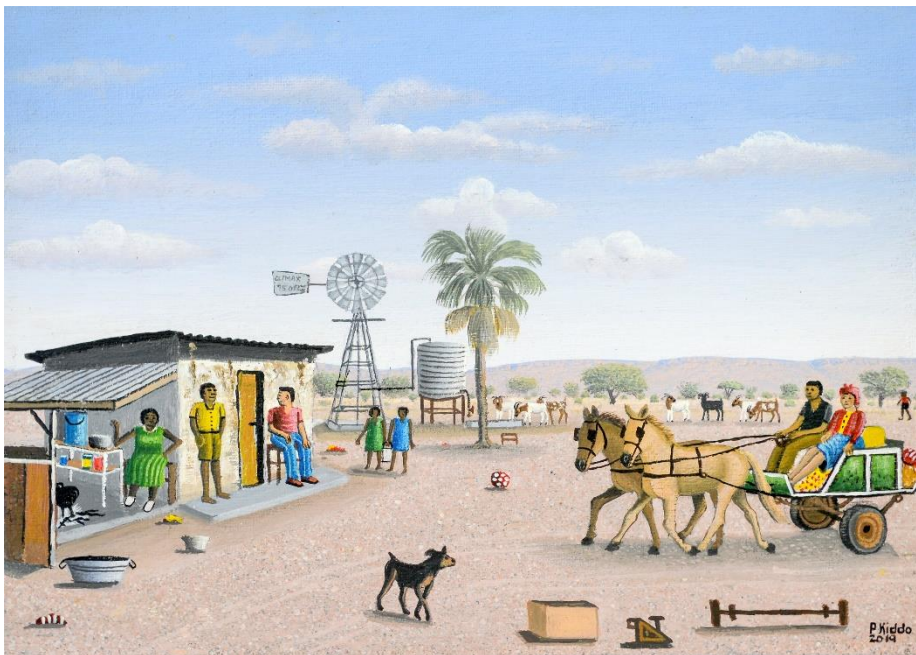


## Landscape, history and architecture – recurring motifs in Paul Kiddo's paintings

by Fabian Lehmann, 2020

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To most people familiar with contemporary Namibian arts, Paul Kiddo will first of all be known for his lively depictions of everyday street life in the rural areas of Namibia. These pictures show snapshots of bustling scenes around dwellings of stone and corrugated iron. People on bikes or horses pass by market stands and parked old pickup trucks, dogs and sheep run around and donkey carts just enter the scene. All this is shown in colourful tones and with much attention to detail. What makes these pictures so popular, surely is the fact that one can spend hours looking at them and will always find something new. For my contribution I will however leave these well-known street scenes aside to take a closer look at Kiddo's paintings and the elements that he is less known for, but that deserve attention just the same.



*Nearby Gomeb, 2019, Acrylic on canvas panel*

### Mountains and landscapes

In Kiddo's famous street scenes the horizon usually partitions the image equally into a foreground with houses, people and animals and a blue sky above with some roving clouds. Because of all the things going on in the foreground, one can easily overlook the beautifully depicted mountains that often appear in the background. Taking a closer look at these mountains, one will however immediately realise that they are just as carefully painted as the foreground. Tones of brown and blue push them far away and create an accurate presentation of the impressive mountainous areas of

Namibia. What allows Kiddo to present the mountains in the image in their entirety is the perspective he chooses. The viewers' position in the images is not street-level. Instead, we seem to stand on a higher platform, like the roof of a car or a small hill. This allows us to look at the ground while still having an uninterrupted panoramic view of the mountains far away.

Paying attention to the background one realises that the mountains are equipped with many details and look even more realistic than the people in the foreground who can appear a bit stiff. The mountains are clearly more than just a fitting background for the primary focus that is on the hustle in the lower half of the picture. And indeed, when I had the chance to meet Paul Kiddo in early 2018 in his studio in Katutura, he told me that it is not so much the people and their everyday life on the farm, but the landscape of the desert in Namibia's west and south that he loves to paint. Kiddo was born in Bethanie in southern Namibia, 140 kilometres west of Keetmanshoop which is why he is familiar with the landscapes of southern Namibia around Bethanie, Aus and Lüderitz.

Paul Kiddo is solely self-taught and never received any formal art education. In his own words he has not even participated in a workshop throughout his whole artistic career. When he began to paint in the 1980s, he started with landscapes and animals. It was only for his first solo exhibition at the Swakopmund gallery "Die Muschel" in 1992 that he started to also integrate people, houses and cars into the scenes. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, these lively farm scenes have become his most famous subject. However, Kiddo still creates pure landscape paintings. The fact that he has continued to work figuratively for decades now can presumably be explained by his autodidactic background. Indeed, Kiddo states that he does not like to paint in different disciplines like portraits or abstract paintings.

His decades-year interest in landscapes is striking as it resembles the approach of the old "Südwestler painters" like Erich Mayer, Adolph Jentsch or Carl Ossmann. This makes sense considering landscape painting was still the predominant genre when Kiddo started to paint in the 1980s. It is important to note, however, that Kiddo felt painting landscapes was never obligatory or the answer to expectations imposed by the market – for him it was a matter of personal preferences.

However, while stressing Kiddo's integrability into the tradition of the inherited German colonial landscape painting in Namibia throughout the 19th and 20th century, one also has to mention a major incompatibility: Kiddo's paintings depict actual places that have a name and a history and often include buildings and people, representing community life in Namibia's rural areas. The old *Südwestler* painters to the contrary mainly presented landscapes that looked virgin and untouched and rarely included anything that might indicate the presence of a local population. Instead of depicting actual *places* they presented idealised *spaces* that could not be connected to a certain locality in Namibia. In contrast the titles of Kiddo's paintings state the name of a farm or a region, the older generation of painters often used to title their works blankly "Südwestafrika" or South West Africa.

## Remnants of a colonial past

Landscape is not the only subject Kiddo has pursued for the past few decades. An important topic in his oeuvre is also German colonial history and its remnants in Namibia. A prime example where both come together is a painting called *Oxwagon in Desert* from 2009. The composition here is very simple and of a great stillness that could not be more in contrast to his street scene paintings. In the centre of the picture's lower half, there is a drab old rundown oxwagon that stands amidst a great sand dune. The upper half of the picture by contrast shows a completely empty and deep blue sky. Nothing in this picture indicates the presence of any living human or animal. Only some tufts of grass here and there prove that even in the desert, there must be some life. The scene is dreary, and made all the more so with the inclusion of white animal skeletons and horned skulls that stick out from the light rose coloured sand. These are the obvious remains of the oxen that once pulled the wagon and now lie to the left and right of the wagon's drawbar. There is also a crate next to the broken rear wheel and a suitcase in the left of the front wheel, partly covered by sand.



*Oxwagon in Desert, 2009, Acrylic on canvas panel*

Kiddo's skill at telling stories in images is obvious in both his street scenes and in this image – only the means are quite different. Each depiction of the rural life street scenes contains innumerable stories of people who are conducting their daily business. There is a granny selling fruits under a colourful sun shade, a shepherd next to his herd who greets the incoming donkey cart, or a young man giving a lady a ride on his bicycle. They all meet for a moment in one place before they are gone to follow their individual paths and objectives. In contrast, *Oxwagon in Desert* focuses on one story and tells it differently. Here, the picture counts much more on the spectator's fantasy. Looking at the picture one cannot evade the question of what has happened here. Why did the holders of

the wagon – usually boers from South Africa or colonial settlers from Germany – stop it in the middle of nowhere? What happened to them and why did they leave their oxen and belongings behind? All these questions point to a tragic story and together with the impression of emptiness, silence and quietness evoked in the reduced and focused image, this creates a melancholic atmosphere. So the image in the end is less about what we see but much more about what we do not see because it is long gone.

The oxwagon picture speaks to the embedding of stories and the role of Namibia's colonial past in Kiddo's oeuvre. However, it is also a good example to explain how Kiddo works practically. When Kiddo showed *Oxwagon in Desert* to me he also gave me a folder including a photograph that showed the real historical oxwagon that he had used as a model for his pictorial adaptation. It then became clear to me that Kiddo does not invent, he documents.

When Kiddo does his landscapes he does not work en plein air, but rather relies on photographic templates. His motifs stem from the area of his childhood in southern Namibia or, as in the case of the oxwagon, from photos, which means places that he has not necessarily seen himself. That should however not mislead to the conclusion that he would simply copy these photos. If one compares the oxwagon painting and its source photo, it is clear to see that the painting differs significantly from the photo. In the painting Kiddo chose another perspective, used different colours and equipped the wagon with different details. Most importantly, besides the wagon itself, the photo does not show any bones or remnants that would point to the past presence of animals or people. If such objects had once been really there, they would surely have been taken by past visitors a long time ago. Therefore Kiddo's painted adaptation of the photo is a *mise-en-scène* that plays with the viewers' knowledge about Namibia's past and stimulates their imagination.

## Historic architecture

Another picture focussing on the remnants of German colonialism in Namibia is *From New Angle Kolmanskop* from 2014 (the image below shows an altered version of 2019). Many years ago, in 1982, Kiddo visited the ghost town of Kolmanskop, a few kilometres outside of "Lüderitz." For this reason, when painting this picture, he again chose to work from a photograph. Similar to *Oxwagon in Desert*, it presents an old German building partly eaten up by a sand dune. The picture presents the former teacher's house – an impressive building that works as a prime example of the former diamond town of Kolmanskop. The front of the building is still intact, but when looking around the corner, one sees a ruin, missing walls and parts of the roof. Moreover, the rear of the ruin is already consumed by the dune, as if a wave of sand hit the building from the back.



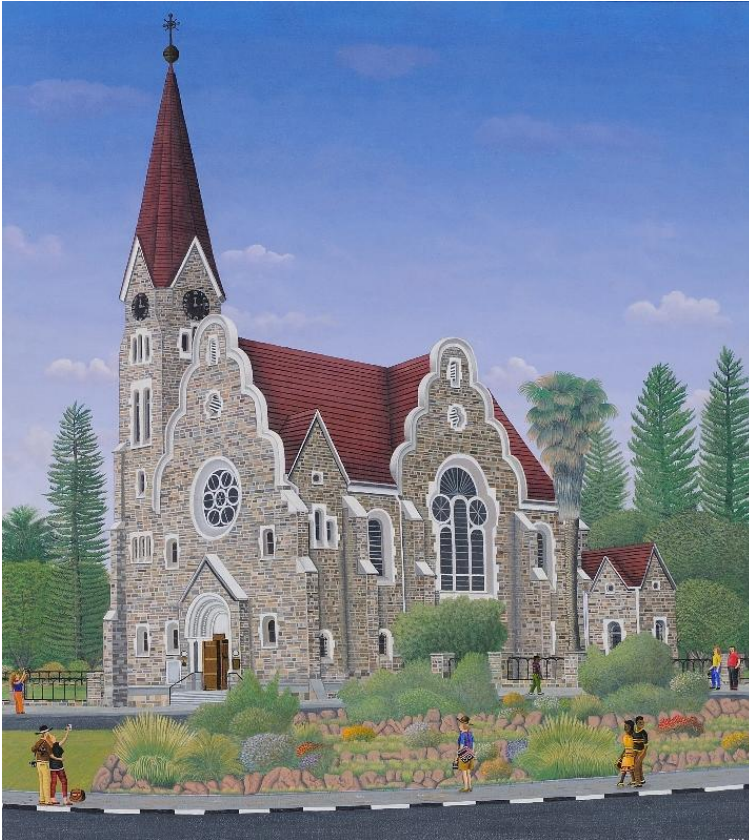
*From New Angle No. 2 Kolmannskuppe Ghost Town, 2019, Acrylic on canvas panel*

Instead of displaying the still solid front of the building, Kidido has chosen a perspective that reveals its fragile character. This impression is also supported by the composition as two thirds of the image are occupied by the evenly spread orange sand. The homogenous mass of sand and the detailed depiction of the ruin, where one can count every single stone, work as antagonists of the greatest possible extent. While the sand is a single colour field with only some structures and some small white stones, the teacher's house is a particularised study that seems to be of even greater detail than the original building. Similar to the people in the street scenes, the depicted building has a stiff character that comes with strong clear lines, hard edges and contours that contrast the orange sand and the pale blue sky in the background.

Both *From New Angle Kolmanskop* and *Oxwagon in Desert* present material traces of the German colonial past that has left relics like these buildings and vehicles. These remnants now work as reminders of colonial structures and power relations and their aftermath in today's Namibia. The pictures accordingly represent the melancholic view into the country's history within the oeuvre of Kidido.

At the same time there are also strong examples of depictions of historical buildings that appear in all their brilliance. Outstanding works for this approach are the images of the *Christuskirche* in Windhoek and the State House in Swakopmund. The church with its characteristic red roof and the white gable decorations was built in 1910, and the state house as the former district magistrate's court in 1902. In Kidido's picture *Christchurch* from 2014 the building covers nearly all of the image's space, while the state house is shown with its characteristic line of palm trees in front and the lighthouse in the back of the building. Kidido again documents the actual state of the two renovated historical buildings that are still in use and attract many tourists.





*Christchurch, 2014, Acrylic on canvas panel*

*Christchurch* in its massive, nearly square-shaped dimensions of 95 x 85 centimetres, is a stunning depiction of the German colonial church with its historic neo-gothic facade. The image exists in two realisations. The first was done when then director of the National Art Gallery of Namibia, Hercules Viljoen, encouraged Kiddo to paint the church. This painting was then acquired by the National Gallery and became part of its collection. Kiddo did a second edition of the painting when the German collector of contemporary Namibian visual art, Rheinhold Würth, saw the painting in the gallery and asked Kiddo to do another one for his own collection. After having done the work before, Kiddo was a bit faster in painting the church the second time. Instead of one month and 28 days for the first picture it took him 8 days less to paint the second one.

Shown from the natural perspective of the street level the church looks massive and awe-inspiring. The picture shows the south-western facade of the church with its main door in front and the choir to the back. The building is seen in its natural surroundings with a small green area around it and the trees from the Parliament Gardens in the background which make it look as though it is situated in a remote rural area. Only the dark paved road at the lower edge of the picture indicates its actual position in Windhoek's city centre where Robert Mugabe Avenue and Fidel Castro Street meet. The sky is painted in the typical blue with small and scattered white clouds.

The pristine condition of the building is one of the differentiating factors in this image compared to the ones discussed before. *Christchurch* also includes people walking around the building, staring

at it or taking pictures of it and themselves. By their luggage and general attire most of them are easily recognisable as tourists. In the image these figures help to stress the grandeur of the building in a double way. Firstly, with their interest in visiting and photographing the church they emphasise the building's prominence and relevance. Secondly, the mere appearance of these people in front of the great grey stone building makes them look very small and the church proportionally much larger. Accordingly the people here are not in the centre as they are in Kiddo's street scenes where it is all about everyday hustle and bustle. The figures in *Christchurch* rather work as staffage to liven up the image.

*Christchurch* is a remarkable masterpiece that differs from most of Kiddo's paintings as it does not present architecture or street life in its environmental embedding but instead neglects the surrounding landscape to fully concentrate on the architecture. This is only consequent when it comes to the Christchurch as it is surrounded by urban infrastructure which does not allow for it to be presented in a wider natural scenery of mountains or sand dunes. With its stone structure, its ornate curved gables and the high tower, it is rather the church itself that becomes the landscape. And just like in Kiddo's painting of remote mountains one finds the same level of details and realism in the depiction of the church. The painting shows the facade as a mosaic of literally thousands of natural stones, all individually drawn and coloured. Together with the shaded white window frames and the dark red roof tiles it is the perfect pictorial reproduction of the building. Take a photograph of the church from the same point of view and compare it to Kiddo's painting and you will realise that both are absolutely congruent when it comes to dimensions, angles and details. The only difference is that the painting does not have any distortion that usually comes with the camera's lens.

Kiddo's interest in the German colonial history of Namibia and its architecture is obvious. This might stem at least partly from his family background. Kiddo is a great-grandson of Cornelius Fredericks who used to be a *kaptein* of the Nama in Bethanie in southern Namibia. Together with the famous Hendrik Witbooi, Fredericks led his troops against the German colonial army. When Witbooi was killed in 1905 by German colonial soldiers, Fredericks kept on fighting and became a successful military leader, using refined guerrilla tactics. Interestingly, even Witbooi himself is part of Kiddo's family history. According to Kiddo, his grandmother from his father's side came from the lineage of Hendrik Witbooi. And it was also her who had told him about the war with the Germans and how her family had to flee from the German troops. As a child, Kiddo was fascinated by these stories.

### **Kiddo's production of pictures**

In 2010 Kiddo traveled to Germany for a two-month residency in Berlin. There he showed landscape paintings, an earlier series of buildings from Kolmanskop as well as images that he had painted in Berlin. The residency was organised by "p.art.ners berlin-windhoek", an association that was founded by Namibian artist Imke Rust and Berlin parliamentarian Oliver Schruoffenegger. Based on the connection of the partner cities, "p.art.ners berlin-windhoek" mainly enabled artistic

exchanges between the two cities. The following year in June, Kiddo and Elia Shiwoohamba, who followed Kiddo in the exchange program, had an exhibition at the Grafik Studio Galerie in Berlin.

During his residency Kiddo made several paintings, among them a thorough architectural study of the classicist museum *Altes Museum* or a presentation of the *Friedrichwerdersche Kirche* in central Berlin, a neo-gothic church with an inventive reduced shape from 1831. This painting was the last remaining picture from his Berlin residency that Kiddo still had in his studio when I visited him in early 2018. All the others had been sold. Generally it was one of only a handful of pictures in his studio that had not found a buyer yet. This is all the more remarkable as in his best years, Kiddo used to paint twelve pictures a month. In recent years, due to his aged eyes that are not that strong as they used to be, it is only four to five. But this still makes an amount of about 50 pictures a year. And Kiddo indeed needs to keep on painting as it is his main income to pay rent and food. During the 1980s he went from door to door to offer his paintings to the inhabitants of Windhoek. Today interested customers – most of them tourists, many from Germany – buy his works from institutions like the National Art Gallery or they come to see him in his studio.

In this article I wanted to trace some recurring subjects in Kiddo's painting like the desert landscapes of southern Namibia, remnants of the German colonial past and historical buildings from that time. There would be more to mention, of course. For instance Kiddo has also developed great skills in painting large vehicles. I remember a painting of a veritable ocean cruiser – a picture from 2012 that was among the few remaining in his studio. In this picture it is again the lifelike machine equipped with all details that makes the centre of the image. But as a true Kiddo-painting, the vessel is embedded in a maritime landscape that is more than mere background to please the viewers eyes. Landscape is a quiet element in Kiddo's paintings, especially when compared to his presentations of lively street scenes, but still it is key to understanding Kiddo's work.

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