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## Use of Realism as Social Commentary on Specific Subject Matter in Painting: An Analysis of the Realist Paintings of Zephania Lukamba, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

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Form.*

The creation of any work of art often has a purpose or an intent. In this regard, artists endeavour to create pieces of artwork that bear or propagate certain meanings or points of view and also express some social phenomena that are unique to a particular environment or what has often been referred to as a catchment area. This is usually an important artistic undertaking because artists have the innate responsibility to observe certain social peculiarities and visually record them for all their worth. Some of these peculiarities are a reflection of society and its circumstantial behavioural tendencies often brought about by various factors; such as social-economic malaise and bad governance that precipitates social decay. When an artist embarks on such an artistic depiction of his or her own social environment, then there is a need to give it due artistic attention. This study featured 22 paintings based on the subject matter of the overloading of vehicles. Although the paintings appeared generally alike in terms of layout and execution, it is the depiction of the paradox of the repeated occurrence of the same phenomenon which in reality reflects a tendency that is both widespread and bizarre. In this regard, each painting depicts a scene that in reality is in itself a specific curious occurrence. This, in retrospect, can be seen as a type of popular culture of defiance and of the absurd. Since the overloading of any vehicle is ordinarily not only unwarranted and dangerous, but also blatantly illegal, the artist, in his observations which constituted this study, depicts a societal problem that has degenerated into impunity. This study, therefore, sought to find out how effective such focused paintings were as an avenue for social commentary. The artist over a period of time observed incidents of overloading as they manifested themselves in real-life occurrences and made the necessary sketches that were later developed into paintings in the studio. The paintings were examined using formal analysis to delve into their composition and use of elements and principles as well as descriptive analysis to explore their meaning or what the artist intended to convey. The study posits that the essence of such focused paintings in this study is that they become a visual pointer to the wider debate about the debilitating effect of such social malaise upon the psyche of society. The ordinary citizenry subsequently becomes spectators in their own space that degenerates into such recklessness and disregard for individual and collective safety as well as the rule of law.

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## INTRODUCTION

Works of art are ordinarily used to communicate or express a desired message as envisaged by the artist. Some are specific to a given subject matter and are emphatic about a pertinent aspect of that subject matter. Some are responsive to certain peculiar environments and are, hence, executed in a way that leaves no doubt in the eyes of viewers what the artist intended; some are responsive to broader themes and individual pieces of artwork may be open to multiple interpretations as viewers seek to unravel the message and see different perspectives of the same thing. In this regard, paintings and other genres of art can be used to study social phenomena and more so give artists an opportunity to express their points of view concerning a particular phenomenon of interest. This gives credence to why artists create paintings that gravitate around a certain phenomenon that they deem to contain peculiarities that would certainly be of interest to the wider audience or society at large.

Subsequently, the artist finds it worthwhile to highlight these peculiarities and executes them in a way that best suits his/her style. In this regard, Saulo (2024) notes that "Artists often respond to current events and cultural shifts through their work, creating pieces that comment on and critique societal norms and values. This reflective practice turns art into a powerful tool for social

commentary, generating discourse and sometimes even sparking social change." In this study, for instance, the artist chose to use realism as a style in executing his paintings since it perhaps best captured the reality of the 'action' of overloading and the bizarreness of the moment. Also in this study, the peculiar nature of overloaded vehicles, however mundane and unacceptable it may appear to a rational mind, is still an occurrence that apparently happens within the environment and circumstances in which it seems to thrive. However, it becomes important for the audience to be made aware of such a peculiarity since it involves the bizarre behaviour of human beings that potentially affects the well-being of other people and interrupts, by its sheer impunity, the general sense of order in society.

Paintings that dwell on a particular subject matter are often executed in a series that depicts the consistency of occurrence of the same behavioural trend that underscores not only its peculiarity but also its description of being a bad culture. In describing the characteristics of realism, Heider (2023) observes that Realism "places a premium on objectivity and accuracy in portraying the external world. It aims to represent reality faithfully, without distorting or romanticizing it. Realist artists and writers pay attention to details, everyday life, and ordinary people, reflecting the complexities and nuances of the human experience." Historically, within the realism

movement the concept of social phenomena as a basis for subject matter was seen in the context of the quest to feature the plight of ordinary people without exaggeration or undue sentimentality. Basing their paintings on contemporary subjects and settings, realist painters revolutionized art as it had been perceived in the Romanticism era. Meyer (2023) observes that “The Realist movement introduced subject matter that featured ordinary and working-class individuals, contemporary settings, and everyday scenes, as subjects that were worthy of being portrayed in art. This led to a greater focus on the realistic aspects that were evident in these areas, as subjects that fell outside of “traditional high art” were suddenly considered valuable.” Still dwelling on the historical perspective of realism in Art, Green (2022) identifies four characteristics, one of which he observes as ‘Focused on everyday people, settings, and situations’ which underscores the essence of the paintings in this paper.

### **The Essence of the Study of Social Phenomena through Painting**

Painting as an Artistic genre has been used for artistic expression for centuries. Paintings have been used to propagate points of view, opinions and ideas in various social dispensations (expressiveness) or to depict certain individual feelings and emotions emanating from certain experiential undertones as a form of personal visual language (self-expression). Paintings have also been used to record certain events and momentous occurrences in the history of mankind and are still used today as a means of recording circumstances as they unfold and environments as they manifest.

In the context of this study, the essence of the study of social phenomena through painting is anchored in the continuous necessity to unravel the basis of the occurrence and ultimately the implication of such social phenomena and bring them to the attention of the viewers for all they are worth. The description of social phenomena is that they form an important aspect of how any society functions through happenings and occurrences

that are not only unique and impactful to that society but tend to significantly affect and define it. If any society were to function optimally and everything appeared natural, normal, serene or rational, then in such a utopian society, there would exist no phenomena as described here. However, in the context of this study, a phenomenon manifests itself when there occurs peculiarities and intricacies in certain social dispensations that tend to interrupt the rhythm of a normal functioning society. In this regard, behavioural patterns of segments of society, particularly when they are repeated consistently and occur regularly to constitute some form of quasi-culture often underscore a systemic problem that does not integrate with the norms of social order. In this case, there is bound to be the emergence and manifestation of an identifiable phenomenon that is bound to attract the attention and interest of artists and other social activists.

Social phenomena, therefore, denote those observable unique events and occurrences that may be uncommon, uncanny, unexpected or even bizarre. Their manifestation subsequently appeals to the creative mind of artists to the extent that they subsequently feel the need to package and channel them back to the viewers in the form of artistic commentary that is profound and visually impactful. This in turn ignites some measure of discourse or debate that draws individual or collective human conscience which results in actions or interventions that seek to counter the negative impact of such phenomena. In emphasizing the role of art as an avenue for social commentary and signifying the role of artists themselves in this regard, Wacuka & Odundo (2022) observe that “Many contemporary visual artists in East Africa are using various visual techniques to react to various happenings in society including corruption, impunity, poverty, environmental issues and moral values of a society. They aspire to document the daily events of a society in order to hopefully inspire discussions on the subject matter that is highlighted, and to accurately represent the social and political events as a mirror of the society.” Jenkins (2023) further observes that “Paintings

have been crucial in providing social commentary throughout history, offering unique perspectives on contemporary issues within their respective societies. By engaging in social commentary, artists can reflect, translate, and mediate societal issues, including racial and gender equality, civil rights, sexual politics, cultural and social identity, and globalization.”

The perspective of the artist:

*“The overloaded cars paintings are aimed at shedding light on societal norms on one hand and the issue of impunity on the other within the realm of traffic in African cities. The series captures the chaotic and overloaded scenes of cars navigating through an abstract background, which helps emphasize the state of the cars as the main focus of the paintings, displaying the everyday challenges faced by both drivers and passengers. I try to use vibrant colours and dynamic brushstrokes to convey the energy the overloaded cars still have despite being used all these years to their fullest capabilities. Despite their strength and resilience, most of the overloaded cars are not road-worthy. Some of the cars lack side mirrors, lights, and wipers among other requirements for a road-worthy vehicle. However, impunity among traffic officers leads them to turn a blind eye to safety regulations, as well as the passengers, thus ironically making it an accepted norm in the community.”* (Zephania Lukamba, 2024)

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining any work of Art such as the paintings featured in this paper, the application of formal analysis bears special importance because of its ‘visual structural’ guidance in compositional analysis. The effective use of elements and principles is always an essential component of this analysis as a fundamental technique of determining the effectiveness with which a work of art, in this case, a painting, has been composed and hence generated its visual essence. The paintings are first described by the presence of elements and principles as they are integrated to create the compositions. In this regard, the use of

colour, colour tones or value, textural effects and use of light and dark, contrasts as well as shadows are all taken into visual consideration. Since elements and principles are not used in isolation but rather in cognizance of one another, analysis entails further examination of how the elements inter-relate in the various paintings. Since the style of the paintings in this paper falls within the realm of realism, the pertinent quest for meaning is not contained in any abstract symbolism but is overtly implied in the realism of the paintings as a series. Hence this determination of meaning is derived from the vividness of the holistic naturalistic images as presented by the artist as it most probably occurred in the real-life dispensation.

Realism subsequently reduces the gap between the artist’s intent and the viewer’s own determination of possible meaning. The paintings can be evaluated simply by way of their visual impact upon the viewer as visual recordings of certain pertinent occurrences as well as the social significance of these occurrences. In this paper, the ‘interpretive’ value of the paintings is not viewed as a fundamental anchorage of the essence of the paintings as it would be in other complex paintings since realism is generally straightforward. Particular attention of analysis focuses on aspects pertinent to realism such as the observational skill of the artist, the extraction and depiction of details, the impact of the use of elements such as colour, light and dark and shadows, and the confluence between the intent of the artist and the perspective of the viewer. The artist has to a significant extent, used colour and value in his paintings to enhance the unique effect of light and shadows. Farr (2018) notes that “Artists are able to create the illusion of light using different colour and tonal values. Value defines how light or dark a given colour or hue can be. Values are best understood when visualized as a scale or gradient, from dark to light.” Forming part of the overall analysis of the paintings in this paper, it is noted that textural effects can be used effectively in realism to enhance certain effects. Farr (2016) observes that “Implied texture is

created using other elements of art, including form, line, shape and colour.”

### ANALYSIS OF WORK



Plate 1. 'Gone are the days' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2020  
(Source: Artist)

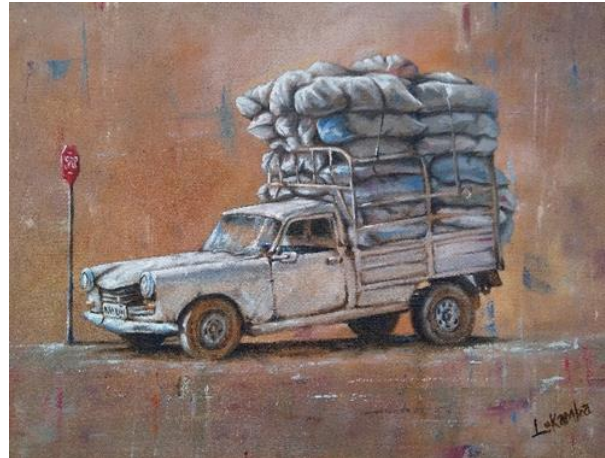


Plate 2. 'End of the Road' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm - 2020  
(Source: Artist)

In *Plates 1* and *2*, the artist studies overloaded vehicles in a very real and telling manner that leaves the viewers with no doubt about the absurdity of the occurrences in terms of visual representation. The artist uses colour and colour tones to show value and to apply the effect of light and shadows to create unique vividness. This effect is evident in all the subsequent paintings. *Plate 1* is particularly vivid in its representation of the phenomenon of uncensored overloading of a moving vehicle that defies all logic. The vehicle is

completely dilapidated and can barely function; but despite this, the human figures in their gestural poses atop the vehicle are depicted as engrossed in casual conversation depicting a predisposition towards casual impunity. Paintings can be effectively rendered to depict multi-faceted interpretations of the same phenomenon. In the two paintings, the viewers are able to see the perils of overloading, the recklessness of people, the culture of negligence and the holistic impunity with which all of these are conducted.



Plate 3. 'Sasa nini Tena' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2020  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 4. 'Jenga Jina vunja gari' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2020  
(Source: Artist)

*Plates 3 and 4* are again well executed with the necessary details that help underscore the subject matter. *Plate 3* depicts the irony of overloading; the driver bends down to the ground to see whether there is a problem underneath the car. The driver cannot possibly escape the perils of his own negligence, there is bound to occur some kind of breakdown as a result of the overloaded vehicle. In *Plate 4*, the artist emphasizes the extent to which people can stretch and overload a vehicle. The model of the vehicles is easily identifiable in both paintings and it underscores the strange nostalgia of the vehicles themselves and indicates the accuracy with which the artist depicts the vehicles. Accuracy is an important attribute of

realist paintings. The age-old strength and durability of the vehicles are still tested with the use of this overloading parameter. Some paintings by their nature can be strikingly absurd in their content yet nostalgic in the emotions they elicit and both these characteristics fall under the realm of multiple interpretations. While some viewers will be appalled by the perils of overloading, others will marvel at the accuracy with which the vehicles have been rendered which instead sets their minds rolling down memory lane. The use of shapes that make the vehicles identifiable is very well executed and the use of value, light effects and shadows is convincing.



Plate 5. 'Nani huyo' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2021  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 6. 'Mzee ni wewe' - Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2021  
(Source: Artist)

Sugarcane tractor hauliers have the habitual tendency of overloading and bear the dubious reputation of being a danger to other motorists who encounter them on the road. They often have no headlights at night and occupy most of the road leaving no room for the oncoming traffic. *Plate 5* depicts such a vehicle and the artist studies it in accurate detail using appropriate shapes, colours, colour tones and shadows as well as capturing the nature of the precarious sugarcane load. *Plate 6* shows a dilapidated cabinless pickup vehicle with

no bonnet and is testimony of the casualness with which people in certain environments treat the concept of moving objects. The artist again studies this composition with articulate detail of the vehicle itself as well as the human figures utilizing colour and contrasts very well leaving the viewer with a vivid insight into the visual encounter. As observed before, such paintings are a worthy record of these occurrences in the reality of their circumstance as well as the social message that they portray.



Plate 7. '*Nabado kanasonga*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2021  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 8. '*Utabidi Umeelewa*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2022  
(Source: Artist)

*Plate 7* continues the depiction of overloaded vehicles beyond their capacity, particularly on roof-mounted carriers upon vehicles that are not designed to carry such loads in the first place. The vehicle depicted in *Plate 7* is a station wagon, the type which the artist depicts with admirable accuracy since the model of the vehicle is identifiable. The identification of the model as an integral aspect of the painting underscores the effect of realism in constructing a narrative that is compatible with the artist's intent. These are some of the conversations that the artist ignites in these

paintings since the viewers may be familiar with the underlying narratives behind these depictions. The nostalgic perspective of the vehicle is that it bears the perceived resilience and durability of the Peugeot 504 station wagon. In *Plate 8*, the effect of the use of value to create an illusion of illuminative light as it would naturally fall upon the vehicle is very well executed against the background. The shapes, textural effects and shadows further enhance the painting making it accurate and pleasant to view.



Plate 9. '*Mali safi*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2022  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 10. '*Chini kwa chini*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2022  
(Source: Artist)

The artist continues with his study of the subject matter of overloading and in *Plate 9* the vehicle is duly overloaded with furniture and though there is an attempt to secure the load with ropes, the danger posed to other road users is still apparent.

The study of the vehicle itself depicts a (Peugeot 404) pickup which in the sub-context of the painting is used as an indicator of the nostalgic resilience of the model of the vehicle. The artist hence shows the obvious perils of overloading but

also in another context, the exaltation of these vehicles for their durability despite the continuous abuse. In *Plate 10* the artist reverts to the absurdity of overloading. The vehicle featured is a sedan (Peugeot 504) and despite the fact that it is not designed to carry loads on its roof and rear trunk as depicted, the artist demonstrates the innate culture of negligence and impunity. The vehicle is also overloaded with human beings. The

demonstrated illogic and futility of this occurrence are obvious; the vehicle would perhaps better serve the owner if it were better maintained and loaded within its capacity. It can be deduced from the painting, which forms its interpretive value, that in such circumstances, the cost of repair of such a vehicle most certainly outweighs the meagre profits of its owner and hence the cycle of poverty very likely prevails.



Plate 11. '*Hawatufuati*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2021  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 12. '*Tende irudi*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm - 2022  
(Source: Artist)

*Plates 11* and *12* show the precarious nature of overloading, often without any regard to the effect of wind resistance, which nobody bothers to apply or even remember. Vehicles that are overloaded in this manner have a lot of drag and are often also overloaded with people meaning in retrospect, that people are stripped of their humanity and are regarded merely as individual or collective commodities. In both paintings, the artist takes great care to study minute details which he repeats throughout his paintings such that each painting is not only well executed but is visually fascinating and engaging. The use of illuminative light is a stylistic strategy used to enhance the centre of interest and hence in both paintings, the viewer's eyes are focused entirely on the occurrence of overloaded vehicles plying the road. The sight of vehicles loaded to the brim that need to get to the destination, offload the goods and replicate their journey is perplexing but also memorable.

An aspect of overloading that is perplexing is how loads upon loads are heaped upon one another and fastened up so they do not tip over. *Plates 13* and *14* depict just how precariously this is achieved especially when mounted on the rooftop of the vehicles. In *Plate 13*, the artist also depicts the overloading of people inside the car with hands hanging out of the passenger door as a result of people being pushed towards the inner edge of the vehicle. It portrays the perception that nothing is left behind at the point of departure. Although *Plate 14* depicts a pick-up vehicle that is ordinarily more suited to carrying loads, it is stretched beyond its capacity by creating a roof bed upon which loads are further stacked. The artist also features the model of vehicles which like in other paintings are identifiable, a Peugeot 505 station wagon (*Plate 13*) and a Peugeot 404 pick-up vehicle (*Plate 14*). As observed, the kinds of details with which the paintings are executed as well as the accuracy of observation in the study of



objects, people and vehicles in particular, are meant to depict the essence of the scene in its entirety as depicted by the artist. By studying the

paintings in equal measure, the viewers are able to draw their own conclusions, parallels and interpretations.



Plate 13. 'Hatufiki' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2022  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 14. 'Wiperless manenos' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2022  
(Source: Artist)

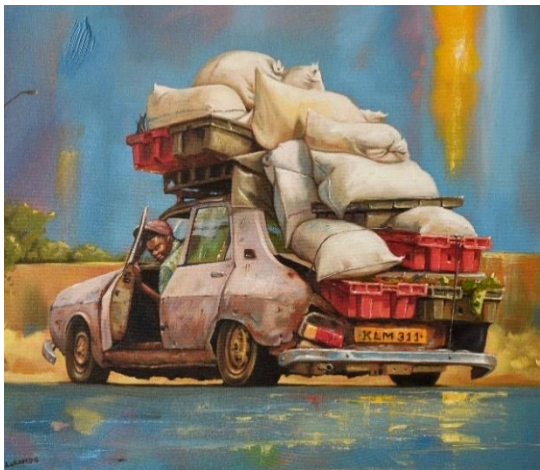


Plate 15. 'Iko nini?' Oil on Canvas  
55 cm x 55 cm – 2022  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 16. 'Sherehe haitaki sheria' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2022  
(Source: Artist)

*Plate 15* depicts the absurdity of overloading using a sedan vehicle which (like in *Plates 1,10*) is not designed to carry loads on its rooftop or rear trunk. The complete disregard for safety and the precarious stacking of loads upon a moving vehicle is deplorable. It might be argued in retrospect, that the prevailing social/economic factors tend to encourage this kind of behaviour but it is also acknowledged that in normally functioning societies, this is interpretable as a breakdown of social order within the given environment which it is allowed to prevail and flourish. Artistically the depiction of someone

peeping out through an open door to check whether the vehicle can hold the weight on its rear axle is visually significant because it is testimony to the fact that the perpetrators of this impunity are very aware of their actions and that these actions are premeditated. The overloaded vehicles in both paintings are identifiable; a Renault 12 sedan vehicle (*Plate 15*) and a Peugeot 505, station wagon (*Plate 16*). As noted before the models of the vehicles are significant in these paintings because of their nostalgic and historical value; they are like a record of a bygone era frozen in time.



Plate 17 '*Masaa ni machache*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2021  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 18 – '*Kazi sio ofisi tu*' Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2022  
(Source: Artist)

The phenomenon of overloading is not only confined to vehicles but also extends to motorcycles. *Plate 17* depicts a motorcycle rider ferrying a passenger and two sacks of load. The painting depicts the rather squeezed and precarious posture of the two people hemmed in to make room for the sacks. The painting indicates that the culture of overloading is engrained and seldom takes into account any considerations of safety; it is evident that the riders are not wearing safety helmets and are content to ride along

despite the obvious potential danger to their lives. The artist uses superb tonal contrasts, shadows and illuminative light to depict the centre of interest against the almost plain background. The study of detail is excellent and the viewer is able to make out the posture and perhaps the anxiety of the riders. *Plate 18* is a further study of overloading showing the use of a particular battered model of a vehicle (Peugeot 504 pick-up) as the workhorse of trade.



Plate 19 '*Ongeza kumi Twende*' - Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm – 2021  
(Source: Artist)



Plate 20 '*Kisumo mwisio*' - Oil on Canvas  
45 cm x 35 cm 2022  
(Source: Artist)

*Plates 19* and *20* depict a different form of overloading; that of human beings. These kinds of vehicles featured in the paintings that were based on a regular pickup were called 'box matatus' and

were used mainly in the rural areas to transport people further into the hinterland. The term 'Matatu' remains the local description of small to medium-sized public transport vehicles including

vans and minibuses characterized by a yellow line running across the centre of the vehicle's body. *Plate 20* depicts how people are packed like sardines inside the vehicle while others hang on at the rear door literally travelling from the outside as the vehicle hurtles along. This bizarre behaviour became common in many parts of the country as the owners of the vehicles sought to maximize their daily income and hence relegated safety and public order to the periphery. The

gestural pose in *Plate 19* depicts some kind of hugging, perhaps over the amount of fare, as the conductor convinces one more passenger to hop in. Indeed the caption for the painting '*Ongeza kumi Twende*' (add ten more shillings and we will be on our way) says it all. The artist took time to study all relevant details including the model of the vehicles, a Chevrolet pick-up van (*Plate 19*) and a Toyota Hilux pick-up van (*Plate 20*).



Plate 21 '*Bora tufike*' - Oil on Canvas  
80 cm x 100 cm – 2022  
(Source: Artist)

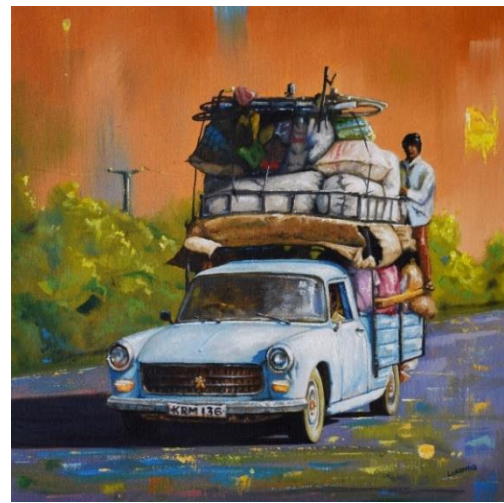


Plate 22 '*Utajua haujui*' - Oil on Canvas  
35 cm x 35 cm 2023  
(Source: Artist)

*Plates 21* and *22* are characterized by people hanging at the back of vehicles which is a strange behaviour since ordinarily people of normal behaviour are supposed to ride *inside* the vehicles. Apart from the depiction of grossly overloaded vehicles, the people hang onto the back since there is no longer any possible space inside the vehicles. This is not only against the law but it endangers their own lives. The paintings are well executed with a detailed study of the vehicles themselves as well as the study of the human figures. Through certain gestural poses, paintings can suggest some form of conversation. In *Plate 21* the gestural poses of the two figures are indicative, from a visual perspective, of some form of casual conversation. The driver's hand dangling out from the door is seen to be indicative of some form of defiance. The artist is able to vividly depict the cars as the focus of either painting by using unobtrusive colours in the background. The details with which the paintings are done are such

that a keen viewer is able to identify the models of the vehicles themselves which is part of the nostalgic context of the paintings. For example in *Plate 21*, the vehicle is an old Nissan Bluebird station wagon and in *Plate 22*, the vehicle is an old Peugeot 404 pick-up.

## OBSERVATIONS AND OVERVIEW

### Certain Phenomena are Peculiar to Certain Places

The nature of certain paintings often has a bearing upon the locale where the featured phenomenon bears regular manifestation. This means that in terms of both content and context, paintings tell a tangible story that is recognizable to the audience and they can, hence, associate it with a certain physical or geographical area that bears the peculiarity of occurrence. This is not unusual and in the context of this paper, the use of the painted images of certain vehicles as featured in the paintings can indeed be peculiar to a certain given

area which ironically also implies that the inherent impunity is confined or is 'endemic' to that area. In this regard, the nature of paintings and the peculiarity of what they contain may not be readily comprehended by all audiences since they do not constitute their experiential situations within their own environment. Paintings, therefore, serve as visual/artistic channels of enlightenment towards the nature and profoundness of social occurrences in various dispensations and geographical theatres of operation even though the audience may not belong or operate in those dispensations.

### ***Style and Quality of Work***

The artist used realism in the execution of his work based on sketches and photographic images that captured each scene. The use of realism was deemed important in view of the need to capture each scene as it unfolded in its circumstances. Paintings tell a story; there are types of paintings that seek to record a phenomenon with all its intricate manifestations and are, therefore, devoid of any other personal stylistic inputs such as distortions, visual exaggerations or caricatures. The artist in this case only focused on the natural details that are emphatic of the essence of the occurrence. The artist, therefore, executed this task with significant photographic accuracy that clearly depicted the shenanigans of overloading and focused the viewers' attention on the bizarreness of reasoning of the people represented in the images. As observed before, when this was repeated in a number of representations of the same behavioural tendency, then this recurrence became a phenomenon worthy of study and implied that there was a need for the appropriate intervention. It can be observed that the style and quality of work were deemed appropriate and suitable for the propagation of the subject matter as an emergent phenomenon.

### ***Use of Elements and Principles***

The creation of any painted work or any other work of art entails the use of elements and the application of principles in a concerted way. The paintings depict good use of elements and principles as guidelines in a manner that clearly

shows that the paintings meet their purpose. The usage of colours that are reminiscent of the actual colours that adorn the actual vehicles featured helps in the clarity of the paintings. The use of appropriate colour tones, textural effects, contrasts, and effects of natural light and shadows are all well rendered and help to make the paintings convincing, naturalistic and engaging. The artist also sought to create the necessary focal point in each painting with pleasant yet unobtrusive backgrounds that focused the viewer's eyes upon the pertinent action of the moment. The use of shapes, particularly in describing the vehicles is superb such that one can actually identify the type of car featured in the painting which is contextually important in these particular paintings since the cars are depicted as extremely resilient old workhorses.

### ***Individual Talent***

Talent refers to the unique natural artistic ability to create a work of art in any genre. It is intrinsically related to the development and refinement of artistic skills. The fundamental use of artistic talent is that it helps artists create meaning in their work in a way that is enduring, captivating and thoughtful. It involves the unique ability to observe and sketch, formulate, construct and organize ideas that may manifest in the mind as images, visually interpret or record situations, and anticipate artistic value in occurrences that might be of collective interest to others, as well as the overall ability to use elements and principles in artistic composition. In this study, the artist executed his work with the prerequisite artistic ability required to meet the purpose of the work. This can be seen through the observational skill that culminated in the application of details the accurate layout of the pictorial compositions and the study of shapes. The use of shapes, particularly in the study of the various types of vehicles was rendered with utmost keenness and accuracy that made each painting captivating and engaging. As earlier indicated, it is observed that the artist used colours, colour tones, shadows and backgrounds to execute his work which made each piece memorable and nostalgic among viewers who recognized the types of vehicles

depicted and the times in which they were at their prime. It can subsequently be observed in this paper that the level of individual talent correlates with the level of execution of realism which then helps to articulate the phenomenon as perceived and internalized by the artist.

### ***Use of Realism and Details***

It can be observed that all paintings featured in this paper were each executed with intricate details that helped to underscore the ‘action’ contained in each case. Although the paintings featured the same subject matter, the artist sought to capture each scene as it most likely unfolded in the real world underscoring the fact that each was indeed a real incident occurring in its own time and circumstance. When observed over time, this contributed to the holistic essence of the artistic inquiry that highlighted the absurdity of human behaviour in the social context in which it occurred. Photographic detailing in painted realism is often used to focus attention on certain pertinent aspects of the subject matter that are best articulated in that style. Unlike surrealism, abstraction or any other subtly created paintings where the artist is inspired by certain non-conventional imageries which ultimately require critical unravelling by the audience, realism-based paintings are overt and readily observable and are created to depict subject matter without distortion, undue adjustment or even creative prejudice. The artist’s creativity is confined to depicting or constructing the painted scene with the level of accuracy that mirrors as closely as possible the referent item or using forms and objects in a manner that is envisaged to accurately reflect a real or natural circumstance in which they exist.

### ***Use of Gestural Poses In The Paintings***

It is observed that the artist also spent considerable effort in depicting gestural poses. In a painting, gestural poses depicted in the forms can visually suggest certain interactions or actions that contribute to the essence of the overriding meaning of the painting. For instance, in *Plate 1*, the gestural pose of the human forms depicted suggests some form of conversation between the two individuals riding at the back of the vehicle

and the driver, ostensibly suggestive of whether everything is proceeding well. The gestural pose in *Plate 1* also depicts an inherent willingness to ride on a dangerous and overladen vehicle and hence suggests a strange complicity of impunity. In *Plate 15*, the gestural pose suggests ‘concern’ for the overladen rear tyre and whether it will reach the destination in one piece. The gestural poses in *Plates 19* and *20* suggest some form of conversation that contributes to the drama of the moment. In a painting or drawing, a ‘conversation’ may be suggested by a gestural pose; although it cannot be ascertained since it is not verbal or audible, the visual appeal of the gestural pose can suggest the nature of the conversation. It can be concluded that these gestural poses in a painting contribute significantly to the communicative ability of the painting itself. This implies, in these paintings, that in real life, the perpetrators of such absurd behaviour are certainly aware of it and that such blatant contravention of traffic laws underscores the premeditated and deliberate manner of their thinking. This ultimately culminates in the attitude and impunity that the artist wished to highlight.

### **Significance of Captions on Paintings**

It is observed that the type of realism depicted in this paper is visually self-explanatory. Therefore the paintings themselves did not ordinarily require any underscoring of message through inclusion of titles or captions. However, the artist found it necessary to add certain perceived ‘conversational texts’ as captions alongside all the paintings. These are perceived because in a painting they are not verbal and are instead suggested in the nature of gestural poses contained in the compositions or in the visual context therein. Such captions are often interesting quips or lamentations that in real life emanate from the people who are players within the particular theatre of occurrence depicted in a painting. They, hence, become intertwined with the visual context of the painting. This paper contends that such captions play an augmentative role in the propagation of the emergent message in a painting and that it is indeed possible to suggest some form of plausible

visual conversation through gestural poses contained in the human forms in a painting. In *Plate 3*, the caption '*sasa nini tena?* (Now what again?), is compatible with the depiction of a person bending down to the ground to check underneath the vehicle to see what the recurring problem could be. This is almost the same way as actual physical gestures can suggest the nature of conversation even without the verbal component. For example in *Plate 19*, the caption '*Ongeza kumi Twende*' (Add ten shillings and we will be on our way') aligns itself to the gestural pose of the two people who appear to be 'haggling' over something which in the context of the setting is most likely to be about the amount of fare. In *Plate 21* the caption '*bora tufike*' ('As long as we reach the destination') is compatible with the gestural pose of the two figures who appear to be in a conversation, most likely reflective of their sorry plight of having to ride on the back of the vehicle, meaning verbally that 'as long as we get to the destination it does not matter that we have to ride this way'.

### **Nostalgic Essence of Realist Paintings**

It can be deduced from the paintings in this paper that one of the useful purposes of realism is the sense of nostalgia that emanates from the paintings specifically because of the style of execution. As it emerged in the analysis of the paintings, the execution of remarkable details particularly in the depiction of aged, dilapidated and battered vehicles is testimony of their resilience and durability despite the obvious misuse over time. In this regard, nostalgia is created by the visual extraction of a unique component that elicits a positive recollection of some recognizable aspect that is associated with the contextual setting of a painting. In the case of the paintings in this paper, the audiences who recognize these unique vehicles and marvel at the details and accuracy with which they have been rendered, tend to 'recall' the more robust times that these vehicles were at their peak of service and popularity. They can, therefore, feel associated with that period of time and tell a story about those times to those who may not have experienced them. In realist paintings, nostalgia

momentarily rolls back the hands of time creating a moment in time of transient memories and recollections.

### **Realism and the Emanation of Familiarity**

Related to the emanation of nostalgia which in the context here is a recollected and often sentimental or emotional reaction to the content of a painting, it can be concluded that realism also tends to elicit familiarity which is a visual reaction to the content of a painting in terms of spontaneous recognition. This is particularly evident among audiences who recognize certain aspects of the drama or objects contained in the paintings. This is spontaneous and natural among these audiences who may have either experienced or were witnesses to the featured phenomenon, or others who may have heard the narratives told of the adventurous scenes featured in the paintings. In this regard, when viewing a painting, audiences are able to recognize events, objects, sceneries and people and are, therefore, able to associate with the circumstances surrounding a given painting and perhaps even the motivation of the artist. The photographic style of realism by its nature, hence, appeals to a wide spectrum of audiences irrespective of their individual artistic inclination.

### **The Essence of Context**

Context refers to the circumstantial setting or underlying narrative within which the painting is set, inspired, composed and subsequently executed. Irrespective of the style of execution, paintings often contain a contextual anchorage in which meaning is subsequently extracted. Context is important and usually singularly so in deciphering what the artist wishes to express. Often analysed simultaneously with content since the two are intrinsically intertwined, context helps the viewer to better comprehend the essence of the painting. The realism in the paintings presented in this paper possesses overt context. The paintings are all seen in the context of impunity and glaring ineptitude on the roads and it can be deduced that the segment of society in which this phenomenon of overloading manifests itself is both complacent and participative.

### **CONCLUSION**

The work presented in this paper is indicative that specific subject matter can be selected and pursued as a pertinent social phenomenon worth highlighting. This study posits that the role of the artist in this continuous endeavour to observe, record and highlight such phenomena is important not merely as a propagation of genres of art but as a viable channel through which the inherent concerns are raised. For instance, the intricate painted studies of overloaded and dilapidated vehicles may be viewed not to necessarily carry a profound artistic/philosophical message in their style or content as would ordinarily be the expectation in artistic social commentary, but they need not; the principal objective in this kind of work is to record the absurdity of this inherent behaviour and hence to highlight the 'contextual' implications of the actions therein. This then indicates that overloading and having such vehicles on the road is a pointer to the wider culture of 'impunity'.

In an environment where the occurrence of such peculiar behaviour may be ignored or even viewed as an acceptable or normal means of survival (hustling) by social apologists, the highlighting of such persistent incidents through painting helps to focus attention and ignite a debate that shows that such tendencies are, on the contrary, not acceptable in society. As a result, mechanisms should be initiated to curb such impunity on public roads. It can also be said that the role of individual artists, through the dissemination of their work through modern technologies and electronic channels, still remains critical in informing viewers, in a visual way, about specific social issues that ought to draw their concern and which cannot be ignored. It can also be concluded that paintings that are developed in series, meaning that the same subject matter is constantly propagated in its regular manifestation, imply that the occurrence is continuously apparent and thus attains the description of a phenomenon. This style of presentation and mode of analysis has the probability of drawing more attention from the audiences than a multi-thematic presentation where the audiences oscillate from one theme to

another often missing key visual components of social implications.

In addition, although multiple interpretations in certain non-realistic paintings have been accepted as a mode of analysing such paintings where the viewers are not obliged to subscribe to the original intent of the artist, such paintings run the constant problem of often missing out the actual intent of the artist and hence failing to focus on the pertinent matter as intended by the artist and perhaps missing the appropriate remedies and interventions that are all-encompassing. It can be concluded in this regard, that paintings which feature the same subject matter presented in series hence minimize the prospect of multiple interpretations since the content depicted in the paintings is consistently emphatic of the perils of the phenomenon.

The paintings in this study were based on realism and the quality of work is superb and intricately studied. This painting style can be said to be compatible with the concern of the artist in articulating this phenomenon since it is not based on the notion of self-expression but on the need to record specific bizarre occurrences as they manifest on the ground. This study concludes that these kinds of artistic depictions are perhaps best articulated in a style that the audience will easily comprehend and attain immediate resonance with the intent of the artist. The paintings can be described as useful in this context because the artist intended them to contain unidealized visual narratives of sustained related occurrences that depicted a 'trend' that needed attention. Unlike social realist artists who evoked empathy from their audiences and encouraged them to pay attention to social issues through activism and protests, the artist in this paper does not evoke empathy from the audience. The paintings depict occurrences that mirror the self-destructive behaviour of segments of society when basic social order is left unchecked or unsupervised.

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## APPENDICES

### Translation of captions

The following are the captions used in the paintings some of which are translations from Plate 1 "Siku ni zile zilizopita" - 'Gone are the days'

Plate 2 "Mwisho wa barabara" - 'End of the Road'

Plate 3 'Sasa nini Tena' – 'Now what again?'

Plate 4 'Jenga Jina vunja gari' – 'Exalt your name, destroy the car'

Plate 5 'Nani huyo' - Who is that?

Plate 6 'Mzee ni wewe' – 'You are the old one here'

Plate 7 'Nabado kanasonga' – 'and still it ploughs on'

Plate 8 'Utabidi Umeelewa' – 'You will need to have understood'

Plate 9 'Mali safi' – 'Perfect set of goods'

Plate 10 'Chini kwa chini' – 'Down and down again'

Plate 11 'Hawatufuati' - 'They are not on our trail'

Plate 12 'Tende irudi' – 'It should go; it shall return'

Kiswahili to English in cases where the captions are presented in Kiswahili. All these captions and their translations were derived from the artist.

Plate 13 'Hatufiki' – 'We are not getting there'

Plate 14 'Wiperless manenos' – 'Wiperless issues'

Plate 15- 'Iko nini?' – What is it now?

Plate 16 'Sherehe haitaki sheria' – 'A celebration requires no law'

Plate 17 'Masaa ni machache' 'Hours are limited'

Plate 18 'Kazi sio ofisi tu' – 'Work is not only about the office'

Plate 19 'Ongeza kumi Twende' – 'Add ten shillings and we will be on our way'

Plate 20 'Kisumo mwiso' – 'Kisumo is the destination'

Plate 21 'Bora tufike' - 'As long as we get to the destination'

Plate 22 'Utajua haujui' – 'You will realize you know nothing'