Leilah Babirye

in conversation
with Rianna Jade Parker

RJP Watching your studio film, I found it interesting when you started to speak about the beauty you find in found materials. I use a lot of found material myself when it comes to writing, using secondary research, archival footage and archives.

When Black people hoard things, we repurpose things out of necessity and/or want because we see, like you said, the beauty in repurposing what we already have.

LB I came up with this concept, which I literally picked up from the term that is being used by the gay community, which in our local language is 'ebisiyaga', meaning sugarcane husk. That was around the time when the anti-homosexuality bill was passed in parliament and it had become a very big deal. As an artist and a person who was going back to do my Master's at university, I thought, "Why don't I look at this as a core for my thesis?" That is the origin of using found material in my work. Coming from an African context, where people don't throw out certain materials because everything is put to use. So, when you look at all my work, especially my latest ones, they contain such materials that are now honoured and respected, they have a lot of value.

I put spoons, forks, knives, things I find on the street that are being thrown out in my work, which carries a lot of meaning for me, creating stuff out of rubbish or trash. But it also carries a lot more expansive resonance to a person from Africa, from the continent: when they look at it, they might think, "Oh, you just bought these spoons and you're wasting them on your work." That's another way of thinking, turning it around, of how we value everything around us.

RJP I also want to think about 'community,' which is such a big word. In the last year, for all kinds of reasons we've all had to reconsider what community can look like when being isolated from friends and family, scared of an airborne virus; what can you do when the world is on fire as a lot of America was, what does community look like?

For me that has definitely changed. I could have presumed that my community before was just my friends and family, but now I can see a much wider community than previously.

The pandemic year, 2020 in general, has required me to rethink what community is. So, when we speak about making these kinds of works to represent your community, who is your community now, what does that look like? Especially since you've left the continent, how do you make that community for yourself?

LB My community is the LGBTQ+ community; I support my community back home and also here in the US. Because I'm in the position where I can offer a job and always give back to my community through my art. Now I'm creating my art, I also feel like I am getting into another community. I don't know whether I'm becoming selfish because if I'm not home I'm in my studio, and I have a lot of peace when I'm in my studio with my work.

I'm getting more attached to my work which is quite interesting. When I look at all those pieces in my space, it's another community that I've started creating. My community basically is the LGBTQ+ community. I started following Ugandan politics on social media, with the aim to help me to get into the Ugandan community that I never knew around the United States. Now I just go and visit people because I made friends through politics.

The first time I met this community it was scary, because people are in the US, but they don't know about the LGBTQ+ community. And I came up with the idea that, "Okay, now I have to show them I'm good enough for them to believe in me and then believe in my community and find what is working", and it's really worked. A lot of the LGBTQ+ community people in the US from Uganda are now engaged in politics and they're highly respected, and we no longer have any issues of, "Oh, you are a lesbian, you are gay", there's no such thing. So, I have that other community that I've also built around me, that's my community.

RJP I am interested in hearing more about your Fire Island Artist Residency that you were speaking about in the video. I want to know what that was like for you, what was central? What changed after Fire Island?

LB For me Fire Island was the starting point of how I got here. When I was accepted to the Fire Island Artist Residency, they organised a group of artists to pay for my ticket to fly to New York including Mickalene Thomas and Kehinde Wiley. I'd never met them.

When I came to Fire Island, I thought, "That is America, where people just wake up naked every single day, having sex on the beach every single day." Where I come from this is not allowed. The first time I saw drag queens, I'd never heard of that — they come in every Friday, putting on huge hairstyles. I'm going back this summer for two weeks, I'm buying a camera just to keep the memories. They have very big heads and when they start talking like men, I'm like, "Okay, I need to get all this together", because I had never seen a trans woman, a trans man, a real drag queen. I wouldn't even identify all of these gender names. As an artist coming from another oppressed country where we don't have this freedom, I was like "This is beautiful." I came here and thought I was going to do work that was depressed, showing all

the pain and anger, but when I came I realised "just leave it right now."

So, I was there for a month and I was just enjoying everything. I remember the piece that I did for them. Basically, it was a mirror made for the drag queens, because they used to come out dressed up and having to go to the restroom to do their makeup. So, I did this big mirror in front of the bar where they always hang out so that they don't need to go to the restroom. It was called *Door of Fantasy* — that is the piece that I ended up doing for them. I picked the huge mirror from somebody's yard. And they liked it, it was really fun.

RJP You said something about anger?

LB According to the laws where we come from, it's totally taboo to be lesbian, it's taboo to be a gay person. So, when you come to areas like here, where people are very accepted in whatever they do, especially when it gets to sexuality, it's … The time that I chose to come here, when I applied for the residency, was the right timing because my father had denounced me, sending me a letter. I was also being isolated by other family members and I was standing on my own, so when the chance of Fire Island came I was like, "Okay, I can use this." So yes, it was the right timing.

RJP Thank you for being here and doing that for your community, back home and in New York. What does 'back home' mean for you anyway?

LB When you ask what 'back home' means, at times it's families there, but we are also here and I'm like, "Everything happens for a reason." I'm in the right position right now of not even wanting to be back home, and even for people at home to say, "You're better off there because if you weren't there, we wouldn't be better off home." When you look at the Covid pandemic, right now our countries are still in lockdown, not only Uganda, all over Africa, and the only way they can survive is through us. So, this is the time when you feel like being back home doesn't make any sense, especially if you're there. It's a time we can use, but until back home feels like back home … that is something we have to do in our generation: to make back home feel back home.

RJP That's so true, I haven't thought about it ever before in that way. I have all of these Diaspora conversations all the time, and I've never thought about it the exact way you've positioned it.

LB When I was on Fire Island, I gave a talk about how we're treated back home as LGBTQ+ people. People were crying and they told me, "You're telling us exactly what happened in the 1970s", that's like 40–50 years ago, but we're having these problems right now in Africa. These problems were worked through in America 40 years ago and where did we get stuck, what were we doing 40 years ago, what were our parents doing? Was homophobia a big issue? It wasn't a big issue, this is why when I had my first show at Gordon Robichaux in New York in 2018, I brought up our history, "This is what we had a hundred years ago, much more peaceful, and look at where we are right now."

I started thinking and talking about a history of King Mwanga II of Buganda (1868-1903) who was bisexual. And that is how I started connecting our history and our sexuality and sexuality issues that people used to look at as normal. So where did homophobia or discrimination of sex on a certain level come in? I'm doing research, trying to connect dots, also in other African countries like Nigeria where they have trans women who are leaders, they're spiritual leaders, who are highly, highly respected. And they're not gay, do you get that? They're not termed as gay, they just say, "Oh, one of our great grandparents came back in somebody's body in a certain, round body", so there's a certain respect there. They let them get married to people they want, if it's a man married to a man because they feel like, "Oh, he just talks like a woman of a certain spirit."

All my works in the show were centred in the Kingdom of Buganda, where I come from, the biggest and the first kingdom in my country. I gave all the queens beards and I gave them princess names, giving them earrings, jewellery, they all had ornaments on them. So, this raises the question why, and then I always say because there is homosexuality in there, in our kingdom, in our history, it is there, it is us, and it's been highly respected. So, for me the only way to communicate that and throw it in your faces is through my work. If you respect them, go with it.

So, last year I decided to look at the 52 clans in the Buganda Kingdom, where each clan is represented by either an animal or a plant. And those 52 clans have clan leaders and clan leaders are our heads, so everybody has the clan they come from. I come from the antelope clan, that's my father's side and my mother's side is from the lungfish clan. So everybody has a clan and my argument here is, before we started to be given names — gay, rubbish, this, that — everybody is given a clan name. Had our parents known who we were going to be, they wouldn't have given us clan names. If they looked at us as a disgrace on where we come from, we wouldn't bear their names. So, every gay person in my country has a clan name, so in my latest work I decided to make clans. I'm giving names from different clans to my gay community, does that make sense?

RJP Absolutely.

LB So, that is what I started off last year. I created a few names for the clans, and this year we decided to do a continuation of clan names and some of the pieces were given different clan names in my gay community. For my London show, for the first big pieces that I did, which are 12 feet or 10 feet high, I decided to give them queen mother names from the different kings that some people of my generation may have and the reason why is, when you look at the clan roots, only the king is allowed to marry someone from the mother's side. The king is the only person allowed to marry from the mother's side, because the hope for every clan is to get a king so that people don't fight for the kingdom.

There's also a group of 24 paintings inspired by ID cards. I started to wonder, if we had rights, how to take our passport photos. So, all these crazy backgrounds used in those works, that is my imagination of how we would do things. I want to come in and pull one of my hair strands down, I want to come in and be smiling, wanting a pink background. Why do you have to be controlled over that? Why does it have to be white? So, I said, "Now I'm making our own identification portraits. You'll see the boys, with weird backgrounds and crazy looks and how they would like to look in their passports. We need a freer world, which is why I created that body of work."