Motifs of Modernization and Urbanization in Paintings from the Collection of the Makerere Art Gallery /HCR in Kampala

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Dating back to 1937, Makerere University’s School of Fine Arts — today, the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA) — was the first and, for many years, the only institution of formal art education in East Africa. In 1969, the Makerere Art Gallery was constructed with funds from the Gulbenkian Foundation, providing exhibition space for artworks by the faculty and students.¹ The gallery’s collection, gathered from the 1950s, is the only public historic collection of modern Ugandan art. Since the country does not have a national art museum or a comparable institution with a mandate to collect artworks, the university continues to fill this gap. Additionally, the collection represents a significant part of modern art production in East Africa and beyond, claiming lecturers and students from Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Sudan and Zimbabwe, among others. Moreover, it showcases different discourses and influences within formal art education across generations.² Indeed, it is a unique resource for local, national and international researchers.³

This visual essay presents a selection of images that engage with and depict technical modernisation and urbanisation. It is a collage of images combined with findings from the archiving process, as well as excerpts from scholarly research and interpretation of those works in different art historic contexts. By focusing on motives of technology, architecture and changes in the urban environment, recurring themes in painting at Makerere, it offers insight into the collection’s body and introduces some of the artists represented.

MORDECAI BULUMA

Born in 1936, Mordecai Buluma was one of the early Makerere art students and graduated in 1960. He was an actively practicing artist, at least throughout the 1960s. Three of his works became part of an image collection of contemporary African art by the Harmon Foundation, a nonprofit, private foundation that was active until 1967. The collection of images is kept in the National Archives in the United States. In 1984, Buluma with Fathma Abdullah and Elimo Njau,

² Margaret Trowell, the founder of the school, promoted the approach of keeping modern influences away from her students. Rather, she encouraged putting emphasis on spiritual and cultural beliefs and motifs and using these as inspiration for artwork. Her successor, Cecil Todd, presented a more universal approach to art education. He introduced courses in art history to the curriculum and moved away from an Africa-centred model.
³ Recently, the Institute of Heritage Conservation and Restoration was founded under the roof of the College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT). It is located in the Makerere Art Gallery within the MTSIFA campus.
both former Makerere students as well, co-curated the exhibition: *Sanaa: Contemporary Art from East Africa* for the Commonwealth Institute, London.

*The Rocket Kiln* is one of the early paintings in the gallery collection. It seems very likely that it was inspired by the sensation of Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin’s travel into space on 12 April 1962.
HENRY LUMU

Henry Lumu (1939-1989) was a painter and art educator. He completed his art education degree at the Makerere art school in 1963. Lumu, whose art was strongly anchored within the precise drawing of form, gradually modified the shapes and tones of his work towards an innovative semi-abstract style. He was an active voice in the debate about teaching abstract techniques, arguing in favor of proper acquisition of drawing skills as a necessary foundation for artistic development. The artist participated in and won a few art competitions organised by petroleum corporation Esso to produce the company’s annual art calendar, which was widely distributed each year throughout the region, giving a great exposure to selected artists. Beginning in 1968, Lumu held regularly televised art classes on Uganda National Television. This broad exposure helped to stimulate growth of a dynamic, extended art community, which was based around, but expanded well beyond, the Makerere campus.4

THEOPHILUS TABBARO

Theophilus Tabbaro, an artist and printmaking student at Makerere art school between 1968 and 1972, chose the rural setting of his native Ankole region in Western Uganda as the stage for a dramatic series of images of giant machines. In a block-print, a huge road grader invades Bahima land. Having run over some cattle, the intruding machine and its operators now face the outraged crowd. In the small painting of a solitary bulldozer at work, the earth below shows abstract, amorphous forms resembling trampled humans and animals. This unusual focus on the object suggests that alongside his inclination to see giant instruments as metaphors for alien strength and drastic change, Tabbaro is also interested in their massive, complex forms, structures and actions. The powerful, imposing machine becomes an independent entity in the artist’s iconography, appearing in the painting as much as an aestheticised visual form as the image of a specific object. According to the American art historian Sanyal, Tabbaro, like the Italian Futurists of the early decades of the 20th century, acknowledges the machine as an agent of change. However, the Ugandan artist also diverges from the Futurists, for he does not idolise the machine. Rather, it becomes Tabbaro’s metaphor for the modernities he could see around him.5

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AK MUBITANA

There is not much information available about AK Mubitana, the author of this painting, but the work represents a particular period in the story of the art school when emerging modernism and mixed abstract styles converged and arguably defined the period. Uganda celebrated independence in 1962, and all of the selected paintings come from that era of optimism and reflections of imposed modernity. It is possible to see throughout the collection the reoccurrence of motifs such as this one, which depicts a scene that at the time was an expression of the most modern technologies available, and of the fears they brought with them.

AK Mubitana
Disaster, 1963
Oil on hardboard
64,8 x 95,8 cm

HENRY TAYALI

Henry Tayali (1943-1987) is probably Zambia’s most famous painter. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts at Makerere University in the 1960s. In Village Bar (late 1960s), he used a fauvist style to articulate a narrative of activities, including socialisation, alcoholism and drunkenness. By the mid 1960s, urban bars like Suzana Night Club, which was located in Nakulabye neighborhood of Kampala, only a kilometer away from the University’s campus,
were popular as spaces for socialisation. Traditionalists sharply criticised them for eroding African values. Tayali’s work exposed African nationalism and deep concerns for the African urban masses uncomfortably uprooted from their traditions.6 After graduating from Makerere, he continued his education in Germany.

CHARLES MUKIIBI

Following Angelo Kakande’s reading of Charles Mukiibi’s painting, Dispensary (1960s), we can see an expression of the artist’s concern with maternal health and child mortality:

The artist captures a receding space. To the right we see a naked child sitting, in an erect pose, on a table.

There is no medical equipment in sight at all. Instead we see a creature which, given its long tail, could be identified as a monkey, nursing the child. It has replaced the mother, who turns her back towards the artist’s audience and her child. With her hand on the head, she is probably crying or thinking about what to do next as she walks about in a tiled space.7

The painting also represents a modern interior, people living in modern homes, away from traditional houses. Its style and visual language differs quite significantly from the other works in the collection. Sadly, little is known about Mukiibi and who he became after leaving the art school.

Charles Mukiibi
Dispansary, 1960’s
Oil on board
59 x 42 cm

JAMES BUKHALA

*Window Cleaner* (c. 1959-1963) by Kenyan art student James Bukhala, reduces a familiar campus scene to numerous geometric segments. Sunanda Sanyal analyses the painting:

Instead of rendering the subject abstract, however, he overlays the geometric configurations on a naturalistic picture surface. We as a result seem to be looking at the scene though a piece of segmented, coloured glass. In this maze of shapes and colour, while the leaning broom-handle on the right and part of the high-stool in the left corner echo the overall geometric orientation, they also accentuate a compositional asymmetry. These objects on the periphery allow us to casually connect with what is otherwise a tightly organised space. Bukhala’s painstaking application of paint into tiny dabs and his distribution of colour not only define the volume of each object, but as in Msangi’s work, they help unify the scene. For example, repetition of the blue of the sky and the red of the roof in the wall, floor, and the buckets, establishes a harmony between the inside and the outside.⁸

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ALLAN BIRABI

Allan Birabi was born in 1942. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts at Makerere in 1985 and then pursued a PhD in architecture. Currently, he lectures in the Department of Architecture and Physical Planning at Makerere University, where he is strongly engaged in the preservation of Uganda’s architectural heritage. Birabi’s interests lie in urban conservation, poverty eradication, sustainable ecosystems and public art.

Many artists critiqued urban authorities and service delivery in Kampala. Cityscapes are a recurring subject in paintings of the 1980s and 1990s. Urbanity as a living condition has become a social reality for many people. Respecting and conserving the urban heritage of different origins and times needs to be balanced with the necessary process of modernisation.
SEVERINO MATTI

Volume 30 (1967) of Transition featured four paintings by the South Sudanese artist Severino Matti (*1937). 9 These paintings show his composition style in depicting mass rural scenes by applying a build up from a very detailed foreground far into the background space. In The City, Matti presents a panoramic view of the growing urban centre of Kampala, with its bustling taxi-park occupying a large space. The viewer’s position is at street level, which emphasises the dominating role of modern architecture in Kampala’s cityscape.

Severino Matti
The City, 1963-1967
Oil on board

EA LUTAAKOME

EA Lutaakome is a graduate of Makerere art school. His Untitled (1984) depicts the joblessness, congestion and dilapidation of Kampala in the mid-1980s, just before the NRM seized power. This style of filling large canvasses with a very detailed narrative, almost like a story in pictures, is commonly referred to as mural and can be seen as the art school’s signature format. The symbolism of a degenerated Kampala as depicted in Lutaakome’s idioms has remained a popular artistic symbol in Uganda’s arts since the 1980s. According to Kakande, ‘it grew out of earlier idioms of the late 1970s and continued into the 1990s. For example, Jane Okot p’Bitek, in her poetry published in Song of Farewell (1994), projected a Kampala like Lutaakome’s, full “of rotting garbage of bayaye,” 10 polluted air and ‘tormented children.’ 11

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10 Street children.
Another of Lutaakome’s paintings is a very evocative impression of a garage somewhere in Kampala.

EA Lutaakome
*Garage*, 1981
Egg tempera on manila
76 x 92.5 cm

PILKINGTON N SSENGENDO

Pilkington N Ssengendo, born in 1942, is a renowned Ugandan painter who has exhibited widely. He studied at the Makerere School of Fine Arts, where he became a lecturer and has served as the Dean since 1992. His earlier work shows mainly impressionistic landscapes around Kampala in an elaborate technique. Later he concentrated his studies on the influence of African material culture in art. He believes that the modern African artist has to understand his roots first in order to be confident and self-assured, even when handling abstract and modern art, which tends to go beyond figurative or narrative reporting.\(^\text{12}\)

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Pilkington Ssengendo
Kampala Roof Tops, 1984
Oil on hardboard

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STEPHEN KASUMBA

Born in 1960, Stephen Kasumba pursued his art education first at Kyambogo University and later at the Makerere art school, graduating in 1999 with an MA in Fine Art. He is an independent artist pursuing his own goals. In his paintings, Kasumba examines the origins of the nature and destiny of human beings in relation to historical and cultural aspects of her/his beliefs. Like Trowell, Kasumba passionately believes that Africans have their own inimitable ways of dealing with the forces of nature of which sculpture and material culture are visible signs. He contends that if he is to create an African modernity, he must recapture the lost force that led him (‘the African’) there, and in order to achieve this, he must subvert several of the academic rules of pictorial construction. Kasumba’s paintings are emotionally charged. He achieves maximum expressive intent by balancing emotional qualities and dramatic properties of form. The Slum explores poor living conditions in Kampala.

William Opolot Okitoi graduated in 1990 from the Makerere art school. He used his art to express his critique of the NRM’s failure to end what Museveni called the ‘cancer of

corruption. In his dissertation on the relation of art and politics in Uganda, Kakande gives an interpretation of this narrative mural. Concerned with the ways the corrupt NRM elite exploited the rural masses, Okitoi used open hands at the centre of his composition to receive and convey the excess labor of the working, but mainly rural, peasant agricultural class, through a tunnel, which terminates on a table where the act of exploitation takes place. As if to heighten emotions, Okitoi recalls the politics of naked and exposed children of the 1970s-1980s. He introduces a baby to the left of the composition. Here too, the infant is naked and vulnerable. The presence of the baby accentuates the commitment of the working woman, who unreservedly works the fields at the expense of tending to her vulnerable child. What we therefore confront in Okitoi’s work is a reappropriation of earlier visual vocabularies to suit new challenges. He redeploy the mother and child symbolism to mount a pointed attack on the corruption that NRM cadres inherited and perpetuated under the new dispensation.

William Opolot Okitoi
Untitled (Corruption)
Oil on board
120 x 210cm

REX REGIS SEMULYA

Rex Regis Semulya graduated from the art school at Makerere in the late 1980s. Like many of his peers he later became an educator, in his case the much-appreciated Headmaster of Namugongo Secondary School. Semulya produced his *Untitled* (1987) visualising the intense reconstruction efforts that followed the civil war. His painting is an example of positive sentiment towards the new President Museveni and his NRM government that had taken over in 1986. It represents idealistic and hopeful depictions of a new Uganda.

Charles Kaggwa studied art at Makerere from 1987 to 1990 and became well known for his meticulously detailed style, which he perfected as a batik artist. His painting, *Untitled* (1990), depicts extreme poverty, disease and homelessness in Kampala. In Kakande’s reading, it captures the presence of marabou storks, that recently had become common in urban areas, feeding from uncollected refuse. The viewer is confronted with the omnipresence of garbage in the city and the resultant living conditions. It shows a marabou stork, stray animals and a destitute person scavenging the trash. Kaggwa also hints towards the dangers, which the urban

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poor and stray animals face due to the ominous presence of rat poison.17

Charles Kaggwa
*Untitled (Kampala)*, 1990
Oil on board
94 x 125cm

Nearly a decade later, apocalyptic visions of Kampala predominate Rogers Anguzu’s paintings from the late-1990s. In his work, *Untitled* (1999), he uses a graphic narrative showing the run-down urban spaces in informal settlements. Against the modern high-rises in the background, the living conditions in impoverished parts of town unfold and, at the centre of the foreground, the artist depicts a violent scene. The painting bluntly shows the lack of basic infrastructure, hygiene and proper housing.  

![Rogers Anguzu](Untitled (Kampala), 1999)

*Oil on canvas*  
*88 x 122cm*

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18 Ibid. p 235-237.