

Artist Wangari Mathenge's latest oil paintings question the dehumanising meaning behind the term 'expats'



Wangari Mathenge in her studio, 2020 Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA Photo by Maina Mucoki

Originally from Kenya, Chicago-based artist Wangari Mathenge turns to history as inspiration for her oil paintings which reinterpret traditional African patriarchal society alongside her own.

by Katy Cowan

29 April 2020

CREATIVE BOOM

MONICA DE CARDENAS

Her contemporary portraits highlight the “silent exchanges and hierarchical dynamics” of her subjects through structured compositions, bold strokes, and mark-making, often depicting people with whom she has close relationships.

In her latest series, *The Expats*, she exposes how the term is usually only reserved for white Western migrants. “It was from a conversation I had with a friend wherein we recognised that Africans living abroad were rarely referred to as ‘expatriates,’” she explains. “Growing up in Nairobi, I often came across news articles and magazines that were slated for the ex-pat community. It was obvious, judging from the content, that the audience was the white Western migrant.”

Another ongoing series, *The Ascendants*, follows a similar theme. She adds: “I have lived in the United States for several years,

many of those of which I was not an immigrant but a student and later a permitted worker categorised as ‘non-immigrant’, yet I have never been referred to as an ex-pat.”

Wangari also considered her family’s experience when they lived in London in the 1970s. “My father worked on assignment to the Commonwealth as a representative of the Kenyan government. I realised that while the word ‘expatriate’ would have been apt, it never would have been used. “After researching the issue, I found that there have been discussions highlighting this double-standard, where the word ‘immigrant’ or ‘refugee’ is deployed to non-whites who live abroad while the word ‘ex-pat’ is exclusively reserved as a qualifier for white Western migrants. Because these words are inherently interchangeable, reclaiming and propagating its use in relation to the African migrant became the goal of the series.”

Mathenge has a background in International Business and Law and is a graduate of both Howard University and Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, D.C. In 2019, she joined the MFA Painting and Drawing Program at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Her works are held in private collections in Africa, Europe and North America.

“I was born and raised mostly in Nairobi, Kenya. When I was in primary school, my parents enrolled me in an after-school art class, and that’s where my journey began, even though it would be derailed for a while when I went to college. It was after I’d started practising law that I returned to art,” she says. “It was while studying under an amazing and passionate art history teacher, Lynn Robinson, that I became certain that I wanted to pursue art full-time.”



Wangari Mathenge *The Expats*, 2019 Oil on canvas 56 × 70 in (142.2 × 177.8 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA

MONICA DE CARDENAS



Wangari Mathenge Sundials and Sonnets, 2019 Oil on canvas 54 x 68 in (137.2 x 172.7 cm)



Wangari Mathenge The Cacophony of Silence, 2019 Oil on canvas 55 x 75 in (139.7 x 190.5 cm)