

art

A toast to Albert...who?



Fluent... from the Crow Series, by Gor Soudan. Pictures: Frank Whalley

Eight artists showcase their exemplary works in a one-off exhibition on King's Day, writes
Frank Whalley

You might be as surprised as I was to discover that I bestride the world of international relations like a colossus.

At diplomatic dinners I am in demand. No consular cocktail is complete without my presence.

This was brought home to me by the arrival of an invitation to a reception at the residence of the Belgian ambassador, His Excellency Bart Ouvry, to celebrate King's Day. This Tuesday, in fact, November 15, should you be at a loss for something to cheer.

I am not certain whether decorations should be worn, or even a tie and tails, although I do suspect that jeans won't cut it, even in these unstuffy times. The invitation gave no guidance. Moreover, it did not say who the King was, either, but resourceful as ever, I checked him out on the Internet and it turns out he is Albert II, whose grandfather Albert I was the nephew of King Leopold II, known, alas, for turning the Congo into his private property.

Moving swiftly on, then, what the invitation did state was that accompanying the reception would be a one-night-only exhibition of works by eight artists — seven Kenyans plus Xavier Verhoest who, coincidentally or not, is Belgian.

Called *Beyond Black on White*, it encapsulates exemplary works

by some of the finest artists on the scene.

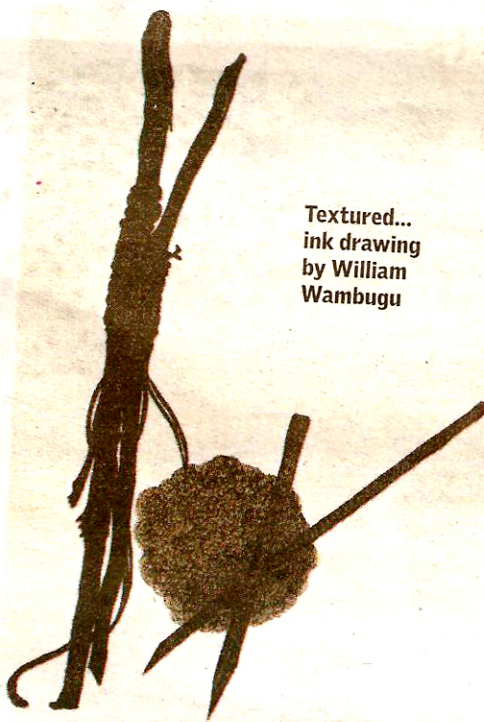
Established names include Peterson Kamwathi (contributing a giant Queue Series charcoal drawing), the photographer James Muriuki and installation artist Miriam Syowia Kyambi, who is showing part of her video, screened recently in Finland, dealing with Kenya's identity and history.

And then there is Verhoest himself, whose enigmatic, photo-based pictures continue to provoke and enchant.

Newer names given a space include William Wambugu, who is showing a finely textured ink drawing, plus Shabu Mwangi, Paul Onditi and Gor Soudan — and I am certain we shall be hearing a lot more of these three, with their often startling imagery and fluent, liquid brushwork.

What I liked as much as the choice of artists for this shindig (the juxtaposition of known talent and rising stars) was the idea itself... a one-off exhibition to complement a specific event.

It was the idea of Samantha Ripa di Meana, who runs her own art gallery called Roots Contemporary in Brussels, with an



Textured...
ink drawing
by William
Wambugu

offshoot at her current home on Kirawa Close, off Nairobi's Lower Kabete Road.

Ripa di Meana is here because her husband is trade commissioner at the Belgian embassy. He was previously stationed in Moscow and Shanghai, giving her the chance to develop expertise in Russian and Chinese art, both of which she presents regularly in Brussels.

Now she has turned her eye on the artists of East Africa. And she likes what she sees.

East Africa is the last major region of the continent to have its contemporary art explored. Works from the Maghreb, West and South Africa have major followings, and now it is the turn of the East. European auction



Above: His day... Albert II, King of the Belgians.

houses and galleries are devoting shows to East African art, as I have noted before, and prices are rising steeply. Now is the time to buy.

Commented Ripa di Meana: "It is so interesting what's going on here. This generation is using new media and concepts to send a message about Kenyan society and all the consequences linked to its transformation."

The King's Day show is being held in a purpose built gallery at the Belgian ambassador's residence in Muthaiga, finally being put to its proper use by an ambassador who is a huge and discerning fan of fine art.

There have been suggestions that the gallery could be reopened for a couple of days after the reception to attract a wider audience for the exhibition, which is likely to move in part at least to Ripa di Meana's gallery off Lower Kabete Road.

Then, in January, some of it will be crated up and sent to Brussels as part of the Bruneaf African art fair, which sets contemporary works alongside fine, often classic, pieces of tribal art.

Currently the Brussels gallery is home to a show by Muriuki of some 25 photographs highlighting Kenya as a country in transition.

This King's Day exhibition is a great idea, and the ambassador is much to be congratulated for his foresight in encouraging it. Perhaps, like Dutch ambassador Laetitia van den Assump and the Germans, French and British, he will project his country as an enthusiastic supporter of the contemporary arts in East Africa.

So, in the hope that might happen — and as a reward for His Excellency's good taste in inviting me to add lustre to the proceedings — let me raise a glass in advance to the health of His Majesty Albert II, King of the Belgians, with the added wish that he has a Very Happy Day.

Frank Whalley runs Lenga Juu, a fine arts and media consultancy based in Nairobi. Email: fwhalley@gmail.com