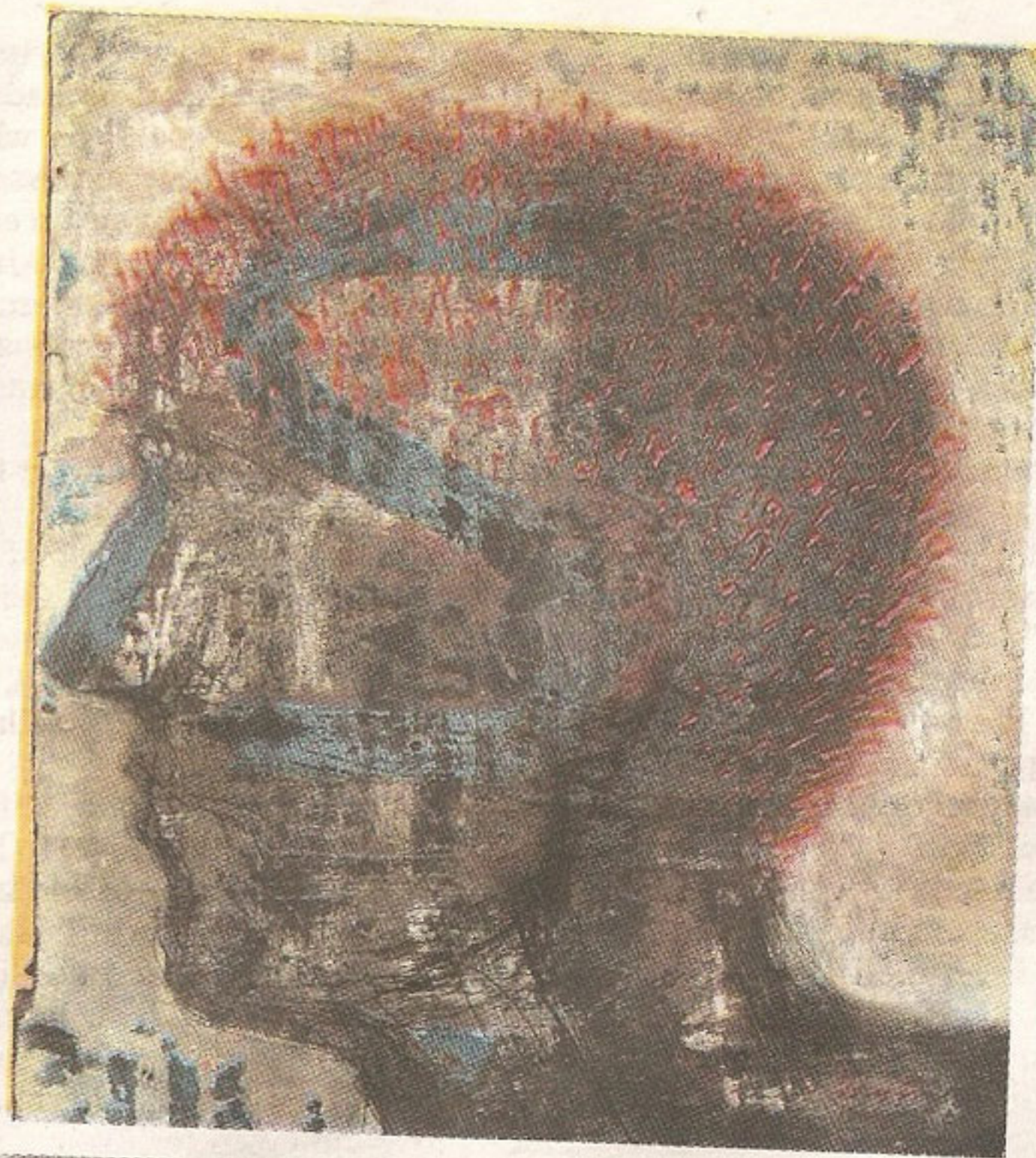
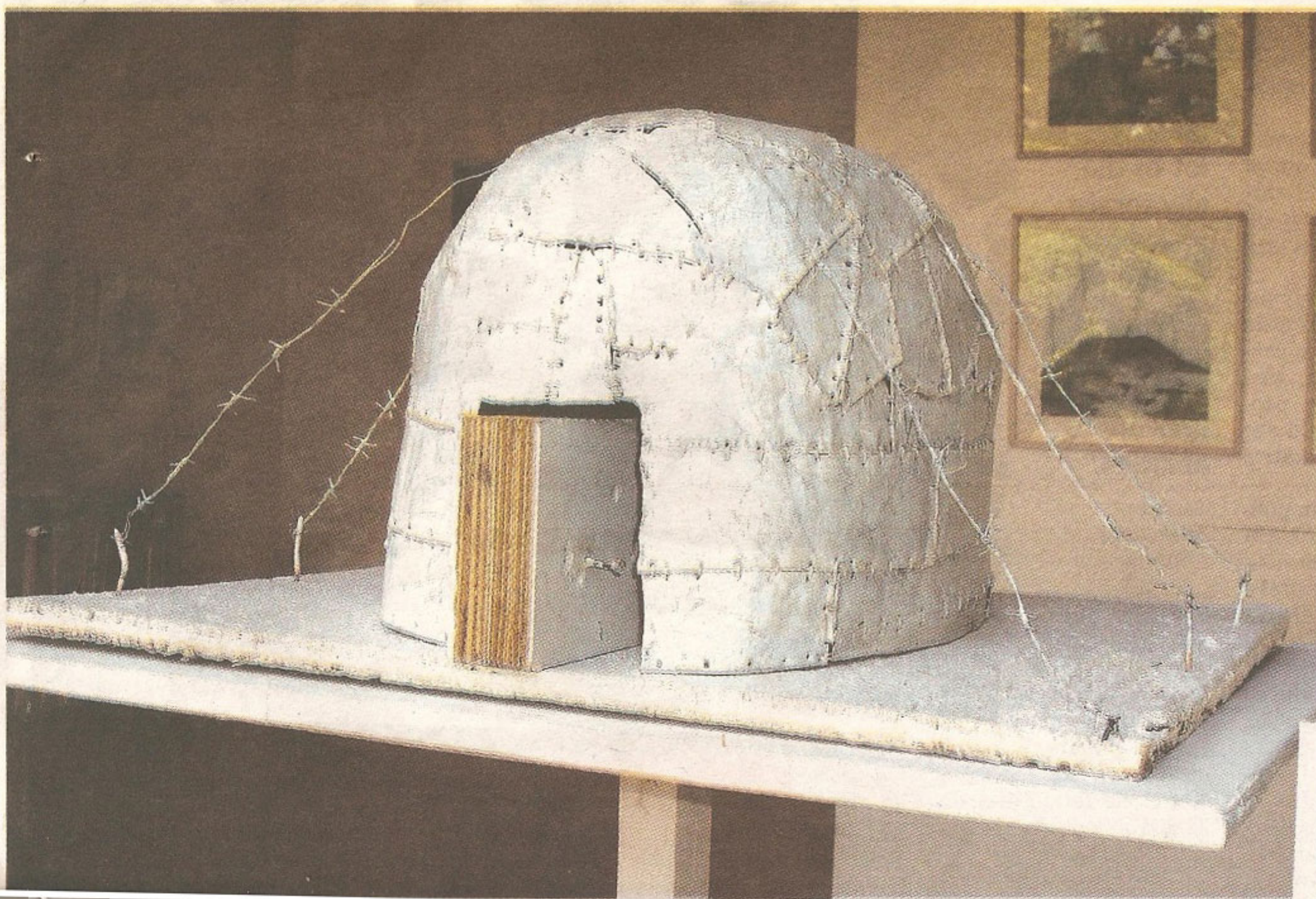


art



Images of loss and longing fill the latest exhibition by Xavier Verhoest.

They are based on the harrowing experiences of the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) following Kenya's PEV (Post Election Violence) of 2008.

Too many initials. But IC the works XL.

The paintings of Verhoest, who specialises in recording landscapes of the mind, are restful to view. Often wistful with dreams writ large, they float before us, beguiling us into considering the possibilities of their messages only after we have absorbed their beauty. And by then we are receptive to the ideas they project.

His exhibition was at the Roots gallery's Kenya branch in Nairobi, off Lower Kabete Road, an offshoot of the main space in Brussels, where the Kenyan artist William Wambugu is currently showing pen and ink drawings under the general heading *Seats of Power*.

Wambugu is a meticulous observer of the commonplace (garden tools, for instance, and in this case, chairs), which he thus invests with a grandeur beyond their normal scope.

The gallery owner, Samantha Ripa di Meana, is an enthusiast for Kenyan art and is keen to carry the flag in foreign parts as well as at home, where her garage does duty as the exhibition space and where Verhoest was showing 21 paintings and three sculptures until the end of last week.

The sculptures look like little huts and in one sense that is exactly what they are. They are models of the places where the IDPs found temporary succour; havens from the violence that took their homes and often members of their families too. But there is more.

The House of the Other is the Kafkaesque title of a small sculpture of a white igloo, tethered with barbed

Quiet tales of unspeakable acts

Yet the paintings of Verhoest, who specialises in landscapes of the mind, are restful to view, writes *Frank Whalley*

wire, its entrance blocked by a book. It is a hut, a temporary place to live, somewhere to hide and with steel stitches holding its iron sheets together, a helmet offering protection, an alien place which shelters while concealing identity.

The book that blocks the entrance, impeding access to this refuge, is a reference to the many words of condemnation, the volumes produced by inquiries, prosecutors and teams of lawyers for the defence.

The layers of meaning in these works reveal themselves slowly, like an opening rose.

Mountains in his paintings (and there are several) are symbols of the uphill struggle people face to free themselves from the pain of their loss.

Several pictures bear strange numbers.... 01-02, and 01/09 for example. These are the case file numbers of some of the suspects the International Criminal Court at The Hague, accused of, among other things, crimes against humanity.

Verhoest put the exhibition together after extensive discussions with the IDPs and attempts, through the healing process of art, to help them to come to terms with their predicament.

It is a procedure with which he is familiar through body mapping, the results of which have been shown around Kenya. First know yourself to understand others.

Certainly Verhoest knows about the dispossessed. As a volunteer driver with Medecins Sans Frontieres, he spent years with the victims of conflict in Palestine, the DRC, Sudan, Somalia, Burundi and Rwanda.

He believes there could be up to 6,000 people still in the IDP camps, although precise figures are hard to obtain. "A few thousand" is the government's best estimate, he said.

One large painting that touched the heart, the signature piece of the show entitled *I only have what I remember*, was based on the landscape photographed at 30,000ft above Kenya at the precise time the PEV was taking place. All looks so peaceful, so calm, so meltingly lovely, with a silvery plain stretching into the distance, glimpsed through ethereal clouds and drenched with light. Yet we know from the testimony of those who gave evidence to the Waki Inquiry exactly what was going on below.

A generation has been scarred. These paintings and sculptures tell quietly of unspeakable acts.

(Clockwise) *The House of Other* by Xavier Verhoest. *The Power of Red* by El Tayeb. *I only have what I remember* by Xavier Verhoest. Pics: Frank Whalley

Verhoest hopes that with the next general election on the horizon, he can move his show to a new space as soon as he can find one that is suitable. But meanwhile an exhibition organised by him and containing a couple more of his paintings while featuring 10 other artists can be seen just down the road at Le Rustique restaurant. And this one is on until the end of the month.

Called *II in One Day*, it sets out to showcase the wide variety of styles of work being produced in Kenya.

And there are lots of good things to see.

There is a large charcoal drawing by Peterson Kamwathi of a heavily armed soldier, the figure darkly menacing against a surprisingly gentle, green background — for me a neat metaphor for the way violence can spring from unlikely places — plus an expressionist Naivasha landscape by Allan Githuku.

The acerbic wit of the *Daily Nation* cartoonist Gado (pen name of the Tanzanian Godfrey

Mwampembwa) is well represented and it was refreshing to discover that Ato Malinda, best known as a performance artist, draws with precision and a clear, strong line. Her drawings of human figures with goats heads, juxtaposed with delicate paintings of flowers, examine female sexuality.

Otieno Kota contributes a heavily embroidered head, red on blue canvas, that somehow gets inside the skull, while Beatrice Wanjiku continues her examination of transition and the idea of self.

Outstanding was *Power of Red* by El Tayeb — a vigorously painted profile head chipped and gouged from a board, while with his two pictures dealing with the fragility of existence, Shabu Mwangi confirms himself to be a thoughtful artist of growing authority.

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