making cutouts and reassembling them onto a large canvas attached daintily at the temple. When these two paintings are hung at an angle, they are transformed in space into a kinetic sculpture, eerily swinging and activated. In his compositions using galvanised steel that create relief sculptures, Kimathi applies this same method of reassembling cutouts using hand tools such as heavy-duty scissors, and for stiffer metal sheets, a hammer and a chisel. In the making, Kimathi again is his primary audience and says, “This is where the satisfaction lies in working till you get what you want, there is no rush.”<sup>21</sup> Which is to say that there is wisdom and regard for the process and its rhythms, a conversation and consideration for the materiality and not just the finished artwork.

*The Conversation Series* of 2019, ushers in *Local Conversations, Lugha ya Mtaani* series of 2023. In the latter, Kimathi dials up the volume of phonic substance with more animated formations for each tableau, and rather than having titles, each composition is accompanied by a descriptive outline of the imagined conversation unfolding among the people in the frame. These paintings hearken to a rich store of oral tradition where East African artists such as Kivutho Mbuno and Jak Katarikawe illustrate the link between narrative and visual execution. For example, Kenyan artist Kivutho Mbuno (b.1947) did not give titles to his early pictures that closely narrated landscapes and surrealist interpretations of nature, man and animals, but instead provided oral commentaries about each scene in clear simple terms.<sup>22</sup> This narrative style lends itself to another format as well, that of the graphic novel and while the paintings do not sum up to the linear flow of a single story, they provide fictional vignettes that are both windows and mirrors for audiences viewing the work.<sup>23</sup>

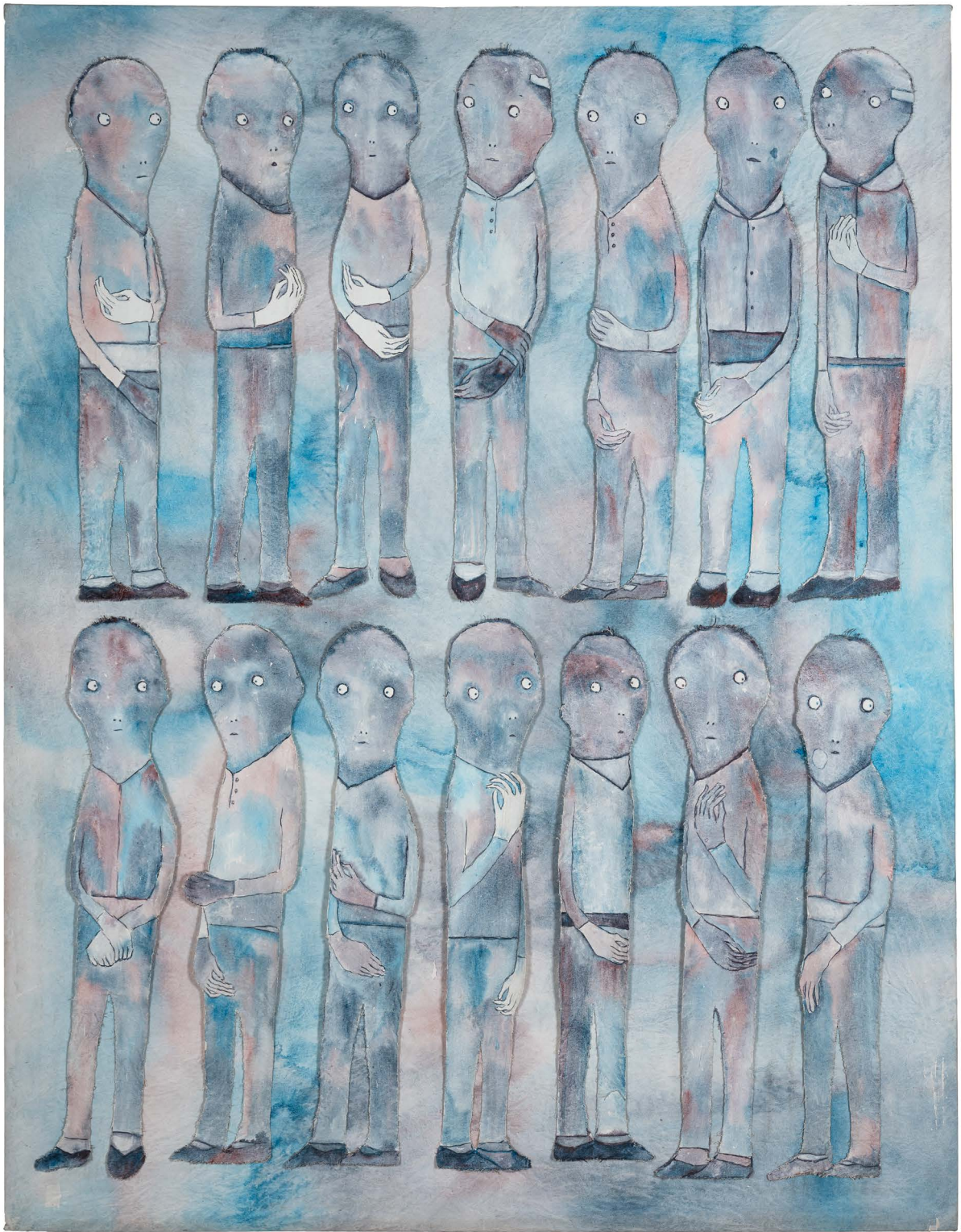
<sup>21</sup> Richard Kimathi, personal communication, December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Wanjiku Nyachae, “Concrete Narratives and Visual Prose: Two Stories from Kenya and Uganda”, *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel, 1995), 158-189.

<sup>23</sup> Dr Rudine Sims of Ohio State University coined the idea of “mirror books” and “window books.” In children’s literature, “mirror books” refer to books in which children see themselves and “window books” offer an opening into different experiences.

Violet J. Harris, “Profiles and Perspectives: In Praise of a Scholarly Force: Rudine Sims Bishop.” *Language Arts*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2007, pp. 153-159. [www.jstor.org/stable/41962258](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41962258).







The implicit movement in each composition with the characters going one place or another, allows me to extend my imagination beyond the frame, and while the background is executed in a simple grey wash, the sonic environment built is more active.

## OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

“But where is the garden and where I’m I in it?”<sup>24</sup>

There are long traditions of artists tending to gardens and further painting, writing, and photographing them as a consistent endeavour alongside their studio practice. For Kimathi, his family home and studio are a divine manifestation of this entanglement and in the exhibition titled *Outdoor Activities*, Kimathi presents what I read as an autofiction of his home and studio in Malaa, a two-hour drive from Nairobi.

When we visit, the garden is verdant from what is unusual rainfall from December into January, which are historically some of the area’s hottest and driest months. The green maize is ready for harvest, along with other kitchen vegetables, while the bananas and pumpkins are only just then flowering. There is also a refreshing flower garden cultivated in raised beds and other containers, a modification made as rooting directly in the ground tends to be too harsh for their growth. These flowers later climb into Kimathi’s compositions.

Painting on second-hand fabric, particularly old canvas curtains, Kimathi integrates some of the initial silkscreened floral patterns; first muting them with a pastel grey wash, then adding new floral motifs of flower bushes, butterflies and dragonflies that fill the picture plane. While the decision to use curtains is both an aesthetic one and one of convenience, I find poetics as well in their initial everyday domestic use as a threshold, a screen to allow for privacy at night or to let light in during the day.

The characters in the paintings, primarily women and young girls, stand among the flowers, their expressions restful, curious and contemplative, spacy, blank, near and far. In Jamaica Kincaid’s travel memoir, *Among Flowers*, she unpacks the formation of her consciousness around gardens, remarking:

“We cultivate food and only after there is a surplus of it, which produces wealth, so we cultivate the space for contemplation, a garden of things not necessary for physical survival. The awareness that comes from that fact alone is what gives the garden its special powerful place in our lives and imaginations.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *Among Flowers: A Walk in The Himalaya* (Michigan: National Geographic, 2005) 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,14.

This exploration of interior worlds is invoked in several of the paintings in *Outdoor Activities*, a welcome invitation to not only consider nature, its sights, sounds and beauty, but also to turn inward and make room for pause in a world that's often cacophonous and demands attention to everything but ourselves and our immediate communities.

## WHAT DO WE HEAR WHEN WE LISTEN TO KIMATHI?

A deceptive effortlessness marks almost three decades of Kimathi's practice. It is in the paring down to its essence that a visual language emerges, steeped in intention, and drawing from life in a seemingly non-dramatic way. Kimathi works with the flow of the current, resisting spectacle, and favouring and responding to rhythm and pattern instead, both a microscopic and telescopic view. If I could set Kimathi's work to music, it would be to the blues, 'Listening to the Blues', as intimated by James Baldwin's reflection.<sup>26</sup>

I want to talk about the blues not only because they speak of this particular experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate. And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. . . Consider some of the things the blues are about. They're about work, love, death, floods, lynchings; in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the arbitrary heading "Facts of Life."

Rosie Olang' Odhiambo is a curator, writer, and artist based in Nairobi, Kenya. Her artistic and curatorial approach is on a commitment to generative collaborative processes, centering local context and deep research, all thoughtfully deployed to develop exhibitions, publications, and programming that is accessible, sustainable, ambitious, and liberatory. She is currently exploring workshops, zines, and artists' books as curatorial formats to play across various disciplines engaging with decolonial, queer, feminist, and black radical traditions.

She has written for Contemporary &, The Arak Collection, The Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, The National Museum of Women in the Arts among others.

<sup>26</sup> James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 70.

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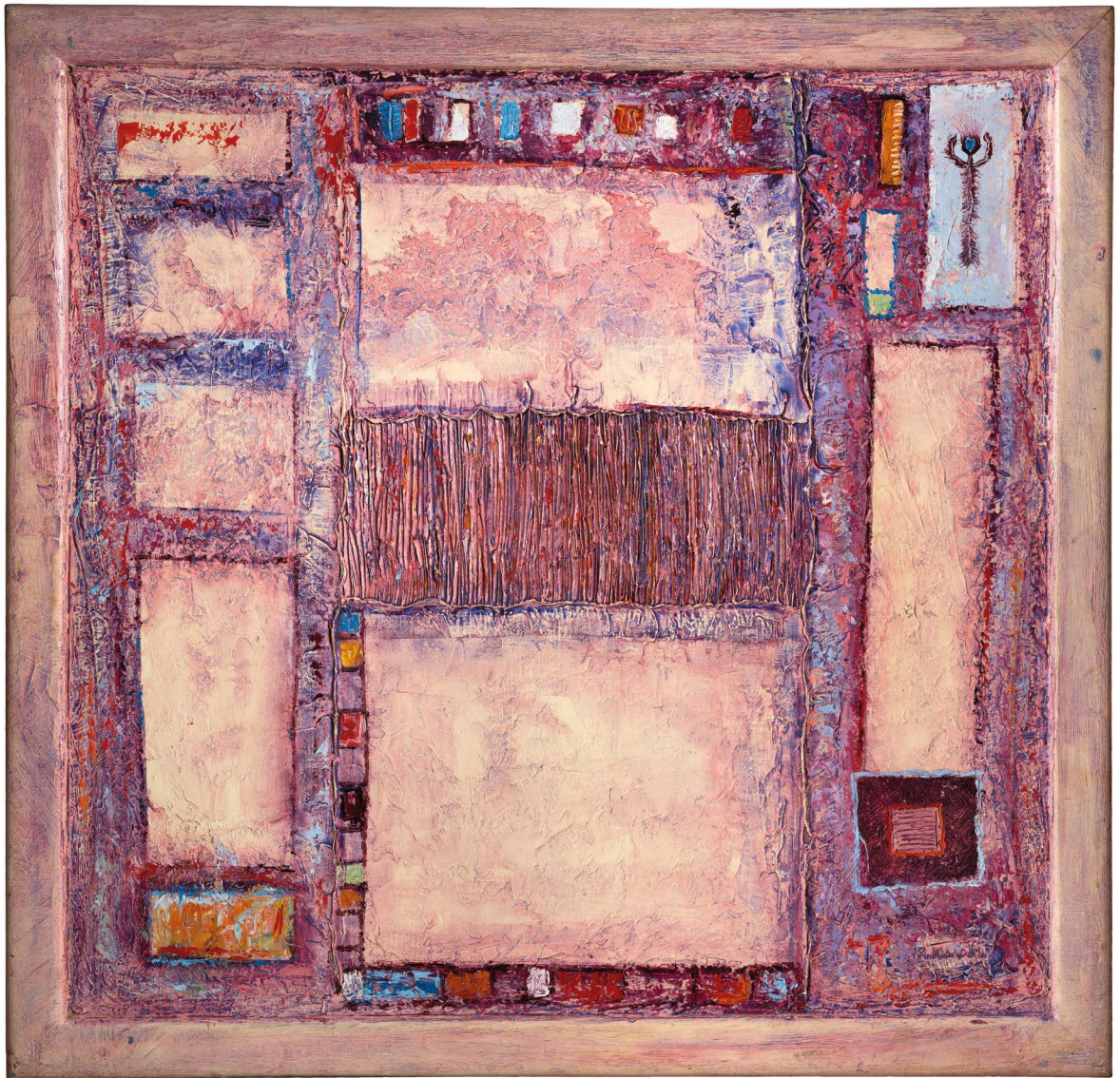








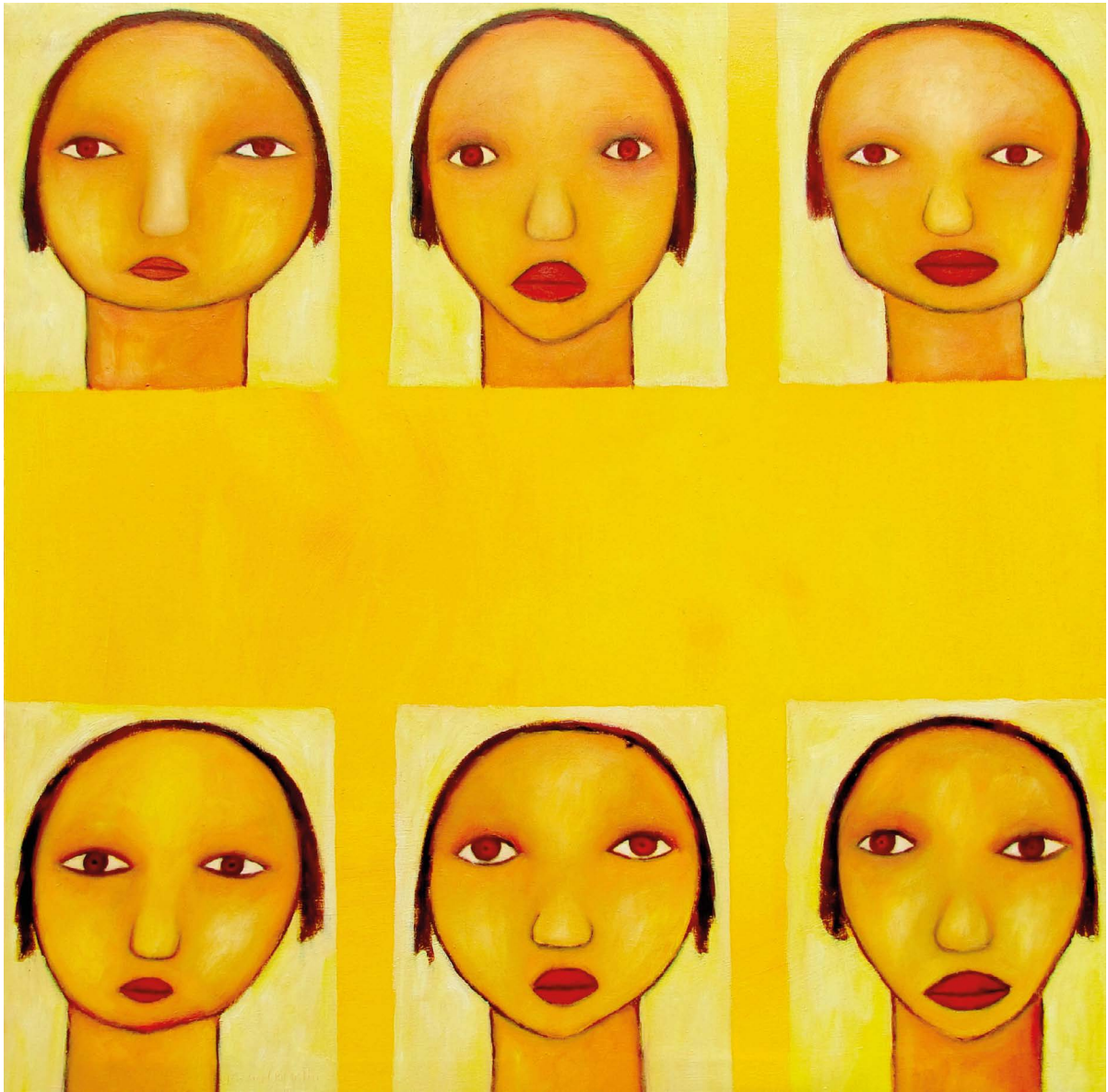




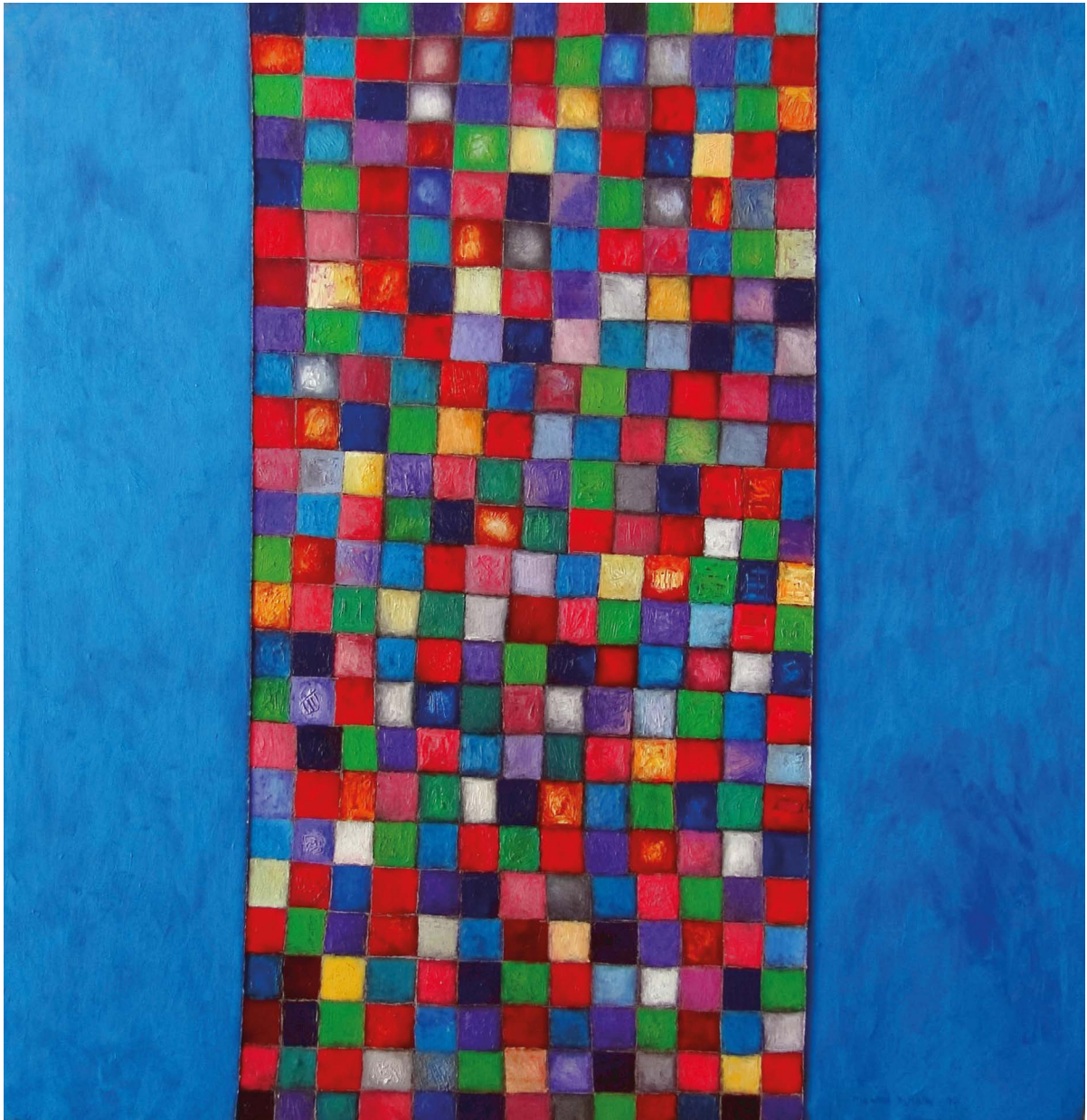










































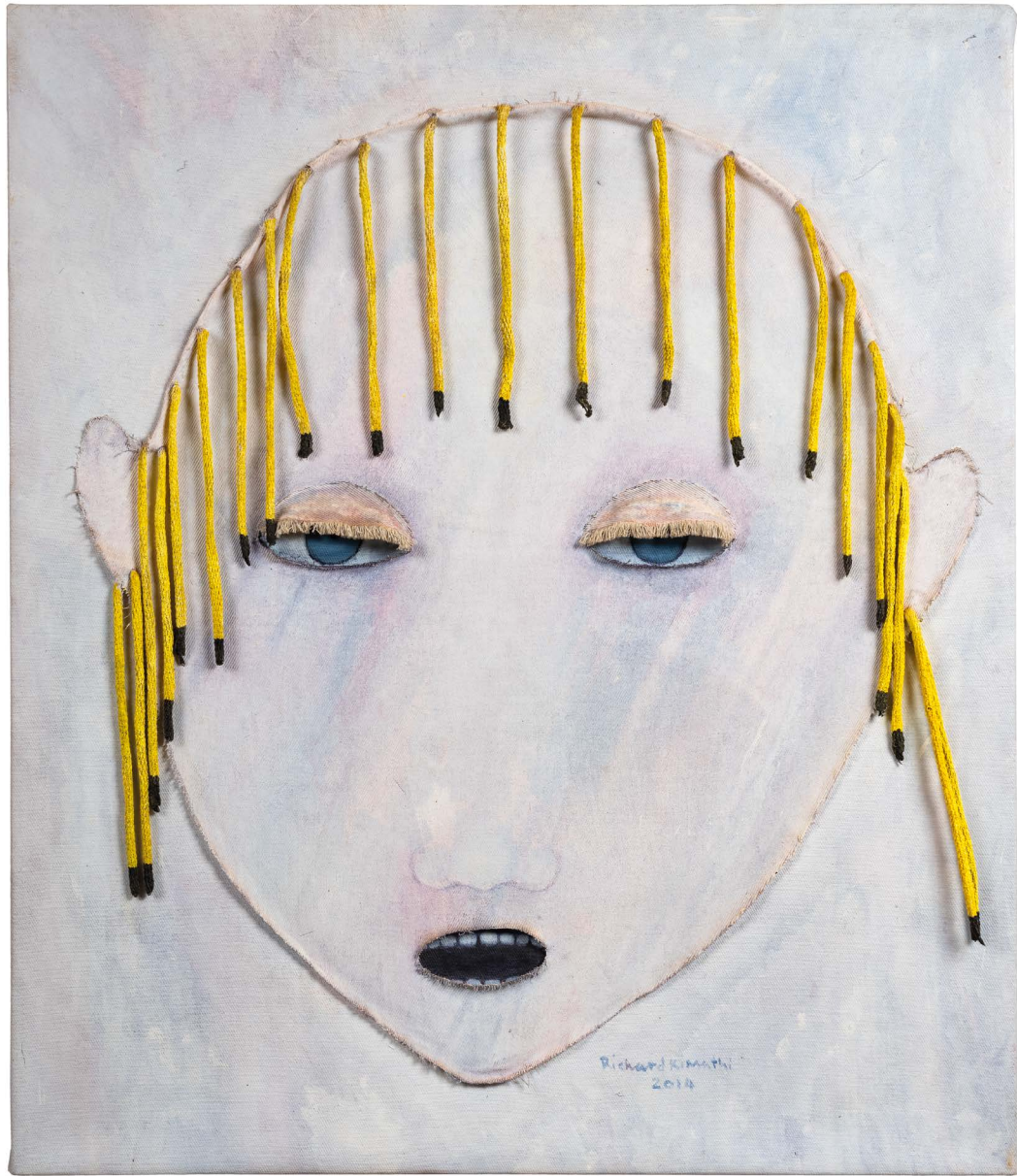






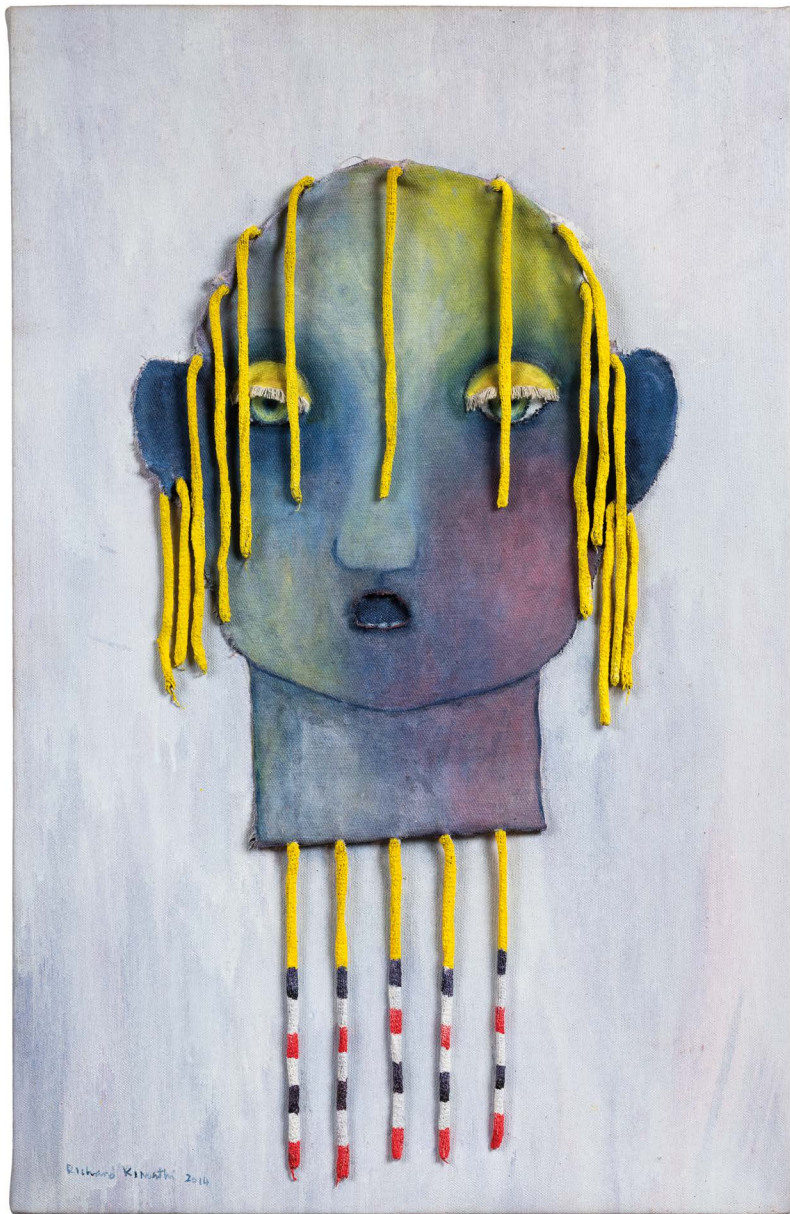










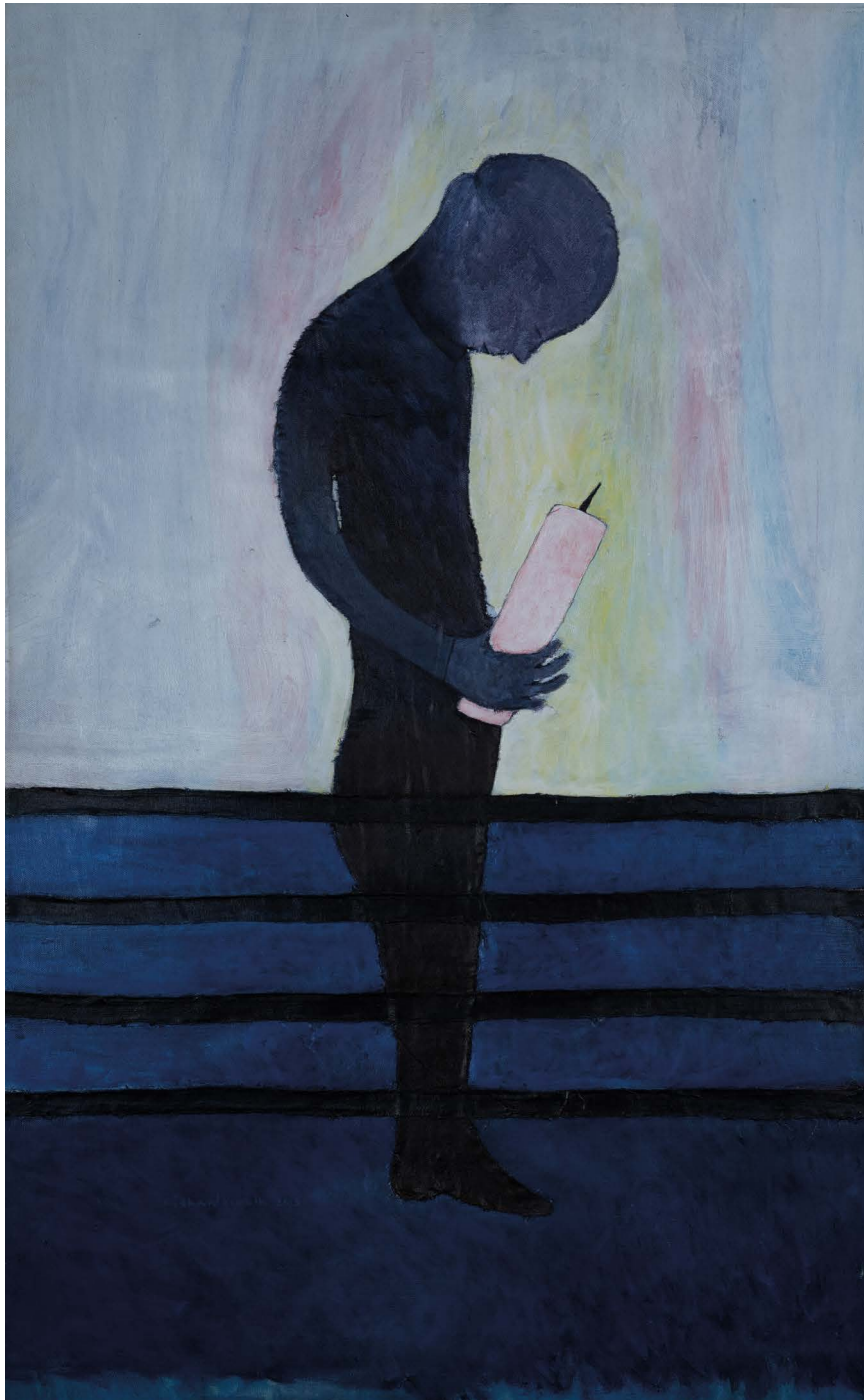


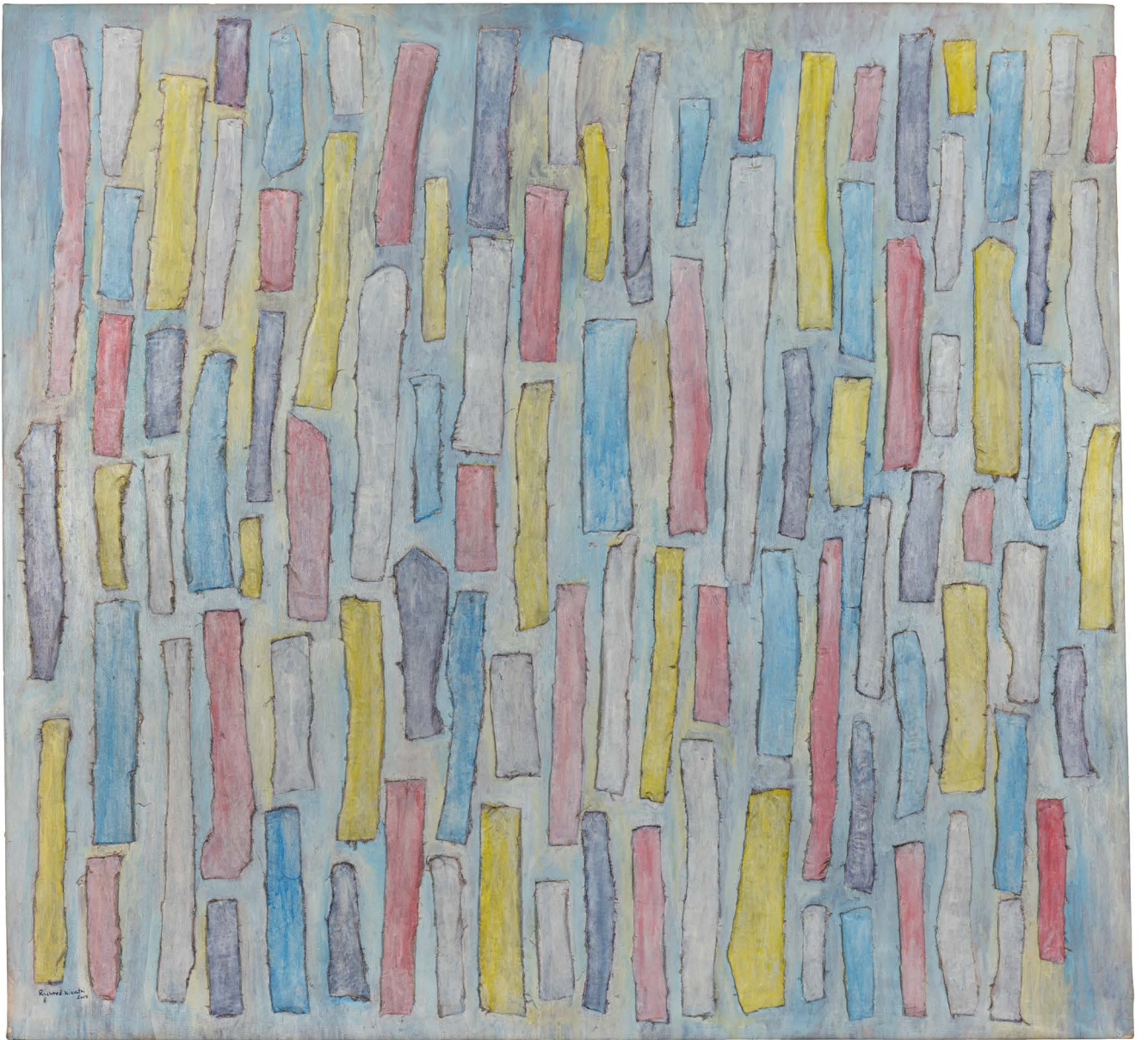


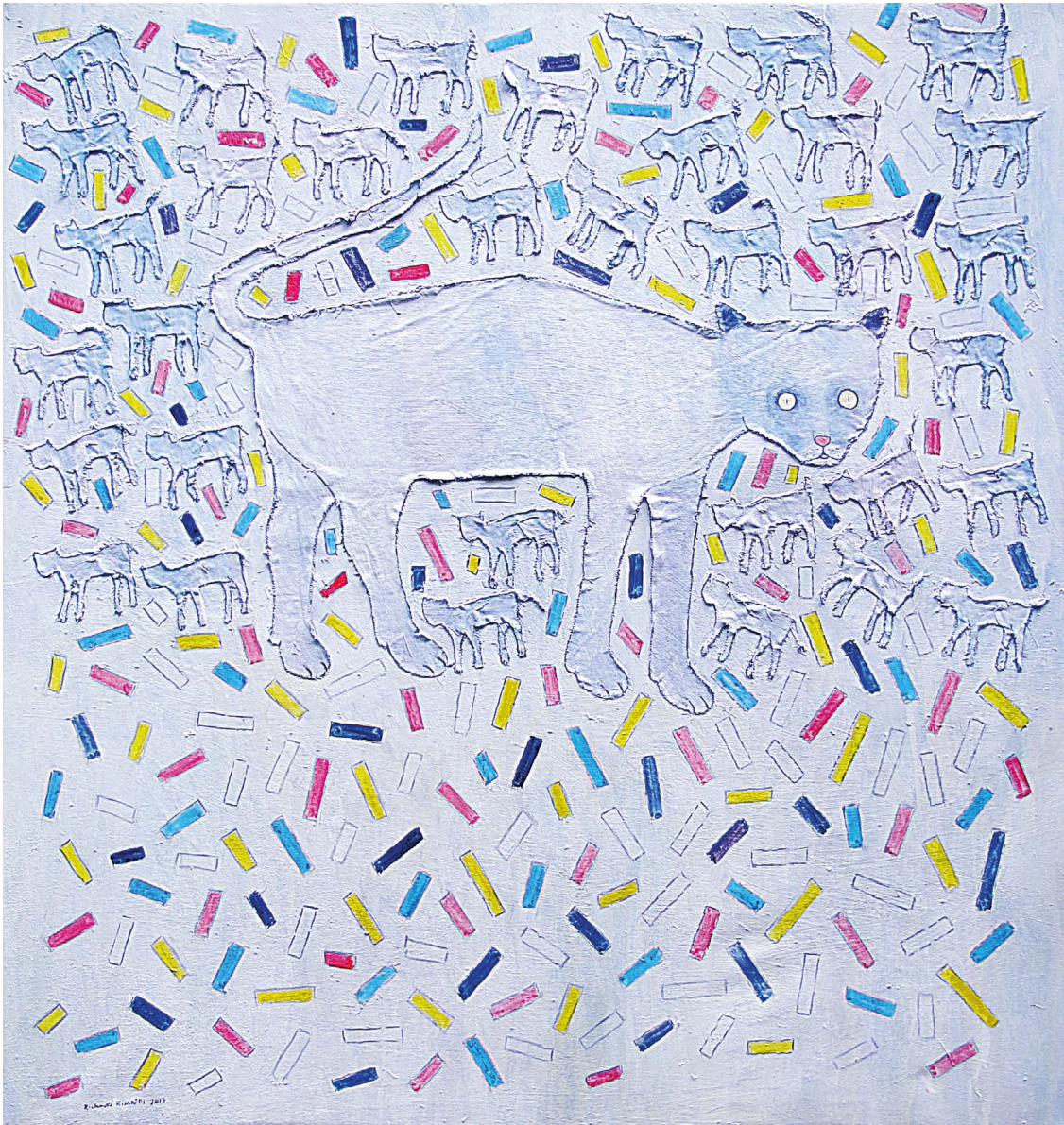




















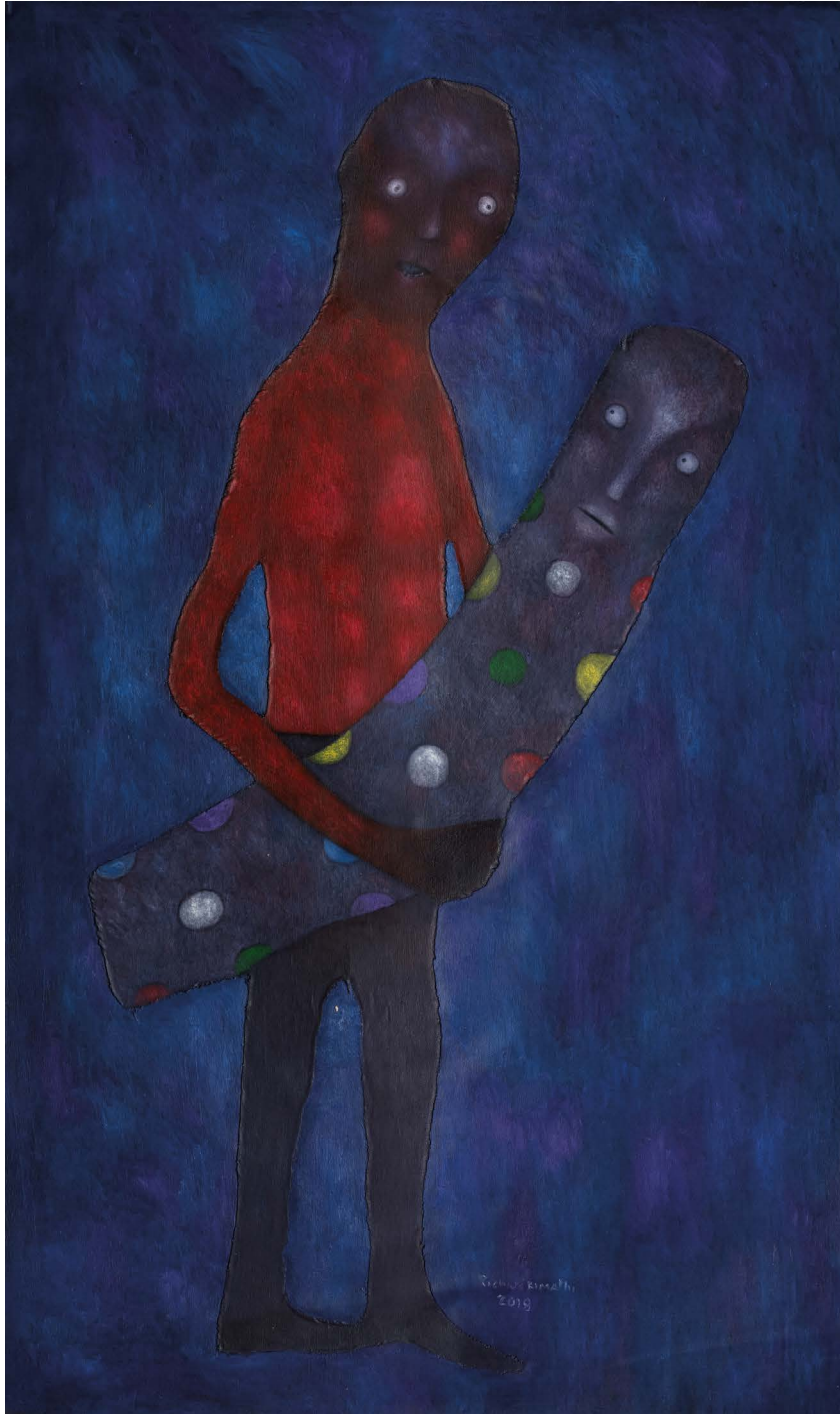
*Large Round Head V*, 2017, mixed media on metal, 41 diam. x 5 cm 103



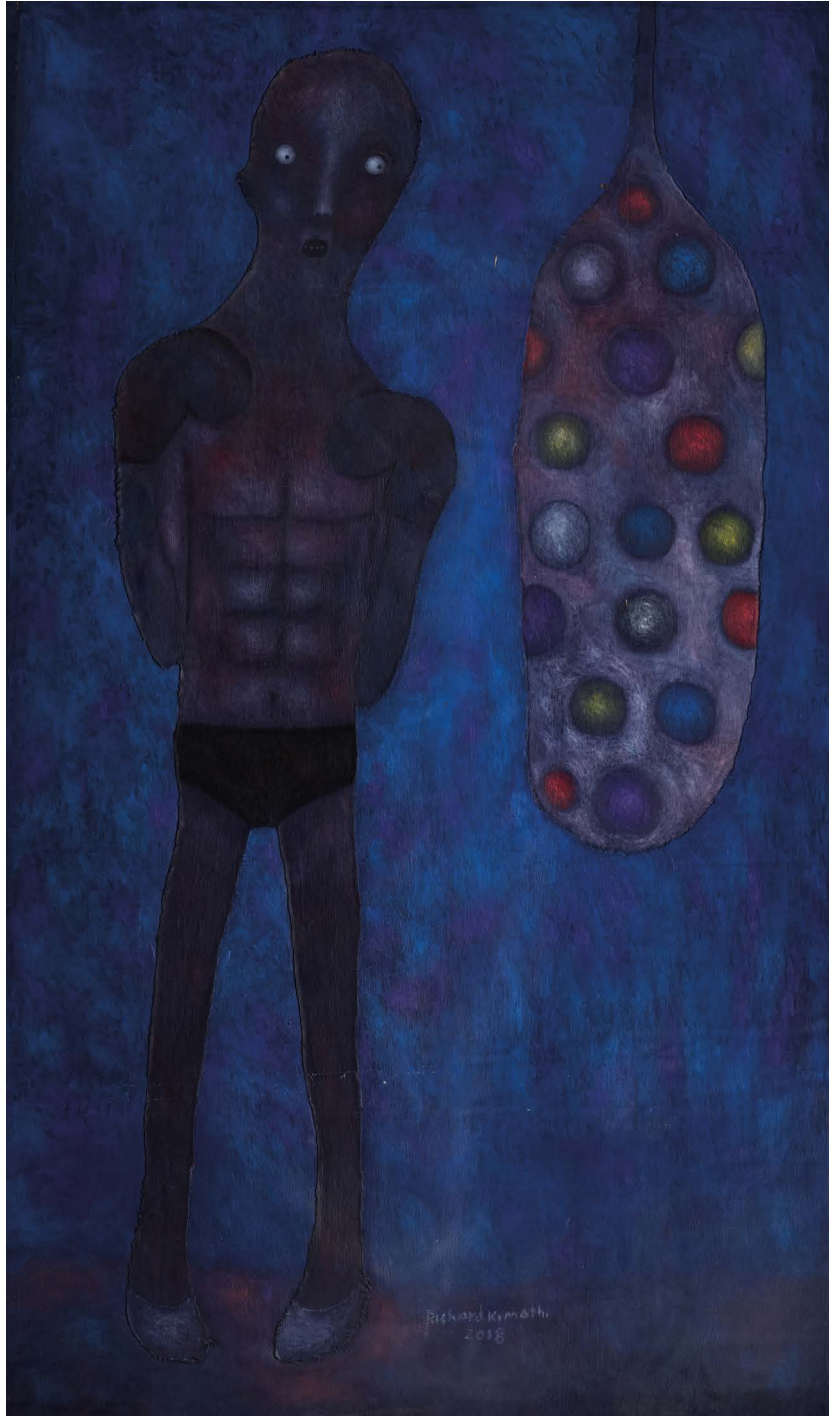


























Richard Kimathi  
2014







Previous, *Heaven is Dry*, 2019, mixed media on canvas, 135 x 182 cm







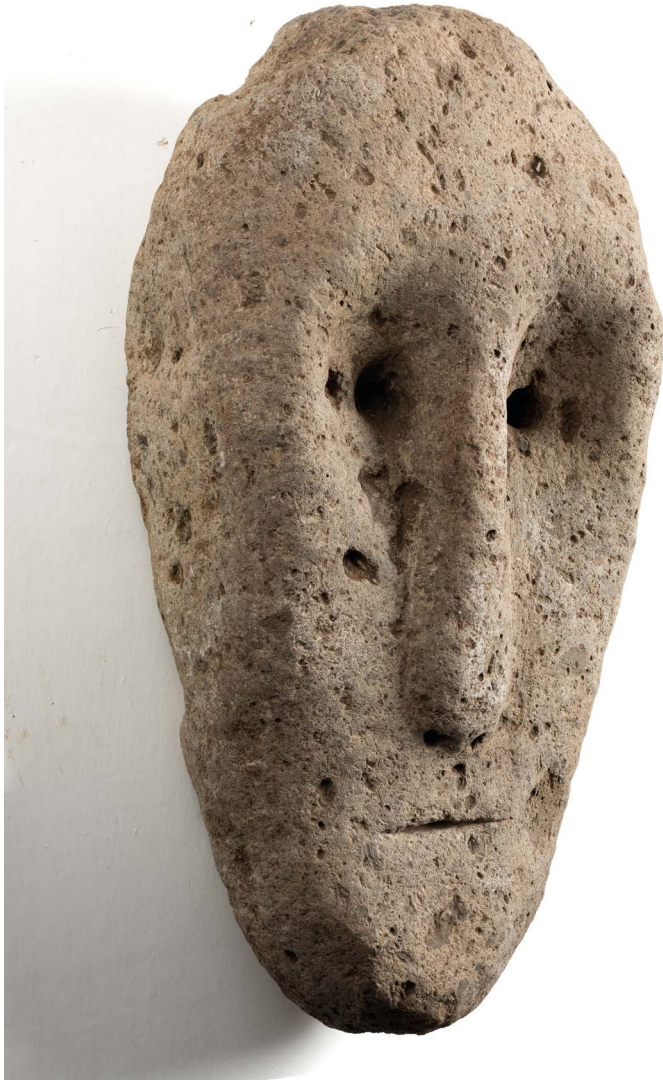


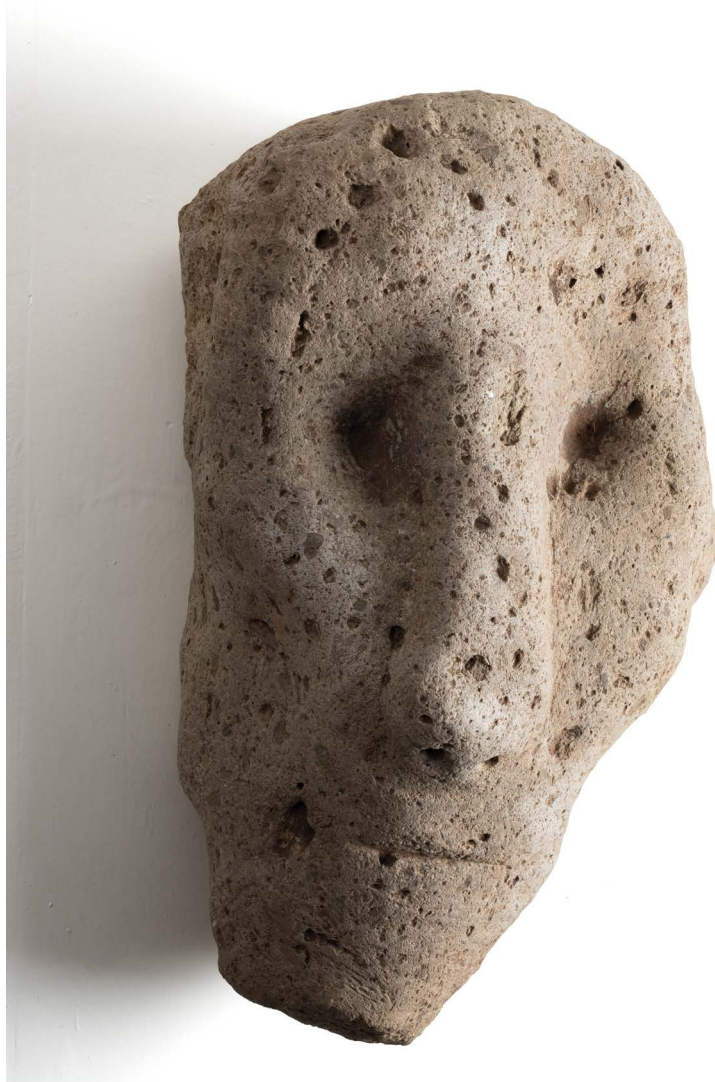






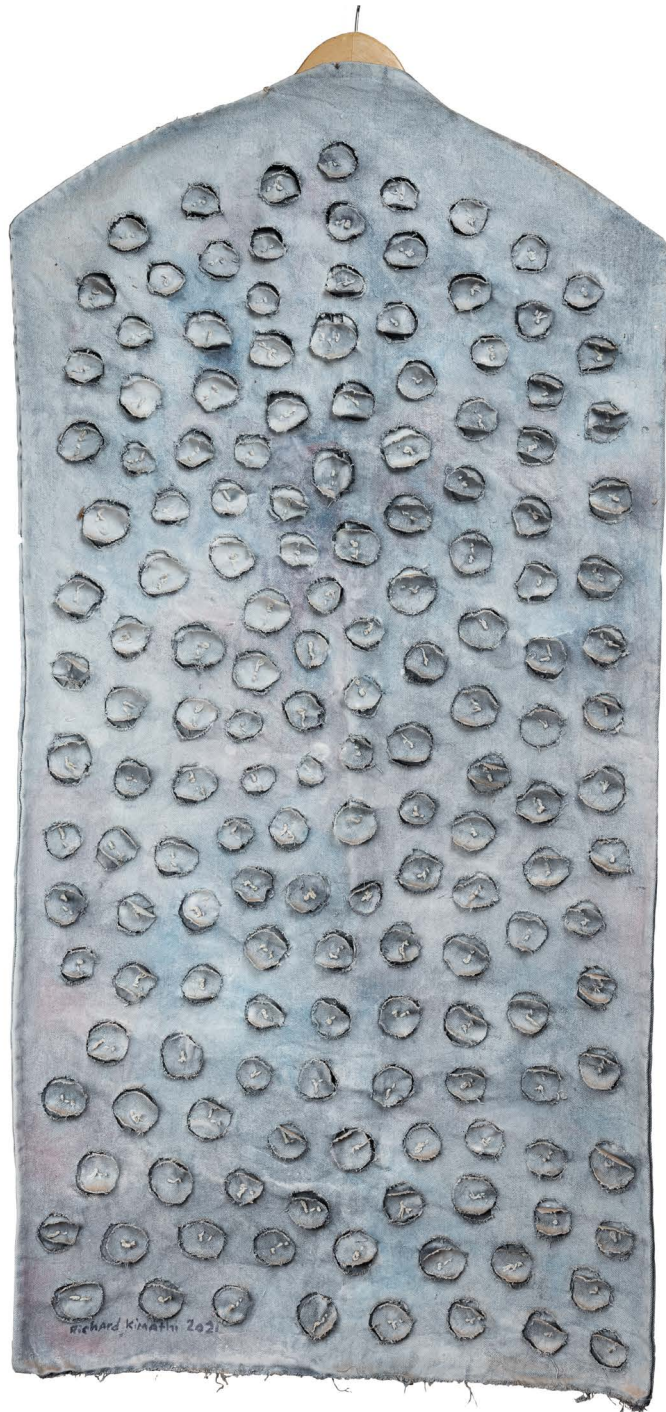






















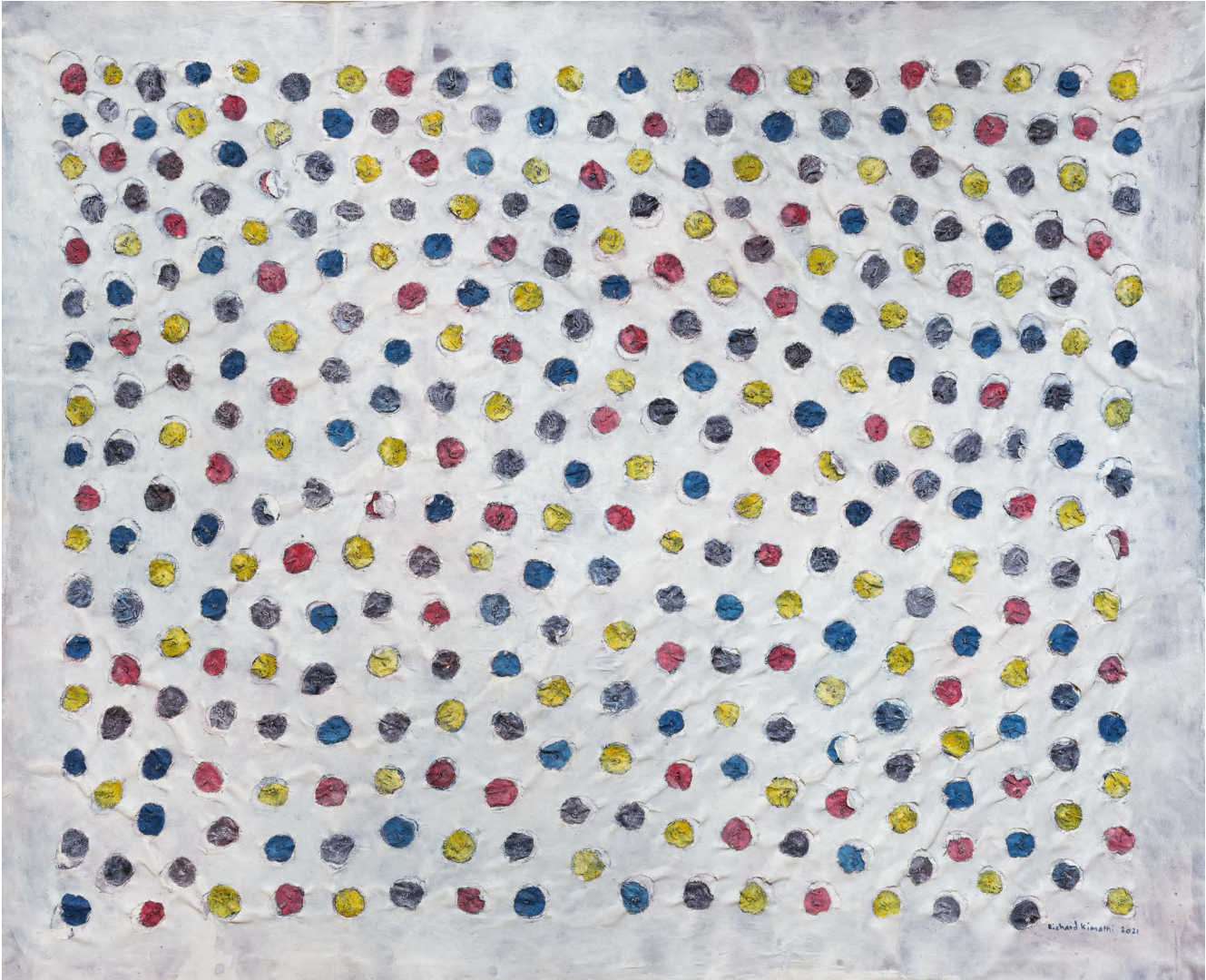












140 *After the Rain III*, 2023, mixed media on canvas, 212 x 146 cm





















## BIOGRAPHY / CV

### RICHARD KIMATHI

Born in Nyeri, Kenya 1971  
Attended Creative Art Centre, Nairobi  
1996 - Joined Kuona Trust Art Studio

Richard Kimathi studied graphics in the Creative Art Centre in Nairobi. He lives and works in his studio in Malaa, southeast of Nairobi.

Kimathi is always exploring and experimenting. He has a unique expression, camouflaging an empathetic portrayal of the circumstances of the common Kenyan in caricature-like reductionism: the suffering, privately worn and stoically borne, as if simply the price of life. Invisible to the sleepy eye, this sensitivity permeates the entire body of his work.

He exhibits regularly at One Off Contemporary Art Gallery and has shown at Heong Gallery, Cambridge, UK in 2017; The Gallery of African Art (GAFRA) on Cork Street in London in 2014; The Belgium Embassy Residence in Nairobi in 2013 and at Gazzambo Gallery in Madrid, Spain in 2010. He represented Kenya at the Dakar Art Biennale in Senegal in 2006 and has exhibited in Germany, Amsterdam, Italy, Austria and the USA.

### SELECTED SOLO SHOWS

- 2022 *Outdoor Activities* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2021 *Rocky Roads* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2019 *Wounds* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2018 *Bare Knuckle* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2017 *On the outside looking in* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2016 *The Common people* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2014 *Men and women* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2013 *Little dresses* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2012 *Richard Kimathi* - One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2010 Gazzambo Gallery, Madrid, Spain
- 2006 RaMoMA, Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2005 RaMoMA, Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2004 La Rustique, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2003 Living Art and Science Centre, Lexington, USA
- 2002 National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2001 John Tuska Gallery, Kentucky University, Lexington, USA
- 1999 One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya

### AWARDS

- 2001 - 2002 Awarded the Ruth Hunt Wood residency at Kentucky University, Lexington.
- 2000 The painting "Living single" selected to be a part of a series of United Nations stamps  
First prize in the national stage of the world wide painting exhibition and competition; My country in the year 2000, sponsored by Windsor and Newton
- 1997 First prize - East African Industries Art Exhibition and Competition

## SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

- 2017 Heong Gallery, Downing College, Cambridge, United Kingdom
- 2014 Gallery of African Art, Cork Street, London, United Kingdom
- 2013 Belgium Embassy residence, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2007 *Ngong Forest International Workshop*, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2006 *Dakar Art Biennale*, Senegal
- 2004 Lamu Museum, Lamu, Kenya
- 2004 *Kenyan Artists*, Brooklyn, USA
- 2004 *Jubilee 2000*, Trieste, Italy
- 2003 French Cultural Institute, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2002 *Homage to 9/11*, Cerlan Gallery, Kentucky, USA
- 2002 Barnhart Gallery, Kentucky, USA
- 2002 Capital Hill Gallery, Washington, USA
- 2001 Heritage Art Centre, Lexington, USA
- 2001 *East African Artists*, Vienna, Austria
- 2001 *Kenyan Artists*, Milan and Rome, Italy
- 2000 United Nations Headquarters, Nairobi, Kenya
- 1999 Nairobi and Kakuma refugee, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 1998 French Cultural Institute, Nairobi, Kenya
- 1997 *Missio Art Prize 1997 Africa*, Berlin, Germany
- 1997 National Museum of Nairobi, Kenya

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We would also like to thank James Mariuki, who took the beautiful photos of Kimathi's work you see in this publication and Nyaguthi Maina and her team for their dedication and care with the documentary film and the photographic portraits of Richard Kimathi you see in this publication.

We are grateful to Joanna Deans for the visual design of this book and her unwavering patience and professionalism. We thank Libby Rodger of Cpi Anthony Rowe for her guidance and support throughout the publication process.

## ALMAS ART FOUNDATION

Almas Art Foundation (AAF) is a London based non-profit organisation that is committed to celebrating the invaluable contributions made by African and African diaspora artists to Modern and contemporary visual arts.

AAF aims to present and create an awareness for the practices of established and mid-career African and African diaspora artists through a programme of publications, exhibitions and films, documenting these artists' practices for a new generation of African artists, scholars and the wider international art community.

AAF aims to foster collaborations with emerging artists, curators and writers to support the arts ecosystem in Africa and facilitate residencies through partnerships with universities, institutions and independent initiatives.



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*The Merchant I*, 2020, mixed media on canvas, 92 x 138 cm

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