

Within and Without

On Pacifique Ndayiheke's paintings of the Burundi pastoral

Rodney Muhumuza

In the last decade or so, a period of great literary discovery for me, few books have been as satisfying to read as Gaël Faye's *Small Country*, a fictionalized account of growing up in Burundi during years of political upheaval. The cover art for the Vintage edition depicts a boy leaping into water, his arms aloft in reverie. The joy-and-wonder scene on the cover sets the tone from the beginning, and yet the book surpasses all expectations in its evocation of the Burundi pastoral. I read it in one sleepless night, grateful for the example of Faye's crystalline prose but also mesmerized by the debut author's ability to capture the spirit of the country in which he was born but left as a thirteen-year-old. Decades later, he had forgotten nothing of the wonderful country of his boyhood.

There was the gardener “who wielded his machete in great pendulum strokes, as if executing a golf swing.”

Maman's ankles “hinted at long, lithe limbs that turned women's stares into daggers and made men dream of half-open shutters.”

One fat mayor somewhere in Burundi who looked “like a calabash.”

The juice of stolen mangoes “flowed down our chins, our cheeks, our arms, our clothes and our feet.”

In every neighborhood there were “these little huts without lights where, under cover of darkness, people came to drink a warm beer, perched uncomfortably on a bottle rack or low stool barely off the ground.”

In Bujumbura there was nothing, “apart from the empty Bata shop window in the town

centre, and the stalls at Jabe market offering Reebok Pumps with holes in them and designer brands with spelling mistakes.”

There was an old man on the bridge “leaning against the railings, a rainbow-colored umbrella unfurled above his head, its metal tip gleaming like a Christmas star. Old people enjoy watching children messing about in rivers. They know their days of playing like that are over.”

There was Madame Economopoulos whose flowerbeds “were sumptuous feasts for the sunbirds as well as for the neighborhood bees. I collected dried leaves from under the trees to make into bookmarks.”

And there were evenings “when the noise of weapons blended into the birdsong or the call of the muezzin, and I found such beauty in this peculiar landscape that I forgot myself entirely.”

Faye, to summarize, never forgot where he came from, which seems to me the object lesson of his fine work. I think of *Small Country* when I see Pacifique “Pacy” Ndayiheke’s paintings of Burundi, a country that is very much a part of the East African Community but also, in manifold ways, an outlier in the region. Burundi, which I have visited three times over the years, most recently in 2024, is unique in our region for its economic poverty and for its seemingly slow walk to prosperity since the end of civil war in 2005. We see it not just in the economic numbers – annual per capita income was \$153 in 2024, among the lowest anywhere in the world – but also in the incorrigibly simple habits of the people that hearken back to ancient times: the early-rising fishermen on Lake Tanganyika, the women who still use mortar and pestle to pound peanuts, the world-acclaimed traditional drummers and dancers, the aging men who gather in small bars to drink Primus, the communal washing of clothes, the big-breasted mamas selling vegetables in the open market.

It could be said, of course, that any of these scenes is to be found anywhere in rural east Africa. But I would argue that in Burundi the atmosphere is different, so that all of that traditional charm adds up to something altogether unique and unforgettable. Burundi is Burundi, as I wrote in my essay for the seventh issue of *The Weganda Review*. For this reason, Burundi is the only other country in these parts I would consider living in, the same reason I alight with joy when I meet Burundians in Uganda, like the young woman at

a hotel reception in Mbarara who grabbed my attention one morning earlier this year when she revealed she was a Burundian refugee. I told her I was giving her compatriot a solo exhibition of his art at my gallery in Kampala and she looked confused, causing me to take out my phone and show her Pacy's pictures. She saw in the paintings a personal picture of Burundi, saying of Pacy that "I can see he is the best."

Pacy - as he is known and as he signs his work - is the outstanding painter of Burundi. I discovered him almost by chance one day while traveling in Ngozi, a city in the north-central highlands of Burundi, in September of 2024. At the reception of the stylish Belan Hotel de Ngozi, a three-star property owned by a former finance minister of Burundi, I was waiting to be checked in when I glimpsed, in the restaurant area, a colorful painting of two boys eating from the same plate. Even before completing the check-in process, I walked into the restaurant to view the piece, which had been signed by a certain Pacy. I went back to the reception and demanded to know who Pacy was, if more of his work had been collected by the hotel, and if anyone had his contact details.

The people at the reception didn't understand the urgency of my request, as most Africans don't when it comes to art, and so I went online and did all sorts of Google searches until I found an artist in Bujumbura who went by the name of Pacifique Ndayiheke. There was a number online, and when I messaged him that very evening he said he was glad to hear my compliments and then let me know where he was to be found: in his small studio and gallery at the Musée Vivant on Bujumbura's Rue du 13 Octobre.

To encounter the work of an artist of Pacy's gifts in a city like Bujumbura is to come face to face with unrequited genius. He was persisting with his painting practice despite poor sales and with almost no recognition. Properties like the Belan Hotel had thankfully supported him, and he also had sold some pieces to foreign embassies in Bujumbura, but otherwise it was hard to live off his talent. He was selling his paintings for almost nothing, and he himself, in conversation with me about his daily struggles, revealed that those who buy his art and take it to regional capitals like Nairobi soon find out that the framing work costs more than the pictures themselves.

At the Musée Vivant, of course, my goal was to immediately acquire a painting by Pacy. I zeroed in on a painting titled *Le Bananier*, an almost abstract interpretation of a banana plant that was rich with texture and a feast of color also. I paid Pacy what he asked for, a



The Meal, a painting by Pacy that hangs in a restaurant at the Belan Hotel in Ngozi, Burundi.

small amount in the highly inflationary Burundian franc, and he packed the piece for me to take on the flight back home. We have dozens of paintings in my house, but *Le Bananier* is the favorite picture of my middle son Jotham, who said to me once that its overall beauty inspires him.

I told Pacy before I left his studio that humid afternoon in Bujumbura that one day I would show his work in Kampala. I had no right to say that – because at the time the idea for what became the Weganda Gallery was still just an idea, a dream that could have led nowhere. After we launched the gallery in May of 2025, I reached out to Pacy and told



Le Bananier, a painting by Pacy that is now in the private art collection of Rodney Muhumuza.

him to work on at least twenty canvases that would describe the spirit of his country, if not exactly as striking as *Le Bananier* then as charming as any pastoral scene out of Burundi. We kept in touch as he updated me on the progress of his work, often astonishing me with the quality of his painting and a few times even lifting me out of gloom and into delight when I saw pictures of what he was producing for “Within & Without: Painting Burundi.” This is Pacy’s first solo show outside Burundi, an honor for him and for the Weganda Gallery, which is committed to showing the work of the most important artists in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa.

One of the hallmarks of Pacy’s work is the distinctive scratched line and rich texture, a rare attribute in contemporary art. The pictures often express African identity and celebrate traditional beauty wherever it can be found, from the heart-warming scene of a boy climbing

a tree trunk to the woman in sombre reflection as she nurses her baby. I like all the canvases Pacy made for this show, although I do have personal favorites: *In the Dust of the Season's End* and *Washes of Our Lives*, pictures that will go into my growing collection of art.

In terms of image-making these two paintings are masterpieces of composition, as unexpectedly mysterious as they are charming. I know, for example, that when the boys of Bujumbura lack what to do, they go to play soccer in a playground, if they can find one, or in the streets. In *In The Dust of the Season's End* there are dark clouds overhead, signaling the imminent arrival of rain after what has clearly been a dry season. The boys in the picture are chasing a ball while their friends cheer them or look on passively, quaint city buildings rising in the background. The cityscape reminds me of the Parisian landscapes of Maurice Utrillo in the last century, and I have said to others, as I will tell you now, that



In the Dust of the Season's End, a painting by Pacy that is now in the art collection of Rodney Muhumuza.



Washes of Our Lives, a painting by Pacy that is now in the art collection of Rodney Muhumuza.

Pacy's picture is worthy of Utrillo, although the Burundian may have never heard of the great French artist. Here is a picture that will never stop giving me joy, just as *Washes of Our Lives* puts me in mind of Paul Gauguin and fills me with a sense of wonder every time I behold it: Whose clothes are the women washing? Have they been hired to wash one family's dirty linen, or is it a mother and her daughter simply looking after the needs of their family? It seems like a lot of work, and one wonders what others of the family are doing at that exact moment in time. The linen on the wash line – clothes of many colors – can seem to symbolize the entire range of existence, even of human renewal, so to say.

Despite the noticeable formalism of his work – do you see the shadows in *In The Dust of the Season's End?* – Pacy has never been to formal art school. Yet it is not entirely accurate to describe him as self-taught, for he grew up in an artistic household. He was born in 1986 in Gitega, these days the administrative capital of Burundi, to the renowned artist Méthode Ndayiheke. Learning from his father, Pacy began painting at a young age and was taking part in drawing competitions before he was a teenager. After studying clinical and social psychology, he worked as a designer in a painting workshop in 2008 before devoting himself to full-time work as a painter. Against the odds, he remains committed to his profession and is a leader in the small community of artists in Bujumbura.

The pictures in “Within & Without: Painting Burundi” capture the Burundi pastoral in all its joy and wonder, in all its mystery as a country still firmly grounded in the modest but consequential habits of its ancestors. Time can seem to move very slowly in Burundi, where sometimes I felt frustrated by the slow service in restaurants but grew to appreciate this particularity of life there. The food, when it finally arrived, was often very good, like Lake Tanganyika perch, pan-fried with garlic and served with sauce aux champignons, I had more than once at the Belan Hotel, where I enjoyed a peaceful and pleasantly breezy few days. If I am honest, I never wanted to leave.

Let it be known that, in one essential way, Burundi is nice as Kampala is not. Pacy's pictures remind us of it, those of us who have been to Burundi and hope to return someday. Viewed together and even individually, the paintings are thoroughly evocative of what is true and pure among Pacy's people. Pacy has described Burundi as Gaël Faye saw it all those years ago: as a place of wonder unlike many others. This exhibition is, for me, *Small Country* in nearly two-dozen canvases, a force field of traditional elegance if it could be painted. ■