SOJOURNER: THE DIFFERENCE IS THE SAME

MAGGIE OTIENO



Maggie Otieno: Sojourner: The Difference is the Same

Efie Gallery

Sojourner: The Difference is the Same

Maggie Otieno

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Foreword

Efie Gallery is pleased to present Sojourner: The Difference is the Same, Maggie Otieno's debut solo exhibition with the gallery, marking a significant moment in a relationship that has developed alongside Efie since its inception. Otieno's work formed part of our programme in 2021, and five years later, this exhibition reflects the depth of a sustained dialogue with an artist whose practice has remained central to our thinking around material, memory, and transformation. To arrive at her first solo presentation with the gallery after years of working together is therefore not simply a milestone, but an affirmation of our belief in relationships with artists that are allowed to unfold over time.

For nearly three decades, Otieno has developed a sculptural language rooted in the reclamation and reconfiguration of materials marked by previous lives. Railway sleepers, metal, and other found elements become carriers of history: surfaces bearing the physical traces of movement, labour, use, and time. In Sojourner: The Difference is the Same, she extends this language through a new body of mixed-media sculptures, transforming materials once associated with movement and infrastructure into objects of stillness and contemplation. Their histories are neither erased nor preserved intact; instead, they become the foundations from which new forms and meanings emerge.

The exhibition also follows an important period of artistic exchange for Otieno, including a two-month residency at El Anatsui's studio in Tema, Ghana. Immersed in an environment shaped by a profound sensitivity to material and its capacity for transformation, Otieno further considered the possibilities held within objects that have already travelled through time. This experience resonates throughout the exhibition, but as a departure from her established practice, but as a continuation and deepening of questions she has pursued throughout her career: how materials remember, how histories are inherited, and how acts of reconstruction can become gestures of renewal.

At the centre of Sojourner is the idea of passage. Otieno approaches both material and memory as things that are continually carried forward, altered by each encounter while retaining traces of what came before. Her sculptures occupy this space between difference and sameness, continuity and change, asking us to consider transformation but as the abandonment of an earlier state, but as an accumulation of experience. The weathered surfaces and histories of her materials become inseparable from their present forms, allowing the works to hold past and present simultaneously.

For Efie Gallery, presenting Otieno's debut solo exhibition five years after first exhibiting her work carries particular significance. It speaks to the kind of artistic relationships we have sought to build since our founding: patient, sustained, and grounded in the conviction that an artist's practice is best understood not through isolated moments, but across its evolution. Sojourner: The Difference is the Same is both the culmination of a dialogue that began with the gallery itself and the beginning of a new chapter—one that celebrates Otieno's enduring commitment to material, memory, and the possibilities of becoming






WORKAHOLIC

Maggie Otieno

(b.1974)

Maggie Otieno (b. 1974, Nairobi, Kenya) is a seminal Kenyan sculptor whose nearly three-decade practice centers on the conceptual and physical transformation of reclaimed, historically charged, and distressed materials. Working primarily with monumental timber and metal, her semi-abstract forms examine layered narratives of colonial history, collective memory, environmental survival, and interpersonal dynamics. Otieno initially trained in painting and design at the Creative Art Centre in Nairobi before executing a pivotal transition to three-dimensional sculpture in 1999. This shift, catalyzed by rigorous international workshops and formal mentorships, marked the beginning of her deep engagement with material voice.

Central to Otieno's contemporary practice is her use of century-old railway sleepers, timbers originally laid across East Africa during British colonial expansion. Rather than imposing a predetermined form onto her media, Otieno utilizes an intuitive, responsive methodology that collaborates with the material's structural scars, weathering, and deep weight. Her sculptures act as architectural vessels of remembrance and physical sites of renewal.

Otieno's work has been exhibited across major global institutions and platforms in Kenya, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, South Africa, Ethiopia, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Notable projects include her inclusion in the Anthropocene Museum 9.0 by Cave Bureau at the Sharjah Architecture Triennial (2023), curated by Tosin Oshinowo, and her recent inclusion in the group exhibition Resonance at the Fondazione Giorgio e Armanda Marchesani during the Venice Biennale (2026).

Her works are held in notable civic and private collections, including major public commissions for Kenya Railways and the Trade & Development Bank. Alongside her studio practice, Otieno operates a vital pedagogical hub from her Nairobi studio, providing mentorship and professional cultivation for emerging contemporary artists.




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Sandeep Desai

Listening to the Grain

Memory, Material, and the Emotional Architecture of Maggie Otieno

There are artists who impose themselves upon material, and there are artists who listen. Maggie Otieno belongs decisively to the latter. Her practice emerges from attentiveness rather than imposition. Wood is not forced into submission and metal is not bent into silence; instead each fragment of matter is approached as a bearer of memory — already marked, already shaped by time, already carrying histories that precede the sculptor's intervention. Maggie's work begins by recognising that materials remember.

This first solo exhibition marks the public articulation of a philosophy that has matured quietly through years of practice. The sculptures presented here are not simply assembled objects. They are encounters with material histories: railway sleepers weathered by time, distressed timbers bearing the marks of labour and environment, fragments of metal tools, joinery bolts, spanners and structural elements drawn from the lived world of work and infrastructure. In Maggie's hands these materials are not inert components. They remain active participants in the sculptural conversation.
At the centre of this exhibition is the railway sleeper. Within the East African landscape the sleeper carries a particular historical gravity. It is an object bound to the physical expansion of railway infrastructure and the movement of people, goods and labour across territories. Beneath locomotives these beams absorbed immense pressure. They carried vibration, heat and weight for decades, often without recognition. Maggie approaches these materials not as remnants of industry, but as witnesses. Their endurance becomes part of the sculptural language.

The surfaces of the sleepers retain their histories. Bolt holes remain visible, cracks are preserved, and weathering is allowed to speak. The grain of the wood becomes a record of experience. Rather than concealing these marks, Maggie positions them at the centre of the composition. Fractures become lines of structure. Splits open subtle emotional spaces within the form. The timber itself reads almost like a map: a topography of endurance shaped by time, labour and environment. Distressed materials are fundamental to Maggie's process. Instead of seeking pristine surfaces she actively hunts for fragments that have lived. Weathered timber, oxidised metal tools, structural bolts and worn fastenings are drawn into her sculptural vocabulary. These materials appear almost to gravitate toward her practice, each carrying traces of its earlier life. Maggie's role becomes one of recognition: identifying which materials resonate with the evolving language of her work and allowing them to find new form.

Within this process the sculptures begin to behave almost as travellers through time. Each work carries fragments of earlier histories while inhabiting a distinctly contemporary sculptural presence. The past is not reconstructed literally but communicated subliminally through material presence. The works possess a contemporised spirit: they remain grounded in nature and history while existing fully within the present moment.

Earlier phases of Maggie's practice reveal the development of this sensibility. Her early explorations in jacaranda wood established an intimate relationship with organic material. Carved surfaces emphasised tactile sensitivity and the expressive potential of natural grain. These early works demonstrated an emerging attentiveness to the way material itself communicates form and feeling.
The introduction of metal into her practice expanded this vocabulary. Metal introduced density, resistance and structural tension, allowing Maggie to explore weight and balance in new ways. During her time at Kuona Trust in Kilimani the dialogue between wood and metal became central to her sculptural thinking. Organic material and industrial material began to interact within the same works, reflecting the intertwined realities of nature and human activity.

Another significant chapter in Maggie's evolution emerged during the COVID period. During this time she produced a series of fragile coloured aluminium sheet sculptures that functioned as detailed studies. These works explored gesture and posture through a refined sculptural language. Often simplified to essential forms, the creations communicated emotional presence without relying on multiple features. These aluminium works can be understood as exercises in reflection and sculptural expressionism. Their delicacy emphasised sensitivity to form and emotional nuance. Each piece operated almost like a quiet meditation on aspects feminine. The coloured aluminium surfaces introduced lightness and subtle tonal variation while maintaining structural clarity.

When viewed in relation to the sleeper sculptures, these aluminium studies reveal a deeper continuity. Both bodies of work explore how form communicates internal states. In the aluminium pieces this occurs through delicate form and purposeful abstraction; in the sleeper sculptures the same sensitivity emerges through weight, balance and the silent authority of material presence. The shift is not conceptual but material — an expansion from intimate study to monumental memory. A defining moment in Maggie's engagement with railway sleepers occurred through her encounter with the late Mr. Chandu Dodia, who supplied many of the materials she now works with. During a visit to his furniture workshop he expressed a simple yet profound insight. While he could transform the sleepers into furniture, he recognised that an artist could reveal the deeper stories embedded within the wood. He encouraged Maggie to give the material a voice. This moment reframed Maggie's relationship with the sleepers. They were no longer merely reclaimed timber but entrusted histories. The sculptor's task became one of listening carefully to what the material already contained. Through composition and balance Maggie began to reveal those narratives — not through literal illustration but through presence.

Trust therefore becomes a quiet thread throughout the exhibition. Trust in material. Trust in process. Trust that certain fragments will resonate with the artist and naturally find their place within a work. The sculptures emerge through careful selection and intuitive assembly. Materials grounded in nature — wood, metal and tools shaped by labour — are brought together in ways that feel both deliberate and inevitable. The resulting works possess an energy that feels almost predestined. Once assembled they project a subtle but unmistakable presence. Collectors and viewers frequently respond to these sculptures with a sense of recognition rather than surprise. The works feel discovered rather than invented, as though the materials themselves had been waiting to assume this configuration. This quality contributes to the universal energy embedded within Maggie's sculptures. The works do not depend on explicit explanation. Instead they operate through resonance. Viewers encounter not only a physical object but an energetic field shaped by time, transformation and intention. In this sense the sculptures are manifested forms through which universal energy becomes visible.

Maggie's professional formation within the Kenyan contemporary art environment also plays a crucial role in shaping her discipline. Early involvement with AfricanColours exposed her to rigorous standards of presentation and curatorial thought. From this experience she developed a deep respect for craftsmanship, detail and the responsibility of the artist toward both material and audience.

Despite the rugged character of her materials, Maggie's works are carefully resolved. Joinery is deliberate, weight distribution is balanced, and structural integrity is preserved. Bolts, spanners and fastenings remain visible not merely as functional elements but as compositional components. Each element contributes to the visual rhythm of the sculpture. Standing before these works one becomes aware of duration. The sculptures appear to contain time. Weathered timber surfaces reveal years of exposure. Metal fragments speak of labour and industry. Through Maggie's sculptural language these traces coexist within a single form.

There is also a distinctly Kenyan sensibility within this body of work. Railway sleepers are familiar objects within the landscape, appearing along disused tracks and in repurposed structures. Maggie elevates these materials without romanticising them. Instead she invites viewers to encounter them anew — not as infrastructure but as carriers of collective memory.

Across Maggie Otieno's practice one principle remains constant: scars are evidence of endurance. Marks within the material are not flaws to be erased but records of lived experience. By allowing these marks to remain visible Maggie honours the history embedded within each fragment. This exhibition reveals an artist who has developed a confident material language. Maggie listens closely to wood, metal and the quiet narratives embedded within them. Through that attentiveness she transforms remnants of the past into sculptural forms that continue forward into the future.

The works presented here are not merely objects but presences. They travel through time carrying a contemporised spirit while remaining grounded in nature. They communicate through material memory and structural balance rather than overt narrative. Ultimately Maggie Otieno's sculptures remind us that artistic evolution, like natural evolution, is guided by energy. Materials that resonate with the artist become vessels through which that energy is expressed. Through sculptural assembly those materials acquire new life while preserving the dignity of their earlier existence.

In listening to the grain Maggie reveals that history continues to live within matter. Wood remembers pressure. Metal remembers labour. Tools remember the hands that once held them. When an artist listens carefully enough those memories become form.

And in doing so, the works resonate with permanence.



Chachu Tamu 1 (Bitter sweet), 2026
Railway sleepers and mild steel
194 cm × 20 cm × 30 cm







Chachu Tamu 2 (Bitter sweet), 2026
Railway sleepers with mild steel
193.4 cm × 18 cm × 30 cm







Msikilizaji Makini (The Keen Listener), 2026
Teak wood with mild steel
196 cm × 27 cm × 27 cm









Wasafiri Majini 1, 2026
Wood with mixed media
257 cm x 17 cm x 16 cm









The Sleeping Wanderer, 2026
Teak wood with mild steel
213 cm × 20 cm × 28 cm


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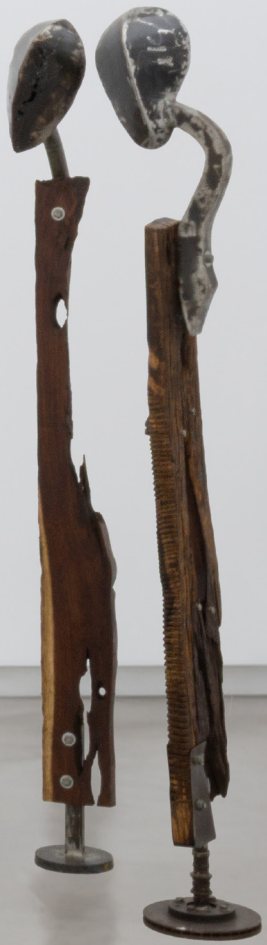










Wholesome, 2026
Railway sleepers with mild steel
262 cm × 24 cm × 28 cm







Because Walls Have Ears, 2026
Red teak and mild steel
213 cm × 20 cm × 28 cm











Msikilizaji - The Listener, 2026
Teak wood with mild steel
239 cm x 23 cm x 48 cm











Wasafiri Majini 2, 2026
Wood with mixed media
247 cm x 68 cm 68 cm





El Anatsui Studio Residency

June - August 2025

Maggie Otieno's two-month residency at El Anatsui's studio in Tema, Ghana, offered a period of sustained experimentation, exchange, and material discovery. Taking place ahead of her debut solo exhibition at Efie Gallery, the residency allowed Otieno to temporarily step outside the familiarity of her studio and surroundings in Nairobi and immerse herself in a different cultural and material landscape. What began as an opportunity to encounter a new environment ultimately became an experience of recognition: the further she travelled into the particularities of Ghana, the more she became conscious of the continuities between the lives, materials, and experiences she encountered there and those she knew at home in Kenya.

Working within El Anatsui's studio provided an especially resonant context for this exploration. Anatsui and Otieno share an attentiveness to materials that have already lived, to objects shaped by labour, movement, utility, and time, and to the possibilities that emerge when these materials are removed from their original functions and allowed to assume new forms. For Otieno, whose practice for nearly three decades has centred on reclaimed wood, metal, and found materials, the residency offered an opportunity not to abandon an established language, but to test its possibilities within unfamiliar surroundings. Through observation, experimentation, and exchange, she encountered new materials and processes while deepening the questions that have long animated her work: what does a material remember, whose histories does it carry, and what remains when its original purpose has passed?

Her search for materials took her beyond the boundaries of the studio and into the everyday life of Tema and its surrounding communities. At New Town Fishing Harbour, Otieno became particularly drawn to the wooden oars used by local fishermen. Her encounter with one fisherman, whom she came to know as "Onko," began through her desire to acquire his weathered oar in exchange for a new one. What interested her was precisely what distinguished the old object from its replacement: the accumulation of experience embedded within it. The worn wood had registered the fisherman's grip, the repeated movement of his body, the temperament of the Atlantic, and countless journeys between shore and sea. In Otieno's understanding, the oar had become more than a tool. It was an archive of an individual life and of a relationship between a person, an object, and an environment.

These encounters echoed the way Otieno has long approached materials in Kenya. Whether working with railway sleepers that have carried trains and people across East Africa for generations, fragments of metal bearing evidence of previous use, or an oar weathered by the Ghanaian coast, she is drawn to objects precisely because they have already participated in human life.

Their imperfections, erosion, weight, and wear are not qualities to be corrected but evidence to be read. In Ghana, Otieno discovered unfamiliar objects carrying unexpectedly familiar histories. The geography had changed, as had the people and the particular circumstances of their lives, yet the fundamental relationships she observed, between people and labour, hands and tools, memory and material remained recognisable.

It was from this experience that the title Sojourner: The Difference is the Same began to take on its fullest meaning. Otieno arrived in Ghana as a sojourner: temporarily inhabiting a place distinct from home and encountering it through the heightened attention that comes with being elsewhere. Yet her encounters repeatedly complicated the distinction between the familiar and the foreign. Conversations with people she met, the gestures of daily life she witnessed, and the materials she collected revealed differences of place, language, history, and experience while simultaneously exposing the shared structures beneath them. Ghana did not become indistinguishable from Kenya; rather, its difference became the very means through which Otieno recognised a deeper familiarity.

The Difference is the Same therefore does not propose sameness as the absence of difference. Instead, it asks whether difference itself can become a point of convergence rather than departure. Two people may arrive from distinct histories and geographies and still recognise something of themselves in one another. Two objects may have served entirely different purposes and yet carry comparable evidence of touch, labour, movement, and time. Difference, in this sense, does not necessarily create distance. It can become the space in which correspondence is discovered.

This understanding extended into Otieno's experimentation within the studio. Alongside the reclaimed wood and metal central to her practice, she explored clay and other materials, becoming increasingly attentive to the ways different substances respond to the hand. Clay, with its sensitivity to pressure and its capacity to retain the evidence of touch, introduced another articulation of the relationship between body and material. Rather than forcing predetermined forms upon it, Otieno allowed the material to participate in determining the outcome, responding to its unpredictability and to the forms that emerged through pressure, repetition, and intuition. Across these experiments, difference again became generative: distinct materials demanded different forms of engagement while revealing a shared capacity to receive and preserve human gesture.

The residency was therefore as much an encounter with people as it was an encounter with materials. Otieno's movements through Ghana brought her into contact with fishermen, craftspeople, artists, and communities whose lives entered her thinking through conversations, objects, gestures, and memories. The experience reinforced an understanding fundamental to her practice: that materials do not exist separately from the people who use them. Their histories are intertwined. To encounter an object is, in some sense, to encounter the lives through which it has passed. Her time with Anatsui further situated these discoveries within a wider conversation about African material practices and the capacity of discarded or ordinary objects to hold complex histories. The residency was an exchange between distinct artistic languages. In the proximity between their practices, difference once again became productive. Otieno remained firmly within her own sculptural vocabulary while encountering another artist's radically different response to related questions of material, transformation, accumulation, and memory.

The works that emerged from and followed this period carry the residency forward not as a discrete episode, but as part of an ongoing process of reflection. Sojourner describes both physical travel and a broader condition of passage: between places, between people, between one function and another, and between what an object has been and what it might yet become. The materials Otieno gathers are themselves sojourners. They move through different lives and purposes before arriving within her sculptures, never entirely relinquishing the histories accumulated along the way.

In this sense, the exhibition grew directly from Otieno's experience of being elsewhere and discovering continuities within difference. Ghana offered new landscapes, materials, conversations, and histories, yet these encounters continually returned her to questions already present within her life and practice in Kenya. The exhibition emerges from that recognition: that our differences need not mark the point at which understanding ends. They can instead provide the conditions through which we recognise one another. Difference becomes not a boundary, but a meeting place, a point of convergence from which new relationships, meanings, and forms can begin.



El Anatsui and Maggie Otieno. El Anatsui Studio. Tema, Ghana. 2025



Maggie Otieno. El Anatsui Studio Residency. Tema, Ghana. 2025





Contributor

Sandeep Desai

Sandeep R. J. Desai is a Kenyan entrepreneur, art collector and writer based in Nairobi. His professional and cultural work has been closely connected to contemporary East African art, ethnography, architecture and cultural heritage.

Educated in Kenya, the United Kingdom and the United States, Desai studied Management Economics at the University of London before undertaking further business studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His professional career has principally been associated with his family's longstanding involvement in East African tourism and conservation.

Desai has been collecting art throughout his life, with a particular focus on East African artistic practice and material culture. His engagement with the visual arts also extends to writing and cultural documentation. His publications include an essay in Visual Voices (2016), "Art must be brought back into the mainstream of education ...", and an Introduction to The Echoes of Humanity (2025), which examines the significance of collecting, patronage and the preservation of East African artistic heritage. In September 2026, he contributed "Frank Whalley, indomitable art critic and storyteller" to The EastAfrican, a tribute to the late journalist, art critic and collector.

Desai is also involved in the documentation and preservation of material relating to Kenya's cultural and social history. Based in Nairobi, he continues to collect, write and engage with artists and cultural initiatives connected to the development and documentation of contemporary East African art.

Efie Gallery






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Sojourner: The Difference is the Same

Maggie Otieno

Sojourner: The Difference is the Same
Maggie Otieno

Designed and edited by Toga Al Tahir

With contributions by Sandeep Desai

Photography by Moz Photography and Ofoe Amegavie

Warehouse 61, Alserkal Avenue. 19th Street Al Quoz 1, off 1st Al Khail Street, Dubai, UAE

+971 (0)4 252 4182
+971 56 546 6779

This book was published on the occasion of the solo exhibition “Sojourner: The Difference is the Same.” by Maggie Otieno. 2026

info@efiegallery.com
www.efiegallery.com