

ART AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY: SATIRE AND SYMBOLISM IN JOSEPH MBATIA'S ART

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ABSTRACT

Background: From novelists to political cartoonists, artists have long brought a unique perspective to important public discussions of social and political issues. Yet, fury and debate over the role of the artist has resulted in blacklisting, banning, and symbolically burning artists who use their work as a means of social critique and social change. **Problem:** Art as social commentary has not been appreciated in the East African region. This has led many artists to rely on the western and European markets. Furthermore many artists focusing on socio-political issues have experienced censorship, threats and destruction of their works. **Objective:** This paper aims to explore the work of contemporary East African visual artist, establish the aspects of their work that distinguish it as social commentary and investigate the challenges that artists focusing on socio-political issues face. **Design:** Using desktop research this paper will determine and analyse findings on East African social commentary artists. **Subject:** Joseph Mbatia Njoroge began his career as a sign writer in the slums of Nairobi but his inventive spirit and sharp intellect compelled him to begin producing amusing paintings full of social commentary on issues relating to the chaos and corruption in Kenya. Bertiers' artwork now focuses on the socio-political paradoxes infused with humor and parody that exist in Kenya and globally. **Results:** This study shows that satire and symbolism are very effective methods of passing a serious social or political issue present in a community and facilitate discussions on the matter displayed. **Conclusion:** Art as social commentary in East Africa plays a very key role in highlighting the social and political issues within the region.

Keywords: Socio-political, social commentary, satire, censorship

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Art has long been a forum for expressing opinions about the state of politics and society. Through caricature, satire, symbolism, and allegory, artists have commented both explicitly and subversively on everything from vanity and excess to corruption and greed, and poked fun at everyone from the anonymous masses to the privileged elite. Often widely disseminated through prints and other reproducible media, the ability of such images to strike a meaningful chord and leave a lasting impression has at times made political satire dangerous terrain for artists, especially those living under the governance of repressive regimes. (THIRTEEN, 2009)

Social commentary is the act of using rhetorical means to provide commentary on issues in a society. This is often done with the idea of implementing or promoting change by informing the general populace about a given problem and appealing to people's sense of justice. This practice dates back to the 19th century, many artists looked at their art as a means for social change and correcting the ills and injustices of the society. Inspired by the ideas of enlightenment, they were taking the role of social critics. They were influenced by the values of modernity and enlightenment. Such values were in stark contrast to those of society at large. Poster art as social commentary was introduced by artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Theophile Steinlen, and Leonetto Cappiello. They assumed the roles of reporter and analyst in an exploration of their era and their society. Their subjects ranged from the daily struggles of working poor, the scenes in brothels, the lifestyles of addicts and outcasts and the hardships of the old and humble. It appears that these artists wished to analyze the social fabric of society and draw conclusions, perhaps for changing it. Their art appears to be critical of socio-economic structures which are seen as harmful, but it also celebrates the simple joys of humanity and somehow poeticize everyday life. (Novin, 2017)

Art with a social message is not new to Nairobi. For decades local artists have been enlisted to create artworks that reflect social issues, ranging from family planning and HIV/Aids to the IDPs of the 2007-2008 post-election violence, the endangered wildlife like elephants and rhinos, and even the plight of Palestinians. One work of art that earned Kenyan graffiti artists worldwide attention was the city-block long mural that Swift Elegwa, Uhuru B Brown and Kevin 'Banks' Esendi spray-painted just before the 2013 General Election. The graffiti art sent a highly critical message to the masses about a myriad of political grievances and the power of Kenyan people to dismiss greedy government officials by non-violent means, namely their vote. Unfortunately, the artists remained anonymous due to concerns there might be a political backlash against them. (Business daily, 2015)

Michael Soi 48, is another Kenyan artist and painter, who has always insisted that his work should be viewed as social commentary, rather than an effort to influence policymaking. Mr. Soi said. "I don't seek change in my work. I document." His work in the collection "China Loves Africa" questions the guiding principles of Beijing's engagement in Africa, scrutinizes the role of leaders on both sides in shaping the relationship and examines the consequences for ordinary citizens. The bright acrylic paintings on canvas have proven popular and polarizing and have offered a creative and complex approach to

China-Africa relations. However in 2014, Mr. Soi said that four Chinese officials came to his studio and started lecturing him about how “ungrateful” he was for “all that China is doing for Kenya.” Mr. Soi, who has visited Hong Kong but not mainland China, said the group handled the paintings lying around the studio roughly and marred some of the artwork that was on display. (Dahir, 2021)

In 2017 artists Joseph Mbatia, Michael Soi and Patrick Mukabi endured the repercussions of their boldness in expressing socio-political issues when they faced censorship of their works by the Kenya National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Painters Michael Soi, Patrick Mukai and Joseph Bertiers had been invited by the Kenya National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to showcase their work at Nairobi National Museum from May 18 (International Museum Day) through May 30, 2017. However, on May 17, the exhibition was cancelled after the artists walked away from a meeting with the top administrators of the National Museums of Kenya protesting alleged censorship by Kenya’s house of culture. The show was to have been held in the Creativity Gallery on the theme, ‘Museums and other Contested Histories: Saying the Unspeakable in Museums’, and was widely publicized as an ‘exhibition by artists who do not flinch from controversial issues’. The image in the official publicity from Nairobi National Museum was of two adult African men embracing and kissing intimately as if they were lovers. (Keboge, 2017)

Dr. Mzalendo Kibunjia, the Director-General of the National Museums of Kenya, told BBC’s Focus on Africa that the museum did not approve of ‘nude images’ as they were distasteful, particularly to children who comprise the largest segment of visitors to Nairobi National Museum. On the same date Michael Soi told BBC’s Focus on Africa, that the museum had told him that his paintings were unpalatable to children who have impressionable minds. Soi explained his symbolic, not realistic, painting stands for the closeness of church leaders and politicians in Kenya, a highly religious country. With the church going to bed with politicians, one could not expect it to play its prophetic, and therefore adversarial, role in keeping the government accountable to the citizenry. (Keboge, 2017)

2.0 THEORY

2.1 East African Contemporary Visual Artist Exemplar; Joseph Mbatia



Figure 1. Joseph Mbatia, Source: (Craig, 2017)

2.1.1 Early life and Education

Joseph Mbatia Njoroge (figure 1), also known as Bertiers was born in 1963. Growing up, Joseph ‘Bertiers’ Mbatia used to be known as a cheeky trouble maker, a boy who barely made it through school because he discovered his creative calling at a very early age. Fortunately, he had a few teachers who appreciated his artistic talent and nurtured his obvious potential by giving him colored pencils, paper and occasionally even paints. Otherwise, he never meant to be defiant. He just knew he loved to draw and got inspired by everything around him, from the lions on Simba Unga and Simba Chai packets to Safari Rally cars to wall paintings he’d see outside the butcheries, bars and beauty salons painted by the renowned “bar artist” — the late DBC Ringo Arts.

“At home, I’d be beaten by my mum whenever she caught me drawing instead of doing my homework, and at school I had one headmistress MS. Wanjiku who used to pinch my ears every time she found me drawing in class,” says Mbatia. But the beatings didn’t deter him. Instead, he even found inspiration and even humor in the pain. “After she’d let go of my ears, I’d go straight back to drawing only then I’d make fun of her pinching me.” Ever the humorist who could make fun of the most painful personal experiences, Mbatia recalls how he even got the name “Bertiers” as a sort of joke. “Finding a nickname for yourself was what all teenage boys at Mutu-ini High school did, so I just played around with names until I came up with Bertiers, which many people tell me sounds French.”

2.1.2 Career

Ironically, his name would come in handy years later when he won his first major award given as a collaborative prize by both French and German Cultural Institutes in 2006. “They were commemorating 50 years since the two countries officially made peace (after World War 2)”, he recalls. The prize included a grand tour of the two European countries where he visited major art galleries, museums and artists’ studios. “The same year, I was number eight out of the top 10 award-winning artists at Dak’Art in Senegal,” he says, noting the accolade was meant to include trips to Dakar and southern France where he’d been given a two-month art residence.

Later that year, Mbatia would become an even more seasoned globe-trotter, travelling first to Scandinavia where he and his art would be part of the “Africa Now” mobile art exhibition that went from Denmark to Norway and Finland. But in between he made it to the US where he had another successful exhibition in Seattle, Washington. The trip was especially significant to Mbatia since his paintings had been regularly exhibited and sold out of a Los Angeles gallery ever since he met American art dealer Ernie Wolfe outside the Wasafiri Hotel in Dagoretti back in the early 1980s. “The Wasafiri was actually where I had my first exhibition,” says Mbatia, who’d started hanging his storytelling-style of paintings up at the popular tea “joint” soon after he’d completed a three-year graphic design course at the YMCA Craft Training Centre. (Gacheru M. W., 2015)

2.1.3 Influences on his work

“I used to paint on old metallic plates after I’d scrap off the original Malariaquin ads; then I’d hang them anonymously and sit in a corner at the hotel and listen to what people had to say about them,” he remembers, indirectly confirming that his style of visual storytelling has elicited curiosity and public commentaries ever since he began taking his art into the public domain.

He'd always assumed the public didn't know who the artist was; but one day as he was coming home from a day's work at Chibuku where he'd been employed as a graphic designer in 1985, he saw a huge crowd near the hotel. "Once I got near, people started shouting, 'There he is, there's the guy.' Then I saw a tall white man emerge from the crowd, stretch out his hand to me and introduce himself."

His name was Ernie Wolfe, the Californian art dealer who bought up all of Mbatia's metal-plate paintings that day and launched a relationship that (despite having its ups and downs) would last up to this day. Wolfe is the first serious art collector to appreciate Mbatia's brilliance and begin commissioning him to create series of paintings, after which the artist would ship them to the US. "By today's standards, people might say he paid me peanuts, but at the time I was grateful to have that steady income," the artist tells Lifestyle. "My wife always reminds me that that is what enabled us to buy our land near Dagoretti and build our first iron sheets house." (Gacheru M. W., 2015)

The other thing that Wolfe gave to Bertiers was advice on what to paint. "He liked my style of painting, but as I was relating to local topics that struck a chord among Kenyans, he asked me to broaden my perspective so that my art could relate to a more international audience." Advising Bertiers to start reading Newsweek and Time magazine as one of the ways he could broaden his painterly perspective, the artist credits Wolfe for suggesting he paint about global topics, everything from the first Iraq War to the OJ Simpson and Monica Lewinski sagas to specific events unfolding in Europe and Asia (figure 2). "For a time, I knew more about international events than local ones," he said. (Gacheru M. W., 2015)



Figure 2. *It is hell in Britain*, Source: Bonhams, 2015

2.1.4 Art exhibitions

Nonetheless, despite his painting primarily for an American clientele, Mbatia's art and sign-drawing skills were still in great demand locally. "I was still painting (wall or bar art) in butcheries and salons, much like DBC Ringo had done." It was the "bar art" that one German (working for GTZ) saw and subsequently sought out Mbatia, encouraging him to hold an exhibition at Goethe Institute. "Ast Guido is the one who helped me get my first show at Goethe in 1992," says the artist. Bertiers is an increasingly successful and acclaimed artist. He had his first solo show in the UK in 2011 at Fred Gallery, with his works travelling with him to the Basel Art Fair that year and Johannesburg Art Fair in 2012.. Today,

Mbatia's art can be seen all over Kenya, in parts of Africa (Senegal and Tanzania) as well as internationally in several major collections in Europe and in the U.S.A. Most recently his paintings have been on display at Alliance Francaise, Nairobi National Museum and the Nairobi Art Fair where his booth won the prize for being the second best-attended. (Gacheru M. W., 2015)

2.1.5 Paintings

Joseph Mbatia first used his artistic skills painting signs for local shops and bars as a teenager, after which he studied at the YMCA Craft Training Centre and began working professionally as a sign writer. His dissatisfaction with commercial sign-writing resulted in him producing a series of paintings entitled, 'Painting a cat. I really hate it.' The series is based around the notion that the only thing worse than sign-writing would be to earn a living painting live cats. This is an early example of Bertiers' trademark humor which is ever present in his work. Even the name he gave himself is playful. He renamed himself Bertiers from the original Mbatia to see if having a European name would boost his art sales. Bertiers' tableaus are populated with characters and subjects he gathers from newspapers and television news channels and melded with aspects that are entirely imagined to create detailed, surreal but intriguing scenes. Many of his paintings are detailed commentaries on both Kenyan and world politics where no politicians are spared his scathing satire. (ask art, 2017)



Figure 3. *ICC in AFRICA*, 2012, Source: Africana org, 2016

ICC in Africa, 2012, (figure 3) is a serious commentary on the ICC scenario. The International Criminal Court is represented as a dilapidated room with people viewing the proceedings through holes in the ceiling. All the main characters are there: the accused accusing each other, the prosecutor Louis Ocampo bowing out, the incoming prosecutor Bensouda holding up a poster reading Uhuru must be jailed, Raila wearing a British Union Jack patch on his trousers, President Moi holding his face in a pensive mood, President Kibaki reading the Nation newspaper and many international leaders holding their national flags. All this, while the evidence of machetes, a grave cross, pierced skulls and shattered limbs lies seemingly discarded in a heap on the floor. (Nation, 2020)

The painting above (figure 4) called "Faith Here" lampoons the kind of predatory preacher who is more into money and sex than spirituality. This one is holding up a Bible in one hand and groping a woman's breast with the other. The price-list on the wall of the preacher's "Fire Gospel Mission" is indicative. The lowest price is for prayers – only Sh1,000. A cure for barrenness is Sh20,000 and the

woman in the background waiting on the preacher's bed in a state of near undress suggests something about what the attempted "30 minute miracle cure" will involve. The longer drawn out treatment for diabetes – and no doubt less indulgent – is the highest at half a million shillings.

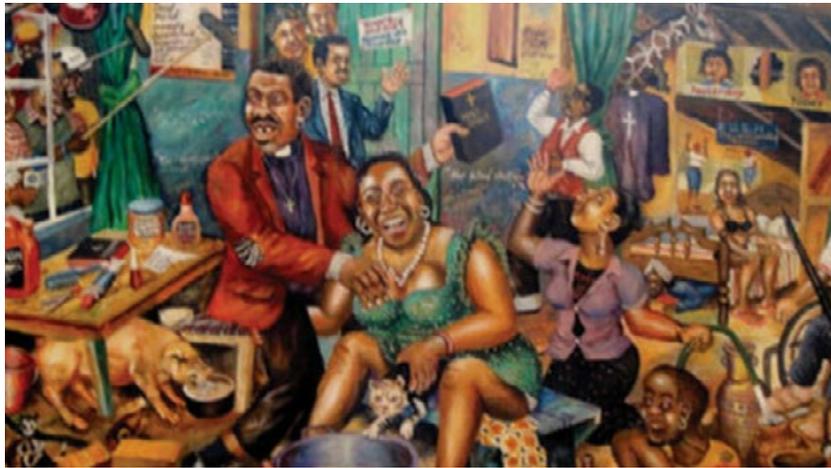


Figure 4. *Faith Here* Source: Contemporary African Art, 2013

And a sex-worker who, as shown in the "Yesterday-Today" signboard, was persuaded to distort and then un-distort her mouth to signify another miracle cure – and she then went on to accuse the preacher of not giving her the promised small fee. Two of the women in the painting are clutching cats. For Bertiers, a cat is a recurring symbol of futility. (Nation, 2020).

Another favorite theme on Bertiers canvases is the Kenyan transport system and market scenes. He highlights the many challenges in the transport industry including traffic jams, overcrowding and overloading of buses with passengers and animals on the carriers. The painting below named Matatu station (figure 5) also shows poor sanitary conditions and water pollution from a roadside market with people swimming in the river while another woman washing clothes nearby and a woman fetching water from the river as a pastor urinates into the river. All these is displayed in his characteristic satirical manner. The world's craziest bar (figure 6) depicts world politicians in a party.

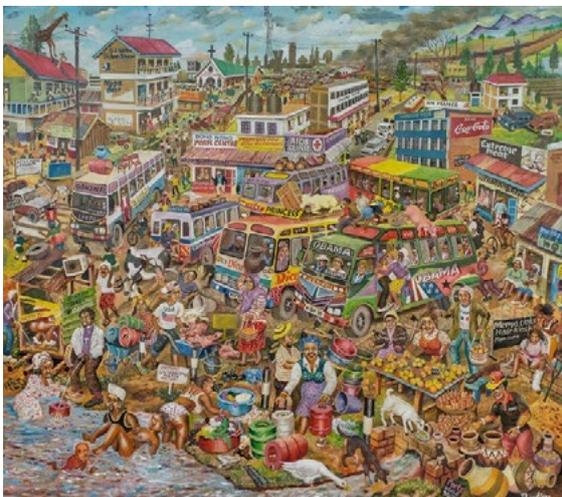


Figure 5. *Matatu station*. Source: Ask art, 2017

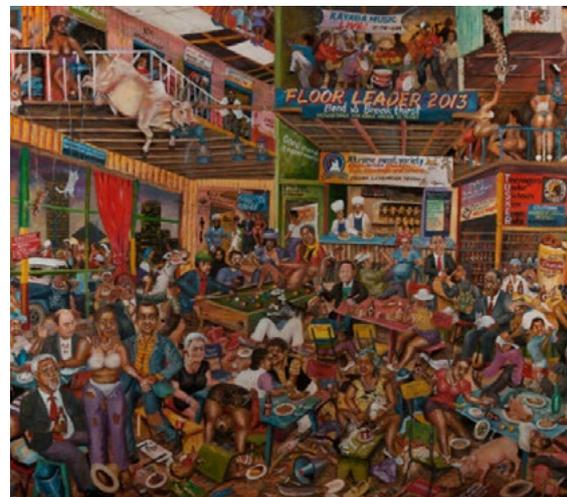


Figure 6. *World's craziest bar*, 2006. Source: Bonhams, 2015

2.1.6 Sculptures

But, ultimately, Mbatia's amazingly intricate scrap metal sculptures may be the art that he will be best remembered for. Like his realist paintings, his sculptures also capture iconic images straight out of Kenyan everyday life. And as with his paintings, he injects heavy doses of humour into his works. The extraordinary fact about his scrap-metal characters is that he only learned how to weld a few years back. "The man who came to weld the windows of our (new stone) house inspired me to learn to do it myself," he said. The hawkers (Figure 7) is a sculpture that highlights the plight of hawkers, who are arrested by city inspectorate officers and are carried away in the county officers van.



Figure 7. *The Hawkers*, 2015 Source: Artnet, 2022

2.1.7 Darts

Now he's teaching young men and women who he recruits to join his youth group, DARTS, which is short for Discovering Artistic Talents. He started DARTS in 2011 with the aim of assisting aspiring artists. (ask art, 2017) "In the same way that my talents were discovered and nurtured by others, I want to do the same for young Kenyans who have artistic talent but need to be discovered," Mbatia says.

2.2 Problem

Art as social commentary has not been appreciated in the East African region. This has led many artists to rely on the western and European markets. Furthermore many artists focusing on socio-political issues have experienced censorship, threats and destruction of their works.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The data used in the study was acquired through a desk research. This study is based on existing information on art as social commentary and on the artist. The study explores the work of contemporary East African visual artist and seeks to establish the aspects of their work that distinguish it as social commentary and to investigate the challenges that artists focusing on socio-political issues face. The study uses the work of Joseph Mbatia as a case study to examine the philosophies behind his works, the

socio-cultural functions of his work, the techniques of production and themes in his work. The data was collected from searching internet libraries and newspapers. The researcher used content analysis to analyze information from texts and images to find patterns and themes in the artworks and identify challenges facing artists who focus on socio-cultural issues.

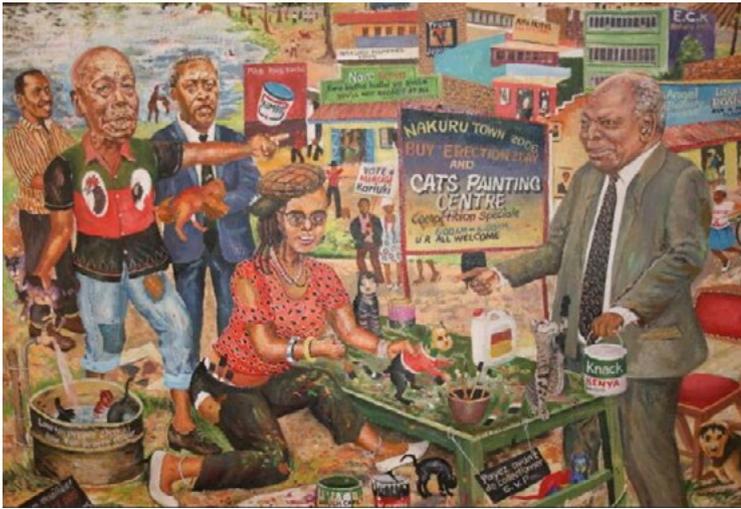


Figure 8. *Painting cats- I really hate it!* Source: Top schools in the USA, 2021

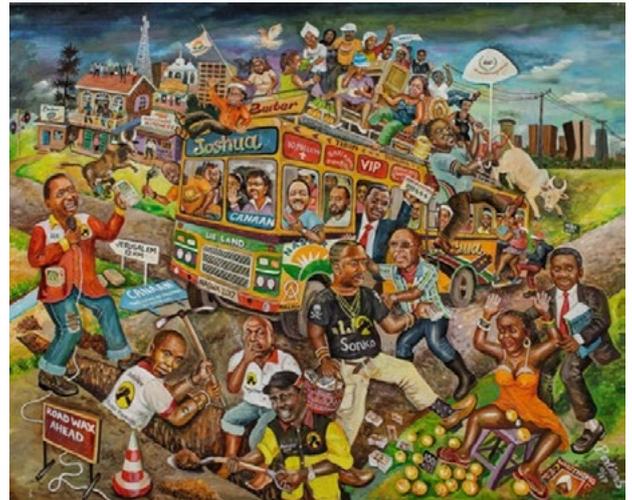


Figure 9. *Rush hour*, 2017 Source: Artnet, 2022

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Symbolism

Bertiers began his career painting signs until he got fed up and did a series of painting titled 'painting cats- I really hate it!' Figure 8 shows an early example of Bertiers' trademark humor which is ever present in his work. This was the breaking point into painting and also a basis of symbolism in many of his paintings. The cat recurs in many of his paintings for the symbolism he attaches to them. For Bertiers, a cat is a recurring symbol of futility. In earlier works, he shows our political leaders painting cats. When asked about what he was getting at, "Well I can't think of anything crazier than painting cats," he said. "The paint wouldn't last very long on the fur. We work; we struggle – and often there's little point." That, then, is what Bertiers thinks about politics in Kenya – often a crazy, pointless activity. (Nation, 2020).

4.2 Satire

For more than two decades, Joseph Bertiers of Kenya has created humorous yet sophisticated message and political commentary paintings about events world- wide. (Ernie wolfie gallery, 2022) Satire is what Bertiers is known for best and it appears in all of his artworks. In the painting rush hour (Figure 9), Joseph employs satire to humor the behavior of Kenyan politicians as general elections approach.

In the painting there is a bus that is overcrowded with passengers including on the carrier, the bus is called Joshua, referencing the biblical Joshua who led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. In the 2017 election Raila Odinga promised to take his supporters to Canaan hence the connection to Joshua. Another satirical element is the name barber on the bus's carrier which is a play on Raila Odinga's nickname 'baba'. In front of the bus are members of Jubilee Party, the other contesting party who are depicted to be digging a ditch so as to hinder the people in the 'Joshua' bus from passing on to Canaan.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Many contemporary visual artists in East Africa are using various visual techniques to react to various happenings in society including corruption, impunity, poverty, environmental issues and moral values of a society. They aspire to document the daily events of a society in order to hopefully inspire discussions on the subject matter that is highlighted, and to accurately represent the social and political events as a mirror of the society. Their art comes out as critical of government and other institutions or even the society, therefore they may often attract censorship, banning and destruction of their works. Joseph's visual methods of representing the issues within the local and international scene through the use of satire and symbolism are effective to create awareness and stimulate discourse on the state of a community.

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