

Watatu is back!

An exhibition celebrating three veterans of East African contemporary art:
Wanyu Brush, Sane Wadu and Jak Katarikawe

gallery watatu

simply the best in East Africa

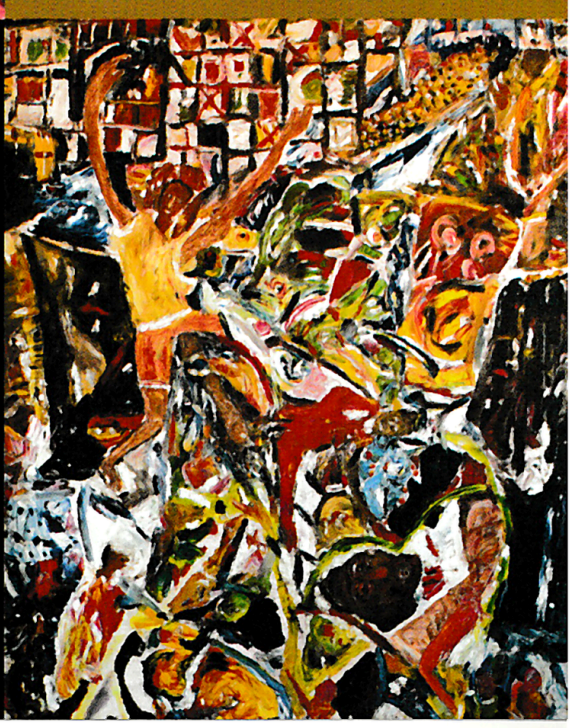
April 16 – May 8, 2011



Sane Wadu, Ex-President on Cross,
186 x 123 cm, oil on canvas

Sane Wadu's painting career began not on canvas, but on clothing. In 1983, he left his job as a teacher and began to coat pants, shirts and sheets of plastic in designs drawn with water-color and household paints. His friends and neighbors called him "insane" for giving up a secure career to pursue art, but he would not be deterred. In 1985, he strolled into Gallery Watatu wearing a suit painted vibrantly by his own hand and presented Ruth Shaffner with a portfolio of his work. Wadu's originality and talent bled through those early pieces and he became a foundational pillar of Gallery Watatu, a position he holds to this day. His artistic success also prompted him to adopt the name "Sane" in defiance of those who had doubted his decision to give himself over to art.

Wanyu Brush is one of the founding fathers of East African art. However, even with his international success, he still lives in a simple house in Ngecha village, where he was born. At birth he was called John Njenga Kamau, yet he now adamantly denies knowing anyone by that name. He has called himself Wanyu Brush since 1969, when he began painting under the guidance of Gallery Watatu's late Ruth Schaffner. Wanyu means "yours", and so with his self-chosen name this eccentric artist bears the most fundamental truth of his artistic philosophy: "I am your brush."



Wanyu Brush, We Will Be Free

WATATU IS BACK!

FAMED PREMIER ART SPACE ENTERS NEW ERA

This is the beginning of a new era for Gallery Watatu. The past two decades of rapid globalization have increased international interaction and heightened the importance of the creative economies worldwide. At the same time, East Africa's vibrant contemporary art has continued to lack recognition and representation on the global plane commensurate to its potential.

Gallery Watatu's experience in the international art market presents us with opportunity to capitalize on international trends and to boost world appreciation for African contemporary art.

I must admit the last two years especially have been extremely difficult for us. The gallery faced the same depressed art buying market as faced by all enterprises in the global economic downturn. But, we have weathered the worst.

The clay that shaped the foundations of the gallery over 40 years ago has been remolded and invigorated with new energy. The result is a leaner, stronger, more focused Gallery Watatu, committed to fostering international openings for East African artists and patrons.



I take this opportunity to formally present Executive Officer designate and partner, Osei G Kofi, a long-time associate and Watatu's European agent based in Geneva, Switzerland. With Kofi at the helm, and with the caliber of both the veterans and emerging young artists that Watatu represents, I see a future for contemporary East African art that is ripe with innovation and public delight.

I know that my late wife Ruth would have been proud to see the path that Watatu is pursuing, and I count on you all, artists and patrons, to join us in realizing the tremendous possibilities of this next phase of our journey.

Adama Diawara, Director
Gallery Watatu

Jak Katarikawe, Wedding Night, 1992, 80x60 cm, oil/museum-board. Private Collection, Switzerland. Bought at Gallery Watatu in 1993 for $2,000. Valued in 2010 at $60,000 in Paris auction.



Jak Katarikawe is East Africa's most successful painter, yet he can barely read or write. Instead of letters, his language is art. For over forty years, the Ugandan-born artist's brushes have poured muted colors onto canvas, where they curve into the animal and human figures that populate the tales he sees in his dreams. In the 1980s, many who came to Katarikawe's studio compared his work to Chagall and Matisse. This was the first that Katarikawe had heard of these masters, and so he told his visitors "this Shagaal, this Maatisa, they saw my paintings and painted like me." When Katarikawe learned that both artists had in fact died when he was just a young boy, Katarikawe was not fazed. Instead, he simply concluded: "We must [have] dream[ed] the same dreams, then."

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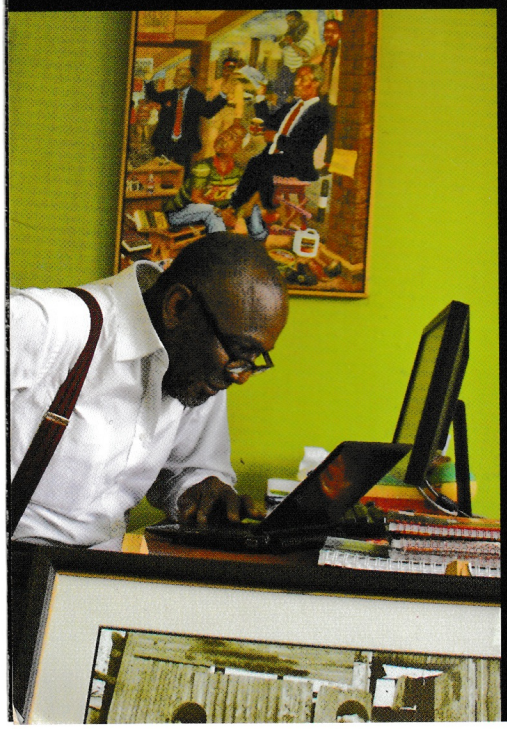
"Art is exactly the same asset as gold bullion"

Castlestone Art Fund, London

A little over 40 years ago three friends – Jony Waite, Robin Anderson and David Hart – embarked on an adventure. They created a privately-owned, professionally-managed public space in Nairobi, dedicated to showcasing art. They named their baby "Watatu" – three persons. It was the first of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa. It had no state or government support whatsoever at a time when such ventures were unheard of outside the industrialized economies. Very quickly the venue became the place to go, not only to see some of the finest plastic creations East Africa had on offer but also to listen to music, read poetry and toast the sun down in the no-frills rooftop cafe.

The trio and their patrons enjoyed the ride. But quickly they found out they were cut to make art – not sell it. Making an art gallery financially viable required totally different skills. Someone with that sort of skill emerged in the person of Ruth Schaffner, a German-born American collector of post-war art, a gallerist and passionaria of the then emergent Africa contemporary. Ruth and husband, Adama Diawara, who doubles as Cote d'Ivoire's consul-general in Kenya, nursed the Watatu baby into the honed adult it is today. Ruth died in 1996 and Adama kept the Watatu spirit, stone & mortar afloat through very trying years.

Watatu's art buying base is made of about 97% foreign visitors, a market which is buffeted by the same boom and bust forces that shake the global economy. My task is to take Watatu to the next level.



I've set myself four core challenges:

- Get Kenyans and East Africans to constitute 50% of Watatu's market – in five years.
- Grow the Watatu Brand, making it a global art market brand.
- Revive the corporate social responsibility initiatives of Ruth, such as the Ruth Schaffner Foundation, the internship and art researchers programme and, especially, her art as community empowerment tool under the Ngecha and Banana Hill collectives.
- Help more Kenyans and others in the sub-region discover a broader, exciting dimension in the art of acquiring art; to enjoy what one buys certainly, but to also see its potential as an economic asset.

Please, come for the ride with me.

Osei G Kofi

CEO Designate, Gallery Watatu

Artists exclusive to Gallery Watatu

Wanyu Brush
Meek Gichugu
Jak Katarikawe
Justus Kyalo
Lonad
Sibylla Martin
Zacharia Mbutha
Anwar Nakibinge
Richard Onyango
Yusuf Ssali
Tabitha wa Thuku
Eunice Wadu
Sane Wadu
Jony Waite
Sophie Walboeffe
Annabelle Wanjiku

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Mon: closed
Tues-Sat: 8am-6pm
Sun: 10am-4pm

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