Original Article

Stylistic Approaches in Portraiture Painting: Analysis of Selected Portraiture by Contemporary Kenyan Artists.

Dr. Kamau Wango, PhD[1]

[1] Kenyatta University P. O. Box 43844-00100, Nairobi, Kenya.
* Correspondance email : kamauwango@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

Portraiture painting remains an important and popular sub-genre in art where artists paint portraits as a response to various motivations. Some artists paint for the fun of it, or what is often referred to as art for art's sake, where they are more captivated by the flow of vivid colours, tones and textures which they capture with their brushstrokes to study pertinent aspects of the face; others wish to study the likeness of their subjects in detail as they appear on the reference photographs; others are interested in the narrative that they perceive to be apparent in the portrait; others are interested in particular facial expressions that denote certain human feelings. These expressions are incorporated in their portraits to draw attention to given circumstances and emotions such as anger, despair, joy, scepticism, displeasure or anxiety as the case may be. Others are obsessed with the peculiarity of facial details and the study of absolute likeness or even surpassing likeness to create hyperrealism. Others do not think that these absolute details are necessary and are only interested in those aspects that capture the transient face. In all these motivations, there is one common denominator that is often the foremost motivational factor; the individual artist's stylistic approach. Whatever reason or motivation for embarking on portraiture, the major driving factor is always the application of personal style. In this regard, whether the personal style is hyperrealism, realism, abstract, expressionism or even stylized, artists work within the realm of their personal styles that make them feel comfortable and helps them not only to meet their immediate artistic objectives but to enjoy their work. Artistic styles are different in approach but aim to achieve the same goals in different ways. Subsequently, artists respond to these styles differently and utilize those that they subscribe to in order to meet their artistic objectives. Likewise, the respective audiences or viewers also respond to these styles differently, such that in any

circumstance, there is no style that is superior to the other as such, since each style appeals differently to the multitude of viewers and meets its purpose within its own stylistic confines. In examining portraiture, what is ultimately important is to determine whether painted portraits carry the impetus in their own right as works of art to elicit certain desired responses from the audience. It is also important to examine the extent to which the artist's intent is significant in this elicitation. This paper examines portraiture from different Kenyan artists to determine their stylistic approaches, their particular motivations and the essence of such varied approaches in the comprehension of the purpose of painted portraiture. The paper also examines whether, in this context, the portraits featured carry a visual message. The paper examined selected portraits from a number of practising Kenyan artists in Nairobi, Kenya where many of them are based. The portraits featured do not necessarily cover all styles of portraiture.

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INTRODUCTION

Portraiture in its varied styles and techniques has been undertaken for centuries. Artists at any given period in art history painted portraits for various reasons and to meet certain objectives. In European art culture from where the formal portraiture started in earnest, portraits were in the pre-photography era done on commission and hence they were painted for those who could pay for them such as wealthy aristocrats. Portraits were, therefore, a way of representing and immortalizing oneself and family and denoted power, authority and status. Eventually, commissioned portraits were replaced by those of family, relatives and friends of artists. During the renaissance and beyond, as portraits involved more people and the restriction of strict likeness as the only purpose of portraiture was no longer critically important, portraits developed to concentrate more on the notion of human individuality, particularly the psychology; that is, the sitter's inner substance, character and moral attitudes.

It can be argued that over the centuries, portraiture has developed as a genre to play complementary roles and to inspire many artistic quests beyond its traditional representational or documentative value. While it still retains its commemorative value, some artists view portraiture as an avenue for social commentary, enlightenment and activism; others see it as a means of expression of their personal feelings and emotions, and yet others view it as an artistic platform for the derivation of 'visual character' through the study of facial characteristics, which in turn helps artists to delve into the essence of their subjects. This has often

attracted controversy, but it is perhaps one of the most captivating purposes of painted portraiture. The essence of portraiture has been viewed from different angles by artists, subjects and viewers alike. In the case of artists, it is often from the perspective of their skills, styles and motivation and how they relate to their subjects; in the case of subjects, it is mainly how they would wish to be portrayed, and in the case of viewers, it is mainly from the perspective of what they wish to derive from the portrait or what they perceive the subject of the portrait to portray. Melville (2018) observes that the goal of portraiture regardless of the medium is to capture the likeness, unique charm, and personality of the portrait's subject. Underscoring the different perspectives from which artists view and approach portraiture, Baumgartel (2018) states it slightly differently but notes the same end principle that the 'key feature of a portrait painting is not to create a literal representation of the subject, but instead to capture their inner essence – the emotions the subject experiences.' Moore (2017) notes that

> A good portrait will not simply communicate the likeness of a person, but will tell a familiar story to the viewer, enough that, regardless of the subject, the viewer will come to "know" the portrait.'

In addressing the fundamental aim of portraiture, Freeland (2007) identifies two principal aims that define portraiture. She notes that 'It has often been observed that portraiture has two fundamental aims that conflict; a *revelatory* aim requiring accuracy and faithfulness to the subject, and a creative aim presupposing artistic expression and freedom.' She breaks it down, therefore, to *render the subject* and *creative expression*, 'the portrait encompasses distinct and even contradictory aims: to reveal the sitter's subjectivity or self-conception; and to exhibit the artist's skill, expressive ability and to some extent, views on art.' In the execution of portraiture in contemporary times, therefore, this implies that there exists a point of confluence between the two aims that generates a perception of a holistic purpose since it is apparent that none of the two aims applies independently.

Stylistic Approaches in Portraiture Painting

Artists have traditionally painted portraiture using different styles mainly in accordance with their familiar individual personal styles. At times, though, they have also been influenced by the circumstances in which portraiture is often undertaken, including motivation, inspiration, historical background or any other specific objective of painting the desired portrait. Each style is unique and bears certain characteristics that lend credence to its essence and why it is deemed useful in the rendition of given portraiture. In terms of this stylistic approach, Baumgartel (2018) notes that 'some artists aim for photo-realistic portraits, while others are impressionist or even verging on abstraction. But for the most part, portraits are generally figurative and capture the artist's impression of an individual.' Subsequently, if painting of portraiture were to be viewed in a kind of stylistic continuum, then these stylistic approaches would range from hyperrealism, where portraiture is super refined to appear better than its referent source, to arbitrary abstraction where portraiture is completely broken down to dismantle any modicum of likeness.

This stylistic range is itself not unusual since portraiture painting has historically always been executed within the wider realm of prevailing artistic styles that more or less reflected the influence of those styles in the prescribed period. Within this stylistic continuum, it can be argued that contemporary artists tend to paint portraiture in the styles they are most comfortable with or those that best help an individual artist to respond to a given need that informs his or her intent. For example, in instances where portraiture is expressive of a given phenomenon through facial expression or interpretive symbolism, but where 'likeness' is not a major factor, artists find more flexibility in their painting style. In instances where facial likeness is a major factor, the artists find that the window of stylistic flexibility narrows significantly since facial likeness is best rendered in certain styles and is not substitutable.

Artists, however, still subscribe to the stylistic tenets of some styles although those styles have long ceased to exist. This is mainly attributed to the enduring stylistic influence, particularly in terms of

colour application, use of brushstrokes and utilization of light and shadows that are still potent. The following are some outstanding portraiture painting styles whose influence is still felt today and whose stylistic tenets are still applicable today based on their appeal, strengths and uniqueness. In modern portraiture, they help shed light on how contemporary artists select their personal styles in the execution of their work in tandem with these influences.

Baroque Portraiture

Baroque portraiture existed between 1600 and 1700 and like the wider baroque art featured the application of illuminative effects and use of sharp tonal contrasts, dark backgrounds, facial expressions and dramatic settings. "Baroque paintings were characterized by the use of vibrant colors applied with swirling and wide brushstrokes, which indicated movement and emotional intensity." (Artincontext, 2022) During this period, portrait painting became very popular as an income earner for most artists and produced some of the world's most outstanding portrait artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Paul Rubens, Diego Velazquez, Caravaggio and Anthony Van Dyke, among many others. Baroque portraiture was heavily influenced by colour and its dramatic qualities, atmosphere and the use of light. Some of the featured portraits in this paper, though not fully embracing the principles of baroque painting, show some element of influence of its style of colour application and experimentation with light and the effect of extreme contrast.

Romanticism Portraiture

Coming within the realm of the industrial revolution in Europe which heralded great enlightenment, romanticism was an artistic movement that started in the late 18th Century and gained momentum and reached its peak in the early 19th Century. Romanticism as a movement de-emphasized the culture of order, rationality, balance and reason that manifested at the time and which underscored the neo-classicism precepts of the time. Instead, it embraced the notion of subjectivity and imagination, feelings and emotions. In portraiture, the individual became the focus of interest, with human emotions and all their manifestations becoming the mainstay of portraitists. Artists used portraiture to express a range of psychological and emotional states including moods, feelings and inner turmoil. Subsequently, portraits became less of depictions of individual likeness. Portraiture was characterized by spontaneous and expressive brush strokes and the use of rich colours. (Galitz, 2004, Artincontext, 2022)

Neoclassicist Portraiture

As part of the wider neoclassicism painting that emerged in the late 18th Century, this type of portraiture depicted serious, unemotional faces that tended to convey moral narratives. Paintings were executed in sombre or dull colours with only patches of bright highlights and use of light. "One of the primary characteristics of Neoclassical art was its return to ideals of "simplicity", "symmetry", "proportion", and "harmony. This simplicity of form and shape was seen in Neoclassical painting, architecture, and sculpture." ". (Artincontext, 2022) Sculptures bore heroic poses reminiscent of the classical art of ancient Greece and Rome which inspired the revivalist spirit and desire of neoclassicism art. This was important because the classical spirit of order and reason resonated with the age of enlightenment in Europe towards the end of the 18th Century and hence brought about this artistic sense of nostalgia.

Impressionist Portraits

The visual characteristics of impressionist portraits were derived directly from the influence of the wider impressionism that existed from the 1870s through to the 1880s. "Instead of pursuing realism, Impressionist artists emphasized light, movement, and atmosphere in their portrayals of everyday life. As a result, their works captured fleeting moments in time." (Cole, 2021) Impressionist portraits were characterized by spontaneous, short, thick (or thin) brushstrokes that were rapidly and directly applied onto the canvas making them visible and enabling a technique that was colour interactive on canvas. Rendered deliberately to create textural effects, the strokes captured the transient essence of the subject. Unlike realism, the brush strokes were not smoothed in order to create a fine finish that made the portraits life-like since the artists did not seek to portray minute details. Impressionist colours were also bold and vibrant, usually applied wet to wet, that were

meant to capture the subject's facial character rather than actual details. Impressionist portraits also showed deliberate use of light effects to create a naturalistic effect designed to make the image appear as spontaneously natural as possible amidst the changing light. There are many artists who still subscribe to this style, particularly those who are attracted to the notion of spontaneity in painting and the depiction of facial essence in portraiture without the need to render unnecessary details.

Expressionist Portraiture

Expressionism itself in its inception in the early 20th Century concentrated on expressing meaning and emotion in their most vivid visual manifestations. Each artist attempted to express their emotions in their own unique way and in order to accomplish this, they distorted and exaggerated their subjects. "In the years leading up to World War I, the Expressionists reacted against the increasingly industrialized and isolating modern condition through artworks that conveyed innermost human emotions." (White, 2018). Hence the expressions of emotions in their portraiture were viewed from three perspectives; the expresser or the artist, the featured subject and the reaction of the viewer. They used bold and rapid brushstrokes, harsh tonal contrasts and vivid, perplexing colours that often shocked the viewers. In their portraits, whether self or featuring subjects, the expressionists sought to discard the notion of likeness and, hence, their facial renditions were non-naturalistic and non-representational. Their portraits were an emotional response to what they encountered and they responded by using lurid colours and distorted forms.

Abstract Portraiture

Abstract painted portraiture seeks to avoid the regular representational approach to reality. Unlike other forms of portraiture that focus on the need to showcase the likeness of the sitter or the subject, abstract portraiture delves into depicting the face in a non-representational way that leaves personal interpretation to the discretion of the audience. This type of portraiture is much more concerned with the realm of ideas than the purely objective or representational approach to painting. Barcio (2016) notes that "To be considered an abstract portrait, an artwork must incorporate two faculties: first, it must utilize the concept of portraiture in some way; and

second it must be abstract, meaning it must deal with the realm of ideas, or at least avoid a purely objective or representational approach to reality." In this regard, abstract portraits demand more thought and reflection from the audience in order for them to comprehend the hidden meaning contained in their symbolism of visual language. One notable effect of abstract portraiture is their tendency to inspire the audience not only to unravel the relationship between the artist and his/her subject but more importantly to reflect inwards into their own lives. Abstract portraits by their nature, also reflect the ideas of the artist in a profound way, engaging the audience in a unique way. In helping understand the place that abstract portraitists occupy, Barcio (2016) further observes that:

> *Abstract portrait artists confront peculiar challenges. When we see faces in everything; that is called pareidolia. When we see everything in faces; that is called empathy. Abstract portraits inhabit a space somewhere between the two, and their artists must contend simultaneously with both.*

The audience hence tends to view faces with recognizable likeness generally from the point of empathy. This is beneficial to abstract portrait artists as long as it is not carried through to the extent of obscuring the viewer's ability to unravel whatever ideas the artist had in mind from the onset. This is because the tendency towards natural empathy itself can trigger biases that culminate in prejudices and generalizations that can hinder understanding.

Cubist Portraiture

Cubist portraiture in its inception around 1907 brought about a new boldness and innovation in portrait painting with the introduction of flat, angular and geometric shapes in the description and presentation of forms. "While other art styles and movements sought to depict the human form in a more realistic detail, Cubist painters focused on the geometric congruence that could be found in the face and posture of an individual." (Artst, 2021) Forms were, therefore, fragmented and then re-assembled into a new composition, the execution of which determined the level of abstraction. Cubist portraiture showed emphasis upon three major tenets; *flatness*, use of *geometrical shapes* and use of *multiple perspectives*. The portraits also showed

muted colour schemes that were often toned down to neutral colours such as browns and greys with their respective tones. With the use of flatness, the cubists tried to merge both background and subject matter in the foreground and de-emphasize the notion of depth. Geometric forms replaced usual forms in subject matter greatly simplifying them and reducing the visual load and creating abstraction. With the use of multiple perspectives, the artists sought to show different viewpoints simultaneously within the same space suggesting their own three-dimensional forms in a flat dispensation of the canvas, eliminating the usual sense of depth created by linear perspective. Cubism as a style emerged in two phases; *analytical cubism (1908 -1912)* followed closely by *synthetic cubism (1912-1914)*. The analytical phase was the initial rendition which involved very profound stylistic innovations including fragmentation and abstraction. Synthetic cubism was a little more accommodative with the use of simpler shapes and brighter colours. The major proponents of cubist portraiture were Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Surrealism

Surrealist portraiture developed within the surrealism movement in the aftermath of World War 1 in the 1920s. Founded in 1924 in France by Andre Breton, a French poet, the movement was heavily influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, the founder of Psychoanalysis who studied human behaviour and personality. Breton believed that the *unconscious mind* from where dreams emanated was the reservoir of creative activity. Surrealism, subsequently, presupposed that the superior qualities of the irrational, unconscious mind had been unduly suppressed by the intellectual movement that hitherto existed and which propagated reason, rationalism and individualism. Artists sought to find confluence between the unconscious and rational life in which they explored the power of dreams and the occurrence of automatism (brief unconscious episodes) that freed them from conscious thought, creating a state of super-reality or absolute reality. Articulating this in his 1924 Manifesto, Breton wrote about how dreams and reality would resolve into "a kind of absolute reality, a surreality." (Cohen, 2019). The surrealist portraits themselves in a radical departure from traditional principles of execution now embraced

formal distortion that often stretched to degrees of grotesqueness. Some of the outstanding proponents of surrealistic portraiture include Salvador Dali, Joan Miro, Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon among others

Realism

Realism in portrait painting remains important as a basis of all portraiture since artists always find it necessary, as a starting point, to depict their subjects as they appear in real life and in the circumstances in which they appear or which constitute their reality. Boddy Evans (2019) observes that "Realism has been the dominant style of painting since the Renaissance. The artist uses perspective to create an illusion of space and depth, setting the composition and lighting such that the subject appears real." Hence, realism is simple yet precise and is devoid of unnecessary embellishments and imaginary idealization of the subject or sitter. In this case, it is often executed with smooth brush strokes to attain the correct facial tone and texture, muted colours in sync with skin colour and strict observance of all other facial characteristics that define the uniqueness of the individual subject. In a sense, realism features somewhere in the middle of the stylistic continuum suggested in this paper.

On the one hand, the artist either opts to fragment or break down a form in order to abstract it to whatever desired degree; or on the other hand, endeavours to perfect the realistic form to levels of a new reality as in the case of photorealism and hyperrealism. The essence of realism in painted portraiture is that it provides a standard guide to accurate layout and depiction of the subject and although some artists often wish to steer away from realism, it is always important to master it. According to an article in *Evolve Artist* (2020):

> Realism offers artists a starting point from which they can launch themselves into an infinite number of artistic styles. When you understand how to faithfully render what is in front of you in a way that expresses the reality of those objects, you can begin to bend and shift the realities into something more abstract.

Photorealism (Super-realism)

Photorealism emerged in the United States in the 1960s and extended through the 1970s mainly as a deviation from the unplanned spontaneity of abstract expressionism which was the predominant style at the time. In the case of painted portraiture, artists sought to recreate the effect of a referent photograph on large pieces of canvas. This was done by projecting the photo onto the canvas which enabled them to achieve a high degree of accuracy; and then applying paint using an airbrush which ensured an intriguing smoothness that eliminated brushstrokes. Other artists used the grid system that enabled them to focus on each small segment of their project upon which they gradually worked through their painting. In describing the essence of photorealism in art, Lesso (2020) notes that there 'was a deliberate attempt to replicate qualities unique to the photographic image.' She refers to the publication in *Art in Time* that articulated these photographic qualities, "Photorealist artists of the 1960s and 1970s investigated the kind of vision that was unique to the camera … focus, depth of field, naturalistic detail, and uniform attention to picture's surface."

Hyperrealism

Hyperrealism in its description is an advancement upon the objectives of photorealism since it aims to depict naturalistic details that are not only indistinguishable but *surpass* those of the referent photograph. The effect of this phenomenon is so startling that it is referred to as 'illusion of a reality since the level of meticulous detailing by the artist aided by the technique, captures those details that exist and perhaps those that are not visible to the naked eye to the extent that surpasses natural reality. This creates a new realm or a counter realm of likeness that manifests itself as 'new art', which then becomes important in portraiture. Hyperrealists, hence, create for themselves a window of manoeuvrability that allows them to define their portraits in a way that makes them unique and different from the static and at times mundane appearance of photorealism. In describing the role of hyperrealists, Lansroth (2015) notes that they 'developed ways of including narrative, charm and emotion into painting, not leaving it bereft of

"personality" as some of the Photorealism works do." In concurrence, Meisel (1980) observes that:

> *Furthermore, they may incorporate emotional, social, cultural and political thematic elements as an extension of the painted visual illusion; a distinct departure from the older and considerably more literal school of photorealism.*

Pop Art Portraiture

Pop art emerged in Britain in the mid-1950s and eventually gained momentum in the United States in the early 1960s where its figurative approach became a substitute to the predominant abstract expressionism art culture. The movement itself had its roots in the thinking of activists, intellectuals and artists who abhorred the conformist social order. Pop art resorted to identifiable commercial imagery that was derived from mass media and the consumer culture and embraced bright colours, irony and satire, very innovative mass production techniques including printmaking processes, as well as collage and mixed media. Pop artists focused on ordinary objects and common people that underscored popular culture, a glaring departure from the traditional themes based on classical history, moralistic and mythological interpretations. In portraiture, pop artists pursued the likeness of recognizable figures and celebrities but stripped-down photographic details to basic tones of light and dark but with the application of bright colours, patterns and textures. These techniques made pop art, including portraiture, one of the most profound and visually recognizable artistic styles in modern art. Zanello (2021) notes that "Unquestionably, Pop Art has had an enormous amount of success, influencing the vocabulary of many contemporary artists all over the world. From the 1960s up until today, society has been greatly focused on celebrities, mass production and consumption." Some prominent proponents of pop art were Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg and David Hockney.

In view of the foregoing, it is evident that portraiture has developed and metamorphosed over time and the development of styles and application of techniques has been gradual yet methodical, culminating in a consolidated way in which portraiture is viewed and executed today. While

local artists do not necessarily view or label themselves as belonging to any of these traditional styles in portraiture painting or in general artistic work, their paintings will analytically always tend to be pegged on whichever style they are perceived to be closely affiliated with. It can be argued that the traditional styles and the stylistic tenets that defined them at the height of their existence are now perceived as 'reference standards' because of their fundamental artistic value. Subsequently, whether or not they advertently apply them in their work, artists cannot ignore these stylistic tenets because of their transcending value and enduring influence in the development of techniques and styles in painting. In this argument, local artists will not appear to necessarily describe themselves as baroque, romanticists, neo-classicists, expressionists, impressionists or cubists; and indeed they need not to; but in the execution of their work, there will always be, perhaps, an element of reference to these traditional styles whether advertently or otherwise.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper uses an analytical approach to portraiture that is derived from a confluence of perspectives as outlined in the following framework. These perspectives highlight related concepts of interpretation that manifest holistically and not in isolation.

Formal Analysis

Since portraiture falls under the realm of wider art, it is inevitable that formal analysis will be applied in examining the portraits featured. The formal analysis deals with the formal elements of art such as line, colour, texture, shape, value, mass and space and is applied along with four basic segments of analysis; description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

Description deals with the visual impact of the portrait and what constitutes its immediate visual focus. It is also descriptive of the presence and level of utilization of respective elements and application of principles of art. *The analysis* examines the stylistic approach that the artist embraces as well as the technique applied and media used to create the portrait. This includes examining in detail the development of composition as guided in both the use of elements and the application of principles. This is particularly important in portraiture since compositional considerations and placement of certain elements have a significant bearing on the narrative in portraits. *Interpretation* seeks to unravel the meaning of the portrait by examining the holistic compositional features in the portrait particularly in reference to the subject, as well as all other visual clues. The focus here is the intent, motivation or inspiration that makes the artist embark on the portrait. Of particular importance is the emotional response or *mood* created as well as observing how the artist has created a certain atmosphere in the portrait or whether the portrait bears character. The paper, therefore, seeks to examine the subjects featured in the portraiture to see whether they portray or emanate a 'personality' or whether they tell some sort of story, or whether any given portrait succeeds in carrying a particular message. *Evaluation* refers to an informed opinion on the overall ability or success of the artist to convey meaning through a portrait which then determines whether or not a portrait is significant.

Contextual Analysis

Just as portraits harbour narratives, they also have their contexts; it is easier for the audience to interpret a portrait if its context is known. Often artists give a short synopsis of their inspiration, motivation or circumstance that culminated in the creation of a given portrait. This synopsis is often sufficient to underscore the context in which the portrait is viewed. In earlier portraiture, artists gathered detailed and meticulous historical or background information about their sitters and subsequent portraits were always painted in the context of this historical background or the current circumstances of the time.

Concept of Narrative in Paintings and Derivation of Clues Using Principles of Design

Portraits convey certain visual narratives and in order to comprehend or unravel these narratives, principles of design can be applied to a given portrait, just as they are applied to art generally, in order to communicate these narratives. Moore (2017) refers to Molly Bang's book, '*Picture This*', as an appropriate resource in this regard. She refers

to the description of psychologist Rudolf Arnheim who describes the book 'as using 'geometrical shapes… entirely as dynamic expression,'' demonstrating how the principles of perceptual psychology inform our principles of design and how these work in concert to affect our emotions.' According to Moore, the effectiveness of this book is based on the notion of the translation of the human experience of the physical world into the experience of the pictorial world through enlightening verbal and visual metaphors. She writes that 'These same principles of design can be applied to portraiture.

Portrait artists leverage the underlying perceptual psychology of design to inform our interpretation of facial expressions, mood, and narrative within a portrait.' While this paper does not delve into the intricate dissection of the featured portraits in the entirety of this description, it, however, borrows from this application of principles of design in order to shed light on certain interpretive clues that pertain to various aspects of the portraiture that add impetus to the narrative contained in a portrait. In this regard, this paper generates the following interpretive guide towards examining and interpreting portraiture using the known elements and principles of art on the one hand and the observations of Moore (2017) on the other. Moore's observations, which are based on Molly Bang's book, are applied in each case in order to determine possible interpretive clues when viewing a particular portrait (her guiding observational clues are indicated in italics)

- Use and manipulation of light in a portrait.

'A portrait full of light can likewise indicate these feelings of joy and levity.'

- Use of shadows in a portrait.

'A portrait full of shadows can fill us with a sense of mystery and fear.'

- Use of light and dark or value contrast in portraiture painting.

'Using strong value contrast in a portrait can be used to metaphorically communicate the light and dark aspects of a person.'

- Use of colour in portraiture painting.

'Colours are not simply connecting us with different elements of a composition, but also connecting us with our emotional associations with colour.'

- The concept of balance, placement and positioning of the subject in a portrait bears certain visual associations that aid the viewers' ability to derive visual narratives embedded in portraits.

'How a figure is oriented or balanced on a page and the orientation of its gaze can also indicate a narrative in portraiture. When an object is placed higher in a composition, it can indicate a sense of "freedom, happiness, triumph, or spirituality,'

- Facial features and expressions are critical in the derivation of certain feelings and emotions that link the viewer to the essence of a portrait.

'Principles of design can also be used to explain how facial expressions and features communicate certain feelings to us.'

In appreciating that portraits do indeed tell stories and in underscoring the use of principles of design in narrative portraiture as propagated in Molly Bang's book, '*Picture This',* Moore (2017) Concludes that:

Studying these principles of design reminds us that portraiture is much more than the features on a person's face; it reveals a personality or a soul with which we can relate to and communicate. This sympatheia of psyches is the ultimate goal of storytelling.

In winding up the framework, this paper takes into consideration the observations of Freeland (2007) who suggests 'that portraits can show subjects in any of four ways (and sometimes in more than one of these four ways at once): by being accurate likenesses; testimonies of presence; evocations of personality; or presentations of a subject's uniqueness.' This paper takes cognizance of the first three as particularly significant in painted portraiture. The accuracy of likeness is important in distinguishing the subject and delving into his or her physiognomy or external appearance as a pathway

into delving into their character and personality. The notion of presence is contained in the artist's ability to portray the subject as 'coming alive' on the canvas in painted portraiture. In delving into the subject's personality, portraits need to contain adequate psychological information on emotions and attitudes that the viewers need to decode and which are seen in the expressive ability of the artist.

ANALYSIS OF WORK

Plate 1

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

Plate 2

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

Plate 1 is a well-executed portrait that leans towards hyperrealism by the nature of facial details as well as the execution of the attire and the clear plastic bottle. Portraits can at times carry a gestural pose, in this case holding out a bottle of water, which becomes the centre of interest. The face indicates the probable likeness of the subject and suggests a muted smile that underlines a gentleness of character, but the portrait itself does not communicate anything much other than the gesture of an extended hand holding a bottle. This implies that the artist was interested in studying the subject in the context of this action where the study of the clear plastic bottle and the detail of the hand holding it was clear intent. This is consistent with a commissioned portrait where the subject wishes to be depicted in the desired pose. The nature of the attire wrapped around her neck up to her chin also suggests that this pose was probably during a chilly

excursion, the drama of which, perhaps, the subject wishes to be immortalized.

Plate 2 is a portrait of a pensive young woman wearing a fashionable bare dress, implying that that may have been the visual purpose of the pose itself. The artist uses a dark green background to create a sharp contrast against the outline of the subject's body, helping to illuminate the form with patches of light. This effect, as in the case of many portraits, helps to create a three-dimensional effect, making the portrait rounded and full. The use of contrasting brown tones also helps to accentuate the form by defining certain parts of the feminine body structure. The artist uses contrasting textures to define the form, seen through the smooth skin tone and textured hair. The effect of shadows placed underneath the lips, chin, neck and on the dress contrast and therefore aid the effect of falling light.

The artist also inserts the gaze in the eyes, a technique used to suggest focus and poise of character.

Plate 3

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

Plate 4

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

In *Plate 3*, the artist uses realism to depict the face of the subject. He uses carefully varied tones on the face to highlight areas upon which the light falls, an effect that helps to define the details of the man's face. He combines this effect with the use of well-placed facial shadows that help to make the face rounded and to indicate the direction from which the light is emanating. The artist also studies the subject's attire depicting well-executed folds on the shirt and casual jacket. The artist includes the spectacles as an integral part of the face but more importantly, studies the nature of the man's eyes placed through them helping to bring out a key element of facial character. The nature of the subject's eyes seen through the spectacles, the slightly tight lips enhanced by the folds on the side of the mouth, and the gentle folds on his forehead create a very calm facial expression, providing an impression of a gentle character. Despite the intricate and often inconclusive nature of arguments that pertain to the visual essence of portraiture, this
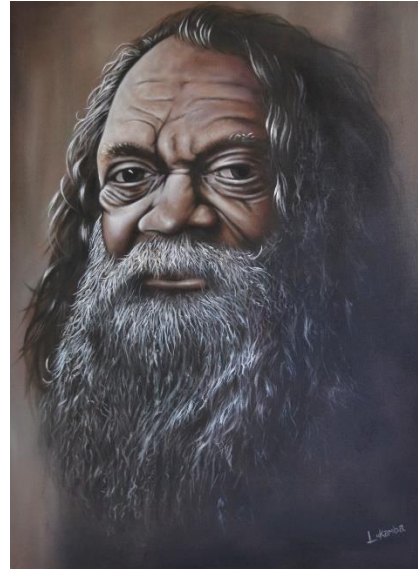
paper contends that it is always more likely than otherwise that the audience will proceed to construct in their minds, an interpretive impression of a subject's character that helps them to figure out what that character would most likely be in real life. This is visually instinctive and need not be verified in truth because there is no human being without a definition of character, however mundane.

In *Plate 4*, the artist portrays an almost serene face with a focused gaze. The face itself is smooth and well executed with the facial folds and hair textural effects necessary to suggest that the man is elderly but alert. Some portraits can portray a subject who exudes an aura of wisdom in his or her facial demeanour. The subject is serious but not stern; the gaze is focused but not intimidating; rather than look away, the viewer would probably wish to seek his indulgence, probably his guidance. The artist enhances this view by the use of light that illuminates the left side of the subject's face, leaving

the right-side dark, creating the aura of a sage. Portraits have the ability to portray probable character through facial expression. Since facial expressions manifest themselves in a very wide continuum from the severity or grotesqueness of

extreme circumstances to the serene mystery of the subconscious, it is always up to the viewer to decipher what the face may allude to in terms of character.

Plate 5

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

Plate 6

Artist: Zephania Lukamba

Oils on canvas

Source: Artist

Plate 5 portrays a hyperrealistic portrait of an elderly man in a gestural pose depictive of smoking a cigarette. The artist studies intricate folds on the face that describe common facial tension and help to enhance the expression on the face. The artist pays great attention to the eyes and focuses on the gaze that is direct and piercing. The gesture of smoking indicates that the man is inhaling the smoke which is depicted by the smouldering cigarette and lack of exhaled smoke. Such portraits often suggest the possible emotional state of the subject, in this case, depicted through the intensity of the eyes, the focused gaze itself, the folds on the brow and the act of puffing smoke. Puffing on a cigarette can ordinarily be an indication of some degree of stress on one extreme and relaxation on the other, both of which can be portrayed in facial expressions and captured artistically. The portrait depicts what can be termed as an anticipative gaze which is an expression of both anxiety and
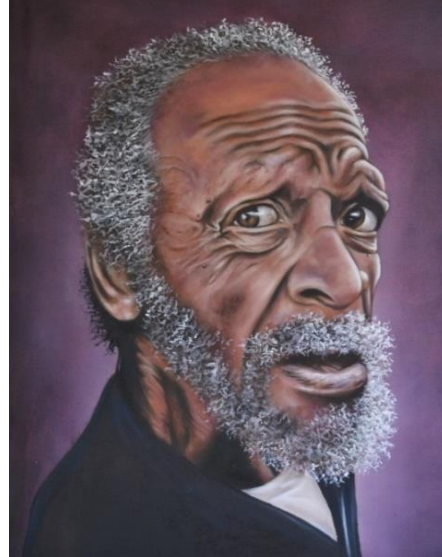
expectation. When one is anxious yet expectant, it is a combination of conflicting mental states which can be visually very confusing. When combined with a puff of smoke, the facial demeanour can be deceptively calm. Such portraits are less about the probable character of the subject but more about the nature of the prevailing circumstantial environment to which the subject is most likely responding.

Plate 6 is a portrait of an old man with a rather puzzled look. In contrast to *Plate 5*, the execution of the face of the subject is smooth and lacks the intricate facial skin effects of the subject in *Plate 5*. The folds on the subject's brow, however, help to construct the facial expression which together with the study of the eyes and slightly fallen lower lip create a feeling of anxiety or concern. The artist again uses the intense gaze as a tool to express this sense of anxiety. The subject is placed in a slightly angled or twisted pose suggesting psychological

discomfort. Moore (2017) notes that 'How a figure is oriented or balanced on a page and the orientation of its gaze can also indicate a narrative in portraiture.' The subject in this portrait has a story to tell; he is anxious and testy, but portraits, of course, cannot tell you the causal truth behind an expression or what the truth behind the story actually is. They can, however, lead you to construct the probable narrative which viewers often do by studying various visual clues.

Plate 7

Artist: Ron Lukes

Acrylics

Source: image.jimcdn.com

Plate 8

Artist: Clavers Odhiambo

Oils on canvas:

Source: Instagram @claversodhiambo

In *Plate 7*, the artist combines many visual factors in the portrait. The face has an angled twist as if the subject is looking over her shoulder at a temporary distraction which gives it its gestural pose. The artist gives the subject a flashy smile which metaphorically 'lights up' the face, giving it a sense of joy. The artist also uses the effect of light shining upon the face, body and attire of the subject. On such use of light, Moore (2017) observes that 'An area of light on a particular section of a subject's face can bring focus to that portion of their facial expression. We use linguistic phrases like his face "lit up" or a "dark expression," and these can be communicated literally through visuals.' The artist also uses the study of attire to give a cultural dress narrative, including the beautiful head wrap, where attire on its own becomes an integral part of the portrait's statement. Portraits are not always about the character of the subject but can also be used to propagate other aspects such as cultural elements.

Plate 8 depicts the portrait of a woman with a very deliberate expression of awe and surprise on her face. Often portraits are used as studies of human expressions rather than being studies of specific or individual characters. For instance, in this portrait, the viewer wonders what could possibly have fascinated this woman; her face turns at an angle almost surprisingly to stare at a definitive source of her fascination in the obscured foreground. Her eyes are focused and radiant suggesting a captivating pleasant surprise. The artist studies her facial expression in hyperrealistic detail capturing all the elements that enhance that expression such as folds on the forehead and on the side of their eyes, the raised eyebrows; a very focused gaze in the eyes, this time not into the distant yonder but to a specific

source. Her lips show a slight suggestion of muscle relaxation and are, therefore, not tight and tense, suggesting a modest smile. The artist also uses light effects to shine specks of light on the face to enhance its form. The artist paints the hands as enhancers of the general gestural pose and also studies the colourful African attire as an embellishment, which is a light sheet of colourful cloth usually wrapped by women around their waist or shoulders. As observed before, some kinds of portraits are less about the character or personality of the subject but more about the overt facial expression that suggests specific meanings in the myriad of human expressions. It is, hence, unlikely that the artist wanted the viewer to fathom or decode the character of the subject, whether she is a gentle or compassionate individual or whether she embodies leadership qualities. It is more likely that the artist wanted to demonstrate that faces can bear expressions that denote certain human responses such as fascination and awe.
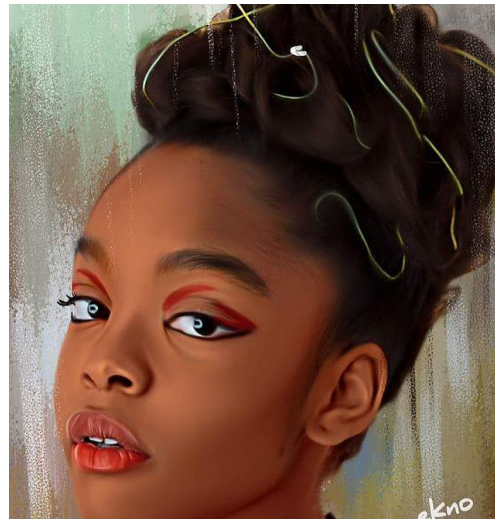

Plate 9. '*The black-skinned beauty'* (2020)

Artist: Sandra Aissatou

Oils on Canvas – 35 x 40 cm

Source: sandraaissatou10@gmail.com

Plate 10. '*Marsai Martin' (2019)*

Artist: Sandra Aissatou

Oils on canvas: – 35 x 40 cm

Source: sandraaissatou10@gmail.com

In *Plate 9,* the artist depicts the portrait of a young girl placed in a gestural pose that is both charming and engaging. The gestural pose itself, including her hand holding onto the wall edge, enhances the girl's almost playful physical presence as if she is emerging from behind the wall. The artist studies the smooth, youthful skin and facial demeanour that depicts a gentle hidden smile that is present but not obviously rendered. The ability to suggest an underlying smile that is mildly present but not necessarily breaking through across the lips is a unique artistic attribute. The artist also studies the eyes that possess an engaging gentle gaze. The portrait is enhanced by the colourful attire and bold hairstyle. This portrait demonstrates the artist's ability to insert an element of subjectivity into the face of the young girl; the girl is full of charm and innocence; she cannot be faulted; she is perfect. The element of youth, unlike in portraits that depict older subjects, does not necessitate too much delving into the essence of her 'character'; the viewer need not worry too much about her emotional state or her spirituality. These are already romanticized within the purity of her youth, so she is pure of character.

In *Plate 10*, the artist approaches the portrait of the young girl in the same manner, studying the youthfulness of the girl. The artist emphasizes the ultra-smooth skin and feminine facial structure that signifies perpetual youth and the girl's almost

perfect, idealistic individual beauty. The element of 'beauty' is already apparent according to the artist's rendition; her make-up including lipstick, neat eyebrows, large eyes with eye pencil and salon crafted hairstyle. This portrait is most likely a study of a specific individual and, hence, the need to attain her likeness, with all its enhancements to depict her as absolutely faultless. This paper can only speculate upon the accuracy of the physical likeness

since the referent source is not available. It can be determined, however, going by the precision of execution, that this objective was attained. Though such portraits still underscore the essence of youthfulness, particularly the manifestation of innocence and perhaps naivety, the main intention of the artist is to attain a high degree of likeness of the subject and in this case, the specific embellishments that enhance that likeness.

Plate 11. '*Sijali Juakali*'

Artist: Allan Kioko

Acrylics and charcoal

Source: Will_not_think

Plate 12. *'Through the lens* 2' (2021)

Artist: Eddy Ochieng

Oils on canvas: 110cmx160cm

Source: Artist

Plate 11 is a portrait that depicts a definition of a person in distress. The eyes are closed in a manner that suggests some kind of personal turmoil and the subject wears a pull-neck that is stretched right up to cover the lower lip. This results in a gestural pose that is expressive of distress. The artist uses tones to describe the structure of the face including prominent cheekbones and a wide face. He also uses the effect of light falling upon parts of the face that helps to enhance the facial form. Portraits can be used to express certain human emotions including the more obvious ones such as joy, laughter, anger and disdain; but as this portrait demonstrates, also those that are less obviously apparent such as elements of distress like inner fear, worry,

unhappiness, anxiety and turmoil (see *Plate 14).* In this portrait, the artist succeeds in portraying a soul in distress even though he uses the little facial expression, hardly any facial folds or muscular tensions, colour, or bold brush strokes that enhance the expression. The smooth face is painted in a manner that defines the emotions in a subtle, less dramatic manner, and that is what makes the portrait interesting to view.

Plate 12 shows the fascinating effect of hyperrealism. The artist generally de-emphasizes the background of the portrait by creating blurred effects but focuses hyperrealistic details on the face itself. Hyperrealism entails the use of certain techniques in a visual attempt to surpass the details

of the referent photograph. The artist meticulously portrays aspects of the portrait that are pertinent to its effectiveness. He concentrates on the *textural effects* on the beards but most vividly on the facial scarification which also gives the portrait its cultural significance. He uses carefully constructed *colour tones* of what appears to be a combination of raw umber and ash grey to create a facial complexion. This, together with the placement of shadows, help him to portray the facial structure that gives the physical definition of an elderly man. Most importantly, the artist meticulously studies the eyes and creates *the gaze in the eyes* which becomes part of facial expression. His concentrated gaze gives the subject a look that portrays both anxiety and concern. The use of the gaze is extremely important

in creating the character in a portrait. It can be concentrated solely on the eye-level or can be portrayed holistically, enhanced by other aspects of the face such as facial muscular tension, the angled twist of the face or the treatment of the lips, as is often the case. Tight lips, for instance, can imply tension and anxiety; lips that are slightly ajar can imply consternation or resignation; muscular tension can pull the face towards a certain direction, giving it a definitive expression that draws meaning. The artist also uses the effect of illuminative light on the face. The most memorable part of this portrait remains the facial scarification which underscores its cultural significance that is often the objective of some portraiture.

Plate 13. '*Thou shall not fear.'*

Artist: Allan Kioko

Acrylics/mixed media on canvas

Source: Will_not_think

Plate 14. '*Are we still friends'*

Artist: Allan Kioko

Acrylics/mixed media on canvas

Source: Will_not_think

'Thou shall not fear' (Plate 13) is an impressionist inspired portrait characterized by short, bold brushstrokes and an array of unusual colours and colour tones that are applied directly and spontaneously rather than pre-mixed on the palette. The artist is only concerned with the level of detail enough to capture the subject's essence and render the desired expression on the face. The artist also uses the effect of natural light to capture its transient

nature and changing qualities, specks of which can be seen on parts of the subject's face. The artist captures the expression on the face through the fixed gaze in the eyes and the tight lips which underscore an element of indignation and perhaps distant fear. The application of spontaneous brush strokes, warm colours and tones help to enhance facial muscular tension that in turn strengthens the desired tense expression. This demonstrates that portraits can tell

a story or visually depict an emotion that resonates with the audience and helps them to build varying degrees of empathy.

'Are we still friends' (*Plate 14*) adopts the same impressionistic style, but the artist uses cooler colours with the same quick, spontaneous brushstrokes. The artists concentrate on the expression on the face and are able to harness the use of colours and brush strokes to capture an expression of deep worry and anxiety. The look in the eyes is again distant and anxious which denotes the subject's state of emotion. The artist achieves this by enhancing the cheekbones, the eyebrows,

tightening of the lips as well as the angle of view. These kinds of impressionist portraits aim to capture the subject with adequate definitive realism but without meticulous or enhancive details which then allows the artist to use the effect of brush strokes and colour spontaneity as well as natural light to mould the subject's expression. Just like in *Plate 13*, the portrait demonstrates that it is possible to depict a sense of deep emotion in painted portraiture that mimics the real expression on a real-life referent sitter. This underscores the power of portraiture in engaging the audience in terms of possessing the ability to elicit responses, particularly reciprocal emotive responses such as empathy or sadness.

Plate 15.

Artist: Wanjuki Kamunya

Acrylics on canvas

Source: Kamunya.com

Plate 16. *'Mama Plastic' (2017)*

Artist: Joan Otieno

Acrylics on canvas/Mixed Media: 70x100 cm

Source: wordpress.com

Plate 15 is an impressionist inspired portrait of a woman executed with bold brush strokes and spontaneous colour application. However, the colours are not bright but seem subdued. The artist uses colour tones and patches of falling light to show the main features of the face. The eyes stare

into the distance and the lips are slightly parted depicting a reflective pose of the subject. Reflective or thoughtful poses are often captured through the nature of the eyes, mainly the distinctive distance gaze and the facial muscular tensions that usually affect the appearance of the lips. In this portrait, the

lips are slightly ajar, suggesting a concentrative moment of thought. The artist also uses texture to depict the long-twisted strands of hair. The background bears the same colour tone as the immediate edge of the face, and probably the face would have been better enhanced and more sense of depth created had he used a dark contrasting background. However, artists have their different approaches and this may have been informed by the need to show the direction from which the natural light is emanating from.

Plate 16 is a portrait of a woman adorned with attire such as a head wrap and a dress decorated with pinned recycled items gathered from the environment, which appears to be the main intent of

the artist. The face itself is painted with evident brush strokes and colours that show shiny spots of light that define facial structure. The artist uses only the detail necessary to bring out the radiant expression depicted by the broad smile. Such portraits are used to draw the viewers' attention in order to highlight specific issues of interest, in this case, the use of recycled items to create art. It is unlikely, therefore, that the artist was interested in studying the personality of the subject as such; the angle of view makes the eyes appear closed and the face itself looks down suggesting that a character study was not a pre-eminent consideration. The basic posal expression on the almost sculptural face, however, is of a female face that suggests contentment with her unusual adornment.

Plate 17 '*Debonair*'

Artist: Patrick Kinuthia

Acrylics on canvas: 90 cm x 130 cm

Source: kcdf.or.ke

Plate 18

Artist: Patrick Kinuthia

Acrylics on canvas

Source:. capitalfm.co.ke

Debonair (*Plate 17*) is a semi-impressionist style portrait of a young woman placed in a gestural pose that draws attention to herself by the slight fashion-like twist of her body. The artist pays particular attention to her face by applying illuminative light on it and depicting her youthful complexion by the

application of a very smooth textural effect. This illuminative effect is also applied on the shoulder and elongated neck, headscarf and part of the attire. The artist creates sharp contrasts by having the illuminative effect on the portrait placed against a plain dark background which enhances the portrait

itself. This is reminiscent of the Chiaroscuro effect. Her beauty permeates through the light make-up on her face including the light purple lipstick as well as the adornment of beaded jewellery. Her facial structure is also well articulated in a manner that indicates her feminine youthfulness. The artist also combines a variety of brush strokes, with bold, spontaneous brushstrokes used on the attire and headscarf and smoother brush strokes used to depict the facial and body skin complexion, creating a touch of realism. The use of bold brush strokes and bright colours, as well as natural light shining upon aspects of the portrait, are characteristics of impressionism; but the artist also pays equal attention to the face with deliberate and more precise details as well as smooth brush strokes which is a deviation from the impressionist tendency, into the realm of realism.

In *Plate 18*, the artist uses the same illuminative effect to focus light upon the subject. He also uses the right-facing side angle, with a little upward tilt of the subject's head as a way of emphasizing the gestural pose that gives rise to the subject's sense of poise and elegance. The use of vivid colours and tones, spontaneous but well-directed brush strokes, shadows and contrasts make the portrait stand out without too much application of details. The artists, hence, suggest the personality of the woman without the need to delve into hyperrealistic details. The angle of gaze gives the subject some kind of nostalgic, futuristic demeanour. When a subject bears an upward gaze, they project a sense of joy and hopefulness. Moore (2017) notes:

> *When the subject of a portrait gazes in the direction of the upper half of a composition, they are also perceived as being free, happy, triumphant or spiritual.*

Plate 19

Artist: Kay Katanu

Oils/mixed media on canvas

Source: Instagram @ Kai_sanna

Plate 20.

Artist: Kamunya Wanjuki

Acrylics on canvas:

Source: Kamunya.com

The fascinating portrait of a young woman (*Plate 19*) demonstrates the powerful nature of portraiture to express feelings in a calm, subtle way. It is obvious that the young woman is captivated and

thinking about something, but her face is calm and almost expressionless. The artist creates this calm demeanour almost solely by the use of the gaze in her eyes that permeates through her spectacles and

the slight parting of her lips. Structurally, there is no visual indication of muscle constriction on her face and her slightly propped up face enhances this thoughtful pose. This is achieved through the smooth skin tone that bears no folds but interestingly shows some freckles as part of facial detail. A portrait has the ability to elicit a degree of empathy; it can also tell a story and this particular portrait emanates a strong sense of African feminine strength of individual character. Not all portraits, though, are able to achieve this. The viewer feels the subject's distant preoccupation with a thought so obviously pre-eminent in her psyche that the viewer is left wondering what this thought could be. The artist combines her painting style with actual pieces of multi-coloured African fabric as part of the adornment on the subject's head which becomes an integral aspect of her overall technique of execution.

Plate 20 is a portrait of a woman wearing an African traditional beaded necklace which is made of hundreds of stitched beads. She also adorns a traditional hairstyle on an otherwise clean-shaven head as well as showing an element of ear lobe piercing. One of the purposes of portraiture is visual cultural propagation where certain aspects of culture that pertain to the face and upper torso are displayed. In related portraits, these could be such as the adornment of traditional jewellery, facial, neck and chest decorations, ritual scarification, ear piercing, lip extension, labrum piercing and many others. The artist paints the face in realistic detail, depicting the woman smiling warily in what is referred to as a 'tight smile'. The gaze in her eyes is studious yet a little wary. Although such portraits are culture-specific, focusing more on depicting aspects of culture, the face really never strays far away from some form of innate individual suggestion of situational narrative; what could she be wary of? Is her life as gentle as the look on her face or is it all a great façade?

Plate 21. '*After all these years* (2017)

Artist: Eddy Ochieng

Oils on canvas: 95 cm x 145 cm

Source: Artist

Plate 22. '*Stand out*'

Artist: Eddy Ochieng

Oils on canvas: 95 cm x 140 cm

Source: Artist

The portrait '*After all these years*' (*Plate 21*) depicts a Turkana elder and is an outstanding example of the essence and power of portraiture. This portrait serves both a vi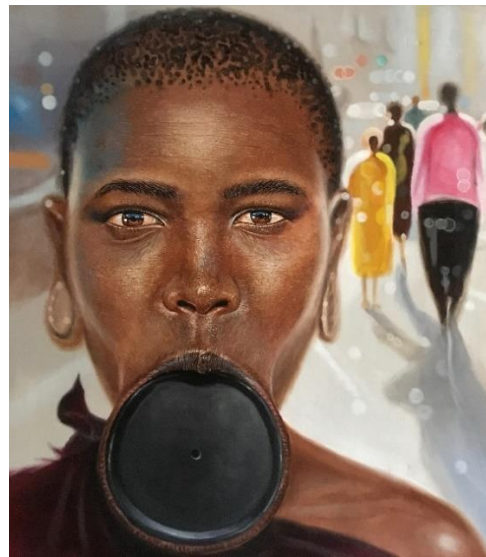sual cultural purpose as well as denoting a reflective narrative. In terms of its visual cultural purpose, it depicts African cultural labrum piercing and ear lobe piercings as aspects of inherent Turkana culture. The use of hyperrealism

in the execution of the portrait helps to underscore not only the outstanding detailing of the face itself but the reflective nature of the old man that must surely underline his character. Even without the artist actual written synopsis which describes the ravages of drought, the portrait in its holistic detail and distant gaze in the eyes is a telling example of why portraits can be powerfully expressive of a phenomenon. The subject is depicted as physically alive but broken of spirit. The distant gaze in his eyes betrays a hint of sadness and despair, one that attracts empathy from the audience.

In '*Stand out*' (*Plate 22*), the artist develops the kind of portrait that depicts a specific cultural phenomenon and demonstrates that portraiture can be used to propagate aspects of a community's culture that highlight either its strengths or weaknesses. The portrait is of a young Mursi girl from Ethiopia with a lip plate inserted in her extended lip. The lip plate signifies youthfulness, beauty and the identity of her age group. It is usually adorned by young unmarried girls and young brides. The beauty of hyperrealism in such portraits is that it accentuates the minute details of the study in a manner that surpasses those of the referent photograph and hence helps the audience to fathom the unique cultural phenomenon as though they were looking through a lens. The artist studies the girl's youthful appearance by focusing on her smooth African skin with its natural complexion, textured hair and sparkling eyes. The irony of the artistic description of this youthful African beauty is that in the modern context where many cultural ritualistic practices are bound to face severe scrutiny, her natural beauty is, in this case, thoroughly interfered with by the overbearing absurdity of her mutilated and stretched lips as well as her concealed chin. Her 'invaded' facial beauty in this context culminates in what can only be described as grotesque which certainly raises many cultural/ethical questions. However, portraits are designed to leave such judgement to the audience whose responsibility it is to suffer such consternation.

Observations and General Overview

- ✓ *Artists have different reasons and motivations for painting portraits.*

Artists have varied reasons for painting portraiture and particularly in the style with which they choose to do so. A major underlying reason is determined to be monetary where artists derive part of their income through commissioned portraits of specific individuals or families. In this category are also attractive portraits that are not necessarily commissioned portraits or those of family or familiar people but are constructed as pleasant wall embellishments and sold mainly because of their beautiful colour renditions, style of execution and compatibility with certain interior environments and decorations that are popular with clients. These are the ones where the artist uses a photograph as a reference source but develops the final product as a new piece, mainly through unique colour application and other effects that distinguish the portrait as unique. There are also those artists who paint portraiture as 'art for art's sake' because it gives them a huge sense of personal satisfaction either in attaining the desired physical likeness or even just the execution of their styles since the study of the human face remains such a magnetic undertaking.

Some artists have, however, indicated that there may not be such a thing as art for art's sake in portraiture painting after all; those artists tend to infuse themselves in the portraits they paint in all aspects including the use of colours, brushstrokes and even gestural poses such that their personality is evident therein. Then there are ultimately those portraitists whose artistic agenda is to express a certain phenomenon in society, be it social, cultural or political. Their expressive portraits then become tools of social commentary that aid activism and augment social enlightenment. Some artists love to paint expressive paintings that portray elements of human emotions that viewers often relate to or empathize with. These are often representative of the artist's own experiential feelings or are 'proxy' paintings based on what others have experienced, expressed or narrated. When artists interact with other people in different experiential settings, they develop the ability to empathize with those experiences even though the experiences are not theirs. This concept of *sympatheia* is "the ability to *see* ourselves in another and experience what they experience: an ability that is accessed while examining portraiture" (Moore, 2017).

✓ *There is a relationship between the reasons given for painting the portraits and the styles that artists use in their painted portraiture.*

The reasons that artists gave for painting portraits were directly related to the style they eventually used to paint the portraits. Those who painted commissioned portraits and aimed at attaining likeness tended to use realism as a predominant style. Those who sought to have deliberate but spontaneous expressions on their portraits tended to lean towards expressionism as an influence on their individual style. Those who sought to make their portraits as conduits for their social commentaries were much more flexible in their styles ranging from impressionism influence to colourful stylization and ultimately abstraction in various forms.

✓ *The styles that are used generally fall within the stylistic continuum suggested in this paper.*

It is apparent that looking at the variety of portraits featured in this paper, artist and their styles fall within the continuum suggested in this paper, from portraits that are a definition of hyperrealism to those that are a definition of abstraction. There are also those portraits that seem to suggest a combination of the influence of styles and as such, do not depict a concise style.

✓ *Some portraits are not so much the study of individual likeness as would often be the norm but are deliberately painted to tell a story; be it a cultural or social story, a personal odessey or even a story of innocence.*

Artists often paint portraits that are expressive or denote given narratives or stories, referred to as narrative portraiture. Although these portraits are very well executed and often finely finished, the 'physical likeness' of an individual subject is not a priority, though facial fineness and accuracy of the depiction of cultural iconography are meticulous. Some of these portraits are usually a series that constitute a study of a cultural phenomenon such as facial adornment, ornamentation, facial decoration, ritualistic cultural peculiarities (such as ear lobe piercing or lip elongation) of selected Kenyan or other African traditional communities. In the construction of such portraits, the artist uses photographic references that focus on certain areas of interest and the artist is able to create his or her studies using these references and develop them into a series of portraits.

✓ *Portraits can bear expression that may point out to something the artist wishes to express, beyond the need to bear likeness.*

Portraits are not always about likeness, and certain styles show clearly that artists are in some instances, more interested in the expression of human emotions than a mere physical likeness. Portraits of this nature are imagined and rendered to meet this objective and even where they are not imagined, the artist uses the reference source only as a springboard to his or her intended expression. It is observed that in instances where the overriding factor is to derive facial expression of one kind or another, then the subsequent use of brush strokes, colour, shadows and facial distortion that are used to execute the desired expression also tend to relegate physical likeness to the periphery. Given that facial expressions are used by humans to convey various types of meaning in various contexts (Elliot & Jacobs, 2013), facial expression as it manifests in painted portraiture is important to artists since that visual expression is attached to certain emotions, feelings or responses that give rise to meaning. Since facial expressions exist in a physical sense in living human beings and are ordinarily used to convey various types of meanings in any given context, then the artist exploits the same in a painting to derive the same kind of meaning by association, in a visual sense, since the painted face is static and without life. But however, the resultant elicited response or reaction to an expressive painting by the viewer is itself real and emotionally felt; this is why expression in portraiture combined with certain gestural poses can be extremely potent in conveying situational meaning.

✓ *Most portraits are obtained from a photographic reference but artists try to add more vigour to the portrait to make it more engaging than its photographic referent.*

It was observed as an interesting phenomenon that artists often use a photograph as a reference

resource but proceed to construct their portrait in their own unique 'quasi-style' that raises the profile of the portrait as a unique new creation. This is particularly so with the development of hyperrealism in portraiture, where the portrait is meant to appear more realistic than its referent photograph. Other stylistic influences such as impressionism and expressionism culminate in results that are comparatively different from the original photograph due to their innate characteristics such as application of lurid colours, bold brush strokes and even facial distortion in the case of expressionist influence.

✓ *Portraits cannot decode the character or personality of the subject because they bear no life, but they can imply its likelihood of manifestation or occurrence in real life.*

Portraits are not neutral artistic depictions of faces; they tell a story from the onset in what is described as the construction of visual-facial character. They suggest something about the subject and probably how the subject wanted to be depicted. There has been, of course, the argument that a painted face is not a living entity, it bears no soul and, therefore, cannot emanate 'character'. However, it is precisely for this reason that artists endeavour to study pertinent facial characteristics in order to bring out what this paper terms as the notion of 'implied character'. They do so by studying the eyes and their glare or their gaze, facial expression and positioning of facial components and the tension of facial muscular anatomy. For instance, the placement of cheekbones, the positioning of eyes, the eyebrows, tight or fallen lips, easy or hard smiles, dimples and facial muscle structure are all examples of how an artist studies a face in order to suggest its human essence. The face then becomes a window through which the audience can glimpse into the possible character of the subject. Artists have, however, been accused often of the 'aggrandizement of character' through their portraits in order to make their subjects appear more important, powerful or meritorious than they really are.

✓ *Portraits tend to show the subject in the best light possible.*

The tendency of portraits to show the subject in the best light possible is not uncommon. It is indeed the normal intention of both the artist and the 'sitter'. In painted portraiture, particularly in portraits featuring a specific subject, whether a sitter or a referenced photograph source, the artist always endeavours to depict the character of the individual as unblemished. But it has always attracted a fair share of controversy. It is granted, of course, that people, just like in photography when a photo is taken of them in a pose, want to project their best character through facial demeanour that projects a 'serene faultlessness'. Likewise in painted portraiture, the artist wishes to portray the subject in the best light possible, that is, presuming that there exists the notion of a projected character that permeates through the painted portrait. The query that has always arisen is what exactly is this projected character and whether it is even possible to visually project an innate or 'inner' character. In addressing this matter from the perspective of photography but in relation to the role of the artist, Tjintjelaar (2018) observes:

Personally, I don't believe that you can capture someone's spirit, or soul or essence, by just merely looking at someone's physical features and deriving someone's internal personal traits by how we perceive their physical traits.

Underscoring the scepticism that often engulfs the interpretive aspect of painted portraiture just as in photography, he further asserts:

If a person looks beautiful with a soft look in the eyes, then that says nothing about the person's character.

In the light of this, this paper contends that what artists then often try to do in this regard is to 'visually imply' the kind of character that is most likely hidden beneath the facial demeanour. It is, therefore, '*indicative*' rather than '*conclusive*' of character. This visual approach as an indicator towards character traits is important even in forensic art as may be suggested in a suspect's facial structure. As noted earlier, this indicative element in most portraits is perceived first and foremost through the study of the nature of the eyes, since eyes even in physical reality, tell a deep story. Artists also use other facial clues such as the nature of smiles, the tightness of lips, the twist of the eyebrows, placement of facial folds, the prominence of cheekbones, dimples, the texture of the skin and holistic facial expression that manifests in a whole

array of intricate facial-muscular tensions. There is no sitter or subject who wants their projected character to be determined or interpreted to be rogue or unsavoury. Subsequently, there will always be a strong argument for physiognomic value as being one of the major communicative and interpretive tenets of portraiture. In the same token, it cannot be denied that a certain degree of superficiality shall always exist in this communication and interpretation; but even in real life, people do often succeed in camouflaging their real characters.

✓ *Artists and the subjectification of their subject*

The concept of subjectification in portraiture, as has been noted before, has often attracted controversy among art historians, artists and audiences alike. It is presumed, though, that the task of the artist in executing a portrait is to portray and visually project the subject's individual essence, feelings, character, spirituality, personality and emotional state because all these are orbital factors that describe the subject's uniqueness. In the pre-photography era, artists worked with sitters who wanted to be portrayed in a certain light and the controversy gravitated around the interaction between the artist, sitter and viewer, such that often there was 'tension' between the artist and the sitter. The artists also researched the background or archival data of their sitters and would often be accused of over-subjectifying them to the point of adulation, leading to the tendency towards idealization or making their sitters 'perfect' human beings. It is agreeable, however, that the artist bears significant responsibility, through the rendition of his or her style and technique, to portray an element of the person's subjectivity as a way of evoking that individual's uniqueness.

In the context of this paper, artists do not work with sitters as such and prefer to work from reference resources such as photographs. It was not clear that artists deliberately took too much time thinking specifically about subjectifying the subjects in their portraits beyond the visual clues that are already present in the referent photograph. But in their quest to obtain accurate likeness, the artists seemed aware of this need, but this was limited to what was projected in the photograph. This, of course, underscores the difference between a 'sitter' and a

referent photograph. Historically, in the era when artists used sitters, they felt the obligation to subjectify the sitter since he or she was a living, breathing person about whom they also obtained archival bio-data. In many instances, the sitter also sought to influence how they should be portrayed. A photograph is, however, static and does not bear the human presence of a sitter which greatly affects the notion of subjectification. This is not unusual and has been viewed as one of the limitations of photography in portraiture. By extension, therefore, when an artist uses a photograph as a reference for a painted portrait, this limitation in the portrayal of subjectivity tends to manifest. In some hyperrealism portraits in this paper, where the artists endeavour to portray elevated details beyond the referent photograph, the artists display their awareness for subjectifying the persons beyond portraying the mere physical likeness by the controlled use of minute details absent in the referent photograph. The notion of the creation of a new reality in their work provides them with a window of opportunity to add a modicum of subjectivity. The portraits themselves tend to indicate that there is something more to the faces that aids in the portrayal of the individual essence of the subjects and makes them live and thoughtful, considerate and sensitive, which in turn helps the viewer to delve into their subjectivity.

✓ *Use of the gaze*

Although it is known that one of the major tenets of painted portraiture is the use of eyes as a tool for depicting the perceived personality and character of the subject, the work featured in this paper shows that artists go a step further to harness the effect and power of the gaze to underscore certain feelings and emotions. This is traditionally not easy to achieve and needs a lot of focused attention on the execution and portrayal of the eyes in order to derive and artistically articulate the penetrating effect of the eyes. Eyes tell a story through their gaze and penetrative look; this gaze tells a story of sadness, weariness, hope, anxiety, confidence or hesitance, as well as agitation or calmness. These and a myriad of other descriptive expressions of emotions ultimately tend to draw the attention of the viewers towards the possible underlying character of the subject that makes him or her unique (*Plates 5, 9, 12, 13 & 14*)

✓ *Portraits of subjects can be re-created as new subjects.*

Some artists in their comprehension of the essence of portraits are really not interested in depicting the likeness of their subjects as they exist, as their integral purpose. They instead go further to transform their subjects into new creations of their own, executed in their own styles, with colours, brush strokes and distortions, from which they create their liberty to express certain phenomena through these ambiguous faces. They hence create new persons and immerse them into a new world where they become conduits for the expression of their own emotions.

✓ *Portraits can be used to propagate a given phenomenon.*

It is evident that in whatever given style, portraits are used to portray a given phenomenon that the artist deems of particular significance to the audience which bears historical, cultural or commemorative symbolism. In Plates *20, 21* and *22*, the portraits depict aspects of ethnic cultural peculiarities. Apart from the depiction of these aspects as they exist, for instance, in the case of ear piercing and elongation, lip extension and facial scarification, which is one fundamental task for the artists, the portraits become channels for discourse pertaining to these peculiarities and their place in a modern world. In other cases, they become means of celebration of these cultures as well as educative platforms in instances where cultural symbolisms relate to and positively impact a community's social/cultural norms.

✓ *Portraits can be a mirror for self-reflection.*

Just as artists use portraits as an avenue for self-expression, portraits can serve as a mirror for self-reflection. When a portrait tells a perceived story or portrays a particular narrative, seen through the expression of the subject, symbolic qualities, formal qualities or interpretive value, there is always the possibility that the created narrative may resonate with the viewer's own experiential undertones making the portrait uniquely significant and personal to the viewer. This is particularly evident in abstract portraiture which by nature direct the viewer to reflect more and engage with oneself. Barcio (2016) underscores this from the social constructivism perspective and observes that 'Social Constructivism postulates that everything we understand about life grows out of our experiences and that all of our instructive experiences grow out of social interactions. In a psychological sense, one creature staring at an image of another creature is social interaction. A viewer interacting with a room full of abstract portraits constitutes a community.' In this sense, a portrait can become, by their very essence, mutually interactive entities that compel the viewers to engage with themselves. In underscoring the unique role of portraiture in this regard, Moore (2017) observes that 'We recognize aspects of ourselves, of our own emotions, of our own stories, through another human being's face.

✓ *Use of gestural poses.*

In some of the portraits, the artists use gestural poses that are designed to suggest a certain feeling about their subjects that enhances the charm of their personalities. Gestures have been used in painted portraiture throughout time and are an important tool for the visual derivation and enhancement of the notion of personality as viewed in a portrait. In *Plate 9*, the artist chooses to depict the young girl holding onto the edge of a wall, as if she is emerging from within. Combined with the girl's mild but disarming smile, the artist succeeds in visually portraying and creating a feeling of a very engaging young personality, full of charming innocence, almost free of human blemish. In *Plate 5*, the gestural pose of the man smoking a cigarette adds, by association, to the fuss of anxiety or anticipation that is then enhanced by the man's gaze. In *Plate 1*, the woman holding out the plastic bottle of water is perhaps expressing something about her situation or current activity which would not have been apparent if the gestural pose was absent in the portrait

✓ *Use of lighting.*

It is evident that artists view the use of lighting as an integral part of rendering their styles across the board. This is executed to different degrees depicting the effect of falling natural or artificial light upon faces, body and attire. Depending on the style, the general intention is to create a feeling of fully rounded forms and to give the faces particularly, a feeling of being 'alive'. The use of falling light effects or illumination as well as the use

of shadows and dark backgrounds have been used traditionally to focus attention on pertinent aspects of the portrait as well as to create certain feelings and emotions such as elation, mystery or even melancholy all of which pertain to the subject's personality and environment. Moore (2017) notes, 'A portrait full of light can likewise indicate these feelings of joy and levity, while a portrait full of shadows can fill us with a sense of mystery and fear.' In terms of character indicators, Moore writes, 'Using strong value contrast in a portrait can be used to metaphorically communicate the light and dark aspects of a person.'

CONCLUSION

Portraiture is a vast genre and continues to be a vital art staple in the modern art scene in Kenya. Artists use a variety of styles and each artist uses the style that he or she is most comfortable with. There is a stylistic continuum within which artists derive their stylistic comfort and some artists tend to combine or overlap some of these stylistic approaches in the application of their techniques.

It can be concluded that portraiture in Kenya is vibrant and widely practised and the major motivation is earning a living. This is no different from the motivation of historical portraitists who painted in order to earn a living. In such portraits, the intent of the artist is to attain a high degree of physical likeness that resembles the referent source and resonates with the subject as a client. These types of portraiture will be found amongst artists whose stylistic approaches fall mainly within the realm of realism, photorealism or hyper-realism. In this regard, the painting of portraits in order to derive accurate likeness is done for a specific commercial purpose.

Artists, however, have other reasons for painting portraiture that significantly contribute to the existing vibrancy. Painted portraiture is used for social commentary. This is important for artists to vacate their personal comfort zones and engage society in order to be able to address certain social phenomena. Portraiture, in this regard, is deemed effective in its expressiveness of the particular phenomenon under scrutiny. Some portraits provide an opportunity for the audience to delve into the character of the subject that helps to make the subject unique. The possibility that a portrait, from

a visual perspective through its expression, can become a window for delving into the nature of the subject's character is both intriguing and fascinating. The subsequent study of facial characteristics that constitute the all-important visual clues including the facial structure itself, the nature of the eyes including the gaze, the folds and facial peculiarities, nature of the lips, the wary smile, gestural poses and many others, make portraiture a very potent interpretive platform.

Visual clues that manifest in the actual physical human expression are the ones that help to construct and ultimately convey the meaning that is extracted from actual human emotions. When they are painted into a portrait, they underscore, by extension, the same clues that suggest the same emotions that give meaning to the portrait when viewed by the audience. The study and use of a subject's physiognomy and the nature of external features, therefore, remain an important approach in the rendition of portraiture. It can be concluded that this interpretive value of portraiture that provides artists and viewers alike with the impetus to delve into the subject's character and personality, including psychological characterization, is one of its most important uses of portraiture and underscores its visual essence.

Lastly, portraits can be done for personal artistic fulfilment or as art for art's sake. Artists often create portraits for the sake of enjoying the application of their personal styles particularly colours, brushstrokes and the study of expressions. Even in such circumstances though, the notion of an underlying purpose that is tied to the quest for individual artistic expression and freedom is always present since personal artistic fulfilment is also embedded in purpose.

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