Tushauriane – Let’s Talk About It, 2013.
Sheet metal, steel wire and fabric, 229 x 214 cm.

Routes of Migration, 2015.
Sheet metal, steel wire, poultry wire and fabric, 244 x 224 cm.
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Gerard Houghton. Naomi, could you begin by describing your journey from a small Kenyan village to becoming a major contemporary artist living in the United States today.

Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga. Well, I was born in Gacharage, a small rural village, in Kenya, outside Nairobi, where I spent the first years of my life. Because my mother taught at the local school, my grandmother would look after me. However, she didn’t ‘baby-sit’ me in the western sense of watching me inside the house all day; everywhere she went - to her garden or the farm, to pick coffee - I went along with her. Thus, although we never called it ‘art,’ I was introduced to art at a very young age. The village women would paint their bodies gently back to join the earth again. I realised that each new-born baby’s cord, to the huge baskets that brides receive as wedding gifts, and the ropes that finally lower the ropes of woven wire, they’ve become a signature component of your work.

G.H. Tell me about these ‘mabati’ and how, alongside the ‘string’ pieces of woven wire, you’ve become a signature component of your work.

N.W.G. In East Africa, mabati just means galvanized sheet metal, or ‘corrugated iron’. During the ‘60s and ‘70s the grass roofs on houses were gradually replaced with mabati. For many families this was an important marker of modernity and ‘Mabati Women’s Groups’ were organised by women in the villages to help finance the whole community’s transition. I witnessed my grandmother and her friends, deciding they’d had enough of thatch, installing mabati roofs on their houses and granaries. One immediate benefit of the sheet-metal roofing was being able to harvest rainwater. In post-Independence Kenya (after 1963) there was less time available to the women. Given the new cash-driven economy, the men had gone away to Nairobi in search of jobs. This left many women on their own, with children, trying to manage everything while still tending the main cash crops of coffee, tea, pyrethrum, etc. For the women, installing mabati roofs freed them from the constant chore of having to go looking for water. As a child shadowing my grandmother I saw all this going on, and also noticed how, a few years later, the weathered mabati looked totally different from when it was new.

Those childhood memories, reawakened by the Texan environment, inspired me to introduce mabati into my current practice. The single aspect of my practice over which I have no control at all is that of allowing the mabati to be transformed by chance weathering processes. I must collaborate with the aleatory effects created by the weather’s unpredictable elements. Depending on whether it rains or shines, whether as real string or as the stainless steel wire I use to link my mabati together today. When I eventually emerged from graduate school, I understood the connecting thread running through my entire creative process.

...For I believe that ... true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth, rooted as it is in the histories and cultures of the different peoples of the earth.¹

There was never any doubt about my path in life. Everything I’d done pointed me towards studying Art at the University of Nairobi. However, that was a completely new environment. The idealistic students were protesting about what was happening in the Kenyan government, and much time was lost, because when we’d arrive on campus the government would send us all home. In 1982, there was an attempted coup, and the students went out on the streets supporting those aiming to overthrow the government. When the coup failed, we were sent home for an entire year! Despite all the drama of student life, however, we still managed to cover all the basics: painting, photography, communication arts, etc. Given my early training with string and basket-making, I naturally gravitated towards the fibre and textile arts. After graduation I was given an Assistant Lecturer position and, eventually, the University awarded me a scholarship to pursue post-graduate studies at U.C.L.A. in California.

G.H. It must have been quite a shock to the system when you first arrived in the United States.

N.W.G. Leaving Nairobi for Los Angeles changed everything. The biggest shock was that I now needed to discover just who I was as an artist. Until then, I’d never asked myself the question, ‘What is my art about?’ But in this new environment, without any of my familiar references, everything was analysed. Professors would ask me, ‘So, what is this about?’ and wanted to know, ‘What’s your purpose?’ I’d never had to answer such questions before because, in Kenya, everyone knew exactly what I was talking about! It’s very disconcerting when suddenly no one understands what you’re trying to do and you have to dredge up answers about what it all means. But what kept coming back to me was the yard that my grandmother made. She’d taught me how to make yarn from start to finish: how to identify the shrubs; cure the shrubs; twist the threads; and use them to weave all kinds of baskets. String is woven into the intimate fabric of an African woman’s life: from the midwife’s tying of the umbilical cord, to the huge kĩondo baskets that brides receive as wedding gifts, and the ropes that finally lower her body gently back to join the earth again. I realised that my art, too, was intertwined with those yarns, constructed, deconstructed and repeatedly refashioned over many years,

¹. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Preface: Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom, Heinemann, 1993

Tuwawili - Two of us, 2015.
Sheet metal and steel wire, 264 x 51 x 25.5 cm.
develops through an irreproducible sequence of random factors. The mabati I use today comes in huge rolls. After exposing them to the elements for two or three months at least, it’s only when I bring the coils indoors and unroll them for the first time that I finally see what hidden designs have been lain down for me to explore. Unrolling them I get really excited to find all the things that have steeped in with the rain. It’s an exhilarating experience to discover the complexity of accumulated marks, lines and patterns so painstakingly traced by nature herself.

G.H. Do extraneous materials lodged in there by accident change the surface results that much?

N.W.G. Yes, they certainly do! The mabati will have been sitting there for a long time, and if there’s anything – leaves, twigs, insects – that has been trapped against the surface for some time then an imprint remains. When I open the coils and discover what’s in there it really is very humbling. That’s where my own artistic input begins. Sometimes, as with Tuwawili – Two of Us, I’ll decide to use entire rolls to emphasise the surface qualities and the textural continuities. With Redefining Boundaries, which is composed of interconnected – almost pictorial – pieces, I cut the roll into smaller sections. Unrolling that coil, some parts were really dark while others remained light. So composing it became an exploration of light and dark elements with intermediate tones adding subtle shades to what became just a beautiful landscape. Each weathered coil seems to suggest a particular approach, and much of the creative work subsequently depends upon sensitivity towards the serendipitous effects produced.

G.H. In this context you frequently use the word ‘landscape.’ Is there a sense in which your works map memories of real terrain or perhaps represent remembered places?

N.W.G. My work is very much influenced by the landscapes I’ve inhabited. Interestingly, the Texas Hill Country, with its steep tree-laden slopes, is similar to the landscape around where I first grew up. Then I moved to the Rift Valley, with its craters and lakes, which has some of the most awe-inspiring sights on earth. As we moved up the Rift Valley to Kitale near the Ugandan border the various terrains through which I travelled also made huge impressions. Here, in the US, I lived six years in San Francisco, situated in one of the most beautiful landscapes you could wish for, and then, the Texan countryside continually triggers memories of earlier places that surface in the works I create.

For example, Redefining Boundaries makes direct reference to the landscape around Gacharage that was full of rivers – which form natural boundaries. I remember as a five-year-old girl watching my grandfather have long discussions with his neighbours about access to the river for water. Often land adjoining the river belongs to someone, and on the other side lies someone else. So where can the women stand to draw the water they need for daily life? At the local level this becomes an issue of defining boundaries, and a real dialogue needs to take place. Often a little space on the bank is left in between a parcel of no man’s land – where the women can draw water, wash clothes, hang them to dry, bathe their children and so on, and this vital no man’s land is filled with life’s daily bustle and much creativity. If someone decides they don’t want women actively using this piece of land because it belonged to their grandmother, then the villagers need to talk things over together to solve the issue satisfactorily. There must be discussion leading to an agreement to redefine the previous boundary. We, as a community or people, have to engage in fundamental dialogues about the borders that both separate and unite us. Redefining Boundaries is very influenced by all this.

G.H. When you talk about ‘no man’s land’ you’re actually using it in a particular way to mean a privileged area used, almost exclusively, by women.

N.W.G. That’s right! It’s a space for the women. The Agikuyu woman holds her own space as an integral part of her tradition. The same idea is implicit in works like Ndumo - The Girls’ Dance, which refers to something quite special, since only women attend the Agikuyu women’s dance. All the women are present and meet together; it’s a reserved ritual space that belongs to women alone. The same thing happens in her kitchen. The space around the kitchen fireplace belongs to the Agikuyu woman. When she’s cooking, or when she’s talking about history or discussing the future, then she does so from a place that’s hers to command. Returning to that no man’s land by the river, when she meets there with her women friends and they talk together about what’s happening, the talk, the laughter, the dance, all belong to that place - and remain there. So I come from generations of Agikuyu women who are very proud of the spaces they occupy.

G.H. Can I ask about the titles you use, both for this exhibition and for many of your pieces, since western audiences won’t immediately understand them. Are they from your own language of Gikuyu?

Bridge Not Walls, 2015. Sheet metal, steel wire and poultry wire, 264 x 229 x 10 cm.
Redefining Boundaries, 2015.
Sheet metal, steel wire and paper; 231 x 216 cm.
N.W.G. Actually, Tushauriane is Swahili. I grew up, in Gacharage, speaking Gikuyu, but from first grade in school we were introduced to English. In Nakuru, a much larger town, there were people from all over Kenya, Luhyia people, Kamba people, Luo people and so on, each with their own language. So, Swahili was the common language that everyone spoke in the streets. When it comes to naming my work or exhibitions, I just go with the flow and choose titles from any of the languages I’m comfortable with: Gikuyu, Swahili or English.

I’m often asked which artists have most influenced me. The truth is, I grew up in a place where there were no museums or galleries and therefore no ‘artists’ as such. Encouragement came from my grandmother, but she wasn’t an ‘artist’ in the western sense. One major source of inspiration came from African literature and, in particular, the Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. I first read him at primary school and still love reading his work today. Very early in my career as a visual artist I decided I was going to use Gikuyu or Swahili titles for my work, and that was Ngũgĩ’s direct influence. Although he’d written many plays and novels in English, in his later work Ngũgĩ returned to his own language, Gikuyu. Devil on the Cross, was first written in Gikuyu and then translated into English, French, etc. Of course I can read Gikuyu, but without too much to read you can easily lose the facility. With Caitaani mũtharaba-ĩ (Devil on the Cross) I remember thinking, ‘Oh, come on! Do you have to stretch us like this?’ Now, however, I really appreciate the fact that Ngũgĩ consciously wrote in Gikuyu, because he wished to underline the importance of that cultural identity. He taught me to be proud of my own language; to be proud of who I am. If you have to translate it into another language; to be proud of your own language, Gikuyu.

Nearly thirty years later I moved with my young family to San Antonio, Texas. There I met a family that had been one of those expelled from Uganda. These complete strangers embraced my family, new immigrants to San Antonio; and they did everything possible to help us settle into this new land. That’s my own personal experience of immigration. It’s a complex topic and we were struggling to understand who exactly were ‘migrants’. East African Asians were descendants of the labourers brought in by the British to build the East African railway system, and who’d settled in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc. One morning we learned that Idi Amin had expelled all the Ugandan Asians. Suddenly, we saw the real meaning of the word ‘migrant’ manifest in Nakuru railway station. We saw families with babies and distraught children whose only remaining possessions were the clothes they still had on. I remember those scenes as if it were yesterday: anguished people, suddenly homeless, fleeing Uganda by train, bound for Nairobi and an alarmingly uncertain future.

As for references to immigrants in my titles, I’m not specifically talking about the present crisis as much as the idea of migrants and displaced people in general. I remember when I was at school in Nakuru in the 1970s. For some time we’d been following the worsening situation across the border in Uganda, reading the papers and talking in class about what was going on. Immigration is a complex issue and we were struggling to understand who exactly was a ‘migrant’. East African Asians were descendants of the labourers brought in by the British to build the East African railway system, and who’d settled in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc. One morning we learned that Idi Amin had expelled all the Ugandan Asians. Suddenly, we saw the real meaning of the word ‘migrant’ manifest in Nakuru railway station. We saw families with babies and distraught children whose only remaining possessions were the clothes they still had on. I remember those scenes as if it were yesterday: anguished people, suddenly homeless, fleeing Uganda by train, bound for Nairobi and an alarmingly uncertain future.

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where I’ve seen real dialogues overcoming problematical issues. I’m simply asking people to engage in meaningful conversations that explore differences of opinion and perspective – rather than jumping to hasty conclusions.

G.H. This exhibition also contains other wonderful works, to which you’ve given evocative titles like Late Evening, Midday, Drizzle, and so on, that are almost haunting, abstract canvases.

N.W.G. I choose titles suggesting mood, season or time of day to give an insight into my own reactions on first seeing these materials, and to stimulate the viewer’s own imagination. There’s also a new set, which will be shown for the first time at October Gallery, of what I call my Jua Kali paintings. In Swahili, jua means ‘sun’ and kali is ‘hot’ and the term refers to artisans in the informal sector who work all day, under the fierce African sun, using recycled materials like tyres, metals and wood. They create fascinating objets d’art by cobbled together things they’ve chanced upon accidentally. In 2010, I received a grant to travel to Nairobi to interview some of these artisans. I’m quite familiar with their way of thinking because I leave my own unusual materials outside to develop under the fierce sun, and work the results into my own assemblages. That’s my own version of – to coin a word – ‘jua-kali-ing.’ When I bring my mabatis in from where they’ve been exposed to the outside elements, I first load them onto workbenches where they undergo preliminary cleaning, or, if necessary, I might paint them and seal them to prevent further rusting. This can be very messy, so I first cover the benches with papers. All the excess rusty water, paints, sealant and whatever else has become attached drops off onto those coverings. Originally I didn’t consider these papers very important, and would clear them out overnight where they might get rained on and then dry off in the next day’s sun. Eventually they’d spend a whole summer under the hot Texan sun and over time they became an amazing source of secondary materials that are real records of my primary mabati-producing activities. I was astonished when I first saw how they had been transformed, and integrated them into the piece called Macahaya - Lamentations.

To protect my workbenches I’d purposely bought industrial paper, which ended up being the perfect material to soak up all those random spills and splashes. Baked under the same hot sun that creates my mabatis, I discovered a derivative material that produces another gorgeous painting. I often give talks about my art and people frequently ask me what it is that makes me an artist. Lately, I’m starting to realise that it’s not necessarily about perfecting artistic skills, like sketching or sculpting, but actually, it’s about learning how to see. My way of working forces me to look very closely at details. For years I’d just been crumpling up those used, old papers and throwing them away. Then one day I looked more closely - and I saw something I’d never ever seen before! Tushauriane! Let’s talk about that!