

ART

A satirical take on modern relationships

EXHIBITION

Artist Labid Omnes is fascinated with dating and relationships, forming the theme of her current series of paintings in acrylic on canvas.

Labid is featuring her works at The Owl's Nest, an art space on the grounds of Merinda Gardens in the Muthangari neighbourhood of Nairobi.

She satirises society's take on relationships by using a limited palette of colours on dark pink or magenta backgrounds. The *Situationships* paintings depict a pair of faces with gapping eyes and absurdly long tongues. The chameleon-like tongue of one person is snaking out towards the face of the other.

"Modern-day dating is mainly a battle for power and control, such that each party within the relationship feels the need to constantly dominate," Labid said.

She added, "The one with the long tongue is controlling the relationship. But the eyes tell you whether the person is interested or not."

Indeed, the light blue eyes of her subjects are either sneaking peeks at each other or pointedly looking away.

Labid, a student of fine art at Kenyatta University, said that the current generation lacks patience when it comes to dating. "All we ever look for is convenience."

Another aspect of relationships that she explores through art is monogamy. The *Monogamy* set of paintings shows three faces of unequal size, but still with minimal features and prominent tongues.

As Labid sees it, there can be a good deal of conflict in relations, sometimes leading to violence. It makes her question whether monogamy is natural to mankind.

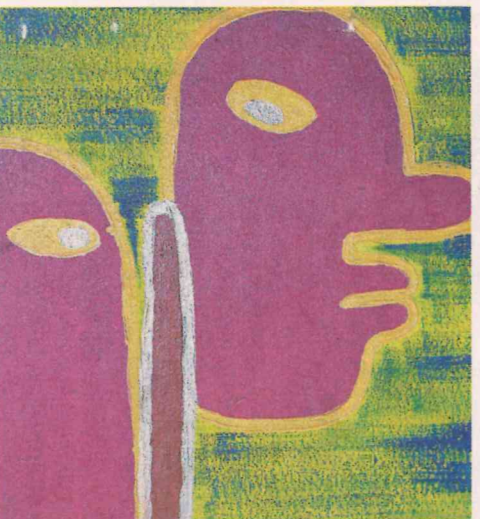
"One may argue that there are monogamous relationships that succeed, but in the same manner there are polyandrous and polygamist relationships that have thrived. To each his own," she said.

Labid first started drawing in pencil at the age of six. She remembers that she enjoyed drawing images of voluptuous women at the time.

"I lived with my grandfather who was a connoisseur of art. He helped me develop this skill, and gave me vintage books on art," she said.

Labid also dances, sings and plays the orutu, a one-stringed traditional guitar from Western Kenya. "Art is my form of release."

—Kari Mutu



Situationships, by Labid Omnes. Picture: Kari Mutu

GALLERIES: Show highlights the plight of elephants, which are being killed in Africa at the rate of 100 a day, in part to satisfy Asian demand for ivory. They could become extinct within the next 20 years, says World Elephant Day

PREPARE A CANVAS SAVE AN ELEPHANT

Frank Whalley, Special Correspondent

A momentous event has trumpeted far and wide.

World Elephant Day took place on August 12, ironically or perhaps appropriately also known in the UK as the Glorious 12th when over-privileged ladies and gentlemen clad in tweed sally forth, shotguns in hand, to slaughter as many grouse as possible on the high moors of the British Isles.

It's for the sport, you understand.

Bearers, stout yeomen ever ready to doff a cap and tug a forelock, drive the specially reared birds towards people who have paid vast sums of money to take aim and fire.

One landowner called Tom de Grey, the 6th Lord Walsingham, managed to kill 1,070 birds in one day in 1888, shooting from dawn to dusk and using four guns handed to him in turn by two loaders on a Yorkshire moor. It stands as a woeful record of pointless fortitude.

And it is not only grouse in the gunman's sights. Elephants too are in danger.

In spite of the best efforts of conservationists, the number of elephants has plummeted by 62 per cent over the past 10 years, and it is feared they could face extinction by the end of the next decade.

An estimated 100 African elephants are killed each day by poachers seeking ivory and meat, leaving only 400,000 remaining.

It's for the money, you understand.

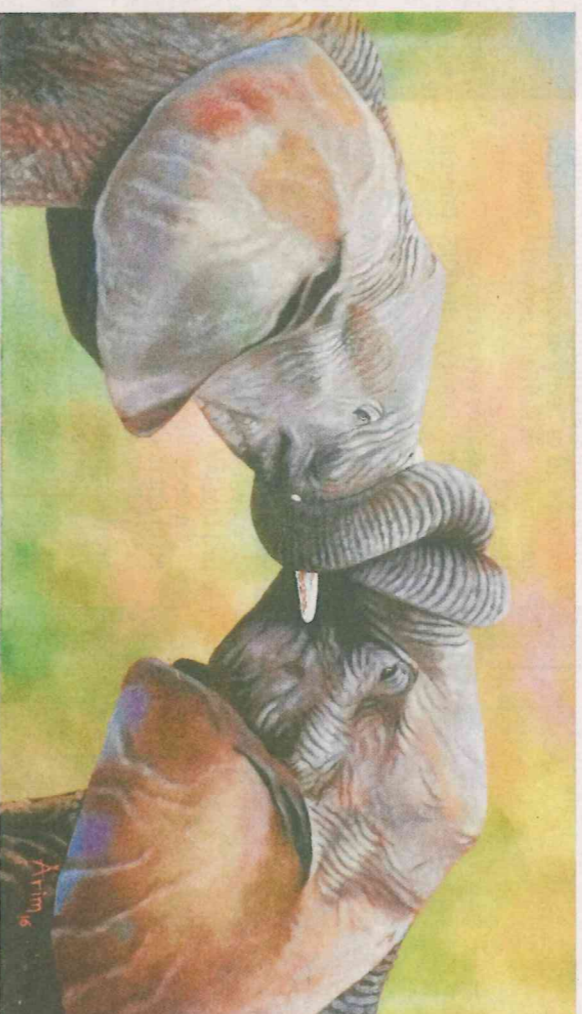
Demand is fuelled by the Asian Ivory market, according to the World Elephant Day organisers.

What to do? The first thing is to draw attention to their plight, and that is exactly what the Banana Hill Art Gallery is doing with an exhibition of paintings by Andrew Arim that opened this weekend and runs until the end of the month.

The gallery's owner, Shine Tani, is fond of elephants himself and often paints them as rather jolly, Disney-like things bouncing around trunk to tail and probably smiling if you look hard enough.

His artists are keen on them as well. Patrick Kinuthia does a good elephant with his typical broad brushstrokes, powerful and massive (both elephants and the brushstrokes) that show he has looked hard at his subject, while Ismael Katerregga turns out elephants too, catching their tree bark skin and leggy bulk but also their surprising lightness of foot.

Now comes Katerregga's fellow Ugandan Arim with around 30 paintings that remind us what a gift these creatures are. And by extension how we really must do



Devotion, by Andrew Arim. Picture: Frank Whalley

our best to save them.

Arim, I think, can fairly be described as an enthusiastic amateur. His day job is as an IT worker for a telecoms company in Kampala. He has a degree from Makerere and his declared ambition is to go back for a masters in IT and then become a consultant. Not a professional artist.

But then again, there is a long tradition of gifted artists who were amateurs before fame overtook them. L.S. Lowry was a rent collector, becoming a full time painter only on his retirement. The American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko was a primary school teacher, Paul Gauguin was a stockbroker, the pop artist Jasper Johns was a shipping clerk, and Julian Schnabel was a dishwasher and fast food cook.

It goes on: Jeff Koons, known for his balloon-like sculptures of subjects like puppy dogs, was a Wall Street commodities broker, while the Chinese painter and political activist Ai Weiwei, who designed the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing, was first a professional blackjack player and carpenter.

Maybe IT expert Arim too will change direction if success beckons.

Arim, who proudly states that he is a vegetarian (like the elephants he loves to paint, although whether he eats hay and grass like them or restricts himself to beans, tofu and such he does not say), works in an exhaustive, detailed realist style on finely woven canvas, which gives his works a tight, rather over-finished look.

They are well drawn, however, and at roughly 70cm by 100cm have a presence on the wall. With their meticulous attention to detail, coupled with a huge aaahhh factor, they would certainly appeal to those who like a refined and lifelike picture that will continue to give



Top, Lito, and above, B, by Andrew Arim. Pictures: Frank Whalley

pleasure to all who see it.

In two of the best pieces — *B* and *Lito* — Arim captures the playfulness of baby elephants, while in *Devotion* he projects the robust intimacy of two adults with entwined trunks, recalling a well known photograph by Peter Beard.

Supporting the show and propped against the wall, although not hung, are other excellent elephant paintings by Shine Tani, Kinuthia and Katerregga. It's for the cause, you understand.

Frank Whalley runs Langa Juu, an arts consultancy based in Nairobi