



CHELENGE VAN RAMPELBERG
"I Love You", 2018

ALONGERAWAY HOME

If you want to explore Nairobi's booming art scene, you can't miss it: a meeting with CHELENGE VAN RAMPELBERG, the grande dame of Kenyan art

Text
ANNEWAAK

Almost a month after the opening of her retrospective, Chelenge Van Rampelberg is there again. On this late November afternoon, a young man sits in the reading and work room of the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI) and draws one of their human-sized wooden sculptures on his block. When the artist sees this, she quietly asks the man to stand up. Then she hugs him and sits with him for a long time.

Van Rampelberg is so well known in the local art scene that it is enough to mention her first name. "The Long Way Home" brings together more than 50 works from her career spanning almost four decades. "It touches me very much," says the 62-year-old when asked what it is like to walk through the exhibition. "Every picture and every sculpture transports me back to the day on which I worked on the respective piece." Van Rampelberg, who repeatedly deals with questions about the nature of motherhood and patriarchy, could be considered the grande dame of Kenya call art. Wouldn't she be a very unpretentious person?

For around 15 years, contemporary art from Africa and the African diaspora has experienced increased international interest - which is still synonymous with: the interest of the Global North. Compared to the continent's cultural leaders South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, contemporary art from Kenya is underrepresented. The art landscape in the 4.4 million city of Nairobi is of manageable size, but extremely lively, characterized by mutual support and clearly on the move.

Two days earlier on Van Rampelberg's extensive property on the edge of Nairobi National Park, an hour and a half's drive from the center: she lives and works here, along with a few dogs, chickens and rabbits. In the distance, giraffes pluck leaves from the trees, and an airplane regularly drowns out the birdsong. "I didn't know the word 'artist' when I was a child," says Van Rampelberg. "I grew up in a mud hut, the outside of which was cleaned once a year with red ochre, charcoal and

Ashes were repainted." When her youngest child was in kindergarten, she, who was then a wife and housewife in one of Nairobi's wealthier districts, began painting out of a feeling of loneliness. Many years later, Van Rampelberg's retrospective opens with some of her early paintings and her first-ever sculpture: a depiction of a woman and her infant, carved from avocado wood, entitled "My Mum and I."

Van Rampelberg had been painting in secret for years until her husband at the time discovered her work under their marital bed and asked the director of Gallery Watatu to take a look at it - in 1990 she was represented there for the first time in a group exhibition. Watatu was in the middle of the city's Central Business District from 1969 to 2012. "For a long time it was one of the few places you could go to in the evening," says Van Rampelberg. "We didn't have a TV at home, so we either went out to eat, to the drive-in movie theater or to the gallery."



TOP: "The Crying Man," 1991.
 BOTTOM: "Children playing under the Moon and Stars", 2008

The scene has now expanded and become more professional. The NCAI, which is a non-profit company supported by, among others, the major gallery owner David Zwirner, opened in January 2022. "At a time when African art is experiencing a kind of boom, we want to take a closer look at the history of art creation in East Africa." says Don Handa, the curator of Van Rampelberg's retrospective. "We try to connect artists with each other and show the younger people what the older ones have created - and what that could mean for the work of those who come after them." The team around director Ayako Bertolli and the co-founder, the painter Michael, is already there Armitage, is working to develop the NCAI into one of the region's most important arts institutions.

When Armitage, currently one of the internationally best-known artists with Kenyan roots, presented his largest museum presentation to date in 2020 under the title "Paradise Edict".



CHELENGE VAN RAMPELBERG
 with "My Mum and I", 1985



"Happy with Music", 1992



TOP: "Karibu Kwetu," 1991.
 BOTTOM: "When they Came," 1995

Munich Haus der Kunst showed, in addition to its own works, it also included 70 works from the 20th century from East Africa, including the ebony sculpture "Eve I" by Chelenge Van Rampelberg and the painting "No Erotic Them Say" by Meek Gichugu. The picture of a naked woman and a zebra sitting on her lap hung in Van Rampelberg's house for a long time and made a lasting impression on the then nine-year-old Armitage, who came and went with the family.

As the painter star Michael Armitage 2020 in Munich's Haus der Kunst exhibited, he showed alongside own work too the ebony sculpture "Eve I" by Chelenge Van Rampelberg

The art historical dialogue with previous generations seems to be as central to the contemporary scene as a strong collaborative spirit. You can see this in the large number of art collectives in the city, including the BrushTu Art Collective, which runs a studio house and residency program in the Buruburu district. "The collective idea is extremely important for Kenya simply because of the lack of resources," says the painter Michael Musyoka, co-founder of BrushTu. There have been no art lessons in primary schools for 20 years, and there is hardly any state or local support for artists. "That's why we're still often seen as jokes here. Only knowledge can create appreciation."

Another collective, Maasai Mbili, works in the middle of Kibera, one of Nairobi's slums. In the mid-noughties, Dickens Otieno caught fire here

Art. In 2022 he was one of four Kenyan representatives at the Venice Biennale. When Otieno's latest solo exhibition, "Trails," opens at the Circle Art Gallery on a rainy evening in early December, curator Don Handa and Michael Musyoka show up, as does Margaretta wa Gacheru, the longtime art critic for the daily newspaper "The Nation."

Chelenge Van Rampelberg did not make the long journey to the city center again. Regarding her younger colleagues, given their clearly audible social media activities, she said: "I know they work hard. But I wish they were more patient." However, the time for patient waiting may soon be over for Nairobi's artists.

CHELENGE VAN RAMPENBERG "The Long Way Home", Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, until February 17th