

#NairobiNiMimi

"WITH ART THERE'S FREEDOM.
YOU CAN BE ANYTHING YOU
DECIDE TO BE."

GEORGE ONKOBA

George Onkoba is the proud owner of the The Art Kiosk Gallery in Loresho, a leafy neighbourhood on the west side of Nairobi. Born in 1982 in a hut in Kisii, George passed through several cities, including a town in Uganda, before deciding to build on his practice here, and settle in Nairobi.

"I came to Nairobi to look for employment. Not work. Let me be specific." He pulls a small wooden seat which I presume he made himself and settles down beside me. We're seated under the plywood-lined coffee-colored walls of his studio, decorated with paintings of women and men dressed in traditional attire, with tall trees and branches for heads.

"After finishing my degree in accounting and working for two years as a bank clerk in Equity Bank, I realised that I could never be satisfied because my job didn't entitle me to think for myself. Banking slips; depositing money; it was all so routine. Everybody already knew what they were going to do in the bank before they went in. There was no room for creativity. I would have left earlier but I was tied to what I now hear is called 'black tax'. The expectation that once you've made it, in quotes, in your family, then they expect you to start handling their challenges. Be it financial, educational or at home. We're Africans. We cannot pretend that we're anything different. This is the society we live in."

"The only person who supported me unconditionally in this life is my grandmother. She's my favorite human being to date. Though she died in two-O-eight, she's the type of person who would have even sold cows for me to continue pursuing my passion. And she lives on through my art" He points to a piece hanging by the entrance. "That's her." In the piece, a lady sits in the centre weaving a basket. It's done in George's unique woodcut stencil style where he uses white paint for the intricacies of his subject. He paints on wooden boards mostly using two primary colors with a carved line through the centre.

"The reason I partition my work is because when my grandmother was weaving her baskets she'd always use two different colors, one for the bottom half and one for the top."

"And does your family support what you do now?" I ask.

"No. Nobody from my extended family does. We no longer speak to each other. Not my brothers, my sisters. Even after paying for their education. But you see, I've learnt that you don't have to beg people to understand you. If they chose to attach my value as a human being to my financial success then that is not my problem. I am already living my greatest achievement; my community has accepted my art."

"Since I was young there are four things I wanted to achieve. I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to be an accountant. I wanted to be a doctor. So far, I've won at two and lost at two, though the other two are still a work in progress. You know with art there's a freedom where you can be anything you decide to be. I can practice law through my art. I can also heal through my art. I've seen a person preach. I've seen a person kill. I have seen a person rape through their art. Art gives you that freedom because once you've expressed that thing that you've felt inside you, you can finally do away with the thought." My advice to Nairobians, would be to understand that opportunities exist here. That there are as many opportunities as there are people in this city, you only need to be daring enough to go for them

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