

Press kit

Nicholas Odhiambo Mboya

Utopia – Dystopia

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Press release | 13.8.2025

Nicholas Odhiambo Mboya
Utopia – Dystopia
27 September – 16 November 2025

Press preview: Friday, 26 September 2025, 11 am

Exhibition opening: Friday, 26 September 2025, 7 pm



Detail of: Nicholas Odhiambo Mboya, *Between Hope and Despair*, 2022, Courtesy the artist

In his multimedia works, Hamburg-based artist Nicholas Mboya addresses socio-political issues in his home country of Kenya alongside experiences of the African diaspora in Germany. He thus raises questions about traditions and spiritual-political challenges and examines conceptions of identity. His first institutional solo exhibition entitled *Utopia – Dystopia* has been created specifically for Kunsthaus Hamburg. It revolves around the field of tension between idealized notions of belonging and actual experiences of exclusion.

At the centre of the exhibition space is the expansive kinetic installation *Transit Point* (2023). It consists of found doors, motorized and mounted on rails, which the artist collected in different parts of Hamburg. The idea for the work arose during an encounter on a train, when a passenger who spoke Luo, like Nicholas Mboya himself, referred to him as a “jadhot” – as a “person of their own door”. This term is used in Luo-speaking communities, especially outside their homeland. As a symbol of different cultural identities, reflected in Mboya’s ability to speak Luo, Swahili, Sheng, Kikuyu, English and German, doors to him became a symbol of the negotiation of identity.

In the installation, the moving doors act as a symbolic cipher for linguistic and social thresholds. They represent the potential for mixing different languages and, at the same time, the exclusiveness that can accompany language policy. The rhythmic to and fro evokes urban transition zones – such as the nearby, heavily frequented Hamburg central station – places of anticipation, transculturality, multilingualism and fleeting encounters. The doors challenge viewers on the physical level to relate themselves to the movement and their surroundings. The installation thus becomes an experiential space regarding the principle of transit – in the sense of a physical passage and as an existential state of limbo.

The kinetic sculpture also references the fragile balance of diasporic existence: a ceaseless negotiation between visibility and invisibility, belonging and foreignness. Expanded for the hall of the Kunsthaus and positioned at its centre, it turns the exhibition space into a metaphorical Panopticon. Based on Jeremy Bentham's prison model of the same name – where the guard can observe all the cells from a tower while the inmates cannot see the guard – the French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term panopticism in the 1970s to symbolize the subtle mechanisms of power that express themselves through self-monitoring and discipline rather than coercion. In this way, internalised surveillance plays a role in one's identity formation, shaping thinking, behaviour and self-image.

The installation is framed by a series of large-format paintings visualizing socio-political structures. In these works, Nicholas Mboya transfers found archive and newspaper material onto canvases using image transfer techniques. From there, he develops dense collages, which he then paints over. They show people in Kenya in moments of waiting – at the polls, at land allocations, in schools or at border posts. Queues symbolize the act of navigating through physical and metaphorical systems alike, embodying the interplay between patience and impatience, individual hope and collective order. Nicholas Mboya transforms these everyday occurrences into a complex narrative about social spheres, rules and realities. Queuing thus turns out as a social choreography in which power relations, hope, exclusion and belonging are manifested.

The exhibition is complemented by a selection of drawings from the series *Rite of Passage* (2020, ongoing). These are self-portraits the artist created on photocopied documents such as passports, bank statements and other official documents, particularly those required by immigration authorities, ultimately, to decide on matters of accessibility and participation. In this group of works, the artist deals with institutional representation, bureaucratic classification and the marginalization associated with it. Here, the social dimensions of waiting condense into a personal narrative. The drawings convey the feeling of uncertainty before the residency status is extended, but also the stagnant time of waiting. They disclose what usually remains hidden under the covers of administrative files – the emotional impact of state decisions.

Utopia – Dystopia is an exhibition about movement and stagnation, about attributions versus self-assertion. It places the human body at the centre – as a bearer of history, memory and resistance, as a permeable membrane between the inner and outer worlds, a projection surface for social expectations and as an actor that claims space and positions itself. In the works on display, the body will appear sometimes fragmented, sometimes static, then again in motion – but always as an arena of negotiation processes into which attributions, traumas and utopian designs are inscribed in equal measure. Nicholas Mboya renders visible the structural conditions of diasporic existence. His works invite us to reconsider relationships – not as being predetermined, but rather as negotiable. They show how collective questions can be derived from personal experience – poetically condensed and politically urgent.

Curated by Anna Nowak

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 Hamburgische
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Biographie

Nicholas Odhiambo Mboya (*1992, Kisumu, Kenya) studied Fine Arts at the Mwangaza School of Fine Arts Kisumu and at the HFBK Hamburg. His works have been exhibited at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, JO (2025), at ICAT, Hamburg, DE (2024), in the Falckenberg Collection, Hamburg, DE (2024), as part of the fluctoplasma Festival, Hamburg, DE (2021), at the MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg, DE (2021), and at the Alliance Francaise, Nairobi, KE (2018). He lives and works in Hamburg.

Accompanying programme

Fri, 26 September 2025, 7 pm

Exhibition opening

Introduction: Anna Nowak

DJ set: yung_womb

Thu, 2 October 2025, 6 pm

Panorama XVII

with fngr fuia & CHO ROOM

Sat, 25 October 2025, 5 pm

Decolonize — art — perspectives

Talk with Nicholas Mboya

In cooperation with fluctoplasma Festival

Fri, 31 October 2025, 11 am–6 pm

#seeforfree

4–6 pm: Collage workshop

Thu, 6 November 2025, 6 pm

Opening Whisper Down the Lane &

Panorama XVIII

with RVDS & GGG

Sun, 16 November 2025, 4 pm

Finissage of the exhibition &

Launch of the ReferenceLibrary on Public Art

A cooperation of para-education, Stadtkuratorin & Kunsthaus Hamburg

Further information on the accompanying programme at www.kunsthausehamburg.de

Guided tours

Thu, 2 October 2025, 6 pm, with Hannah Köchy

Thu, 16 October 2025, 6 pm, with Jaana Heine

Thu, 6 November 2025, 6 pm, with Anna Nowak

Sun, 16 November 2025, 3 pm, with Anna Nowak

General information

Opening hours

Tuesday–Sunday 11 am–6 pm

Closed on Mondays

Admission fees

Regular: 6 €

Reduced: 4 €

Groups: 2 €

Admission to the events at the Kunsthaus Hamburg and participation in guided tours are free of charge.
Admission for refugees is free.

Press contact

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