



## **Interview with Kenyan artist Beatrice Wanjiku**

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**Beatrice Wanjiku as a female artist breaks away from Kenyan traditional expectations, in her art and in her life.**



The Quintessence of Loneliness III, 2016

[Beatrice Wanjiku](#) was born in the Ngong Hills near Nairobi in 1978. She did her art training at the Nairobi's Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts from which she graduated in 2000. She now lives in Nairobi, Kenya.

Her canvases and works on paper waver between figuration and abstraction and have a rawness that is provocative. Always starting from her personal experience she delves in the human psyche, revealing its struggles as it contends with loss, social dictates and political instability. Beatrice's work is visceral, uncompromising, and reflects her personal challenges. Finding her voice has been an arduous process and now that she has found it she is unconcerned with others' opinion of her work. Indeed sometimes her imagery is hard to look at. She manipulates her paint with an expert hand. The paint stretches, pulls, hides, conceals, reveals, and drips. During my visit to Nairobi this

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August I had the pleasure of interviewing her. The interview provided important insight into her personal story, her artistic methodology, and her commitment.



State of Existence , *Immortality Series*, mix media, includes X-rays.

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Disquieting Muses, *Straight Jacket Series*, 2016

**Isabel Wilcox:** When did you know you liked making art?

**Beatrice Wanjiku:** I would doodle on walls; my mother used to be very irritated about it. I always had the need to understand how things work. I studied art at the primary level and in high school I dropped history and took art instead. So when I graduated from my high school I knew from inside I wanted to be an artist.

**IW:** What did it mean for you to be an artist at that stage?

**BW:** In art school later I was taught the theory of art and art history. The funny thing was that when I graduated I did not know who I was. I learned to do all these things: One paints and it looks like Renaissance or Impressionism. “But who am I as a painter?” I asked myself. For a longtime I used to do traditional subjects like mother and child. It felt familiar. I borrowed from the context of my environment. The context was social. When my mom fell ill, it was then that my work changed. My work lost color. I could not see the beauty in color. The context of my work had totally shifted. My mom was the only parent I had known. My dad died when I was very young. My mom and I were very close. So when she died I felt like someone had pulled a rug under my feet. I remember during the wake my mother’s family telling me that I had to put on a brave face. So here I was this cheery person, chatting them up. Wakes are funny because people just sit down, have tea, catch up, and share stories and laugh. It is a time of tragedy but everyone is laughing. We buried her and everybody left and I felt the stillness in the house then. I felt like I was almost buried with her. It was just quiet. She was gone. Before that you are so bombarded by everything

you don't have a moment to actually think. And then you know she is not coming back. You don't know what to do. It is almost as if you lose sight of who you are. Everything I am, my identity is very much attached to her. So who am I without her? So how do you function like this? I started not to care if my work was positively received. That was in 2006.

Prior to that an artist from Belgium and I had done a workshop with people who were HIV positive. When they shared their stories I was shocked. At first I did not understand this whole idea of empathy. There was a divide somewhere. Eventually I opened myself to them. There was so much hope, and fear! I started doing this series of portraits where the resemblance did not matter. I was trying to express the emotions, the things that we hide because I realize that faces become masks. People are not allowed to express what they feel. I realized from that workshop that we are mirrors of each other. I became more open; I had more empathy.

**IW:** How did that show in your work?

**BW:** The only way to grieve is through my work. That is how the portraits I made after my mother's death felt for me. You present this front and people think you are OK but you are not. I painted the *Immortality* series, which explore the notion that we may die physically but we are very much alive in the memory of the ones we have left behind. I believe that when we have stopped remembering that person is completely dead. I finished the series in 2009 but in a way it morphed into the next series.

**IW:** Is that what you are working on now?

**BW:** Currently I am working on the *Straight Jacket* series. It is about my identity as a female in a very patriarchal society. I look at the boundaries that are set by society. Being an artist, female, single, everyone is asking me: "when are you getting married?" Being married and having kids is the pinnacle of success especially in an African setting. I am not married, don't have kids, and work.

My work is very autobiographical. It is my story. When you stop caring how people look at you and at your work, you are freer. I am even surprised at my own work.

**IW:** How would you describe your creative process?

**BW:** I mull over something for a very long time. Most of my inspiration comes from something I have read or watched. The image of the straight jacket becomes a metaphor for what I am thinking or feeling at that time. I take note of what I am thinking. I sketch.

I have books on anatomy. There were in my family's library. My dad wanted to be a doctor. I utilize them. I am very fascinated with how the body works. The flesh, the blood like in the anatomy books. I see it as color and think about how I can put it into my work. I try to use the exposed inside as a metaphor for what is happening to a person. I tend to feel that I can't be the only person feeling like this. So I try to put it into a universal context.

I love the human form. It is central to my work. After I prepare the canvas I sketch. After that color takes over and I can paint a layer and leave it, just look at it for the whole day, thinking about how I can develop it. I find accidents I can play around with. But I am very deliberate.

**IW:** What do these dark areas of color that spill over refer to?

**BW:** The dark shadows...it is something that has been recurrent in all my paintings. I did the *Immortality* series when my mom died. Everybody moved on I felt like there was a shadow trailing behind me. I could not catch up with people. I felt stuck and people did not understand that. There are things that you never stop mourning. "For life" I say. I never use black. It is almost dark purple.

I am very content with my life but the world is not content with who I am because I don't follow a typical idea of who I should be.

**IW:** The figure screaming. Is it about rebelling against conventions and expectations? Could it also be that you are struggling with that shadow?

**BW:** When I speak of shadows it points to my presence in the work. My figures are androgynous, neither male nor female. The *Straight Jacket* series is about breaking with conformity.

**IW:** Tell me about your way of painting?

**BW:** I love the idea of layering, there is much building of color. I want the final color to be so thin that you can see underneath it. In the *Straight Jacket* series I paint the form first and I paint the reds that denote the internal organs, the chest cavity exposed, like it is almost drooling blood. It is so gory at times. I put the straight jacket on. I put it in such a thin way, but I want it to cover yet one needs to see through it. Other works are very solid.

**IW:** What makes you want to do choose transparency over opacity?

**BW:** I don't want to be too analytical. Sometimes it feels like an out of body experience. People come to my studio and they are shocked. They ask me if I am ok. It must be something in my unconscious that needs to come out. I do not care if it shocks you. It is there. I have a sense of peace when I look at my paintings. I am mentally exhausted and need to sleep then. My work takes a long time to develop. I am always thinking about it, taking and adding. I don't work on a single canvas. I work on multiple canvases. They can look messy. But they will be done. I like the idea of peeling away the skin.

**IW:** It seems to me that you are very deliberate with the composition.

**BW:** I am very particular about form. I don't like constraining my form to the canvas. When you think about ourselves as human beings, we see ourselves as finite. We die but I feel our spirit lives on. You live and grieve beyond the canvas. When I constrain my figures within the canvas I feel like my figures are almost not breathing. I want the viewer to feel this person is living beyond the canvas.

In a new piece I just did there is no straight jacket. I am thinking about our roots, not just the sense of what family we are born into, or where we come from, but how we are brought up with ideals. I find that we are self-consuming. We stand in our own way. It is more about how we think and stand in our own way. At times my work is almost literal. You can see that one figure is devoured by the other.



People ask me why do I decapitate my characters. We are never present in our lives. We are almost mechanical.

I say to people: If you want pretty pictures, I don't know how to do that anymore. Beauty is so temporary.

There is loneliness when you break the rules of the community.

By wanting ones own path, people shun you people, don't include you.

It has its costs.

People did not buy my work when I was doing "Renaissance" painting. It had no center. When I did the *Immortality* series it was shown in a restaurant in Westlands. People bought my work. I was grieving; I found it disturbing. I felt utterly exposed. My work transformed because I spoke of the human condition. I am painting what is very real to me.

**IW:** Who was your most important influence?

**BW:** People have referenced Goya, Soutine. I had no idea who Soutine was. I was so inspired by Richard Kimathi and Justus Kyalo.

**IW:** While your work is autobiographical, can you tell me what else feeds into it?

**BW:** My ideas also come from what I see, the special situations like the political one, and what affects me in my environment.

During the post election I did a painting called *Point of Entry* that spoke about the first time I felt afraid. As human beings we are capable of such extremes. I remember not leaving the house. It felt like house arrest. I lived in apartment block where different tribes lived. The tribes were the issue of the violence. You say to yourself: "How can human beings do stuff like that?" Unconsciously it stays with you and you are haunted by it.

The news was the only entertainment. At some point I had to get out. I got out and drove. There was not a single car or person on the road. It felt like an apocalypse had happened. Yet it was a relief to get out.

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Beatrice Wanjiku's works have been exhibited nationally and internationally. Group exhibitions from 2015 *Paper II* at Circle Art Gallery in Nairobi; and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* at Richard Taittinger in New York, USA.

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