

‘27’

Vol. I – No. 1

10th – 17th November, 2017

Price Sh. 0

**Awuor Onyango | Faith Wanjala
Wawira Njeru | Kawira Mwirichia**

*“...& still we love & hide & wait for rapture...”
– Metamorphosis, Romeo Oriogun*

National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission
presents

‘27’

Awuor Onyango | Wawira Njeru | Faith Wanjala | Kawira Mwirichia

Special screenings by None On Record

Shifteye Studios, Priory Place, Argwings Kodhek Road
10th – 17th November 2017

Preview Event, 9th November, 6.30pm

Art Auction of a donation from Michael Soi, *The Motherboard, Untitled
IV (b), 2017*

Curated by Nyambura M. Waruingi



Broken Metafarsal
Productions

Activities

14th November 6pm

Public Forum

Public Discourse & Expression: How Private Lives Become Public

16th November 6pm

Artists' Talk

Catalogue Design by Asteria Malinzi

HEINRICH
BÖLL
STIFTUNG
EAST & HORN
OF AFRICA

One step at a time. A man kisses another & hears bullets hitting his windows. A man kisses another and hears a mob running on his skin. A man lies on the edge of bliss & hears the rape of boots on doors & still we rise with the sun & plant seeds of love in dark places & still we love & hide & wait for rapture within a boy's body as a voice flirts with the birds in his throat and a man burning on a street in Lagos for singing too loud.

Metamorphosis, Romeo Oriogun

- (1) Every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law.
- (2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and fundamental freedoms.
- (3) Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.
- (4) The State shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, health status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.
- (5) A person shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against another person on any of the grounds specified or contemplated in clause (4)...

Article 27, The Constitution of Kenya

Any person who -

- (a) has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; or
- (b) has carnal knowledge of an animal; or
- (c) permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years:

Provided that, in the case of an offence under paragraph (a), the offender shall be liable to imprisonment for twenty-one years if -

- (i) the offence was committed without the consent of the person who was carnally known; or
- (ii) the offence was committed with that person's consent but the consent was obtained by force or by means of threats or intimidation of some kind, or by fear of bodily harm, or by means of false representations as to the nature of the act...

Section 162, The Penal Code of Kenya

Tender(ness)

They are sitting alone, dreaming a world, wishing for a little tenderness. Wishing for a different kind of tenderness, not the limp-stumble, bruise-soft after that lingers, not the aloe-rubbed, ice-packed relief, not the gravel-hard calluses where tenderness used to be. And now the thick thick scar tissue where tenderness cannot be. The question of whether tenderness can be here. Again. If gravel-hard calluses can learn to feel again. Something. Beyond bitter-pain. Perhaps something bitter-sweet.

*

Dreaming can be difficult (here).

27 September 2017

Newly elected governor of Nairobi, Gideon Mbuvi, known popularly as Mike Sonko, described newly elected member of parliament for Embakasi East, Owino Paul Ongili Babu, known popularly as Babu Owino, as a shoga. Sonko threatened to send members of a banned militia group, Mungiki, to rape Babu Owino.

Shoga. Homo. Fag.

To be conjured – as an apparition. To be made present as rapeable by an outlawed gang.

Mungiki is the the spiritual-military wing of Kikuyu ethno-nationalism: those called to defend the Kikuyu nation against outsiders. Outsiders are broadly defined as other ethnic nations and those that fail to follow traditional Kikuyu practices. Militarized Kikuyu masculinity, represented by Mungiki, defines itself against the shoga. The shoga is to be raped. Rape is a weapon of war.

Dreaming can be impossible (here).

On September 27, 2017, I was in India. One of many Kenyans who travel to India for medical care. From India, I heard shoga and was pulled from my body, marked as rapeable by an ethno-nationalist militia deployed by the newly elected Governor of Nairobi. A difficult home became more difficult. Almost impossible.

In these streets, men have touched me in ways I have not touched a man. In ways a man, too, has never touched them. But these same men have touched me – neither a man nor a woman. I have been told, on these streets, that I would be raped and possibilities of pregnancy throw at me with overloaded hints at a forbidden termination. I, neither man nor woman, will carry the baby of a man whose name I do not know. A baby sired in the streets of Nairobi by a man whose face I choose to forget.

– Neo Musangi, "In Time and Space"

To be queer is to be unhomed by legal and ordinary practices of attachment.

Article 45(1) and 45(2) of Kenya's 2010 Constitution:

(1) The family is the natural and fundamental unity of society and the necessary basis of social order, and shall enjoy the recognition and protection of the state.

(2) Every adult has the right to marry a person of the

opposite sex, based on the free consent of the parties.

These two work together through what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed describes as a problematic proximity. While 45(1) implicitly recognizes a range of intimate arrangements that go by the name family – blood kin, fictive kin, claimed kin, chosen kin, queer kin, adoptive kin – 45(2) restricts family to a heterosexual couple.

Shall we call this queer panic?

Queer: to be disappeared from legibility, with all the terror of state violence that disappeared conjures

Queer: to be made legible as a target of state-approved, ethno-national violence, to be made rapeable

(dreaming might be forbidden here)

We imagine survival because we must, as we work toward freedom rooted in care.

Survival, Audre Lorde teaches, should not be confused with resilience. Resilience refers to a system's ability to absorb shock. "You can take it." Survival is the imaginative act of pursuing freedom amidst devastation. Resilience says, "I can handle it – do your worst." Survival says, "I can imagine beyond and work toward practicing freedom."

Survival is also hard work, requiring daily practice. It is exhausting work: to resist being pulled out of your body and out of your unhome, to be present as the object of political homophobia. To imagine yourself elsewhere – in another body, another place, another mind, another spirit. Somewhere less vulnerable.

Calluses form.

Is there space for tenderness?

*

They are dreaming themselves into being (possible). In stolen seconds, short snatches of impossible time, as scream and cry and whisper and groan. They are building a world in which to be possible: touch by touch, crush by crush, hookup by hookup, DM by DM, bae by bae, climax by climax. Touch by Touch. With tenderness.

They don't know

we are becoming powerful.

Every time we kiss

We confirm the new world coming.

– Essex Hemphill

K'eguro Macharia

A Glimpse into the Work of the NGLHRC

How did the conversation that has evolved into '27' start?

It has been some time since we actually began developing this and we can't quite remember exactly how this conversation began, but the goal, with a project such as this one, is to find a way to make our work more relatable to the public. We want to create a space where people can come in and engage with the ideas that drive this organization, and the work that we do to bring these ideas closer to reality, and art seems like a good place to start: we think of the work as a point to launch into conversations around the work that we do. As we thought about who we could get involved in this, we had artists such as Kawira Mwirichia in mind, having seen and been captivated by her work, but we also stayed open to recommendations and dialogue, and that's how '27' grew into its present form.

The work that you do is primarily in the legal sphere. Could you elaborate on the nature of the work that you're engaged in?

Our work consists largely of litigation, and we break this up into two broad categories. We have, on one hand, strategic litigation, a deliberate selection of cases which, because of their content and depending on the judgments we receive, could have an effect on the way in which certain laws are enforced. Such cases are specifically selected to have a larger impact. At the moment, we're working on a case dealing with anal testing, and we're also involved in a case in the Court of Appeal challenging the status of our organization. We had already received a judgment on this in 2015, but this has since been appealed and we're

hoping that the Court of Appeal upholds that earlier ruling. We also have the criminalization petition, which is dealing with *Sections 162 – 167* of the Penal Code which essentially criminalize homosexuality. On the other hand, we have cases where individuals walk in seeking our assistance on a range of legal issues. One of the things we would like to bring to the public's attention is that while these laws overtly target gender and sexual minorities, they can also be turned around and used against them.

So, the work becomes not just about ensuring that laws are followed in a certain way, but also about enabling people to see themselves in the law, and to understand how these laws shape the ways in which they move through the world.

Yes, there is definitely an aspect of awareness-building, and attempting to draw connections between persons and how they think about their interactions with the law at any moment.

Do you work with other organizations regularly?

Yes, we do. While we are based in Nairobi, our services are available across the country, and for us to be able to offer these services, we work with organizations and groups in different localities that we might not have immediate access to. We've had situations where we would have liked to intervene, in places like Uganda or Tanzania, and we're limited, and all we can do is send out a press release, or make a statement of support, but we do also offer technical support and advice to organizations.

Have you previously done activities that involve members of the public?

Yes, yes we have. Our focus is on advocacy work, but we also hold lectures at public universities, engaging with members of the public online, and our director, Eric Gitari, has had sessions severally in the media. However, one of the realizations that we are coming to is that we have focused quite a bit on working with people like us, people involved in the same type of work, and now we need to develop strategies to have the public coming along with us on this journey.

Talk To Us...

Tear here & submit...

Hotline Number: 0800 720 566
www.nglhrc.com/exhibit27

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‘27’

“...We hurried out of the supermarket. The Nakumatt Crossroads. He, ahead of me, back straight, feet carving a path out of the crowd to the car park. Quickest route out. In that moment, I felt that he had done this before, too many times. I tasted the instinct to survive, to keep one’s body safe. I knew it too...”

The 2010 Kenyan Constitution gave birth to a progressive nation, in theory. Euphoric in its ideals of democracy, equality, and inclusivity: birthed in a quagmire of political wrangling and divisiveness.

Article 27 enshrined some of the boldest tenets on the continent, if not, the world. The spirit of our constitution carved into law our deepest desires for our humaneness: freedom to be.

*...& still we hide...**

The Penal Code embeds the ways that we, the citizens, move and interact with the world and each other: man/woman, heterosexual, patriarchal—defining fixed immutable categories, which are rendered truer through specific traditional narratives. A heteronormative existence is exalted despite evidence to the contrary. The law affects us all in overt and insidious ways, allowing violence and violations on those considered *un-natural*. So, we, *un-natural, un-African, un-Kenyan*, lead invisible lives out in the open, skirting the boundaries; we choose not to define ourselves, while we embrace who we are; we seek out safe spaces, dangerously...sometimes we are lulled into the comfort of passing for normalcy, other times we are attacked by those closest to us.

*...& still we wait for rapture...**

Our lived everyday realities reflect a very different order, which imposed

draconian laws on unruly bodies and minds. The Penal Code marks love and pleasure as deviance: Section 162.

*...& we love...**

...fiercely, deeply, making our very personal lives, political statements to survival and thriving. We re-claim our minds, our bodies, our souls. We love each other and, most importantly, ourselves. It is a political act, one of protest in our everyday lives.

“...We were at the parking lot, weaving our way out of the complex. His neck was riddled with knots, tightly-bound muscles. Someone was shouting after us. He went faster ahead. I chose to turn around instead. A Nakumatt attendant, plastic bag in hand, was calling after us. Turns out, we had forgotten to take our shopping with us. The din that triggered this flight was them trying to catch our attention. We walked to the bus stop in silence. We never spoke of that moment. It became that something we shared. Later, I would learn why...”

‘27’ serves to bring together voices from different spaces, art and litigation, ordinarily rarely communicating directly or with each other, to create conversations that allow us to step out of our seemingly immutable identities. ‘27’ was inspired by Article 27 of the Constitution and began as a need to demonstrate the glaring disconnect between our enshrined rights, freedoms, and dignity, and the criminalization of bodies and consensual sexual acts. We wanted to invoke in the audience the lived realities of the law on our bodies and minds and souls...and re-claim the spirit of the Article.

Enter Awuor Onyango, Wawira Njeru, Faith Wanjala, and Kawira

Mwirichia, who contributed and created artwork that elevated the ideas, taking us down paths we hadn't anticipated. Awuor Onyango's *Shemus*, from the series *Visibility is a Trap*, makes us ponder spaces of androgyny and queer visibility in Nairobi. And her poem, *Navigate*, takes us on a walk: each space encountered marks a moment of dehumanization. Wawira Njeru's black and white photography asks us to shed our heteronormative lenses, questioning how we construct male bodies and masculinity. Wawira's *Untitled I* is part of an ongoing project on the male form and body politics.

While Faith Wanjala's performance video-art, *Pain of Release*, embodies the fight for psychic catharsis, her painting and print series, *Grounding*, beckons us to turn a corner and find moments of lucidity. And finally, Kawira Mwirichia's subversive and playful take on our symbols of 'nation' with her khanga print, *Discor(dance)*, implores us to consider a needed and timely reflection: 'how is justice our shield and defender?'. Kawira's imagery captures the dissonance between the promises of freedom and inclusion of our Constitution and the forbidding reality we exist in instead.

'27' is fractured, as we are, as is our society, as is our legal framework. It veers off in unlikely directions, with the artwork and law texts giving us points to navigate from, not to. I welcome you to embark on a journey through diverse interjections and contestations from non-heteronormative bodies, minds, and souls. This in only a beginning...

...& still we rise with the sun & plant seeds of love in dark places...*

Nyambura M. Waruingi

*Poetry quoted from *Metamorphosis*, Romeo Oriogun

Every person has the right to privacy, which includes the right not to have—

- (a) their person, home or property searched;
- (b) their possessions seized;
- (c) information relating to their family or private affairs unnecessarily required or revealed; or
- (d) the privacy of their communications infringed...

Article 31, The Constitution of Kenya

(1) Notwithstanding the provisions of section 26 of this Act or any other law, where a person is charged with committing an offence under this Act, the court may direct that an appropriate sample or samples be taken from the accused person, at such place and subject to such conditions as the court may direct for the purpose of forensic and other scientific testing, including a DNA test, in order to gather evidence and to ascertain whether or not the accused person committed an offence.

...

5) Where a court has given directions under subsection (1), any medical practitioner or designated person shall, if so requested in writing by a police officer above the rank of a constable, take an appropriate sample or samples from the accused person concerned.

...

7) Without prejudice to any other defence or limitation that may be available under any law, no claim shall lie and no set-off shall operate against -

- a) the State;
- b) any Minister; or
- c) any medical practitioner or designated persons, in respect of any detention, injury or loss caused by or in connection with the taking of an appropriate sample in terms of subsection (5), unless the taking was unreasonable or done in bad faith or the person who took the sample was culpably ignorant and negligent.

Section 36, The Sexual Offences Act

A Conversation with Wawira Njeru

“There is something about the way I present my work – it is not euphemistic, and there is a reason for that. I don’t want to go around in circles, I want to be forward and to the point.”

- Wawira Njeru

Don Handa:

Perhaps we can begin with the general – could you tell me a little bit about your work as a photographer?

Wawira Njeru:

I do photography, that’s my main medium of working. I think of my work as a combination of documentary and creative photography. I find that the first thing that I do is that I seek beauty, or try to create beauty, and this is mostly in objects that are not conventionally considered beautiful. I also try to go into topics that aren’t usually discussed.

So, it’s trying to use images to bring up those things that are not always spoken about openly?

Or just topics that eventually create or open up conversations; the blue elephant in the room, the one that no one wants to talk about. That’s what I set out to do. I don’t have too many projects to speak of, but what I have done so far, and what I intend to do, all leans on such topics. Recently, I’ve contributed to the *Revolutionary Love* project with Kawira Mwirichia – I created a series of images of, and based on, Dennis Nzioka. I have also just done some work around the male body. In the latter case, they were not what you’d call tasteful nudes.

These images are more forward, confronting the body, in a sense.

Yes. The male body is not often looked at through that lens. It is usually depicted in such a way as to exude masculinity or...

These sort of abstract, loosely defined notions that don’t always have any concrete basis?

Right.

Are your subjects primarily human?

I’m yet to start using objects. I think that could be the next thing I try. So far, my subjects have been individuals living as out queer people. These are not staged images, or images created with models who I ask to try and personify certain ideas. They are centered on the actual lived experiences of these people.

And are these people you know personally, or people you encounter?

Yes, some are people I know, and there have also been people who have volunteered to be photographed. So, there are people who reach out to me, and they are willing to get involved, to experiment with the work – so there is usually no convincing, or transaction involved.

It’s a kind of collaborative process, isn’t it?

Yes, it is.

Could you talk a little bit about the work that you have contributed to this exhibition?

I initially did not create this work with this exhibition in mind. The thing about my images is that they are not stylized. They are not posed. I observe my subjects, going about their everyday activities, and then I choose what to shoot from their movements.

So, it's a kind of careful observation, and you choose which specific moments to capture?

Exactly. As we were speaking with Nyambura about the work, she brought up this idea of the body struggling, trying to move beyond being confined, and that's the thing, that struggle – it is almost like somatic stress. The person I shot for these images, he's a straight dude who's interested in nude modelling, and he's been facing some opposition, some challenges being open about what he wants to do to his family and his acquaintances. This is especially because of a kind of heteronormative ways of viewing certain kinds of work. If it were a female person doing this (the nude modelling), perhaps people would be, I guess, more okay with it.

So, among his friends and family, there is often questions about why he does this, or who he is doing this for?

There's this idea that this is not what a man would or should be doing. So, there's this individual who has to live a kind of double life. The assumption, among many people, is that he is gay. You know, "Why

would you do that?" "Why would you go around showing your body like that?" So, this person is in a situation here, because of the work he has chosen to do, he has to deal with these assumptions about his sexuality, and so, for me, his is an example of how heteronormative thinking can limit how one can act, or be, in society.

And you had mentioned that you actually did not have this exhibition in mind when you were creating this work.

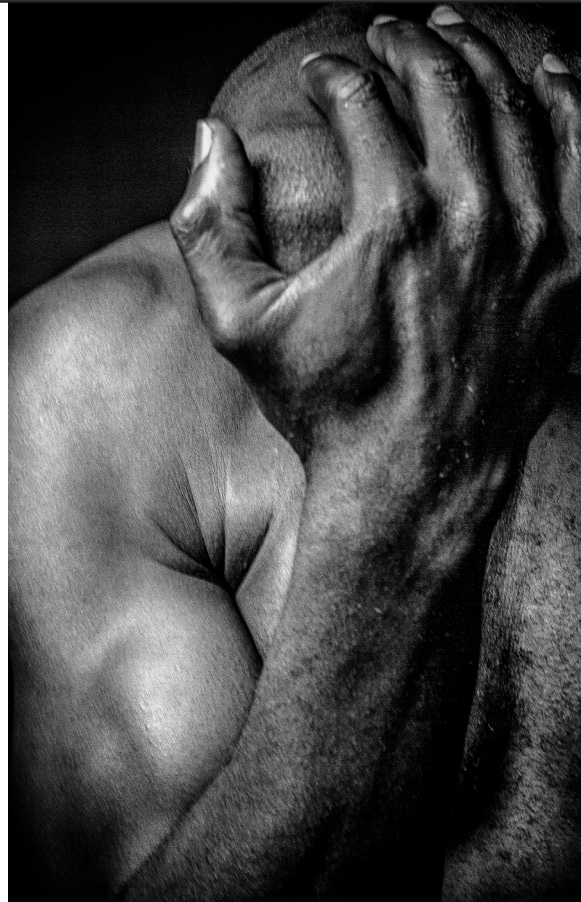
No, I didn't. I think the best way to put it is that the work found a home. It is a project that came at a right time.

And, do you have an audience in mind when you're making your work?

Yes. Most of the time the work begins from this urge that I have. However, I have this thing where I like poking into people's thoughts, pricking them, getting them to think. And, there is something about the way I present my work, it is not euphemistic, and there is a reason for that. I don't want to go around in circles, I want to be forward and to the point. I think, I want to present work in a way that...In my head the thinking is, "Okay, now that it's here for you, you're past the embarrassment of bringing it up, can we now talk about it?"

You're interested in sparking conversations. You're raising issues, such that once it's already brought up, your audience can now stop beating about the bush and confront the questions at hand.

Yes, you could put it that way.



Wawira Njeru, *Untitled I*, 2017,
Photographic print on canvas

A Conversation with Faith Wanjala

"I want to share my experience, to put it out there for anyone who might be going through something similar. I have had the experience of people reaching out, and talking with me about these issues which they feel unable to discuss with their partners, or family – and all this because of what I share. It makes it worth it, and it feels more like something I need to do."

- Faith Wanjala

Don Handa:

To begin, could you talk about the work that you do as an artist, and how you see your work fitting into this '27' project?

Faith Wanjala:

That's a question that I spent some time thinking about, and also had a conversation with the curator about. Initially, we (the curator and I) talked about heteronormativity, and the provisions of the law and such. However, the work that has ended being included in the exhibition, does not directly deal with queerness and how the law regards queer people. And so, we had this conversation about the exhibition, and how it could deal with the different stories of people who face discrimination in our society. The selected work is from a series called *Grounding*. *Grounding* is about a person settling into themselves. This is someone trying to stabilize themselves, mentally.

And what does this work have to do with mental or emotional distress?

Most of my work is based on personal experiences. In the making of *Grounding*, I had gone through something and I had to come back to myself, to focus, to try and accept that I have a mental health disorder, and to try and put that first. There is also a video, *Pain of Release*, which follows *Grounding*. Here, there is this idea of wanting to ground oneself, but then nobody tells you how hard it is going to be; trying to cut away bad habits, and the things that you have used to keep yourself stable that have not been very healthy. It is very hard. So, thinking about this, is how I created *Pain of Release*.

You're going through this process where you're trying to find yourself, trying to find some standing ground, and looking at what it means to have to let go of certain things so that you are able to steady yourself.

Yeah. But it also has to do with how no one tells you that it is not easy to, um ground yourself, if I may put it that way.

And with this work, you look inward; it is about this very personal experience. Is there something in the work about finding yourself alone, or not being able to see yourself in the society where you live?

I think that comes up when you think about how a person dealing with mental health issues might not know how to talk about it, and make themselves understood. When it comes to personal relationships, for example, I have sometimes found myself in situations where I am the one comforting the other person.

I recall you, recently, on social media, talking about the difficulty of conducting relationships while working through mental health issues, and having to do the work of explaining your situation, and making someone else understand what it is that you're dealing with.

Part of the reason for creating *Grounding*, and *Pain of Release* was that I had been through a mental breakdown, and I found that with the people around me at the time, it was discussed completely out of context. Following the episode, I found myself hearing really mean things about how unstable I was, and from the people that I thought I could talk to, and be open with about my experience. To have these same people turn around and use it against me made me question whether I should actually be talking about my issues with mental health. And it left me in this very lonely space.

In your work, are you setting out to document these experiences, or is the making of the work itself, part of how you work through these moments of distress?

It is both of those things. All the art I make is based on my personal experiences. Whatever I am feeling, whatever I go through, I put it on paper, or canvas, or capture it with the camera. And, once I have done that, I am sort of able to see it more clearly for what it is, and I share that with the world.

Still on the making of the work, I know you create paintings, drawings, photography, and you've recently also been working with video as well. Is there a particular process that you go through in making your work?

I just move to my desk, or grab my camera, or just find a space, and I start working on it.

So it's more about creating work whenever you're struck by something that you feel needs doing.

Yeah. And, I also have work evolving, and other pieces developing out of previous work. The most recent video work I created started off with me taking photographs for a totally unrelated project, but as I was editing the images, I noticed something in the images, the motion of falling, and I wanted to explore that further – it brought to mind something I was experiencing in a relationship, moving back and forth. So I took my camera, went into my room, created something, edited it, and shared it immediately.

On the question of sharing, as you're making work – and you have spoken of art-making as this process of you figuring things out, and working through various mental and emotional states – do you do it with a view to putting it out into the world? Is the sharing always something you have in mind, or does the decision of whether or not to share come after the work is made?

Sharing is definitely part of what I want to do. When I became aware that I had a mental health disorder, I tried to do research and I could not find any material locally I could relate to. So, I want to share my experience, to put it out there for anyone who might be going through something similar. I have had the experience of people reaching out, and talking with me about these issues which they feel unable to discuss with their partners, or family – and all this because of what I share. It

makes it worth it, and it feels more like something I need to do. I think it is also very important to expand the way we think about mental health, so that we don't just discuss it in terms of those who have disorders that have been diagnosed by professionals. It also has to do with our interactions with people every day, our habits, our relationships; our moving through the world and how that impacts us psychologically and emotionally.



Faith Wanjala (Clockwise, from right):
Grounding II, 2017, Photographic print of Ink and Pen drawing
Grounding I, 2017, Acrylics and pen on canvas
Grounding III, 2017, Acrylics and pen on gouache paper

A Conversation with Awuor Onyango

"I feel like there's a permissions game that happens in Nairobi where you are permitted to be certain ways or do certain things, but only to an extent that is deemed acceptable."

- Awuor Onyango

Don Handa:

We had spoken a little bit, earlier on, about this work, and you'd explained to me that in making this, the poem and the images, you were thinking through navigating Nairobi as a woman and as a queer-identifying person. Could you expand a little bit on that?

Awuor Onyango:

I'm thinking about '27' and this conversation I had with Nyambura about how what you seem to be is such an important factor for your safety in Nairobi. For me, the fact that I look a certain way, and sound a certain way shields me from certain realities and that's something that I have become very aware of. That knowledge, and my personal experience, coupled with things that I hear people say make me feel like I live in a different Nairobi. Hearing people's very different accounts of Nairobi, and how we have all these different relationships with authorities...On the one hand, across the board, everyone gets scared when they see cops, but then there are also levels to this – there are people whose concern might be: "I have money but I don't want to give them"; but then there are others for whom the questions are, "Am I going to be raped?" There are these very different realities, and it is

all based on what you present as. It's interesting to me how your body, and what it is perceived to present is such a key thing in Nairobi. It is random and weird.

What you say, about how you present being such a big part of how you move around, and of the feedback that you get from people, do you think there's something in it of people, society, wanting to lay claim to your body and have a stake in what you can be, how you can be?

Absolutely. I feel like there's a permissions game that happens in Nairobi where you are permitted to be certain ways or do certain things, but only to an extent that is deemed acceptable. I have conversations where, for example, people will say, "Ah, don't bring, like, your gay friends." And, apparently, it (being gay) is not a problem until...

Certain bodies, or certain ways of being aren't a problem until you encounter people who identify with/as such.

Yes. And that's when it becomes a problem. You know? Be gay, but not too gay.

"Be gay, but don't rub it in our faces."

And there's something similar in being female. Be a tomboy, but not too much. And, I don't even know what tomboy means. You constantly have to negotiate your femininity, and how much of it you can have at any given point; even your sexuality, and your sensuality. It becomes a

series of permissions that you constantly have to negotiate in whatever space you're in. The creation of safe spaces becomes such an important thing, because there are very few spaces where you--

Where you can just be, and not have to present a certain version of yourself, but be whatever, whoever, you want to be in that moment.

Just to carry on with what you're saying, about negotiating spaces, the last time we talked about this you also mentioned that this negotiation is a something that you sometimes have to do in what are presumably safe spaces – having, even in these spaces, to come up against certain assumptions and claims that you imagine you would be free from in those spaces. Is this something that you have experienced personally?

I have just recently learned to leave spaces that I feel that I have to ask for permission to be in, or prove myself worthy to be in. But I have encountered feminisms, and queernesses, that demand certain things from you, a kind of my-struggle-is-bigger-than-yours way of thinking. And it tells you that when it comes to the creation of spaces, you have to start from where you are. You can't just walk into spaces and... there's always going to be questions. I think there is also an element of people feeling like they have to guard the spaces that they feel safe in, and that then, sometimes, turns them violent against certain people who perhaps they feel don't deserve those spaces.

That ownership of this safe space can, in turn, also make one hostile to others not already in the space and wanting into come into it.

Yeah...

I want you to say a little something about writing. I know you work with text as well as images, and you had mentioned to me that your art-making process always begins with writing. Could you talk a little about that?

I used to think of writing as drawing letters and writing has become a huge part of my art-making in that way. My mom used to buy exercise books, and cut them into thirds, and then give a third of an exercise book to me, just because I used to write everywhere. I wasn't writing with purpose or anything, I was just in love with the idea of making this mark, and that this mark can mean something. The exercise book, since it was cut into thirds, was like four lines per page, for forty-eight pages, and so you have to really think about what you're writing in each page, and that sort of made me realize that this mark, in unison with a bunch of other marks can mean something. That, then, builds into a kind of exercise of, "What can I make all these marks together mean?"

So, it's sort of writing as thinking. You take these marks and you try to make meaning of/with them, and they can evolve into something else, and they also remain as a thing in and of itself.

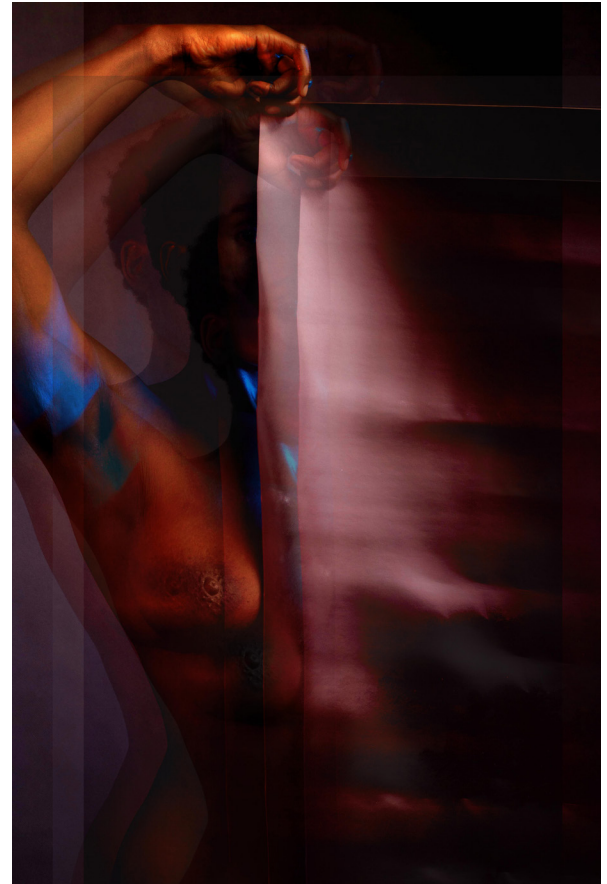
Yeah...

Working for '27', is there a thing in particular that you felt you needed your work to say in relation to the other work in the exhibition?

The thing I find interesting about Nairobi, and the thing that I hope my

work invokes, is the commonness of these traumas. I can write or make something that I think is very revealing, very what-Awuor-went-through, but then everyone in the room will have a similar experience, or will have a point of entry into that. It's creating that kind of entry point into these traumas that need to be addressed that I hope to bring into '27'.

Awuor Onyango, *Shemus*, 2017, *Photographic print on luster paper*



Lessons from

Men

I now despise

2. How to lie

About my

Age

Because somehow

Rape is fine

But statutory rape isn't

3. How to

Try and correct my

Body

With baggy clothes

Sit in the darkness

And try and forget that I

Have limbs

4. How

Little boys with strong

Mother-figures

Conquer their fears by

Breaking

"Strong women"

Or

Trying to

5. How to

Lose

A friend

To a pair of

Growing

Adipose lumps

On my own

Chest

6. The kindness of

Strangers giving you

Direction

Leads to offers of 20k

For a

Blowjob

Your pregnant wife

Won't give

7. That feminists are

Either

Lesbians

Or

Prostitutes

Navigate, Awuor Onyango

A Conversation with Kawira Mwirichia

“I tend to be experimental in my approach, and so I will try out different materials and techniques until I settle on the one that I feel best works for whatever it is that I’m trying to put across. I have enjoyed working with khanga, but I don’t believe in sticking religiously to a single style; if there is a more powerful way to communicate a message, then I cannot ignore that power.”

- Kawira Mwirichia

Don Handa:

The khanga – let’s talk about that. How did you start working with the khanga, and what is it about it that drew you to it as an object or a material?

Kawira Mwirichia:

I actually started working with the khanga after I saw it featuring very prominently at an event that I was working on with a certain organization. After seeing how it was used there, I started playing around with the motifs, and subtly weaving in certain symbols and messages into that kind of standard formatted that you find in khanga. It’s from this that I evolved what I created in the *TRTL** where I make use of the history of the khanga as an object – how it is, for example, used to welcome a bride into her new family, or how it is used to pass on messages between women, and between women and the society around her.

So you were/are harnessing the cultural significance of the khanga.

Yes. For this project in particular, I was approached, based on the work that had done previously, to come up with a khanga design that touches on the themes of the ‘27’ exhibition.

Outside of TRTL and ‘27’, is the khanga something that you explore in your other work?

No actually... At the moment, I have only used it in the *TRTL* space, and I would like to leave it there for now, and move on to other projects and works. I like to explore different media in my work, and I have worked with sculpture, with drawing, painting and probably other things that I cannot immediately recall. I tend to be experimental in my approach, and so I will try out different materials and techniques until I settle on the one that I feel best works for whatever it is I am trying to put across. I have enjoyed working with khanga, but I don’t believe in sticking religiously to a single style; if there is a more powerful way to communicate a message, then I cannot ignore that power.

Tell me a little bit about the khanga you created for ‘27’, Discor(dance).

The work deals with the equality, the ideals promised, and aspired to, in the Constitution of Kenya, and the distance between that vision and the reality of our lived experience. Ours (sic) is a religious, patriarchal, very homophobic society, and it is that dissonance that I am getting at in that work. You also see that in the work I borrow the symbol of two lions as it appears in Kenya’s Coat of Arms, and I like the way their stance looks as though they are fighting, but also dancing – a kind of violent dance between the two, and the title I’ve given the work actually plays on that.

And there is also a kind of co-opting of national symbols to actually point out the gaps, or the fractures in our society.

Yeah, exactly.

Are questions of queer visibility something that occurs repeatedly in your work as an artist?

Yes, in a lot of my work, it does; and that is because a lot of the work I have done, I have done while working with queer organizations.

On the question of audience, who do you have in mind when you're creating your work?

Obviously, with commissioned work, there is always someone in mind, but with my personal work – which I do mostly for me – there's an element of wandering, working out my own thoughts and interests.

And are there ideas that you've been delving into, or that recur in your work, but might not have made it into the work that we see currently?

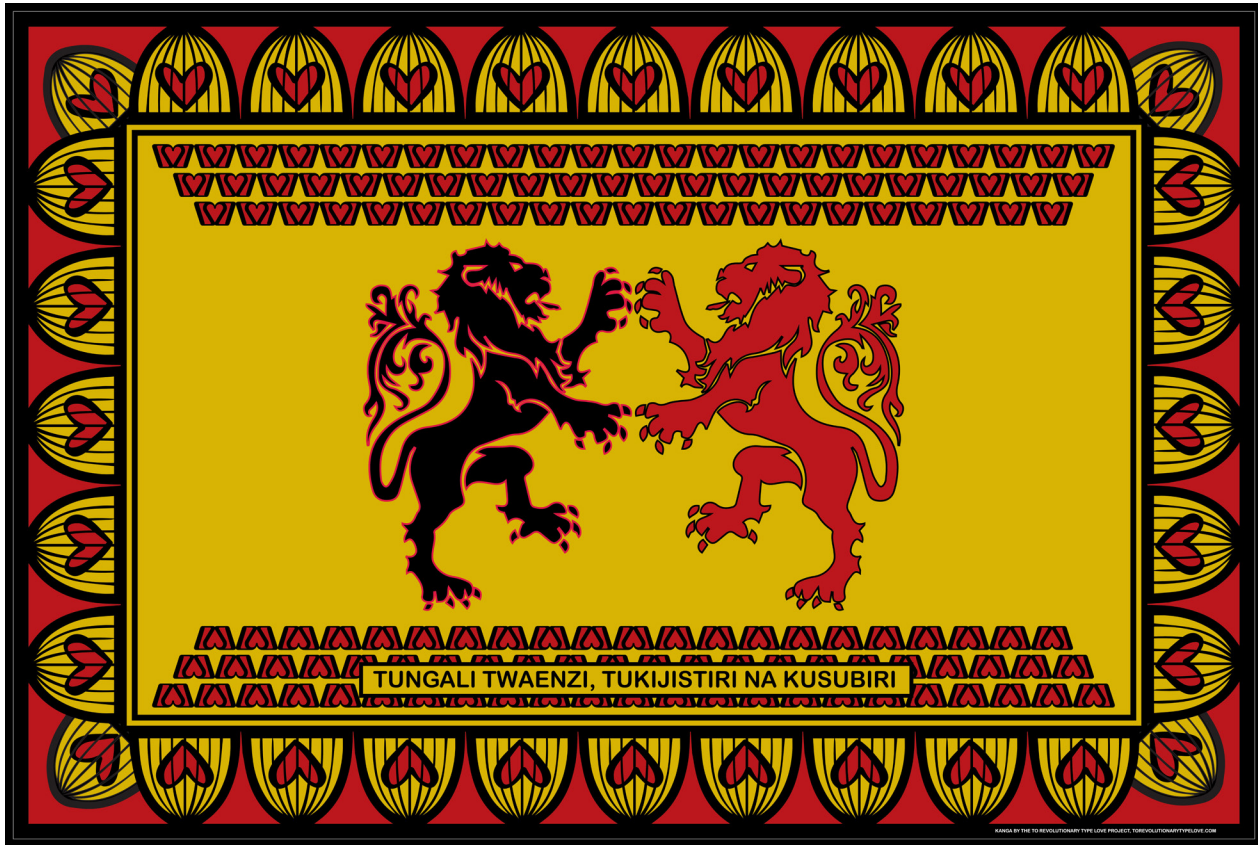
Well, recently I have been very curious about the use of paper, and collaging techniques, and how I can use these to sort of translate images into form that is somewhat fluid. There are also other things I have tried out, comics, for example...I have a lot of my own little things that I'm trying out at the moment.

Finally, for '27', where did you see your work in this exhibition? Is there something in particular that you wanted to communicate in this instance?

I was thinking about the message of the exhibition, and I was caught on

this disconnect that you see between what the constitution says, and the lives that people live. And I was thinking about this fact, and the more personal, more emotional aspects of such a reality, questions of forbidden love – and I like how this comes out in this poem by Romeo Oriogun. So, for me, I find that the law can sound so clinical, but it affects people's lives, and so I wanted to include something that people can connect with, something that can help the viewer see themselves in the law, and how it shapes how we move through the world. And, of course, how such a message could look like on a khanga – and especially in keeping with the tradition of the khanga, and creating something that, visually, carries on in that tradition.

****TRTL – To a Revolutionary Type of Love***



Kawira Mwirichia, *Discor(dance) 2017*, Khanga design printed on polyester flag material

Special Thanks

As someone who has dared to render the invisible visible through your art; as an affable artist who brings your art to the Kenyan people by finding ways to incorporate them—whether through visual storytelling or the dedication of their bodies as blank canvases—your support of our exhibit and your generous donation to it are a gift that we, as The National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, could not have dared to imagine and one we are beyond thankful for.

Affirmations come by way of all kinds of acts, we are reminded. And as we foray into the world where art intersects with advocacy, we conjure up James Baldwin's words: "The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey into our attempts to avoid this knowledge." Through '27' we illuminate the fallacies of our constructed heteronormativity and allow for the creation of alternative worlds.

Thank you, Michael Soi.



Michael Soi, *The Motherboard, Untitled IV (b)*, 2017
Photographic print on luster paper

Acknowledgments

'27' is a labour of love and dedication.

First, to all the artists, Awuor Onyango, Wawira Njeru, Faith Wanjala, and Kawira Mwirichia, who contributed their work, and made all this an evocative experience.

To Don Handa, for taking time with the artists and giving us insight into their work and process.

To Kui Wachira, for her advice and for managing the curation of the project.

To None On Record, for coming on board and sharing their "Queer In Africa" archives.

Most of all, to K'eguro Macharia, for *Tender(ness)*, a needed compass for compassion and empathy.

And to Romeo Oriogun for *Metamorphosis*, a poem which has woven itself into the fabric of our imaginations and expressions for '27'.

Finally, to Heinrich Boll Stiftung for their unending belief in the importance of the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission's work and their financial support of '27'.

To all, our deepest gratitude.

Talk To Us...

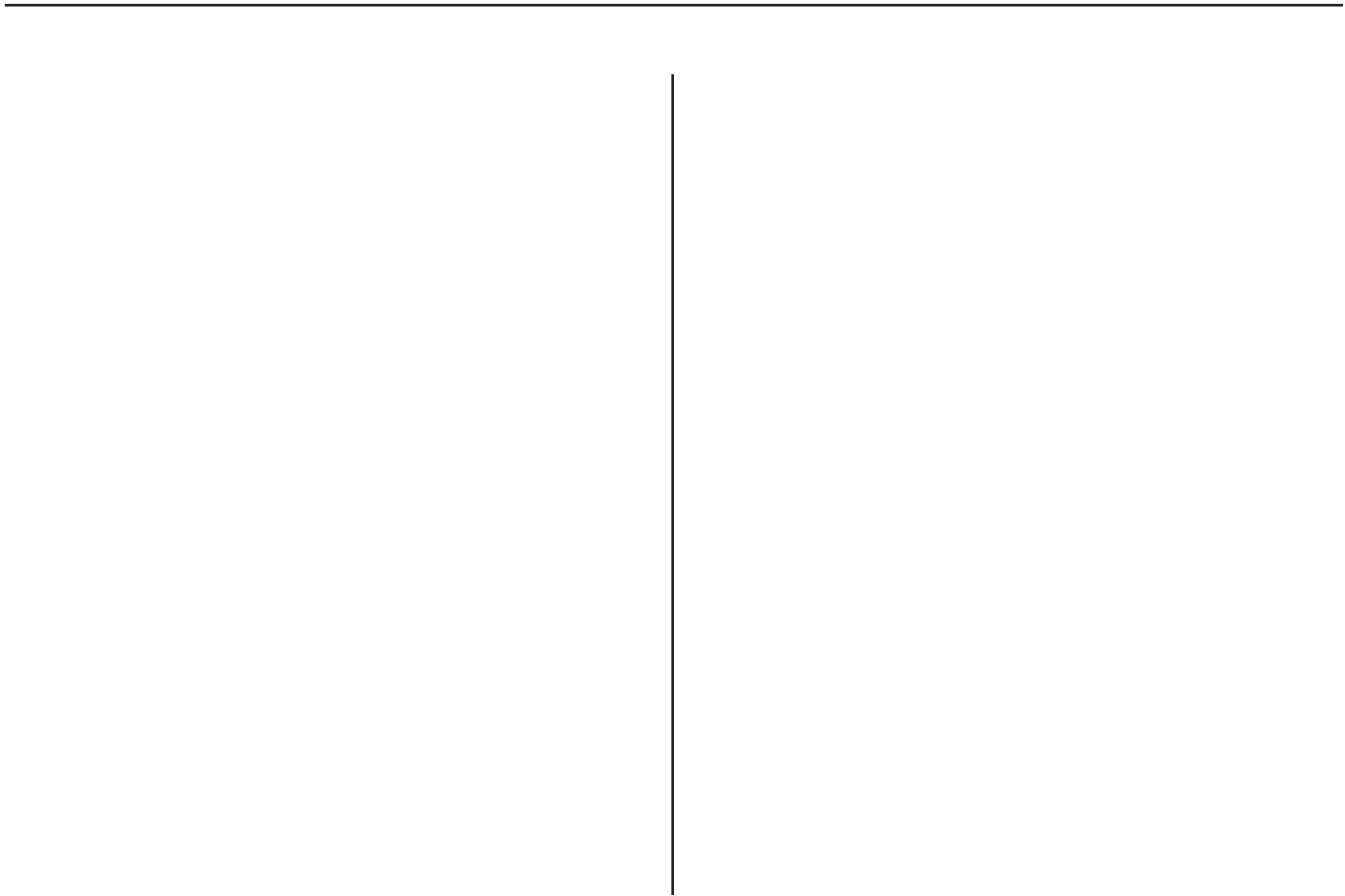
Tear here & submit...

Hotline Number: 0800 720 566
www.nglhrc.com/exhibit27

Talk To Us...

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www.nglhrc.com/exhibit27



Every person has inherent dignity
and the right to have that dignity
respected and protected.

Article 28, The Constitution of Kenya