

The Dallas Morning News

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT › VISUAL ARTS

Nairobi-based artist Kaloki Nyamai brings layers of meaning to first U.S. solo show

'Moments I Wished I Had' runs through Oct. 8 at Keijsers Koning in Dallas.



This untitled painting (detail view) from Kaloki Nyamai is among the Kenyan artist's works on display at Keijsers Koning through Oct. 8. (Nan Coulter / Special Contributor)

Cut, stripped, painted, stepped on and stitched.

The canvases of Nairobi-based painter Kaloki Nyamai are best described as constructions of time and memory. Paint is just one dimension through which narrative emerges. Nyamai adds layers of paper, archival photographs and rubber thread to deepen the dialogue.

Out of the physicality of these surfaces, Nyamai paints with mysterious vulnerability the intimacy of our ghost selves and future selves, misremembered and reimagined.

"Moments I Wished I Had," which opened Sept. 10 at Dallas' Keijzers Koning gallery, marks Nyamai's first solo show in the United States. The 35-year-old artist and father of two has had an explosive year. His work is currently showcased in the Kenya pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale, the art world's most prestigious exhibition. His *Untitled (laborer) 2022* was one of 10 works acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art at the Dallas Art Fair earlier this year.

With shows on three continents, a growing base of Black collectors in Los Angeles, and more in Dallas, Nyamai has been energized by the reaction to his work: "It's that thing of silent support, where you're told, 'We are with you. You will never fall if we're here.' And that was so overwhelming until I almost was in tears, because they felt the connection."

Though deeply personal, Nyamai's paintings are able to embody a seemingly universal connection to personal memory and collective history. His dynamic and time-intensive process



Kaloki Nyamai uses layers of paint, paper, archival photographs and rubber thread to deepen the dialogue of his paintings. (Nan Coulter / Special Contributor)

of preparing a canvas symbolizes how layers of information, story and image accrue to form our understanding of ourselves and our world.

Nyamai described his process in very down-to-earth terms on a recent WhatsApp call. “It is like when you go to the streets and you see posters in the street, and then you will see a poster from last year,” the artist said. “Another poster on top of each other, another one on top of each other. You can tell. ‘Oh, this thing has been [pasted] over a certain period of time.’”

Nyamai re-creates this weathering effect by distressing the work — even going so far as to step on his canvases. It’s a process that made gallery owner Bart Keijsers Koning anxious at first. But Nyamai reassured him that anything that falls off in the process needs to; anything that remains becomes an essential part of the creative record.

History moves like a band of ticker tape across each painting, in haunting, grayed-out backgrounds collaged with archival, newspaper and personal photographs. Only after that do figures emerge, pulled out from the river of time and foregrounded in colors of yellow, turquoise, Pepto pink and Prussian blue.

Six of the show’s seven works unfold subjunctive memories, recollections the artist hoped had been true in his life: a young boy looking onto a scene of tenderness and affection, a couple clasping hands as they pose for a photograph, a father — possibly the artist’s — holding his son on his back, a mother holding a young child as a father turns and leaves. (For a run? For good?)

The way Nyamai reconfigures the canvas and abstracts the human form distinguishes him from many Black artists within the diaspora who also focus on painting the body. That’s part of the reason Keijsers Koning is excited to expose U.S. audiences to Nyamai’s oeuvre.

“Where figurative work stops, this kind of painting begins,” Keijsers Koning says.

The figures that come to life in “Moments I Wished I Had” — as much as the backgrounds they emerge from — reveal the struggle of the artist to render the memory into paint. Figures aren’t always rendered anatomically; a threaded outline of a nose or mouth whispers of a face.

Nyamai leaves the paintings unresolved, which oddly feels more truthful to the subject matter. This tension animates a much more expressive composition, capturing the tender and provisional posture with which we must approach even our best efforts at (re)constructing a life.

“I always have an idea of what I’m going to do, but I never know how it’s going to come out,” the artist says. “It’s like working somewhere new, where you’re expecting something. You might be surprised.”

Painting in a post-colonial and wartorn context, Nyamai attempts to raise questions about how Kenyans can create an expansive future for themselves in the wake of violence. Individuals across the diaspora and the world resonate with this question: The body needs stitching; the ground needs stitching; so does the wounded soul, and also the collective imagination. That’s where the mass of threads that spool and hang from the paintings come in.

“It’s like going through the fire or going through an accident where you have an open wound. You have to be stitched together, so you can have a new beginning,” Nyamai says.



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Each work on view is composed of fragments of unstretched canvas sutured together with crude and irregular stitches done with sturdy rubber wire. In addition to making allusions to Nyamai's grandmother and mother's practices of basketry and fashion design, this choice draws visual attention to the personal and social attempt at repair after trauma.

The artist says the threads were the result of an accidental experiment that came out of his 2019 Nairobi show "The Fire This Time," inspired by James Baldwin's seminal book *The Fire Next Time*.

Whether attempting to mend the strained interpersonal relationship between a father and son or weave a new future for post-colonial Kenya, the stitches are not done cleanly. Thick black threads pour from the skin of Nyamai's figures, reaching out possibly to connect to the viewer or to obscure their forms from view.

"Moments I Wished I Had" reminds us that art, like history itself, is not simply an object to be admired but a process that entangles us "in the space between now and the past," as the artist puts it. That between space is revealed on the surface of Nyamai's composition after all that needs to fall off has fallen off, once the wounds have been sutured and fractal memories collected. Only then can we responsibly, if at all, talk about wishes and dreams, about a future where all the threads might finally come together.

Details

Kaloki Nyamai's "Moments I Wished I Had" runs through Oct. 8 at Keijzers Koning, 150 Manufacturing St., Suite 201, Dallas. Wednesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Monday and Tuesday by appointment only.

keijzerskoning.com



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