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'Painting with my students' – Development of Subject Matter and Refinement of Personal Styles in Selected Paintings among Fine Art Students at Kenyatta University

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Students of Fine Art at the University level embark on many artistic undertakings within their semester durations as a requirement of their programme. In painting, a major objective is the development of a personal style that occurs over a period of time as each student works through the respective painting units spread out across the academic years. As they work through the units, they consolidate and refine their individual styles in readiness to begin their artistic careers in earnest, as well as enhancing their individual growth. This means that they spend a significant amount of time refining their skills as well as gaining knowledge. Another objective in painting is to help students delve into the realm of thematic interpretation in order to acquire the impetus towards an inquiry into the myriad of pertinent issues in their environment and life. This enables them to develop a rationalised personal view that in turn allows them to develop subject matter for the purpose of self-expression. Students' work is often viewed as *students'* work. This paper posits that this, however, does not necessarily denote that students, who for the purpose of this paper will be referred to as *student artists*, do not already possess the capacity to examine and interpret themes and extract admirable interpretations and anecdotes of self-expression. It does not imply that they do not already possess admirable painting skills even as they endeavour to further develop and refine these skills and consolidate their individual styles. It does not, subsequently, imply that what they paint lacks the capacity for significant inquiry, commentary and sense of self-expression. This paper delves into selected paintings by student Artists to determine whether their level of visual execution, construction and composition of subject

matter as well as their interpretive ability, demonstrates or negates a current ability to meet the stated thresholds in their own right.

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INTRODUCTION

In painting, which is considered one of the most important disciplines of Art, University students have to grapple with two major tenets. The first tenet is the learning process itself that encompasses intellectual and emotional development. Students embark on the generation of ideas in order to develop subject matter which is the normal pathway to self-expression. This generation of ideas is based fundamentally on the examination and interpretation of themes as catalysts. Students are also expected to be keen observers of their communities, the wider society, their environment, occurrences and events as they unfold in many spheres of life, in order to be adequately informed and enlightened. This, in turn, opens channels of thought that enable them to develop rational opinions and ideas, truth-seeking and critical thinking. The ability to generate ideas and have interpretive impetus

is significantly aided by the growth of intellect. In terms of emotional development, they are able to take charge of their feelings and channel their emotions towards meaningful thought and good decision making. In this regard, they develop self-awareness, social skills and empathy, all of which are critical ingredients both for understanding other human beings and for self-expression.

The second tenet is the development of a personal style. In order to be able to execute paintings and ultimately to express himself or herself, a student has to develop a style of painting that defines his or her own stylistic rendition. Lieu (2013) notes that (personal) "style is important as a visual artist, it's essentially what distinguishes you from other artists, and what keeps your work looking professional, cohesive, and focused". This quest for a style involves the choice and application of colours, choice of medium,

meaning attached to colours, use of colour tones, utilisation of brushstrokes and overall technique. In addition to the uniqueness of colour as a critical ingredient of the development of personal style, this development also encompasses the personalised utilisation and organisation of all other formal components, meaning the way that one utilises and organises elements and principals of art. A personal style takes time to develop and is often a culmination of various experiments.

When the two tenets are juxtaposed, that is the learning process that amalgamates one's intellect and emotions on one hand, and development of artistic skills or personal style on the other, the students become holistically equipped with the necessary tools to interpret themes, brainstorm and rationalise, as well as internalise or unravel situational circumstances. Subsequently, they are able to harness their motivation, construct subject matter and execute paintings that are expressive and communicative and which bear the hallmarks of personalised artistic responses to whatever matter that they are confronted with.

It is acknowledged, of course, that there are often underlying dynamics in the course of the development of personal styles, learning and acquisition of skills among students. These are such as individual disparities in talent, intellect, levels of skill, backgrounds, and natural expressiveness among others. These are, however, considered, by the nature of their manifestation, to only be of an individual peripheral advantage since they tend to be spread out. They are, hence, not considered to be impedimental factors to the holistic artistic

development among students. The paintings featured in this paper were selected across various painting units with consideration only of their visual spontaneity in response to the general stated themes. They are divided into four categories; still-life composition, outdoor painting, portraiture and general themes.

Analytical Framework

Formal analysis is a regular basis upon which any work of art is visually examined. It addresses visual structure and involves four levels; description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation. *Description* deals with the visual essence of the artwork, in this case, paintings, or what confronts the eyes upon viewing the painting. It is also descriptive of the presence of respective elements and the application of principles of art. Often an artist will distinguish his or her painting by the choice and placement of elements as well and the utilisation of principles in order to generate the desired visual impact.

Analysis goes a step further and examines the rendering of the work and addresses how the artist has executed various aspects of the painting. In essence, this focuses on the stylistic approach that the artist embraces. This includes a detailed look at the effectiveness of elements in terms of the appearance of the holistic painting, such as *how* shapes, textures, colours and spaces are used to complement each other and achieve form. It also delves into how the principles are applied in order to aid the structure of composition, such as balance, proportions, perspective and suggestion of movement and illusion of depth. Analysis also includes such factors as the use of light and its effects, colour tones as well as the handling of the particular medium and tools.

Interpretation is of particular significance because it seeks to unravel the meaning of the painting by addressing the ‘content’ of the subject matter. The focus here is *why* the artist embarked on this particular painting; there is always a reason, motivation, or inspiration. Barret (1994) notes that Artworks have “aboutness” and demand interpretation. In describing this basic principle of interpretation, he further states that “Very briefly, this principle holds that a work of art is an expressive object made by a person, and that, unlike a tree or a rock, for example, it is always about something”. As the viewer attempts to draw meaning, this must be supported by visual evidence. Interpretation is hence vital to the expressive or communicative essence of the painting.

Barret (1994) outlines a number of principles of interpretation but this paper identifies the following as being significant in the interpretive approach to the paintings of student artists;

Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative; No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork; Interpretations ought to present the work in its best rather than its weakest light; The objects of interpretation are artworks, not artists; An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about (p. 1-9).

Evaluation refers to the value judgment attached to a work of art based on determined criteria and considered evidence that is commensurate to each criterion. Once these are in place, then one can pass informed judgment about the quality of work. The evaluation may

take on particular importance in certain circumstances and less in others.

As an addendum, perhaps, to the formal approach to analysis, some paintings within the general themes require an ekphrastic approach in seeking to describe the vividness of what they inspire. Nordquist (2019) describes ekphrasis as a rhetorical and poetic figure of speech in which a visual object (in this case, the paintings) is vividly described in words. This is because the paintings seem to exude a sense of poetry in the story they tell. It is not unusual for artists to leave the viewer to extract his or her own imaginings from a scene or particular content in their painting, to submerge themselves in the utopia of the moment or to engage the painting in a highly personal or emotional way and, subsequently, to arrive at a verbal-poetical description of the visual. This paper postulates that for some genres of paintings such as surrealism, an ekphrastic approach becomes essential in the interpretation of a painting since it is in essence what artists seek to portray and viewers seek to unravel and devour. Whether the viewer or critic proceeds to construct a poetic transcription, as the poet would do, is of secondary consideration. What suits the artist, critic or viewer is the emotional engagement with the painting that triggers a dialogue, creates a story or speculation, spurs reflection and probably draws parallels with one’s own life. Craven (2018) explains; “Ekphrastic poetry explores art. Using a rhetorical device known as *ekphrasis*, the poet engages with a painting, drawing, sculpture, or other forms of visual art”. There is, however, no harm in making reference to poetry since the confluence between art and poetry already exists.

Punzalan (2018) refers to the findings of Eisner (2000), who identifies four resultant benefits of student learning from art education experience:

Students learn the process of putting ideas and expressions into a form of creation; Students gain greater perceptual abilities and become more analytical; Students see the interconnectedness between arts,

culture, and history; Students demonstrate perseverance through ambiguity” (p. 124).

The framework takes all these factors into consideration and weaves them into a consolidated platform for analysing the paintings featured in this paper, in order to determine whether the thresholds underscored are evident.

CATEGORY 1: STILL LIFE COMPOSITION



Plate 1: Kindiga, Joseph (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 40 cm

The student executes the painting (*Plate 1*) with interesting simplicity but captures the essential details such as the label and cold grapes and particularly the glassy effect of the bottles and the wine glasses. However, the bottles seem to bear more of a ceramic than a glassy effect. The student artist uses perspective but combines it with aspects of



Plate 2: Mungai, Michael (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 40 cm

surreal spatial arrangement; for instance, the fallen wine glass is floating in space, the glass-half-full of wine seems to have its rim placed in an unusual perspective relative to its base; and the grapes diminish too rapidly. The standing wine glass appears to be both behind the bottle yet overlapping it at the same time; the base and stem of the glass are behind the

bottle but the bowl overlaps the side of the bottle making the glass float in space. The colour theme is purple which is done in various clear tones that bring out the objects; the background is adequate enough and does not interfere with the composition. The ground on which the still life rests is well executed and provides due visual stability.

The painting (*Plate 2*) is executed with accurate shapes that identify all the items in a well laid out composition. The glassy effect is achieved through the use of light effects shining on the

bottles and wine glasses that makes the particular items visually effective and delicate. The still life itself is executed using a chiaroscuro lighting effect that combines a dark background with bright illumination focused on the objects. The fallen glass suggests the use of spatial arrangement that shows it is actually floating since it does not rest on the same base as the bottles. Other details such as the labelling are well manifested. The painting as a whole lacks colour, probably because of the nature of the items themselves and the intent to create a dark background.



Plate 3: Warurua, Wainaina (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 40 cm



Plate 4: Kisoche, Kalerwa Paul (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 70 cm

In the still-life composition (*Plate 3*) the student artist creates the bottles and glass with studious detail focusing particularly on the effect of lighting falling on the each of the items and thereby creating the glassy effect. He also deals with the shapes of the objects ensuring the distinctness of each as well as the proportion of one against the other. Shapes are a key ingredient in still-life composition and in

this case, one is able to distinguish the different bottles, their sizes and their contents. The student artist proceeds to study the minute details of the labels on the bottles that help to bring the objects to life and help to differentiate the characteristics of the bottles and their contents which is important in realism. An important aspect of this composition is the use of natural lighting in illuminating not only the

objects but the drapery that forms the base of the still-life. A variety of tones are also used to create contrasts that help to emphasise the bottles and distinguish the objects from the rest of the background as well as show the folds on the drapery.

In *Plate 4*, the student artist studies the shapes of the different items placed at a sharper base angle that shows that the base is a bookshelf. He uses lighting effects meticulously to depict illumination that helps to create a glassy effect on the bottles. He combines the illuminative

effect with colours that define the bottles and uses the respective colour tones that underscore the effect of the lighting. He also uses dark shadows bearing the shapes of the bottles creating an interesting background in its own right as well as magnifying the illumination. This is augmented by the use of dark tones, the sharp contrasts of which help to focus the lighting effect upon the front of the objects. There is a very detailed study of the labelling of the bottles and the books giving each item its identity and distinction.



Plate 5: Kigundu, Ian (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 70 cm

Plates 5 shows the study of fruits in a tray basket. The student artist studies each fruit in its colour and shape as well as suggesting textures on the leaves. He also uses the illuminative effect of light falling and reflecting on the fruits. The respective colour tones are applied on each fruit but the tones are light and subdued, focused more on the neat edges of each fruit. The focus is really on the depiction of the nature of fruits in the basket rather than the background which is a dull combination of grey and blue. The fruits rest well within the tray basket with adequate



Plate 6: Amenity, Akoth (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 70 cm

shadows underneath; the tray of fruits itself is well placed on the base but lacks the emphasis of shadows. The student artist uses fine brush strokes to apply the light colour effect and surface texture and to reach the fine edges of the fruits.

Plate 6 is another set of fruits on a tray basket done as a study of the rich fruit colours with the influence of the chiaroscuro effect; light shining and reflecting on the colours of the fruits against dark tones and shadows. The study of the fruits is well executed with the reflection on the fruits also being used to bring

out their texture. The brushstrokes are bolder but very well controlled to show the different rich colours, carefully outlining the edges of each fruit and its colour. The brushstrokes are also used to focus the lighting effect and also helping to create the necessary softness. The fruits rest well in the tray basket.

Overview – Still Life

Still life is defined as a collection of inanimate objects, which are either man-made or natural, that are arranged together in a desired and defined manner. Still life art has been in existence through the ages and can be undertaken today within the influence of the various styles of art that exist ranging from realism to abstract and can be studied across the centuries, each of which produced unique pieces by various artists which are still cherished today.

The study of still life is essential by virtue of its nature; it gives the artist the opportunity to refine his or her painting skill by exploring essential art elements that he or she is already familiar with. These are such as colour relationships, composition and spatial

arrangement, proportions, light effects, textures and detailing. On the essence of Still-life as it applies to the development of individual skill, Giuroiu (2019) observes;

A decent understanding of Still Life acts as a catalyst in the transformation of even the most mundane objects into an artwork, based on the capabilities of artists. Also, this form of art notably enriches the skill sets of the painter or sketcher.

The still life pieces featured in this paper show that the student artists have a fundamental understanding and skill of how to paint a still life. However, as expected, they still need to further refine many factors including compositional elements, utilisation of colour and consideration of backgrounds, perspective and application of lighting effects. This is recognised as a way of enhancing their personal style that they wish to apply in other genres of art. Giuroiu concludes:

Additionally, through Still Life paintings, artists have a free hand in the composition of the scene which, in turn, makes room for experimentation and improvisation.

CATEGORY 2: OUTDOOR STUDIES



Plate 7: Onguti Stella (2019)
Watercolours – 50 x 70 cm

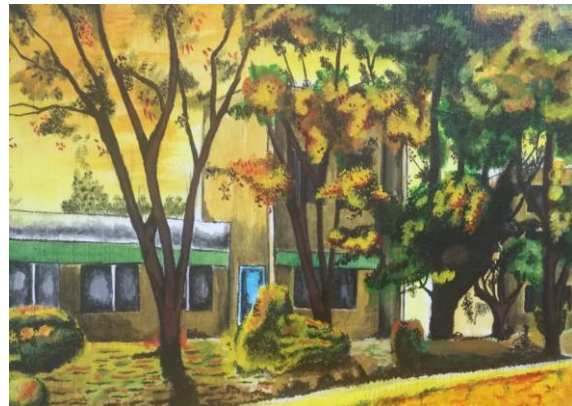


Plate 8: Warurua, Wainaina (2019)
Acrylics on canvas – 50 x 70 cm

The painting of the department (*Plate 7*) is an almost impulsive study of a section of the departmental buildings. The painting captures the whitewash on the buildings and the reflecting shadow lines showing the bright mid-morning sunlight. One can make out the mid-morning time of day because of the straight falling shadows as the one beneath the car. Use of colour tones is evident including the variety of green tones differentiating the various trees in the background and on the green hedge in the foreground. The student artist captures the vivid colours of the environment including the clear sky and the green of the hedges and trees. The buildings are placed in perspective with neatly executed edges that show a keen study of the nature of the buildings themselves. The perspective helps to create the illusion of depth from the tarmac in the foreground, down to the parked car and beyond into the distance.

In *Plate 8*, the student artist captures the sunset colours composed mainly of oranges and yellows. The sky in the background suggests the intense but diminishing brilliance of the sun which is the source of illumination. He uses bold brushstrokes to show the fallen leaves as well as the leaves and branches of the trees. Most notable is the illumination emanating from the strong sunset rays that reflect upon one object against another, including the leaves of the trees, which is consistent with impressionist tendencies. This painting also captures the study of the building located behind the trees which also shows the application of perspective and ultimately depicts the illusion of depth. The painting also uses shadows and dark tones, particularly on the trees and around the buildings to create the necessary contrasts that aid both illumination and depth. The painting suggests that the environment is captured spontaneously as a passing moment before the sun diminishes into the horizon.



Plate 9: Kindiga Joseph (2019)
Watercolour– 50 x 70 cm

The painting (*Plate 9*) captures the outdoor environment with refreshing detail that seems to be spontaneous and a studious reference to



Plate 10: Kariuki Alex (2019)
Watercolour – 50 x 70 cm

the environment. The student artist paints the textural details of the immediate scenery around a natural pond including the foliage and

the sprouting flowers. He captures the reflection on the water and introduces life in the form of a bird that appears to be a grey heron. The utilisation of the effect of sunlight is evident in the illumination of the right side of the painting which is also reflected on the trees in the foreground. Colour is used as it appears in the environment with the light blue of the sky, and greens and yellows accompanied by a variety of tones that help to map out the spatial arrangement; for example, the painting is demarcated in about four strata each of which is outlined by a dark tone.

In *Plate 10*, the painting depicts the use of prominent shadows and utilisation of the effect of sunlight as it appears in the time of day to illuminate the outdoor environment. This illumination reflects the natural manner in which the sunlight permeates across the real environment which the student artist then captures with ardent accuracy. He uses colour as it manifests in the scenery showing tones of greens, sprinkled with the purple of the leaves on the trees as well as the naturalistic light blue

sky. The colour tones are well studied, each one placed to describe an aspect of the environment as well as enhancing the sense of spatial arrangement. Perspective is used to create the illusion of depth as described by the pathway, the placement of diminishing trees and the distant fence. The application of textures is evident in all the greenery, particularly visible in the grass in the foreground and on the concrete pathway. The holistic painting captures the spirit of the moment as the painter ventures outdoors and paints in the park in the freshness of the morning sunlight.

These two paintings depict the major factors that underscore impressionist style outdoor painting. They depict spontaneity and the need to capture the beauty of the moment. The use of natural sunlight and the tendency for the light to reflect upon surrounding objects is a major characteristic. The use of bold shadows particularly in morning scenes helps create a sense of freshness which is consistent with the depiction of nature as a social experience.



Plate 11: Karani Mwandiki (2019)
Watercolours – 50 x 70 cm



Plate 12: Adwar, Choni (2019)
Watercolours – 50 x 70 cm

The painting (*Plate 11*) captures the outdoor environment in a simple and apt way with the choice and application of natural colours mixed in a variety of tones. Tones help distinguish the various aspects of the environment such as the different trees, shades of grass and suggest the solidity and roundness of all objects featured. The student artist also uses tonal contrasts to depict shadows as well as the surrounding areas that have light shining on them, depicting the effect of sunlight. The painting shows the clear application of perspective shown vividly by the diminishing effect of the line of trees, effectively helping to create the illusion of depth. The clear sky is well executed with realistic tones of blue and soft suggestion of clouds. The student artist executes the painting utilising suggested details rather than minute details, a style that captures the entirety of the scenery with admirable softness but still capturing the moment. This is a place you want to take a walk.

In a close-up study of a scenery around a pond (*Plate 12*) the student artist captures the lushness of the greenery around the pond including the wide leaves of the money plant, the overlapping effect of which he studies in great detail. In order to achieve this effect, he uses a variety of tones of green and yellow-green as well as dark tones to underscore the deep undergrowth and intertwined foliage. Textural effects on the leaves are applied using visible brushstrokes, the holistic effect of which makes the leaves become the focus of the painting. In the foreground, he studies the water and depicts the resultant reflection of surrounding foliage and the sky colour creating the closed-in effect of a pond scene. In both paintings, it is evident how light is used to reflect upon trees in the foreground as well as

the rest of the background with other trees that diminish into the horizon bearing the same illuminative effect

These two pieces are outdoor paintings done *en Plein air* meaning the deliberate choice to work outdoors ‘in the open air’ for the purpose of capturing the essence of the landscape. This practice was popularised by French impressionists who sought to exploit the qualities of natural light, particularly its ephemeral characteristics. Their work, hence, constantly featured the effect of light shining upon objects. The two paintings clearly depict impressionist qualities in their use of sunlight from three usual sources of illumination; the sun itself, the illuminated blue sky and reflected light from illuminated objects. All these are visible in each of the paintings which are indicative of the influence of outdoor illuminative effects. Other visible related qualities include the depiction of essential natural details, colours, textures, perspectives and still-water reflections all culminating in an effect that is both spontaneous and refreshing.

Overview – Outdoor Painting

The approach or the style depicted in the outdoor paintings depicts a very striking similarity, with the student artists seemingly guided by and applying the same basic principles of outdoor painting. It is also observable that these principles are themselves, by and large, influenced by impressionist characteristics or tendencies. The impressionist sought to depict the artist’s perceptual impression which they would then project to the viewer or the beholder, rather than to recreate details of natural reality as seen by the artist. Hence when their style came to the fore in the 19th century, impressionists made a

distinct deviation from the realistic style as it was known at the time. They recognised details but were not interested in their naturalistic minuteness; they were more interested in the perceptual impression. In terms of outdoor painting, impressionists preferred painting *en plein air* which featured exuberant brushwork and sought to capture passing moments. Caves (2015) notes that “Impressionists aimed to capture the momentary, fleeting effect of a scene on the eye, especially the effects of light”. Another hallmark of this painting style was the utilisation of natural light and the reflection of colours from one object to another as well as the use of shadows. They mainly painted landscapes and scenes of everyday life, particularly rural life.

In examining the work of the student artists, done mostly in watercolour, one in acrylics, it can be determined that by working outdoors, they show evidence of interaction with natural light, trying to capture the transient effects of sunlight on one hand, and the effect of colours as they manifest themselves on the other. They also show evidence of working to capture the moment by attempting to visually describe all the components of the scenery and how, for instance, light illuminates upon all these components. The paintings, however, show the influence of an element of naturalism which is itself regarded as having a close association with *en Plein air* painting. Close examination of some of the paintings (Plates 9, 12) shows some close attention to naturalistic detail which suggests some post-outdoor studio work to give a little more finish to the paintings. Others show spontaneity and softness suggesting that

they were worked on and finished on the scene while at the same time capturing the natural environment, the natural light, the colours, the shadows and objects in a manner that the beholder wants to be present, to sit in the scene. (Plates 8, 10, and 11)

The significance attached to student artists engaging in the outdoor painting can be therefore be seen from the perspective of it being essential in the growth of their personal styles. A personal style develops over a period of time and requires continuous refining. When one is exposed to the use of natural light and how it applies upon subject matter, it becomes engrained irrespective of the genre of painting. This applies too to the use of colours; the observation of colours as they manifest themselves in a natural outdoor setting helps one to internalise their nature and qualities and subsequently how they can be applied or manipulated. The observance of rich textures and use of tones and shadows also helps to consolidate personal style; hence this paper postulates that outdoor painting is a key enhancer of personal style. It is also important to note that styles are dynamic; even impressionists who loved to paint *en plein air* had their own deviations; some were inclined towards an element of naturalism in their work while others shifted completely away from realism and detail. If the student artist wishes to pursue a counter effect upon the application of these outdoor artistic cues, as exemplified, for instance, in the work of Van Gogh, then they add impetus to their personal style which is ultimately, the idea.

CATEGORY 3 – PORTRAITURE



Plate 13: Mwangi, Paul Kimani (2019)
'Lost in my thoughts'
Oil on canvas 90 x 70 cm

The immediate reaction to the portrait *lost in my thoughts* (Plate 13) is not a celebration of physical likeness, but a 'feeling' of deep thought or perhaps despair. The portrait depicts a feeling of momentary reflection; the closed eyes and the pose with the chin resting on the palm of the hands. The student artist uses bold brushstrokes, working quickly to capture the facial expression. He uses light and dark tones to create contrasts that in turn help to illuminate certain parts of the portrait. This illumination focuses on the face, hands and shoulders. Other notable factors include the elongated fingers that are deliberately used to underscore the pose and, by extension, the feeling of despair. The posture of the subject in such portraiture is often important in aiding the portrayal of



Plate 14: Thuo, Nyambura Victoria (2019)
'Cheekiness of ageing'
Acrylics on canvas 90 x 70 cm

demeanour; in this portrait, one shoulder is raised above the other giving it a somewhat angled tilt which props up the hand to support the chin.

The portrait of an old woman, *cheekiness of ageing* (Plate 14) shows the use of bright colours as well as digital or pop art portraiture influence to emphasise facial movement and facial expression. The portrait still shows an element of likeness or identifiable imagery since it can be developed from a photograph as a base; but suggested details and textures are shown through dots, colour contours and contrasts as shown on her face and fingers. This portrait succeeds in bringing out the expression of extreme amusement or inquisitive

cheekiness on the face of the old woman. Dark tones are used to create very sharp contrasts which when placed next to the bright colours creates the desired illuminative effect. This type of portraiture is meant for quick, spontaneous, expressive facial communication

and not like the studious classical paintings which require the viewer to linger around to study eyes, posture and demeanour, likeness, and other compositional factors to try and decipher what the face is all about and whether the message might be.



Plate 15: Yonga, Norbert (2019)
 ‘Portrait of innocent boy’
 Theme: Purity of heart
 Acrylics on canvas 80 x 60 cm



Plate 16: Yonga Norbert (2019)
 ‘Girl of my dreams’
 Theme: Beauty
 Acrylics on canvas 80 x 60 cm

In the *portrait of an innocent boy* (Plate 15), the student artist captures the feeling of absolute innocence of the boy; this is done through the careful study of the facial profile bringing out the age-old features of youthfulness through which innocence permeates. These are characterised by the chubby cheeks, large eyes, small rounded nose, large forehead, little tender lips and large head comparative to the neck. The student artist uses a variety of tones and contrasts to create

roundness and childlike softness, as well as focusing light on illuminating the face. The brushstrokes are used to create a smooth skin tone and complexion as well as textures on the hair and hairline. The stare of innocence is vivid in the boy and is testimony that portraits do communicate a subtle meaning which though unspoken, is hard to ignore; what is the child telling the viewer *beyond* his innocent face? Is it possible that we can delve or peer into the purity of youth; and by extension,

purity of virgin character? This could be likely possible because unlike the controversy of an adult sitter's face, a child's face bears no danger of the Enigma of hidden character.

In *'Girl of my dreams'* (Plate 16), the student artist paints the portrait of a young African woman adorned with a head wrap. This is a regular size portrait reaching just below the neck. Subsequently, he concentrates almost exclusively on the face, embellished only with the head wrap upon which he carefully overlaps the folds to depict the wrap. He uses bright African colours that blend with the background and surprisingly omits any ornamentation. He uses light to illuminate particular parts of the face and body and applies brushstrokes to

create a smooth, soft skin effect that underscores both youthfulness and beauty. The eyes pierce sharply and the lips are upright signifying a 'royal-like' image of beauty and poise. The portrait raises the pertinent matter of what portraits often portray, against the 'intent' of the artist and whether it is possible to extract the character and personality of the subject from the painted image. The artist perhaps only intended to depict *his* fascination with the perceived 'beauty' of the girl of his dreams and that the subject herself is only a passive participant. It can also be argued that in the process of creating the portrait, the artist may have inadvertently brought out a glimpse into the 'content of personality' that the subject wishes to project.



Plate 17: Wachira, Elvis (2019)
'Girl with Afro'
Theme: Beauty
Acrylics on canvas 90 x 70 cm

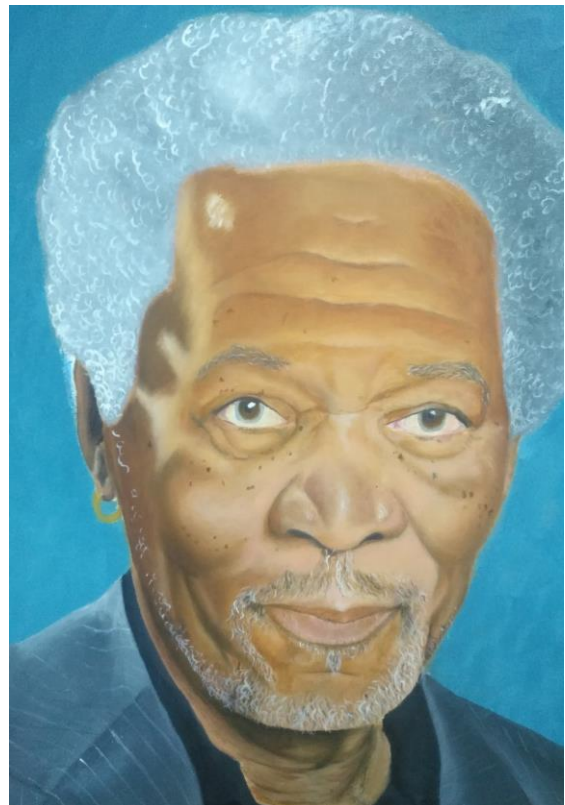


Plate 18: Kosgei, Lorna (2019)
'Morgan Freeman'
Theme: Fantasy

Girl with Afro (Plate 17) captures the era of the famous Afro hairstyle which was a major reference for popular culture in the 1960s and the 1970s that signified black pride. Bearing significant political and cultural symbolism among the African American community, it reached Africa more of a fashion statement rather than a symbol of defiance, although it has been argued that in the immediate post-colonial period, it still bore political/cultural connotations among African people. The portrait, influenced by African-impressionist portraiture captures the basic details of the subject that denotes African beauty; the oversize Afro hair, the large bright eyes, well-defined nose and lips with purple lipstick as well as the subject's beauty pose. The surge of the concept of beauty depicted on the portrait by the lipstick, loose hanging strap top, round ring earrings as well as the Afro hairstyle itself was synonymous with the sense of freedom and rejuvenation of the youth in the immediate post-colonial period in the late 1960s and

1970s. This is also the period that lipsticks and other symbols of beauty became widespread.

In the portrait of *Morgan Freeman (Plate 17)*, the student artist captures the main physical features that describe the famous actor's face that makes it instantly recognisable. She captures the intriguing mild smile which although does not readily emanate from the lips, permeates through the face making the actor simultaneously serious yet seemingly possessing great candour. She also captures the penetrating stare strengthened by facial contours and detailing. The artist also uses a variety of tones, contrasts and shadows as well as the effect of light falling upon parts of the face; all impressionist characteristics. The textural rendering of the hair is suggestive of soft grey hair. The poise of the portrait creates the impression of a man of great character and personality, a controversial yet lingering quality of portraiture that is used effectively here.

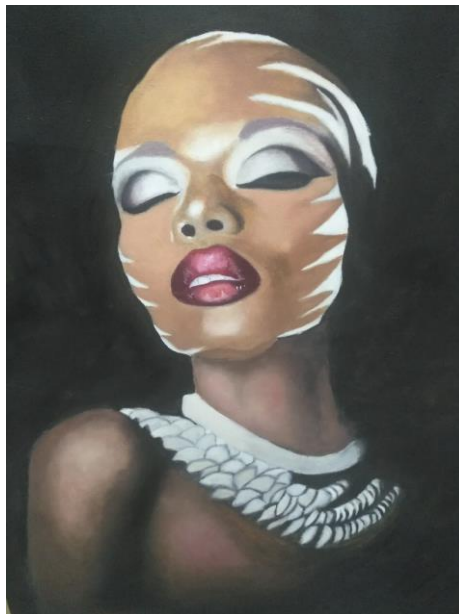


Plate 19: Kosgei, Lorna (2019)
'Images of my fantasy'
Theme: Fantasy



Plate 20: Self- portrait -unsigned (2017)
'Moment of Reflection'
Theme: Reflection

Images of my fantasy (Plate 19) underscore the kind of portraiture that emanates from the subconscious mind or in some cases the unconscious mind; in this case, as the title alludes to, fantasy. Images flow in one's mind and one attempts to capture those images. Subsequently, this subject is neither a sitter nor a regular self-portrait. This may explain the chiaroscuro lighting effect; very dark background and the illuminative effect on the subject herself underscoring the illusion of fantasy. The posture and expression on the face are dreamlike yet realistic and descriptive, but the white marks and decorations are removed from the norm. Is the student artist depicting what she sees when she removes herself from the realm of reality and makes reference to the subconscious world? Or could this imagery be indeed a glimpse into her unconscious mind through the manifest content of her dreams? Whatever the underlying motivation, the portrait underscores an interesting angle of analysis and raises questions on the role of some forms of portraiture.

In the self-portrait (*Plate 20*), the student artist uses bold brush strokes to apply colour and creates a compelling study of the face with the use of a variety of colour tones and reflecting light. The facial details are well studied and executed; the slightly elongated face, the cheekbone highlighted by a spot of shining light and the tight lips all help to create a serious demeanour that is expressive of deep reflection. The posture of the subject as well as the depiction of such details as the folds on the jacket and tying up of the unruly hair with a scarf, all contribute to the poise of the portrait that, however, helps to focus attention on the face itself. The striking aspect of this portrait and indeed its hallmark is the 'stare of

reflection', the distant look into yonder as if seeking answers to a deeply personal dilemma.

Overview- Portraiture

The *Morgan freeman* portrait (Plate 18) raises the question again about the purpose of portraiture; do portraits tell stories or are they mere embellishments on a picture plane? Is their purpose to just depict the physical likeness of a subject or do they delve into the 'character' and 'personality' of the subject? What role does the artist play and what self-image would the subject wish to be projected, and ultimately what is the uptake of the viewer? In analysing this portrait, the execution of the basic details that define the likeness of the subject suggests that the student artist 'internalised' the key elements that define this likeness and that the subject's facial expression and posture is part of the student artist's fascination with this individual. (The actor Morgan Freeman). It is possible to decipher the circumstances of a portrait, and it is possible to arrive at some degree of human interpretation of a portrait that provides insight into the personality and psychology of the subject. It should be acknowledged, however, that a portrait is an image, not a 'reality' so the interpretation can only be embedded within the realm of symbolism. In this regard, therefore, there exists the likelihood of an allegorical perspective in the portrayal of character and personality in a painted portrait; but that is not a worry because the need for painted portraiture rests on another pedestal. Nairne (2006) observes, "The possibilities of allegory and complex meaning are distinct: the symbolic realm can come to the fore. The conveying of character in a painted portrait is specific and dynamic".

In the *portrait of an innocent boy* (Plate 15), the portrayal of a child's innocence is much more powerful to the viewer than the concern of the presence of allegory. Indeed, when it comes to the character of a child, allegory is not a possibility because the purity of a child's character does not allow for a hidden other-self. It can be argued that the artist's interpretation of the child's innocence is accepted as truth.

In the self-portrait *lost in my thoughts* (Plate 13), the portrait portrays more about the 'feeling' or 'mood' extracted from the face, than the presence or lack of likeness; the likeness is only a minor detail. The viewer is much more drawn to what could be behind the forlorn demeanour than whether the face bears familiarity. Indeed, not only does likeness become secondary or even redundant, the matter of personality or character is also relegated to the periphery. This paper posits that certain types of portraits do convey a specific intended message by the artist, beyond the normal pursuit of likeness or implied

personality or character. This is again evident in the self-portrait (*Plate 20*) based on the same theme of reflection.

Viewing this portrait without prior knowledge of what the artist actually looks like immediately de-emphasises this factor, since the appreciation of the execution of physical likeness is no longer of primary importance. What then becomes important, in its place, is what the portrait portrays and what the artist seeks to portray. This portrait has a face that is very well executed and is probably a fitting self-likeness; but does it portray a feeling of reflection as per the theme? Does the artist seek to portray his or her feelings through this facial self-likeness? It can be assumed that through the portrayal of facial demeanour, in this case, the distant stare as well as the posture, the artist 'intended' to portray a 'feeling' of an inner emotion as a means of self-expression, much more than the desire for the physical likeness of self.

CATEGORY 3 – GENERAL THEMES



Plate 21: Kamau, James (2019)

'Shining path of romance'

Theme: Love

Acrylics on canvas – 60 x 80 cm



Plate 22: Jerono Cynthia (2019)

'Demons in my mind'

Theme: Torment

Acrylics on canvas 70 x 50 cm

In the *shining path of Romance* (Plate 21), the student artist paints using warm intense colours; mostly reds and yellows with brilliant illumination towards the point of convergence at the centre of the picture plane. The impressionist effect of light spreads outwards, illuminating the surface and the trees. The trees themselves bear tones of black that enhance contrast and aid illumination. The brushstrokes are bold and spontaneous and depth is created by the use of linear perspective created by the trees and street lights which depict the shining path. The student artist paints two distant figures, a man and a woman, in the middle of the composition, placing them at the centre of the illumination, hence underscoring the title of the painting. The warmth of the illumination, therefore, is akin to the warmth of love in which the couple basks.



Plate 23: Ijai, Fridah (2019)
'Curious bird'
 Theme: Nature
 Oils on canvas 80 x 60 cm

In *demons in my mind* (Plate 22), the student artist paints a bold semi-abstract painting using geometrical shapes modelled into screaming ghost-like faces that denote torment. The painting depicts a tormented figure with hands placed against the head as if to shield himself or herself from the torment. The artist uses cold colours; purples, greens and blues as well as dull browns that all entangle the yellow/orange and pink figurine to denote the relentless suffering. This painting is influenced by a geometric abstraction which is usually characterised by simple geometric forms placed in non-illusionistic space and bearing non-representational images. The student artist, however, does not utilise pure geometric forms but instead introduces an element of facial representation such that human-like facial forms can be identified.



Plate 24: Unsigned
'Focus of the wandering eye'
 Theme: Femininity
 Acrylics on canvas 80 x 60 cm

The *curious bird* (Plate 23) is a realistic study of a bird. The student artist takes time to paint the bird perched on loose hanging strands of foliage in order to study textural effects, colour and tones. She captures the shape of the bird accurately and uses different brushstrokes to study the varying textures from the stiff crown, the soft belly feathers to the more brittle wing and tail feathers. The highlight of the painting is its style. She uses a chiaroscuro lighting effect with a plain dark background that contrast it sharply with the illumination focused on the centre of interest. The painting confines itself to nature and is not a social commentary but is testimony to the variety of subject matter that fascinates student artists.

In *'focus of the wandering eye* (Plate 24), the student artist exploits the theme of femininity by painting the back view of a three-quarter size female figure. This is certainly a deliberate choice of pose with the intention of depicting the thoroughly African feminine profile, greatly emphasised by the impressionist use of

illuminative natural light. The student artist then focuses the light on the woman's buttocks, arms, shoulders and the strand of an elongated hairpiece. He then applies colours and a variety of tones, including very dark tones, to create sharp contrasts creating depth into which the woman strides. The figure defies normal composition; shows no face, fades out the hands and cuts out the body from the knees downwards. This also appears deliberate to completely focus attention on what the student artist must ostensibly consider being the 'epitome' of femininity. The painting-like most impressionist female figure portraiture captures its essence by focused illumination upon a pertinent area, to draw attention to that particular area or spot (like in the work of Edward Alfred Cucuel *et al.*) and hence the mystery of its title; where, indeed, does the focus of the wandering eye lie? The painting itself is developed as portraiture and hence there is a fair share of physical referencing to a figure of interest.



Plate 25: Manyala Baraka John (2019)
'Feeling blue'
Theme: Emotions
Acrylics on canvas 80 x 60 cm



Plate 26: (2019)
'A woman of all seasons'
Theme: Beauty
Acrylics on canvas 80 x 60cm

In the painting *'Feeling blue'* (Plate 25) the student depicts a woman with body completely submerged in water in apparent momentary bliss; depicted by her peaceful face and the gentle grasping of her fingers as if in prayer. She feels blue in this place but ironically, it is also the place of her comfort. The different colours on her face are perhaps testimony to her experiences or tribulations and the rest of the blues and purples are cool and peaceful. The student artist writes;

It's a piece about a lady in her own world, her universe; the blue background representing a place she's stuck in, as it also symbolises a place she has grown fond of despite her loneliness. The different colours representing situations and feelings she has experienced.

The semi-abstract painting (Plate 26) shows a female seated figure, hardly abstracted but

rather compartmentalised with lines, shapes and colours, which then show her in multiple intertwined angles, showing her many facets. The combination of both warm and cool colours is perhaps indicative of her personal contradictions, her highs and lows; indeed, a woman of all seasons. The student artist writes;-

She does not want to be flattered; to hear that she is flawless. All she wants is to be appreciated, to hear that she is loved regardless of her flaws. She equates herself to a beautiful but broken piece of pottery, cobbled back together by her own hands; and yet a critical world judges her on account of her cracks while missing the beauty of her original creation. There is nothing neither rarer nor more beautiful than a woman being herself, unapologetically comfortable in her own skin. That's the true essence of beauty.



Plate 27: Gikuma Daniel Gatuni (2019)
'Three faces'
Theme: self- Identity
Acrylics on canvas – 60 x 80 cm



Plate 28: Dennis Kamau (2019)
'Enigma of identity'
Theme: Self- Identity
Acrylics on canvas – 80 x 60 cm

The student artist sums up his painting “The Japanese say you have three faces. The first face you show to the world. The second face is the one your mother knows and the third face is the one which reflects who you are”. The semi-abstract painting *three faces (Plate 27)* utilises elongated geometrical shapes to depict the three faces that are also intertwined to depict their inextricable relationship since they are, in essence, indissoluble. None of the faces can vacate its space since they are faces of the same compositional character. The student artist’s work here is influenced by Geometric abstraction, an abstract sub-genre which according to Dabrowski (2004) is based on the use of simple geometric forms placed in non-illusionistic space and combined into non-objective compositions. The artist, however, provides a window through which one can make out the faces and peer into their wary expression; he does this by using distinct colours and suggesting the eyes and lips in an almost quasi-cubist manner, which however breaks its complete abstraction.

In *Enigma of identity (Plate 28)*, the student artist depicts two young women walking together, perhaps with a little suggestion of hesitation, leaning upon each other in the form of mutual camaraderie. Security cameras or lenses are mounted in place of their heads, focused upon different directions as if scanning the surrounding. The fact that they are young women implies that they are the subjects of focus in the inquiry constituted by the artist. The painting aptly raises the matter of their personal identity; who exactly could they be? Without heads and facial features that ordinarily give identity, then they are indeed devoid of human and individual identity, both physical and spiritual. This is analogical of real

human beings who despite possessing real heads and identifiable features, do not comprehend or appreciate who they are. The student artist may have intended to direct this analogy towards young women in particular as a ‘lamentation’ emanating from different scenarios. Could it be that young women, in certain circumstances behave in such a manner as to suggest a total eclipse of their identity? Is it possible that they could walk in such naivety and exist in a bubble completely devoid of self-realisation? The painting is suggestive of surrealistic influence combining aspects of realism and absurdity; with dull background colours that direct the viewer solely to the subject matter.

Overview – General Themes

In the realm of creating paintings through imaginative composition and dealing with the exploration of themes, student artists may adopt various approaches mainly based on the conscious mind, the subconscious mind or even the unconscious mind.

In the *shining path of romance (Plate 21)*, the student artist expresses her notion of the warmth of love. She utilises bright warm colours set in a surreal environment, only upon which such heavenly light falls, illuminating the path upon which the couple trends into infinite romantic bliss. She tells the story of the shining path of romance which seemingly must bring nothing but joy. Such paintings are extracts from often vivid dreamlike imagery born of fantasy; but also, more importantly perhaps, of moments of ‘nostalgic ecstasy’, which means that they bear a specific inspirational source. This source is an occurrence, an event or an experience so profound that it becomes ingrained in one’s

subconscious mind, only to manifest itself at some point as passing imagery. It is probable that this is the reason for the impressionist style of this painting since the artist sought to capture the imagery of the couple; the shining light and the array of colours as they all flashed through the mind. It is an important avenue for highly individualistic, deeply personal self-expression, the genesis of which the artist may or may not feel the obligation to divulge.

In *Enigma of identity (Plate 28)* the student artist demonstrates his fascination with, and hence inquiry into, the essence of identity and the persistence of its Enigma. The painting itself with its surrealism is testimony to this Enigma. Such a painting is open to a number of interpretations. Barret (1994) observes that no single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork. Are these two female figures with CCTV cameras in place of their heads being watched or watching others? Are they fervently searching for their lost identity and why do they hold onto each other? For comfort? There must be a motivation behind this inquiry, a channel of thought towards some degree of societal truth to which the two figures are an analogy to. In this regard, the student artist is hence expressing a query in his mind most likely consequent upon observing an equally enigmatic occurrence, tendency or behaviour. This is consistent with Eisner's (2000) finding that through art, students learn the process of putting ideas and expressions into a form or creation.

In *a woman of all seasons (Plate 26)* the artists adopt an ekphrastic approach and describe the core of the painting poetically; 'She equates herself to a beautiful but broken piece of

pottery, cobbled back together by her own hands.'

As observed in the analytical framework, an ekphrastic approach can be applied where a poetic transcription lends meaning to a painting or the painting itself inspires a poetic interpretation. The poetic analogy emanating from the artist is testimony to the prior thoughtfulness and emotional engagement applied to this abstract painting which subsequently inspired the subject matter.

The abstract painting *three faces (Plate 27)* delves into the Enigma of a human character using the analogy of three faces each of which denotes a different version of the self. The student artist uses a simple Japanese saying as a catalyst to inquiry into the transient nature of human character; *which face is the real you?*

In the paintings *demons in my mind (Plate 22)* and *feeling blue (Plate 25)*, the student artists demonstrate degrees of emotional engagement with their paintings. As highlighted in the introduction this is consistent with emotional development and the ability to manage feelings and emotions and covert these to meaningful thoughts which in turn, aid self-awareness through self-expression. This phenomenon is, of course, not confined to students alone and occurs among people and manifests particularly in creative environments.

CONCLUSION

Still-life composition

It is noted that student artists have the fundamental skill to paint still life compositions but depending on the style that they wish to pursue in their later artistic career, they need to keep refining their pieces. Still life

study is already recognised as one of the disciplines in art that greatly help in the development and refinement of personal style in painting. In addition, since they are still students at the university, they can use the time and opportunity to embark on further experimentation with various media and techniques in still life painting as part of their growth in order to consolidate their personal style. This is no different from other areas since the development of personal style is not static; it is dynamic.

Outdoor painting

It is noted that the students' watercolour pieces are painted by different individuals; hence they are independently generated and executed. Although they were all done outdoors, they seem to underscore remarkable similarity in the overall stylistic approach that follows an impressionist tendency, seen through the use of the sunlight and its illuminative effect. Since the students worked independent of each other, it is a notable and significant occurrence, that they were each observing and being influenced by the same cues from the environment or from the landscapes that they were referencing. This means that irrespective of their own individual style that perhaps would manifest differently in another artistic undertaking, their work in this outdoor environment is interestingly similar in execution and observance of the artistic cues emanating from their respective landscapes. It can be concluded, therefore, that outdoor painting or *en plein air* bears significant influence upon the individual style of a student artist when the artist observes and applies the artistic cues in a naturalistic way without a 'counter' effect of distortion. Hence the application of naturalistic colours, use of the

illuminative effect of light, reflections on water, shadows, textures and tones are bound to manifest themselves accordingly as refinements to their personal styles, the extent to which may vary from one individual to another.

Portraiture

Even in the digital age and deep into the age of photography there still exists an inextricable relationship between the subject and the artist in portraiture, a form of intensity that survived the onslaught of photography and still flourishes today. Nairne (2006) sums it up:-

There is a process described through paint - an intensity to the relationship between artist and sitter - which produces a different character from the medium of photography. And it is this intensity, often freed from the conventions of previous periods which, gives a great portrait its authority. The painted portrait endures.

Student artists have demonstrated in this paper that they possess the capacity to use portraiture to convey the desired message, whether about the portrayal of a child's innocence or the beauty of an African woman, in a manner that is consistent with and unique to this medium. Subsequently, it can be concluded that because of this intensity of the relationship between the artist and subject, as is evident in each of the pieces featured, painted portraiture remains not only necessary but essential in the development of personal style among students.

General thematic compositions

In the examination of paintings that bear certain thematic foundations, student artists have demonstrated in this paper that they have

attained a level of interpretive capability that is indicative of their thoughtfulness and insightfulness in approaching themes and constructing subject matter. It can be concluded, therefore, that they bear the impetus to generate engaging artistic ideas as a direct result of their interpretive capability as it manifests currently. Since this capability is developed as they also grow their intellect, gain knowledge and refine their personal style, it is assumed that they will only become better in addressing the myriad of issues that confront them, in an artistically profound manner. It can also be concluded that student artists can process wide-ranging issues from those that they observe and internalise around them to those that are of a personal nature. Painting then becomes an important avenue for self-expression not only for academic purposes but for self-fulfilment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Still-life composition

Still life composition painting always provides a very good opportunity for students to practice and refine their painting skills without undue pressure of quick results because they are often in control; they can even choose what to paint and how to arrange it, they can choose to challenge themselves. This means that it is a good avenue for experimentation and development of personal style. One can try out techniques and styles and eventually apply them in other types of paintings as an integral part of their style. It is, therefore, recommended that students try out still life compositions both in and outside the classroom or studios, where they can set up their own still life compositions and experiment with many types of media, items, objects and lighting effects. Painting

drapery, for example, is a good way to practice painting regalia and clothes on painted forms; studying lighting effects is a good way of gaining skill on how to handle other types of paintings like portraiture or landscapes. Still life is also very useful in the study of details, colour relationships and compositional layouts. In order to refine their painting style, all these experimentations should be done with the supervision of the lecturer in order to identify consistencies.

Outdoor painting

As observed in the conclusion, outdoor landscape, nature or environmental painting particularly painting in plain air, is crucial for the development and/or refinement of individual style depending on the stage the student is at. Students should be encouraged to work outdoors in selected sessions to provide them with a first-hand opportunity to interact with the effects of natural sunlight and in particular its ephemeral nature. They will also be able to better apply other elements and principles as directly observed from a natural landscape setting including colours, textures, tones, perspectives, shadows and all aspects of detailing. In this regard students should not be encouraged merely to work with photographs since that makes them revert to working indoors in their rooms or studios, reversing the earlier objective.

Portraiture

As is evident that each student artist shows competence in his or her quest to convey not only a representational likeness of the subject but to also delve into the interpretive realm of portraiture; that is, to capture the character and personality of the subject. Students, therefore,

should be encouraged to pursue portraiture in whichever sub-genre that they subscribe to and be allowed to paint portraiture in accordance with the motivation they build. They should be given the opportunity to explore styles and media, to enjoy the satisfaction of building likenesses, to immerse themselves into the challenges of interpretation as well as expressing themselves through self-portraiture. Often student artists are micro-guided, at times steered away from formative individual exploration and growth, particularly if they are initially perceived to be poor at accurate representational work.

Other General Themes

As has been observed, student artists already bear the impetus to interpret themes and construct subject matter in a way that is quite refreshing and engaging. In order to consolidate this gain, they need to grow both intellectually and emotionally since this is a continuous process; it neither ceases nor diminishes. This means that apart from the regular knowledge and skills they acquire they have to be further engaged in terms of approaches to theme interpretation and derivation of the subject matter. It is therefore recommended that regular discussions be held about pertinent current affairs and matters that affect communities and the society at large. These help to spur thoughtfulness and help students develop an analytical and rational mind. They should also be encouraged to engage each other in various supervised fora on issues that are of concern to them personally and collectively as a means towards opening channels of self-expression. This is best done through class sessions that are intertwined with critiquing their presented pieces because this

provides the best opportunity to address themes as they emerge and capture the students' full attention as they respond to and address their own work. This is important because as has been seen in this paper, paintings can be highly expressive of issues that emanate from the self.

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