

## IAN GICHOHI



### 'I make photographs as a way to confirm experiences'

**Jonathan Fraser:** In the way it sometimes goes between friends who are also artists, you graciously shared a brief portfolio of your work with me several months ago. I often found that the images would oscillate between a desire to hold onto a particular moment/emotion (perhaps even something that you only happened upon by chance) and more deliberately orchestrated compositions. Does this sound accurate to you? How might you describe the work that you make?

**Ian Gichohi:** Yes, it does. I like to think I make photographs that exist in that space between what we see and how we perceive the things we see. It's a way of confirming experience by converting it into an image, a souvenir, something to take with me. Evidence that I have interacted with the world around me.

**JF:** In that same portfolio, there's a note about "photographs as created, not captured", and I am curious about what you meant when making that distinction. What processes do you undertake, or even undergo, to create an image?

**IG:** Here, I'm referring to the process of getting actively involved in setting up the image maintaining flexibility regarding what I'm willing to invite into the composition. In doing so, I'm making conscious choices to arrange whatever's in front of me to create the image, so it's less about what I see and more about how I see it.

**JF:** Let's explore this idea a little further by looking at two of your images: *I Have A Cry* (2020), which is so soft-looking to the point of almost disappearing completely; and the hypergranular, careful-where-you-touch, *Fold (II)*, 2023. How might you describe how you arrived at these two very different compositions?

Installation view of various printed photographs

**IG:** A good understanding of my tools has allowed me to anticipate the results of the technical aspects of my process. When I decide to take a photograph using my camera, I often have a good idea of what image I want to create so I can work backwards to achieve that composition. I first make pragmatic adjustments to the camera and the environment around it. I knew I wanted a quiet image of the horizon at dusk for *I Have A Cry*, so I removed all the visual clutter – roofs, buildings – and adjusted the camera's position to ensure I only shot what I needed. The goal here is to get as close to the idea in my head as possible in the camera before I move onto my computer to adjust light and colour depending on what I'm trying to achieve with the image. With *Fold (II)*, I wanted the rust to feature prominently, so I intuitively played with texture, light, shadow, and contrast until I was satisfied that the image aligned with what I had in mind.

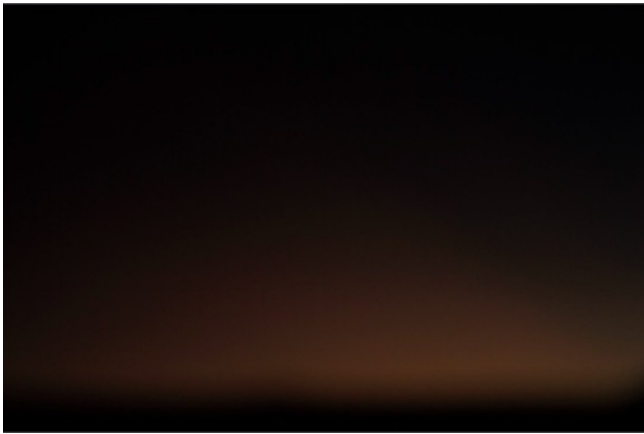
**JF:** In my practice, I am very invested in close looking and sensitivity to the environment around me. Several of your photographs resonate with me in this way. I'm keen to learn about your relationship to your environment when mediated through your camera, an instrument that can create and bridge the distance between you and your subjects.

**IG:** My relationship with my environment has changed over the last few years as I've grown to understand myself better. A considerable part of the process of understanding my camera required me to be keenly aware of my surroundings to make the most of what I had with limited tools and photography education.

Finding my place in relation to objects around me has enabled me to make sense of ideas, dream up new plans and think through old ones, looking outside of myself to make sense of what's happening on the inside.



*Fold (II)*, 2023



**JF:** An artistic practice can be very isolating in nature. Whose ideas, work, and worldview are you currently responding to or in communion with?

**IG:** I've been thinking a lot about John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*<sup>1</sup>. When thinking about presenting my work, I'm constantly going back to his thoughts around the language of images. Our assumptions concerning the nature of beauty, truth, civilisation, gender, taste, etc., and how they influence how we see are always interesting to play with. Then there's the child-like play in artistic exploration that you and Jackie Karuti<sup>2</sup> spoke about a few months ago. I think *Vitu Vya Sanaa*<sup>3</sup> is a perfect example of that very intentional process of observing to transform, of curiosity, as a starting point for making things to see, grow, learn, and understand what's around us. This aligns with some advice I got from Don, "try it, see what happens."

**JF:** Instagram and other social media websites present an opportunity for your work to reach a wider audience and access others' work. But often, there's a loss of context and perhaps even the risk of alienation with your thematic concerns. With your participation in the group show, *Open Studios, 2023*, there was an opportunity to have a focused presentation of your ideas. What was your experience presenting your work this way? Did you arrive at any new conclusions, especially with your work being in dialogue with two other artists and holding an exhibition walkthrough?

**IG:** It was interesting to see what the different stages of the process lent to the work. Initially, as these images had only existed on my laptop, decisions around printing had to be made. How does one decide what size to print when you can print any size you'd like? What does a large print of this image do? What does a really tiny print of this image do? What would it look like on different types of paper?

Until then, I had been making these A4-sized prints on tracing paper, which I didn't know what to do with. Using a corkboard to display them in the exhibition felt like a good way to present these layered images, as it allowed for interesting layering and overlapping. This moved the work in a new direction as I could organise these images in a way I couldn't before. The result was a presentation of varying paper types and sizes, an exploration of the ways we receive images.

Being able to present the work as a whole gave me the chance to flesh out my ideas and make them cohesive. The opportunity to talk to visitors about the work alongside Adam Yawe and Anita Kavochy helped get the ideas across to people in the intended ways.

**JF:** I have asked multiple questions about your practice and am grateful for your time responding to them. However, to round out this conversation, I want to ask a question that strays somewhat from the others. How are you taking care of yourself? Inside of "the studio" and perhaps also beyond that.

**IG:** Thank you so much for doing this with me. Right now, I'm taking care of myself by being in the 'studio'. Other aspects of my life have taken priority over my art practice in the past, so I'm being more intentional about making time to feed my craft and create a community with other artists, to learn from them and with them. I'm pursuing my goal of actively engaging with my work so it can move forward.

## ENDNOTES:

1. *Ways of Seeing* is a 1972 television series of 30-minute films created by writer John Berger and producer Mike Dibb. It was later adapted into a book of the same name. The series and book criticise traditional Western cultural aesthetics by raising questions about hidden ideologies in visual images. The essays are accessible here - <https://www.ways-of-seeing.com/>

2. Jackie Karuti is a multimedia artist based in Nairobi, Kenya. Here, Gichohi references a conversation between Fraser and Karuti held at the Goethe Institute, Nairobi on 12 April, 2023 as part of her exhibition, *Division: Before Line/ After Image*, 29 March - 26 April, 2023.

3. Kenyan designer Adam Yawe developed *Vitu Vya Sanaa* as a practice that seeks to explore urban Kenyan material culture as an aesthetic basis for the creation of objects. The associated publication outlines a methodology by which one can seek out and develop designs from objects encountered on their everyday journeys. The website is accessible here - <https://www.vituvyasanaa.org/>

*(This conversation took place in 2023)*

## Ian Gichohi

Ian Gichohi is a photographer living and working in Nairobi, Kenya.

Taking place as a central theme, Gichohi's compositions highlight the ways in which objects around us offer insight into the ways we live. His image-making is an exploration of our relationships with our environment, and the function of everyday objects as vessels for subjective meaning. Striving for a painterly softness, Gichoh creates images across the genres of still-life, landscape, and portrait photography.

## Jonathan Fraser

Jonathan Fraser is a multidisciplinary artist primarily using drawing as a means for paying careful (and caring) attention to his environment.

He studied Fine Art at Kenyatta University. In 2022, he was a recipient of the Venice Biennale travel grant, *WAFI*, facilitated by Wangechi Mutu Studio. In 2021, his solo exhibition *There Is A Time and A Place* was held at Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi.