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Original Article

### How Students Think: Efficacy of Surrealism as an Avenue for the Generation and Expression of Thought among Fine Art Students at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

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expressiveness.*

Surrealism is one of the most fascinating expressive genres of Art and seems to engage students in a very profound manner in the way they perceive themselves, the essence of their individuality, their inherent ideas, emotions and thought processes. In retrospect, it can be viewed from the perspective that it provides a unique opportunity for individual students to express points of view from imageries that emanate from the state of their minds. At the University level, surrealism particularly in drawing, has emerged as a potent visual consolidation of the ability of students to galvanize thoughtfulness that applies to their personal psyche and general outlook towards occurrences and upheavals in their lives. This study sought to examine how students think through surrealist inspirations as a basis of their imaginative work and the extent to which they were able to internalize and embed the basic tenets of surrealism such as distortion of forms, bizarreness of composition or grotesqueness in artistic compositions of their own. The study also sought to determine if indeed these new surrealist compositions carried any social message that was derived from the drawings themselves in order to underscore possible contextual meaning. The final year cohort of students involved in this study had not done any surrealist work before and were introduced to the concept of surrealism and its potential for individual expression through the discussion of selected previous works of past students at the same level. This was deemed useful as they were able to initially internalize the nature of compositions and the possible derivation of surrealist images such as those that manifest in the subconscious mind and other dreamlike dispensations. The students subsequently produced a significant body of work from which pieces were selected for this study using the criteria of visual impact such as profoundness of the surrealism, level of execution using pencil and social message. The analysis of the work was done using the analytical framework provided. The students were engaged in weekly class presentations of their individual work that provided the opportunity for critiquing.

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## INTRODUCTION

In encountering surrealism for the first time, students are initially perplexed by the paradigm shift from the way they perceive artistic creativity, self-expression and pictorial composition to an approach that is totally new and vastly different. They often express themselves within the broad realm of rationality, sober synthesis of their ideas, and artistic interrogation of their emotions, experiences and desires. All these are derived from their thought processes as rational beings. In this regard, Heckman (2020) notes that "Rationalism says that the world is what it is, it exists within a reality and that reality is real." To put this in perspective, students just like other artists, deal and perhaps conform to certain realities in their environments that encompass certain truths that manifest in their lives and are expressed as such in their work for others to decipher. From preliminary studies on the effects of surrealism, it can be concluded that students find this new avenue of self-expression exciting and intriguing; and that there could exist other possibilities of the definition of truths derived from unconventional sources such as images in dreams that could be interpreted as 'alternative' truths and impact their lives. Heckman adds, "Our "society" masked the truth that lay

beyond the veil. The only true way to break free of the restraints that chained us to rationalism was to release our unconscious."

The initial dilemma for students as they grapple with the intricate nature of surrealism is whether images that emanate from dreams and fantasies contain or embed tangible or interpretable meaning that can be extracted and artistically rendered. The students consequently have to comprehend whether the meanings contained in surrealist images bear some form of metaphorical value that can be presented to audiences for them to decipher and draw some truths that can be applicable in everyday life. When this dilemma is overcome and students ultimately resonate with the nature and form of surrealist work, they experience an artistic transformation that becomes an integral part of how they recalibrate their experiences and emotions and construct their points of view. A notable surrealist discourse gravitates around whether images that are drawn from dreams themselves or dreamlike dispensations have any possible connection to actual real-life experiences, or are amorphous images that manifest themselves in short-lived mental flashes that have no relation to any existing factors in real life. It has been thought in some schools of thought that these dreamlike images as

they flow in the unconscious mind have some affiliation to real-life experiences and therefore contain reverberations of guiding truths; that real-life experiences are juxtaposed and subsequently manifest themselves as surrealist images in dreams as some form of ‘revelation’ of hidden meaning. Tarrab (2013) notes that “while many may neglect or underestimate their dreams or view them as random firings of their subconscious, dreams do indeed possess significant meaning.

Your nightly reveries accurately portray your deepest thoughts and feelings.” On the potential usefulness of the unconscious mind as a source of creativity (Artchive, 2020) explains that “Unconsciousness means to enter the repressed memories, our underlying unexplainable fears, and turn that potential into something creative. For two reasons, the unconscious mind piqued the Surrealists’ curiosity. They were intrigued by it first since the unconscious is where the irrational comes from. Second, creativity can also come from the unconscious”.

## APPROACHES TO SURREALISM

As students embark on surrealism, they are introduced to two basic approaches which guide their origination and help them to fathom its fundamental basis. From a broad perspective, they are introduced to figurative surrealism and biomorphic surrealism as ways of anchoring their work. Craven (2019) notes that “As the Surrealism movement evolved, artists developed new systems and techniques for exploring the irrational world of the subconscious mind. Two trends emerged: Biomorphic (or, abstract) and Figurative”. Figurative surrealism is important and attractive because it involves the use of forms and objects that are readily recognizable since they are realistic or representational but bear surrealist distortions. These representational forms are often contained in dreamlike flowing images that may carry metaphorical or analogical connotations. The biomorphic surrealist approach is more abstract oriented and emergent forms may not be readily

recognizable since they are neither representational nor geometric; but in dreamlike images, people may still connect with them on a primal level almost as if they are familiar with them from another worldly dispensation.

## Analytical framework

In this paper, the analytical framework encompassed four major considerations that were designed to extract the essence of each student’s surrealist thinking. Each of these four components was explained to the students in adequate detail. However, each of them was ultimately interwoven with the regular tenets of surrealist analysis. The four considerations that informed the basic analysis as presented to the students were; the presence of surrealism in their individual work such that it can be termed ‘surreal’, the ‘profoundness’ of the surrealism contained in the drawings; execution of pencil work, the possible interpretable meaning as fathomed by the student and the coded message extended to the audience. The analytical framework also included considerations of other regular components that comprise analysis of any surrealist work.

## *Presence of surrealism*

The purpose of students’ interaction with surrealism is to produce work that contains surrealist connotations that are extractable or identifiable in their work. Students were expected to demonstrate some surrealist tenets such as distortions, absurdity, unnaturalness and even grotesqueness that would probably emanate from dreamlike experiences. In delving into the role of surrealism in helping artist and audience turn inwards, Meyer (2021) notes that “This self-reflection opened up space for what the Surrealists regarded as the ultimate reality to take form through the super-imposition of the conscious with the unconscious, resulting in a creative work that escapes the understanding of the rational mind”. Students were also expected to be able to fathom their work based on their interaction with these tenets as a way of delving into their inner worlds.

***Execution of pencil work***

In this paper, students were expected to present their work in pencil, manipulating the effects of light and dark effects or shading to levels that were compatible with their surrealist inclinations. For purposes of uniformity of presentation, the use of pencil was determined to be a prudent tool across the board for students to work and confidently present their work. They were all familiar with pencils in other units and hence as a tool, it was expected to provide a good anchorage for their work.

***'Profoundness' of the surrealism***

Good surrealist work bears a certain profoundness that makes it uniquely impactful and unforgettable. Students were expected to exploit and depict the possibility of profoundness emanating from this dreamlike dispensation. Though by the nature of the emanation of surrealist work, a deliberate 'thought' process is not factored as an integral emanative tenet, students were however expected to extract this profoundness from the juxtaposition of certain images that manifested in their dreamlike dispensation or fantasies that bore visual impact. In regard to the elaboration of this profoundness, Karageorgi (2024) writes of the surrealists, "The Surrealists aimed to tap into the unconscious and to mix the logical with the irrational, dream, and reality to create a new hyper-reality."

***Interpretable meaning***

Though surrealism is derived and developed from unconventional sources such as the unconscious mind, there is the emergence of pictorial compositions of images that constitute conversations that ultimately may contain interpretable messages. Students were expected to extract this interpretable meaning from their work and be able to present it as a social message to the audience.

***Possible message to the audience***

When the audience examines any work of art including surrealist work, they expect to gain some impetus in the comprehension of some phenomenon. Surrealist work contains images that contain glimpses of this possibility. This is because there is no work of art that is ultimately completely devoid of meaning. It has been argued that surrealist work can constitute elements of truth that may be applicable in the real world when subjected to certain interpretations. In the explanation of their work, students were expected to delve into possible interpretations that the audience could resonate with. However surrealist work is open to multiple interpretations.

***Presence of metaphors and symbolism***

In surrealist work, images can be developed from dreamlike dispensations that are perceived to contain meaning when interpreted. These images can be naturalistic but distorted, juxtaposed and presented in such a way that they appear absurd and surreal in the space and environment within which they are placed. These metaphoric images then seem to represent something else often woven into abstract ideas with complex undertones that carry a potentially different kind of truth when applied to the natural world. In surrealism, pictorial metaphors are often evident in symbols and dramatic imagery and contain within them certain analogies, connotations, ambiguities and symbolisms. Moore (2017) observes that "Visual puns, metaphors, and symbols all seek visual patterns in our environment and make connections between those patterns. The humour found in visual puns is an accessible way for students of visual literacy to gain an understanding of metaphors and symbols in art". Students were expected to interact with the application of metaphors in their pictorial composition in order to spur a measure of interpretive inspiration from viewers.

***Suggestion of automatism***

In the perception of surrealism, automatism as a technique is suggested when the formulation of artwork in painting and drawing is based almost entirely on the unconscious mind where the application of conscious thought or control is absent. It is possible that students can extract their images from their unconscious mind dispensation where they cannot be in a position to apply organized thought or a specific plan of the flow of thought patterns. The nature of the images contained in a drawing may suggest a manifestation of automatism. The usefulness of automatism is that the derivation of related images is perceived to contain creative potential which is otherwise thought to be suppressed by conventional thought processes. By extension, this creative potential may contain meaning when subjected to artistic interpretation. In regard to its importance, Meyer (2023) notes that “Automatism was a key concept within the Surrealist movement, which described a practice of making that relied on the artist’s ability to release control over the outcome of their work and enabled them to produce works that focused on their unconscious thoughts.

***Illogical juxtapositions and bizarre assemblages***

In describing or comprehending surrealist work, the juxtaposition of unrelated images and the symbols they contain occurs in a manner that is visually irrational and illogical. This juxtaposition may include both naturalistic forms that may be recognizable but distorted, and biomorphic shapes that bear no naturalistic resemblance to any recognizable forms. This is descriptive of the dreamlike dispensation within which they emerge. This therefore becomes pertinent in the construction of allegory or metaphors that are synonymous with surrealism. It is perceived that these illogical juxtapositions that appear in dreams or occur in the unconscious mind however contain some element of hidden meaning that can be unraveled through interpretation. This study sought to reveal through

the analysis of students’ work whether or not such juxtaposition of unrelated images and specific symbolic forms, was emergent in students’ surrealist drawings.

***Dreamlike imagery***

Dreamlike images emanate and manifest themselves in the dream world and as such they have an intrinsic connection to the realm of surrealism. The symbolism contained in dreams, through the manifestation of certain forms, is considered an avenue that leads to the primal self and which is removed from the natural world. Dreams therefore require interpretation in order to unravel their hidden meaning and symbolism as contained in surrealist work. Dreams are also thought to carry certain symbolic undertones that are peculiar to individuals, including aspects of personal iconography that are connected to personal real-life experiences and hence when certain images occur in dreams, they may allude to specific meanings that relate to that individual. When students interpret their own work, they tend to refer to the forms and symbols that are featured in their surrealist work as encompassing certain information and meaning.

***Spontaneity***

The notion of spontaneity in surrealism is related in a fundamental way to automatism. Its application in a work of art refers to the ability to capture the mind’s undercurrents as they manifest as flowing and spontaneous images. In such circumstances, the artist avoids the deliberate intervention of a conscious or rational mind in the formulation of their work. Subsequently, students were expected to demonstrate a suggestion of spontaneity in their work as a basis for understanding the derivation of their composition.

***The uncanny***

In conventional art, something that is uncanny bears some striking resemblance to another. In surrealist



work, the juxtaposition of images can bear forms and symbols that are familiar but are presented in a composition that makes no logical or natural sense. This attracts attention to what these forms could mean in their bizarreness and strange presentation and whether they allude to the possibility of new meaning or a new reality.

### ***Visual puns***

Visual puns are inserted images within a composition that may add humour or suggest a certain irony that is pertinent to the entire composition. They are particularly useful in surrealist work because they blend in with the use of metaphors and lend weight to symbolism. In this

regard, they are not only humorous or apt but often enhance the absurdity that underscores hidden meanings in surrealist work. Visual puns are therefore seen as part of the artist's integral quest for creativity and derivation of meaning in the application of metaphors or analogies in his or her work. Moore (2017) observes, "In art as well, a pun is more than just humour, but the light emanating from the laughter it creates illuminates the truths that lie behind the metaphors and symbols that shape our world. She notes, "Therefore, puns exist not just for our amusement, but can also inspire creativity, as well as critical and conceptual thinking."

### **Analysis of Work**

**Plate 1. 'Artist's euphoria' Jane Tete. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*"The drawing depicts a hand of an artist with the notable absence of the index finger*

*symbolizing the numbing sensation often felt after prolonged drawing. Flipped nails represent the hardened tips of fingers while a central skull signifies the endurance required in*

*the artistic process including both physical and mental strain. Rising from the thumb, a diminished pencil signifies the culmination of the artistic endeavour. Ultimately the work itself stands as a tribute to the artist's perseverance, showcasing that despite the challenges, the final work is beautiful and fulfilling".*

Although on the face of it, the work appears naturalistic, it bears aspects of surrealist influence and is testimony to how students use flowing images derived from the state of their minds to formulate artistic compositions.

**Plate 2. 'Paradox of beauty' Jane Tete. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that

*"A woman's legs, depicted with taut muscles and visible intertwining veins are placed in high heels symbolic of convectional yet at the same time bizarre notion of attractiveness. The blend*

*of strain and allure highlights the extent to which some women are prepared to go in their quest for beauty. This drawing is a poignant commentary on the paradoxical nature of*

*beauty and its description of femininity and elegance”.*

The legs of the woman placed on high heels are intricately studied including their shape, calf

muscles and bulging veins which highlights the surrealism. The very dark background creates the contrast necessary to enhance the subject matter. Such images address the paradox of beauty and can only really manifest in a dreamlike environment.

**Plate 3. ‘In his hands’ Jane Tete. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that

*“Relationships are often marked by complexities involving a myriad of contradicting emotions. A woman’s face is divided into two halves; one half depicts*

*calmness while the other is fractured, reflecting the eerie nature of her dual emotions. The head is propped up by a man’s controlling hand symbolizing his toxic influence over her emotions and wellbeing”.*



The student artist uses sharp pencil contrasts to enhance the focus of the drawing and also uses textural effects to study other details that help to bring out surrealism. This is a dreamlike image that is most likely to manifest in a subconscious mind.

**Plate 4. ‘Shipwreck’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



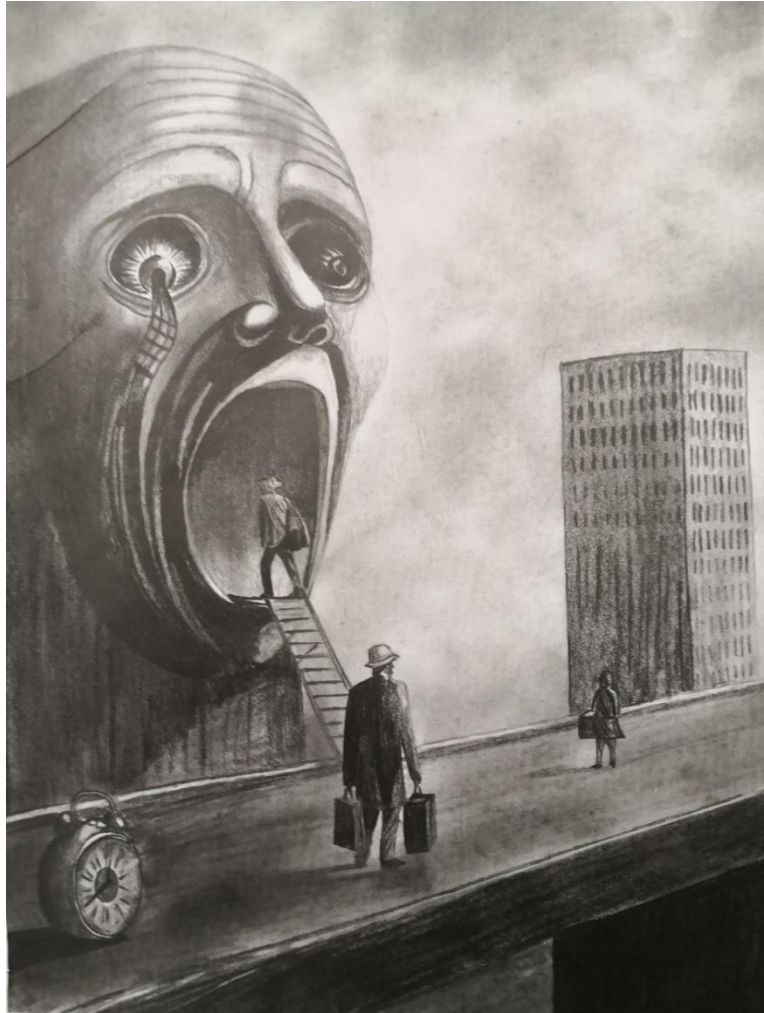
(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist describes his drawing,

*“In the greyscale abyss, a ship contends with the sea’s wrath akin to life’s relentless trials. The shattered timepiece, a metaphor for fractured dreams and lost direction looms ominously. Ghostly silhouettes, perhaps the soul’s*

*fragments, spectate the chaos, embodying the duality of being both the victim and the observer of one’s own demise. This scene captures the essence of watching one’s life disintegrate, powerless amidst the storm of existence”.*

**Plate 5. ‘Corporate World’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*“The drawing serves as a cautionary tale against the consuming nature of corporate life. A monstrous face, symbolizing the corporate world looms large over the cityscape ready to devour its victims. The figures represent various reactions to this threat; submission, contemplation and defiance. An abandoned clock suggests liberation from these constraints. The drawing warns people to guard their individuality and resist being consumed by corporate demands, emphasizing the*

*importance of personal values over corporate allure”.*

The use of ghostly images and bizarre settings are common features of surrealism. The placing of the abandoned clock and the strange activities depicted in the drawing constitute an irrational setting that would most likely manifest in a dream image. The artist, however, tries to rationalize the content of the drawing from the perspective of what was flowing in his mind but such work is open to multiple interpretations.

**Plate 6. ‘The GenZ Graduate’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*“The artwork illustrates a Gen Z graduate boldly stepping out of a box with a multiple-eyed face which is a representation of society. It is a visual analogy of the purposeful rejection of outdated, restrictive thinking. The graduate, holding a blind man’s cane, strides away from the patterned face in the box in a backdrop of vibrant abstract shapes which signifies the*

*determination to venture from the known comfort zone to the unknown. This eagerness to leave a familiar dispensation in order to embrace new, diverse ideas and innovation in an ever evolving world is the message of the drawing.*

The intricate study of patterns as well as the paved foreground are part of the components of the flowing dream image.



**Plate 7. 'Eye of the storm' Nyiendo A. Catherine. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

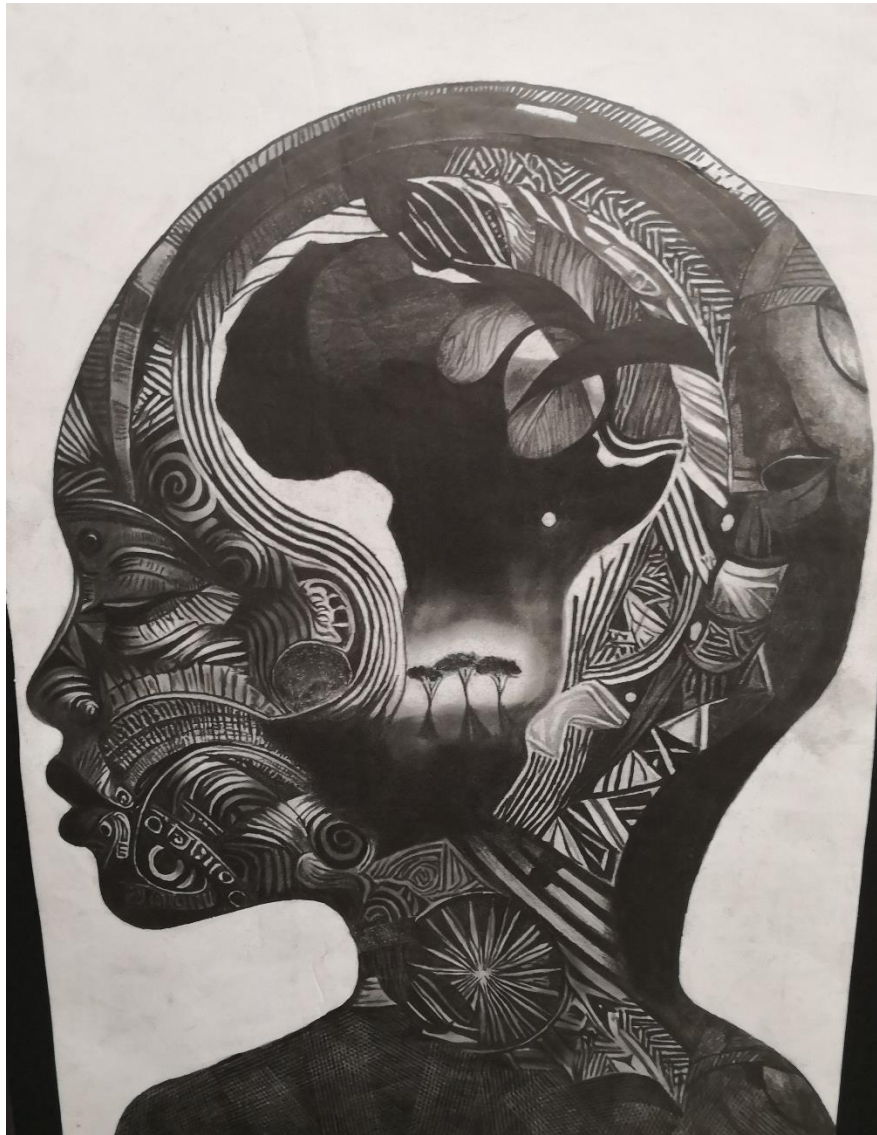
*“Emotions and pain are intertwined, and the ability to address emotional wellbeing can positively impact pain management”.*

Pain and emotion are expressed through the eye; whether through the flow of tears or the myriad of expressions that permeate through the forlorn appearance of the eye that underscore underlying emotions. The drawing shows a hand that grasps the

eye and attempts to contain the flow of tears as well as to create a window around the eye through which it sees an array of hope. The suggested symbolism is that the eye is always the focus of human emotional expression through which tears of despair flow. But it is also a space through which a sparkle of commensurate hope is manifested. This kind of image may be evident in a dreamlike environment and the eye itself appears often in surrealist work.



**Plate 8. Ng'ang'a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

The artist underscores

*“The philosophy that embodies the essence of being human. It is the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. The*

*intricate patterns represent the various cultures in Africa highlighting the collective humanity; it is an ode to the African ethos of communal existence and mutual support encapsulated by the phrase, ‘I am because we are’”.*

**Plate 9. 'Inner beast' Rehema Sang'ona. Pencil drawing 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The drawing depicts a half lion head superimposed upon a human head creating a dreamlike metaphorical creature. The student artist writes that

*“this is symbolic of the primal predatory instincts and untamed aspects of human nature. This hints at the struggle to reconcile normal human nature and hidden animalistic instincts that manifest themselves in certain*

*circumstances creating an ambiguity of character”.*

The blank, pupilless eyes denote that the creature is devoid of human characteristics and is, therefore, demonic in nature. These kinds of images may occur in the subconscious mind as manifestations of certain human insecurities, fears and anxieties in the natural world. *‘Be wary of the hidden nature of character beneath the veneer’.*

**Plate 10. 'Resilience of the foot' Eliya Wekesa. Pencil drawing 2024.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

Some surrealist drawings are self-explanatory in their underlying connotation. The bizarre superimposition of a rubber shoe onto a foot denotes some form of infinite relationship between the modern and the past. However, the foot as a human limb always remains fundamental in body mobility and stability and hence it has its unique infinite power. The shoe has its acknowledged use of protecting the foot but cannot replace the foot in

form or purpose; one is alive with bone tissue and blood and the other is synthetic and, therefore, not substitutable. The immediate bizarreness of the content of this drawing can be applicable to any situation where there exists a visual perception of a relationship between two entities but where there exists no chance of substitutability. At the end of it all, it is the foot that matters.



**Plate 11. 'Heart to heart' Njagi Kuguru. Pencil drawing 2024.**



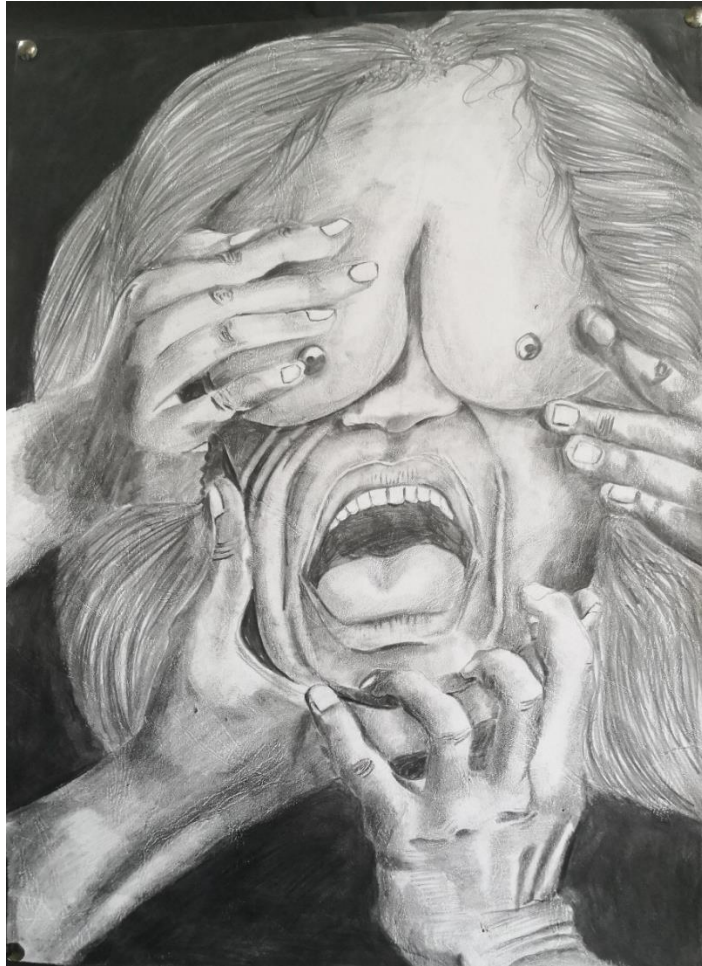
*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

A spark of light lights up the connection between the externally visible hearts of the mother and child, creating an eerie sparkle in the eyes of the baby. Although the figures are naturalistic, the student artist sees the human hearts of mother and child as electrical gadgets that are interconnected by the use of wires. The spark of light is initiated by the mother from whose big heart the energy of love emanates

which symbolizes undying maternal love. The student artist observes that *"The drawing is about the infinite love between the mother and child"*. The execution of the pencil is well done with the use of contrasting tones that create the necessary illumination to highlight the expression on the faces as the focus of the drawing.



**Plate 12. ‘Sexual harassment’ Munga Wanjiru. Pencil drawing 2024.**

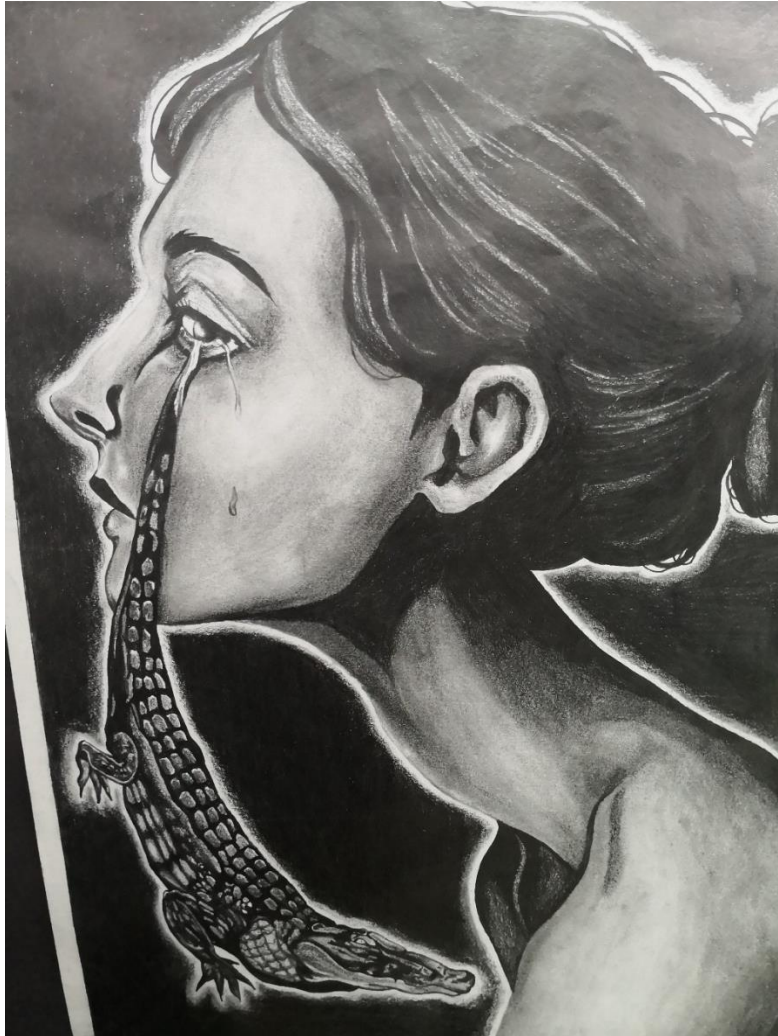


*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

The student artist writes “Many people are attracted by the outer appearance and hence judge others. The outer self can lead to unwanted attention amounting to sexual harassment and torment” The bizarre drawing depicts the torment of the individual with breasts replacing the eyes and the mouth showing the scream of distress amidst a

pair of invasive hands. The upper hands appear like they are protective of the self in the circumstance of this torment completing a rather weird face. These dreamlike imageries may occur in the subconscious mind and are testimony to how the human psyche can be engulfed by certain fears and tribulations which manifest themselves in dreams.

**Plate 13. 'Crocodile tears' Njagi Kuguru. Pencil drawing 2024.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

The notion of 'crocodile tears' has long existed in the realm of human interaction, particularly human deceit and pretence. In this drawing, the tears from one eye crystallize into the form of a crocodile underscoring the analogical social narrative of the insincerity and insensitivity of human nature. The form of the crocodile is very well studied with naturalistic texture in order to enhance the visual

analogy. The use of animal analogy is a regular occurrence in surrealist work because it is easier and more powerful to embed the underlying message within the bizarreness of the composition when the role or reputation of the animal in the real world is easily relatable.

**Plate 14. ‘Untitled’ Njoroge Kirika. Pencil drawing 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*“The tree trunk replaces the human head yet the trunk is already cut through and further struck and split open using an axe. The axe represents an unseen force that emphasizes the surrealism of the occurrence. It shows that life and opportunity can seemingly be cut short and deliberately sabotaged even before they blossom”.*

This kind of image constitutes the kind of surrealism that is described as ‘nonsensical’ simply because a tree trunk and a human head are not naturally interchangeable or substitutable. However, the image still retains its profoundness from an analogical perspective. This kind of image is also prone to multiple interpretations. The student takes time to study and execute the drawing with intricate textural detail which contributes significantly to the visual profoundness of the drawing.



**Plate 15. 'Self-sabotage' Apiyo Omwono. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist comments, “*Endless self-sabotage leads to depression. There is a point it reaches where an individual cannot take it anymore and has to desperately push back for self-preservation*”. A bizarre composition shows a distraught person seated on the ground pushing away the torment of self-sabotage. The big palm of the hand in the foreground forms part of the surrealism and is used as a gestural pose

highlighting the subject matter. The student demonstrates how distorted images can manifest in the subconscious mind often triggered by underlying tribulations. It suggests that there exists a connection between what transpires in the real world and how the mind stores that information for it to appear in a dreamlike dispensation in the form of surreal images.



**Plate 16. ‘Untitled’ Pencil drawing, 2022.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

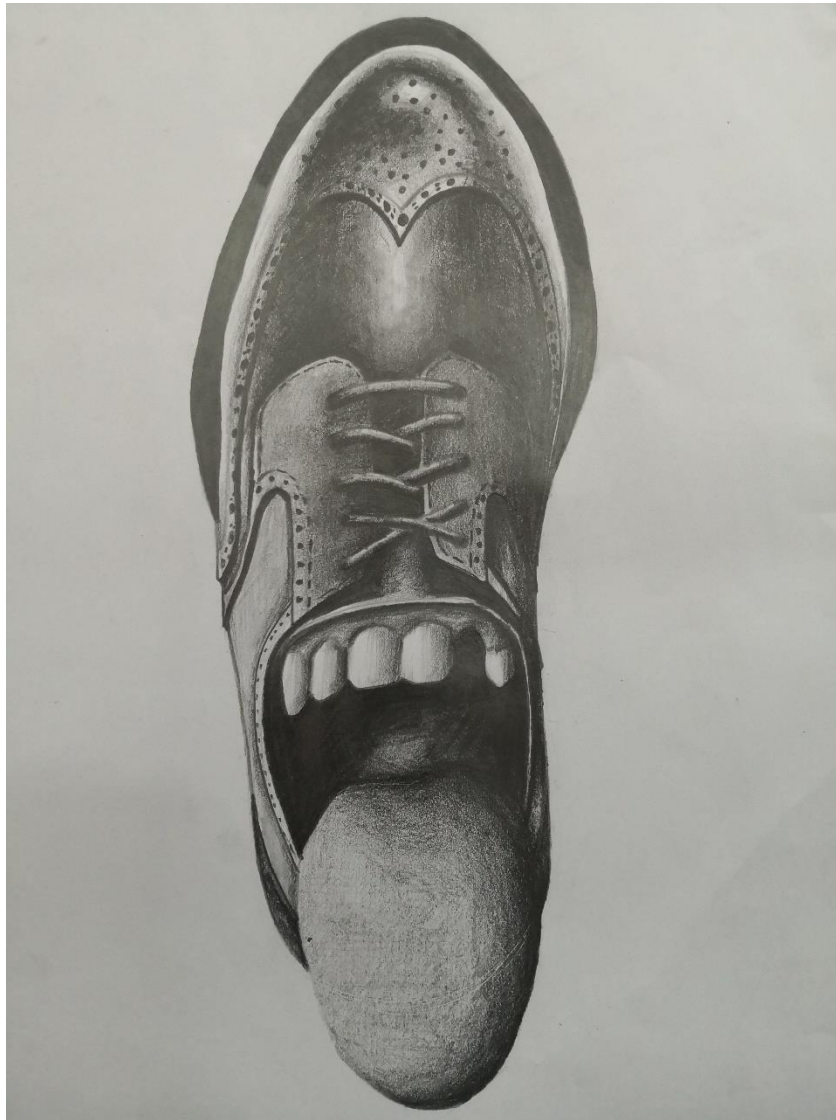
The drawing shows a gigantic ant pushing forward a human foot helping the person to walk. Even though a foot can crush an ant in an instant, the image of an ant having the ability and strength to push a foot forward is surreal but bears analogical meaning. The student artist notes that,

*“Ants are small creatures that everyone ignores but they have their earthly purpose. In human*

*endeavour, there are small things that are easily ignored but they bear great opportunity that can propel a person through to a higher pedestal. Don’t ignore or belittle small opportunities.*

This drawing is prone to multiple interpretations.

**Plate 17. 'Untitled' Njoroge Kirika. Pencil drawing, 2024.**

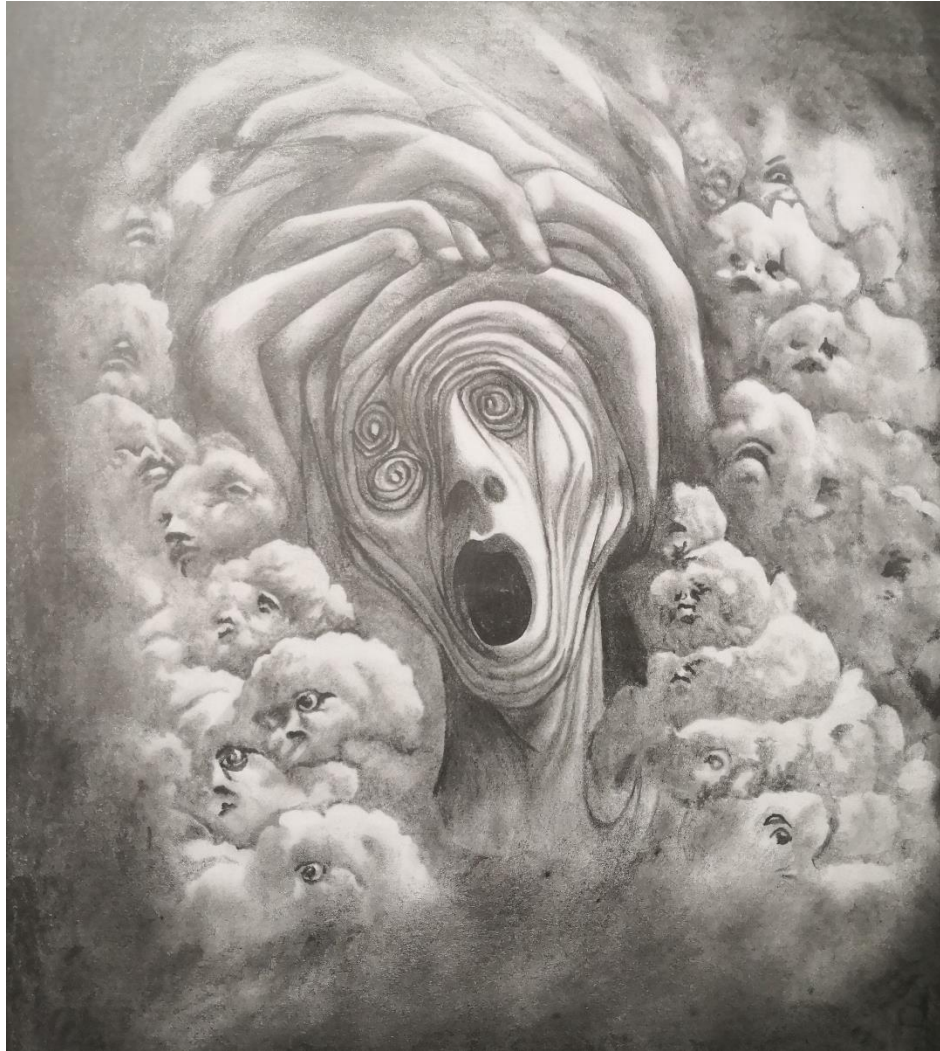


*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

The student artist aptly notes that '*Stepping into shoes that will bite you is a bad idea*' Opportunities that are enticing on the surface and seem to offer endless possibilities could turn out to be far removed from practical reality and could be detrimental to the initial idea of good fortune. The drawing shows the surreal form of an attractive shoe that seems like the perfect fit but it bears an eerie

mouth that is waiting to torment the wearer. There are some surrealist drawings that carry a cautionary connotation where a social message is fathomable. Although surrealist work was traditionally meant to be free of purposeful thought and regular social messaging, such drawings suggest that it is possible for dreamlike imageries to connote social messages that caution against certain perils.

**Plate 18. ‘Helpless’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

According to the student artist writes,

*“Reminiscent of ‘the scream’, the drawing depicts a distraught figure with multiple constrictive hands wrapped around the head amidst a storm of bizarre faces presented in the form of clouds. This symbolizes the notion of overwhelming and conflicting omnipresent whisperers in society who make social pressures unbearable. The repetitive motifs indicate the perpetual sounds that surround and*

*engulf an individual in an attempt to tear them apart. The drawing urges individuals to maintain their own voice and identity against external pressure and undue influence underscoring the power of individual resilience and courage”.*

The student artist embeds himself in this image and contends that he is the culprit. Often the use of such surreal images ultimately becomes social commentary.



**Plate 19. ‘The shelve life of time’ Faith Chebet. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

*“Time is precious and is irretrievable when unduly wasted, just like any liquid that is left to spill into the ground”.* The clock is a celebrated symbol in surrealist work since it underscores the concept of ‘visual time’. Hence when it melts away into an irretrievable liquid, the analogy of lost time and opportunity is clear. When such images occur in the subconscious dispensation, the distorted state of a melting clock is a clear caution against the

underestimation of the shelve life of the precious ‘commodity of time’, because it is very short. The gestural effect of hands trying to hold the melting substance in their palms is again vivid and relatable as an analogy towards the irretrievable nature of wasted time. Hence just like the fluidity of a melting substance leads to its perpetual loss, so does wasted time lead to the inevitability of its loss.



**Plate 20. ‘Looking busy’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist notes that,

*“This drawing depicts the irony that society, through its education system, has become adept at producing learned graduates who are job seekers by default, rather than encouraging diverse aspirations and individual growth. It is a visual commentary on the narrow focus that*

*neglects the multifaceted nature of young adults. The drawing features a dejected man in a suit with a telescope for a head ostensibly scanning for elusive jobs. The vultures represent a bad omen of failure and imminent demise. Such surrealist images are often manifestations of real-life tribulations.*

**Plate 21. ‘Barbed Silence’ Akanya Omusitia. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that

*“The suffering of the male gender is often ignored by society and victims, in their specific circumstances, are forced to suffer in silence even when facing obvious discrimination, physical and psychological abuse. The drawing depicts a man’s mouth that has been painfully*

*stitched shut with barbed wire; silhouettes of hands protest in his head”.*

Although the face and the expression of distress are naturalistic, the barbed wire stitched upon the mouth symbolizes the extent to which silence is sought and subsequently enforced; the surreal use of barbed wire itself is symbolic of human insensitivity through torture and unbridled brutality.

**Plate 22. 'Enigma of personality' Eliya Wekesa. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

The student artist laments about the manifestation of multiple personalities in certain people which are juxtaposed with each other and are subsequently hidden within. An individual who harbours this kind of enigmatic personality is not only hard to deconstruct and relate to but can be potentially dangerous. This surrealist drawing depicts the

innocent face of a woman, shown through the piercing eyes, but the underneath reveals a skeleton which by symbolism, denotes danger or even death. Manifestations of these kinds of ghostly imageries are most likely found in dreams and can be eerily cautionary when recalled and interpreted in the context of the natural world.



**Plate 23. Brian Muliro. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*“There exists evil in society and the evil permeates through all segments of society. In this drawing, it is symbolized by the ghostly hands rising from the grave precipitating the emergence of an evil empire that shall engulf all earth”.*

Ghostly forms and other related symbolisms are often featured in surrealist work mainly because of

their aura of mystery and eerie representation of the underworld that constitute a significant body of what people consider as both mystical and surreal. The simple idea that evil therefore emanates through some unearthly creature mysteriously rising from the tomb is one such surrealist belief that all manifestations of evil come from the netherworld and are inherently anti-life.



**Plate 24. ‘Two masketeers’ Njagi Kuguru. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

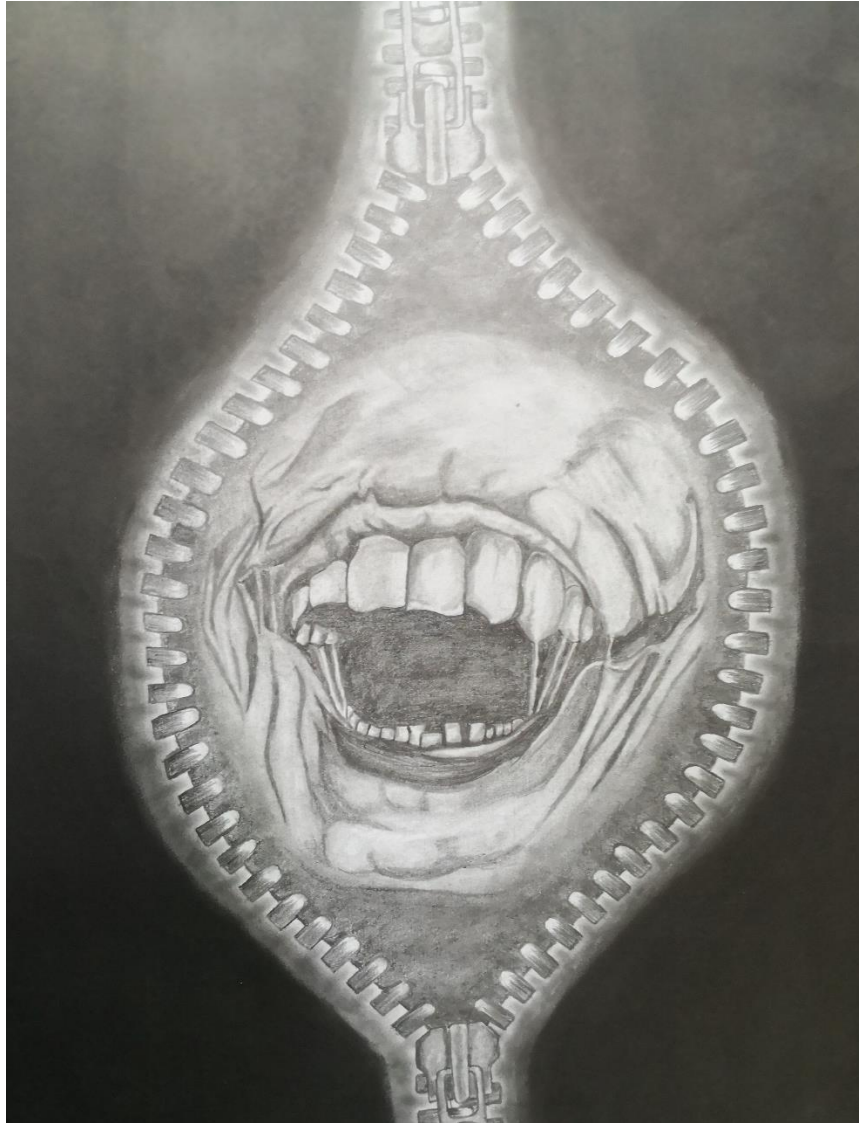
The student artists lament the wanton destruction of the environment, particularly through the effect of pollution. He describes his drawing,

*“In the surreal post-destruction world, two little birds hurdle together wearing protective gas masks as a sign of infinite comradeship. Though they look around in despair and know that their*

*chance of survival hangs on an intricate balance, symbolized by the barbed wire, they still have hope”.*

The drawing is well executed in pencil with the kind of shading and textural details that enhance the surrealist outlook.

**Plate 25. 'Zip it' Apiyo Omwono. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that,

*"It is important to know when to listen and when to speak and to distinguish that silence is a virtue that is impactful. Carelessly uttered words turn out to be compunctious and hurtful to others".*

Since there are people who are prone to a loose mouth without discrete, the drawing suggests that a mouth can be potentially tamed by zipping it up like a piece of cloth when necessary to prevent the possibility of the utterance of unfiltered words. The drawing is well executed with the texture of the zip clearly shown since it forms the surrealism in the drawing.

**Plate 26. Mahiva Arsenal. Pencil drawing, 2024.**

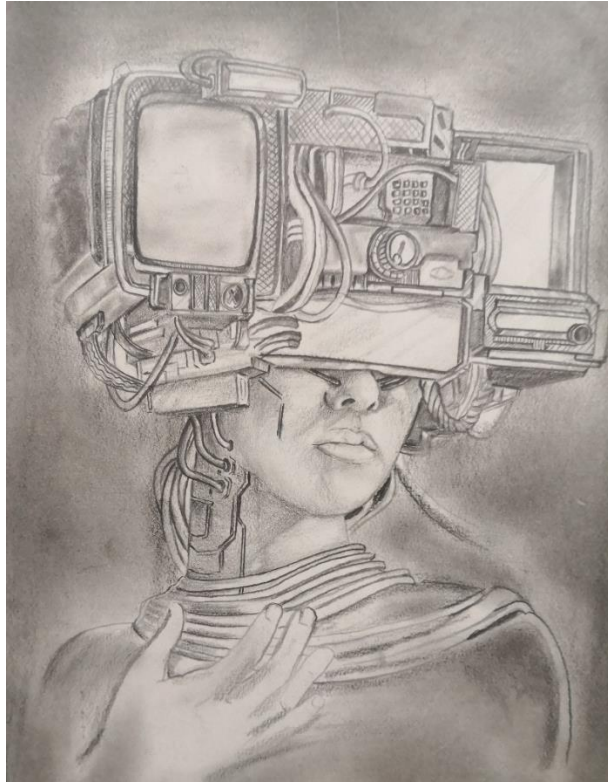


*(Source: Department of Fine Art)*

Some drawings may not depict the traditional tenets of surrealist work since they feature no grotesqueness, unnaturalness or distortions of regular forms. However since these images ostensibly flow in the subconscious mind, the surrealist suggestion is found in the kind of technological gadgetry that a human being would require in order to function (Plates 26, 27). In this drawing, the student shows the almost surreal web of technological paraphernalia that an elderly person would require in order to boost normal cranial functions. In a dreamlike world, this elderly person would be presented as a walking freak that would be bizarre in the real world. The pencil

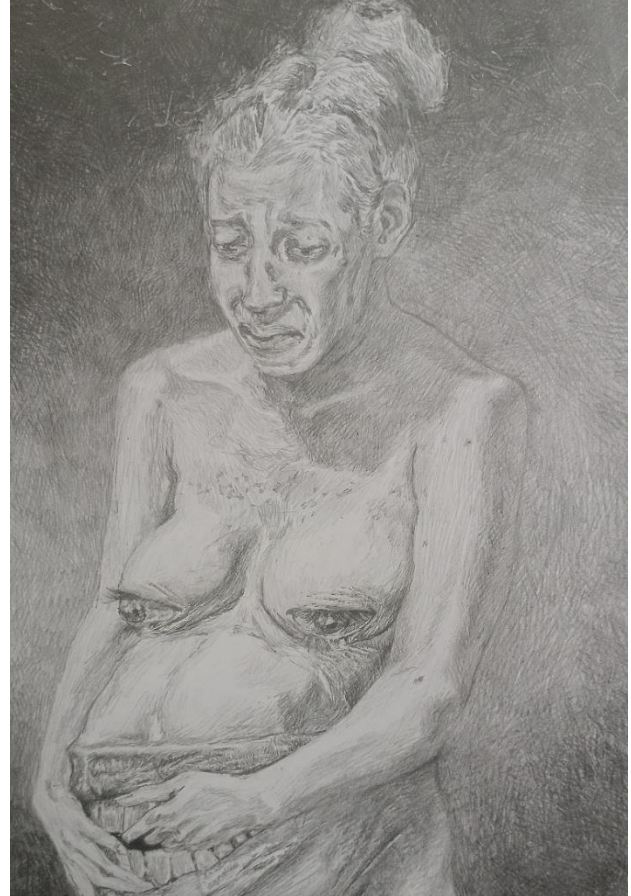
execution is done with very good detail and study of surrealist gadgetry.



**Plate 27. Mahiva Arsenal. Pencil drawing, 2024.**

(Source: Department of Fine Art)

As observed in the previous drawing, some drawings may not feature any grotesqueness, unnaturalness or distortions of regular forms. As in Plate 26, the student artist shows the bizarre technological gadgetry that would apply in a hypothetical tech-world that would exist only in the dream world. In the confluence between surrealism and reality, the drawing shows how the student perceives the intrigues of technology and its absurdity if it were to be placed on a human head rather than the distortion or unnaturalness of the forms themselves. However, since such images exist only in the unconscious mind, surrealism is still pertinent when viewed from outside that setting.

**Plate 28: 'Untitled' Gichia Mwathi Pencil drawing, 2024.**

(Source: Department of Fine Art)

This drawing is prone to multiple interpretations because of its bizarreness and grotesque nature. The breasts bear eyes and are like silent witnesses to the act of abortion which is itself depicted as an eerily grotesque occurrence. The possibility that it can be self-conducted through the open mouth is surreal. Facial expressions are part of surrealist imagery and the expression on the face of the person is that of worry and indignation. Such bizarre drawings are suggestive of the student's ability to fathom macabre occurrences as they would manifest in an unconscious dispensation, completely removed from practical reality. Such surreal 'scenes' in drawings could be triggered by traumatic experiences or depressive tendencies caused by unwanted pregnancies. The drawing is well executed with the necessary pencil shading that brings out the surrealism of the work.



**Plate 29. 'Anguish' Njagi Kuguru Pencil drawing, 2024.** (Source: Department of Fine Art)



The anguish of a woman is clearly shown in this drawing. Her blank eyes, the scream and the action of tearing away at her face from the surrealist image that is very prevalent in dreamlike dispensations. Even in dreams, these kinds of images are often triggered by some traumatic experiences in the natural world that linger, to a significant extent, in the minds of the tormented. They then manifest themselves in dreams as images of horror, often depicting surreal grotesqueness. This kind of image is also often associated with cautionary indicators of warning when interpreted in the real world particularly when viewed in the context of superstition.

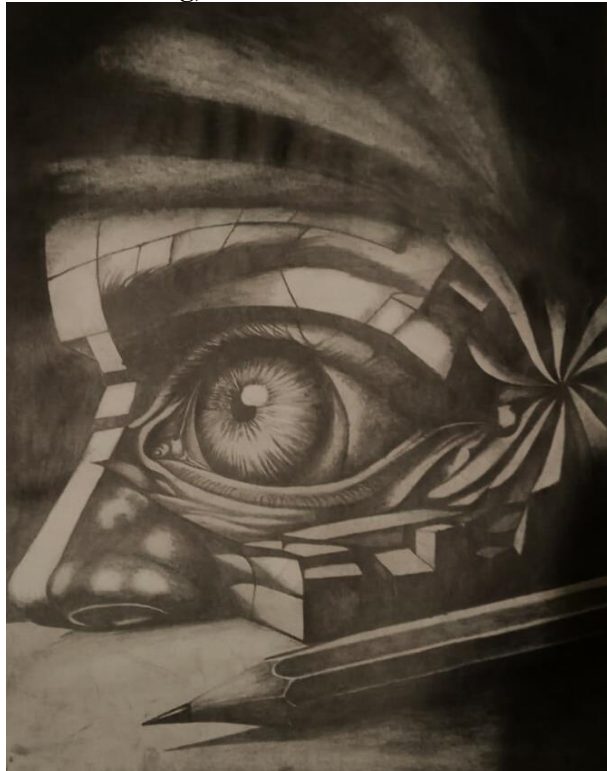
**Plate 30: 'Untitled' Ngugi Maina. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

Some surrealist drawings are testimony to the rumblings of the brain that result in images that flow in the minds of students. It is presumed that these images manifest in dreamlike dispensations and are recallable to a certain extent. Monster forms, mythical creatures, ghostly figures and eerie gestural poses are common in surrealist work because they blend well within the realm of the mysterious world or nonsensical imagery. These images may or may not be triggered by happenings in the natural world and hence some may have some connotations when interpreted while others fade away and are lost in mythical oblivion.

**Plate 31. ‘Mental blocks’ Ng’ang’a Muiruri. Pencil drawing, 2024.**



(Source: Department of Fine Art)

The student artist observes that

*“The drawing features a face-like entity made of blocks that is placed firmly on the ground. It incorporates an eye located in the centre of the face which constitutes the focus of interest. The pencil in the foreground represents the potency*

*of creativity while the top depicts a collapsing void”.*

Images of this nature may manifest in a dreamlike environment and though they may appear nonsensical, they may be related to certain insecurities or unresolved matters in real life. The enlarged eye, for instance, depicts an eerie melancholy, staring into the emptiness of yonder. The firm placement on the ground of the entire form could imply immobility or some form of predicament or mental block, while the pencil may represent an array of creative hope. Such images contained in the flowing imageries in the subconscious mind may be unravelled by the artist within the context of his or her predicaments but are also often prone to multiple interpretations.

## OBSERVATIONS AND OVERVIEW

### Execution of work

In this study, students were able to execute their drawings to varying levels of detail that were admirable. They used various pencil tones to create sharp contrasts between dark and light areas that helped to highlight their surrealist forms and create bizarre images. Some of their work comprised a juxtaposition of forms that needed to be scrutinized in their holistic composition. Some of these were recognizable human or animal forms that bore distinct distortions underscoring the effect of the manifestation of dreamlike dispensations. Some of them were not necessarily distorted but although they appeared partially naturalistic, they were intertwined in captivating bizarreness that was testimony of interpretable hidden meaning. In Plate 2, for instance, the depiction of exaggerated calf muscles and a web of bulging veins winding down the high-heeled legs of a woman is intricately executed making the drawing both bizarre and perplexing. It implies that the audience has to unravel the symbolism embedded in the drawing. Students also used textural effects that further enhanced certain forms in the context of the surrealist nature of the entire drawing. Textural

effects were effective in the description of forms whose presence in the composition was critical to the surrealist outlook of the drawing and ultimately the pertinent hidden meaning, message, warning or general caution.

### **Surrealist gestures**

This study found that there was significant use of surrealist gestures, which can be described as action gestures that feature prominently in a drawing that help depict the essence of the expressive content of the drawing and by extension, the probable meaning. Dreamlike images that flow in the mind may contain such gestural expressions as they would manifest in an individual's dream that underscore the profoundness of the drawing's content including absurdity, grotesqueness, and certain exaggerations. Plates 1, 12, 15 and 23 all include gestural poses of the hand in the compositions that help to uniquely enhance the surrealism. The hand is often a popular surrealist tool that is evident in many compositions because of its regular ability to depict a certain gestural pose that emphasizes the desired action.

### **How students think and generate surrealist ideas**

A major tenet of surrealism as envisioned and described by its proponents, sought to relegate the notion of purposeful thought to the periphery so as to free the individual to explore their dreamlike images as the driving force towards alternative truths as described through metaphors and symbolism. In this regard, Gideon (2024) observes that "Whether it's floating objects, distorted figures, or strange landscapes, Surrealist art often challenges our notions of reality and presents a fantastical and otherworldly experience for the viewer". On the other hand, the notion of individual thought that leads to self-expression is regularly viewed as an engagement that helps individuals to engage in focused thoughtfulness that interrogates their minds, circumstances, emotions, desires, fears and how they ultimately draw their conclusions within the context of their own reality. Therefore, the

ability to think is an integral part of how human beings place everything in perspective and are able to comprehend their existence. In this study, it became apparent that in delving into surrealism, students were much more drawn to the notion of surrealist ideas becoming an integral part of how they view themselves, their personalities, circumstances and even their own personal philosophies. In discussing their own drawings, it became clear that they sought to internalize them in terms of what the images meant to them in terms of their metaphorical value or their inherent symbolism as well as what they perceived were pertinent lessons for the audience.

The line between the derivation of surrealist images from dreams and other unconventional sources and the notion of purposeful, deliberate thought became very thin. In Plate 15 for instance, the surrealism is contained in the human figure grotesquely seated trying to fend off imaginary tormentors. The big palm of the hand in the foreground forms part of the surrealism and is used as a gestural pose highlighting the subject matter. Although such an image itself is synonymous with dreams or the subconscious mind, it is interpretable as inherently personal in a real-life dispensation which could be the catalyst for its manifestation in the first place. The student laments about the perils of self-sabotage and the drawing implies in retrospect that there could exist a correlation between dream images and related real-life occurrences.

### **Multiple interpretations**

Ordinarily, in examining and discussing their own drawings, students tend to perceive their own work from a defined angle of interpretation derived from their experiential context. Whether their work is from a strange dream image or is a concoction of surreal images from impulses of their brains, they view it as bearing a singular interpretation that aligns with a certain context in their personal experiences. However, it was found in this paper that when an individual student's work was subjected to critiques by other students in class,

there was a prevalence of multiple interpretations in the deconstruction of the work since the other students were not privy to contextual experiences and viewed the work purely through its profoundness or lack of it. Therefore, where some drawings bore analogical values that led to a single interpretation of caution (Plate 13, 17) others were more complex and therefore prone to multiple interpretations (Plate 3, 5). The concept of multiple interpretations is not new or uncommon; it is based on the notion that the view of the artist is not necessarily the only view of his or her own subject matter and that the viewer ultimately has the capacity and discretion to derive a different point of view based on the visual indicators derivable from the artwork.

### **Surrealism as social commentary**

Social commentary is a situation where an artist creates works of art as a result of the need to respond to given social phenomena that interest them or draw their attention. They subsequently conclude that such phenomena are significant enough to be highlighted, artistically packaged and brought to the attention of the audience and the wider public. In the description of their drawings, students firmly perceived the content of their work as descriptive of a social phenomenon and went on to discuss their work from a philosophical standpoint as a pertinent point of view. They viewed the derivation of the surrealist connotations in their drawings not as mere images that are an end to themselves but rather as an avenue for social commentary. This view may draw controversy since surrealist images in their manifestation are not necessarily a result of purposeful or directed thought but are images that emanate from the subconscious mind and are, therefore, not deliberately calibrated. Students, however, sought to find purpose in their drawings as conduits for their ideas about society, human behaviour or an identified social phenomenon that required attention. For example, Plate 17, 22 and 24 propagate elements of caution that gravitate around

human character deceit, naivety or bad actions all of which contain grave consequences.

### **Spontaneity**

One of the major tenets of surrealist work is spontaneity. This is because it defines the concept of flowing images in the mind and that they have to be captured spontaneously as they manifest themselves. Some images are vivid enough and linger in the post-dream-conscious mind and others are less so. Some artists are even known to wake up in the middle of the night to artistically 'record' through quick sketching, the pertinent essence of a passing image in their dreams. In this context, spontaneity applies to the manifestation of surrealist images and subsequent imageries and not to the regular creation of artistic ideas which an artist actively thinks about and formulates through composition. Many drawings in this study, by their own nature, suggest elements of spontaneity particularly in the execution of glimpses of irrationalism, bizarreness and even grotesqueness that further suggest the emanation of flowing images in the subconscious mind. Dreamlike spontaneity is present in many drawings in this paper but when perhaps expressed in terms of bizarre images as they would flow and manifest almost readily in the mind, then Plate 12, 16, 18, 29 and 30 are good examples.

### **Intellectualism**

As observed in social commentary, surrealist images and ideas presented by students in this paper cannot possibly be devoid of glimpses of intellectualism since students ultimately applied their minds to the interpretation of their work. It was also observed that students were intrinsically attracted by their own ability to interpret their surrealist work in whatever context. Intellectualism, in this context, is their ability to interrogate their surrealist images to extract appropriate imageries or visual symbolism and convert them into channels of thoughtfulness that are compatible with their own sense of self-expression. It is only when they do this



that they are able to demonstrate their intellect and hence are able to appeal to their audience and the wider public. One effective way in which students were able to achieve this is by delving into the analogical or metaphorical value of dreamlike images which formed the bedrock of their interpretive revelation. The use of analogy, metaphor and symbolism was important in images derived from the unconscious mind since they contained hidden messages as they often manifest themselves in dreams. Therefore, they become hidden truths and the intellect of the student is defined within the context of the individual student's ability to fathom what these truths could mean in reference to the real world. This study contends that in order for students to engage adequately with their surrealist ideas, it is inevitable as thoughtful individuals that they will ultimately delve into their individual thought processes from a prescribed angle of motivation. This, by extension, helps to sharpen their intellect.

## CONCLUSION

### Surrealism and derivation of new meaning

In examining students' drawings in this study and the passion which they displayed in the execution and oral articulation of their drawings, it can be concluded that there exists, in this context, a confluence between surrealist images and the quest for new meaning. From the onset, students in their surrealist undertaking felt a sense of freedom in executing their drawings but also needed to feel that they had shifted to a new realm of creation. In drawing a parallel to this quest, Hibbitt (2020) notes that "If unimpeded, the individual would be free to create from, according to the Surrealists, a superior viewpoint. The Surrealist mission was to make reality accord with the anarchy of the unconscious mind, and in doing so the individual would be liberated to connect with this well-spring of creativity". The drawings in this paper suggest that there exists a relatable connection between surrealist images and glimpses of reality as they manifest in the real world. The lenses through which

the students viewed and perceived their surrealist drawings underscored how they constructed new meanings. Subsequently, surrealism is seen to bear a certain level of profoundness of meaning that cannot be ignored. This implies, therefore, that the underlying meaning that is contained in surrealist work is not redundant and that it bears a significant reflection of human endeavour.

### Impact of surrealism on student self-expression

Closely related to the generation of new meaning is the concept of self-expression. Self-expression emanates from one's mind, feelings, emotions, thought configurations and all other dynamics that emanate from the conscious mind. From the drawings presented in this paper, students sought to explore their surrealist ideas from the notion that they represented aspects of their self-expression. To the students, surrealist imageries as presented in their work did not, therefore, stand out on their own as enigmatic phenomena but as fundamental emanations of their self-expression, enabling them to peer into their own internal worlds. Students, therefore, did not view surrealism as an end to itself but became a pertinent avenue through which they interpreted their work, examined themselves and viewed the world around them. When this is put in perspective, it means that surrealist images, whether they emanate from dreams and fantasies and are subsequently removed from reality and rationality, still contain certain indicators of truths that can be interpreted to be pertinent to reality and life as it unfolds in the real world. To suggest this notion, Jordan (2023) notes that "The application of the unconscious by the artist is a fundamental component of the Surrealism art movement, but actuality and the conscious also interact with this state of awareness when the unconscious figures out a way to portray reality and translate it onto the canvases created by these artists". It can be concluded that in this paper, students found great satisfaction in delving into their work through the interpretation of its otherwise surrealist content as a catalyst towards finding new meaning. This

observation was deemed important and can be construed to be a major contribution by students on how to perceive surrealist work in a modern way; that indeed these images contain revelations of hidden truths which though compressed in an *unreal* or *irrational* world could, indeed, be metamorphosed into new meanings in the *real* or *rational* world. This could be deemed impactful to the ramifications of self-expression.

### **Analogical/metaphorical perspectives of surrealism**

In a dreamlike or subconscious dispensation, images that flow in the mind often carry imageries intertwined with metaphors, analogies and symbolisms. In seeking to interpret these metaphors and analogies which they featured in their drawings, it can be concluded that students found new impetus to find meaning in their work. Close interpretation of their own work showed a great desire to decipher the underlying meaning within the context of the truth contained in this dispensation to create a new interpretive ‘revelation’. In order to put this in perspective, when dealing with a conscious mind, there are emergent ‘elements of truths’ that are accepted as definitive and binding in the real world. When dealing with a subconscious mind there are emergent imageries that carry metaphorical or analogical connotations that can be considered to carry other elements of truth when properly deciphered. These other truths are not amorphous and have been thought to be potent in helping individuals comprehend their environment and be able to build their personal outlook in life. Often in this regard, certain forms that appear in dreams are interpreted as analogies or metaphors that allude to certain premonitions or cautions that might be eerily applicable in the real world.

### **The confluence between surrealism and reflectiveness**

Through the work submitted by students, this study sought to establish a link between surrealism as it is defined and reality as it manifests in the real world.

If indeed surrealist images contain hidden meaning whether embedded in metaphors, analogies or symbolism, it implies that in the deconstruction of these meanings, a certain measure of reflection is applied. Reflectiveness, therefore, refers to a purposeful thought process that is applied to a given situation in order to better comprehend it. It was evident that although some of the surrealist drawings were indeed distorted, bizarre and even grotesque and emerged from dreams and fantasy, students actively sought to unravel possible meanings that resonated with reality or formed some synchrony of truth that ultimately made sense in their lives. They therefore engaged the content of their work as if they were removed from it and were seeking a revelation of truth from the inner for the first time. They demonstrated that surrealist work can spur thoughtfulness and can lead to a significant measure of reflectiveness in students and artists alike and that surrealism, in this context, does not manifest itself in a vacuum and contains potent meanings. It can therefore be concluded that surrealism bears, in its essence, useful parallels and insights interpretable and applicable in the real world as it is perceived by the rational mind. To underscore this connection, one student artist observed, “For me, Imaginative drawing (surrealism) was more than just an academic unit to be completed, it is important to note that the drawings presented during this period were created as therapy for my experiences and environment”.

### **The role of surrealism as an artistic influence on students’ creativity**

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that in terms of spurring creativity, thought and self-expression among students, surrealism remains an important creative outlet in the wider realm of Art and expression. Meyer (2024) observes that “The influence of the thought-provoking and sometimes disturbing images that did emerge from the Surrealist artists’ minds continues to capture the attention, prod the curiosity and stimulate the minds of audiences even today. Decades after the

movement, it continues to influence the art world". Students today may not subscribe entirely to the tenets of surrealism as originally envisaged by its proponents but in a contemporary context as seen in this study, they have adapted a new way of internalizing it that fits their artistic inquiry. When they delve into their subconscious inner world through surrealist images, they also want to connect what they see with their own reality; to synchronize the images with what is comprehensible such that those images are not amorphous floating imageries but carry some interpretable meaning in their real world. This way they are fascinated by the possibility of new meaning; something they can share in retrospect with their peers and audiences.

### **The relevance of surrealism to the wider audience.**

Surrealism by its own nature still appeals to the wider audience since it has over time evolved to be a potent avenue for conveying deep feelings, points of view, certain truths, tribulations and emotions. On its enduring legacy of surrealism, Thiange (2023) contends that "the surrealist quest for the marvellous has survived, most likely because humanity carries it within ourselves and maybe that is where the hope is. This is what makes this artistic movement so appealing nearly a century after its founding". Its origination from very unusual sources, be they the unconscious or subconscious mind, elicits a sense of expressive freedom which artists and audiences alike have found very fascinating. It can be argued that the freedom to explore the uncanny, the absurd, the unnatural, bizarre or fantastical images, opened the opportunity to explore endless possibilities and is still being utilized today in many facets of artistic self-expression. Through this avenue, artists have found their own unique individual ways of engaging the audience through spurring emotive reactions, thoughts and perspectives. In underscoring the essence of surrealism in contemporary times, Kordic (2016) observes that "Indeed, the Surrealist intent to liberate expressive form, to release the

world of the subconscious, of dreams and nightmares, paranoia, suppressed eroticism, and the dark side of the mind, continues to fascinate the world almost a century after it was born, creating an enduring and ever-lasting legacy."

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