

PRESS RELEASE

Chemu Ng'ok

Echoes

November 16, 2024 – January 18, 2025

Vernissage on Friday, November 15, 6 – 8 pm

Artist talk with Chemu Ng'ok and Kami Gahiga, 6.30 pm

Waldmannstrasse 6, CH-8001 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Echoes*, the gallery's first solo exhibition with Nairobi-based artist Chemu Ng'ok.

“Disorder should not be thought of as chaos, but rather as a process of relinquish and creating”

– *Françoise Vergès*

Ng'ok's work spans practices of both spontaneous ink drawings and abstract figurative paintings suffused with psychological and emotional depth. *Echoes* builds on previous explorations and new concerns influenced by an ever-changing environment. A selection of the works exhibited was painted in a context marked by significant socio-political upheaval in Nairobi. In contrast, another section of the show realized in the latter phase of summer in Lamu, marks a departure in composition and thematic exploration. Reflecting on her experiences while painting between diverse cultural, socio-political, and geographical contexts, Ng'ok's considerations adapt to shifting contexts.

Painted in bold swathes of color and intertwined with intricate trails and swirling fine lines, the central compositions in the exhibition espouse expansive spatial dynamics that unfold layered narratives. Fields of color in a palette of scarlet lake, ochre and viridian green, blend into one another, evoking a multiplicity of influences and the flow of Ng'ok's ideas. The physical richness of these works renders them almost kinetic. Ng'ok's painting method might appear chaotic at first glance, but upon closer inspection, reveals recurrent motifs that infer a logic and structure to the work.

The diptych depicts a faceless crowd with loosely defined features engulfed in vivid chromatic flames that conceal nebulous characters. From early on in her practice, Ng'ok has been interested in visually expressing the tension that occurs when individuals choose to push away from the established order.

During the conception of this painting, Nairobi was grappling with waves of protests against the sitting government. Constricting tax hikes were imposed in a climate of growing tensions in a country already facing high inflation and soaring living costs. When the new finance bill was introduced to Kenyans in late May 2024, its citizens had reached a boiling point. Ng'ok's paintings appear to suggest an allegorical meaning for the misuse of power while evoking the role of community in challenging fractured political and economic networks. Her expressive brushworks convey a disruption of dominant narratives and evoke Rudolf Arnheim's theory of entropy. Arnheim's contends there exists an inherent human tendency to confront chaos by giving it visual form and creating structures to impose clarity within an unpredictable life².

In tandem, *Untitled* (2024) suggests efforts to create new possibilities and embodies the artist's engagement with themes of in-betweenness and liminality³. As we get closer to the composition marked by intense spiraling brushstrokes in scarlet red and green, we begin to recognize corporal elements in the background: Hazy faces and a thinly painted leg seeking to enter the whirlwind. The chaotic symphony of the painting hints at a form of dual consciousness, a navigation between local identity and broader influences. Literary theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhaba associates the concept of hybridity and unfixed identity as the 'Third Space of Enunciation', a condition perpetually in flux never entirely identifiable which resists monolithic definitions⁴. Through Ng'ok's paintings, we begin to understand and witness painted members that transcend the physical realm, existing between the psychological and the physical, contesting to be defined and roaming a liminal space.

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Intangible aspects are equally apparent in Ng'ok's series of spontaneous ink drawings, free of disciplinary configuration. The apparent economy of mark-making echoes an attempt to recreate a world in transition. Ng'ok's vigorous and expressive brushstrokes resonate with feminist discourse, channeling a response to the natural shifts and transitions the female body undergoes, suggesting an attempt to create new avenues beyond imposed structures.

The latter part of the exhibition draws attention to Ng'ok's experimentation with new pigments and forms inspired by everyday scenes from the artist's surroundings while on an artist retreat in Lamu. A secluded archipelago, Lamu is situated on the northern Kenyan coastline facing the Indian Ocean. The oldest and most-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa, built on mangrove timber and coral stone, its distinct architecture blends African, Arabic, Indian, and Persian cultures. Strips of land and beaches stretch endlessly towards the horizon where one can witness Dhows sailing upon the ocean. Lamu is a town endowed with a confluence of beauty, where euphoric calls to prayer from churches and mosques alike resonate across town in searing sunshine.

Ng'ok's series painted on the coast, hint to the spiritual, communal, and emotional depths embodied in Lamu. Focused on collective experiences, it illustrates previous explorations by the artist in which she depicted processions and collective rituals: commemorating transitional periods such as weddings or funerals and abstracting those occasions to concentrate on the participants' internal dimensions. There is a sense of temporal suspension in conjunction with a reaffirmation of communal bonds that help overcome chaos and transition. Motifs such as the umbrella, reminiscent of the traditional ceremonial Akan umbrella from Ghana, is a frequent element in her work and stands as a relic and preserver of traditions amid life uncertainties.

In several paintings, elusive characters positioned at the edges of the canvas evince a ghostly and haunting presence. They appear to be watching the core scene of the compositions, akin to the viewer, bringing forth a heightened layer of observation. These peripheral figures shape the psychological space of these paintings and subtly conjure the panoptic theory articulated by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his book "Discipline and Punish" (1975)⁵. Visual motifs in the composition allude to the presence of elders, spiritual beings who oversee traditional ceremonies, suggesting societal and cultural forces that regulate individual behavior. They also evoke those who are no longer there but whose presence and souls are felt by the living, conveying a state of transition and transcendence from one dimension to another. At its core, Ng'ok's oeuvre, explores the lingering presence of the past, its spiritual manifestations in our lives. Despite moving through countless transitions, their echoes ground us and continue to resonate in our acts and our thoughts.

Kami Gahiga

Chemu Ng'ok was born in 1989 in Nairobi, Kenya, where she lives and works. In 2017, she received her MFA in painting from Rhodes University, Grahamstown, ZA. She was the subject of a solo exhibition at ICA Milano, Milan, IT (2023). She has participated in group exhibitions at institutions including The Institutum, Singapore, SG (2024); Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, CH (2024); Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi, KE (2024); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Sint-Martens-Latem, BE (2022); ICA, Miami, FL, US (2022); Zeitz MOCAA, Capetown, ZA (2022); de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL, US (2021); Blank Projects, Capetown, ZA (2020); New Museum Triennial, New York, NY, US (2018); Grahamstown National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, ZA (2018; 2014); and National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare, ZW (2017).

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For press images and information, please contact press@presenhuber.com.

[1] Jitani, S., & Vergès, F. (2024, September). The Disordered Museum. *ArtReview*.

[2] Arnheim, R. (1974). *Entropy and Art*. United Kingdom: University of California Press.

[3] Snepvangers, K., Ingrey-Ardell, J. (2018). Spaces of Speaking: Liminality and Case-Based Knowledge in Arts Research and Practice. In: Knight, L., Lasczik Cutchner, A. (eds) *Arts-Research-Education. Studies in Arts-Based Educational Research*, vol 1. Springer, Cham.

[4] Bhandari, N. B. (2022). Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space Theory and Cultural Identity Today: A Critical Review. *Prithvi Academic Journal*, 5(1), 172.

[5] Rajchman, John. "Foucault's Art of Seeing." *October* 44 (1988): 89–117. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778976>.