

Peterson Kamwathi: Explaining Kenya through wood cut prints and icons

By: Karen Dabrowska

Talking to Nairobi artist Peterson Kamwathi and looking at his wood cut prints provides a penetrating flash of insight into key issues affecting Kenyan society. (Note: we had selected the wrong picture and apologise for any embarrassment caused.)

Kamwathi is a historian, recorder and questioner. His narratives take the form of wood prints which explore developments, most recently the constitutional referendum of 2005.

The 30-year-old artist talks with the wisdom of a man twice his age, carefully considering answers to questions, weighing every word.

For him conversations are laboratories. "Conversations open my eyes. What is in front of you is your teacher – even the things you don't see. Conversations are stimulants in the sense that a thought or idea is malleable and

can be toyed with, passed around, stretched, hammered etc. Rarely do I find conversations definitive".

A broad, engaging smile is never far from Kamwathi's lips. He loves his work and his enthusiasm for wood cut prints knows no bounds. The colours are somber and he jokingly refers to 'a pragmatic melancholy'.

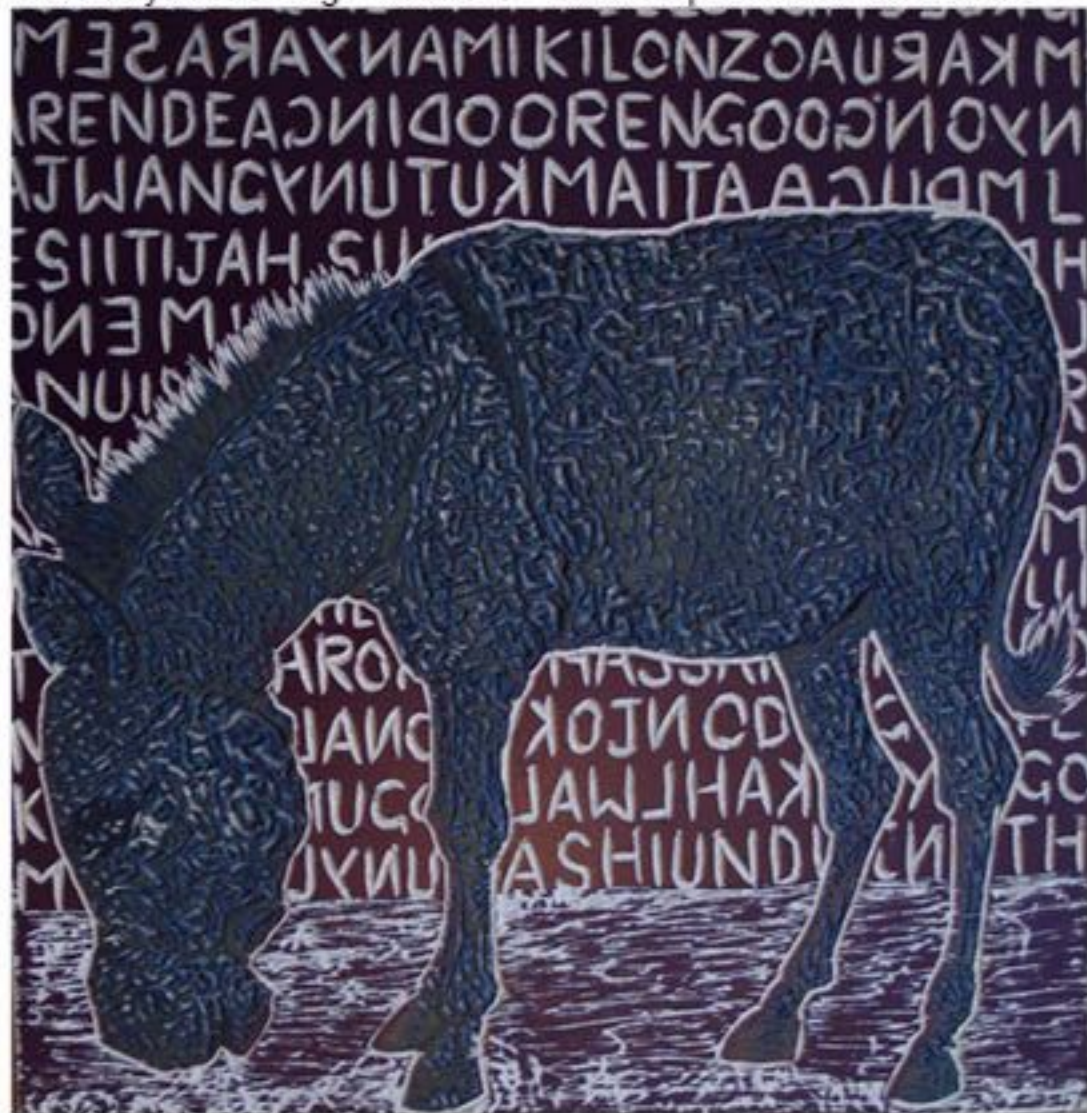
"With print making the media itself restricts the speed with which I work so I have to take time about what I am doing. When I am painting I paint very fast but when I am creating wood cuts the process forces me to slow down.

The paint has to dry, I can only carve so fast, it is laborious. So I reflect a lot on what I am working on. In that process I trim away all the unnecessary weight and get to the core of what I am talking about.

There are a few grey areas to what I am trying to say so I filter the message rather than let it be in your face".

Despite his preoccupation with

The Diary of all Things Stolen 1 Woodcut plate 2009 43 x 41cm





political issues, Kamwathi insists that his art is neither the art of political protest nor the art of political advocacy. "Neither is my point of departure. My art is my perception about what happens in my environment as a Kenyan, as a Nairobean, as someone who is affected by all that is happening. I am referencing social issues – politics is a very small part of society and I don't want to be especially aligned to politics. I do

not want to limit myself to that sphere".

Kamwathi is an artist who reacts to issues. "The latest body of work is looking at the symbolism around social , economic, political and cultural change. I am looking at the micro social cosmos - at my reaction to the referendum".

A dominant feature of his latest solo exhibition «Matter of Record»,

held in East London in November at Ed Cross Fine Art Ltd, is the constitutional bull prints. He began the series in the US and it continued for three years. The reference to the iconic bull was extended to cover the 2002-3 constitutional conference which met in a large performance venue known as the bomas of Kenya. Thus the drafting of the power-sharing constitution became known as the 'Bomas process'. (In Swahili boma refers both to a cattle enclosure and administrative offices).

The then government offered the public an altered form of the bomas draft, which when put to a national referendum was roundly defeated and resulted in a frustrating stalemate. These events set Kamwathi to devise his epic constitutional bull series (2005-8) of twelve woodcut blocks. The outline of each large bull used as the main symbol to represent Kenya, is filled with a distinct motif: the Ndizi bull with bananas, the referendum's sign for 'yes'; the Amani bull with doves, the international icon for peace.

The works on display



Untitled (Amani, Constitutional Bull Series) Woodcut plate 2008
24 x 30ins



In his work animals become symbols for human issues. The sheep represent people whose lives have been altered by modern weaponry. In most cultures sheep symbolize the sacred and are viewed as gentle, submissive and in part helpless. In the works the sheep walk on earth littered with icons of weapons whose presence is only visible in the shadows.

Although his language is local his

themes are universal. Many of the works dealt with queues: in Kenya queuing is part of the normal way of life - there are queues in transport and banking. "These are issues that effect human beings in geographical spaces. I queued to clear customs in Nairobi, I queued to clear border control in London. As human beings we are sensitive to what is happening around us, borders notwithstanding. The specific body of work I did was

specifically targeted at what is happening in Kenya but the theme is universal”.

In the wood cut prints showing figures queuing to vote the people are overwhelmed by ballot boxes, suggesting a stalemate of icons. The repetition and dense arrangement of so many ballot boxes raises the issue of election fraud, inverting the ballot icon to indicate corruption of the electoral

Untitled (Bananas, Constitutional Bull Series) Woodcut Stamp, 2006, 24 x 30 ins

process.

The wood cut prints have many levels of meaning. It is possible to just appreciate the bulls, the sheep and the donkeys as works of art, expertly executed by a master wood print maker. But Kamwathi is convinced that human beings are masters at peeling away the layers of meaning.

“We eventually find our way to the



Untitled sugarlift print



essence of things. It may take a short time, it may take a long time but it's almost guaranteed it will happen. Art is a process of constantly giving. The first time you look at something one thing grabs you the next time something else grabs you. The more you gaze at something, the more it reveals itself. You pass a specific

street and you notice one element. You come back tomorrow and you see other elements and all these elements connect to form what you call a street. You move down a street in one direction it looks different than moving in the opposite direction. I don't think my work is meant to be something that you digest in one go".

He recalls one of his exhibitions with a black and white drawing of a sheep. "A lady purchased one sheep drawing. She told me when she bought it because she liked the form. There were all these tags and symbols that related to conflict in the work. A work will always open itself. It becomes a chapter within a larger book".

Aesthetics are important but they are just supporting elements to larger issues to enhance the message of the wood prints. "A

book can be beautifully bound but at the end of the day it is the quality of the writing not the binding that is crucial. I cannot invalidate someone who sees beauty in my work but there is more to it than aesthetics and beauty. It has a message".

Sometimes Kamwathi wishes his works were bigger. "I think about spaces. When the work is in my studio it seems big. When it goes out of the studio I see the world is bigger than the work".





A very important question for Kamwathi is 'Who am I talking to? Does this work have relevance to London—a universal significance?'

Turning to a practical issue with regard to the constitution, Kamwathi points out that there is a clause which covers arts and culture. "But this clause needs structures around it – the institutions through which policies can be implemented. We don't have those institutions. The constitution is a positive thing. As a Kenyan artist I can say I am included in the constitution".

To-date government support for the arts in Kenya has been negligible and artists have very limited resources. Most support comes from private societies and institutions like the British Council and the Ford Foundation.

"I hope there will be a lot more support for the arts in Kenya. For myself I want the luxury of creating. I question a lot. Somebody spoke about finding a path but you can also forge a path".

Peterson Kamwathi (b.1980) is one of Kenya's leading visual

artists who lives and works in Kiambu, Nairobi. After graduating from the Shang Tao Media arts College in 2005 he has taken part in numerous exhibitions including the Edinburgh art Festival, the Liverpool World Museum and an exhibition at the World Bank headquarters in Washington 'Africa Now: emerging talent from a continent on the move'. He also held a solo exhibitions in the Nairobi GoDown Art Centre. In

2005 he took part in the London Bankside Gallery Exhibition of Kenyan prints. His residencies include Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, Durban Art for Humanity artist-poet project and the New York Art Omi International Residency.

Matter of Record, Peterson Kamawathi's first solo exhibition was held at Ed Cross Fine Art Ltd (email: ed@edcrossfineart.com)



Peterson Kamwathi2_Photo by Selina Cuff