

NV Ian, where are you at the moment?

IM I'm in my studio in Kampala, the capital of Uganda in East Africa. I like geography and defining things. It's fascinating to understand how places shape identities and influence artistic practices. It feels like the perfect introduction to our conversation.

NV How would you describe your life as an artist in such a context? Is it a supportive environment?

IM It depends — what type of artist you are, and where you are in your career. Speaking about myself, I don't categorize myself as emerging, mid-career, or established. Those labels feel limiting. In Uganda, the situation is unique. There is very little support or appreciation for artistic practice and institutions for artists are scarce. But recently, a non-profit organization emerged, and it has been pivotal for me. It helped me participate in my first residency after my undergraduate studies, exposing me to new ideas and opportunities. That experience grounded me and gave me a clearer insight into paths I could take and the diverse contexts I could explore. Without that infrastructure, I'm not sure where I'd be now. It's a testament of how vital even the smallest system of support can be for an artist.

NV How does the local context in Uganda inform or influence your art-making?

IM Sometimes I joke about it because whenever I'm away, I miss the local vibe and energy. There are all these small synergies — the sounds, the movements, the spirit of the place. These subtleties shape how you see things. They are not always easy to articulate, but they profoundly influence the way I think and create.

NV Can you give us an example?

IM Kampala is so eclectic and vibrant. The streets are bustling, with people moving everywhere. We're known for our chaotic transport system, especially with the motorcycles. It's complicated, disorganized, but full of energy. That chaos becomes an integral part of how I process my surroundings. It's not just inspiration; it's a constant rhythm that shapes my work. It feels distinctly Ugandan, and that essence often inspires my creativity.

NV Are you also chaotic in your process?

IM Actually, I'm very organized — the opposite of what I consume. [Laughs, ed.] But I'm deeply aware of my environment and how it influences my work. There's a psychological association between settings and what you create. Even though I thrive in structured approaches, the chaos around me often acts as a counterbalance, adding texture and unpredictability to my ideas.

NV Could you guide us briefly through your creative process? How do you start a new painting?

IM My process is open, and that explains my versatility. I'm inspired by whatever resonates with me at the moment — a thought, a scene, or an image. My work reflects how my mind interprets the world. I see myself as a consumer of imagery and experiences, constantly absorbing what's around me. It's often spontaneous. An idea might spark while walking, and then I build on it, letting my intuition guide me.

NV Are there any references — personal or cultural — that guide you?

IM Sometimes it's as simple as a landscape or a image, maybe someone moving in the street. A particular gaze might catch my attention, sparking something, and from there I let my imagination take over. I'm inspired by the everyday — things that might seem ordinary but hold extraordinary potential for storytelling. These moments carry a rawness that I try to preserve in my work.

NV Let's be more specific. You're a storyteller. Is there any particular narrative you aim to highlight?

IM When an image speaks to me, it's not demanding for a story nor an explanation — it's just a spark. I try not to overthink it so I don't lose its rawness. My work often stems from ordinary scenes, which later tie into greater ideas like solitude and passivity. These are notions I'm drawn to — how they shape us, and what they reveal about our interactions and inner worlds. I like to examine those correlations and see how they resonate on a universal level.

NV Your work often focuses on portraits. What draws you to this approach?

AP Humans are a natural starting point for me. It feels instinctive to respond to them. Portraits allow me to delve into identity, emotion, and relationships — they're a direct way to connect with both the subject and the viewer. It's a form that feels intimate and immediate.

NV Sometimes you also depict yourself in your paintings. What compels you to create self-portraits?

IM Self-portraits allow me to critique myself and deliberate on my place within a larger community. I'm just a small part of it, but I really wish that my contribution could add something positive to the collective understanding. They're also a way for me to be vulnerable, to put myself under the same scrutiny as the subjects I paint. It's about grasping my role and voice within a broader context.

NV Your work is strongly connected to figuration. Have you ever considered exploring abstraction?

IM I started with abstraction but transitioned into more refined portraiture. This evolution felt natural as I grew as a painter. Initially, I appreciated painting as a language, but over time, I focused on detail and precision. That transition was gradual but necessary, allowing me to find the balance between expression and representation.

NV Have you thought of using media other than painting?

IM Before art school, I used clay to mold. Somewhere within me, I know I could be a sculptor or installation artist. It's about the idea finding the medium that best expresses it. While painting is my primary medium now, I'm open to experimenting with others if the concept calls for it.

NV Let's talk about colour, which is striking in your work. How do you approach it?

IM Emotion drives my use of colour. I see my paintings in colour even before I start. Until the colours align with the emotions I'm trying to convey, I can't proceed. Colour is more than an aesthetic choice for me; it's the foundation of how I communicate ideas and moods in my work.

NV Are there contemporary artists who resonate with you?

IM I admire many. Peter Doig's fluidity and use of colour inspire me. I'm also drawn to Georg Baselitz and Kerry James Marshall, who's known for his portrayals of Black figures. Their practice resonates with me on both a technical and conceptual level.

NV How do you see your work contributing to Black art history?

AP Black imagery has a rich history. I see myself as a small voice contributing to a larger conversation. My work

INTERVIEW BY  
NICOLAS VAMVOUKLIS

IAN MWESIGA CREATES PAINTINGS THAT RADIATE A PERPETUAL ARDOR, BLENDING CLASSICAL INFLUENCES WITH CONTEMPORARY SENSIBILITIES. HIS WORK IS ROOTED IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES OF HIS PAINTED FIGURES, SITUATING THEM IN IMAGINED WORLDS THAT FEEL BOTH INTIMATE AND EXPANSIVE. DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES, HIS ART EVOKES A FLUID INTERPLAY OF REALITY AND DESIRE. VIBRANT COLORS AND DYNAMIC COMPOSITIONS TRANSFORM EVERYDAY PERSPECTIVES, INVITING VIEWERS INTO SPACES THAT ARE ALIVE WITH DEPTH AND MOVEMENT. EACH PIECE RESONATES WITH EMOTION, OFFERING GLIMPSES INTO LAYERED NARRATIVES OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. WE SPOKE TO IAN MWESIGA WHILE HE WAS PREPARING FOR HIS UPCOMING SOLO EXHIBITION AT THE MARIANE IBRAHIM GALLERY IN PARIS, OPENING IN SUMMER 2025. DURING OUR CONVERSATION, HE SHARED HIS THOUGHTS ON IDENTITIES, THE INFLUENCE OF HIS UGANDAN ROOTS, AND THE ENDLESS CURIOSITY THAT FUELS HIS CREATIVE PRACTICE.

Ballerina on the piano, 2022  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery



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Photo courtesy by the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery



# Ian Mwesiga

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speaks to a community of joyful and ambitious people, presenting them as they are — alive, dreaming, and vibrant. It's about documenting life, culture, home. It's my way of contributing to a larger narrative.

NV You've previously spoken about art as a way to preserve. What do you believe your paintings document for future generations?

IM I think about what my work will transmit to people a thousand years from now. It's about capturing emotions, lifestyles, and perspectives — a celebration of life. My work is a reference for posterity, something bigger than my existence. It's of testifying, "This is who we were, this is what we felt, this is what mattered to us".

NV You once said, "history seems to be very vague... it seems to be there and not there". Can you be more specific?

IM History is rooted in memory, which is transient and often abstract. It's not always tangible or verifiable. This creates a situation where history becomes an invention, shaped by interpretation and imagination. It's both real and unreal, present and absent. I'm fascinated by that tension and how it widens our knowledge of the past.

NV Last year, you conceived a painting with the Pepsi "Live for Now" slogan. Why did you choose that quote? Was it connected to the controversy around the campaign?

IM That piece was inspired by a random photo I took in town, but it's a fantastic way to discuss wider themes. The quote itself intrigued me — "Live for Now" feels pessimistic, almost as if the future is hopeless. It made me question the intent behind such messaging and how it mirrors societal attitudes.

NV Your painting "Ballerina on the Piano" reminded me of Michaela DePrince, the groundbreaking Black ballerina. She tragically passed away recently at only 29 years old. What inspired that piece?

IM I was deeply moved by stories of Black ballet dancers, like DePrince and Misty Copeland, who have overcome incredible challenges. My painting wasn't directly inspired by DePrince, but it tackles expansive cultural conversations about resilience, representation, and breaking barriers. It's about challenging norms and highlighting the strength within marginalized communities.

NV Do you believe art has the power to change the world? How do you see your role in that?

IM Absolutely. Art creates spaces for contemplation and imagination. It opens windows to new possibilities, offering hope and encouraging people to think differently. My work aims to address the internal aspects of being, fostering self-reflection and envisioning alternatives. It's about creating moments of connection and awareness.

NV I'm now fully convinced that if you weren't an artist, you could have been a psychologist.

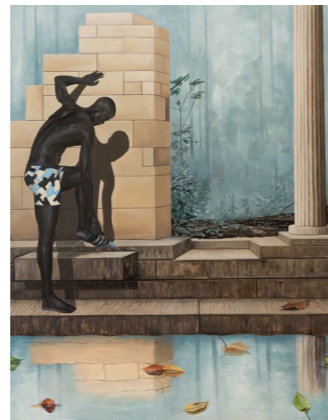
IM I agree. I love studying people and their behavior. Maybe, in a way, I can consider myself as an anthropologist, analyzing society through visual communication. I'm curious about what drives people and how those dynamics play out in communities.

NV Where do you see yourself 20 years from now?

IM I want to make this moment meaningful. Living and working in Uganda is rare and precious. I'm focused on pushing boundaries, expressing my true self, and analyzing the world through my own lens. It's about investigating who I am and sharing that journey with others.

NV What are you currently working on now? Are there any projects to share with our readers?

IM I'm preparing a solo exhibition at Mariane Ibrahim Gallery in Paris, scheduled to open in June 2025. The project explores the vagueness of reality, zooming in and out of contrasting perspectives. It's an exciting adventure that I'm profoundly invested in.



Man and his shadow, 2023  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

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Man striding on a staircase, 2023  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery



Pick your fallen fruit from the orchard, 2024  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

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Forbidden Fruits, 2022  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery





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087

Swimmer and Man standing by the pool, 2023  
Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery