



Real Lives

“I want to portray something that’s authentic to me, as opposed to some imagined version”

The figures in **Wangari Mathenge’s** paintings feel vibrantly alive. But, as she tells **Alejandra Oliva**, don’t assume for a moment that they’re her...

Wangari Mathenge paints people. The people she paints sit up straight or drape across furniture, holding cups of tea or glasses of wine, stiffly perched next to each other or captured during a pause in relaxed conversation. They are people at home, with all the complexities and comforts that home entails.

When I visit Mathenge's studio in Schaumburg, a suburb of Chicago, it's mostly empty. The majority of her paintings are scattered across the globe in Miami, London and Los Angeles for a variety of shows. However, one nearly finished canvas remains, taking up the majority of one wall, looking over us while we speak. The scale of the painting is majestic, even as its subject (a woman in a tracksuit comfortably sprawled on a couch against a vibrant background of orange and blue flowers) is familiarly domestic. As we talk, Mathenge often gestures to the painting, explaining how the colours she used spoke to each other as she painted. She also describes the colour blocking technique she uses to work the canvas over and over again, pulling out and refining details

each time, and discusses the way that painting Black skin requires a vast palette and a mirror to capture the nuances. By the end of the week, this piece too will be shipped out to a show, but for now I get to see it in person, examining its texture and details with my nose mere inches from the canvas.

This is a rare treat in 2021: visiting museums and galleries can mean contending with crowds and the risk of contagion that accompanies them, not exactly invitations to linger and contemplate. Before our conversation, I scroll through Mathenge's Instagram, inhabited by characters lingering and contemplating. Many of the pictures are accompanied by captions that read like short stories, or the subject's internal monologues: "And this is what bothered her, the suggestion that her relaxed tea minded manner indicated an availability of sorts rather than what seemed obvious to her, that it was a much-needed break from the rigours of being in the world as a woman and one of a certain hue at that. The gall."

Many of the women in the paintings resemble Mathenge, and many of the men resemble her husband, a fact she says is more about the convenience of finding models close at hand than about any desire for memorialisation or individual representation. "I use myself because I'm looking for a face, and I have one!" she says, laughing.

Trying to read a biography or a connection to Mathenge's life into her paintings, or considering them self-portraits, feels like an incursion past what she has given on the canvas. "Sometimes I question: 'Isn't what I'm giving enough?'" she wonders. "Why do you feel that the only way that you can connect with my work is by connecting with me?"

Still, it would be a step too far to say there isn't a reflection of Mathenge herself in the art she makes. What is examined in her paintings are the particularities of the face she has painted over and over again. Mathenge is Kenyan, a Black woman living in the United States, in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in America. Earlier this year, she finished an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an experience she describes as being more about the whys of paintings than the hows. For the two years of her degree, professors asked her to mine her Kenyanness, asked questions about authenticity, about Africa, and seemed surprised that the interiors her subjects recline in could be Kenyan, Chicagoan or simply American.

"If I show you an interior, it's just an interior, it's not me grappling with, 'How am I, a Kenyan, living in Chicago?'" she says. "If you came and saw the African interior that I grew up in, it is actually a British interior. My parents lived in England when I was a child, and all the furnishings and the interior of the house were British. In fact, when we moved back to Kenya from England, my parents bought a house that was owned by a colonist, a colonial house." >



Previous spread: *It Is What It Is* (detail), 2021; above: *The Ascendants XX (Here She Is With Mzee and Percy)*, 2021



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> To produce a painting that looked “authentically” Kenyan to largely white audiences, she would have to do research, dive into texts largely produced by colonisers on what Kenya was like at the moment of colonisation, a few too many generations back to be remembered by anyone she knows.

“So if I adopt that as my memory, it is then something that’s imposed on me, it wasn’t from my point of view, or from my parents,” she says. “It’s recreating a very specific view that white people already have for an audience of more white people. I would actually prefer not to have to do this. I want to portray something that’s authentic to me, and that is based on my actual experiences as opposed to some imagined version that comes directly from and is fed back into the same systems of storytelling that get put on us.”

For Mathenge, the authenticity of her subjects, the interiors they populate, their poses and belongings scattered across the room, is more about making a mark in the historical record: this is what it looks like to be a Black Kenyan woman, or a Black Kenyan family, living in a home in Chicago or London or Kenya. These are the things populating their coffee tables, these are the half-read books splayed on the carpet, this is the Toblerone or the Tate’s cookies or the tea set out for guests. However, even as colonialism has rendered the differences between a Kenyan interior and a British or an American one essentially meaningless, she still sees reflections of the diaspora in her home and in her work.

“My interior in Chicago looks essentially the same as that in Kenya,” she says. “To the extent that it looks different, it is because I have carried a piece of home with me that I would not have had at home. What I mean is that if you see an African influence in the Chicago home, you would not see this in the African home. The African home doesn’t need that because you don’t need the validation of being in Africa because Africa is outside. In Chicago, since I don’t have that, then I have brought the fabric (this fabric that I would not use in Africa) here to have a bit of Kenya here.”

The tenderness Mathenge feels for these diasporic homes is evident in the attention to detail of their rendering. The canvases of her *Ascendants* series, which set their protagonists in living rooms replete with Kenyan kanga fabric, have every flower and curling vine of their patterns replicated in oil paints. This care also extends to the subjects of these pieces. Mathenge often works from photographs of herself or her husband, sometimes altering details of the faces or expressions, “allowing one gesture to implicate another gesture” as the layers of paint build up on the canvas. She also works from life in another way, studying her own skin minutely for the varieties and blends of colour rendered invisible by photographs.

“You could look at my skin and then just say, ‘Oh, it’s brown,’ but it’s really not. No, it’s green, it’s blue, it’s yellow. There’s so much in there that then makes up the brown. Interestingly enough, when you look at that,” she gestures at the painting of the reclining woman, “you think that’s brown, but I haven’t used a lick of brown paint to create that. It’s reds, oranges and blues.”

Mathenge’s *The Cacophony of Silence* is more pared down than the canvases for *The Ascendants*, but the attention to detail (especially in the clothes and skin of its subject), the Black woman sitting regally in a throne-like armchair, looking off over the head of the viewer, remains. Nigerian-American writer Enuma Okoro wrote about the painting for the *Financial Times*, describing its female subject as having “a strong sense of self and inner knowing”.

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This, more than anything else, is what distinguishes Mathenge’s work. There’s the sense of a fully realised person behind the layers of paint. Looking at her work, I wonder if the desire to connect her paintings to the painter lies less in an interest in Mathenge’s biography and more with the viewer’s sense of the selfhood that each subject contains.

“If you are trying to translate that this person exists in the world, then for it to be true to the viewer, to someone else, it really has to be a truthful translation, otherwise it just misses its mark,” she says. “In that translation, that’s when the love just comes in, and the beauty of it comes in.”

Even if her Instagram feed were not populated with the stories she has written for her subjects, the viewer would still sense them, lurking just beyond the frame. They would see the annoyance of the woman whose tea has just been interrupted, the knowledge of being observed as a woman plaits her hair, the wariness of a man whose reading has been disturbed. Her work celebrates these emotions and scenes, turning them into moments of beauty that are grounded in the real. Wangari Mathenge paints people.

Wangari Mathenge’s work is included in Black American Portraits at Los Angeles County Museum of Art until 17 April. She has a solo show at Roberts Projects, LA, this year

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