

Willy Photos

Sam Hopkins and Franziska Lukas

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Willy Photos is the public photo studio of Peter Mwangi Irungu who, like a number of photographers, is permanently based in Uhuru Park. Willy came to Nairobi in 1994 after having finished school and started work in a factory in Industrial Area.

A year later he had earned enough money to buy his first camera; an analogue Yashika model. At this time photographic equipment was not particularly expensive and combined with a general interest in photography he considered it a chance to earn some additional income. Thus Willy's first encounter with photography was that of taking pictures of his work-mates. But with more time and experience he developed his practice, and began to take portraits of clients in public spaces across the city. He soon joined a childhood friend already working in Uhuru Park on the weekends, further developed his skills and began to establish his client base.

Two years later, the factory Willy had been working in collapsed, which convinced him to officially become a member of the Open-Air Photographers in Uhuru Park. He chose a space next to the lake as his office and began to develop his own specific style to differentiate him from the other photographers working across the park. A key element of this style is a simple but highly effective photomontage technique which he started developing around 2001. Inspired by the earlier strategy of playing with perspective and scale where, by positioning someone in front of a building in the distance one can see a person 'holding' that building, he used photomontage as a way to portray his clients in unusual and striking positions. Starting with people sitting on buildings, he soon built his vocabulary to include designs that show people sitting on bottles of coca cola, on wild animals, flying through the sky or enclosed in flower petals.

Born out of a commercial initiative and honed to perfection as a means of attracting clients to have their photo taken in this

style, what is so captivating about these images is the extent to which they challenge an image of Nairobi. Through the imaginative use of a very simple technique, a new iconography of the city emerges, re-contextualising and re-presenting familiar people and familiar places. For this current exhibition Willy was asked to further develop this iconography using locations in the city as backdrops which he had not previously worked with, but which are nevertheless very much part of the Nairobi landscape.



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The series of 11 portraits feature portraits of people standing on the new flyover, sitting on Kenyatta Avenue and climbing buildings on Haile Selassie Avenue. Installed hanging in the centre of the space, as opposed to the traditional method of hanging on the walls, the idea is to further break down our habitual mode of seeing the city. These photos do not so much reflect the city that we know but rather trigger our imagination and suggest a new way to see the city that maybe we don't know... yet.



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