Welcome

We hope you enjoy the first issue of our new magazine for modern art. What we have tried to create is a veritable art gallery for you in two-dimensional form that brings you the best that Kenya has to offer. As you can see, we have a great deal of talent in our country, much of which has hitherto not been seen by the public. We hope this new medium will help to change that.

You can receive the magazine four times a year by becoming a Friend of RAMOMA. Your membership will help to promote the arts while enabling you as an art lover to enjoy special privileges. Full details of the scheme are contained in the enclosed form.

Finally, some thankyous. RAMOMA – Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art – would not exist without the generous support and backing of the Ford Foundation and Nick Rahimtulla and the Rahimtulla Trust. Also invaluable are the business brains of trustees Daniel McVicker and John Steel and also Anis Pringle of KPMG. The work of founder Mary Collis, who has a very hands-on role, is also vital. All of these individuals give their expertise on a voluntary basis and are key to RAMOMA’s success.

Moira Tremaine
Editor

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Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (acronym RAMOMA) began as an idea. An idea in the mind of artist Mary Collis, who wanted a permanent showcase for the best contemporary artists in Kenya. The idea began to take shape during an extensive four-month tour of America, during which she visited contemporary art museums in no less than eleven cities from Los Angeles to the Big Apple. "The idea of a museum for Kenya lodged itself in the back of my mind," she explains. "I thought "there are so many world-class artists in Kenya who will go to their graves without anyone knowing about them - and that would be a tragedy"."

Some months later Mary was having dinner with a friend when fate intervened. The friend was Nick Rahimtulla, who was contemplating architects' plans for a new building on Nairobi's Upper Hill Road with twin towers linked by a central amphitheatre. 'He didn't like the idea of the amphitheatre and said he couldn't think what to do with it', continues Mary, 'so I said "What about a museum?"'. Not only did Nick Rahimtulla agree to the idea, he also generously gave the space for free.

Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art took up residence early in 2001 and held its first public exhibition in March of that year: a well-received solo show by artist Kyalo Justus. Eighteen months later a solo exhibition at RAMOMA is considered a sign an artist has arrived, such is the status the museum has already acquired.

RAMOMA's initial objectives were to create a space where promising artists could exhibit their work and promote their careers through publicity and education. To this end, it has already conducted four high-level art courses where a number of places have been sponsored to give opportunities to struggling young hosts an artists' forum with a video show featuring international artists with their work. Led by Mary Collis, it is also an opportunity for local artists to discuss techniques, problems and other issues that are important to them. Another key aim was to foster public appreciation for artistic endeavour, something which the museum is trying to achieve by mounting exhibitions which appeal to a cross-section of people - from the work of Kenya's leading painters to that of untrained but talented street artists.

If Mary Collis is the architect of RAMOMA, then Carol Lees is the builder. As curator, she is responsible for the day-to-day running of the museum which ranges from dreaming up the next show to paying the bills. Carol, who has 10 years' experience of working in the Kenyan art world, has generously handed over her own art business, One Off, to RAMOMA in order to concentrate all her activities under one roof. Already she has mounted 16 exhibitions at RAMOMA - a rate of almost one a month. So why is it important to promote contemporary Kenyan art? 'Art is the cream of life,' she says. 'And I sincerely believe Kenyan art is up there with the best - we can compete on the world stage'.

RAMOMA has been funded for the past 12 months by charitable trust The Ford Foundation as part of its extensive arts portfolio. Medium-term objectives of the gallery are to establish a respected authority on East African art, to create a launch pad for travelling exhibitions; and ultimately a permanent collection of contemporary art which is preserved for the nation.

Carol says: 'I think societies need a sense of their history and although African art has a great history, I don't think it is very well documented and it's important for future generations to be able to see what the best of this generation was. Art is an important part of everyday life. It is reflective of everything that is going on in society'.

Carol Lees and Mary Collis of RAMOMA
Art was an early obsession for Kenyan artist Justus Kyalo. He was the first to hold a solo exhibition at RAMOMA when it opened in 2001 and now has a reputation as one of Kenya’s leading modern artists. Yet the fact he is now a professional artist is thanks to his determination and years of hard work. He began to draw prolifically as a child, encouraged at home by family and artistic friends, gradually developing his personal style. But although he studied art at primary and secondary school, Kyalo never took any exams — instead, his teachers steered him towards ‘sensible’ subjects like economics.

However, their efforts were in vain, because Kyalo decided after school to make art his career. He took up an apprenticeship at CARE (Cooperation of American Relief) International, where he gained experience as an illustrator on Pied Crow, their magazine for children. ‘It was great to be able to interact with other artists and gain experience and encouragement from them’, he explains.

In 1994, Kyalo got his first real break as an artist. He was introduced to the (now closed) Yakini Gallery in Hurlingham, Nairobi, where he painted alongside some of Kenya’s greatest artists and where he was given his first solo show. It gave him a following among the Kenyan community and he began to get commissions for works of art. Kyalo’s early work is illustrative and figurative. He is clearly fascinated by the forms of sensual and erotic women and one of his early inspirations was fashion — particularly fashion photography. He has a two-dimensional structure and a graphic angular line — not that surprising, then, that he is interested in textiles and patterns. Kyalo Justus developed a highly original way of working in pastels on canvas, an unusual medium to say the least. He says: ‘I found it a very flexible medium; also a very friendly one — if you didn’t like the mark you had made, you could rub it out and change it. It also appealed to me because there was nothing between you and the canvas’.

Gradually Kyalo’s work has become semi-abstract. He joined a community of artists working at the Kuona Trust based at the National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi, which led him to begin experimenting with oil on canvas using a palette knife to apply thick layers of paint in the impasto method. He also experimented with other media, adding sawdust to the mix to achieve thickness and texture. His work is characterised by blocks of rich complementary colours which often link the figurative forms to the negative spaces in his compositions. Economy of line (where one line does two things) and the posture of his sensual bodies are also important features of his work.
Since 1999, Justus Kyalo has been working solo from his studio at Ridgeways on the Kiambu Road just outside Nairobi. Music and dance are new inspirations, and so determined was he to exploit this source of creativity that he enrolled in dance classes at the National Theatre just to be allowed to draw the dancers. ‘Contemporary dance is a particular inspiration’, he explains. ‘They use artistic, experimental music they have created themselves and effect of the music on me is also a major influence. I like to see the impact of music on my work’.

Justus Kyalo likes working big. His canvasses typically measure one and a half by two and a half metres and he also loves the symmetry of squares. ‘They are balanced even though my composition is not balanced,’ he says. ‘So maybe it’s the contrast that I like!’ Artists who inspire him are the late New York graffiti artist Keith Haring for his figures, Mary Collis for her colour and the liveliness of her paintings, and the Nigerian artist Bruce Onobrakpeya. His current interest lies in working in very thin layers of oil on canvas, and this was the method which could be seen in most of the works of art on display at the launch exhibition at RAMOMA in March 2001. Kyalo’s career path has been a risky one, but he believes it’s a risk worth taking, and the fact that he has succeeded as an artist is proof of his highly original talent.
Not far from Limuru town, there is a small village called Ngecha which is a surprising source of creative activity. Ngecha is home to a disproportionate number of talented painters, sculptors and other artists whose work has found its way into galleries and private collections across the world.

Famous sons of the community include artists Sane Wadu, Meek Gichugu and Chain Muhandi who came to prominence in the 1980s after they were discovered by Gallery Watatu in Nairobi. Two other well-known founder members of the group, Wanyu Brush and Morris Foit, recently showed their work at a joint exhibition at RAMOMA.

Wanyu Brush has had numerous exhibitions in Kenya and overseas in the USA, Japan and Germany. He is one of Kenya’s most original artists and paints in a naïve style specialising in large formats. His compositions depict rural scenes and are social comments on people’s suffering – hunger, poverty and violence are recurring themes. All his works are loaded with meaning and beautifully painted using an extensive palette and webs of converging brushstrokes. Like Jackson Pollock, Brush works in an overall style, where he forces the viewers’ eye to stop by his use of crosses or brilliant colour spots.

Wood sculptures of people and animals are the speciality of Morris Foit. His pieces – crafted from wood and stone - are full of quirky humour. They are greatly influenced by the particular pieces of wood he uses, whose individual qualities provide the inspiration for the way he shapes them. Foit has a unique sculptural style and a strong feeling for form. He contrasts smooth surfaces with rough or patterned textures – a sophisticated technique created using specialised tools.

He says: ‘I don’t sketch – I just look at the material I am working with and automatically something comes to me. Sometimes inspiration comes from lighting the piece at night. Sometimes I wake up and know what to do. Wood is my favourite medium’.

Foit’s unusual work has found its way to private collections in Kenya and as far afield as Japan. Both he and Brush are passionate about Ngecha Artists Association, a group numbering some 20 artists which was established in 1995 to formalise the community’s efforts to develop a modern artistic movement. They and other artists work in a studio at the Y.M.C.A – often at night by candlelight, such is their dedication to their art. On 1 April, they held an arts festival in Ngecha. The event was a celebration of the visual and performance arts. Organised with very little money but a huge amount of creativity and goodwill, Ngecha Art Festival was a fitting metaphor for the unique spirit of this small community.
When James Mbuthia arrives at the Eye Ward at Kenyatta National Hospital, he is greeted like Father Christmas. A dozen eager youngsters rush to meet him: one or two will offer to carry his bag and equipment and another three or four will grab him by the hands and lead him giggling towards the ward. But these are no ordinary friendly childish faces. All the children are there because they are suffering from serious diseases of the eye: and James is no ordinary man. He comes from RAMOMA under the auspices of an innovative new art therapy project called Eye on the World that is the highlight of their week.

Every Wednesday afternoon, James spends time doing artistic activities and handicrafts with the young patients. Together they paint and make things, using paints and paper but also discarded household objects such as plastic bottles which James helps the children to transform into model aeroplanes, masks, bangles and other appealing items. Recent projects include a wall-hanging and a button collage.

‘Eye on the World is a wonderful project’, says James. ‘Sometimes when the children are new in the hospital, they are very shy, but once they get to know me they become so friendly. Some have no eyes, but they recognise me by voice. ‘Since I started working with the kids in February, I have seen a great difference in them. They are happy to have contact with an adult who is not a doctor or nurse. They enjoy the things we do and I think that Eye on the World is giving them hope’.

20 patients out of the 40 currently being treated in the Eye Ward are children with eye tumours. Kenyatta is the national reference hospital for Kenya for eye complaints, therefore the condition of each child is acute. It has the only eye unit which can treat tumours and many of the patients admitted have a long and gruelling stay ahead of them. A malignant tumour found in very young children is retinoblastoma which, if left untreated, can spread to the brain and cause metastasis (additional tumours) elsewhere in the body. The only solution is to remove the eye.

One of the prime movers behind Eye on the World is Christiane Paschke, an orthoptist - a specialist who deals with functional disorders of the eye such as squints in young children. Based at Kenyatta National Hospital, she is also in charge of the squint clinic at Kikuyu Eye Unit, where a patient interested in the arts suggested something might be done to alleviate the lot of the children and put her in touch with RAMOMA. After a certain amount of brainstorming, Eye on the World was born.

Christiane explains: ‘The children can be in hospital for weeks or months, and the Eye Ward isn’t a child-friendly environment, so we want to raise funds to create a situation that is more conducive. The art therapy is the start, and we hope to go on to buy kids’ furniture and hang their pictures to bring colour to the ward’.

Another important aim of the project is to raise funds for radiotherapy and chemotherapy for young patients, the cost of which is often beyond the reach of their parents. The other requirement is individually constructed artificial eyes for the children who have had an eye removed. Timing is crucial: if these are not fitted within a month of the operation to remove the diseased eye, the muscles around the eye socket fail to build up properly. But the cost is prohibitive: each prosthesis costs US $250 and has to be fitted by a specialist.

One fundraising activity already underway is the production of colourful fabric eye patches which, at Ksh150, are cheaper than their imported counterparts. A longer-term aim is to establish an education programme for preventive medicine - it is a sobering thought that in 80 percent of cases blindness could have been prevented through early detection and the correct treatment.

Footnote: anyone wishing to make a donation to Eye on the World can do so by directing funds to the following bank account: 'Christiane Paschke-Eye on the World' at Citibank, Upper Hill, Nairobi, account number 60 51 92 0 17. PO Box 30711.
Modern artists of Indian origin recently collaborated for a group exhibition at RAMOMA. The exhibition, entitled Monsoon Musings, took place from 9 May into June and featured the work of six diverse painters and sculptors brought together for the first time.

Painter Vijaya Kalyan presented a series of expressionist images on canvas - her favourite medium – which were notable for their strong complementary colours and texture. Vijaya says that painting for her is a meditative process. ‘My paintings are derived from nature and the impressions nature leaves on our inner mind, which have at their core an abstract idea such as wind, formlessness, water’s flow, light’s heat and dark shadows emerging from the cocoon of consciousness. Abstract ideas gather support from colour and space to become images on canvas’.

Vijaya moved to Nairobi from India in 1991 and has been exhibiting ever since. Her early work was mainly in oils, but now she works more with pastels, charcoal, inks and acrylic on canvas. She is influenced by Monet and Picasso and believes art is an integral part of life. Vijaya has exhibited in South Africa, Uganda, India, Italy and the USA and her work has sold all over the world to corporations, embassies and private collectors. At RAMOMA, she exhibited alongside Prina Shah, Dinesh Revankar, Shaila Darr and Sachin Shah.

The sixth member of the group, Kamal Shah, is a third generation Kenyan who studied Fine Art and English at Leeds University. He took up painting full-time eight years ago and his style has been described as an amalgam of his Indian, African and European roots. He says: ‘My paintings are very personal and experimental. I have no preconceived idea about what I’m going to paint. They are often quite layered and I work on several pictures at once. I start with highly coloured canvases then work over them, gradually blotting them out’.

Kamal Shah’s paintings range from the purely abstract to those which feature what he describes as ‘universal’ figures or faces. He works in oils, acrylics and inks and also sculpts and creates installations. A background in the textile industry is an abiding influence on his work that manifests itself in an interest in pattern. He has exhibited in England and India and follows up the RAMOMA show with a solo exhibition in Bombay at the end of September.
The contemporary African art that graces the walls of RAMOMA periodically comes from beyond the borders of Kenya. In its short existence the gallery has already mounted two exciting exhibitions involving groups of artists from other countries in East and central Africa.

The first of these collaborations, in March of this year, saw the convergence of artists from Eritrea, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Among them was Gebrelu Gebremariam, an Eritrean artist who was born and grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He sold half of his paintings on display, including two whose titles — 'Magic Eyes' and 'Morning Prayer' — encapsulate the abiding themes of his art: eyes and religion. Gebremariam became interested in religious painting after graduating from art school, particularly the ancient Byzantine art that came to Ethiopia along with Christianity. "I am particularly interested in the techniques — no depth, perspective or sense of proportion", he explains. "In my paintings there are also circles and eyes, which are symbolic. They represent light, power and knowledge and appear throughout my work'.

Religious art is also an important influence upon the work of abstract painter El Tayeb Dawel Bait. He uses colours derived from rusty gates and old walls to give his paintings a faded, matt appearance akin to the ancient murals in old churches and museums in his native Sudan. Even the titles are nostalgic: "Memories, Old Town and The Tomb". El Taib uses mixed media but a favourite combination is sepia ink drawings and watercolour washes. Human figures and Sudanese symbols appear throughout his work, which he describes as naive. He has been a professional artist for 10 years and, like Gebremariam, now lives in Nairobi after being displaced by war.

Sculpture is the forte of Ugandan artist Mary Naita, who creates beautiful life-size heads by welding metal and using an innovative technique which involves applying copper sheets to wooden carvings to give the impression of patchwork or armour. Many of her sculptures feature people from the Karamojong tribe. She says: 'I like to bring out that strong African form. I studied abstract art, but wanted to do something closer to reality, something people can understand. I like using metal, but casting is very expensive, so this technique of applying metal to wood is a solution to the problem of cost'.

The Karamoja series of seven sculptures took Mary three years to produce and several of the works were successfully exhibited at the Beyond Borders show. Art is a very much a family affair for Mary. She studied at the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art at Makerere University, specialising with a Masters Degree in Sculpture, after which she set up a studio in Kampala joined by her brother and sister who are also artists. Younger sister Barbra Lwanga — also a sculptor — took part in the second East African show at RAMOMA — an exhibition of Ugandan artists from 18 July to 8 August. Also on display were paintings by Kigezi David and Kunba Ibrahim.

Sudanese artist El-Tayib
God's Kitchen - a two-man show of collage, acrylic, prints and installations by Michael Soi & Thom Ogonga. 24 September to 3 October at the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, at the National Museum.

Recent paintings by Peter Ngugi opening 6pm on Wednesday 2 October at RAMOMA. The exhibition continues to Wednesday 16 October.

Photographic exhibition at the Racecourse Restaurant by Eva Jonville. Opening 25 September at 6pm. The exhibition continues to 23

Paintings, drawings and prints by David Bristow on Saturday 2 and Sunday 3 November at the artist's home in Runda - No 61 Ruaka Road off Limuru Road. Open 10:30am to 5:30pm.

Art Affair '02 - the affordable art show. Over 100 artists exhibiting paintings and sculptures - all for Kshs 25,000 and below. Opening Wednesday 23 October at RAMOMA at 6pm. The exhibition continues to Monday 4th November.

Recent paintings by Moyra Earnshaw. Opening Thursday 7 November at 6:00pm at RAMOMA. The exhibition continues to Friday 22 November.

An exhibition by Mathare Youth Sports Association Shootback Project entitled 'Living Positively with Aids' opens at RAMOMA on Friday 29 November from 6pm. The exhibition continues to Thursday 5 December.

Paintings & sculpture by Mary Collis & Ed Cross Opening Wednesday 27 November from 6:00pm at the Village Market Exhibition Hall. The exhibition continues to Wednesday 4 December. Open daily

While every attempt has been made to advertise the correct dates of exhibition openings, it would also be advisable to confirm them with the relevant venues.

Venician Mishe Technique Workshop by Brigid Marlin at RAMOMA 2nd - 13th September 1:30pm - 4:00pm. Kshs 1 500 per day. Sponsored places available.

Clay sculpting classes with Vesna Osojnicki from Croatia - a 2 week course at RAMOMA. From 18th - 22nd November and from 25th - 29th November. Kshs 12,000 for the full 10 days (materials extra). Four participants will be sponsored by RAMOMA.

Artist Jacob Njoroge has been selected to take up the prestigious Kenyan artist's residency at the University of Kentucky in America this year. The programme aims to help contemporary artists develop their work and was established by the Ruth Hunt Foundation in 2001. Last year's winner was Richard Kimathi (see feature on Page 11)

For more information on courses please contact RAMOMA. Applicants for sponsored places are requested to apply in writing. Telephone: (02) 2729181/2. E-mail: ramoma@africaonline.co.ke

P O Box 1040, Sarit Centre 00606, Nairobi
In the Picture

Richard Kimathi

This picture, painted by Richard Kimathi in 1998, depicts a bird trap made from the twines of a climbing plant. The bird, tempted by its berries, has been ensnared and the trapper is removing it. The painting signifies a way of life – it is an observation of Kenyan rural life. The face of the bird catcher is mask-like with a long straight nose – characteristics which make it identifiable as a Richard Kimathi painting.

The Trap is painted in oil on canvas and its subject matter reflects Kimathi’s affinity with nature, people, birds and animals. The artist was born in Nyeri, and grew up there and in his mother’s home town of Machakos. He began to paint at school, and went on to study art at high school. Later, he joined The Creative Centre in Nairobi where he studied graphic design from 1994-1996. Kimathi was invited to a printing workshop at Kuona Trust on completion of his graphics course after which he joined the studio artists at Kuona and began to paint full time.

Its all-pervading blue palette is perhaps the most striking thing about The Trap. It was one of a series of blue paintings completed during 1998, all based on the theme of people and nature. The painting was sold to a private collector after being exhibited at Richard Kimathi’s first solo show at The One Off Gallery in Runda, Nairobi. The Trap is influenced by the work of the Russian painter Marc Chagall, who was a pioneer of twentieth century fantastic art. Chagall also produced a number of works in which the colour blue is dominant and in which birds and animals are a recurring motif. ‘Nature is really important to me, and I felt particularly close to nature during this period’, he explains. ‘I was very interested in people, animals and plants’. The colour blue – the proverbial colour of melancholy – is a metaphor for the artist’s mood at the time. ‘Blue signified a low mood for me. It was a struggle to be an artist and to identify myself’. Picasso also had a blue period early on in his career, which reflected his struggle to adjust to the art world of Paris.

Richard Kimathi describes his style as a mixture of abstract and semi-abstract. His work began to change direction in 1999, the year after he painted the series of pictures to which The Trap belongs. His compositions began to fragment, with elements like faces broken into segments and the compositions divided up into sections. There is an indication of this imminent change in The Trap, where the face of the figure appears to occupy a frame-within-the-frame. This fragmentation has its origins in Cubism, and is another characteristic Kimathi shares with Chagall.

The artist has begun to carve out a respected reputation for his work, with another successful show at the One Off Gallery and the top prize in the Kenyan section of a worldwide millennium painting competition. Last year he studied at the University of Kentucky, USA on an exchange programme and exhibited solo at the John Tuska Gallery of Contemporary Art in Kentucky. He now hopes to conduct workshops of his own for art students here in Kenya.
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