

# Against Expectations

At sixty-three, the Ugandan painter Stephen Gwoktcho is embracing spontaneity in his latest work

*Rodney Muhumuza*

Many Ugandans, including even some who would describe themselves as art collectors, have never heard of Stephen Gwoktcho. The name doesn't ring a bell, but it raises their curiosity about where this Gwoktcho could be from. The questions can be many: *Is he Ugandan? Gwoktcho is from which district? How come I've never heard of him? What does his work look like?*

To be so involved in the Ugandan art scene and not know Gwoktcho is rather unfortunate, of course. And yet, when all is said and done, it is still possible to see why and how Gwoktcho could remain a relatively unknown entity despite his status as an art historically important painter in Uganda.

Although he will turn sixty-four later this year, and has been at work for more than two decades, Gwoktcho has rarely been shown in commercial exhibitions of the sort that draw collectors and art writers whose collective assessment, for better or worse, can help interpret an artist's legacy. Artists who also teach tend to be forgotten, or marginalized as academic artists, or simply underappreciated while many of those they mentored find fame and fortune. Gwoktcho is such an artist, so that while he's been widely collected, it has not been with the praise and enthusiasm that he has deserved for some years now.

Gwoktcho's last exhibition in Kampala was a 2019 show - dubbed *Seniority First* and put on by Kampala's Afriart Gallery - that presented the work of a group of six Ugandan artists deemed by the gallerist Daudi Karungi to be superior. To the extent that Gwoktcho was included in that group, alongside the likes of Sanaa Gateja and Fred Mutebi, he has been acknowledged as a master - albeit one who has not quite achieved fame, does not

seek fame, and will almost certainly continue to produce work with the humility that has sustained him over the years.

I first met Gwoktcho not long ago, soon after he came to the Weganda Gallery to check us out in January. We had exhibited the work of Lilian Nabulime, a legendary sculptor who once was a colleague of Gwoktcho's at Makerere University, in a show that highlighted her practice as a remarkable painter.

I was not at the gallery when Gwoktcho passed by, so I was pleased when my assistant told me that the artist was around and wanted to say hello. Days later, I went to see him at his home in the Wakiso area of Kirinya, just outside Kampala, where his studio is set in a verdant compound decorated with sculptural works by Gwoktcho himself. I visited his studio many more times as he and I plotted the exhibition that would show him in all his majesty: as an artist now set free from his bonds, flexible in his approach to image-making and given, especially, to what he described as spontaneity.



*Stephen Gwoktcho, Learning Together, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 70 cm*

The afternoon I first visited Gwoktcho, he had recently completed a spectacular painting, titled *Learning Together*, of two women huddled over a book. They were learning together, indeed, and Gwoktcho said of this painting that it evoked the kinship of the women's rights struggle in our country. Ugandan women had helped each other to get so far and so high in a country that was notably among the first in sub-Saharan Africa to appoint a woman to the vice presidency. Gwoktcho's inspiration for *Learning Together* intrigued me less than I was delighted by the pictorial style, which was not as I had imagined his work to be. The painting also reminded me of the South African artist Irma Stern, whose work I like a lot. I was seeing Gwoktcho in a whole new light, as if he had gone into some kind of alien colony only to return with a new and bigger set of eyes. But it was the same artist and his objective remained more or less the same: to create masterpieces of Ugandan art.

For too long, Gwoktcho had been pigeonholed as a painter of wildlife, a very good one, making it difficult for some of us to imagine the artist as expressive as what he executed in *Learning Together*, a painting now domiciled in my private collection. He could paint terrorized wildebeest and the poetry of birds in flight and the quizzical look of a buffalo in the wild and the delicate grace of the gray crowned crane, all of which can be found in private collections of Gwoktcho at home and abroad. But in this piece, *Learning Together*, there was a glimpse of Gwoktcho's mastery of anatomy in the promising décolletage of the bespectacled woman as she leans in to make a point, pen in hand. I wondered what a nude, even a semi-nude picture, by Gwoktcho would look like, especially given that he used to teach drawing (anatomy, to be precise) as a primary course at Makerere University's Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts. What could a Gwoktcho canvas look like if he were freed from the squeamish pieties that are known to cripple artists in conservative societies like ours?

Although I never openly asked the question - whether he could describe the bare solitude of people in their sheltered environments - by his own volition he provided answers in multiple paintings that he started executing in recent months. On some weekends, I would go to see him and, on the easel before him, there would be a new piece describing a big-bummed or big-breasted woman set in a desolate scene, the background painted vaguely enough to give the canvas the much-needed tension between representation and abstraction.

One day we ventured into a discussion of what constituted a red line for official censors, today and a century ago, and I pointed out that it would always be pubic hair, not the breasts. He smiled when I told him that that's what the police said when they came to shut down Berthe Weill's 1917 show of Amedeo Modigliani's nude paintings in Paris. A police commissioner is said to have pointed to Modigliani's depictions of pubic hair, responding to the gallerist's question about what had been judged to be indecent. Those canvases now rank among the masterpieces of modern art.

While painting a semi-nude woman, Gwoktcho would also be simultaneously working to complete a realist painting of, say, a cheetah at full speed. While the palette was vibrant at all times, the imagery was eclectic, and it would seem as though Gwoktcho was aiming for the kind of elastic experimentation usually reserved for artists who are just starting.

For Gwoktcho, however, there was a method to the powerful experiments that would become our beautiful reality. He wanted to run the whole gamut in style and substance, as if saying there was no limit to creative expression. He was working against common expectations, against predictability, and he wanted to prove that it could be done.

He rebelled against precise definition - in the sense that his canvases, whatever the visual language, conveyed beauty and meaning in varied ways. "It could be a weakness, but personally I feel it is a strength in terms of the experiential, how much you have experienced in being a practicing artist or a studio artist," he told me one afternoon in his studio.

In a firm way, perhaps, one could say that, in his new body of work, Gwoktcho tries to answer the age-old question of whether realistic representation suffices to communicate that which only artists can communicate. It would seem that it does and that everything else is extra. To put it differently, everything is better than just one thing in Gwoktcho's practice.

In the 19th century there was such an intellectual debate between Romantic and Neoclassical painters. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, for example, sought to defend academic orthodoxy from the likes of Eugène Delacroix, the French Romantic painter whom Ingres once described as an "apostle of ugliness." Midway through the 20th century it was the

defense of the realist cause, as exemplified by the work of the French painter Bernard Buffet, against the intoxicating and – some felt – cowardly intentions of abstraction. The French art critic Jean Bouret once wrote that the “true subject of art is man in his universe” and that art that is not clear, which doesn’t represent familiar objects – like “the bread on which the knife rests” – could be said to be diversionary.

Gwoktcho, a scholar who is on the cusp of earning his interdisciplinary doctorate, is aware of these historical debates. Although he doesn’t make an argument in a certain direction, the delicious buffet he offers in his most recent work leads one to believe he prefers variety – so long as the work is based on solid drawing and is technically sound. “My bias is that I don’t want to be that kind of artist where, like, if you have seen one canvas by me then you have seen them all,” he told me. “That used to be the approach to exhibition work. In other words, people did not move away from a particular theme – it could be of form, it could be of subject matter, it could be color. You would think that the person painted all this work with the same palette.”



*Stephen Gwoktcho, Wildebeest in Flight, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 71 cm*

Take, for instance, the striking painting titled *Wildebeest in Fight*, a detail of which graced a recent cover of *The Weganda Review*, a magazine of ideas that I edit and which is published four times a year. The stylized picture of the animal in flight fascinates because it captures the horrors of existence, so that one finally can imagine what the animal is trying to flee from: imminent death maybe. The picture was inspired by some public sculpture or installation Gwoktcho saw while traveling in South Africa, and later he sought to interpret on canvas what he had glimpsed in a fleeting way.

For Gwoktcho, the artist must retain the ability to surprise himself in the pursuit of higher art. He wants to be an artist “who is given to new ideas, who is given to surprises,” as he put it. “That’s the beautiful thing with art. If a literary person knows the outcome of their story, they would lose interest before they write the book... We respect those who can speak



*Stephen Gwoktcho, At the Beach, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 82 cm*



*Stephen Gwoktcho, Mother Cheetah & Cubs, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 122 cm*

more than one language, naturally.”

Gwoktcho, in expanding his vision of what’s possible in artistic creation, reminds us, as some artists try and fail to do, that to be alive is the most important thing after all. Many of his new paintings are thoroughly evocative of the inner solitude so often sought in vain. They have a psychological charge that can light up a room, causing a viewer to stop and think of the artist’s singular point of view when he painted, for example, the picture of a woman in her bikini as she lay face down on a beach, a shock of black hair emerging from underneath her like an extra appendage.

Viewed together, Gwoktcho’s paintings describe the unquenchable spirit of living things: from humans to all sorts of beasts. The cheetah paintings, seen up close, have a soulful presence to take your breath away. We think of cheetahs as fast, graceful runners. But the cats Gwoktcho paints possess more than just wholesome feline beauty; they also seem to have a strange kind of human poise. The pictures are devastating in their poignance when one is aware of the simple truth that the cheetah is threatened in the wild and will almost certainly go extinct by the end of this century.

And so Gwoktcho, it could be said, is hard to pin down when it comes to his painting style, just as it is hard for some to believe *Gwoktcho* is a Ugandan name. In fact, he is an Alur from West Nile who was born the day Uganda got independence from British colonial rule in 1962. He professes born-again Christianity, and for many years he was an employee of the megachurch Watoto when he was not teaching at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts, from which he recently retired as a lecturer. Cosmopolitan in his outlook and with a kindly comportment, he eschews the tribal feeling that almost certainly compels those who ask about where he comes from. Gwoktcho is a Ugandan, a great Ugandan artist, and I happen to think that *Gwoktcho* is a strikingly cool name for an artist. ■