MSANII
The magazine for the arts from Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art

- Sane Wadu at RAMOMA
- Mary Collis & Ed Cross
- Madeleine Odundo Ceramics
Poet Caroline Nderitu recently gave a dramatic performance at RAMOMA, bewitching her audience with her eloquent words. Nderitu, who graduated from Kenyatta University in 1998, is an actress and poet and has recited on TV and radio and performed in India, Germany, Norway and Switzerland as well as across Africa. She has composed the following poem about art for Msanii.

I AM ART
By Caroline Nderitu

I am the silvery stroke
In the magic of lightning
I am the bold 'boom'
In the majesty of thunder
I am the wild whistle
In the shyness of a night breeze
I am art

I am the light at dawn
I am the night at dusk

I am the stripe on a honeybee
I am the wrinkle on your knee

I am a silent solid stone
I am a fired ferocious fountain
I am art

I stretch out
I fold in
I roll over
I soar above
I am art

I am a choir of colours
I am a marriage of lines
I am a dance of shapes
I am an echo of life

I am art
Just that
Art!

Poems by Caroline Nderitu are available in the form of a new book of her verses entitled Play Your Drum, published by Phoenix and available from leading bookshops in Kenya.
Editorial

Welcome to the third issue of Msanii, Kenya's new magazine for the arts. We bring you features on a new home for the visual and performing arts, focus on the forthcoming three-man show featuring Sane Wadu, Tabitha Mburu and James Mbuthia and look at recent exhibitions by Mary Collis and Ed Cross, plus Moira Earnshaw. There's a feature on one of Kenya's best international artists, ceramicist Madeleine Odundo, and a new feature, Art Market, which highlights works of art available for collectors to purchase as well as pieces which have recently sold. Msanii is growing: this issue is 25 percent bigger than the last and with the invaluable support of our readers and advertisers we will continue to develop and expand the magazine to promote the arts in Kenya.

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Contents

2 Caroline Nderitu
A poem created for Msanii by the Kenyan poet and performer

4 The Godown
A capacious new home in Nairobi for the visual and performing arts

6 Three of a kind
Forthcoming exhibition at RAMOMA: Sane Wadu, Tabitha Mburu and James Mbuthia

8 Friends of RAMOMA
How to join the scheme and support the arts

9 Inspired by Nature
A Review of the dramatic joint exhibition by Mary Collis and Ed Cross

12 Out of Africa
Elisabeth Court profiles leading international ceramicist Madeleine Odundo

14 Msanii Update
What's on, news and opportunities for artists at home and abroad

16 Art for the Senses
The abstract show by Moyra Earnshaw at RAMOMA reviewed

18 Art Market
Art for collectors: what's sold and what's up for grabs in the Kenyan art market

19 In the picture
Msanii puts the visionary painting In Heaven by Alan Gichuka under the microscope

Cover Painting
Fall (detail)
Mary Collis
Judy Ogana of Kuna Trust and Joy Mboya of The Godown discuss plans for the transformation of the building.

Kenyan artists have a unique new space to call their own – in the shape of The Godown Arts Centre in Nairobi. It brings together the visual and the performing arts for the first time and will boast studios for leading visual artists plus a theatre, a puppet workshop and rehearsal space for dancers.

Ten art studios are under construction and the organisers plan to lease six or seven of these to leading Kenyan artists – Morris Foit, Sane Wadu, Jimnah Kimani, Patrick Mukabe and Wanjohi Nyamu have expressed interest. The remainder will be maintained as ‘hot studio space’ for visiting artists from other countries in the region and the rest of the world. The Godown, a disused warehouse in Dunga Road in the Industrial Area, will primarily be a working environment, but visitors will be able to see artists at work and attend musical and theatrical performances. The Kuona Trust, which is spearheading the visual arts presence at the centre, has already booked two visiting artists – installation specialist and sculptor Tapfuma Gutsa and Rashid Rooge from Zimbabwe - to take up 10 week residencies during March and April 2003 and there are plans to invite others from different parts of the world later in the year.

Judy Ogana, the programmes director of Kuona Trust, says: ‘I’m excited about the temporary residencies and the fact we will now be able to accommodate the artists in town. Before we had to take them to Naivasha to conduct workshops, and they felt a bit out of it. It sizzles when visiting artists come – they mingle well with our artists and inspire them by bringing new ideas and techniques to Kenya’.

She is quick to dispel any ideas that Kuona will be moving out of its rather cramped home in the gardens of the National Museum in Nairobi, where it occupies the original Nairobi Provincial Commissioner’s house, but says in future its studio space will be maintained primarily for younger artists. ‘I think the Godown Arts Centre will open up space here, which needs to happen because we are overflowing. We hope the Godown will
Joy Mboya, coordinator of The Godown Arts Centre at its entrance

be a place that our up-and-coming artists aspire to'.

The Godown project is being funded by The Ford Foundation, which is underwriting the cost of the space and providing a development fund to make it financially sustainable from the outset. Various arts organisations were invited to participate in discussions about what was required and the general consensus was an art space where Kenyan artists and performers could control their own destiny. It has taken two years for the project to come to fruition and to find a suitable home.

The coordinator of the project is actress and singer Joy Mboya, who became involved in the process when she was looking for space for a weekend performing arts programme she had set up for young people. Her brief is to ‘steward’, as she puts it, the arts centre to make sure the programming works for the participants and the public and is financially sustainable. There are plans to host plays, dance and puppetry in the small theatre, which will also be for hire to non-residents.

An actress and singer by profession, Joy has already lined up a number of dates for the performing arts at their new home, including contemporary dance workshops led by leading Kenyan choreographer Opiyo Okatch and visiting dancers from the UK which may lead to a dance production in Europe. The Godown Arts Centre is opening at the beginning of March with ten organisations as tenants. The warehouse is leased from CMC Motors and boasts 80,000 square feet of space.

‘The large space provides the opportunity to have different art forms under one roof and it will be exciting to see what synergies come out of that’, says Joy. ‘I am confident it will push all of the art forms in new directions. The artists' needs will drive the agenda and our primary aim is to give them creative support’.
Three Kenyan self-taught artists will be collaborating in a mixed-media exhibition of their latest work at RAMOMA. New canvases by artistic heavyweight Sane Wadu will be shown alongside paintings by Tabitha Mburu and a variety of works by James Mbuthia at the gallery from 6 to 17 May 2003.

The intense, enigmatic works of Sane Wadu are primarily social comment. The people they are chiefly about appear as semi-abstract figures in complex and richly textured compositions that are as personal as a signature. The locations are often rural, reflecting Wadu's own background, and the subject matter tends to be satirical and provocative. The artist deals with themes like civil unrest and the hardships of daily life.

"In the beginning, I had a strong feeling I wanted to interpret everyday experiences. First I tried writing and theatre, but I found it difficult to express myself. I developed a block, so I changed my medium and turned to painting and found I could move people", he explains.

Sane Wadu began to paint in 1983, when people in Kenya were not generally accustomed to encountering artists. His decision to leave his 'sensible' job as a teacher of Geography and English to develop a career as an artist was courageous and provocative, and it was the reaction of his neighbours to his decision (they thought he was insane) that led to him calling himself Sane. 'Then an artist was considered abnormal - an outcast', he says. 'People wondered what I was doing. I used to feel despised, but I was determined to persevere. Once I persevered and I found I could express myself, other people started following my lead - they could see it was going somewhere'.

Indeed, Wadu went on to become a leader in his home of Ngecha, a densely populated village in a farming community some thirty kilometres from Nairobi near Limuru. Assisted by Ruth Schaffner, then owner of Gallery Watatu, he initiated a workshop for his neighbours at the local YMCA and in the early 1990s it was formalised as Ngecha Artists Association. Wadu's imaginative and painterly approach was more expressive than the heavy social realism prevalent at the time and he was pivotal in establishing a new expressive idiom in Kenya that prevails to this day.

A sensitive, intuitive man, Wadu produces canvases characterised by their complexity, their extensive palette and their size – most measure one to two metres and are a mass of human activity loaded with meaning. The artist says he does not like to revisit the same subject twice. At RAMOMA he is showing his newest paintings – completed last year and this – and hints that visitors should watch out for political comment on the arts and Kenyan culture. And the artist is still making waves in the Kenyan art scene: at the time of going to press he was opening a new studio in Naivasha with the idea of training young artists.

Ngecha Artists' Association has inspired a similar studio set-up at nearby Banana Hill, and it is from here...
that James Mbuthia hails. His art is part of the same artistic idiom as that of Wadu and, like Wadu, much of the content of his semi-abstract paintings comes from his imagination. People, particularly female figures, are a favourite subject and tend to dominate the composition. They are devoid of artistic formula but in recent paintings the images have become simpler and the whole more streamlined and stronger. Mbuthia admires the work of the Cubists, particularly Picasso, and his work shares their non-representational use of colour.

'I use non-representational colours, including for the face, because I want to depict universal figures not of any race or tribe because the message behind them is very universal', he says. 'I feel the artistic feeling of my work is very African - my use of colour, for example, is not European - and I focus mainly on female figures because a woman is a symbol of beauty, fertility, happiness - a positive figure'.

Oil on canvas is Mbuthia’s favourite medium and he says his favourite colours are viridian green, magenta and earthy tones including burnt sienna and yellow ochre. In addition to his paintings, he will be exhibiting a collection of metal ‘whistling’ masks and an installation based on the theme of sound and communication.

A dark palette dominated by browns typifies the work of Tabitha Mburu. Her paintings are semi-abstract and she is concerned with society and the environment. She favours oils and acrylics and last year attended a workshop in the Netherlands and went to see the work of the Renaissance artists in Italy which resulted in a series of paintings that are lighter than most of her earlier works. Her collection at RAMOMA will feature approximately fifteen paintings and people are a recurring subject.

Like Wadu, Mburu is also something of a pioneer in her community. She felt lonely as a female artist in Kenya and was motivated to establish an informal women’s group in her home district, Kiambu, to encourage women all over the country to discuss and practise art. The initiative has spawned the Hawa Artists’ Project, which assists women artists through workshops and funding. Mburu now has her own studio in Sigona near Limuru.

'Tabitha is very creative’, says Carol Lees, the curator of RAMOMA. 'I believe her dark palette reflects her difficult circumstances as a single mother and as a female artist in Kenya. She is very observant and her painting is often metaphorical and sometimes quirky. Her paintings are figurative and almost always feature people'.
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"Wow, that really is Service with a difference!"
Inspired by Nature

The juxtaposition of huge wooden monoliths with sizzling canvases by one of Kenya's leading artists at a recent exhibition at RAMOMA was an inspired move by curator Carol Lees. The gallery's modernist interior, with its stark white walls and expanses of glass, provided the perfect backdrop for sculptor Ed Cross and painter Mary Collis to show their latest work.

Nature, colour and emotion were the dominant themes of the ten paintings and twenty-seven sculptures on display. The dramatic use of colour and the dazzling contrast of different hues is the first remarkable thing about Mary Collis' compositions. Expanses of brilliant reds are punctuated by complementary greens and yellows for full dramatic effect in paintings like Disintegration from her Waltz of the Flowers series and Fall, a mixed media collage of abstract falling leaves. Mary's distinctive style is hard to categorise as she is a colourist whose interest lies in exploring colour relationships and the contrast of the brilliant African light against intense shade. She says that composition is also very important. The starting point for much of her work is nature, which is often reflected in the titles of her paintings.

When I haven't painted for a while I always start with something I can see,' she explains. 'I need to be stimulated by what is outside. My stimulation comes from the colours and the light outside - particularly the light. But although I often go back to painting what I can see, my painting is much more than that - it's a jumping off point. I never know how the painting will develop - often I feel I am just the instrument and the painting develops right in front of me. I call it "painting in the moment". When you paint like that, there is an extra dimension which you have no control over: it controls you and makes it happen'.

Among the paintings on display were a group of four which Collis named the Jacky's Garden series after the friend whose garden provided the inspiration for them. The first of these, Abundance, is a riot of colour and features steps leading up to a house encircled by masses of shrubs, flowers and other plants. One of the things which stands out is a patch of violently contrasting red and green vegetation, a slightly off-centre focal point and the inspiration for another more abstract work, Titianette Queen, also featuring an area...
of red and green stripes that echoes Abundance - and is in fact derived from the same source. There is a distinct connection between the abstract works and her works inspired by what she sees. Her inward journey is a balance to her experiences outside - an exact accounting system.

Mary explains: 'Jacky’s garden features around 3,000 species of plants and the flowers come right up to the windows and doors. It’s claustrophobic from inside the house. The garden is almost abstract as nature has it - it is abundant chaos, and that’s what my abstracts are about'.

Mary sometimes revisits canvases she has completed weeks, months or even years after they have been exhibited. She says she is always emotionally drained after holding an exhibition, and this time must be doubly so, having exhibited at RAMOMA in Nairobi and at the Boylan International Studios in New York simultaneously. She plans to rework Titianette Queen, which she feels is an important painting, and is excited by the idea of exploring unknown possibilities.

The work of Mary Collis is heavily influenced by western artists of the twentieth century. Her vivid palette sometimes recalls that of the French impressionist painter Bonnard. But perhaps the most notable influence is Abstract Expressionism, a movement which emerged in America in the 1950s to celebrate free expression of the inner life through the application of paint. Its artists specialised in the exploration of intense emotion on canvas. Emotion is a key element of the creative process for Collis, who says it is probably even more important in her work than colour. All ten paintings exhibited at RAMOMA were inspired by emotion which she believes has a universal language that transcends national barriers.

'Every emotion we have has a colour and in this universe there’s a language we all understand, whether we are Kenyan, English or Inuit. The colour for anger is red for example which can also be the colour of passion. Also these emotions all have shapes - so anger is an arrow or zigzags, while joy is an upward curve like a smile. When you think about abstract art and that language and put the two together, you realise that an abstract painting like mine is actually loaded with meaning. I so believe in the language of emotion'.

A recent inspiration for Collis is the American contemporary artist Cy Twombly, whose childlike scribbled drawings combine painting with writing. He often includes quotations in his work (particularly from Classical myths), something Collis also does. The difference is that his quotations form part of the composition, either in the form of scrawled text or by virtue of the epic scale of his works. Collis applies quotations once a composition is complete and places them alongside her paintings on the gallery walls.
Emotion is also key to the art of Ed Cross, who recently gave up a career in publishing to become a full-time sculptor. He sees his art as part of his own personal development, and began to model clay heads after a potter in Mombasa gave him some tips and lent him a book on the subject. Pleased with the results, he began to persuade friends and acquaintances to pose for him. One of the heads in the exhibition, *Mama Chupa*, is a touching and skilful portrait of an elderly Ugandan woman who is an old friend of his wife's family. Cross specialises in sculpting people who are significant in his life, although he says his star turn was to sculpt the young nieces and nephews of the British celebrity and millionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson.

Cross spent 10 years living in a Swahili house on Shelly Beach, Likoni, from where he was able to indulge his love of collecting and a passion for boats and the sea hunting for huge pieces of old driftwood and the weathered wrecks of discarded wooden fishing boats. One day he took the side of a canoe and painted a beach scene onto it.

'I felt that the boat itself could be part of the frame of a picture, then I saw that the whole piece could be treated as a canvas which could combine my love of colour with my interest in sculpture, texture and form', he explains.

'With the boats, my approach is intuitive: it's not thought out in advance but as I'm doing it. What appeals to me is the transformation of something which has been discarded into something different. I'm also interested in organic art - the way insects make their mark on wood by boring into it, and the way wood is weathered by the sun and the sea'.

'My art is a celebration of the sea and the life there, but it's also about the struggle to be your true self. To me the boat is a symbol of individual struggle and choice and destiny, which to me is the delight of existence'.

Imposing wooden forms created from driftwood and boats - up to 15 feet high - dominated at the RAMOMA show, and you were left with the feeling that it is in these abstract pieces that Ed Cross's heart really lies. His application of paint onto heavily textured wooden surfaces in some cases bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Mary Collis. This was an uplifting exhibition of beautifully synchronised works of art which - but for the fact that they were working at opposite ends of the country - could have been the product of close collaboration between the artists involved.

*Footnote: Ed Cross undertakes portrait and other commissions and can be contacted through RAMOMA on (02) 2729181/2 or by e-mail at: ramoma@africaonline.co.ke*
‘Pottery is at once the simplest and most difficult of all arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract’. Herbert Read (1893-1968)

Magdalene Odundo is Kenya’s famous ceramicist, yet ironically her work is little-known in her native Kenya. Her last show in Nairobi was at African Heritage in 1985 and she is not represented at the National Museums of Kenya. Internationally though, Odundo has a presence in over thirty public collections and in 2001 an asymmetrical and unglazed vessel created by her was chosen to grace the entrance to the new Sainsbury African Galleries of the British Museum in London.

Viewers everywhere proclaim their heightened sensibility on seeing the extraordinary terracotta vessels created by Magdalene Odundo. They are surprised and even intrigued by the beauty of her sculpture and the sense of wonder they experience on encountering it. These observations are both personal and public, having been part of many gallery talks. It is also fascinating to witness the evolution of Odundo’s rigorous artistic practice in relation to her wide professional involvements; how she transforms this tension between depth and breadth into new objects and shapes.

The Nairobi-born artist combines an unusual cosmopolitan experience with a singular disposition for perfection. After being schooled in Kenya, Odundo received specialist art education that included a residency at the Abuja Pottery, Nigeria and field work in western Kenya and culminated in a Masters degree in ceramics at the Royal College of Art, London where she says she ‘learnt to think’. Home is Bunyala in Kenya and Farnham in Kent, England where she has based her practice and domestic life, but her work and studies have also taken her to several countries in Africa and Europe and many states in the USA. Through a process of elimination and refinement through commercial art, painting, textiles and metal casting, she realised her talent was best expressed in ceramic art.

Odundo’s pots are hand-made from red clay which is then polished and coated in a very fine slip — also of red clay — a technique also used in ancient Greek and Roman pottery. The vessels are fired in such a way that they oxidise to produce a burnished terracotta colour. Sometimes she fires a pot for a second time by putting it in an enclosed container called a saggar, which is packed with combustible material and fired under reduction, altering the chemical composition of the clay and making it go black. The process is unpredictable causing the pot to retain patches of its original reddish colour.

‘My hands are my best tools’ says Odundo. Always, she hand builds her vessels very finely, in either symmetrical or asymmetrical forms, with the unglazed red-orange personal and public, having been part of many gallery talks. It is also fascinating to witness the evolution of Odundo’s rigorous artistic practice in relation to her wide professional involvements; how she transforms this tension between depth and breadth into new objects and shapes.

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and/or black surfaces left unglazed and fabulously smooth. This minimalism, ironically due to the repeated work of burnishing (up to four times), contrasts greatly with the densely decorated surfaces associated with east Africa, such as personal adornment or Swahili doors. However, Odundo’s smooth shapes do evoke other regional examples of fine craft such as Kerma from Nubia and Ganda royal pottery. They also echo the Modernist forms of Constantin Brancusi and Alberto Giacometti.

The apprehension of Odundo’s works is simultaneously traditional and modern, African and European, practical and sublime, art and craft, strong and vulnerable, serious and humorous, cool and hot, which altogether offer the viewer many aspects of artistic expression. While her pieces are multi-vocal, they are essentially about women and ultimately about herself. Odundo employs a gendered mode of production referring to traditional African methods. She remakes the long-standing metaphor of the female as a container in which women are vessels for men and childbirth, sometimes by obstructing the orifice. She frequently represents versions of idealised women - those with long necks, proud heads and graceful bodies in their prime.

Looking ahead, Magdalene Odundo is working on a number of short-term projects including the practical work for an exhibition in Seattle, Washington, USA and an upcoming residency at the Fordsburg Studios in Johannesburg, while in London she is advising on a new gallery space.

Elsbeth Court is subject lecturer in the Art History of Africa, Foundation Course of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, a post she has held since 1990. Prior to that, she lived in Nairobi from 1971-1986 where she was an art educator involved in schools, university, exhibitions and industry and an associate of the Institute of African Studies. Her research interests lie in the art history of east Africa, art and development, art education and twenty-first century visual practice.
Exhibitions

Main Art Gallery, National Museum, Museum Hill Road, Nairobi - Arts Festival featuring work by 300 artists. Opens 28 February with a carnival starting 6.30pm: tickets Ksh700 in advance, Ksh800 on the door. 1 and 2 March will feature cultural dances, poetry, music and a book sale. Art festival continues until 17 March.

The French Cultural Centre, Maison Francaise, Monrovia Street, Nairobi - A Gender Festival to mark World Women's Day on 8 March. A variety of activities including visual and performing art shows by women artists and performers, talks by professional women from the fields of fashion, business, politics, media, communications, 7 to 9 March.

RAMOMA, Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill Road, Nairobi - Bush Glass 2003. Numerous international glass artists on show in this annual extravaganza. 26 March to 5 April.

The French Cultural Centre, Maison Francaise, Monrovia Street & RAMOMA, Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill Road, Nairobi - Mysterious Abstraction Unravelled. Artists from South Africa, Mozambique and Kenya collaborate in an abstract exhibition opening at the FCC 3 April and moving to RAMOMA 12 April where it opens with a dance performance by Opiyo Okatch. Continues until 30 April.

International School of Kenya, Peponi Road, Nairobi - Art Show and Sale: 30 artists exhibiting 150 pieces of work in a variety of media. Opens 6pm 3 April continuing all day 4 and 5 April.

RAMOMA, Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill Road, Nairobi - Three of a Kind. Joint exhibition of paintings, masks and installations by Sane Wadu, Tabitha Mburu and James Mbitu. 6 to 17 May.

RAMOMA, Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill Road, Nairobi - Jacob Njoroge painting workshop lasting five days from 12 to 17 May. Applications for places to RAMOMA, PO Box 1040, 00606 Nairobi or e-mail: ramoma@africaonline.co.ke

All information correct at time of going to press. For more information on opportunities and courses please contact the relevant organisations direct. While every attempt has been made to advertise the correct dates of exhibition openings, it would also be advisable to confirm with the venues nearer to the time.

Ngong Racecourse, Ngong Road, Nairobi - Celebration of World Francophone Day: a day of festivities at the Ngong Racecourse including exhibition stands, fashion show, music and dance, horse racing. 20th March

Pictured - top to bottom: Bush Glass; Vagina Monologues: ISK Art Show; Jacob Njoroge.
Kenyan sculptor Peter Walala has been creating ice sculptures in Quebec, Canada. He led a team of three Kenyans selected to take part in the International Snow Sculpture Event of the Quebec Carnival from 3 to 9 February. He and his team-mates Winnie Onwakwe and Michael Kaloki were presented with a huge block of ice from which they had to sculpt a rhino in freezing arctic temperatures. Training for the challenge involved spending several hours a day in the cold room of The Stanley Hotel in Nairobi working on large blocks of ice provided by the head chef. The temperature was set to minus 30 degrees Celsius.

'I thought ice would be different from other media', says Peter, who is more accustomed to working on wood. 'But when I actually experienced it I found I could still use my chisel and mallet. I also used the serrated edge of a saw. I never imagined I would be sculpting ice in a million years - it was a terrific experience'

Kenyan artists are invited to apply for a prestigious four-month residency at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA. The programme was established by the Ruth Hunt Wood Foundation in 2001 and aims to encourage contemporary Kenyan artists to produce art grounded in Kenyan history and to promote appreciation for and the preservation of Kenyan contemporary art. The artist will be provided with a studio at the university and materials to create a body of art for a solo exhibition at the end of the Residency. Interested artists should have at least two years' experience and a track record of producing art that demonstrates some degree of self-expression as well as integrity, quality and continuity. Artists are required to complete an application form available from Carol Lees at RAMOMA, Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill, Nairobi. Tel: (02)2729181. All entries must be submitted by 17th March 2003.

In support of a performance of the Vagina Monologues by Mumbi Kaigwa at the International School of Kenya on 22 March, RAMOMA will stage an exhibition whose content will cover the themes of the monologues. Female artists are invited to apply to participate in the exhibition which will run 11 to 22 March (see details opposite). V-Day is a worldwide movement which aims to raise awareness of violence against women with a view to ending it. Thus RAMOMA will donate half its commission from the show to a Kenyan rape shelter chosen by Mumbi Kaigwa. Each artist will be able to hang up to six works and the deadline for submitting art to RAMOMA is 5 March. Works to be delivered to the gallery at Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill, Nairobi by 4.30pm.

Four young visual artists are being sought to participate in a cultural exchange programme between Kenya and the Netherlands. The programme will be in two phases: five young Dutch artists from the Fontys Academy in Tilburg will visit Kenya from 18 April to 8 May 2003 to work in collaboration with the four selected Kenyan artists at Kuona Trust museums art studio and The Godown Arts Centre. Then the four Kenyan artists will travel to Tilburg to work with the Dutch artists at Fontys Academy from 30 May to 18 June 2003 and participate in the Festival Mundial. Applications should include curriculum vitae, six photographic images and a precis of the artist's work, plus a brief explanation of how the programme will benefit the artist and what he or she can offer the programme. Material should be given to Patricia Kyungu of Kuona Trust (Nairobi Museum) by the end of March. Tel: (02) 3751515.
Moyra Earnshaw sees her job as interpreting what is happening in our world. Through paint. She specialises in oil on canvas, wetting the whole canvas before working layer after layer of thinned-down paint into it. Some of her completed pieces will have twenty layers and take months to complete. She adds a little Liquin, a thinner, to the paint to create a translucent surface and reveal mysterious hints of earlier layers in the finished painting. *Vortex*, one of the works in her recent exhibition of paintings at RAMOMA, is a good example of this technique. The predominantly red composition is punctuated by swirling lines travelling from its outer margins to a central point where everything appears to be pulled inwards and downwards into the painting as if into a whirlpool.

'I have been struggling for years to produce a vortex', Earnshaw says. 'It has many layers and the paint of earlier *Vortex’s* comes through. At first it worried me, but then I thought, no – this is part of the painting’s evolution. There is a lot of struggle behind that one!'.

The paintings in the exhibition were characterised by their bold expanses of colour and they were accompanied by typed quotations. That for *Vortex* is by Francis Bacon, regarded as one of the most important British artists after the Second World War. 'The job of the artist is to deepen the mystery', it reads. Bacon’s shocking and unique images - particularly of the human form often violently distorted - dealt with themes like loneliness, horror and revulsion. Moyra Earnshaw admires his courage. 'Everything he does has integrity and tries to maintain the spontaneity of the subconscious'.

It is the subconscious that Earnshaw cites as the primary source of her latest paintings. She explains that her approach is to try to lose herself in the process of painting. 'I'd like to think of my work as spiritual: it comes from the soul. I am as near to the unconscious as possible when I am working and dreams, images of the mind and mystery are things I am trying to explore.

'I know when a work is done because it shouts at me that it’s done. It’s often not what I expected it to be. Sometimes I have a clear feeling, but I’m not sure how it’s going to manifest itself. It may start as a mood or an idea. I know the colour I want to start with, then I push paint around and try not to judge – I just let the brush do it. When I’m actually painting, I’m not thinking. I’m in that gap where there’s no thought: I’m just doing’.

*Tides*, a large canvas measuring 48 x 48 inches, is about space and emptiness. The

Left: *Vortex*
Above left: *Night Flight*
composition consists of huge expanses of grey, mauve and blue bisected by two horizontal lines representing high and low tides which bring it into focus. 'There is a rapture on the lonely shore. There is a society, where none intrudes by the deep sea, and music in its roar', is the quotation - by the English Romantic poet Lord Byron - chosen to accompany it. 'It started off very differently, as a huge shell in water but I couldn’t get the feeling right', Earnshaw explains. ‘I wanted to convey something about the tides but I couldn’t convey it so eventually I covered it up with layers of paint. The quotation seemed to sum it up’.

Moyra Earnshaw was born in Glasgow, Scotland and graduated from Exeter University in England with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Graphic Design and Illustration. She worked commercially as a graphic designer for ten years before leaving her job to have children. When she returned to the drawing board, it was to begin a journey of self-discovery. She took up painting and was encouraged by her success in a joint exhibition at the Norfolk Hotel. Most of her compositions then were landscapes, painted in a much more representational style than her current work, which she sees as ‘inner landscapes’ that come from an interest in dream interpretation and her search for the meaning of life. Her canvases have an intense, atmospheric and sensual quality. The soft, luminous colours – produced by leaving the finished canvases unglazed – draw the viewer in and elicit an emotional response. They recall the paintings of Mark Rothko, one of the New York painters of the 1950s known as the Abstract Expressionists, who used colour to express human emotion. Earnshaw is an admirer of the contemporary American artist Ross Bleckner, whose work shares the intense, atmospheric quality of her own.

Colour is key to Earnshaw’s work and often the starting point for a painting. Since her paintings are abstract, she is not bound by representation so her choice of colours is an emotional one. In her exhibition at RAMOMA she has used a palette of lighter, brighter, more positive colours than in her last public show. Sometimes it takes a while for the right colours to come. ‘You wouldn’t have recognised Wild Flight to start with: it was dark purple and lime green!’ she laughs. ‘There was a heaviness about it. I had to lighten it up which I did with that line, then it was almost like a release – something popped and all the light, bright colours came out’.

Titles for her paintings and the quotations come after the work is complete. They are designed to enhance people’s appreciation of the work and can perhaps be traced back to the artist’s early career as a graphic designer. ‘I guess the quotes reinforce the fact I haven’t left this earth completely – they show the paintings are grounded in something!’
All the works of art on this page are for sale to the public through RAMOMA or have recently been sold. For more information about the works or the artists, please contact RAMOMA using the numbers issued on page 3 or visit the gallery in person 9.30am to 4.30pm weekdays or 9.30am to 1pm Saturdays. Our staff will be happy to assist.
In Heaven is one of the most recent works of Ngecha artist Alan Githuka. His richly coloured painting is a vision of heaven, perceived as a journey. A warm blue foreground represents the sky, the starting point for all the travellers, who are at different stages of the journey. The yellow figures represent human beings on earth. One is that of a woman with a serene, peaceful aura about her – the artist says she is at peace in the knowledge she will go to heaven when she dies. The other yellow figure is waving goodbye to someone who has passed away.

In Heaven is bisected by a winding and hazy Milky Way-like path – the path to heaven. Behind the waving man are three saintly white figures. The uppermost of the three has a pinkish tinge to symbolise the fact he is in heaven. ‘I cannot know what colour heaven is, but I visualise it as a bluish-white with elements of pink’, he explains. ‘Blue I believe is the colour of life – it tells of time and is also the colour of holiness when combined with white’. Githuka’s heaven occupies the top section of his painting and is a mass of swirling cloud-like matter and hazy mountains which stretches far away from the viewer into infinity – a visual metaphor for a heaven without end. The artist, a devout Catholic, describes himself as a God-fearing man, yet In Heaven is only his third religious painting.

In Heaven is untypical of Githuka in terms of its subject matter. His paintings more often consist of people in landscapes: rural scenes with cows and chickens in the background. However, what they all have in common is a distinct foreground, middle distance and far distance which imbues them with a powerful sense of space and depth. In Heaven is reminiscent of the work of Symbolist artists in the French art scene in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Partly a reaction against Impressionism, Symbolism was about exploring fantasy, dreams and mythology. In Heaven recalls one of its most talented artists, Odilon Redon, whose later works share with Githuka’s the imagery of a rich imagination and glowing colour. Redon was the precursor to twentieth century fantasy artists like Marc Chagall and Paul Klee.

Githuka has exhibited regularly at the annual Best of Kuona art exhibition in Nairobi and also took part in last year’s inaugural Ngecha Alt Festival. He is inspired by Kenyan artist Meek Gichugu and Spanish painter Joan Abello, whose work bears similarities to his own. He concludes: ‘Different artists are birds of a feather. You can find that you are doing the same things with paint even though you are from completely backgrounds and completely different places’
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