

The EastAfrican

MAGAZINE

Recreating realities with a loaded brush



Sentinel, a Christmas card from Nadir Tharani, and right, Cockerel by David Kigozi. PHOTOS | FRANK WHALLEY

IN SUMMARY

- It is this ability to recreate that is one of the benchmarks of good art. And it is one too often lacking.

Here is the Christmas card that the Tanzanian artist Nadir Tharani was kind enough to email to me.

On the original, his goodwill message was written on the wall.

I returned his greetings and thanked him for his unusual photograph.

No. It was actually an acrylic sketch, he emailed back.

“Once in a while, one has to look at what is around, out there,” he added.

Which goes to show that while I am no longer able to tell a photograph from a painting, at least when sent on a phone, this also supports the theory that art, even a sketch, can offer a greater truth than reality.

For while photographs give a superficial likeness, it is paint that can capture the veracity of a place or a person.

What is particularly interesting is that reality, this integrity of presence and substance, can be conveyed even through fairly loose brushstrokes. So-called super realist art with a sable hair brush or a 4H pencil offers sharper focus but not a clearer truth.

The proof is all around us.

What is needed to pull it off is a full understanding of the subject, which is why Cezanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire, the mountain that overlooked his home, so many dozen times.

Closer to home and to our age, Timothy Brooke did something similar with his broad painting of aloe flowers a few weeks ago; so real you could pluck them.

You are not illustrating the subject — in the case of my Christmas card, an urban landscape of palm tree, sky and a tangle of wires — you are recreating it.

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No attempt at context

It was absent for instance at the exhibition *Social Perceptions* by four artists from the Railway Museum Arts Studio in Nairobi.

The four — Moses Nyawanda, Kevin Ndege, Stephen Njenga and Samwel Njoroge — were advertised as offering “their response to certain social issues in the world we live in today.”

What those issues might be and what the responses were, we were not told.

The paintings, currently at the National Museums of Kenya on Museum Hill, may mean a lot to the artists who laboured over them, but little of that is radiated to visitors.

Nyawanda uses cats as his metaphor — they look like illustrations for a children’s story — while Ndege likes to meld bright colours (notably yellow and pink) in a quasi-surrealist style, Njenga plays with pattern to make find-the-subject guessing games and Njoroge paints women using great swirls of colour.

The problem of reading their responses is compounded by the half-hearted way the exhibition was mounted... bang the pictures on the wall and stick a label next to each with the name and price but that is all. No attempt at context, or at illuminating the artists’ intentions beyond the non-specific blurb quoted above.

The show has all the appearance of something stuck together to fill a space over the holidays rather than to inform, enlighten or even entertain.

And that is a pity given the excellence of the *Who I Am* exhibition in the hall just around the corner; a model examination of our identities that offers something for every visitor.

vigorous cockerels by the Ugandan David Kigozi.

Not to be missed were a group of quirky sculptures of birds by George Kahihu. He caught their cheeky alertness and through that brought them to life.

All great fun and a holiday relief but perhaps a little too light to satisfy serious artistic appetites, although I did buy a bird for a bargain Ksh2,500 (\$25).

I went home to find solace in trawling the net for Cezannes. Real meat. Something you can chew on and be nourished.

And to find pleasure too in admiring afresh my non-photo Christmas card from Tharani.

Frank Whalley runs Lenga Juu, an arts consultancy based in Nairobi.

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