

The Artsy Vanguard 2022: Wangari Mathenge

Jewels Dodson



Wangari Mathenge, After The Break, 2022, Monica De Cardenas

After The Break (2022), a painting by artist Wangari Mathenge, takes us inside a home, where a person appears before an upholstered chair and ottoman covered in a tropical leaf pattern. The space is accented by actual flora—raspberry tiger lilies and kelly green lemongrass—along with a teacup and

a clementine. The subject, most likely a woman, is stretched over the ottoman, legs and head not pictured, but presumed to be dangling. The body language hits a familiar nerve; they're either in distress or taking respite amid struggle.

ARTSY



Wangari Mathenge, *For The Betterment Of The Parts And The Whole*, 2021.
© Wangari Mathenge. Courtesy of Christen Sveeas Art Foundation.

The scene is mysterious and intriguing: The viewers know nothing about who or where this person is; the only identifier is the subject's chestnut brown hand lying on its torso. The contextualizing indicators of race, gender, age, and place are irrelevant in the face of Herculean feelings of pain or despair. Mathenge bypasses the noisy political rhetoric surrounding Black art and figurative painting and gets to what matters more: the human experience.

After The Break is part of "**Perspectives**," a body of work now on view at Monica De Cardenas's Milan gallery. Throughout the series, Mathenge creates landscapes of interiority. Most of the subjects are faceless, which could evoke dissociation, though instead, it draws viewers in.

For most art, the viewer is important, though this is even more true for Mathenge's work. The ambiguity of the subject and place demands viewers to harness their own human experiences to really engage with the work. "The beholder's share," the theory devised by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, says part of an artwork's meaning and value is derived from the onlookers—their lens and lived experiences. This is an integral aspect of Mathenge's work.

Interiority extends all throughout Mathenge's oeuvre: The environments are usually within homes, and the subjects are her family and friends, sometimes in the United States other times in her homeland of Kenya. Throughout her work, the artist includes her family members in settings accented by vibrant African fabrics and Kenyan artifacts. Mathenge invites observers into her space and life.

Home is a constant theme in her work, and it creates an intimate and safe space for the viewer. While examining the diasporic material culture kept in her home in Chicago, Mathenge realized her American home is laden with more indicators of her African heritage than her home in Kenya. There, in contrast, everything looks very Western. As an immigrant, there's always a quiet yearning for home, and Mathenge realized she was recreating "Kenya" in Chicago, while facing inescapable Western imperial influences in Kenya. We see this duality of the immigrant experience in Mathenge's work, where despite where one lives, there's a yearning to keep home close.

Often, onlookers get to see Mathenge as herself, in her home, unsheathed. In *Ascendants VI (Imperial Reckoning)* (2020), she is barefoot, stretched out across her living room floor, napping. She is not without the signature elements of vibrant African fabrics and intensive reading materials, this time *Imperial Reckoning* by Caroline Elkins. Books are featured in many of her works—an homage to her father, a voracious reader; her mother, a schoolteacher; and a nod to education being paramount in her life.

Mathenge, now 49, was born in Nairobi. When she was a baby, her father received a president-appointed diplomatic assignment that took the family to London for five years, before migrating back to Kenya. Mathenge, the youngest of five children, has very little firsthand memory of this time.

Working from photographs, she began painting her

family as expats in the U.K. The result is "The Expats Studies: Impressions on Paper" (2020), a collection of drawings exhibited at The Sacristy Gallery in the summer of 2021, featuring images of friends and family, set in the past, in intimate settings. The star of the series is her father, whom she speaks of in golden tones.

"He's a really interesting person when it comes to history," she said. "He's a huge reader. He keeps all this information in his head, it's amazing." In *Study 1* of "The Expats Series," a man embraces a child; presumably, it's toddler-aged Mathenge and her father, but the strokes are so soft that the figures aren't discernible. The loose visual invites observers to engage with the work in a deeper way. The profile of the father and daughter reminds me of a similar photo I have with my father.

Mathenge completed her MFA in painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2021—almost two decades after she first began dabbling with the notion of becoming a full-time artist. Although she's just graduated, her work has already been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, London, Miami, Chicago, Milan, and Frankfurt. She's now represented by the esteemed international galleries Roberts Projects and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery.

Unlike much of her younger peers, Mathenge has lived many lives prior to the current one. "Since I was a child, I was interested in art. I was drawing, painting, I even took private sessions when I was about seven or eight years old," she said. Art wasn't presented to her as a viable career path, though; it was a class you took to be a well-rounded individual. "Interestingly enough, I never thought it was lucrative, or that I could survive off of it," she reflected. "I just wanted to go to art school because I was good at it." After high school, she thought of pursuing art, but her parents quickly vetoed that notion. She studied business administration in Kenya, then moved to San Diego



Wangari Mathenge, *Untitled*, 2020.
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery
Wangari Mathenge, *The Ascendants XVII*
(*She Is Here Too But Why Are You?*), 2021.
© Wangari Mathenge. Courtesy of the artist and Pippy
Houldsworth Gallery, London.

MONICA DE CARDENAS



Wangari Mathenge, *Coffee At Cassell's*, 2019, Roberts Projects
Wangari Mathenge, *The Apothecaries*, 2019, Roberts Projects



Wangari Mathenge, *Sundials and Sonnets*, 2019, Roberts Projects
Wangari Mathenge, *The Apothecaries*, 2019, Roberts Projects

MONICA DE CARDENAS

to get an MBA and begin a career in finance. "The only art I was making was doodles in meetings," Mathenge recalled. "I had totally abandoned art school; it wasn't anything that was in my mind."

She grew bored with business and changed course: After earning a law degree from Georgetown University Law Center, she began working for an insurance company. "In my second year of practicing law, I started getting really restless. I quickly realized I was just moving from thing to thing and not finding my place," she said.

On the weekends, she found herself deep in the self-help section of Barnes & Noble, searching for the thing that would quell her growing antsiness. One book recommended she reengage with the things that gave her joy as a child. Soon after, she picked up some art supplies and embarked on developing a drawing practice. "It immediately clicked in me," she recalled. "I was really enjoying it. I found myself spending a lot of time drawing."

Mathenge began taking drawing and sculpture classes at her local community college. "I took so many classes, it was the equivalent of a BFA. The education of it, being in school, was always thrilling for me," she said emphatically. Soon, her instructors advised her to get an MFA.

While that was appealing, the cost and necessity was hard to rationalize. "I contemplated that for almost 10 years. That was in 2010; I don't think I was ready then. I went in at the right time," she said assuredly. "I kept on asking myself, '5 years, 10 years down the road, will you look back and regret it?' And you start thinking, 'Why didn't I just do it?'" She told herself, "It's scary, and I think that's why you should do it."

After some wise counsel from an art professor, she decided to leave her home in Northern California and commit to being a full-time MFA student. In fall 2019, she started her first semester at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which coincided with her first solo exhibition, "Aura of Quiet," at Roberts Projects in L.A. Fortunately for Mathenge, having a solo exhibition at an esteemed gallery before completing her degree quieted much of the anxieties so often associated with MFA hopefuls, though schooling was still important to her.

"I like formal education," she explained. "For me, I needed it. I needed to understand the words, like, 'How do people talk about work?' I did it for me. I am a more confident painter and artist because I spent those two years listening to criticism, being educated on philosophy; it has made me more comfortable to maneuver in this space."



Wangari Mathenge, *Sundials and Sonnets*, 2019, Roberts Projects
Wangari Mathenge, *The Apothecaries*, 2019, Roberts Projects



Wangari Mathenge, *The Expats*, 2019, Roberts Projects

Before her MFA, Mathenge created from a very intuitive place. “When I started painting and drawing prior to being in school, it was: ‘Sit down, look at the blank canvas, grab the pencil, and just let the hand move,’” she said. But in art school, she was challenged to apply critical thought to that way of working. Her intrinsic sense was to let the work lead, but if she was going to be explaining it, as she found was customary in school, she realized the concept would have to come first. “I started to think about what story I’d like to tell—how do I want to tell it? So I started working that way,” she said.

Although this was the scholastically approved way to work, Mathenge felt disappointed by the methodology. “It felt so contrived,” she said. “The words I came up with to explain the work in mind were just ridiculous.” She pushed back against this fraught aspect of the artistic academic experience. She once conferred with a white instructor on her frustration, and in response, he said, “Nobody’s ever asked me to explain my work.”

Verbal explanations can undermine art because often artists are expressing something visually that they struggle to put into words. Even though the work is figurative and appears to represent specific people and scenarios, “sometimes things are coming out of me, that doesn’t mean it’s well thought out,”

Mathenge explained. “It’s this feeling that you have. I just want to apply paint on canvas and feel free about it.” Mathenge maneuvers around the many expectations often thrust upon artists.

When she entered art school, Mathenge primarily worked in abstraction and sculpture. If she painted at all, it was more about colors, shapes, and textures than figures. But after taking a required portrait painting class, she found herself deep in figuration. “My first stab at it was really good in my eyes. I remember thinking, ‘This is not bad for the first time,’” she said. “I was so interested in following that path, it became more of a curiosity. I didn’t know I could do this...and in the process of trying to become better, you start to just love the challenge of it.” Throughout her previous careers and now her art practice, challenge is a persistent bedfellow for Mathenge. She not only leans into it, she thrives in it.

The work has a soft quality: The eyes are not piercing, the jawline is not sharp, there is an Alice Neel gentleness. It emits kindness and warmth, a soft place to land amid an evermore volatile world.

Mathenge came to this technique and aesthetic through a simple realization: “I love drawing. It’s as simple as that. I’m trying to draw with a brush,” she said with a jovial chuckle. “Paint lends itself to

MONICA DE CARDENAS

blending really well; in drawing, you're working hard to blend. Paint as a wet medium naturally wants to blend."

Mathenge's gestural paintings speak to her early dalliance with abstraction and add depth to her figurative subject matter. In *Supplication in Alabaster* (2019), the female figures exist without much context; Mathenge lets the spectators decide what's happening. In my mind, the women are in a sauna, conducting a spiritual ceremony of sorts, where they are singing and praying, cleansing the old and cultivating the new.

Art historian Ernst Kris said, "Great works are great because they are ambiguous; they allow for alternative readings." This is true for Mathenge's work—it is expansive and rich with possibilities. And with that, she leaves a lot of room for her own growth and development. Neither she, nor the work, becomes outdated. It's like a great novel—every time you come back to it, you find something new to love.

Portrait of Wangari Mathenge in her studio.
Photo by Maina Mucoki.



Wangari Mathenge, *The Ascendants VI (Imperial Reckoning)*, 2020, Roberts Projects