

ARTIST PORTFOLIO: ESTHER MUTHONI MWANGI

Artist Statement

I build cities in boxes. They are small, detailed worlds you can hold, but they contain the vast, complex stories of how a place comes to be. My work is an investigation into the soul of a city, asking how its architecture, its faith, its trade winds and its memories layer upon one another to create the essence we feel on its streets.

While my practice has always explored the profound weight of history, time and trauma, this new body of work, the Narrative Box series, represents a shift in focus. Instead of solely examining the aftermath, I am now driven to understand the process of becoming. How is a city born? What are the first forces that define it, and how do subsequent waves of arrival, displacement, and rebuilding reshape its identity over centuries?

These mixed-media collages, assembled from vintage magazine cut-outs and found materials, are acts of communal recovery. I deconstruct and reassemble fragments of the past not to present a postcard-perfect image, but to illuminate the layered, often contradictory, truths of the present. Each box is a question made tangible. When the rules of a city are rewritten, who gets to stay, who is displaced, and what happens to the stories left behind? Through this process, I invite the viewer to not just see a city, but to sit with its history, to feel its tensions and to consider the forces that quietly and sometimes violently, shape the ground beneath our feet.

Artist Bio

Muthoni Mwangi (b.1997) is a visual research collage artist whose practice is rooted in the belief that true creativity requires space for restoration. As the founder and creative director of Cozy Culture Kenya, she is committed to building frameworks that integrate mutual aid and intentional rest into the artistic journey, both for herself and her community.

Her work is a tangible exploration of how cities around the world are formed through layers of living, arriving, remembering, and building. Using her signature Narrative Boxes, Mwangi acts as both an archivist and a storyteller, reassembling fragments of history to illuminate the present. Each piece is a carefully crafted world, holding within it the architecture, faith and memories that define a place's soul.

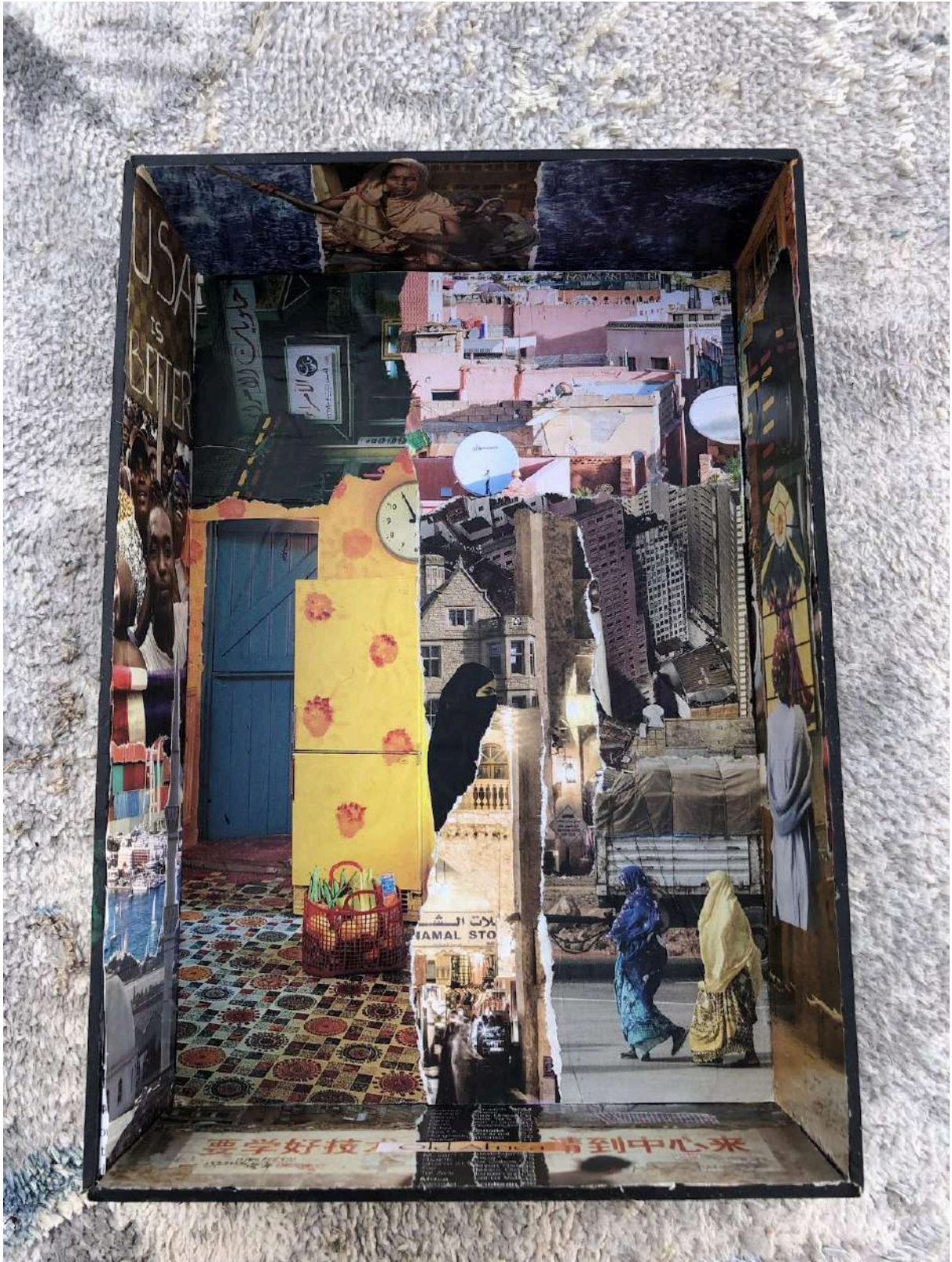
Mwangi is currently developing a major multidisciplinary research project based in the Lamu Archipelago, Kenya. There, she will live and work with the community for up to a year to understand the ancient roots of Swahili culture and the arrival of Islam on the East African coast. This project, which will invite collaborators from around the world, embodies her belief that art is a living process. One that requires deep listening, mutual respect and the honoring of untold stories. Through her art and her advocacy, Muthoni Mwangi builds worlds that ask us to reconsider how we remember the past and imagine the future, one box at a time.

ARTWORK NARRATIVE



1. What you are looking at is a city that shouldn't exist. Or rather, it exists in many places at once, all pieced together from magazine cut-outs and pasted onto a box. This is a Narrative Box, a tangible exploration of how cities around the world came to be what they are now, through layers of living, arriving, remembering and building.

Title: The City Left Out
Medium: Collage outside a box
Size: 12.5cm by 19.5cm
Year: 2026



2. What you are looking at is an artwork inside a box made of cut outs from magazines. The physical journey of the global movement, bodies in motion, carrying homes and histories in a single shipping container. These figures are captured in their cultural element, being present as they transition from one place to the next with a resilience witnessed from above by silent satellites.

“USA IS BETTER.” This phrase echoes from protests an ocean away, where the West is imagined as greener grass. It represents the movement of ideas how dreams and narratives are packaged, shipped and absorbed across borders. It asks us to sit with this borrowed belief and question whose story we are living and whose future we are building.

Tagged on the bottom are the characters written in Chinese. "要学好技 请到中心来" translating to "To learn a skill well, please come to the center." a philosophy of adaptation and creation. This is where the mental and spiritual journey meets the physical, not just arriving, but reshaping. It's a reminder that the inhabitants of every place, whether staying or leaving, hold the agency to rewrite the story from within.

On the right side of the narrative box, a woman prays towards a church. It's silhouette a fusion of local architecture and imported form. Her orientation is deliberate, she is not looking back, but forward, integrating the faith of her new landscape into the posture of her ancestral devotion. This is where geography meets grace, the promised "greener grass" becomes the ground on which she kneels, reclaiming the narrative through a quiet, daily revolution of spirit.

Title: The Cities In The Box

Medium: Collage inside a box

Size: 19cm by 27.5cm

Year: 2026



3. What you are looking at is an artwork built from colonial era magazine cutouts and routes used during slave trade, visualizes the violent entry of foreign systems that moved African bodies and minds against their will, holding communities hostage in their own homes and shipping them across oceans without autonomy. It questions the forced movement of ideas and beliefs, asking where we now anchor our integration when history itself was manipulated by those who seized our freedom.

Title: The Packaged Towns
Medium: Collage inside a box
Size: 13cm by 15.2cm
Year: 2026



4. What you are looking at is an interpretation of foreign forces taking over our homes, rebuilding and gentrifying. This piece visualizes how external movement reshapes spaces long after arrival, transforming neighborhoods, displacing communities and leaving former residents held hostage in their own homes, now stripped of resources yet surrounded by

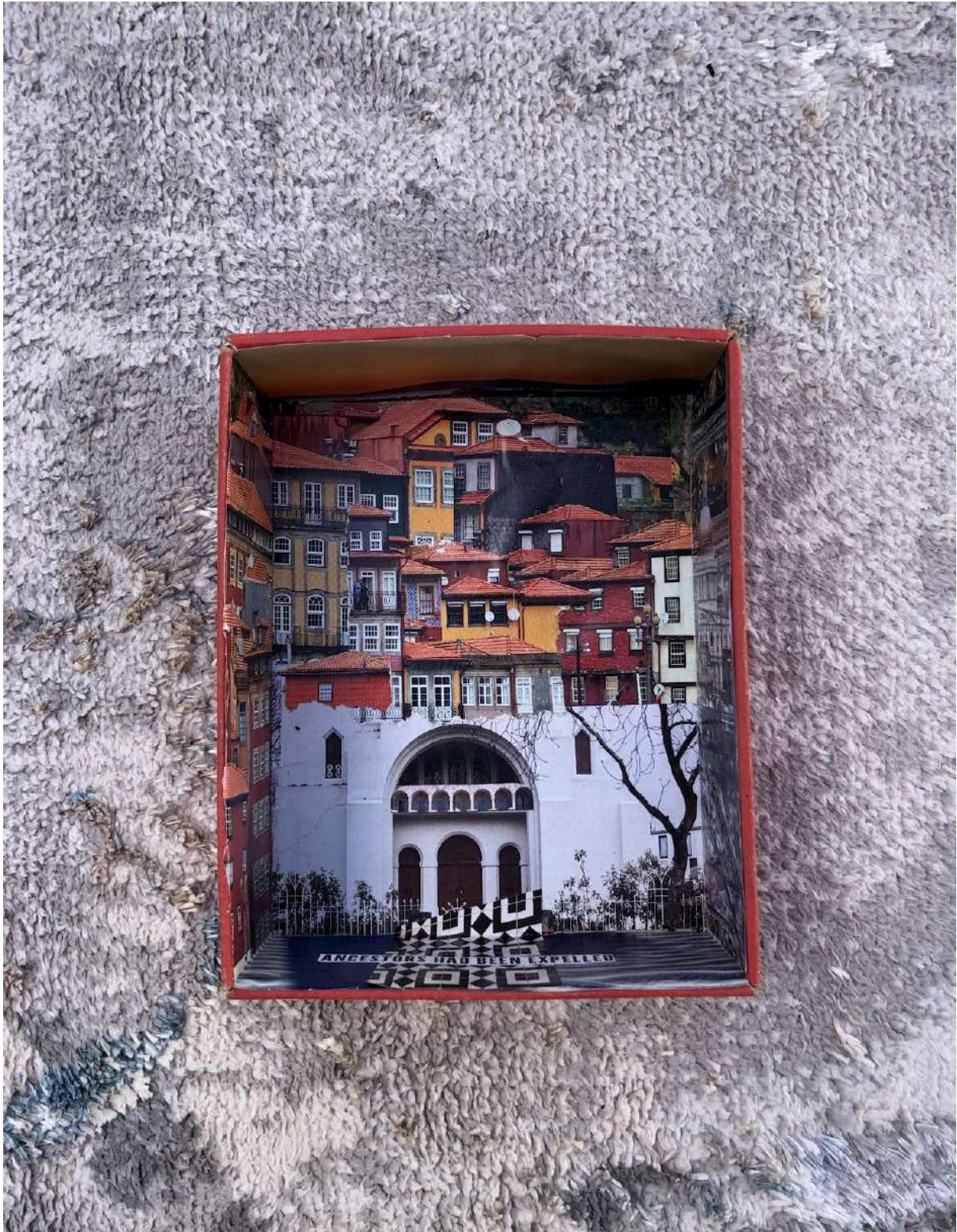
new development. When alien forces introduce foreign ways while constricting your choices, is any decision truly free? Or is every move made from a place of fear, under the quiet violence of invasion? This artwork questions informal leadership and gentrification. Is it free will if the will is decided for you?

Title: The City On Hold

Medium: Collage inside a box

Size: 13.5cm by 16cm

Year: 2026



5. What you are looking at is an interpretation of violently invaded not just territory, but the very fabric of domestic space, imposing alien architectures and perverse new logics. The brutal irony is that these spaces are built by the very people held hostage in their own homes forced to construct the walls that imprison them all while being priced out of the very existence they are laboring to assemble. Under this regime, value is determined by the

invaders rendering former homeowners powerless, scrambling through the psychic debris of their own lives. It's like having an eviction notice from your own existence.

Title: The Preserved City

Medium: Collage inside a box

Size: 13cm by 17cm

Year: 2026



6. What you are looking at is an artwork made inside a box. It's made entirely from cut-up magazines, and it's telling a story about a city and its people. You can see these shiny, modern-looking structures, the alien forces have taken over. They're redirecting the city's flow, changing where things go. In the same piece, we have human movement after displacement, cut from older, duller magazines. They're boxed in by invisible walls made

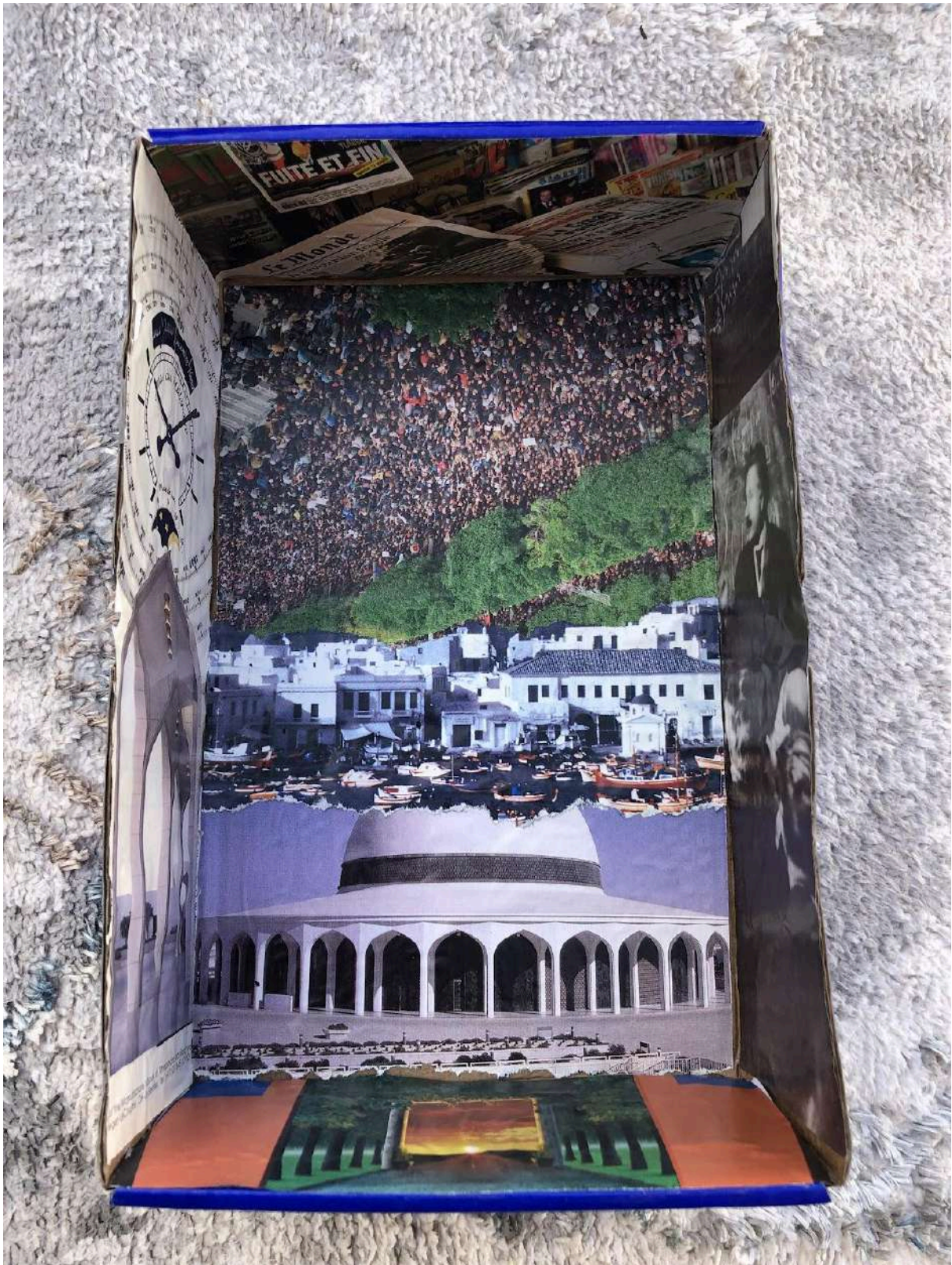
from bits of paperwork, rules and security patterns. Their paths are blocked, they can only go so far, think so much and access so little. The whole piece asks a tough question. When the rules of the city are slowly rewritten to keep some people out and let others control everything, what happens next? When your future feels just out of reach, where do you go from here?

Title: The Shelved City

Medium: Collage inside a box

Size: 14cm by 22cm

Year: 2026



This is the final piece of this art series cut from magazines, cut from histories, cut from a fate decided for us. What you see here is a crowd, inverted. Their world has been turned upside down. After displacement, after loss, after having almost everything taken, this is the view

from the ground: a reorientation of reality. They are not falling. They are finding their footing in a landscape that has been flipped.

Title: The Neatly Stored City
Medium: Collage inside a box
Size: 15cm by 24cm
Year: 2026

Exhibitions, Residencies & Workshops

Selected Solo & Group Exhibitions

2025

- Cozy corner with Love by Cassia
- Return to Kibra, Visit Ngara (Group Exhibition)
- Soft Living, Soma Nami (Group Exhibition)
- Orkedie Art 1 Year Launch, Orkedie Art (Group Exhibition)
- Palestinian Art Festival, Chez Sonia (Group Exhibition)
- Cozy Virtual Rika Festival, TICAH (Virtual Festival)

2024

- Shifting Tides, The Kobo Trust (Group Show)
- Musings of Colors, The Kobo Trust (Group Show)
- Unbound (feat. African Artists), Village Market (Group Show)
- Kenya Arts Diary Featured Artist, Go Down Arts Centre (Group Show)
- Exhibition, Nairobi National Museum (Group Exhibition)

2023

- Testament of Coziness, Statinev hub (Group Exhibition)
- Open Studio, Marula Manor (Open Studio)
- Seven Artist Open Studio Group Show, The Kobo Trust (Group Exhibition)

2022

- Shifting Tides, The Kobo Trust (Group Exhibition)

Residencies

- Artist Residency (Hosted by Wangare Mathenge Studios)
- Artist Residency (Kids Create Kenya, in partnership with The African Art Trust)

Workshops & Community Engagement

- Workshop Facilitator / Participant (Various Venues, Nairobi)

CONTACT DETAILS

Name: Muthoni Mwangi

Email: muthonimwangi431@gmail.com

Phone: +254784123063

Instagram: @_muthoni.mwangi_

Location: Currently based in Nairobi, Kenya. Heading to Lamu Archipelago from July 2026.