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Painting a Controversial Issue in Contemporary East African Art. A Focus on Peter Ngugi and a Comparison with Arim Andrew and Michael Soi between Nairobi and Kampala

Giuseppe Capriotti*

Abstract

This article analyses how Kenyan painter Peter Ngugi, a leading figure in contemporary East African art, integrates elements of Swahili tangible and intangible cultural heritage to address a sensitive issue: the freedom to love and, more broadly, the rights of gender and sexual minorities. A comparative analysis is also conducted with works by Arim Andrew (Uganda) and Michael Soi (Kenya), who engage with similar themes through different visual strategies. While Arim Andrew employs cryptic symbolism to hint at unspeakable desires in Uganda, Michael Soi is overt, portraying homosexual characters to critique Kenyan societal hypocrisy. Positioned between these extremes, Peter Ngugi adopts a poetic approach, using the *kanga* (fluttering freely in outstretched arms) as a metaphor for a nation that honours its traditions but is also ready to embrace a more inclusive future.

Questo articolo analizza come il pittore keniota Peter Ngugi, figura di spicco dell'arte contemporanea dell'Africa orientale, integri elementi del patrimonio culturale Swahili materiale e immateriale per affrontare una questione delicata: la libertà di amare e, più in generale, i diritti delle minoranze di genere e sessuali. Viene inoltre condotta un'analisi

* Associate Professor of Early Modern Art History, Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, University of Macerata, piazzale L. Bertelli 1, 62100 Macerata, e-mail: giuseppe.capriotti@unimc.it.

comparativa con opere di Arim Andrew (Uganda) e Michael Soi (Kenya), che affrontano temi simili attraverso differenti strategie visive. Se Arim Andrew ricorre a un linguaggio simbolico e criptico per alludere a desideri indicibili in Uganda, Michael Soi è esplicito, rappresentando personaggi omosessuali al fine di denunciare l'ipocrisia della società kenyota. Collocandosi tra questi due estremi, Peter Ngugi adotta un approccio poetico, utilizzando il *kanga* (che sventola libero tra braccia protese al cielo) come metafora di una nazione che onora le proprie tradizioni, ma che sarebbe anche pronto ad aprirsi a un futuro più inclusivo.

1. *An Introduction on Peter Ngugi's Art*

The general aim of this paper is to analyse how the painter Peter Ngugi, one of the most representative artists of contemporary Kenya, incorporates significant elements of Swahili tangible and intangible cultural heritage to address a controversial social issue: the freedom to love, and more broadly, the rights of gender and sexual minorities. In parallel, a comparative analysis will be undertaken with paintings by Arim Andrew (from Kampala, Uganda) and Michael Soi (from Nairobi, Kenya), who explore similar themes.

The interpretive approach adopted in this article is the classical method of iconography and iconology, a tradition with deep historical roots that has also proven effective in the study of contemporary art[1]. The paintings will be analysed in relation to their socio-cultural and political contexts, with particular attention to the insights provided by the artists through numerous interviews[2]. In each case, the artist's intention will be complemented by the expressive potential of the artwork itself, which may at times convey meanings that extend beyond the artist's explicit aims[3].

Peter Ngugi, born in Nairobi in 1978, is a Kikuyu artist based in Thika, near Nairobi, where he lives with his wife and two daughters[4]. With its well-established system of artist collectives, art galleries, and studios, Nairobi has become one of the most vibrant artistic centres on the African continent and the location of the Kenyan artistic mainstream[5]. It is not only the hub of the Kenyan art scene, but also a key reference point for artists across East Af-

[1] Janson 1961; Spratt 2017; Balbi 2025.

[2] Interviews with artists were conducted between 2018 and 2025 during my various secondments in Kenya, at Pwani University in Kilifi and Kenyatta University in Nairobi.

[3] I will therefore also seek to analyse the so-called "intention of the work", that is, the capacity of the image to provoke interpretations independently of the artist's original intent. Cf. Baxandall 1985; Mitchell 2005.

[4] Kenyan society is composed of 42 tribes. The Kikuyu tribe is the largest ethnic group in Kenya, primarily residing in the central region. Cf. Balaton-Chrimes 2020.

[5] The Kenyan art scene is changing too fast to accommodate a detailed overview. For a first detailed analysis cf. Swigert-Gacheru 2013; Gerschultz 2013; de Lame 2021.

rica, particularly those from Uganda and Tanzania[6]. As an established painter in this art network, Peter Ngugi is represented by One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, one of the most relevant art galleries in Nairobi, where the artist set up numerous solo exhibitions[7]. In 2017, he was also featured in the book *Visual Voices*, a publication in which over fifty contemporary artists in Kenya are presented[8]. We can consider this book as a canon of Kenyan contemporary art, in which Peter Ngugi is comprised[9]. As one of Kenya's most iconic artists, Peter Ngugi was one of five artists to take part in the *Kesho Kutwa* (The day after tomorrow) exhibition, organised by the Nairobi National Museum in 2021[10].

Peter Ngugi's art is characterized by a coherent series of paintings, each group connected by a unifying theme. Although he does not wish to be identified as a political painter, his work often addresses pressing social issues such as institutional corruption, abuse of power, impunity, civic negligence, and misogyny. For example, in 2013 he exhibited the series *The Pigs of Thika Town*, in which he employs the metaphor of the grilled pig, a delicacy for which his hometown is known, to critique the mass gatherings during election periods, when citizens allow themselves to be bribed by politicians who rarely fulfil their promises[11]. In 2017, he took part in the Lamu Art Festival with a series entitled *Walls Have Ears* (fig.1), where he explores a curious aspect of Swahili life: the hypocrisy of those who believe they can keep secrets[12]. Swahili is the name given to the culture that developed on the Kenyan coast as a result of Arab colonisation in the Middle Ages and which, among many other influences, gave rise to Kenya's national language, Kiswahili[13]. The background of these paintings features patterns inspired by Swahili architecture[14], which occasionally extends into the foreground, merging with the figures. Against this architectural motif, Muslim men are shown conversing, often seen from behind. Although the content of their dialogue remains unknown, the viewer senses that secrets are being shared. These individuals believe they are speaking in confidence, yet the porous walls of Swahili houses allow voices to pass

[6] In a narrow sense, East Africa is an area comprising Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Cf. Maxon 2009.

[7] < https://www.oneoffcontemporaryartgallery.com/peter-ngugi.html >, 19.04.2025.

[8] Wakhungu-Githuku 2017.

[9] Published in 2017, *Visual Voices* is in truth a second attempt to build a canon of artists. The first one was *Thelathini. 30 Faces, 30 Facets of Contemporary Art in Kenya* (*Thelathini* 2003), published in 2003 by Kuona Trust, one of the most established art collectives in Nairobi.

[10] *Kesho Kutwa* 2021.

[11] S.A. 2013.

[12] <http://www.lamupaintersfestival.org/art-lamu-2017/artists-2017/ngugi/peter-ngugi.php>, 25.4.2025; *Art Lamu* 2017.

[13] For an overview see Busolo Namunaba 2023; Wynne-Jones, LaViolette 2018.

[14] For an overview on Swahili architecture see Capriotti 2023.

through, hence, the metaphor "walls have ears." The theme of sound is made explicit in certain works, where mosque loudspeakers evoke the public call to prayer, highlighting the sonic dimension of daily life within Swahili communities.

In 2018, in the exhibition *Fanta Orange Na Mkate Nusu* (*Fanta Orange and Half a Bread*), Ngugi directly addressed the controversial issue of Kenyan corruption, using Kiswahili to title the series[15]. In Kenya, "Fanta Orange na mkate nusu" is a popular expression loaded with cultural significance. It refers to a simple and inexpensive meal, consisting of a small bottle of Fanta and half a loaf of bread. This classic snack is especially common among students, workers, and urban dwellers in working-class neighbourhoods who seek to satisfy their hunger without spending much. Ngugi appropriates this expression to critique citizens who expect minimal rewards from corrupt politicians and continue to re-elect individuals widely known to be dishonest, self-serving, and indifferent to public needs. Corruption in Kenya is a deeply entrenched phenomenon, rooted in the colonial period and shaped by post-independence socio-political dynamics[16]. In the paintings, groups of two or three individuals, dressed in either Western or traditional attire, are depicted without faces: they appear as black silhouettes, faceless figures (fig. 2). Their identities are obscured to reflect the ambiguity between victimhood and complicity. Whether they are suffering from or benefiting from corruption, everything remains concealed. The absence of faces underscores the difficulty in identifying those responsible for systemic corruption. According to the artist, in Kenya, anyone can be corrupted. In this way, Ngugi expresses his disappointment not primarily with avaricious politicians, but with ordinary citizens who, in many ways, serve as accomplices. Kenyans who knowingly elect corrupt leaders become complicit in the perpetuation of corruption. They idly and impatiently await the arrival of a politician who will offer them a small favour, a tip, or a token gift, such as a case of beer, a soda, a Fanta Orange and half a bread.

In the paintings presented in 2021 at the Nairobi National Museum of Kenya, as part of the aforementioned exhibition *Kesho Kutwa*, Peter Ngugi combines the iconography of male and female black silhouettes with traditional, colourful Kenyan fabrics known as *kanga* or *leso*, which constitute one of the most significant elements of Swahili cultural heritage (fig. 3)[17]. *Kanga* or *leso* is a rectangular cotton fabric, typically produced and sold in pairs, and predominantly used by women. In Kiswahili, the term *kanga* means "guinea fowl", possibly due to the resemblance of early fabric designs to the plumage of wild birds. The term *leso* derives from the Portuguese word for scarf, *lenço*, and

[15] Martin 2018.
[16] On the corruption in Kenya see Akech 2011; Van Rij 2021; Kilel 2023.
[17] Amory 1985; Ryan 2017; Birch, Namatsi Lutomia 2016.

refers to the same fabric, though this term is more commonly used along the coast[18]. The origins of these fabrics in the late 19th century remain somewhat uncertain, likely linked to the importation of textile fragments from India and Arabia[19]. Initially plain, the *kanga* later incorporated decorative borders and eventually proverbs, first written in Arabic script and later in Latin characters, rendered in Kiswahili. These proverbs are a fundamental aspect of the *kanga*, and often influence purchasing decisions, as buyers are drawn to the meanings conveyed in the inscriptions[20]. In his paintings, Ngugi employs the traditional Swahili fabric patterns as a visual screen onto which he projects the silhouettes of ordinary people, often dressed in Western attire, though not exclusively. The figures in this series strive to appear fashionable through their poses and clothing, mimicking Western attitudes in some cases, yet they remain faceless, jobless individuals, waiting for something, perhaps for change or a better future. In Ngugi's work, the fabric patterns serve not only as a stylistic motif but also as a device to localize the narrative, grounding it geographically and culturally in Kenya. While the *kanga* or *leso* is an important identity marker and symbol of traditional Kenyan values, Ngugi also uses it as a screen through which to critique certain negative aspects of contemporary Kenyan society.

Following these artistic explorations, Swahili fabrics and black silhouettes continued to appear in Ngugi's paintings as a means to address other Kenyan social and political issues. In Swahili culture, *kanga* decoration is frequently associated with political discourse and conflict. In both Kenya and Tanzania (countries that share a common Swahili cultural heritage) *kangas* may be adorned with portraits of prominent political figures accompanied by celebratory inscriptions or used as tools of electoral propaganda to promote specific parties or political ideologies[21]. On the occasion of the 2022 elections in Kenya, Peter Ngugi drew inspiration from this political use of kangas to create a distinctive series of paintings, always using the theme of the black silhouette. In the painting entitled *Sultan of Khange*, the inscription on the fabric conveys the disillusionment of the ordinary citizen with politics: "If the sultan (the president) can't do anything, what can a citizen do?" (fig. 4) Whereas in previous series the silhouette symbolized the facelessness of the corrupt citizen, in this series it represents the powerless individual, someone unable to influence the nation's trajectory due to the intransigence of politicians unwilling to enact change. In this work, the presence of the *kanga* is fully exploited in its multiple dimensions: not only as a decorative element, but also as a vehicle for conveying powerful messages through proverbs written in Kiswahili. The combined use of *kanga* as a visual language and Kiswahili as a verbal one holds signifi-

[18] Prodanović Bojović 2024, p. 67.
[19] Spring 2005.
[20] Beck 2005.
[21] Clark 2005.

cant weight from a postcolonial perspective. As Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, the imposition of colonial languages led to the erosion of indigenous cultures; English, in particular, functioned as a "cultural bomb" that imposed a foreign mental and symbolic framework, shaping how colonized peoples perceived the world. It domesticated the colonial elites, instilling in them a sense of shame for their origins and native languages. For this reason, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o urges Kenyan intellectuals to adopt Kiswahili as their literary and cultural medium, arguing that this is the only path to achieving respect grounded in one's authentic identity[22]. In this sense, Peter Ngugi appears to align with such decolonial thinking: to speak of Kenya's social issues, he employs both the visual and verbal languages of Kenya, even while addressing a global audience and art market. Just as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o became a prominent voice in decolonial discourse by writing in Kiswahili and thereby compelling translation into other languages, Peter Ngugi uses the language of Kenya to force the Western gaze to engage with and interpret the meanings embedded in his work.

Also on the occasion of the 2022 elections, Peter Ngugi produced a compelling series of paintings denouncing the misogyny inherent in the Kenyan political system. Comprising small-format works sold at accessible prices, particularly targeted toward the local market during a regional art fair, the series is deliberately designed to make a strong impact on local society. Entitled *These Seats Are Taken* (fig. 5), the series depicts silhouettes of men, dressed in either traditional or Western attire, seated on invisible chairs against a pink background. While pink is internationally associated with femininity, the figures occupying the space are all male. The chairs, though unseen, are perceptible through their symbolic weight, as they are filled exclusively by faceless male silhouettes. The message is unequivocal: during the 2022 elections, all parliamentary seats were already effectively taken by men, leaving no room for women. Through this work, Peter Ngugi not only exposes the political misogyny prevalent in Kenya but also critiques the systemic absence of gender parity within the nation's legislative institutions[23].

An incredibly prolific artist, Peter Ngugi has created these numerous series without ever abandoning the distinctive features of his style. His paintings are characterized by the combination of flat areas of colour – used for figure silhouettes or backgrounds, where broad and irregular brushstrokes are deliberately left visible – and finer, monochromatic strokes applied in various directions, which he employs to depict clothing or decorative background patterns.

[22] Wa Thiong'o 1986.
[23] On this issue cf. Boukaa, Berryb, Muthoni Kamuruc 2019.

2. Flying Over the City*: a Series for a Controversial Issue*

All of these elements of Peter Ngugi's artistic language, as well as his engagement with social issues affecting Kenya, come together in a new series that he developed during an artists' residency held in 2023 in Menorca, a Spanish island in the Mediterranean Sea. He was there with three other artists, illustrator Ana Gurduza and writer Alexandra Mihailciuc from Romania and painter Arim Andrew from Uganda. Ana Gurduza and Alexandra Mihailciuc worked together on the Romanian proverbs[24] and for Peter Ngugi, it was an opportunity to share knowledge about proverbs, which are very common in the Kenyan *kanga* or *leso* languages. In his hyperrealist paintings Arim Andrew questions authority, power and control in Ugandan politics, religion and society and, as an activist artist, he also works on the controversial issue of gender and sexual minorities rights in Uganda[25]. The collaboration with Arim Andrew was very stimulating as well, because Peter Ngugi was working on the theme of the traditional Kenyan wedding, in which black silhouettes and *kangas* are still protagonists.

As part of the series dedicated to this theme, the painting *Kelele za Mashua* (2023) takes its title from the Swahili saying "Kelele za mashua, haziitishi bahari," meaning "The noise of the boat does not disturb the ocean". This proverb suggests that minor concerns or disturbances cannot affect a significant force or reality. It is often used to convey the idea that those who cause trouble cannot truly harm something much larger and more substantial. For the artist, the proverb serves as a metaphor for the notion that the noise and sentiments of others should not distract or derail one from one's intended course[26]. This meaning is particularly appropriated for the man, still depicted with a black and anonymous face (the old theme of corruption), who is looking at five veiled women in the painting. The women's heads and bodies are covered by *kangas*. The artist portrayed a specific Swahili ritual: during the wedding, the bride and other women are covered with *kangas*; the groom has to identify his real bride just by looking at her; for each mistake, he has to deliver two goats to the bride's family[27]. The proverb painted on the *kanga* is therefore also an allusion to the anguish the groom must endure during this rite, as the bride's relatives try to make him slip up in order to extract more gifts from him[28]. In Menorca, while discussing about marriage and gender and sexual minority rights with the Ugandan artist Arim Andrew, Peter Ngugi decided to embark on a new series, modifying the original one dedicated to the traditional Kenyan wedding

[24] Mihailciuc, Gurduza 2023.
[25] *The Black Ghost* 2022, pp. 54-59.
[26] Personal communication of the artist, obtained in 2025.
[27] Prodanović Bojović 2024, p. 77.
[28] I would like to thank Stephen Muoki Joshua for suggesting this observation to me.

and expanding the theme to address the controversial issue of same-sex marriage and, more broadly, the subject of freedom in love.

He began by taking photographs of his Ugandan colleague dressed as a veiled bride during the unveiling. The male silhouette, covered and dressed as a bride, is placed against a neutral background in which the proverb is not missing at the bottom of the image or in the *kanga*. The strong winds of Menorca facilitate the production of this new amazing series, giving to *kangas* an extraordinary figurative power. In the paintings of this series Ngugi has captured the real moment of unveiling with the *kanga* agitated by the wind, the moment when you discover that the bride is not a woman but a man. In my opinion, this gender inversion can be seen as a subtle visual protest: rather than simply denouncing the lack of same-sex marriage in Kenya, Ngugi imagines and proposes a possible and more inclusive future for all Kenyan citizens, celebrating different forms of freedom of love. Some of the inscriptions in this series seem to support this interpretation. In certain cases, the proverbs on *kangas* are very simple and general, such as the one that reads "Message ya mapenzi," meaning "A message of love" (fig. 7). In another painting, however, the proverb at the bottom of the image is more explicit: "Tazameni sasa, mlisema hayawi, mbona yamekuwa," meaning "Look now, you said it would never happen, yet it has happened" (fig. 8). This expression is used to emphasize the fulfilment of something that many had doubted would ever come to pass, representing a positive realization or a form of revenge. Indeed, in many paintings, the model with open arms seems to be celebrating the conquest of new freedoms (fig. 9 and 10). Peter Ngugi appears to envision a possible inclusive future for Kenya, using his silhouettes as markers of his artistic research and drawing upon the traditional and identity symbols of Kenyan marriage, namely, the *kangas* with their proverbs and the ritual of unveiling. It can be said that elements of traditional Swahili culture are employed by Peter Ngugi in a progressive manner, aimed at modernizing his country while remaining deeply rooted in his own cultural identity.

On the contrary, in Kenya, recourse to traditional identity has been massively used to feed the homophobic discourse. Religious and political leaders have often stated that homosexuality is not an original part of Kenyan identity and that same-sex practices are an effect of the bad influence of colonialism and Western culture[29]. On the contrary, the current law against sodomy (a crime punishable

[29] This statement is quite widespread across the African continent. Cf. Epprecht 2008. The author argues that the notion of an exclusively heterosexual Africa is a historical construct that originated during the colonial era. Missionaries, explorers, and colonial administrators often ignored or pathologized non-heteronormative sexual practices, contributing to an institutional silence that perpetuated stereotypes and discrimination. This narrative was further reinforced in the post-independence period by African political leaders and public health approaches that failed to acknowledge the diversity of sexualities.

by up to 14 years in prison) is a British law imposed on Kenya in 1897 by colonial authorities. Although it was abolished in England in 1967, it remains in force in Kenya, which gained independence from Britain in 1963[30].

In this social and political context, Peter Ngugi's use of the two most distinctive features of his art – the black silhouette and the kanga – assumes a new and progressive significance.

For some postcolonial thinkers, the silhouette – an essential and schematic representation that omits details to show only the outline of a figure – has acquired incredible metaphorical value. For example, in the essay *Debitores Sumus… Ways of Exhausting Our Question on Violence*, Congolese thinker Valentin Mudimbe uses the metaphor of the silhouette to represent the physical, historical, and epistemological violence through which systems of domination reduce the complexity of the lived experiences of racialised individuals[31]. The silhouette thus becomes a symbol of the colonised condition, where the individual is turned into an anonymous shadow, stripped of personal identity and cultural richness. Mudimbe also links the silhouette to the memory of colonial violence, whose effects linger into the present, making it an image of ongoing trauma. Importantly, the silhouette is not only a sign of this reductive violence, but also a critical tool: it questions what is left out or concealed in dominant narratives. Mudimbe does not merely describe the effects of colonial discourse; he challenges its epistemological foundations, using the silhouette as a way to expose the limits of knowledge systems that continue to shape perceptions of the colonised subject. These interpretative categories may help us to better understand the meaning of the silhouette in the new Ngugi's series. Whereas in previous works the silhouette symbolized the corrupt individual or the complicit citizen, powerless to effect change in society, in *Flying Over the City* it explicitly represents the victim of violence in a macho society steeped in misogyny and homophobia. Similarly, using categories provided by Achille Mbembe, we can say that the silhouette is used as a potential symbol of resistance and transformation, a tool to rethink Kenyan identity beyond the categories imposed by colonialism[32].

The use of the *kanga* as a visual strategy is also radically new compared to previous series. As already mentioned, the *kanga* is a female garment and thus represents a frontier between genders[33]. It is, in a sense, a symbol of the

[30] *Kenya: Court Upholds Archaic Anti-Homosexuality Laws* 2023. On the perception of homosexuality among young people in Kenya, negatively influenced by religious beliefs, lack of inclusive sex education, legal criminalisation and social stigmatisation, cf. Mucherah, Owino, McCoy 2016. On the life of gender and sexual minorities in Kenyan coast, cf. Amory1998.

[31] Mudimbe 2014.

[32] Mbembe 2017. The motif of the silhouette in Peter Ngugi's work will be the subject of an in-depth analysis in a soon-to-be-published scholarly essay.

[33] Biersteker, Amory 2017.

morality of Swahili women, as it completely covers the body in accordance with the norms of respectability in Islamic society. It also became a sign of emancipation following the abolition of slavery, when women abandoned their slave garments in favour of colourful *kangas*, which thus symbolized the status of a free woman[34]. Furthermore, through their proverbs, *kangas* typically celebrate love and heteronormative marriage, while also alluding to the pleasures and intrigues inherent in romantic relationships. As Rose Marie Beck has demonstrated, the proverbs on *kangas* are characterized by substantial ambiguity: wearing, gifting, or using a *kanga* during a ceremony constitutes a communicative strategy based on a message that remains intentionally ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations depending on the context. However, this peculiar communicative tool enables women to address issues that would be considered inappropriate to discuss openly, with ambiguity functioning as a strategy to prevent accusations of social impropriety. Through the proverb, one can both speak and remain silent, playing with ambiguity and the alibi of potential misunderstanding[35].

Peter Ngugi plays with this potentiality of the *kanga* and its proverbs, simultaneously reactivating its emancipatory function. Through the *kanga*, he elegantly and poetically articulates something that, in Kenya, would otherwise be better left unsaid, while maintaining a hight degree of ambiguity and concealment. Indeed, without knowledge of the actual origins of this series, the striking images can be interpreted as simply expressing a generic desire for freedom. Instead, Ngugi transforms a salient object of Swahili tradition and morality – one intimately connected to femininity and heterosexual marriage – into a medium for activism and the advocacy of rights: the *kanga* once again becomes a tool of emancipation, not only for women but also for other gender and sexual minorities.

However, in Kenya, Ngugi is not the first to enact such an inversion. Nairobi-based artist Kawira Mwirichia had previously employed the medium of the *kanga* to advocate for civil rights[36]. Participating in the exhibition *To Revolutionary Type Love: A Celebration of Queer Love*, held in 2017 at the Goethe Institute in Nairobi, Mwirichia designed 22 *kangas*, drawing inspiration from another rite which is still part of the traditional Swahili marriage. This rite involves women laying *kangas* on the floor for the bride to walk upon, encountering the moral lessons inscribed in the proverbs, which she is expected to carry with her into married life. In the exhibition, the artist arranged her *kangas* on the ground, inviting the public to walk over writings that expressed the dignity and sincerity of same-sex love, such as: “Huba ndo imani yangu,

[34] Prodanović Bojović 2024, p. 66; Fair 1988.
[35] Beck 2005.
[36] Muchiri 2018.

njoo tuabudu" (Love is my religion, come worship with me); "Tusilete chuki mapenzini" (Let's not bring hate into love); and "Ushoga wangu si dhambi, sio chaguo, na haliumizani" (My queerness is not a vice, not deliberate, and harms no one)[37]. In a 2019 study, Adriaan van Klinken explored the extent to which certain forms of artivism (or arts of resistance) from the Kenyan queer community explicitly incorporate elements of ritual or Christianity itself in order to negotiate rights and public recognition[38].

3. *Some other comparisons between Kenya and Uganda*

Without using the figurative potential of the *kanga*, other artists in Kenya and Uganda have addressed the controversial issue of civil rights for sexual minorities or simply same-sex affectivity. In Uganda, a country where homosexuality is considered as a crime, Arim Andrew addresses the issue through a symbolic language that relies heavily on detail. The artist thus creates an intentionally cryptic language of the oppressed to express feelings that cannot be articulated explicitly. In the painting *Who's there* (2020, fig. 11), Arim Andrew employs the metaphor of barbed wire, which two boys are shown illegally crossing as they direct their worried gaze outside the painting, fearful of being seen. One of them holds a lollipop, which, in the context of the work, takes on an erotic significance. The motif of barbed wire as an obstacle to be crossed recurs in many of the artist's works, such as *Year of the Monkey* (2022, fig. 12). In this and other paintings, Arim Andrew uses female figures to covertly address themes of homosexuality. The choice to use female characters is connected to the fact that, in Uganda, the depiction of emotional complicity between women is less problematic and controversial and, in addition, it renders the painting more cryptic and less explicit. In the background of *Year of the Monkey*, on the right, he draws on the classical Renaissance theme of the "painting as window": through a window partially covered by a curtain, two smiling women can be glimpsed, having just crossed a barbed wire barrier to symbolically enter the room depicted, where a woman lies on a sofa. This figure, an emancipated woman who has just paused her work on a laptop visible near her feet, appears sad and worried, as even domestic space in Uganda is not safe and can become a site of imprisonment. On the wall, next to the window, hangs a calendar featuring an image of former Ugandan President Idi Amin, who ruled from 1971 to 1979 and is widely regarded as a brutal dictator. His portrait serves as a reminder that, although Amin is long gone, the

[37] Meiu 2022.
[38] Van Klinken 2019.

ideologies he represented (militarism, toxic masculinity, and authoritarianism) continue to shape Ugandan society today. These influences are particularly evident under the current president, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who has held power since January 1986. While the criminalization of homosexual conduct in Uganda dates back to British colonial rule, President Museveni's administration has dramatically escalated repression and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, culminating in the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in May 2023, one of the harshest anti-LGBTQ+ laws in the world[39]. Nevertheless, in the painting, the woman asserts her independence, concealing a dildo among other household objects in the cabinet behind her. Through these richly symbolic details, the artist denounces the difficult situation faced by sexual minorities in Uganda. This high degree of symbolic complexity is, in a sense, announced by the title itself, which at first glance appears to reference the Chinese calendar. In reality, the calendar contains no ideograms; rather, after the number seven, a series of graphic symbols emerges: animals, plants, and geometric figures. In this way, the artist offers a key to understanding his work: he professes to engage in a game of symbols, concealing and revealing meaning at will through their use. The inscription "Arim Monkey" within the calendar – interpreting the artist as a monkey, a wild and playful creature – further underscores this playful approach to symbolic language. The "year of the monkey" thus marks a significant moment in the artist's life, particularly during the seventh month, July[40].

During his residency in Menorca in 2023, while Ngugi was working on the Swahili wedding, Arim Andrew also explores the theme of marriage and couple relationships, highlighting the problems associated with polygamy and open relationships (fig. 13). In the background of the painting, entitled *Petals between us*, the motif of the window reappears, partially covered by a curtain, through which a woman can be seen freely moving in a pond, like the flamingos of Salinas in Menorca. The birds thus symbolize freedom and the yearning for liberation. In the foreground, three female figures interact on a double bed. The first figure on the right, dressed in red and visibly annoyed, looks questioningly at the woman in the centre, who is covered in flower petals. On the left, another woman is entirely shrouded in a floral cloth, with only her feet visible. The petals scattered over the central figure symbolize betrayal: the flowers from the blanket covering the woman on the left have transferred to the body of the woman in the centre, suggesting that she has committed the betrayal. Through the combination of various details imbued with symbolic meaning, Arim Andrew masterfully conveys a complex emotional situation, offering a subtle psychological investigation of the characters depicted on the canvas.

[39] *"They're Putting Our Lives at Risk"* 2025; Shaw 2023; Cheney 2012.
[40] I thank the artist for giving me this personal information.

The strength of Arim Andrew's artistic language lies in his experimental combination of symbols, many of which carry deeply secret, intimate, and personal meanings. The artist employs symbolic and metaphorical language, following a tradition long embraced by historically oppressed minorities. In high-risk social contexts, marginalised groups have often developed secret or coded forms of expression to give voice to their experiences and articulate their discontent[41]. As "muted groups," gender and social minorities (typically silenced and marginalised) sometimes find in art a means to reject hegemonic norms and to subvert dominant cultural codes, reclaiming the expression of their subjectivity[42].

While Arim Andrew in Uganda employs symbolic language to subtly convey the plight of minorities, Michael Soi in Nairobi adopts a far more explicit approach, even depicting homosexual characters in his paintings to satirize the misconduct of those in power in Kenya. Soi's style is very distinctive: he uses flat colour fields to define a small cast of stereotypical figures who reappear from one painting to the next, serving as vehicles for his sharp critique of the vices and corruption embedded in Kenyan society[43]. In a series produced in 2024, he once again features homosexual characters, not in pursuit of political correctness, but to underscore his thematic concerns. In the painting *Konkodi* – which refers to a proper name – a traffic policeman on a motorbike and a matatu driver pause on the road to share a kiss (fig. 14). The kiss between the two men is presented as natural, passionate and playful, like the free-flowing decoration of the background shows. However, in the context of Kenyan traffic, policemen and matatu drivers are typically adversaries, as the former regularly monitor and fine the latter. Here, their usual conflict is resolved in a passionate kiss, which may also suggest a transactional relationship: the officer refrains from issuing a ticket in exchange for some form of compensation. A direct critique of homophobia appears in the painting *The Sergeant*, where a priest and an armed officer are shown kissing (fig. 15). This is an unambiguous denunciation of the hypocrisy within both religious and political institutions that publicly condemn homosexuality while privately engaging in it. This series has sparked an unusual and provocative debate on the painter's Instagram profile, which has been criticised both for addressing such a controversial topic and, paradoxically, for abandoning it following the series' conclusion.

[41] For a recent and updated state of art cf. Syawal, Dwiandini, Khaerunnisa, Irwansyah 2024.

[42] Muñoz 1999.

[43] Born in 1972 in Nairobi , previously based at the GoDown Art Centre and now at Kuona Trust Art Collective, Michael Soi is part of the *Visual Voices* canon: Wakhungu-Githuku 2017, pp. 375-381.

4. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this comparison reveals that Arim Andrew in Uganda employs a symbolic and deliberately cryptic language to allude to an affectivity that cannot even be named, whereas Michael Soi in Nairobi, by contrast, explicitly incorporates homosexual characters (alongside heterosexual ones) to denounce a corrupt and often hypocritical society. Positioned between these two poles, Peter Ngugi adopts a more poetic approach, involving directly an element of the Kenyan cultural heritage: the *kanga*, left to flutter freely in the wind by arms outstretched towards the sky in a gesture of yearning for freedom, becomes a metaphor for a new and possible nation, one that does not abandon its traditional culture, symbolised precisely by the *kanga*, yet is also capable of moving toward a more inclusive future for all its citizens.

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Appendix

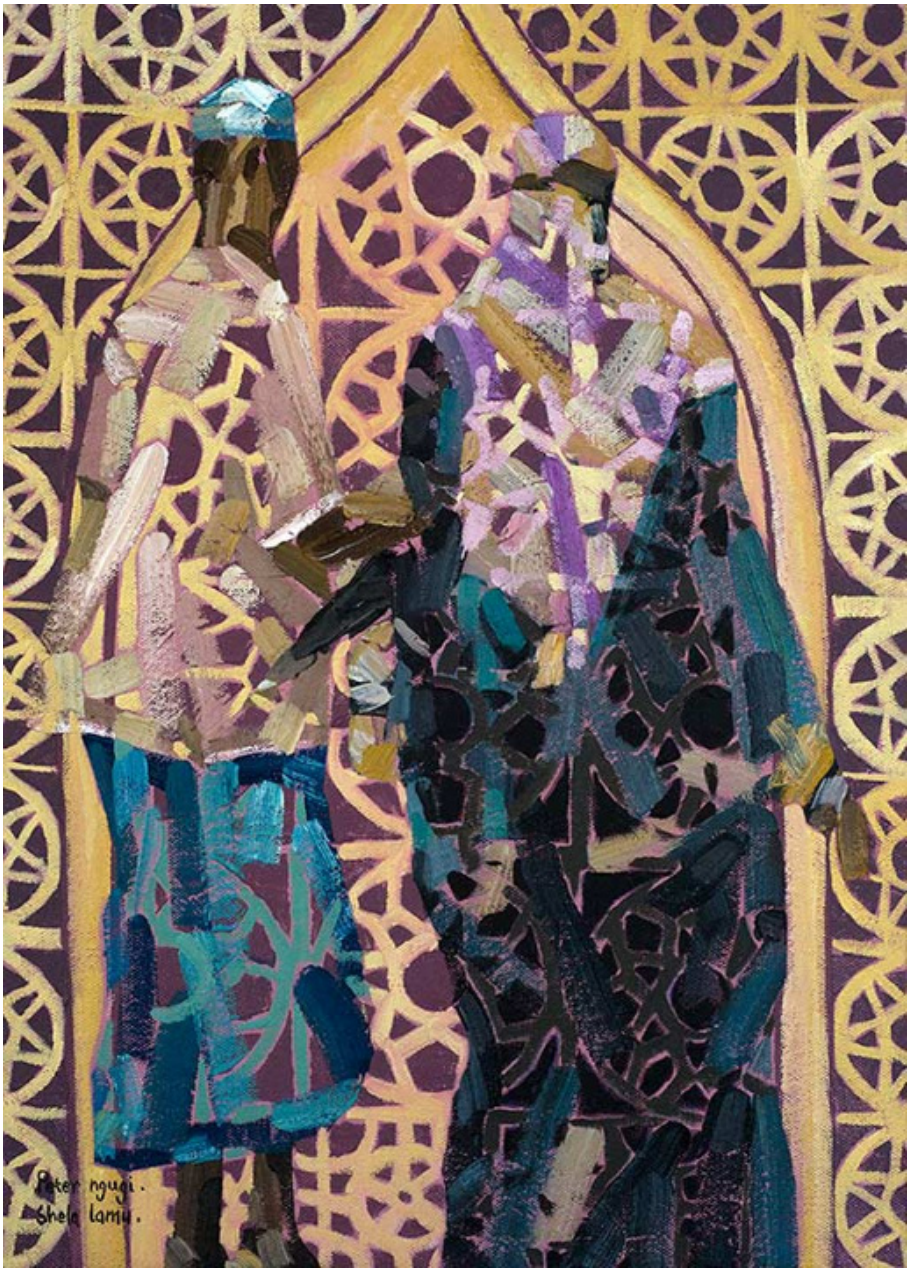

Fig. 1. Peter Ngugi, *Walls have Ears*, 2017, Lamu, Kenya, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

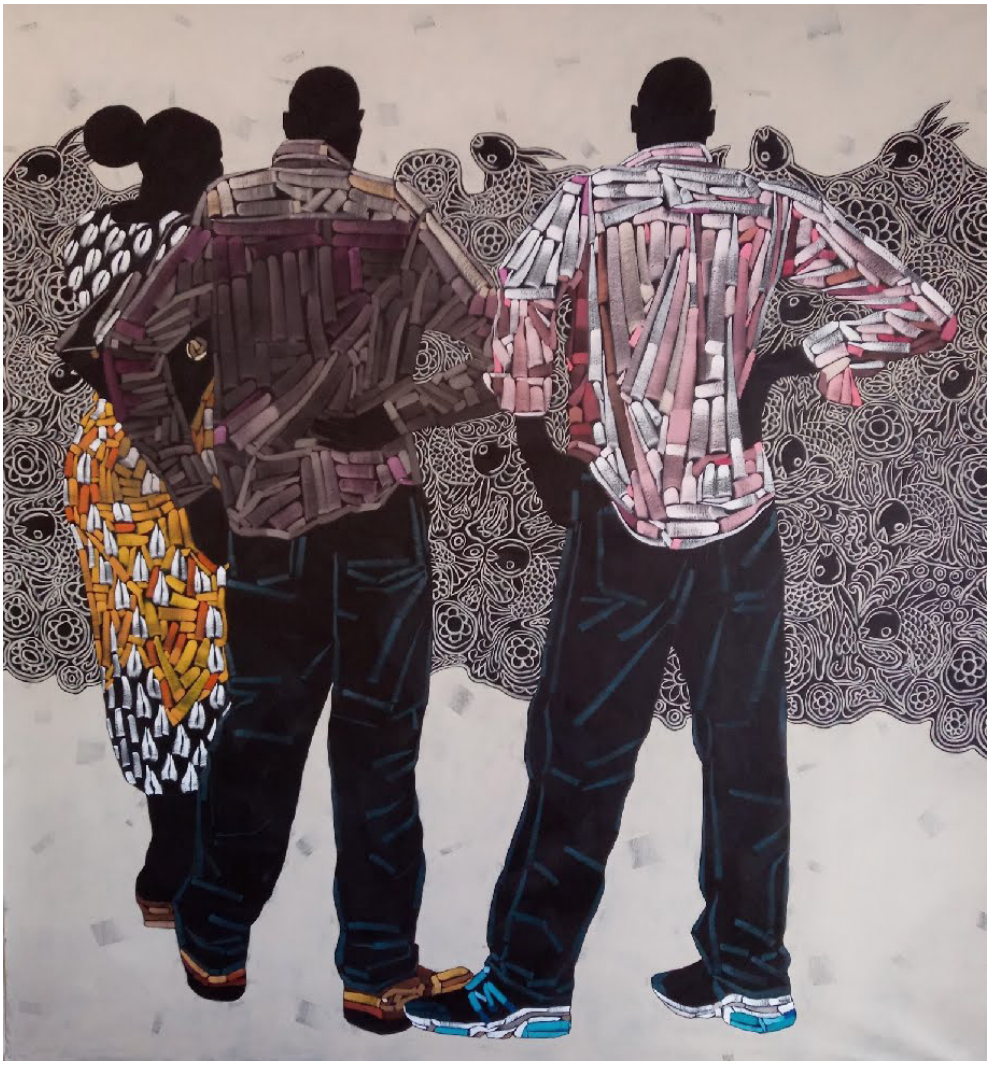

Fig. 2. Peter Ngugi, *Things from that River that has no Name*, 2028, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

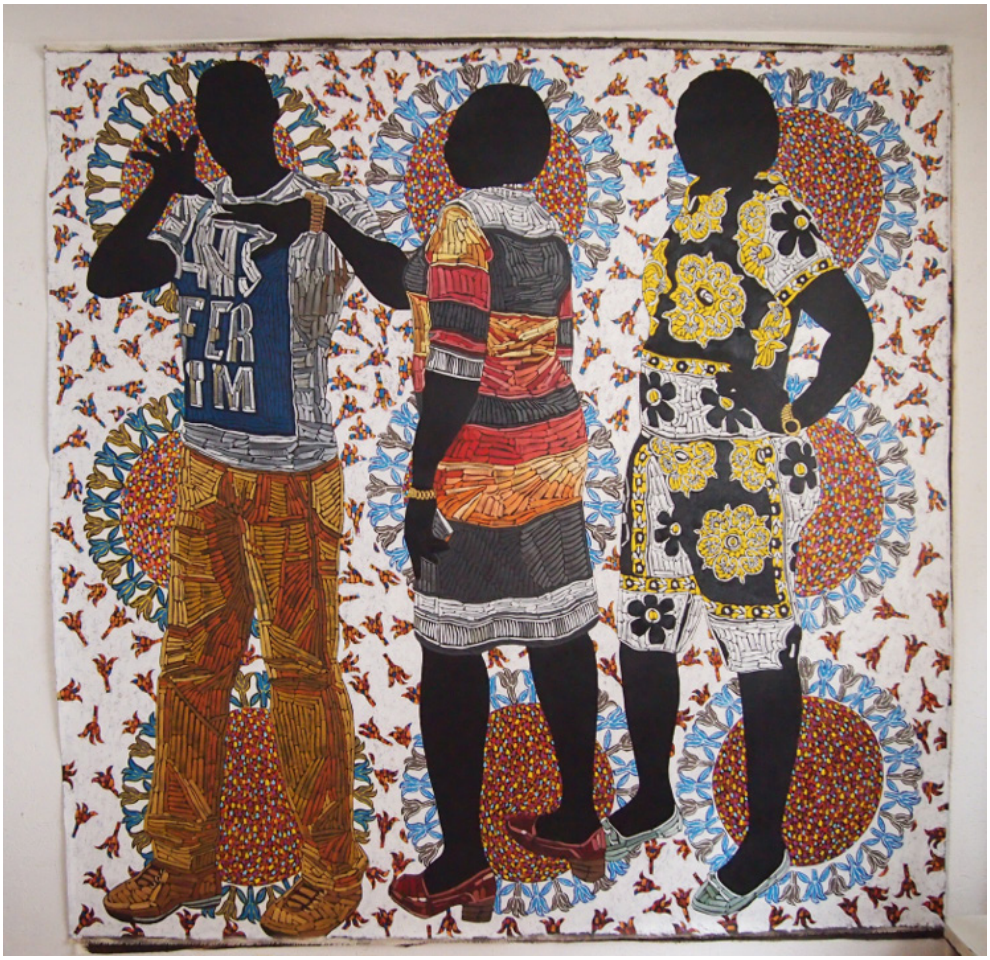

Fig. 3. Peter Ngugi, *White Kanga*, 2021, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

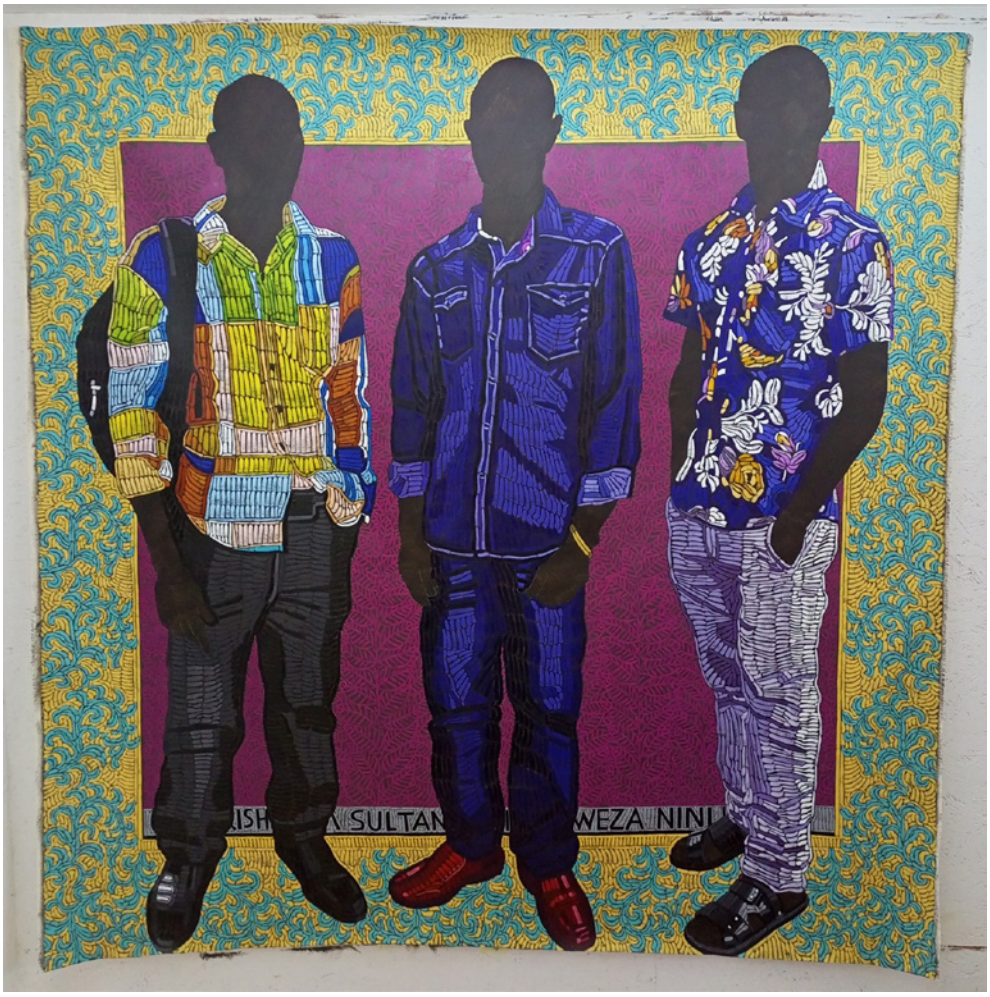

Fig. 4. Peter Ngugi, *Sultan of Khange*, 2022, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

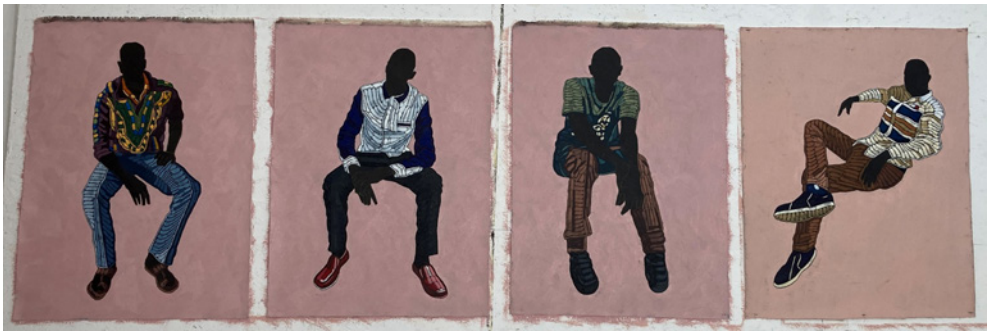

Fig. 5. Peter Ngugi, *There Seats Are Taken*, 2022, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

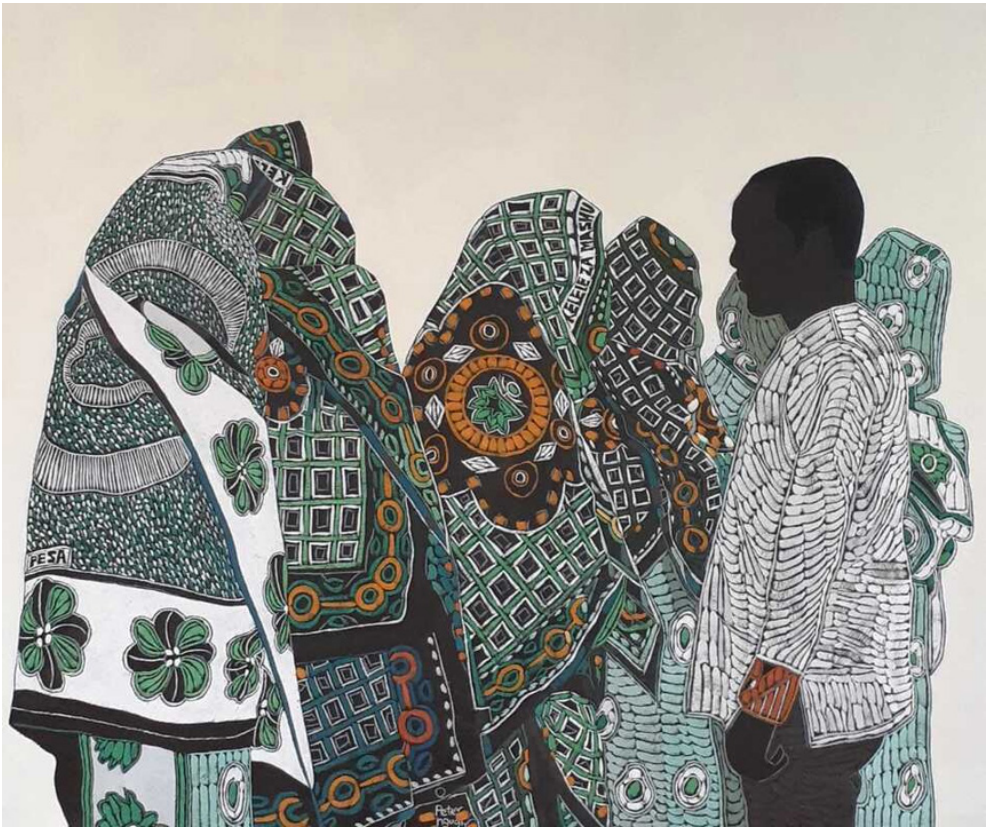

Fig. 6. Peter Ngugi, *Kelele za Mashua*, 2023, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

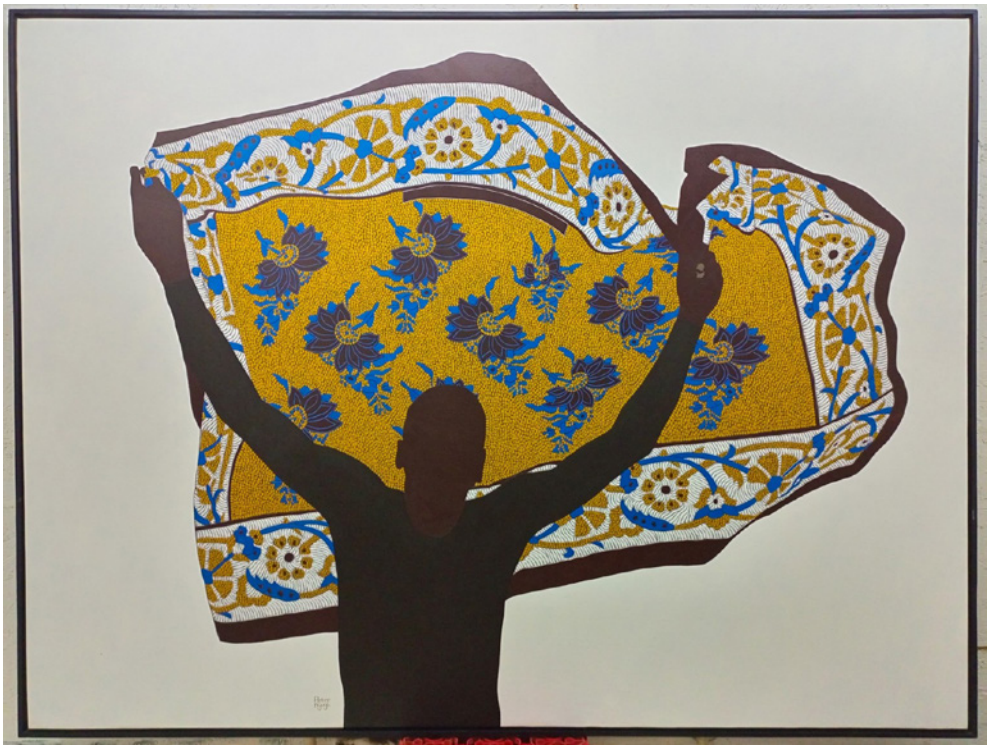

Fig. 7. Peter Ngugi, *Message ya mapenzi*, from the series *Flying Over the City*, 2023, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

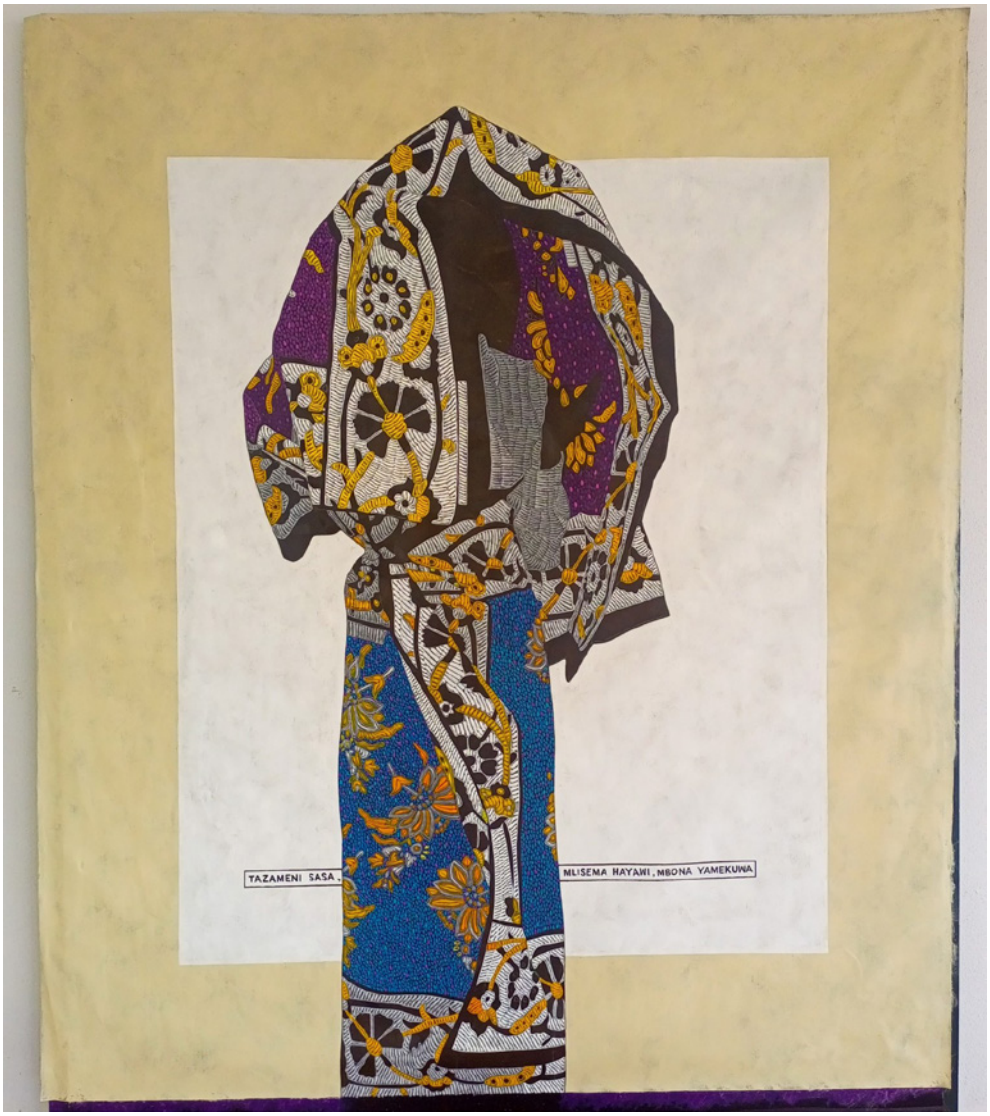

Fig. 8. Peter Ngugi, *Tazameni sasa, mlisema hayawi, mbona yamekuwa*, from the series *Flying Over the City*, 2023, Private Collection; courtesy of Dimitri Sturdza

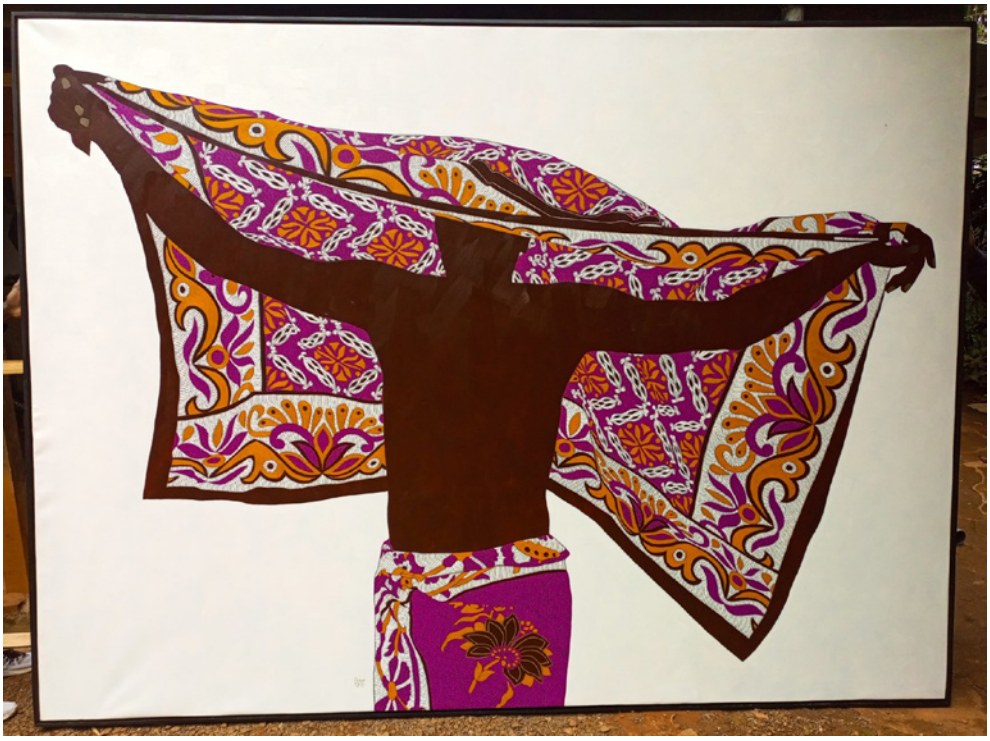

Fig. 9. Peter Ngugi, from the series *Flying Over the City*, 2023, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

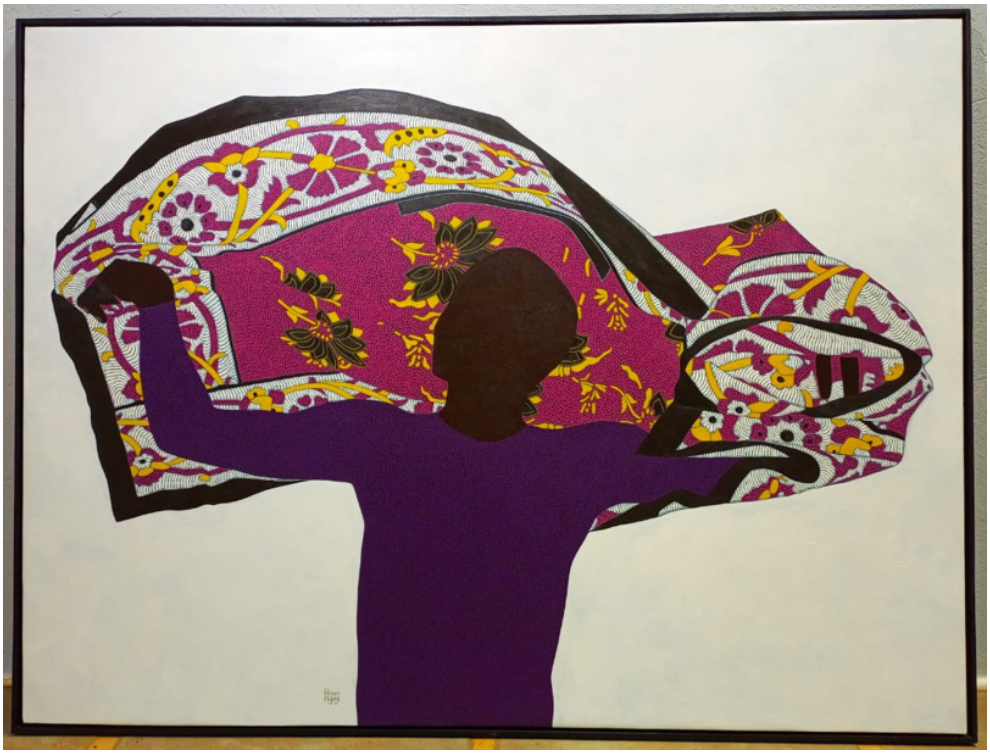

Fig. 10. Peter Ngugi, from the series *Flying Over the City*, 2023, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

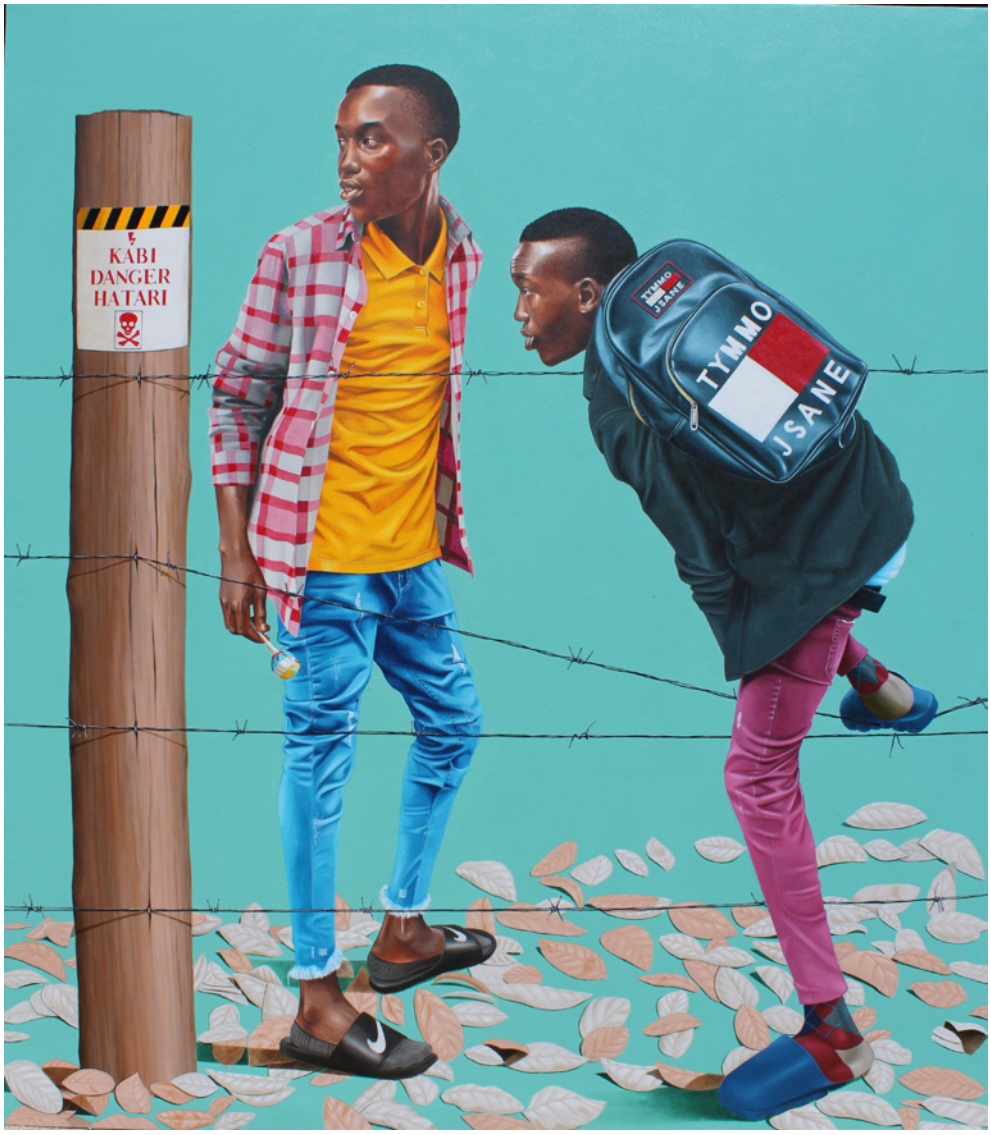

Fig. 11. Arim Andrew, *Who's there*, 2020, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

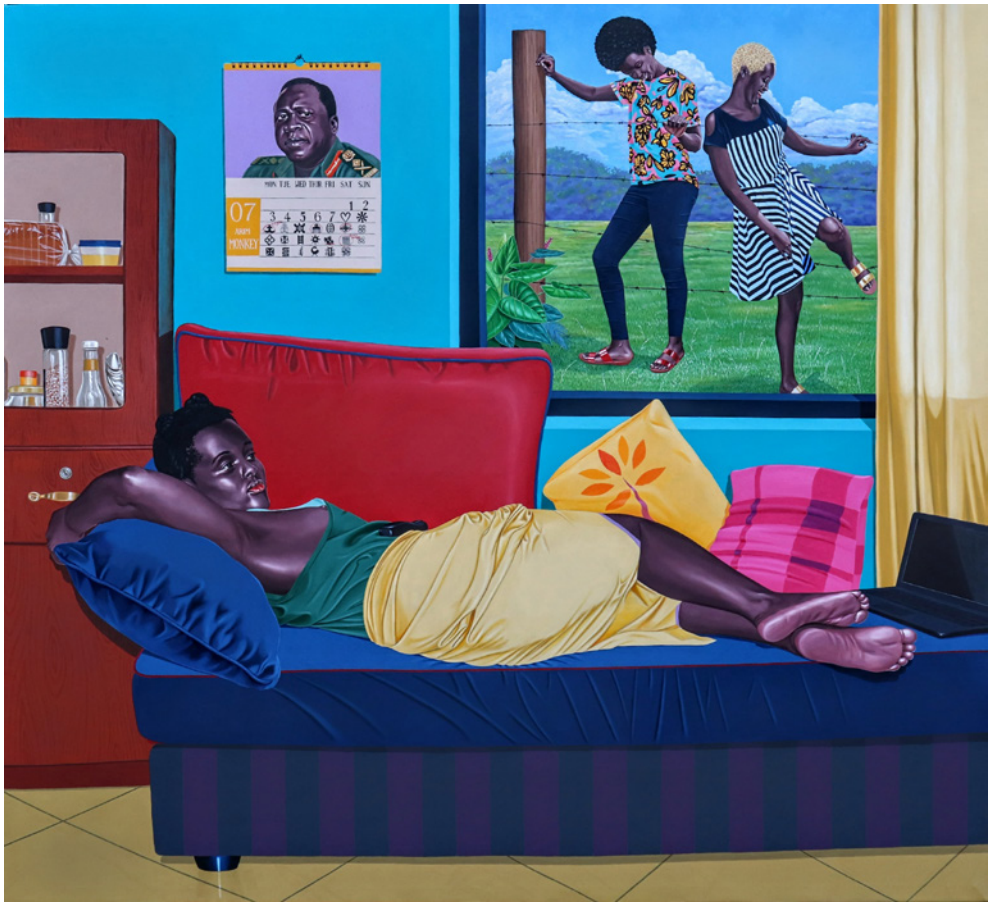

Fig. 12. Arim Andrew, *Year of the Monkey*, 2022, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

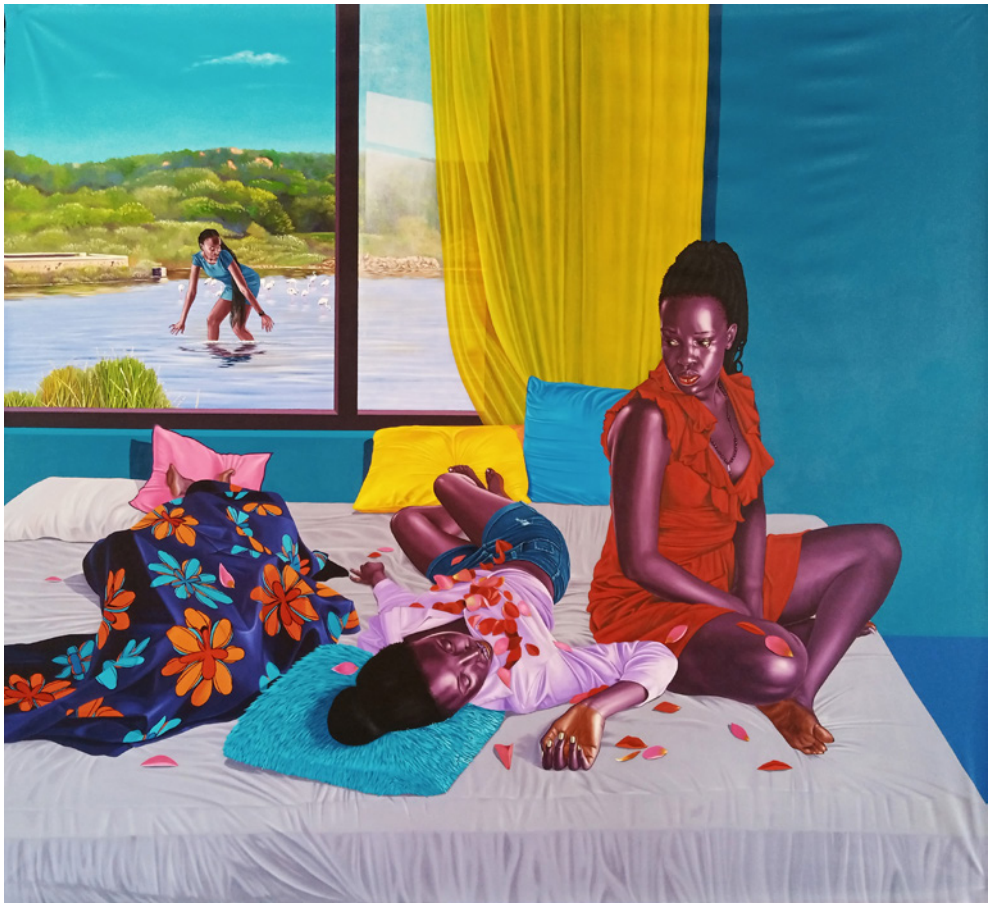

Fig. 13. Arim Andrew, *Petals between us*, 2023, Private Collection; courtesy of Dimitri Sturdza

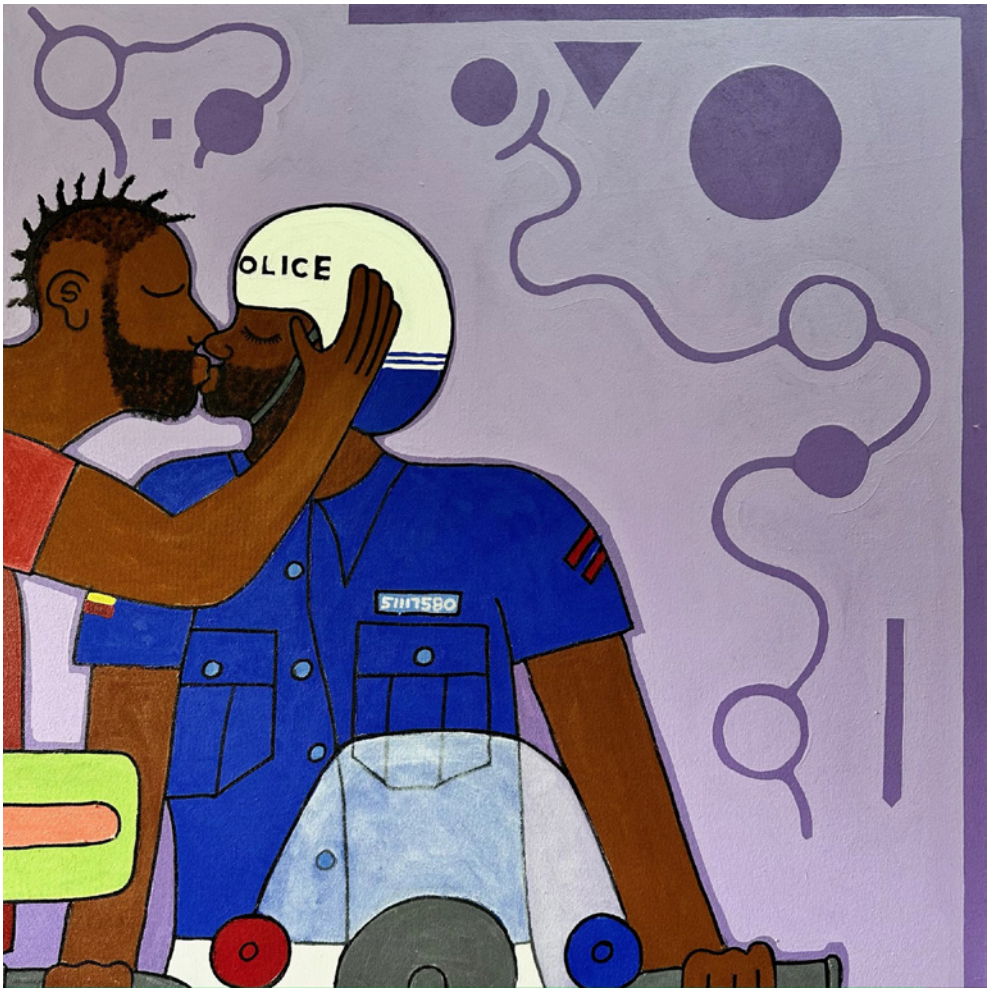

Fig. 14. Michael Soi, *Konkodi*, 2024, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

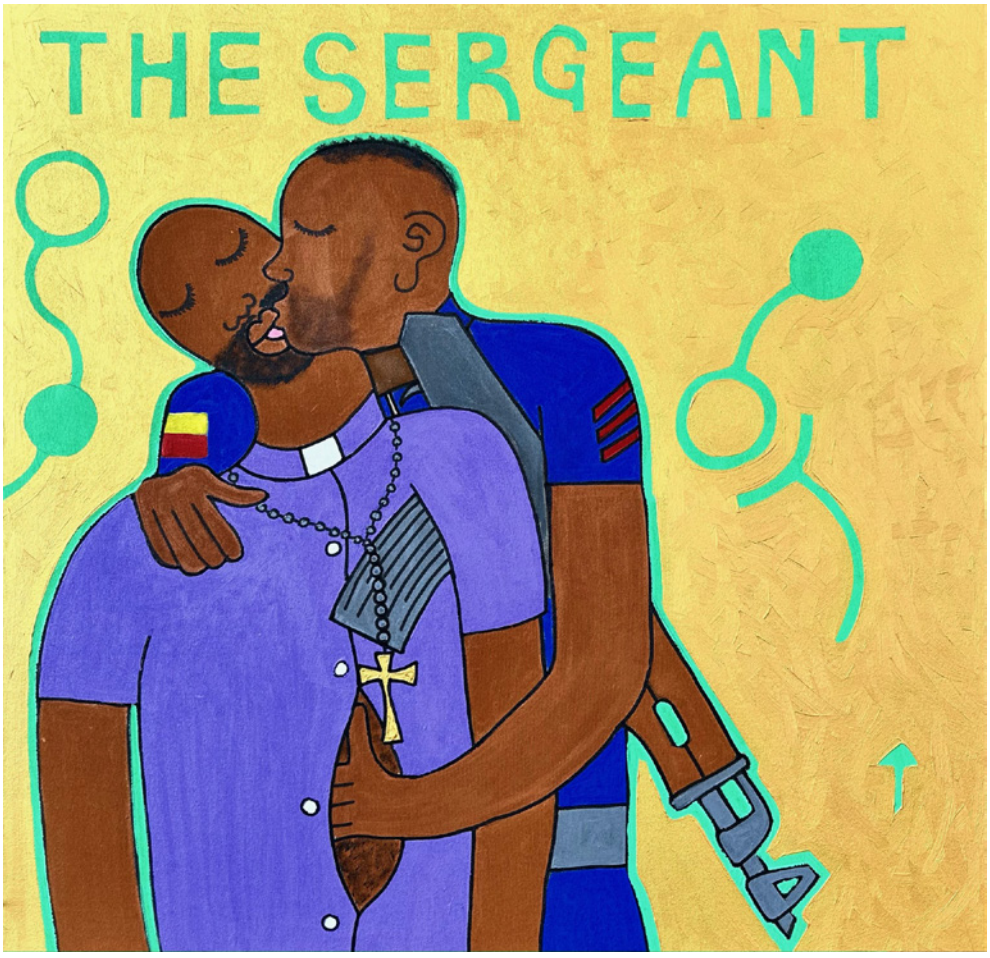

Fig. 15. Michael Soi, *The Sergeant*, 2024, Private Collection, courtesy of the artist.

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