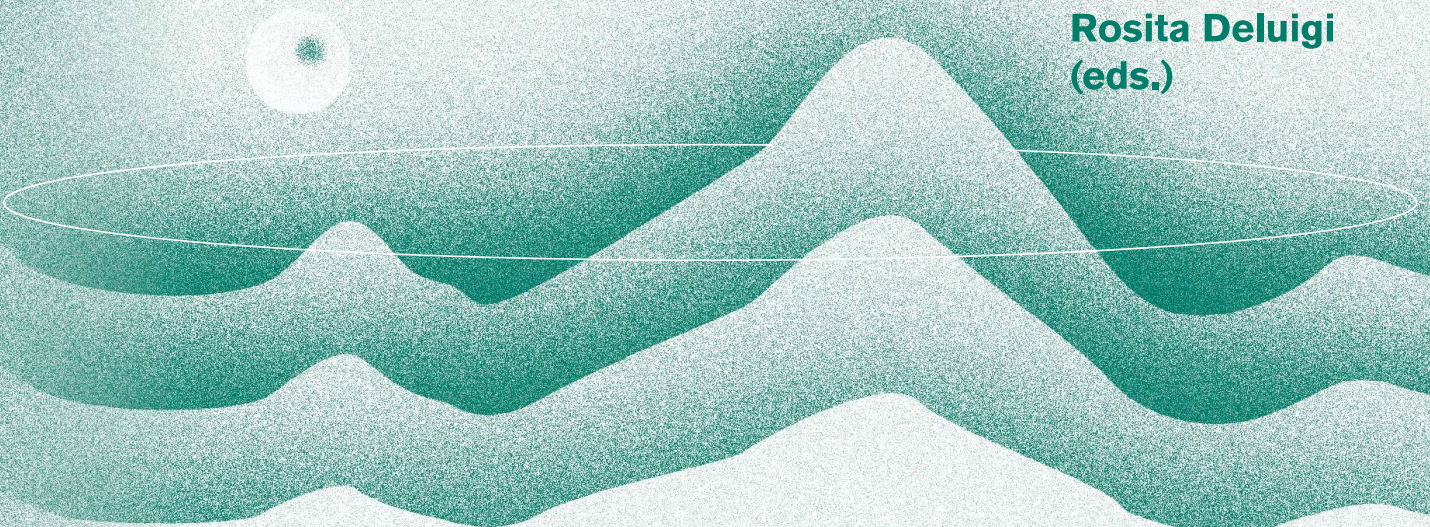




Horizons of Interest



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VISUAL LITERACY, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH. READING AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY ART BETWEEN ITALY AND KENYA

Giuseppe Capriotti

An autobiographical introduction

During my secondments in Kenya, between 2018 and 2021, I had the chance to lecture art history at Pwani University in Kilifi and Kenyatta University in Nairobi. For my courses, addressed to students with a very different background of studies (some not being from the field of humanities), I prepared some dialogued lectures during which I asked them to discuss images mostly coming from the Italian and European Renaissance and Baroque, sometimes adding some deviations toward Antiquity and contemporary art. As an iconologist I intentionally selected works of art full of meaningful details, symbols, and personifications, some of them representing scenes from Greek mythology or the Bible. Because I was lecturing in Africa, I added specific images representing black characters, sometimes represented in a positive or negative way, to stimulate discussion about the European perception of “ethnic otherness” which can be read through the images of the past.

After proposing and explaining some controversial works of art, according to my European point of view, I decided to reverse the “game” by offering students images from their own culture, that is, works of art produced by contemporary artists from Kenya, and proposing them to read and explain to me the images according to their point of view. On this occasion I realised that my African students were able to see and grasp many more explicit or hidden meanings than I was able to interpret in paintings conceived by Kenyan artists. If at the beginning I thought that my African students would have a hard time understanding Renaissance and European art, on the contrary, I later discovered that my comprehension of Kenyan contemporary art was really poor, scarcely going beyond the stereotypes of exoticism, Orientalism, and “nostalgia for Africa”. Thanks to this didactic experience, I decided to undertake specific field research on the relationship between “visual literacy” and “cultural differences”, following a “postcolonial” approach. In this article I shall present the provisional results of the still ongoing research.

Visual literacy, cultural differences, postcolonial approach

Without explicitly speaking about “visual literacy”, in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* Michael Baxandall (1972) introduced the concept of “period eye”, arguing that even though the biological apparatus of a fifteenth-century human and that of a contemporary human are identical, their visual skills are deeply

different. Such visual skills develop thanks to the beholder's daily experience in the various fields of social, religious, and commercial life. For Baxandall, a work of art should be read and interpreted with the specific mental equipment of a particular period, which can be reconstructed by thorough work of historical contextualisation. Reading an image of the past, art historians should enter a culture through as many sources as possible and interrogate the works of art by using the same interpretative categories known by the beholder of a specific historical period. Many close correspondences can be found between such an approach and the *interpretative anthropology* developed by Clifford Geertz, who was a very good friend of Baxandall. In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published in 1973, in a chapter dealing with the interpretation of the artistic productions of natives, Geertz largely focuses on the methodology defined by Baxandall. To interpret a culture, it is necessary to consider the native's point of view and the categories they use to reflect upon their culture.²

If reading a European image of the past full of symbolic details requires a specific cultural equipment, that is, a specific "visual literacy", the problem of visual competencies is equally crucial when a European iconologist decides to start reading contemporary works of art produced in a very distant country.

For "visual literacy" we intend the ability to decode, interpret, and give meaning to the images for their value of information or message.³ Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the development of visual skills was started to be considered as fundamental for the human learning (Avgerinou, Ericson 1997; Vezzoli 2017). In effect, visual competencies make people able to scrutinise and discern the meaning of objects, symbols, gestures, and expressions that are in the images, comprehending advertisements and works of art (Elkins 2010). Nowadays these visual skills are considered highly important because of the centrality of the images and the visual media in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, we also need to have these competences to read an image produced according to a different code in a different context, in a non-Western culture. The knowledge of the social and historical context is in effect the first step to correctly read each image and visual message from the past to the present, also when we deal with non-Western visual cultures.

2 It deals with the difference between the 'emic' and the 'etic' viewpoints singled out by anthropologists. The term 'emic', as opposed to 'etic', was coined by linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s, based on the terms 'phonemic' and 'phonetic', used in anthropology, always together with its opposite, to oppose the observer's description and interpretation of the experience of reality to that of the observed person. Emic analysis emphasises the meanings shared by a native social group, the viewpoints of the community being studied. Etic analysis points out the data produced by an interpretive system built according to the anthropologists' theoretical models and categories (Olivier De Sardan 1998).

3 The language we use to express this concept is meaningful, because it denounces a gap: we use "literacy", a word connected to literature and the ability to read texts and written documentation, after having learned the alphabet, the morphology and the syntax of a language, that is, the grammar; at the same time we use the verb "to read" to express the intention of decoding an image, because the verb "to see" or "to look at" the image does not have the same meaning of decrypting the style and content of a visual message. For this reason, Paul Martin Lester (2011) wrote a handbook for students, explicitly delivering a grammar by which "to read" visual communication with images.

As with many other African countries, at present Kenya is characterised by numerous tribes with different cultures and languages,⁴ even if nowadays people are mixing due to the movement of population from a tribe's land to another, from centres to peripheries, from upland to coast, and vice versa. Likewise, in Kenya, we have to consider the impact of British colonisation, which was preceded by the Arabic and the Portuguese. For this reason, analysing the contemporary artistic production in Kenya, the issue of “visual literacy” is inevitably linked to the post-colonial one.

First of all, in fact, we should avoid looking at African artistic production exclusively with European eyes, projecting our world onto it, and giving it value on the basis of categories developed to analyse European art, considering in addition that the way of making art history is a Western narrative and construct (Enwezor 2003; Valente 2021). As a matter of fact, in dealing with non-Western art production, we should also go beyond our concept of modernity (as running to the progress and overcoming of the existing), which is connected to the Western historical tradition and to an art history based on victories, successes, and revolutions.⁵ More generally, the post-colonial approach has restored dignity to colonised cultures, not only recognising their existence, but also giving them the dignity of becoming an object of study. At the same time, however, postcolonial studies also propose an overcoming of epistemological Eurocentrism, deconstructing colonial interpretative categories and their value hierarchies. One of the possible perspectives is focus on examining non-Western historical and cultural processes in the light of the interpretations given by the natives, analysing the readings coming from within, from the same culture.

However, specifically concerning present-day Kenya, this approach should be pursued considering that the official languages in Kenya are Ki-Swahili and English, the language of the colonisers, and that the Kenyan school system has been modelled on the British one: as stated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), through the imposition of the language as a “cultural bomb”, colonisers imposed a mental and symbolic universe and a way of perceiving the world. Likewise, the artistic education given at Kenyan colleges and universities follows the educational model of European academies and schools of art.⁶ In addition, globalisation and the use of technology – in particular smartphones – is creating a strong circulation of Western models and, in some cases, a homologation of the artistic production, which is particularly visible in the very complex phenomenon of tourist art (Mahoney 2012).

4 On the difficult problem of the identification of tribes in Kenya see Balaton-Chrimes 2021. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) claims that the differentiation in tribes of Kenyan people was underlined by the colonial power to create disagreement among people and better dominate the colonies.

5 A debate for a more inclusive Art history appeared some years ago in the journal “The Art Bulletin” (Pollock 2014; Mattos 2014; Mukherji 2014; Okediji 2015; Capistrano-Baker 2015; Martínez-Ruiz 2016).

6 The foundation of School of Art or Academy of Art, based on European model and often connected to the action of missionaries, is a phenomenon which started in all Africa at the beginning of 20th century (Vansina 1999). In present Kenya, for example, Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts (BIFA) and the Department of Fine Art & Design of Kenyatta University, both in Nairobi, offer an art education that is very similar to the one given in European academies and schools of art. More in general on the impact of colonialism in contemporary African art cf. Clemens 2017.

The tool of the focus group between Italy and Kenya

To conduct this research, I used the *focus group* technique, defined as a non-standardised and in-depth group interview or as a planned and informal discussion: a moderator, in the presence of an observer, proposes some conversation topics to a relatively small group of people, usually constituted on the basis of the specific objectives of the research (Smithson 2000). Compared to other survey methods, the *focus group* allows us to: bring together groups that are not necessarily central to the research topic (Krueger 1994); promote, in a more informal and more confidential atmosphere, a freer explanation of the participants' opinions (Beck, Trombetta, Share 1986); obtain, through face-to-face interaction and discussion, an in-depth study of some issues that would remain on the surface in a questionnaire or interview; and, therefore, bring out information that would not be able to be acquired through traditional tools (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis 2005). The interaction between the participants, a distinctive element of the *focus group*, makes it possible to immediately compare the ideas expressed and make it easier to identify similarities and differences between opinions, favouring the emergence of the strengths and weaknesses of each position (Kitzinger 1999).

The *focus group* tool was in this case particularly suitable for the two objectives of the research: to understand how much the belonging to a culture affects the ability to correctly read an image; and experiment in reading and understanding Kenyan contemporary art starting from the point of view of the local observer, from the point of view of the native.

To start I carried out a *focus group* in Italy with a selected group of eight students of cultural heritage at the University of Macerata, that is, with people having a specific university knowledge in art history. The same was impossible in Kenya, where no such similar degree exists. Using the same paintings, I held two *focus groups* at Pwani University in Kilifi, with small groups of four to six students coming from different degrees. Some of these students practice arts as young artists. In both cases I personally acted as moderator, but in Kenya I also used a local mediator, who in some cases facilitated the communication. In all focus groups I distributed some Post-its, asking the participants to freely write three keywords (which came to their minds while looking at the paintings), and then we discussed the paintings starting from the words they had written.

First of all, I have to highlight a gap: despite having worked in both cases with contemporary works of art (therefore with images close "in time"), for Italian students they were also images distant "in space", while for the Kenyan students they were theoretically familiar works, in that they belonged to their culture.

Reading contemporary Kenyan art

In the rich production of contemporary art in Kenya, I selected some paintings conceived by artists based in Nairobi, in Lamu, and in Kilifi, trying also to compare the differences between the artistic production of a political and cultural capital, the city of Nairobi (Swigert-Gacheru 2013), and the art produced along the coast (in Lamu and Kilifi), by painters in contact with Western tourism (Capriotti 2020). In any case I chose paintings based on the traditional cultures of Kenya, in particular (but not exclusively) on the Swahili culture.

The first work presented at the focus group is *Men at the End of Ramadan* by Wanjoi (fig. 1), a painter of Lamu, who is also the owner of a shop for tourists in the main street of the town. His works are also sold by other art galleries in Shela,

a tourist area with beaches in Lamu. Italian students underlined the regularity of the composition, the geometry, and the symmetry in the positioning of contrasting colours, but also the presence of the important theme of the “man seen from behind”, which is a core expedient of Western art to indicate the point of view of the observer⁷. According to some of them, men going towards the same direction indicates something connected with a pilgrimage or a religious meeting. Proposing a comparison with the *Turcate* by the Italian artist Aldo Mondino (1938–2005), only one student directly argued a link with Islam. For Kenyan students this painting is indubitably a depiction of Islam: the dress code indicates that they are Muslims, the *kanzu* (the specific Swahili dress) and the *kufi* (the traditional Islamic hat) are clearly recognisable; there is equality among men, but the authority in Islam is only masculine: in the paintings there are only men; the painter presents the religious life of the Swahili coast in a creative manner, indicating through different colours that Islam is not a monolithic religion, that there are divisions and different beliefs also inside the Mosque, and that there are many ways to celebrate the end of Ramadan.

Remaining in coastal atmospheres, I then proposed a comparison between two paintings focusing on the image of a donkey, the first by Adams Mussa (fig. 2), a painter of Lamu, and the second by Fred Abuga (fig. 3), who is part of the Nairobi artistic mainstream and works in the Kuona Trust Collective.⁸ The interest of the Italian students was more focused on the first painting. They underlined the theme of the dignity of the hard work of the animal (or the oppression that it pushed on the donkey), and again the issue of the identification (of the observer) with the “man seen from behind”, the general problem of the connection with European Orientalism.

The Kenyan students immediately recognised the coastal set up, quoting Lamu as the city where donkeys are the only means of transport in the narrow corridors of the downtown. As humble and perseverant animals, donkeys are unfairly overloaded by men, because they are strong enough to resist the difficult conditions of the very hot coastal life; there is a sense of religious observance in their walking, like a long path for a desired redemption. One student proposed a deep comparison: the first painter made a more detailed work, he knows the life of Lamu, its narrow streets and the dresses of Swahili people, he is a painter from Lamu; the second artist works in a schematic way, he does not know coastal life firsthand, he represents something he has only heard of. This is an incredible comment, because in effect Adams Mussa lives in Lamu and Fred Abuga (now based in Nairobi, but coming from the upland, half *kisii* and half *luhya* tribes) uses photographs of coastal life as an inspirational source for his donkeys.

The third proposal is a comparison between two seascapes by Fred Abuga (fig. 4, 5). Beyond the sensation of peace and serenity, the Italian students found many interesting comparisons: the two paintings seem to express the transient life, the flow of life, that is, two moments of the same boat like in an impressionist

7 Students made references to the Romantic tradition, but also to Magritte. On the theme of the men seen from behind cf. Lee Rubin 2018.

8 Fred Abuga is included in the book *Visual Voices*, which compiles the artists of the Kenyan mainstream (Wakhungu-Githuku 2017, pp. 195–201).

series (with a specific reference to Claude Monet); the human figures of the first paintings look like African or Alberto Giacometti's sculptures; the loneliness of the boat in the second painting reminds one of a Romantic wreck (*The Sea of Ice* by Caspar David Friedrich); the brush strokes of the painter also remind one of Egyptian painting souvenirs, painted on slices of papyrus. One Italian student noticed a very curious aspect: we would expect that the painter builds the horizon line with horizontal brushstrokes, on the contrary he suggests the horizon with vertical brushstrokes. For the African students the two paintings express a strong difference: the first boat is driven by human beings, the second by the wind as we can grasp by the mast; this detail expresses an advancement in technology, thanks to the ability of using the natural energy of the wind. In the first painting two characters are fishing with nets, while the third one, seated on the canoe, is supervising the work of the others. They look like a family and their travel seems to be an exploration, a metaphor for the hard African life, of the struggle for survival. The second painting could also express the negligence of people who abandoned the boat on the sea. A Kenyan student proposed a very interesting reading: the brush strokes seem reminiscent of the keys of a piano; the piano is decomposing, and the keys are invading the surface of the canvas, giving us the sensation of the musicality of the sea, the sound of the waves as sweet music.

The following proposal is two *Slums* by Mudibo (fig. 6, 7), a painter from the *luhya* tribe, based in Nairobi and coordinator of Kivuli Art Centre, a polyvalent workshop of artists (painters and engravers) who produce different kinds of artefacts for both the local and international market. The Italian students immediately perceived the social difference between the two parts of the paintings, painted in a naïf style: in the background there are rich buildings, in the foreground the small houses of poor people; despite that, in the foreground we can breathe in a sensation of vivid happiness and authenticity in poverty, backwardness, and tradition.

The Kenyan students recognised this place: they immediately named the slums of Kibera, Runda, and Madare, in Nairobi. After having noticed the difference between the two kinds of houses, they underlined that the slum is represented as a place of joy, where people are interacting, having fun, relaxing, dancing, and socialising more than in the buildings in the background: the painter seems to show the advantages of poverty and the disadvantages of richness. One student in particular showed his dismay: in the slum you expect to find miserable people, pain, ugliness, and loneliness, instead the painter represents happiness, the opposite of each expectation; the rich people who live in the buildings represented in the background do not have common spaces for socialising, the poor people live outdoors or in small houses, but they are happier because they can share moments of authentic joy. This last student especially grasped the intentional aim of the artist. Mudibo lived in a slum and, as the painter of the slum, he wants to deliver another image of the slum, his own slum, which is very peculiar and, in a sense, unique. Therefore, from within the slum, he deliberately gives artistic expression to his social group, giving his version: as rich Westerners we expect to see a dirty, dangerous, and sad area, but on the contrary, he offers us another point of view coming from the slum. In his ability to provide artistic expression to the vision of the world he comes from, we can define Mudibo as an "organic intellectual", using a category introduced by Antonio Gramsci (Crehan 2016, pp. 28–30). He does not let Kibera be as everyone would expect, but he proposes his slum with its elements of vitality.

After that I presented a series of three elephants by Yegonizer (fig. 8, 9, 10), a painter based in Nairobi and working at GoDown Art Collective. The Italian students underlined the power of the colours, applied to the canvas with a spatula, and the connection with the style of Vincent van Gogh, who is in effect an artist that Yegonizer considers very important for his activity. According to the Kenyan students the paintings represent the fatigue and the sorrow of the elephants, through different facial expressions which communicate their sentiments. Although elephants move in herds, in the pictures the animal is always alone, and this is the reason for its frustration. The first one is suffering and escaping from danger (the red colour on the right), passing through a dry area and looking for water; in the foreground a dry branch is displayed. The second one is escaping as well, maybe because its large tusks has been noticed by humans. In effect the last one has its tusks severed, but it has finally reached a safe and peaceful place, green and full of vegetation. According to a student, this series is a metaphor for someone overcoming suffering: the colours and the facial expressions of the elephant say that its situation has changed; on its path it lost its tusks, but now it is safe and happy.

The last painting I proposed is the *Maasai Triptych* (2018) by Castro (fig. 11), a polyvalent painter coming from the Luhya tribe, but now based in Kilifi, and working for local and international clients in the Kilifi County (Capriotti 2020). According to the Italian students the triptych represents three women; or a man in the centre, and two women at the sides. The main feelings communicated by the paintings are: a romantic loneliness (painted following the style of Salvador Dalí, an important inspiration for Castro⁹); the suspension, the stalemate, and the wait for something; the will of observing something very far, with the mysticism of a hermit. For the Kenyan students the three characters are without any doubt Maasai warriors, with spears or *rungu* (the Maasai stick): the first one is walking; the second is crossing his legs to confuse wild animals and to avoid their approach, but he is also gazing at a danger that can come from far away; he is carrying an enrolled skin on his spear, to use as a rug in case of rest; the third seems to jump, but in truth this hop is part of a ritual dance, a motivational dance, in which men show how to be proud warriors and hunters, ready for a mature life.

According to a student some tribes, like the Maasai, have maintained their traditions only because of tourism; only because tourists are still visiting their villages to see their dances and rituals.

Provisional conclusions

In many cases, the remarks on the paintings were similar between the Italian and Kenyan focus groups. Therefore, some images have the power to communicate a message or a feeling that can be still understood in spite of cultural differences. In most cases, however, the survey revealed that visual abilities and the skills to identify problems posed by images strictly depends on the observer's culture of origin. For their specific background of studies, Italian students have often discovered connections with styles or themes of European painting, using it as a natural

9 Castro is starting his career along the Kenyan coast doing portraits and imitating the style of many European artists, such as Salvador Dalí. A rich collection of his early works is owned by Lezlie Rampinelli in Kilifi.

yardstick for assessments: this is the “visual literacy” in which they have been educated. On the contrary, Kenyan students have a different cultural code which allows them to immediately recognise settings, contexts, and details, providing in some cases profound interpretations. For instance, it seems incredible that a Kenyan student grasped the different areas of provenance of two painters by the different way in which they represent the same subject (the donkey of Lamu). At the same time, it is astonishing that another Kenyan student clearly read the real intention of the painter in the depiction of Mudibo’s slum: the perception of the student and the purpose of the artist are exactly coincident. In this specific case, I think, we can really talk about a reading of a painting through the point of view of the native, the artist, and the local observer, who expressed the same idea.

We do not always have this coincidence of reading, but in some other cases the interpretation of a student was still very effective in revealing the “intention of the picture”, that is, the real power of the images. The seascapes by Fred Abuga evoked in the mind of a Kenyan student the poetic image of a piano’s keys and of the music of the water, without any connection to the purpose of the painter, who uses this technique in all his paintings.

The series with the elephants by Yegonizer became in the mind of another Kenyan student a story that metaphorically expresses the way out of suffering, against each intention of the artist who produced these paintings without thinking of a series or a story.¹⁰ As stated by Michael Baxandall (1985) and then by William J. T. Mitchell (1996, 2005), some works of art have the power to raise effects regardless of their original function and regardless of the intentions of the artist (and the commissioner) who generated them: this is the “intention of the picture”. The power to cause emotional reading and responses is always vital in a work of art, and it is strictly connected to the culture of the observer. It survives the author and the epoch in which it was generated, and it bursts out differently, in unexpected and ever-new ways across time (Ferretti 2009, pp. 81–112). In my specific case, as a Western art historian, I do not care that the reading given by the local observer has no relationship with the intentional purposes of the artist. Instead, I am interested in the unprecedented way of proceeding in seeking the meanings of the painting through an accumulation of profound observations, aimed at making sense of every little detail that a Western eye fails to notice.

This is the reason why, in my opinion, the reactions of the local observer, their readings of a work of art, and their interpretative proposals, collected with the focus group tool, seem to be a useful cultural key to better enter the world of contemporary Kenyan art production, avoiding an exclusive Eurocentric perspective and learning from the point of view of the natives.

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When asked which painting they would like to have at home, the Kenyan students all replied “Yegonizer’s elephants”.

Fig. 1.
Wanjoï – Men at the End of Ramadan. Photo:
Archive of author.

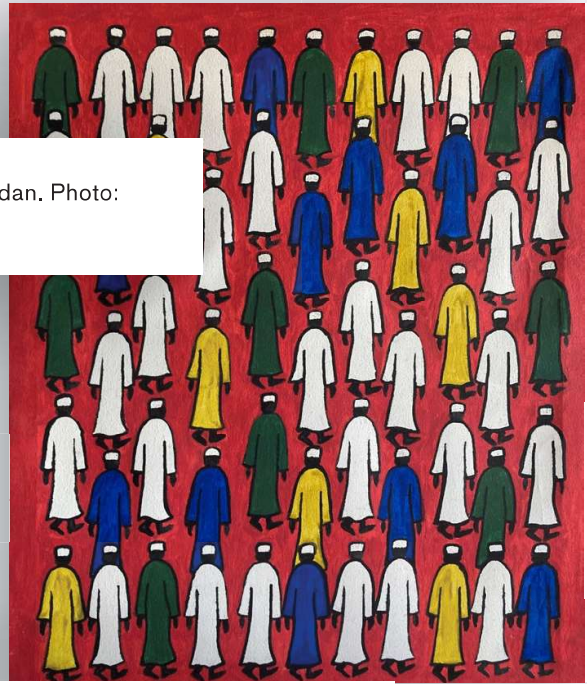


Fig. 2.
Adams Mussa. Photo: Archive of author.
Fig. 3–5.
Fred Abuga. Photo: Archive of author.



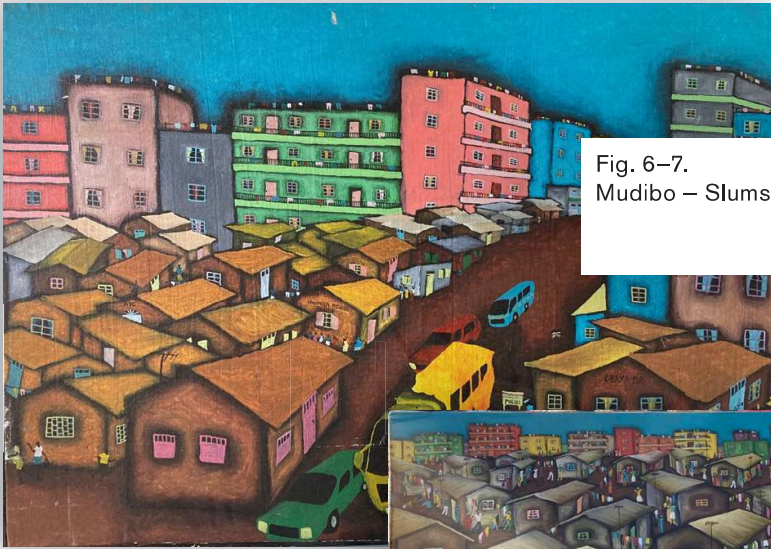


Fig. 6–7.
Mudibo – Slums. Photo: Archive of author.

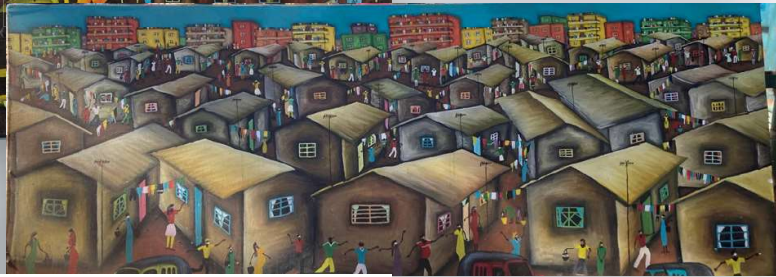


Fig. 8–10.
Yegonizer. Photo: Archive of author.

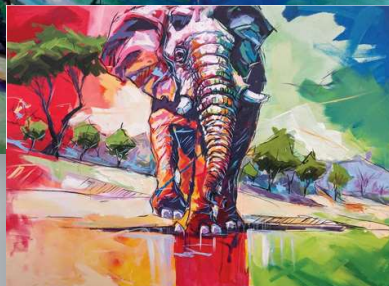


Fig. 11.
Castro – Maasai Triptych.
Photo: Archive of author.

