

Looking for Butterflies and Finding Poetry in Waruguru's Abstract Landscapes

By Roseline Olang'

Towards the end of my studio visit with Agnes Waruguru on a sunny Tuesday afternoon this past August, she generously allows me to scan through her sketchbooks, a privilege that I hope to honor. I imagine some of my own anxieties around sharing thoughts in progress, often incorrigible to anyone other than myself, and I am even more grateful for her openness. Waruguru's sketchbooks range from a little orange pocket-size journal to a large black Canson sketchpad. Page after page is filled with sprawling landscape drawings, sketches of leaves and flowers, and other experimental mark-making in her characteristic visual grammar; an impressive variation of hatching and arc lines, backgrounds treated with dyes, and paint, and stylistic drawings of the natural world that are familiar without being mimetic. These drawings are interspersed with notes that embody the ways that art and life interact, or as Waruguru herself says, are one and the same. A smoothie recipe on one page, and on another, notes on textiles and indigo dyes; a list of artists she would like to meet on one page, and on another some thoughts on developing new exhibition structures.

Here she notes, 'how do you get people to think more deeply + look more deeply?'

Through this question, I am reminded of the relationship between poetry and trust.

Oftentimes a poem requires the reader to trust the impulses, meanderings and leaps that the poet presents. With this trust, the poet also functions as a guide, a witness, and a seer, while concurrently leaving ample room for the reader to come into the work with their own agency. I identify similar sensibilities in Waruguru's compositions, that are coded with the familiar, while also abstracted and expansive. It is for this reason that I can't help but suggest a reading of Waruguru's first solo exhibition, *'Small things to consider'* as poetry, and propose three things to take into account as you look at, and feel through the work.

Landscapes and materiality

"Isn't it wonderful the way the world holds both the deeply serious, and the unexpectedly mirthful?" - Mary Oliver

In conversation with Waruguru, she shares that most of the work for *Small things to Consider* was born out of chance mechanism, which when applied to art-making, allows the unpredictability of chance to counter the consciousness and imagination of art¹. The body of work whose development was initiated during an art residency at Saba Studios in Lamu in 2019, features a series of prints, paintings, drawings and installation works. Often working with found material such as netting in this body of work, and moved by the freshness and expansiveness of the color palette, the seascapes, and vegetation, Waruguru factors in place with stylistic anchors that merge the commonplace, the random, the personal and the imaginary.

“I think that everything is from nature, there is so much design and so many patterns present in the landscapes, . . . and materials are important to me because you can trace culture, origins and personal history, particularly when thinking about the home, these materials carry a code”



In the painting, *In Reality, Dreaming of Palms* (2020), Waruguru creates a dreamscape rooted in reality with a touch of whimsy using stylized purple palm trees. The background is treated subtly and sparingly with green and black dyes creating an open atmospheric quality with splatters of blue ink that blot into the fabric signaling some form of water body, in this case, I imagine an ocean, the Indian Ocean, also suggested by salt in different parts of the composition.

Slow-looking

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."*

- Mary Oliver, *When I am Among Trees*

Based on a study conducted at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016, *Time spent viewing art and reading labels*,² on average, museum visitors spend 28 seconds looking at an artwork before moving on to the next, with most viewers spending just 10 seconds on a single art work.

In an attempt to defy that statistic, the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame introduced the program Art 180 that encouraged museum visitors to spend 180 minutes (3 hours) with a single piece of art over the course of a semester.³ Often, viewers privilege getting through as much artwork as possible on a visit to a museum or gallery, as opposed to slowly and deeply looking. By the time I am writing this, I have spent 90 minutes with Waruguru's painting, *Dreams of more and more, and yesterday*. Over the course of her exhibition, *Small things to consider*, I intend to complete the three-hour exercise.

The more I look, the more I see.

I am always floored by the range of mark-making in Waruguru's compositions. She presents us with a consistent lexicon across her paintings and drawings in a way that makes them relatable; without being monotonous.

The first thing I notice in what is now my second sitting with the painting, *Dreams of More, and More and Yesterday* (2020), is the translucency of the white fabric stretched on a 137 by 152 cm frame. Its tautness allows for the negative space to form fine patterns in the wafts and wefts of the fabric. My eye is later drawn towards the lower left quadrant, to a spiral executed in pink pastel, with alternating rows of complete and broken lines.

Vertigo.

Falling inwards.



Throughout the composition, there is also a range of hatches and arcs of different colors, weights, and lengths: orange at the top right, pink and forest green at the bottom left, and a pale grey to the right. Most satisfying to look at closely, is a series of pink dots, likely made with acrylic ink in a spray bottle, concentrated at the top right corner of the painting. Here, the inkblots form minute cross-like patterns with an even smaller silver glitter center. Noticing this feels like a reward for looking slowly and for looking closer.

The more I look the more I feel.

Waruguru skillfully collapses familiar, abstract and imagined landscapes, creating not only a mood but also a feeling. I am particularly fond of two little flowers drawn in lilac pastel executed in the simplest child-like lines. These flowers make me think about the environments in which one would find a butterfly and I try to remember when I last saw one, but instead arrive at my most memorable experience. Adjusting to the characteristic grey permacloud in early winter, my heart softened when I saw a large-winged golden monarch butterfly on a wide green leaf. I experience the same stillness when looking at the two little flowers in *Dreams of more, and more and yesterday*, and imagine that in these landscapes, I can find a butterfly too.

Colour

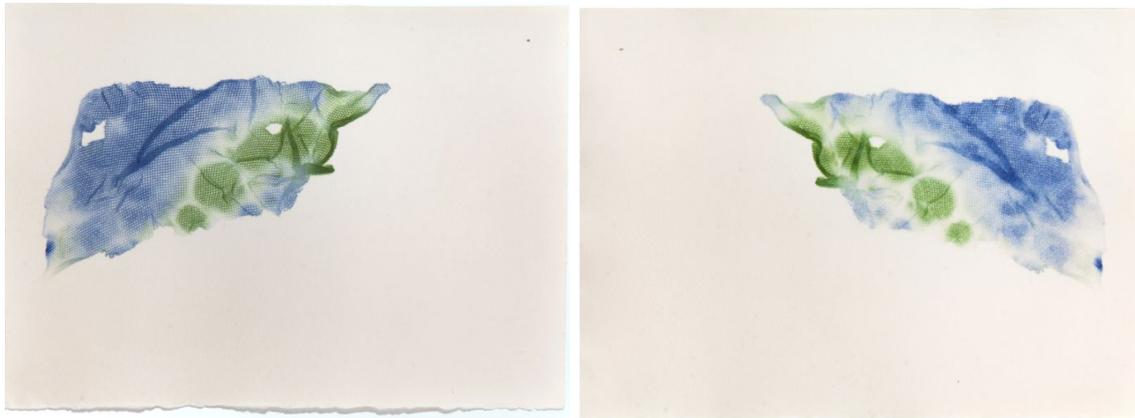
Colour is all that will remain, darling.

Deeply, darkly, but more often gently,

Lightly, lightly - Alexis Teyie, Waterlilies

Waruguru's experimentation and use of colour often respond directly to place, and reflect the mechanics of chance in art-making in both the paintings and prints on view. In *Small things to consider*, we are presented with fresh and vivid colours some of which reference the vegetation and topography of Lamu island. In her paintings, two things stand out to me: first are the interactions of pigment on the chosen surface, often, repurposed fabric, and watercolor paper and secondly, the interactions of pigments with each other. I am drawn to points in the composition where paint, inks, and dyes pool, resist, and diffuse into each other and the resulting range of marks on the surface of the paper or fabric. This interplay, while mediated by Waruguru, is also left up to chance at a particulate level.

In the series of 30 monoprints, I pay close attention to the intensity of color and value in the impression of the netting on the paper, ranging from more saturated and well-defined lines to fainter ones. In Remnants 3 the rendering of the blue and green values creates an airy translucency, much fainter than its sibling print Remnants 20. These variations are a function of choice: opting not to re-ink the netting, and chance: whatever predictable and unpredictable things happen as you run a print through an old press in Lamu town.



There is of course far much more to think about and far much more to consider when looking at Agnes Waruguru's work. Inherent in her use of materials and range of mark-making are fabrics and needlework techniques that pay homage to practices learnt from the women in her life, and that continue to disrupt the position of women's work⁴ in the world of fine art. While viewing and reading *Small things to Consider*, I implore you be open, to look closely, to look slowly and to look again.

Trust that Waruguru is leading you to known and unknown places.
Trust yourself to see, explore and feel through these abstract landscapes.
Trust the work.

Finally, as I think of the poetics in Agnes Waruguru's abstract landscapes and material experimentations with color and netting, I invoke the intimations of art critic John Berger on poetry;

"Poems. . . bring a kind of peace. Not by anaesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been."

Bibliography

1. Brenneman Christine (1994) Chance in Art
https://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/course/student_projects/Kristin/Kristin.html
2. Smith, L. F., Smith, J. K., & Tinio, P. P. L. (2017). Time spent viewing art and reading labels. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 11(1), 77–85.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000049>
3. Ciara Hopkinson. Snite program fosters deeper appreciation of art.
<https://ndsmcobserver.com/2019/10/snite-program-fosters-deeper-appreciation-of-art/>
4. Throughout the history of art, decoration and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as women's work, and as such, not considered "high" or fine art. Quilting, embroidery, needlework, china painting, and sewing—none of these have been deemed worthy artistic equivalents to the grand mediums of painting and sculpture. The age-old aesthetic hierarchy that privileges certain forms of art over others based on gender associations has historically devalued "women's work" specifically because it was associated with the domestic and the "feminine." https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work

