

Russian Jug When I was leaving for Kenya a friend of mine gave me a present, a hand painted jug with pretty flowers on its glossy surface. It travelled with books, paints and canvases and many other things to Nairobi. It became an important part of my décor.

I often used it for flowers and from time to time – in paintings of still-lives. When people move from place to place they usually carry with them things that remind them of their home, family and friends left behind. This jug was a memory of my attempt to get onto the ceramic course at the Mukhina College. Luckily I was unsuccessful but I always considered ceramics as painting in 3D, being seduced by its glazes, its strong colours that in painting would look out of place.

This jug also served as a prop in still-lives for my students in the art school that I founded in one of the well-off suburbs of Nairobi. It was probably the only piece of ceramic in the whole of Kenya that had a traditional Russian shape and ornament of this kind. One day it was lost in one of my numerous moves, but the painting of it with fruits and flowers survived. It became a part of the series *Stripped*. It is a small painting that I simply named *Russian Jug*.

Recycling of the Past In Kenya people recycle everything, it is part of living that has become part of the culture. Recycling often shows a creative attitude, where children make their own toys, such as a football made out of plastic bags or little cars and bicycles out of pieces of scrap and wires. In households the same items will be repaired again and again, until it is totally out of use. It is not surprising to see aluminium pots with a number of welded holes in them or heavy-duty plastic water tanks with cracks sealed.

The old cars were on the roads still moving until they would totally fall apart. Clothes would be passed in families from the older to younger children, till they all outgrew them. This is done not because people were desperately poor as many families have land to work on and have jobs with steady incomes. It was, however, just part of practical living where people did not dispose damaged or old things but tried to mend and re-use them again. It may seem that the main reason was to save the resources or re-direct them into more pressing issues like an education for children. This was often misunderstood by visitors to Kenya who saw such things as evidence of drastic poverty, when it was in fact only a different way of managing the resources and after living in Kenya for decades this approach is very appealing to me too.

I have adopted it in my work and try to re-use or re-integrate the old materials and things into my current artwork. I am fascinated by how limited resources can produce interesting results.

Kerichio Tea Worker One of my travels took me to *Kerichio*, a place famous for its tea plantations. When passing it, one can see very neat green rows of tea plants with people working on them. In those days they did not wear the bright protective cloth and looked like they were dressed in old cloth or worn out rags. All the work was done by hand – no machinery was to be seen anywhere and the pickers had to carry huge baskets on their backs. These baskets were so big that they overshadowed the pickers and from the distance, they looked like little ants carrying huge loads.

This painting was made from a photo in the local newspaper; a woman with a huge loaded basket, its strap tied around her head. The image stayed with me for a long time and I painted *Kerichio Tea Worker* to acknowledge the hard labour and poverty of people working on the farms; farms that provide one of the best quality teas for export. It was not intended as a 'tourist' painting and I could not hope to sell it. It was such a disturbing subject. This image was so dear to me and it remained with me until my last visit to Kenya when I absorbed it into new work.

Barbra After a week of washing and stripping the canvases my hands were bleeding from cuts and skin irritation. At that point Barbra came to help me with this work. Coming from one of the coastal tribes she was small in stature, had delicate hands and looked from first glance like a child.

Yet she was a proud and caring mother in her late thirties, working on casual jobs to support herself and her eight year old son. She was friendly, shy and hardworking. I explained to her that I needed to re-use my canvases and she enthusiastically took to the task, removing more at times than I had intended. In fact, Barbra worked so hard and so fast that I lost control over all the canvases she did and they re-appeared, eventually, totally blank with few or no traces of former images to guide me.

This created a new challenge because I could not relate to the 'lost' imagery and had little recollection of it. I had to look for new 'keys' to develop that work. Eventually these canvases acquired a new disposition under the general title 'monochromes' and they will always remind me of Barbra, a little hardworking woman with a sunny smile.

White Nights When I opened the rolls of old canvases, I became aware of a specific imagery that united them all – Western mythology, portraits of friends from Russia and my student work with strong academic leanings. It was apparent that in the first years of my life in Kenya I was clinging to what I knew best and what was a ‘comfort zone’ for me.

One painting in particular, called *White Nights* was showing a group portrait and was dedicated to my friends in Russia. It was showing people sitting around the table (some of them never met each other), in a close group with candlelight, drinks in glasses and with a reproduction of Leotard’s *The Chocolate Girl* in the background.

‘White’ nights in St. Petersburg is the time of meeting friends and having long discussions, walking along the canals and watching the bridges opening over the river Neva. I clearly missed my friends and this painting was an attempt to connect with them. Or, possibly, it was my farewell to them. Bright colours and strong contrasts entered my work much later, after a period of adjustment to life in Kenya and after I began to take in the reality of ‘being’. It is very possible that the process of painting at that time helped me to make sense of things at the most difficult period of my life.

Ruth With time images of local people would become a topic of my paintings. It started with a nanny (in Kenya they are called 'house helpers') - a woman who helped to look after my baby son. Her name was Ruth. Ruth never had her own children and she would put all her love and longings into caring for my son. He responded with joy and had a strong attachment to her and I understood her craving for a child of her own. In Kenya women who cannot have children face a lot of problems. They were unlikely to get married, have a family or be accepted into a community on the same terms with other women.

For woman in Africa having a child becomes a necessity, status and a form of security in their old age. The one who can deliver a son gets a higher status... and it was no surprise that Ruth would put all her love and affection into bringing up Arty. One day she had to go back to her village and it was a heart breaking decision that affected everyone, she had become part of the family.

Before she left I painted her portrait showing a mature woman in traditional cloth - kanga, staring into the void, her heavy hands on her laps. The gift she left behind was the most important gift of all - she taught me how to be a better mother. That painting and the memory of her are now part of my present work.

Mother and Daughter Two years after I moved to Kenya my mother came to visit me. We went to see our friends, to shop and enjoyed staying at the coast. Of course, I painted her portraits. I always had a difficult relationship with my mother and felt her authority as a heavy burden. Here, in Kenya, it was different and we found a lot of things we could do and enjoy together. At first it was difficult for her to adjust to local surroundings, to the hot temperatures of the time (a time that would have been mid-winter in Russia) to a large house and spacious exotic garden, to so many people on the streets who were friendly and greeted her with respect and smiles.

My friends were also coming to visit her, especially at a time when I was very busy with organising the exhibition of my work at the French Cultural Centre. The opening of the exhibition went well and when we returned home we sat and talked. She told me that she never believed that I could make it as an artist. Instead to be a teacher of art in one of the local schools in a small town somewhere in Russia would be just where her hopes of my future rested.

She said: *'I see that I was mistaken. You just have to continue to do what you are doing.'*

This unusual frankness and recognition of my success was the highest prize for me. I still have one portrait of her remaining and which I have difficulties to live with, but all the same it was a very accurate portrayal of her emotional state at the time: a heavy look, tired and aged face and strikingly blue eyes. Perhaps, one day this portrait will become something else...

Smile! For artists in Kenya in the 1990s life was very much about meeting new people from local and international communities, organising exhibitions and, of course, attending the numerous parties. I was overwhelmed by the extent of outdoor activities and naturally enjoyed it.

At one party a tall and handsome man came to me and said: *'You must be Russian. You don't smile... I have seen a lot of Russians when I was working with them and I rarely ever found them smiling.'* 'Yes', I said, *'I am Russian'*, but he probably knew that by then from somebody else. His remark left me unsettled and on returning home I went straight to my bookshelf and looked at all books on Russia. A number of them, large coffee table books, were showing crowds in busy cities, people at leisure or at work. Page after page I examined the faces, searching for smiles and, to my astonishment, I found very few traces of joyful or happy expressions... It was a shock to see people so withdrawn into themselves and so serious, a part, of course, from a few photos of happy children...

I went to a mirror and smiled. I wanted to know what my face would look like when I smiled. I smiled again and again and somehow it felt good; smiling was an enjoyable experience. Perhaps we make our lives a little better by smiling. For me to learn to smile as 'an attitude to life' happened to be one of the biggest revelations.

Twenty five years later I met the same man – a well known journalist from West Africa, who had become a partner in running one of the prominent galleries in Nairobi and we worked together for a few years. I reminded him of that very first meeting and I thanked him because smiling had changed my life.

Christmas Shopping Just before Christmas the city bustles with life and activities. People hurry around carrying large bags with goods, suitcases to travel to the countryside or, unexpectedly, stop in the middle of streets to greet each other and talk about their families.

I was going to the shop for Christmas presents when I had to cross one of the busiest central streets of Nairobi. Traffic was almost at standstill and people would move chaotically from one side to another. One place seemed to be more open for crossing as no one was walking there and I moved quickly to that opening between parked cars. Just at that moment I was stopped by a policeman who tried to re-direct my movement. I did not notice him before and now when I looked at him I saw the signs of confusion in his face. I greeted him and I was prepared to argue with him in a joking way when I saw in front of me three pairs of bare legs on the ground. Three bodies of teenagers in dirty rugs were lying between the cars in a somewhat very awkward position. They were dead but their faces were quite peaceful and there was no blood... I stood for a while in front of them in shock and the policemen did not like it. I also noticed that other people paid no attention to the bodies. The policeman said just one word, '*Thieves*'.

I do not remember if I did any shopping that day. I probably did... But everytime I have to go for Christmas shopping, I see those three pairs of skinny legs on the ground, between the wheels of cars.

Kisii Malaria In Kisii I worked on the show stand of a large power supply company for the annual agricultural show. The work was moving well and there were a few days left before the opening of exhibition. At that moment I realised I had malaria, although it could be said that '*malaria got me*'.

I took medicine but for whatever reason it did not work. Being under pressure of time and trying to finish everything to a deadline I decided to complete the work first and go back to Nairobi on the day of the opening. I was hoping to get a better treatment in Nairobi. This was a mistake. On the last day, when everything was finished, I collapsed. The signs of very aggressive malaria were developing fast, I could hardly walk and my body was going through bouts of fever: shaking uncontrollably. I felt I would not be able to cope with this sickness any longer and I understood how people were feeling just before they collapsed into a final stage of coma.

At midnight I managed to drive to a local hospital, rolled out of the car and pressed the bell. I fell on the floor. The door opened and two figures in white stood before me. One of the women asked, '*Malaria?*' I said, 'Yes' and blacked out. They took me into the ward. The next thing I remember I was on a hard metal bed covered with a very thin bed sheet, shivering uncontrollably. All the things around me lost their meanings, they only kept appearances that I could not really grasp and connect with. I felt like I was parting with reality.

Unsuccessfully, the nurses tried to get hold of a doctor. He was sleeping that night at home and his phone was off. Although the medicine for treatment was available, the disposable clean syringes were locked in the storage and keys were kept with the doctor. One of the nurses informed me about this problem and asked what I would like then to do... I had to make a decision myself and quickly. By all the signs I felt that by the morning it maybe too late to get any treatment. I felt how fast the malaria was progressing. I asked the nurses to inject me with one of the used syringes that were still lying in a disposal tray. I took a risk. But all I wanted was to see my son again, to see him growing, even if it would be just for a few more years...

Then the morning came and I discovered that I was in a maternity hospital. The Asian doctor was very friendly and insisted that I would stay under drips for another day before travelling back to Nairobi. Eventually, I was driving back home. I was a changed person and it was amazing to see sunshine in the morning, to see the greens of trees and fields, to be, simply, alive. From that time when I wake up in the morning I have the same feeling – I am happy to be alive.