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Original Article

### ‘Derivation of Subject Matter/Content from Themes among University Fine Art Students - Analysis of Selected Paintings by Students at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

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*Painting,  
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Spontaneity.*

In certain painting unit requirements, students are expected to interpret themes and generate appropriate subject matter that ultimately expresses or depicts how they artistically interpret given themes and generate painted pictorial compositions that showcase the same. Themes are specific compartments or clusters of the description of life in its natural existence or manifestations. Themes may feature the environment, nature, manifestations, occurrences, perceptions, and philosophies that are segmented in a way that is orderly and comprehensible to human beings. Hence themes are as broad-based as the entire body of manifestations that underscore human existence, endeavours, and behaviours. Without this demarcation and description of themes, it would be difficult to understand the myriad of ways in which human beings respond to their existence. Since themes are broad and exciting from an artistic context, they are, in essence, infinite and have to be broken down into fathomable subject matter that the artist can accommodate, justify, and explain; and the audience can, subsequently, appreciate and rationalize. Fine art students are, in this regard, introduced to the importance of themes as consolidated lenses through which the world is viewed, but more importantly, the need to develop the skill of deconstructing themes into tangible subject matter or digestible content. The ability to break down themes into specific content is of importance to student artists as they learn to construct their ideas. These ideas, whether or not they bear a certain element of spontaneity, are based on some form of focused response to a given inspiration. The issue of spontaneity and precision of thematic interpretation can often be confusing to students and artists alike but while they all must be aware of the need for a thematic approach to their work, they must be at the same time mindful of the need for expressive freedom and space. This paper seeks to determine the extent to which subject matter is used by students as a strategy for expressing themselves and, further, the extent to which the content they develop within this subject matter is successfully derived from themes as a source of inspiration. The paintings featured

in this paper were developed during the course of the semester at Kenyatta University and were in specific response to the derivation of subject matter from themes. The students were, however, free to interpret themes in the way they found appropriate and were not bound to depict certain contents or contexts in their work. In keeping with the general belief that paintings are themselves not necessarily based on the dogmatism or rigidity of themes in their expressiveness, and in being careful not to stifle the ability of students to express their ideas, the students were encouraged to display a level of spontaneity in their work which is a hallmark of the beauty of the painting. This paper pre-supposes, therefore, that an effective approach to the development of good paintings is found in their spontaneity just as much as it is found in the interpretation or breakdown of themes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Themes, by their own description in art, are a phenomenon that is descriptive of the universality of life. Life as we know it manifests and unfolds in many ways, and these manifestations are probably best understood when they are categorized into both broad and specific thematic compartments. Some themes dwell on the physical; that is, what the eye can fathom such as beauty in all its manifestations, nature, and the environment. There are themes that dwell on perceptions and interpretations of the mind; the philosophical, fantasies, dreams, the descriptive, the prejudices, the stereotypes, the bizarreness, thoughtfulness, or lack of it, beauty, or lack of it. There are those that dwell on occurrences and events that have implications on the well-being of human beings such as conflicts, catastrophes,

extremities, war, and peace as well as history itself. There are those that dwell on the goodness or folly of human nature such as in the case of leadership or lack of it, politics, deceit, and many other manifestations. They, therefore, encompass how human beings think, behave, react to, and respond to the myriad of descriptive occurrences that unfold right before their eyes.

Themes are, therefore, exciting and infinite as a reservoir for artistic inspiration and expression. As a basic approach to painting and the generation of subject matter, students are encouraged to study themes as a paramount source of their inspirational ideas from where they can consolidate their thoughts and generate a fair amount of creativity and expressiveness. Molina (2021) asserts that 'No art can be made without a definite theme. If you are

making a scenery, it will come under the head ‘the natural world’ and like this, every subject comes under a theme. An artist can show anything in a very creative and presentable manner. Themes are often implied or implicit rather than explicit and although it would be problematic to demand that a work of art must manifest deep thematic content, it would be unusual for a work of art, on the other hand, not to imply or underscore some inherent thematic exploration, since there is no visual work that exists in a vacuum of thought. Themes are, therefore, not ideas as such, since they already exist in one form or other; they are instead, seen as a huge repository of inspirational phenomena that underscore the very many and varied facets of life as it exists and unfolds from time to time.

An artist then picks an aspect of this repository and utilizes it to *construct visual/artistic ideas*; in this regard, themes inspire ideas and expressiveness that the artist then utilizes to propagate a point of view. This is the reason why themes must be inculcated in the mindset of students since they shall always be useful in the way they view life’s experiences than would otherwise be the case. When students are made aware of the existence of broad themes and their universality, they become better equipped to generate subject matter within the realm of artistic composition that helps them to sharpen their creativity. In this thinking, themes are not ‘generated’, but are ‘interpreted’; and this interpretation requires a certain amount of thoughtfulness in order to create artistic ideas that lead to the composition of subject matter. Artists hence generate subject matter by interpreting themes through thinking, attaching a possible philosophical connotation, sketching, composing, and execution.

On the usefulness and purpose of themes, Berends (2018) observes, ‘Why is it so crucial for an artist to have a theme? Shouldn’t you be free to paint anything you want? Of course, you should, but I find that having a broad theme, almost like an umbrella under which you create your paintings,

gives an artist a chance to develop his or her work and explore the creative possibilities both technical and visual. This paper, therefore, asserts that irrespective of how creative students are bound to be, they need to work within the framework of themes rather than in a vacuum of themes; this way they are best focused and challenged to bring forth their best ideas and interpretations. Alexander (2022) observes that ‘Working without boundaries may fascinate you as an artist but having a theme and a certain framework can allow you to excel in your creative journey without dilly-dallying. It can help you get exciting results that you might not have even imagined’.

### **Derivation of Subject Matter/Content in Art**

Subject matter in the context of this paper refers to the interpretation of a given thematic consideration that guides an artist into breaking down that theme into a tangible and purposeful artistic composition that focuses on a pertinent and particular aspect of that theme. It refers to what the work is about or the visual representation of the work; in this regard, artists utilize images of people, objects, symbols, representations, places, spaces, and many other items to construct an initial visual idea or narrative in ‘response’ to their interpretations. The subject matter is, therefore, not merely whether a work is a still life or a landscape as is often alluded to, but it is a purposeful visual interpretation that features what the artist wishes to construct. In this regard, Punzalan (2018) in reference to the work of Jolley (2016) on Art education posits that ‘Some of the advantages of arts education are: developing the students’ imagination and creativity; allowing them to understand and express their feelings and ideas; aiding them to understand and visualize other core subjects; helping them to observe the world around them; supporting them in the decisions- making and in solving problems; and in developing values such as concentration and persistence’.

Punzalan (2018) also references the assertion of Ochshorn (2016) who further references the work of

Eisner (2013) in asserting that, ‘Arts Education is important because it improves performance. She claimed that it improved learning skills, school attendance, critical thinking skills, and creativity. A good arts education is built on and reflects recognition of the specific and unique way that the arts shape people's thinking and their lives’. In this regard, the subject matter is the basis of the specific content that the artist pursues in the composition of a work of art that the audience can interact with and interrogate. The two are, therefore, intertwined or one can be said to be the subset of the other. Composition involves the interaction between elements and principles of art and design, and in painting in particular, this interaction is what ultimately constitutes the essence of the work.

Students often find the confluence between themes, subject matter, and content a little confusing and are not initially able to draw the line between them. For instance, the theme ‘*Poverty*’ is neither an idea nor a concept; it exists as a phenomenon in its different descriptions and manifestations in the lives of human beings. Therefore, ideally, one cannot paint poverty but can create an artistic composition or a visual interpretation that seeks to display an aspect of it that is descriptive of the perils of its occurrence in each context. This is done through the placement of various forms, figures, or shapes on a picture plane that helps build the initial visual composition. When this is then developed into a holistic composition with the use of elements, principles, techniques, and all, we start to see the emergence of permeation of content which, in this case, would be the specific message that the artist wants the audience to feel or empathize about the perils of poverty. Themes are themselves universal and cover a wide array of human endeavours, experiences, and aspirations; but the way they are interpreted by different artists in terms of both content and context makes all the difference and adds impetus to artistic thought and creativity. The *content* in a painting and other works of art such as sculptures, epitomize the emotional and/or intellectual message that the artist

wishes to propagate; that is, the expression, core statement, and the mood that the artist portrays and which the audiences can relate with and interpret. The subject matter also encompasses the circumstance or the environment in which the message is constructed; this is the *context* of the work. A well-thought-out subject matter will often not only depict the content of the painting which can easily be visually deciphered but will also suggest the context in which the content is internalized, very much like the context in which a plot takes place. In the paintings depicted in this paper, and in conversation with students, it is evident that students often bear a context in their work that is specific to their environment or circumstances. ‘Context’ as an approach to analysing paintings is, therefore, extremely important in understanding the thinking, inspiration, emotional state, and experiential undercurrents that drive the artist. In the case of student artists, it helps in formulating subject matter in a way that is unique or specific to that artist.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework for the paintings in this paper is approached from the three main perspectives from which analysis of artistic work is regularly carried out. *Subject*, *Form*, and *Content* constitute the three age-old components of art that ultimately form the basis for any artistic analysis. Slight emphasis is, however, found necessary to highlight certain pertinent aspects that are unique to students’ work. These are the usage of colour, since these are paintings, and the derivation of subject matter from the engaging lenses of students since it is presumed that there is always a purpose behind the creation of the paintings.

### Subject

The subject ordinarily refers to the ‘*what*’ in the composition of a work of art and hence refers generally to the subject matter itself. It is important

to determine what the student artist had in mind and what he or she *intended* to portray or express and hence what their specific *motivation* was. It is not always necessary, however, that a student must have a specific ‘intent’ to express something pertinent or specific; some paintings are spontaneous and ideas at times, erratic but this is what makes glimpses into students’ work quite engaging.

### Form

Form refers to the entire or overall organization of an artwork that forms the complete composition that describes the artwork. It is, therefore, the culmination of the purposeful use of the elements in alignment with the principles which give them order and focused purpose. The analysis in terms of form is really about ‘*how*’ the painting was created and the reasons why the artist may have made certain choices in the creation of their work.

### Content

The content refers to the emotional, philosophical, or intellectual message in the work of art. In most paintings or other artworks, there is always the quest to understand ‘*why*’ the artist came up with the form as it is presented. This is often buried deep into the thoughts of the artist and may be difficult to unravel unless one interview the artist. However, when the work is closely examined there are often enough clues that galvanize an adequate argument into the artist’s reasons for his or her painting; either emanating from certain experiential or tethered emotions, personal points of view that underscore one’s intellect as well as philosophical stand-points

### Context

Ordinarily, contextual analysis refers to historical and cultural purposes and meanings that are attached to a work of art and is closely related to formal analysis since formal analysis is fundamental. Within the definition of this paper, the context of the painting shall extend to the descriptive circumstance in which each painting

was done; very much like understanding the setting of its creation. This is often overlooked in analysing students’ work but has been found to bear a critical perspective in this study because paintings often bear their contexts. These contexts are intertwined with the intent and motivation of each student since the subject matter or content of a painting cannot be fully comprehended without appreciating its context. Even when students refer to the same thematic foundations and generate related or similar subject matter, their interpretations are likely to be different since their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are different.

### Use of Colour

The application of colour is always a fundamental aspect of painting. Colours tell a great deal about what the artist wishes to portray in terms of feeling and mood as well as the holistic expression in a painting. The use and application of colour is also important in the way the audiences respond to the content of the painting and the internalization of the message therein. Colour plays an important role in the composition of a painting by harmonizing/contrasting, unifying, producing rhythms, creating areas of emphasis as well as creating visual paths in the way the viewer’s eyes scan over a painting. All these roles are interrelated in producing a painting that does not disturb the rhythmical flow of the eye and the audience can, therefore, be guided into enjoying the essence of its content.

### Formal Analysis

Formal analysis refers to the visual description of a work of art that confines itself to the specifics of the visual structure, that is, the formal arrangement of elements and principles that culminates in a composition. It does not dwell on the subject matter or the content of the work, the contextual aspects, or the poetics emanating from or attached to the artwork. This does not mean that all these others are not tools of holistic analysis, it is only that formal



analysis specifies form as the central focus of examining an artwork. Munsterberg (2009) notes that “Formal analysis is a specific type of visual description. Unlike ekphrasis, it is not meant to evoke the work in the reader’s mind. Instead, it is an explanation of the visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition”. There is nothing unusual in an ekphrastic approach to the general analysis of a painting or a work of art; indeed, some people prefer a holistic, vivid, or even dramatic approach to the descriptive analysis of artworks. Munsterberg (2009) further notes that “Strictly speaking, the subject is not considered and neither is historical or cultural context. The purest formal analysis is limited to what the viewer sees. Because it explains how the eye is led through a

work, this kind of description provides a solid foundation for other types of analysis”.

Subsequently, it is important to understand that a painting has its formal layout structure which is critical in outlining the fundamental basis upon which all other types of interrogations occur.

## ANALYSIS OF WORK

The paintings featured in this paper are testimony to the myriad of ways in which student artists approach the whole idea of thematic interpretation and formulation of subject matter. They were not influenced in any particular way and were free to interpret themes as they found artistically appropriate.



Plate 1: *'Mother's love'* (2020)  
Student Artist – Joshua Thuku Miano  
Oils on canvas – 50 x 70 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art*

The concept of a ‘mother’s love can be expressed in many ways within the realm of human beings or even that of animals. In *'Mother's love'* (Plate 1) the student artist opts to express this love through a family of cats, implying in retrospect, that animals bear the capacity to express the same within their feline world; that they have feelings that resonate within themselves. This is evident through the expression on the faces as well as the interactive gestural pose between the two cats. The artist



Plate 2: *'Landscape'* (2021)  
Student Artist – Otembo Abdulkarim  
Oil on Canvas – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art*

further implies that human beings might not appreciate this connection between animals, since they are of a different species but that it probably exists with the same intensity as that of human beings if one were to be admitted into the cat world. Human beings have studied animals in the wild or in their domesticated form but may never have internalized the extent to which animals develop their interrelationships, particularly as pertains to love or loss, as has been often perceived, for

instance, in elephants. It then becomes a phenomenon because we shall never really comprehend the extent to which the concept of love manifests in animals.

The '*landscape*' (Plate 2) is a departure from the normal realistic renditions that students undertake. The painting is composed of an array of colours that capture the scenery without minute details but show spontaneity of composition and colour application. In the spirit of impressionism, the painting is

executed with the use of short textured brushstrokes and bright colours that lead the viewer through the essence of the landscape itself, not through details but through eye movement that picks only the essentials. Student artists, at times, want to explore their visual experience rather than to 'describe' the subject of the scenery. The student artist, however, depicts a river cascading down a river valley amid the green and lush vegetation, breaking into miniature rapids as it settles downstream.



Plate 3: '*Street boy*' (2020)

Student Artist – Frida Ijai

Oils on PVC – 60 x 80 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

The '*Street boy*' (Plate 3) is a painting of a street boy sniffing 'shoe glue', a popular concoction of adhesives that bear an intoxicating quality when inhaled continuously. The student artist depicts the element of despair and decadence in the life of a street boy. The painting is, therefore, a commentary on this social scourge that relegates so many young people to the periphery of life throughout their lives. The artist observes in her notes, "I went to visit my

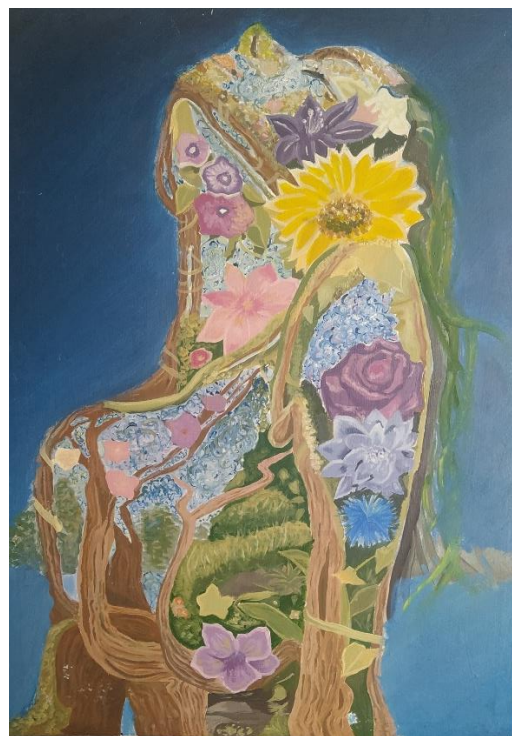


Plate 4: '*Mother nature*' 2021)

Student Artist – Ruby Moraa

Oil on Canvas – 80 x 60 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

brother who lives in the outskirts of Nairobi city and just before I reached there, a group of street kids caught my attention and I got really touched by the way they lived; I could see that they were really struggling to get by and living on the periphery of life. Subsequently, when I thought of an appropriate subject matter, I decided to create a painting that would tell their story to those who may never encounter them".



In '*Mother nature*' (Plate 4) the student artist superimposes the concept of nature, specifically flowers, by painting flower images within a female form. Flowers epitomize the delicateness and charm of femininity yet the concept of Mother Nature is all-encompassing with embedded strength. The student, hence, depicts the confluence between the delicateness of femininity and the strength of a

woman. These kinds of exploratory paintings provide students with the opportunity to pursue the full extent of the images that flow in their minds. These images, which can be bizarre or even surrealist, may seek to express a certain phenomenon that cannot otherwise manifest in the real world but that might hold some innate truths.



Plate 5: '*Thunder within*' (2021)  
Student Artist – Elizabeth Kiambi  
Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In the '*Thunder within*' (Plate 5), the student describes the obstacles that often prevent an individual from achieving his/her full potential, including alcohol and substance abuse. But when you have time to reflect upon your own light in your own personal silence, you create the environment within which you see the radiance of your full potential, seen through the shiny eyes, akin to the blossoming of the full moon. She, therefore, emphasizes the power of self-reflection as a panacea for self-realization. The student observes, 'When you make the determination to escape from the dark cloud that surrounds you, only then will you see

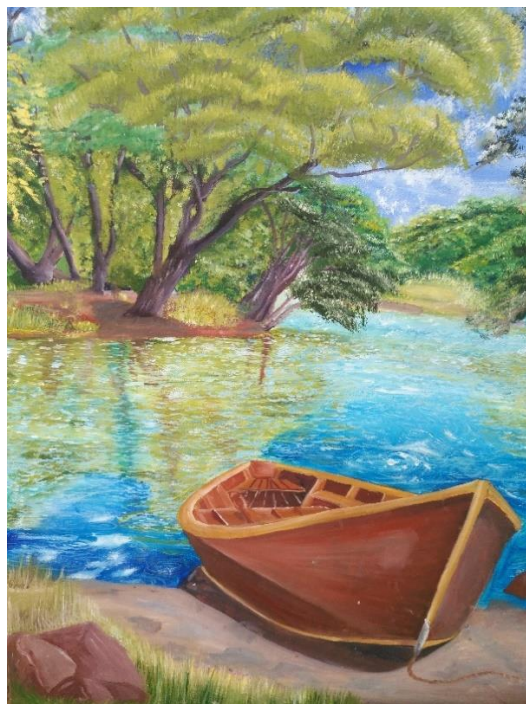


Plate 6: '*Boat by the river side*' (2021)  
Student Artist – Sandra Esendi  
Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

your light as radiant as the full moon'. Human beings are often not accustomed to moments of personal silence which creates the opportunity for personal reflection which, in turn, leads to moments of personal enlightenment. Hence, she observes, 'When I'm silent, I have thunder hidden within'.

The '*Boat by the riverside*' landscape painting (Plate 6) depicts scenery where the student selects interesting aspects of the study, including the boat in the immediate foreground. This descriptive painting essentially 'describes' the scenery as it appears. Although a boat is not considered part of a



natural landscape mainly because, unlike a tree trunk, it is not a static natural object, it is often seen as an object of artistic interest when placed as an embellishment within the picture plane or appears within the scope of view of the scenery itself. The student studies the trees in the background and puts substantial effort into studying the effect of the reflections and waves on the water indicating the

flow of the river and ultimately giving the composition its substance. She depicts a perspective, seen from the boat in the foreground to the edge of the river on the far end, which also creates a sense of depth. The colours are rich and naturalistic and are applied using a variety of tones that help to differentiate various parts of the composition.



Plate 7: 'Divinity series' (2021)  
Student Artist – Elizabeth Kiambi  
Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 8: 'Divinity series' (2021)  
Student Artist – Elizabeth Kiambi  
Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In the 'Divinity series' the student artist depicts the faces of a woman (Plates 7) and a man, (Plate 8) both with wide sparkling eyes which the student describes as 'eyes of the world, looking at the world'. Plate 7 depicts the split personality of a woman, shown by the split yellow ochre crown on top of her head as well as the split face indicated by the placement of two symmetrical colours. The lips are also split, shown by the reversed symmetrical colours. To have a glimpse at how students think and often why paintings cannot be dismissed, the student artist comments, 'She has a visible crown to her neck; she likes her royalty to be noticed. As men have been in power for too long, she feels she would

not be taken seriously as she is female. Her crown is her authority but is split in half, to show that she shares her power with another (Male series) and she is not complete without him. Huge eyes painted with the inspiration of the globe represents her awareness of everything around her. The split face and lips signify that she is aware of the good and bad and is not afraid to show or speak about it'. In regard to Plate 8, the artist asserts, 'He has a crown that is simple and strategically defined. To him, he does not share any power with anyone, as he does not want to seem weak. His eyes are relatively smaller as he focuses only on what is ahead of him. He is not concerned with the good and the bad,

although he is very opinionated and that is why his mouth has different variations of colour’.



Plate 9: 'Freedom' (2020)  
Student artist - Lorna Jebet Kosgei  
Oils on Jeans – 80 x 60 cm  
Source: Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 10: 'In my skin' (2020)  
Student artist - Lorna Jebet Kosgei  
Oils/acrylics on PVC– 29 x 42 cm  
Source: Department of Fine Art and Design

Students often express the upheavals in their minds; how they handle their freedoms and the burdens of responsibility that they have to grapple with during their life at the University. This is intertwined with the pressures of youth and peer influence, in what is called the 'dilemma of youth' that complicate and regularly interferes with their journey towards their end goal, which is to graduate. In 'Freedom' (Plate 9) the student expresses the pressure of physical liaisons that place students between ill-defined infatuations and physical feelings that are often a result of the passion of the moment as well as abundant and unchecked freedoms. The expression on their faces, the suggestive embrace, and the 'intent of the moment' are all clear to the viewer. The mutual feeling is irresistible and requires a concerted presence of mind and discipline to overcome. She expresses that although the short-lived liaison and passion are mutual, there are often

consequences to bear particularly for the young woman. It is a profound painting of the follies of freedom; that these situations occur and cannot be prevented or curtailed even by paternalistic moralism. They happen because the environment and opportunity cause them to happen. However, it is also a painting of hope that sobriety and focus upon fundamental personal goals can still prevail and everybody shall emerge unscathed.

In 'In my skin' (Plate 10) the student expresses the passion and energy that permeates through their bodies and is expressed through body movements, such as suggestive dancing, that gives them an ecstatic feeling of psychological freedom, particularly when alone in their privacy. The term 'in my skin' denotes the adrenalin and sense of euphoria that manifest under the skin, as it were, of the young woman at the spur of that moment. Just



like in *'Freedom'* the painting is an expression of not only the escapades of youth but also the dilemmas that emanate from their freedoms, peer pressure, and the influence of social media. The torn jean is part of popular culture and her exposed upper

body denotes her perceived personal freedom and sense of ecstasy. She turns away from the viewer because her personal identity is not relevant in her quest to express herself; she is just representative of many youths like herself.



Plate 11: *'Fallen tree'* (2021)

Student artist – Lillian Atieno Oloo

Oils on Linen – 80 x 60 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 12: *'Lumbwi'* (2020)

Student artist – Brian Arome

Acrylics on canvas – 70 x 50 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Some landscapes stand out to be specific studies that artists develop into interesting paintings. The fallen tree by the river bank may just be another occurrence but when detailed studies are painted of the scenery, it is transformed into an interesting piece of art. In *'The fallen tree'* (Plate 11) the student artist makes it an engaging and detailed study of intertwining textures, shining natural light effects, colours, tones, shadows, and reflections on the water. The painting, which is a study of the environment, also features the study of vegetation, pebbles as well as the distant sky.

In *Lumbwi'* (Plate 12) the student writes that, "*lumbwi* is Swahili for chameleon which in Africa,

is a common symbol of camouflage, a knack for transforming itself, a quality that can be harnessed for good or evil. Visually, the concept is expressed by the chameleon's ability to change colour, blending in with its current surroundings. Despite being slow in motion, it eventually reaches its destination. The painting is a commentary upon the rapid erosion of cultural values in African societies. Visually, this concept is expressed by how the chameleon turns its back to nature. A sense of balance, however, is achieved by how the chameleon's colours blend in with the leafy flowery side to the left of the composition, meant to represent the past, and the floral mandala patterns in



the background to the right, meant to represent the future/destination. ‘Mandala’ is a spiritual symbol from the Buddhist faith. It is a sacred circular/symmetrical pattern that can be a visual representation of the universe and also a reflection

of the urge to grow towards wholeness and live out our potential as the self. The chameleon’s tails curls into a spiral; which is symbolic of life and the passage of time”.

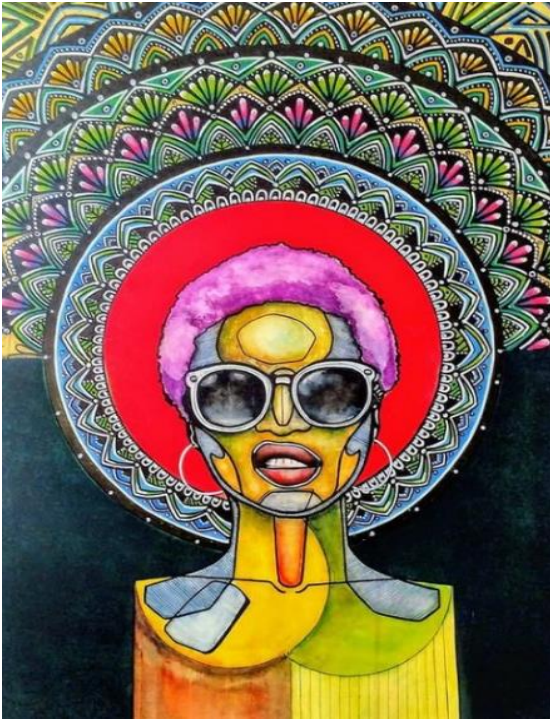


Plate 13: ‘Feeling myself’ (2020)  
Student artist - Brian Arome  
Acrylics on canvas -80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In ‘feeling myself’ (Plate 13), the student artist writes, ‘in this composition, the vibrant mandala background is meant to symbolize a crown while the dark green part symbolizes the darkness of self-doubt. The mandala pattern covers half of the composition to show that the subject is yet to fully fit into the royalty of her full potential. From a young age, girls are burdened with external demands from the society that chains them to constant self-doubt and limits their full potential. This is symbolized by the main subject covering the bottom dark part of the composition and having no arms. The ability to understand and regulate emotions is what leads to the effective construction of self-worth, allowing us to make sense of our



Plate 14: ‘King of many colours’ (2020)  
Student artist – Not indicated  
Acrylics on canvas – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

experiences, believe in our competence, and flourish, based on our strengths and values. This is shown by the woman’s facial expression showing innate confidence, seen through her bright pink hair, red lipstick, and dark shades, symbolizing pop culture. Her head is held high within the metaphorical crown, symbolized by a mandala halo around it. The painting represents the modern woman being in her element: or in simple terms, “feeling herself”, shaping the importance of female self-empowerment and a reminder or reaffirmation of her drive, ambition, and relevance’.

In ‘King of many colours’ (Plate 14) the student artist depicts a lion whose face and mane are clad in many colours with tonal emphasis on the forehead

showing the edge of the mane. The colours, executed in wide brushstrokes symbolize the deconstruction of the lion in the wild, perhaps painting the big cat as a mythical, gentler predator. The sharp eyes denote the alertness and majesty of

the big cat almost as if demanding respect. As has been observed, students build images in their minds that translate into paintings that may tell a story, however improbable it may be in the real world.



Plate 15: *'Winding Forest'* (2021)  
Student artist: Naomi Anyango Ouma  
Acrylics on canvas -80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Students, at times, select sceneries as their subject matter because certain sceneries are captivating and bear artistic value. In *'winding forest'* (Plate 15), the student artist studies a forested patch of landscape scenery. Painting landscapes is often regarded as simplistic and lacking artistic substance. Every artwork, however, has its artistic inspiration at the point of execution. In this landscape painting, the student artist captures the colours of the vegetation and their tones as well as the effect of light and shadows falling upon the trees, which also suggests the transient time of day. The patches of grass are captured using bold brushstrokes and tones that suggest vibrant vegetation. It can be concluded that landscapes are descriptive and often a study of fascinating aspects of the environment captured



Plate 16: *'the saxophone player'* (2020)  
Student artist – not indicated  
Acrylics on canvas – 42 x 29 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

within desired moments in time; hence people study landscapes in order to capture their transient beauty and by so doing derive great artistic enjoyment and fulfilment, particularly when done with the spontaneity of outdoor painting.

*'The saxophone player'* (Plate 16) is an expression of the power of music. The student artist uses an exaggerated backward leaning gestural pose and facial expression to depict the musician's engagement with his instrument as well as the ecstasy of the moment. Other stylized forms like the tumba drums player and other faces in the audience comprise the background. The student uses very defined brown tones to show contrasts and the effect of light as well as to suggest the movement of the



forms and rhythm of the music. The stylistic rendering of this painting, including the use of blue in the background, is effective in enhancing the subject matter and the student uses only the details necessary to express the drama of the moment.



Plate 17: *'Flowers in the dawn of a new day'* (2020)  
Student artist – Stella Onguti  
Acrylics on canvas -80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

The impressionist landscape painting (*Plate 17*) demonstrates how students often draw inspiration from the aspects of natural scenery. In the creative mind of an artist, the existence of unique colours, natural illumination, unique skies, undulating lands, forests, and shrubs are always a motivation for spontaneous work to capture that transient natural scenery. In the foreground, the student captures the bloom of yellow flowers upon long grass with bold yellow/green brushstrokes. The background features the distant forest edge captured just beyond a stretch of bare land, and the sky is done in a haze of light blues that also shows an illuminated part of the sky. The beauty of this painting is its sense of spontaneity, featuring only the necessary details required to show pertinent parts of the landscape yet capturing the essence of the scenery and transient time of day.

Students, in their interactions, are often bubbling with captivating images that flow in their minds and often endeavour to capture some dramatic moments of these images as they flow in their minds.



Plate 18: *'Mother and child'* (2020)  
Student artist – Alex Kinyanjui Kariuki  
Acrylics on canvas – 42 x 29 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

The age-old mother and child theme has been interpreted in many ways by artists over time. The theme bears infinite interpretations and students never fail to explore their unique ideas based on the same. The love of a mother towards her child has been recognized and acknowledged throughout time and across all peoples of the world as omnipresent, enduring, and unfailing in *'My Child and I'* (*Plate 18*), the student artist depicts this image carefully crafted facial expressions of both mother and child that underscores the innate emotion of mutual bond. The mutual embrace, the closed eyes, the smile of satisfaction on the mother's face, the touch on the cheeks, and the feeling of being unreservedly loved on the boy's radiant face are simple but memorable. It also demonstrates that a portrait can both depict and elicit a certain measure of human feelings.



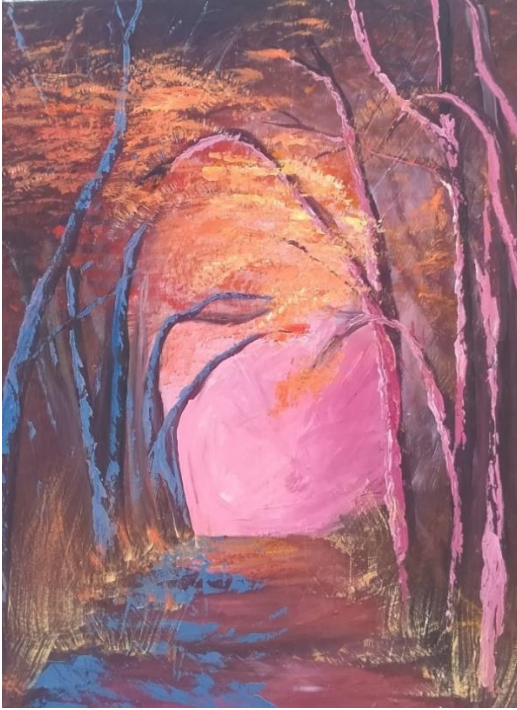


Plate 19: 'Tunnel' (2020)  
Student artist – Josephine Kabura Kamau  
Acrylic on canvas -80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

In 'Tunnel' (Plate 19) the student depicts a tunnel created by a composition of trees placed in linear perspective that shows a ray of light at its very end, akin to the age-old phrase, 'light at the end of the tunnel' Such simplistic paintings may be emanative of a retrospective sense of hope that the student would wish to project through the use of bright colours and the study of textural effects.

In 'Power' (Plate 20), the student artist notes, 'the painting involves a woman arching her body on her

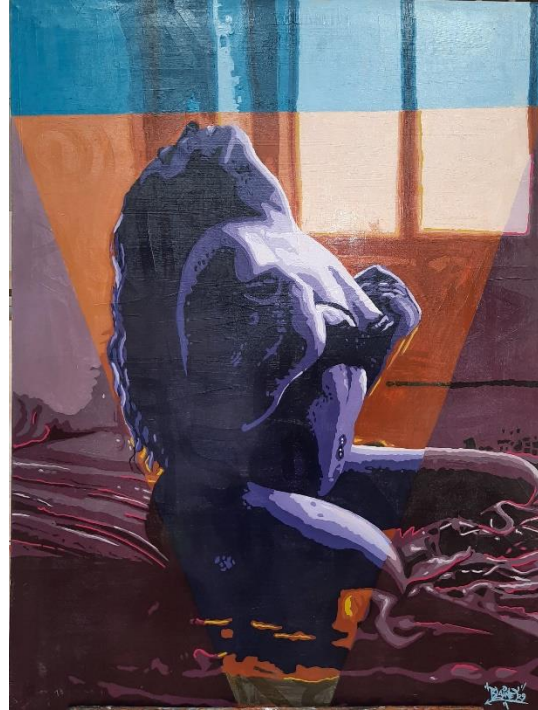


Plate 20: 'Power' (2020)  
Student artist – Victoria Joyce Thuo  
Pigment paint on PVC – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

bed while undressing with her legs apart. The viewers are left to their imagination. The subject displays her potent sexual power which is synonymous with the power a woman possesses with her body'. Student artists often drift off into their imagination or fantasy, exploiting images that flow in their minds. These images may be triggered by certain occurrences or moments of bliss or fantasy that make individuals revisit their sense of self, particularly their sexuality.



Plate 21: *'The feline I'* (2021)  
Student artist - Lorna Jebet Kosgei  
Acrylics on canvas  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*



Plate 22: *'Secretary bird'* (2021)  
Student artist - Mvoi Kigundu  
Acrylics on canvas  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

Students often take interest and explore subject matter that is not of social significance or about society and its dynamics. They need not do so because students have the liberty to explore themes and subject matter as they deem appropriate. Students, for instance, may choose to study nature, including animals and wildlife. In *Plate 21*, the student artist studies a cat but executes it in such a manner as to give it poise and 'character'. She inserts textural details on the fur that enhance the realism of the painting, making it pleasant to view. The cat, of course, does not communicate anything much other than its aura of feline confidence. She uses a dark background to create a contrast between the cat itself and the background of the painting making the animal stand out in an almost majestic way.

In the *'Secretary bird'* (*Plate 22*) the student studies the beauty of this unique African bird using impressionist colours that underscore his emerging style. He gives the bird its character with the details of the eye and beak. Character is, of course, ordinarily granted or recognized in terms of human description; but it may also apply to animals as some form of 'quasi character' that defines the unique characteristics of an individual animal, almost as if it were a thinking being. The bird is artistically portrayed as strong, majestic, and enduring. These kinds of paintings are important not only in the study of animals but also drawing parallels between what we perceive as human characters and what could be construed as perceptions or analogies of animal characters that manifest or exist in the animal world.





Plate 23: *'The acquiescent gaze'* (2021)

Student artist – Ruby Moraa

Acrylics on canvas - 80 x 60 cm

**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*



Plate 24: *'the feline 2'* (2021)

Student artist - - Lorna Jebet Kosgei

Acrylics on canvas

**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

The *'The acquiescent gaze'* (Plate 23) is a surrealistic and interesting depiction of the kind of imagery that manifests in the human mind. The mutual 'gaze' between the dog and the woman is a visual manifestation of a perceived inter-species interaction that can be interpreted as a mutual truce, understanding, or even passiveness; a 'pact' of quiet devotion. The student artist depicts this focused gaze with an eerie precision that is interesting in its placement and occurrence and is, therefore, surreal. She proceeds to depict other surrealist aspects and colours on both the dog and the woman underscoring what dreamlike images often portray. In comprehending the genesis of such images, the student writes, 'I wanted to show the interaction between humans and animals with both representing aspects of Mother Nature as well as a surreal understanding of mutual co-existence and respect'.

In *'The Feline 2'*, (Plate 24), the student artist continues with the series of studies of the domestic cat, showing the beautiful brown/grey fur, its patterns, and its colours. She achieves this by the application of a realistic textural effect and executes the face in a manner that suggests that the cat is alive, almost thoughtful. She takes time to accurately present it in pleasant detail with all its aspects including its crouched pose on a red cloth, facial structure, colours of the eyes, and even its furry tail. The study (in series) of a particular animal has the effect of focusing on its individuality, giving it, in this case, its feline character, like a character in a playbook (Plates 21, 24, 25). Paintings of this nature are often specific studies where an artist chooses to study subjects of interest that bring about a great feeling of satisfaction.





Plate 25: *'The feline 3'* (2021)  
Student artist - Lorna Jebet Kosgei  
Acrylics on canvas  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In the feline series, the kitten (*Plate 25*) brings out the inquisitive nature of young cats which is common throughout the animal kingdom. The gestural pose is as important in animals as it is in human beings and the slightly tilted head and sharp, piercing eyes constitute a gestural pose that denotes inquisitiveness or even curiosity. Animal forms are often artistically used as analogies of human feelings and they can be relatable as they are profound.

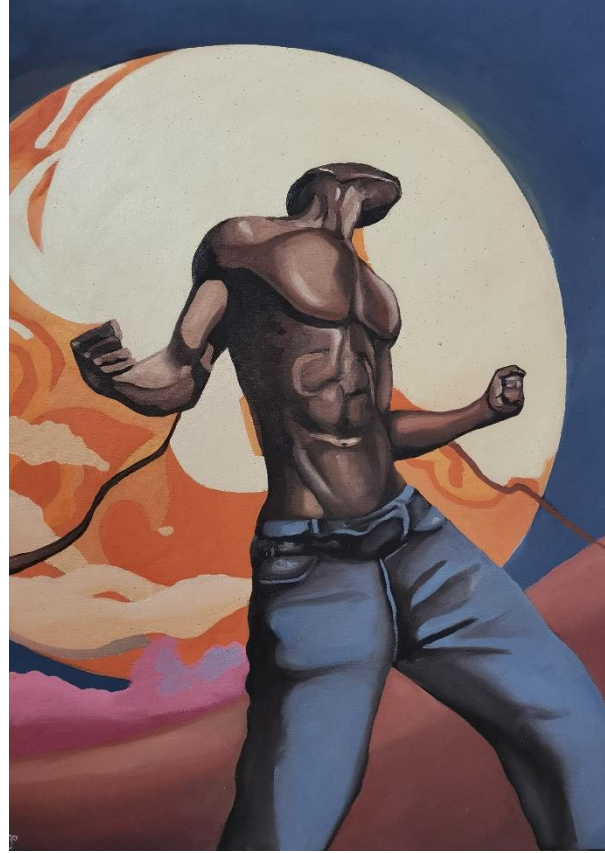


Plate 26: *'Ecstasy of emotions'* (2021)  
Student artist – Makau Joseph  
Oils on canvas -50 x 70 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

*Plate 26* is an expression of the ecstatic emotions brought about by music and dance. In expressive art, these emotions can be depicted through gestural poses. The student artist selects a pose and angle of view that are both vivid and captivating, enhanced by varying tones. This is further enhanced by the gestural pose of clenched fists and outstretched arms, sharp twists of the head seen from underneath the jaw line as well as parted legs. The background is executed in such a way that it enhances the gestural pose in order to underscore its suggestive meaning.



Plate 27: 'Music in pop-culture' (2021)  
 Student artist – Makau Joseph  
 Oils on canvas -50 x 70 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Plate 27 is a depiction of an aspect of popular culture based on street music and dance. Any aspect of popular culture is often captivating to audiences, particularly to the age group who subscribe to it. The huge portable music equipment was in its time, synonymous with impromptu loud street music and the accompanying dance trends which would be the focus of competition among neighborhood street groups. This ultimately transformed into a way of life in the manner through which the youth expressed themselves. This extended to attire, shown in the painting as loose sportswear, oversize sunglasses, and wig; street graffiti as seen in the immediate background, the symbolism of language and cult-like dedication that generally culminated in a culture of defiance against established social norms among the youth.

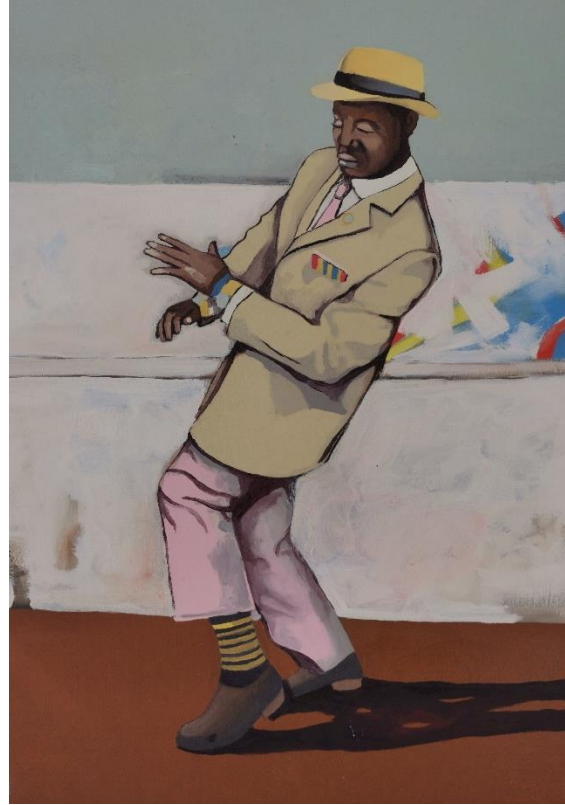


Plate 28: 'The dance' (2021)  
 Student artist - Makau Joseph  
 Oils on canvas -50 x 70 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In 'The dance' (Plate 28) the student artist studies the fascination with street dancing. It perhaps suggests an element of the joy of engagement just as much as it suggests skill and prowess. It depicts an ordinary streetwise individual, executing a dance move with all its poise and masterly steps. It has all the hallmarks of an impromptu street dance executed on the street pavement. When done as wall paintings or murals in public spaces, such paintings are depictive of how society attempts to express itself amidst challenging social/economic environments in a given neighbourhood or community. Students choose such subject matter in solidarity with pop culture as expressed and manifested at a given time.



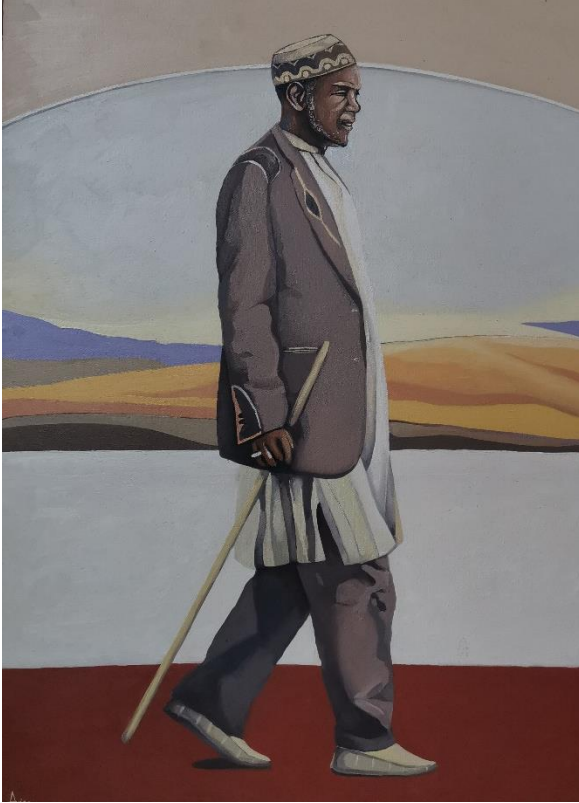


Plate 29: 'Serenity of aging' (2021)

Student artist – Makau Joseph

Oils on canvas -50 x 70 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 30: 'Wisdom of a sage' (2021)

Student artist – Kariuki Kinyanjui Alex

Acrylics on canvas

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In 'Serenity of aging' (Plate 29) the student artist depicts what can be described as the lone walk of ageing. Though ageing is a universal human process of degeneration, the journey of its manifestation and its implications is unique to every individual and hence it bears its burden of loneliness. The reflective man holding on to his walking stick in a desolate background represents the fact that everyone has to eventually walk this path as life ultimately ebbs away.

In 'Wisdom of a Sage' (Plate 30) the student artist studies the expression on the face of an elderly man whom he perceives as being full of wisdom and a blessing to his family and community. The role of portraiture in describing actual human traits and whether, indeed, it is possible to extract such complex attributes as human character merely from a painted portrait of a subject, is debatable and often

controversial. A painted portrait, however, is not passive and bears an element of physiognomy; it can be used to 'portray' certain perceived truths and express certain elements of an individual's character or personality through facial demeanour. This is often what can be read in a portrait and is mainly a matter of the viewer's interpretation of what the artist intended to portray as well as what is perceived to be the subject's intent, self-expression, and emergent character. For instance, in this painting, the poise and visual conviction of the subject exude confidence and devotion to all those who seek his counsel. The wearing of the hat, the expression of his penetrating eyes and facial demeanour, his hand on the chin, and his attire are the epitome of the exuberance of perceived wisdom. The painting itself is simple and monochromatic but it is expressive enough and meets the purpose of the



artist and probably that of the subject. The student uses sharp contrast between the subject and the dark background in order to enhance the focus on the subject.



Plate 31: *'Two faces, one soul'* (2021)

Student artist – Elizabeth Kiambi

Oils on canvas – 82 x 67 cm

**Source** – Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 32: *'Lost opportunity'* (2021) (2021)

Student artist – Rochester Otieno Anabwani

Oils on masking tape - 60cm x 80 cm

**Source** – Department of Fine Art and Design

In *'Two faces, one soul'*, (Plate 31) the student artist depicts the face of a man hesitantly applying lipstick which goes beyond the lips onto the skin of the face. He also wears a stud on one ear and does not do so on the other. His outfit is striped on one half and blank on the other. Looking at himself in a mirror perhaps, this man wants to bear the beauty of a woman but is afraid of being judged. The painting depicts a man who is unsure of his identity and according to the student, 'He is struggling between two worlds, a man's world, and a woman's word and cannot make up his mind when to vacate one and enter the other; he does not exactly know which world he fits in'. The student embraces the sensitive transgender issue in an African context and observes, 'They have forgotten that love cannot fit in a box, nor does it discriminate'.

In *'lost opportunity'* (Plate 32), the broken egg is visually very profound; akin to the tragedy of split milk that cannot be retrieved once it is spilled and soaks into the ground. Similarly, the egg is delicate and the whole idea of its preservation and care is to prevent its breakage before it can be put to purposeful use. The student artist uses this visual analogy to decry the tragedy and frustration of a lost opportunity that is irretrievable or irreversible; he asks, have you tried to scoop back an egg that has been accidentally broken upon a surface? The analogy may be a broken egg but the context could refer to all experiential tragedies where opportunities are lost forever.

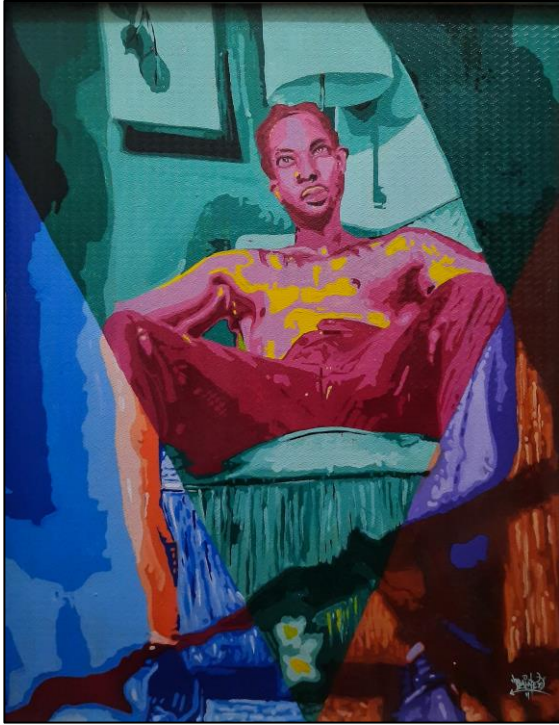


Plate 33: 'Fantasy' (2021)  
Student artist – Victoria Joyce Thuo  
Oils on matrix glass – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In 'fantasy' (Plate 33) the student artist paints a picture almost as if one is seeing a figure through an opening on a window. The painting involves a male character seated pensively as he drifts into his fantasy world. The gestural pose as well as the distant gaze in his eyes are anticipative of what might transpire in his world of fantasy. The choice and execution of colours and their various tones create a hazy, mysterious environment that underscores the mood of the painting. The glowing red colour and its tones on the figure itself create an infra-red effect that denotes that the individual is alive.



Plate 34: 'A mother's sacrifice' (2021)  
Student artist – Rochester Otieno Anabwani  
Oils on canvas – 80 cm x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Within the realm of the celebrated theme of mother and child, the student artist depicts a mother feeding her young child (Plate 34). Realistically executed, the student artist depicts a scene of a happy mother determined to carry out this obligation without a modicum of complaint, seen through the gestural pose and expression on her face. The student artist notes that "This is one of the visible sacrifices that a mother undergoes in order to fend for her children. She deprives herself of all comfort to meet this sacrifice".





Plate 35: *'Queen of the jungle'* (2021)  
 Student artist – Richard Ochieng'  
 Oils on canvas – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*



Plate 36: *'Desert warrior'* (2021)  
 Student artist – Richard Ochieng'  
 Oils on canvas – 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

Some paintings have specific stories to tell. Inspired either by other stories, heroic narratives, adventures, tragedies, legends, and myths, or actual occurrences in history, paintings, and their interpretations can play a pivotal role in human perception. Artistically, these inspirations are viewed and treated as themes and the artists then use their creativity to render interpretations that are descriptive of these themes. In such cases, paintings can elaborate stories that transform them in real-time or seek to recreate situations that would otherwise have been long forgotten in the annals of history, bringing them back into modern focus and hence creating new perspectives. It has been accepted that viewers perceive these kinds of paintings as 'visual testimonies' of what might have transpired. In *'Queen of the jungle'* (Plate 35) the student artist observes, 'Usually we hear of the king of the jungle but not often of the queen. The woman is the all-protective queen of the jungle and stands in a

defensive posture ready to protect nature and all that it entails. The jaguar next to her is considered the third biggest cat in the world after tigers and lions, and so she makes the jaguar the pseudo-king that follows her commands. The jaguar, seemingly, walks ahead of her ready to protect her. This painting just brings out the understanding of the concept of Mother Nature and that women are generally caregivers'.

Some paintings are based on analogical or in some instances, 'fairy tale' stories that bear no realistic bearing but still show the genesis of artistic imagination. In *'Desert warrior'* (Plate 36) – the student tells the story of a desert warrior as some kind of 'wonder woman'; the use of a non-desert dwelling animal like a zebra is bizarre. He observes, 'She is a desert warrior as she will fight for what is fading away and considered to have no life. The zebra is not an animal that lives in a desert

environment but it can survive *having a woman around it*. This painting shows that a woman can bring life into a desolate area and sustain the life she

has brought forth. The ankh she holds symbolizes fertility and life and this applies to all paintings in the series'



Plate 37: 'Aqua lady' (2021)  
Student artist – Richard Ochieng'  
Oils on 600D – 80 x 60 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 38: 'Cave woman' (2021)  
Student artist – Richard Ochieng'  
Oils on PVC – 80 x 60 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Students are allowed to explore whatever thematic stories they deem captivating. Some of these stories are based on bizarre images that flow in their minds. In 'Aqua lady' (Plate 37) the student artist observes, 'A woman, just like water, is a force to be reckoned with and perhaps feared; but given certain circumstances, she can be gentle and accommodating. In this painting, parts of a woman's femininity are considered erogenous zones, denoting her power of persuasion. The dolphin is known to be calm and friendly and so can a woman when she knows she is in a safe space, and the raging water stops at her feet showing the respect she attracts'.

In 'Cave woman' (Plate 38), the student artist suggests that it is possible to fantasize about the charm and power of a woman. Within the realm of fantasy, identified mythical characters can be portrayed to possess extraordinary powers, and capable of accomplishing anything. The student artist observes, 'Wild and out, she sits in a cave that usually is considered harsh and unconducive to personal comfort, but is a vantage point, in case of danger. The lady sits confidently knowing that she has everything under control; even the tiger sits serenely in her presence. This painting demonstrates the aura of feminine power and confidence in protecting her domain'.





Plate 39 '*While we wait*' (2021)  
Student artist: Maria Gikuru  
Acrylics on canvas: 100 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Student artists harbour their own thoughts that they develop into a painting. It is not always easy to decipher the genesis of these thoughts which likely appear as images in their minds in '*While we wait*' (Plate 39) the student artist notes, 'this painting depicts a bizarre human form, wearing a blank mask; with no eyes to pierce through its gaping emptiness. The subject faces the audience directly with an inquisitive gestural pose, gently resting the mask on a very tiny palm, as though yearning for a response. Orange lines extend from behind the subject. Some lines loop back but most extend



Plate 40 '*Turbulence at sea*' (2021)  
Student artist: Innocent Nyabuto  
Acrylics on canvas  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

beyond the frame. The painting denotes thoughts that trail off over time that reflect the reality of our idleness'.

In '*Turbulence at sea*' (Plate 40), the student artist explores the subject of 'action', in this case, the idea of turbulence at sea. The painting captures the rough waves of the sea using contrasting tones and bold brushstrokes that underscore rough movement. The show is executed in relatively fine detail and the sky and sails are done in wide brushstrokes that all help to show the forward movement.



Plate 41 'Unlocked world' (2021)

Student artist: Karean Kendi Kathurima

Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 60 cm

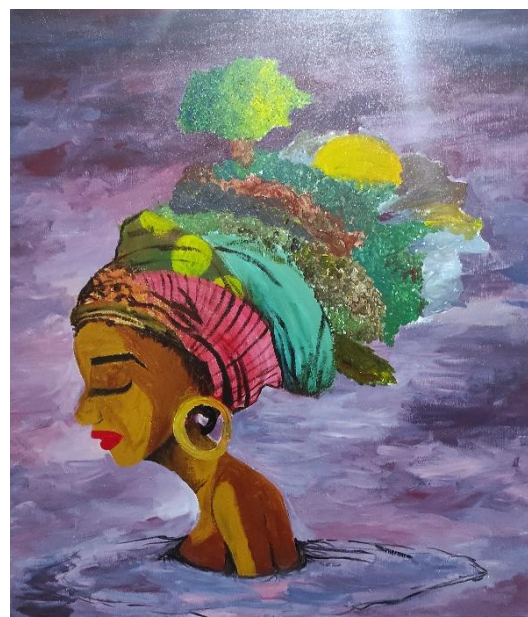
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Plate 42 'Oriella: African beauty' (2021)

Student artist: Joli Ondieki

Acrylics on canvas: 100 x 80 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

In the 'unlocked world' (Plate 41) the analogy of a penguin balancing out a piece of delicate porcelain teapot and cup upon its head underscores the delicate nature of life's terrain and the challenges of its navigation. The penguin also perceives the orange as resembling its egg and hence representing the hatching of her offspring. The penguin, however, cannot quite reach the orange because of the burden of the balancing act upon her head. The student artist aptly notes that the inspiration for the painting emanated from the ironic fact that often "we try hard to reach out for what we desire even though some of these desires cannot be practically (or pragmatically) achieved". This painting is testimony that student artists do often have some philosophical genesis for their generation of thought that forms the basis for their paintings. The choice of a penguin as an object of expression might appear surprising but may have been derived from its characteristic behaviour, such that in the student's mind, the penguin becomes the best choice of an analogical tool.

Students often want to depict the concept of beauty as they perceive it within the realm of femininity. Beauty as a theme is broad and all-encompassing and can be interpreted in many ways. In the 'Oriella: African beauty' (Plate 42), the student artist explores the concept of African beauty in a simplistic but potent way by depicting large closed eyes, long neck, well-marked elongated eyebrows, lipstick, and large earrings as well as a colourful head-wrap. The head wrap in particular is unique to the creative perception of African women in many parts of Africa; is used as a mark of African beauty, femininity, poise, and grace. She places the figure in a pool of water in an illuminated purple background that helps focus the attention upon the portrait itself. She observes, 'Oriella is a Latin name that means, 'Full of life'; she is a woman of noble character, possesses strength, capability, skill, and valour. She is rare and priceless; her worth is far more than rubies'.





Plate 43. 'Portrait of a Lion' (2021)  
Student artist: Otembo Abdulkarim  
Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 70 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 44. 'Portrait of an indigenous cow' (2021)  
Student artist: Frida Ijai  
Oils on canvas – 70 x 45 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Students at times use rather subtle means to describe certain subject matter that suggests diverse feelings such as aggressiveness and serenity. Animals can be a potent avenue through which certain characteristics or traits can be artistically depicted. A lion depicted in 'Portrait of a Lion' (Plate 43) is a universal symbol of raw aggressiveness depicted through its facial demeanour; its canines, intimidating eyes, its mane, its felt roar, and its overall expression. The artist does not endeavour to express any philosophical or social message; only just to express the artistic impact of aggressiveness as a trait in humans as seen through the lenses of an animal. When human beings display excessive aggressiveness, they are often described as possessing animal instincts; therefore, animals are often seen as analogies for human behaviour or traits.

In contrast, the cow in its innate docility (Plate 44) may exude a feeling of naïve serenity. Though the face of a cow may not amount to much in terms of artistic impact or give out a particular message, its expression can be significant as an analogy to something else, such as innocence or naiveté in a human contextual setting. So, a cow remains a cow but perhaps it has something more significant to portray. The painting, therefore, becomes not just a depiction of a portrait of a cow but an expression of something; naïve docility. When a cow is confronted by a lion, for instance, it does not perceive the lion as a mortal danger because the cow does not live in the wild and so the natural instincts are different; hence it suffers the mortal consequences. This is what human naiveté can also amount to.



Plate 45 'Red hair' (2021)

Student artist: John Baraka

Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 70 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

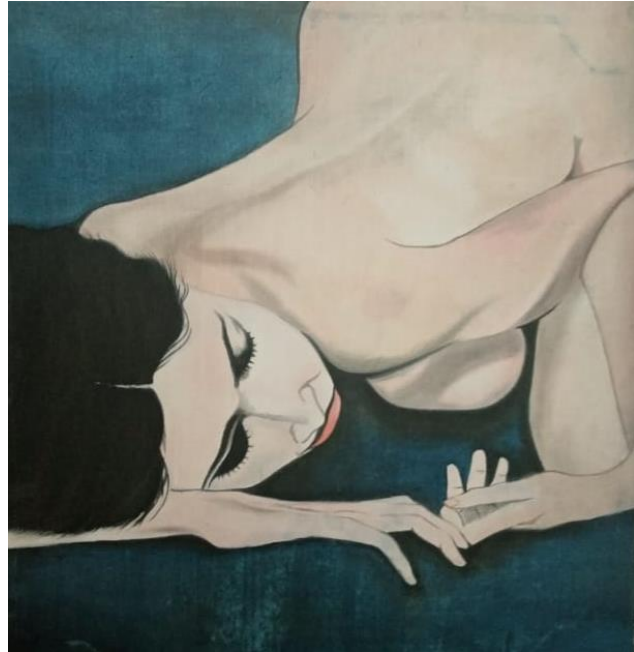


Plate 46 'Blondie' (2021)

Student artist: John Baraka

Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 70 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

On the popular subject of femininity and/or sensuality or sexual appeal of the female form, students often indulge their fantasies as sources of inspiration. In 'Red hair' (Plate 45), the student artist gravitates around the subject of eroticism by painting a nude female form that bears a suggestive gestural pose. Although the student, in his description, does not mention explicitly about the sexual appeal, it is obvious from the painting that that was a major inspiration; the ecstatic facial expression, closed eyes, the hand with a cigarette casually resting on the breast as well as her crossed legs. It probably is not much about her red hair; but more about the suggestive pose of her nudity. The student observes, 'The piece is about a lady with red hair, she is smoking while posing for a picture. She is a sophisticated lady as seen in her long flowing hair and red painted nails, and still, she maintains high self-confidence'.

In 'Blondie' (Plate 46), the student artist paints a suggestive sexual pose that he deliberately chooses not to show in its entirety by cutting it off along the edges. The painting depicts a woman in her sexual element, her face lost in ecstasy, grasping her fingers in an infinite expression of engagement; thus, the incomplete pose leaves the rest of the imagination to the audience; in which case the artist is not responsible for any unsavoury thoughts. These kinds of paintings are often created with the sole purpose of passing the burden of imagination to the viewer. In evading the true intentions or what can be described as the burden of proof, the student artist coyly observes that 'The piece is experimentation of toning of the white skin tone. The lady is in a seductive posture doing a seductive dance which was inspired by the theme of music'.





Plate 47 '*Essence of femininity*' (2021)  
Student artist: Kerian Kendi Kathurima  
Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 48 '*Cadence: Woman with cello*' (2021)  
Student artist: David Kai  
Acrylics on canvas: 60 x 40 cm  
**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

Student artists may view and interpret the subject of femininity from many perspectives. In '*Essence of femininity*' (Plate 47) the student artist paints an abstract painting that emphasizes the eyes and the lips of a woman, giving them prominence as facial tools of femininity. The enhanced eyes bear a solemn gaze as if yearning for attention while the lips glitter with lipstick, drawing attention to their essence. The multi-faced painting consisting of geometric shapes creates a sense of mystery and hidden beauty. The student notes, "The essence of being female is always looked down upon in most societies while it is both creative and mysterious".

'*Cadence: Woman with cello*' (Plate 48) revisits how student artists view nudity and femininity, seeing the female form as an iconic 'instrument' of beauty akin to the cello being an iconic instrument

of music. The woman poses suggestively, strategically holding a cello with her arms crossed at an angle to cover her breasts; meaning that it was a deliberate gestural pose that was meant to emphasize her body contours as an appeal to her sensuality, yet making her charming and presentable. The dark background creates a sharp chiaroscuro effect that enhances the female form. Such paintings are usually inspired by other similar ones or are often emanative of flowing images of sexual fantasies. However, paintings may carry multiple interpretations and the viewer may interpret a painting differently from the artist. The student artist, in this case, interprets his painting purely from a musical perspective and writes, "The painting is a representation of the soothing nature of music in its purest form hence the representation by the nude woman holding a cello".



Plate 49 'Underwater seascape' (2021)  
Student artist: Otembo Abdulkarim  
Acrylics/Oils on canvas: 80 x 70 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*



Plate 50 'Underwater seascape' (2021)  
Student artist: Otembo Abdulkarim  
Acrylics on canvas: 80 x 70 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

Just as landscapes are a popular subject matter mainly because of the rendition of colours, physical landforms, natural light effects, and textural studies, seascapes too are often a subject of fascination for some students. In *Plates 49/50*, the student artist explores underwater seascapes showing these same attributes. Juxtaposed within the dominance of the blue body of water, he studies marine life, shown by the dolphins and the fish, the textural effects of the

brightly coloured vegetation of the sea floor, the lighting effect as well as the physical formation of the underwater land formation. These paintings demonstrate that students often choose to enjoy painting nature as it manifests without distortion or undue exaggeration. They paint colours, lighting effects and study intricate textural effects as a matter of artistic enjoyment without seeking to express any particular social message





Plate 51 'New face of Africa' (2021)

Student artist: Fridah Ijai

Oil on canvas: 75 x 45 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design



Plate 52. 'The African Eve' (2021)

Student artist: Fridah Ijai

Oil on canvas: 75 x 45 cm

**Source:** Department of Fine Art and Design

To underscore how student artist develops their subject matter, the two paintings above are an interesting articulation of thought and how it is formulated into a pictorial composition that generates meaning. In the 'New face of Africa' (Plate 51) the student artist observes, "Most African stories and narratives always depict Africa as a citadel of pain, lifelessness, hunger, violence, and decadence. In this painting, I strive to give Africa a new face, a happier face that replaces the stories of despair they have talked about in Africa. The child in black and white, for instance, is seen to be in pain, and captivity is overshadowed by the colourful, happy face of the other child. This is my way of showing that Africa is beautiful and there is a new face that people should familiarize themselves with and not just the one we have been made to believe.

The white dove symbolizes hope; the green vegetation is the richness of Africa".

In 'The African Eve' (Plate 52) the student artist observes, "In this painting, I was trying to interpret the story of creation in a way Africans would relate to. The African woman stands in the Garden of Eden (Africa) surrounded by lush green vegetation that symbolizes the richness of Africa. In this painting, Eve reincarnates into Mary of the New Testament to solve the problems Eve brought upon the earth in the very beginning. The egg symbolizes rebirth; the rope breaks to show the end of the Old Testament and the introduction of the New Testament. The dove is a symbol of hope and a representation of Jesus. This painting evokes a narrative that goes on and on in a very interesting way".



Plate 53 '*Woman preparing a meal*' (2021)  
Student artist: Rochester Otieno Anabwani  
Oils on canvas: 80 x 60 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*



Plate 54 '*Building an abode*' (2021)  
Student artist: Nicholleta M. Muriithi  
Improvised oils on canvas: 60 x 40 cm  
**Source:** *Department of Fine Art and Design*

Students often express a fascination with a given observed activity. In a rural setting, the preparation of a meal using a mortar and pestle to pound the ingredients may seem an ordinary undertaking to the rural folks but turns out to be a subject of fascination to the student artist (*Plate 53*). It, subsequently, carries a certain element of symbolism denoting the responsibility and dutifulness of a woman, particularly a housewife. In certain communities, women go to great lengths to prepare meals as an art for which they individually become renowned and together with the conduct of other responsibilities, consolidate their position within the family.

In '*building an abode*' (*Plate 54*) the student artist creates a study of a bird building its nest. This is another example of observed activities that fascinate student artists and in this particular case symbolically underscores the resilience of the bird. This painting is, therefore, not only about the artist's

study of a bird but becomes an analogy of human resilience; if a bird can be so meticulous in building its abode, one string of grass at a time, then by extension, human beings can draw lessons of patience, resilience, and single-mindedness. Artistically, the student uses thin brushstrokes to build intricate textural effects that depict the nest and also takes time to study the details of the bird itself.

## OBSERVATIONS

**Students appear to be very creative when left to explore themes and formulate their subject matter**

When students are not provided with rigid thematic guidelines and are left free to explore themes of their choice and subsequently derive subject matter, they tend to generate a wide spectrum of interpretations of themes. Subsequently, their approach to the construction of subject matter can be quite



interesting; which means, of course, that their content and style that underscore their preferences will also vary significantly. These varied interpretations provide an avenue for the generation of thought that fascinates the students as individuals. When they eventually view and critique each other's work in a given forum, it provides a refreshing platform upon which they demonstrate how they dissect themes and generate content. This argument must not be confused with the notion of working without themes; themes are extremely important in artistic development. The emphasis is that the introduction or application of themes should not be driven by thematic patronage or be creatively over-bearing; the introduction of a thematic basis should not be burdened by interpretative dogmatism but should leave enough room for students to find their creative space within which they work best. Ford (2022) notes, 'Though the theme is separate from the subject matter, the subject matter, how it is arranged, and the colours used to represent the subject matter can all be used to convey a message or idea. Themes are often important messages about human life, emotions, and human nature. Themes are also often represented symbolically or through implied meaning rather than being explicitly stated'.

### **Students have a definition of their style**

Though this study includes the work of many students and does not examine a significant number of continuous paintings by individual students to determine a trend, it is evident that each student prefers a given style of painting which he/she tends to use and pursue and through which they seemingly find their freedom of expression and ease of execution. However, the constitution of style is a continuous process and takes time to develop and crystalize. The fact, in this case, that students are aware that there is a connection or correlation between the way they wish their paintings to appear, that is, their execution, and the subject matter that they endeavour to delve into implies that they are aware of the development and potency of their style and what it contributes to the overall meaning of

their work. Liew (2013) observes that 'style is not just about the way your artwork looks, the subject matter that you communicate and represent in your artwork is just as important. Artists are known throughout history for the interaction of their techniques and the ideas they wanted to communicate'.

### **Nature of subject matter/content**

The kinds of subject matter and holistic content that emanate from students can be bold, simplistic, surprising, thought-provoking, enigmatic, and yet profound. As has been observed, when they are not confined to prescribed themes, they seem to develop a natural impetus to express whatever is in their minds which is good for the generation of expressive ideas. In this regard, it can be observed that students are remarkably artistically thoughtful and according to this paper, when an environment is created for students to be both exploratory and expressive, they can think in extremely varied ways. This approach is often misunderstood and there is a tendency to want to 'herd' students towards certain thematic points of view. Teachers often feel that students should think as they do, that they should bear the same level of intellect or bear the same capacity to reflect upon and dissect ideas as part of critical thinking. This approach only leaves students in a state of creative limbo. The way students think must be left to develop and crystalize within their own creative space and environment. This way, they attain levels of creativity that are truly expressive and gratifying.

### **Importance of context**

In the paintings presented in this paper and conversations with students, it is evident that their paintings often bear a context that is in tandem or resonates with the individual student's environment, background, or circumstances, and, therefore, they bear a certain specificity. 'Context' as described in this paper refers to the suggested or specific circumstances, environment, experiential

influences, occurrences, recollections, memories, and other unique factors that constitute the core inspirations for paintings. Subsequently, it can be argued that most paintings that carry an element of personal expression will also bear the relevant context. The consideration of context as an approach in analysing paintings is, therefore, extremely important in understanding the thinking, inspiration, emotional state, and experiential undertones that drive the student artist in formulating subject matter and expressing content in a way that is unique and/or specific to that artist.

### Usage of colour

Colour remains an integral part of how students express themselves in their paintings. It can be observed that many students chose to use a bright, attractive combination of colours either as embellishments or as integral aspects of their paintings. For example, in *Plates 12 and 13*, the artist uses unique pattern-based colours to 'embellish' the work though the subject matter itself touches on a face (*Plate 12*) and a chameleon (*Plate 13*). In *Plates 49 and 50*, the student uses intricate brilliant colours to underscore the underwater seascapes in a refreshing way.

### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be concluded in this paper that: -

- **Students construct their subject matter and develop their content in accordance with their thought patterns and inspirations**

In the context of this paper, a thought pattern is described to be how an individual reacts to a given circumstance that inspires an element of thought where this element of thought manifests in the mind as flowing images. In the case of an artistic mind, when the mind is focused on a certain circumstance, the images that form in the mind tend to flow in a pattern that emphasizes what is unravelling in the mind and what the mind makes of the circumstance,

including the order of events. These flowing images are what an artist exploits in the construction of a work of art and particularly, the formulation of subject matter. It can be concluded that students followed their thought patterns as a guide towards the formulation of the subject matter that emerged in their paintings. It must be emphasized that thought patterns do not necessarily emanate only from personal experiences or specific memories; they are also often emanative of reactions to given circumstances as contained, for instance, in certain themes. This is because artists are thinking beings and are capable of artistic interpretation and generation of thought. This is evident in the varied nature of paintings.

Inspirations are relatable occurrences, notable observations or internalization of the experiences or successful exploits of other parties, marvels of nature, outstanding talent and gift, artistic phenomena, and all other factors that resonate with similar intended objectives by an individual or group of individuals. Hence artistically, if an artist comes across something that is of peculiar personal interest or that which strikes their imagination, then that phenomenon is bound to form a significant part of the interpretation or construction of their subject matter

- **The dynamics of students' thought patterns are unique to themselves and their environment.**

It can be concluded that how students' approach, view, react to and interpret a given thematic circumstance that leads to the formulation of subject matter, is unique to their individuality and their environment. This means that even if different students in the same class setting were to react to the same thematic circumstance, their interpretation of the theme, formulation of subject matter, and development of artistic content would most likely be different. This is not unusual since people react differently to circumstances based on their backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, or even



intuition which all add impetus to their sense of expression. For example, the broad theme '*poverty*' may be interpreted in a myriad of ways by different people depending on their experience or lack of it. If they have experienced poverty on a personal level, they will probably give it more weight and sensitivity based on their individual human experience; if they have not, their work will bear no sensitivities and will be critiqued accordingly. This is because certain inherent individual insights help to construct attitudes and emotions that drive self-expression. This phenomenon is critical in determining the essence and, at times, the value of one painting with respect to another. Some are alive with sensitivity and humanistic appeal, yet others are less appealing or inconsequential because of the incongruity between the subject matter and the weight of the circumstance. In essence, therefore, the uniqueness of individual thought and the subsequent manifestation of sensitivity, empathy, compassion, or any other expression are all reliant upon the student's individuality and the extent of their exposure within their environment.

- **Students thought patterns cannot be analysed beyond their own boundaries and must be appreciated within those boundaries**

When students respond to given themes and create paintings accordingly, they do so with a certain amount of clarity of mind and a personal sense of conviction that is construed to be their sincere interpretation. Very often they are asked by voices in the audience why they did not fathom other perspectives and think of different, much more engaging subject matter. In response, students are normally baffled by this tendency to over analyse their work when they, indeed, have already given and displayed their interpretation. This paper concludes that a student's thought pattern as manifested in their work must be appreciated within the boundaries of his or her interpretation to grasp the underlying inspirational basis which is unique to that individual. It cannot be intellectualized beyond its context. This is based on the creative fact that

students cannot always do what we want them to do and they must be set free to explore their creativity and thoughtfulness irrespective of what we determine to be the correct or more potent interpretation.

- **Students are ardent generators of subject matter and points of view**

While students interpret themes in very different ways, it can be concluded, however, that they are ardent generators of subject matter and do hold points of view. In follow-up discussions with students about their work and in oral class presentations where they were required to explain the artistic essence of their work, it was evident that they indeed applied a significant measure of thought to their paintings in response to themes. The derivation of opinion in any circumstance, and particularly in painting, is a significant step not only toward self-expression but also towards the contribution towards a body of thought or insightfulness. This lends credence to the potency of a creative response to any theme and to finding solutions to pertinent societal issues. Students then learn to be both originators of creativity as well as solution seekers. Liew (2013) notes that "The visual look of artwork is meaningless if there is no concept, motivation, or purpose behind the creation of the artwork. That is why it is important that while you experiment and hone a diverse range of skills that you also work on your ability to brainstorm, develop, and ultimately execute a finished artwork that has a solid and intriguing subject". Students are hence encouraged to view and critique each other's work as a key component of their artistic growth, the emergence of their intellectualism that ultimately leads to moral/aesthetic interaction. Lomas (2016) outlines five major qualities or uses of art that add impetus to how students, in this case, would benefit from their artistic engagement. He outlines them as; *sense-making qualities, enriching experience, aesthetic appreciation, entertainment, and bonding with others.*

- **Students' points of view should not be dismissed on account of their student's status and should be accorded proper attention as being products of potent artistic thoughtful processes**

Often students' work is dismissed as students work. This should not be encouraged since there exists a very thin line of demarcation between this status and the potency of a creative mind. Therefore, even though it is generally agreed that students shall ultimately grow and refine their styles and skills over time, they are already placed in the process of thoughtful creative engagement which bears no demarcation as such.

- **Students bear and underscore certain sensitivities**

Students as human beings possess certain sensitivities which they express in their paintings. But these sensitivities are often ignored since it is presumed that they have not yet built the capacities to bear such sensitivities either from an experiential basis or from an intellectual perspective. This can be an unfounded presumption that can be detrimental to the growth of an artistic mind. This paper concludes that students' sensitivities are in complete resonance with the normal emotions that constitute content in a work of art and cannot be seen to be otherwise; indeed, they must be encouraged to depict such sensitivities as part of self-expression. Therefore, it was found necessary, in this paper, to refer to students as 'student artists'. In this regard, *Sheikh (2016) notes that* 'By virtue of being human, we are full of thoughts and ideas that inhabit us with energy. And if the creative energy in our mind sits untouched, it can turn on itself and we feel all sorts of anxiety and restlessness. To maintain our emotional well-being, we need to exercise our creativity'.

- **Paintings bear certain contexts which are important in understanding their content**

The phenomenon of the relationship between content and context is often misunderstood and context is often overlooked in the quest to unravel the content in the process of analysing paintings. When viewers examine a painting, they often want to enjoy what they directly or spontaneously perceive in their eyes which is based on what the painting itself seems to immediately depict. As observed before, a pertinent message is often missed because the viewers, for one reason or other, do not interrogate or decipher the context within which the painting was created. There have been arguments and counter-arguments regarding whether or not the unravelling of this contextual genesis is the responsibility of the viewer or whether the viewer's sole desire is to view the painting and marvel at its presentation. This paper concludes that when a painting is understood within the boundaries of its context, its content is much better appreciated. When the possible underlying reasons for the creation of a painting are interrogated, be they experiences, memories, recollections of certain times, nostalgia, triumphs, failures, time frames, and so on, the content becomes clearer and, therefore, much more profound. This is particularly so for paintings that tell a story. For example, in *Plates 51 and 52*, the content can be easily made out but the paintings also evoke a certain context in which the artist tells her story; the paintings certainly bear some element of symbolism, some context that the artist wanted the viewer to unravel.

Carruba (2016) notes that 'Context can be defined as the meaning of a work of art, impacted by its history, the mode of encounter and surroundings, and the writings about that work of art'. While this statement is true, this paper posits that context is much more than 'the mode of encounter' or the placement of paintings in their surroundings, whether historical or physical. In explaining their paintings, students emphasized their experiential genesis; that the subject matter/content was significantly influenced by the 'circumstances of occurrence'; that what they experienced or



empathized with was critical in constructing their subject matter and the ‘feeling’ of their content. What they then expressed to the audience was in tandem with the generated emotions that were unfolding in their minds. For example, in *Plates 9* and *10*, the *context* is certainly ‘student interactions within the environment of unprecedented freedom at the University’. This carries with it all the emotional, sexual, or social connotations and their implications. When the audience understands this context, then they are better placed to appreciate what the student artist was trying to express and why the paintings appear the way they do.

- **Paintings always tell some kind of story**

Paintings, indeed, do tell some kind of story or narrative that is embedded either directly or indirectly in the way the painting is formulated and presented. As has been observed, paintings can be extremely purposeful in their intent and can carry far-reaching messages and expressions. Some paintings, though, are a superficial study of something that the artists find captivating and do not necessarily underscore a certain philosophical, ideological, or contextual specificity. This superficiality is often seen in the way the artist perceives certain things that he/she finds interesting such as colour manifestations, forms, shapes, textural effects, or compositional effects. But even observed activities or static natural environments all have some story or motivation; even landscapes have their story, their inspirations, or even perhaps their drama. Sunsets, for instance, have long been romanticized for their colour formations. For example, in *Plate 2* the artist studies the impressionist landscape with shades of green of the environment and blues of the trickling waters as colour embellishments. In *Plates 43* and *44*, the head of a lion and that of a cow may not carry any innate message other than that the lion is captivating, fearsome, and majestic, perhaps as a predator, while the cow bears an element of descriptive beauty and bovine naiveté, perhaps as prey.

- **Students’ paintings may be based on incomprehensible stories but they are still stories to tell**

It is often assumed that for a story to make artistic sense, it must be comprehensible, at the onset, within the realm of reality, or at least it must be fathomable. This paper posits that in their formative stages of the generation of subject matter and interpretation of themes, students must be given the opportunity to exploit the images that flow in their minds, whatever their genesis or whatever we might think of them; this underscores the essence of creativity and greatly enhances their creative potential and confidence. It has been observed that a story can be mythical, that is, it may not have an aorta of practical real-life occurrence; it could be surreal, a wonderland, or a mystical narrative, or could be a reconstructed story from the annals of history. All these seem to form the basis upon which students interpret themes and create their own interesting paintings that ultimately become artistically engaging.

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