



## WANGARI MATHENGE ANALYZES THE SHAPING AND SHIFTING OF IDENTITY

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**WANGARI MATHENGE** uses art as a tool to find connection with space. Originally from Kenya, Mathenge moved to US for school which started her on her path to pursue art full time. Mathenge paints figures using bold brushstrokes that exude with emotion on the canvas. Though she draws inspiration from photographs of herself and loved ones, Mathenge does not wish to represent but rather to explore the possibilities that arise from the source. Mathenge is currently based in CA but will be moving this fall to attend The Art Institute of Chicago.

### When did art first enter your life?

My earliest recollection would be kindergarten. I loved using my hands - sculpting with plasticine, building structures using Lego blocks. I was not keen on coloring books because they contained my imagination. I recall coloring outside the lines or ignoring the color scheme suggested. When I was in primary school, at about seven or eight years old, my parents enrolled me into an after-school art class. Our lessons were held in the teacher's garden, where she had erected easels and set out acrylic and watercolor paints for our use. This was my first experience painting. Even though we were outdoors, we painted unobserved landscapes, which generally took the form of rolling hills. Cityscapes and imagined village scenes with huts and market stalls were popular.

### What was the impetus for you to move from Kenya to the UK? How did this impact your artistic practice?

I moved to the US for college. Living independently and removed from my family and formative culture gave me the space to look inwards. Art was a tool that I used to find a connection with space.

### You have an impressive educational background, having attended law school and now beginning your MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago. Was working as an artist always a goal of yours or one that developed over the years?

It has not always been my goal. I struggled for a long time trying to find my place, trying to find a 'why' for my being. From childhood I had been guided to consider as a suitable venture a career in commerce, medicine, engineering or law. Working as an artist was never on the table. Fortunately I was extremely restless working in other fields and in my search for sanity reconnected with artistic practice. I now look at it as the only thing I have ever felt connected to.

### What is your process like? How do you begin a work?

My process is rather organic. I usually leaf through



my photo albums and if something catches my eye - a pose, an expression, I download it and start manipulating it for composition. I try to work out what the final work will be but it is rare that a work will end up being what I initially planned once I start painting. I take multiple photos of the canvas as I paint and rework ideas if need be.

**Who are the figures you paint?**

I mostly draw inspiration from photographs of myself, but at times will use those of friends and family. It is never my intention to create representations of family members, or myself but to use the images to inform the figure that'll turn up on the canvas. It is a challenge sometimes because the more you observe when painting the more you want to duplicate precisely what you see and that inevitably leads to the rendering of a recognizable image, but I try my best to make alterations when I see this creeping in. I find that it frees my process - not having the burden of trying to paint others or myself with my biased ideas of what I'd like to reflect.

**What themes are you exploring in your work?**

Currently my work investigates notions of identity. I'm interested in the constant shift and shaping of identity due to the passage of time and migration. There are diverse diasporic experiences and I am sharing mine through painting.

**What other artists most inspire you?**

Jenny Saville, Alice Neel, Lucian Freud and Barkley Hendricks.

**What are you excited for most this year?**

Embarking upon my MFA this fall at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago.

**At the end of every interview, we like to ask the artist to recommend a friend whose work you love for us to interview next. Who would you suggest?**

Ian Mwesiga

