



48 WALKER ST | MAR 28 – MAY 4, 2024

# Kaloki Nyamai

## *Twe Vaa*

Kaloki Nyamai, *Isyo kwo sya thela? I & II (Is the food over?)*, 2024, Mixed media, acrylic, collage stitching on canvas, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 in. (each panel), 200 x 200 cm, Diptych.

James Cohan is pleased to present *Twe Vaa*, an exhibition of mixed media paintings by Kenyan artist Kaloki Nyamai, on view from March 28 through May 4, 2024, at 48 Walker Street. This marks the artist's New York debut and first solo exhibition with the gallery.

*Twe Vaa* means “*We are here*” in the artist's ancestral language of Kikamba. The phrase signifies a declaration of presence, a reclamation of a collective agency. Nyamai questions where it is that society has landed in turbulent times. In the ten intricately layered paintings from Nyamai's ongoing series *Dining in Chaos*, he draws inspiration from life in Nairobi, weaving collective memories that emerge and recede from legibility. His paintings are composites of multiple canvases and materials, literally stitching together the fabric of a community scarred by the legacy of colonization.

In each work, Nyamai juxtaposes news accounts of political unrest with depictions of people at leisure, allowing multiple narratives to unfold simultaneously. He photo-transfers newsprint and images capturing pivotal and often violent moments in Kenyan history and other parts of Africa directly onto the surface of his paintings; binding the past and the present. These figures fade in and out of view, much like a memory, revealing themselves through layers of paper and paint.

His interest lies in generating dichotomous worlds, where play and moments of respite can take shape even in the midst of chaos. Silhouetted figures are rendered mid-action, engaged in everyday communal activities—dancing, swimming, embracing, and gathering for a meal. They are illuminated in vivid shades of color, materializing from a mixture of dense acrylic paint, sisal rope, and burnt rubber yarn. The artist suggests, “*We started from where we began*” as a framework for reading his paintings, recalling the cyclical nature of history.

Ultimately, Nyamai’s paintings act as tokens of remembrance, emphasizing that our present is inextricably linked to our shared past. We bear witness to post-election protests in the 1960s and 70s, when Kenya had just overthrown British colonial rule and was attempting to regain its cultural footing. In the artist’s words: “*We are here now; we have arrived. How do we move on from here?*”

Kaloki Nyamai (b. 1985, Kitui, Kenya) pursued formal training at the BiFa Institute of Fine Arts in Nairobi, Kenya. He has been the subject of solo exhibitions at numerous international venues including; Galerie Barbara Thumm in Berlin, Germany, Septieme Gallery, Paris, France, Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya, Kuona Trust Art Centre, Nairobi, Kenya and Oriel Plas Glyn Y Weddw Gallery, Wales, UK. His work is in the public collection of the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas and SAFFCA (Southern African Foundation for Contemporary Art), Brussels, Belgium. Nyamai was one of four artists included in the Kenyan Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022), and in 2023, he debuted *Dining in Chaos* (2023), a monumental triptych at Art Basel Unlimited. He launched Kamene Art Residency in 2023, with a focus on artistic growth and cross-cultural collaboration in the heart of Nairobi.

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