



The World in Common

Lauren
O'Neill-Butler

The complex concept of dignity sits at the core of Leilah Babirye’s bracing art. Her work stems, in part, from her lived experience: Babirye fled her homeland, Uganda, in 2015 after receiving homophobic death threats while studying art at Makerere University in Kampala and collaborating with queer activist groups. In 2018, Babirye was granted asylum in the United States with assistance from the African Services Committee and the NYC Anti-Violence Project. She continues her activism by supporting LGBTQ+ asylum seekers living at the Kakuma refugee camp in Nairobi, Kenya, and working with the African Services Committee.

For legal scholars such as Jeremy Waldron and Katherine Franke, dignity is a key aspect of human rights, involving responsibilities, rank, recognisability and recognition. They argue that a robust claim needs to go beyond the idea that human rights are based on dignity as a foundational value. Waldron, for example, is interested in developing a conception of dignity as a status, as opposed to the idea of inherent moral worth of each person. “[T]he modern notion of human dignity involves an upwards equalization of rank,” he noted in his 2009 Tanner Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, adding: “[W]e now try to accord to every human being something of the dignity, rank, and expectation of respect that was formerly accorded to nobility.”¹ Or, we should. The point is: rather than being considered a value that functions as a major premise of rights claims, dignity as a status underpins fundamental human rights — and this also seems central to Babirye’s work.

It was a clear statement in her 2020 solo exhibition at Gordon Robichaux in New York, titled *Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda)*, which presented more than forty variously sized figurative sculptures and four mono-prints with specific titles derived from the traditional Bugandan kinship system. These ancestral lineages remain crucial to the Bugandan people: as of 2009, there were at least 52 recognised clans within the Bantu kingdom of Sub-Saharan Africa, the earliest of them dating back to 400 CE. Each clan represents a group of people who can trace their lineage to a common ancestor, and members of clans consider themselves siblings in a large, interconnected family no matter their direct birth relation. Another key aspect of the clan system are the names of totems that have come to be synonymous with the clans themselves. The clans are usually known by their main totem, which often denote animals and plants native to Uganda. The seven oldest clans are referred to as the ‘Nansangwa’, and they include the ‘Lugave’ (pangolin), ‘Mmamba’ (lungfish), and ‘Ngeye’ (colobus monkey).

In her work, Babirye explodes the extended kinship of the Bugandan clan system by elevating the Lugandan word ‘kuchu’ (queer) — a secret word, according to the artist — most frequently used by people who identify as such. She also consistently uses the feminising prefix ‘Na’ in her titles, such as *Nagawa from the Kuchu Monkey Clan* and *Nabakka from the Kuchu Civet Cat Clan* (both 2020), as a nod to the universality, historicity and shared presence of her ‘queens’: the “many transgender women, whom we refer to as ‘queens’ in the ‘kuchu’ community, who love naming themselves after their favourite aunts, sisters, or women role models.”²

Waldron describes dignity as a “quintessentially aristocratic virtue” and, to me, Babirye’s noble ‘kuchu’ queens perform and embody these virtues. Take, for instance, *Nansamba*

O’we Ngabi from the Kuchu Antelope Clan, a majestic sculpture. Here, a large ceramic head treated with watery shades of aqua blue and seaweed green is supported by a sturdy earthenware base. A yellow twisted polypropylene rope — the sort used for boat’s mooring lines — threads through the piece. The rope is not negligible: Babirye’s art has increasingly incorporated a precise array of found materials from New York City streets, and with this meticulous selection she upends the pejorative Lugandan slang ‘ebisiyaga’, or sugar cane husk, a word disparagingly used to refer to LGBTQ+ people. (“It’s rubbish,” says the artist, “the part of the sugarcane you throw out.”³) Through her materially fierce approach, which often involves several techniques — including burning, assemblage, carving, burnishing, weaving and welding — Babirye presents a new and stately society, one that supports and protects all of its people through dignity.

While Babirye remains grounded in the present moment, it is clear she finds inspiration by digging deep into her country’s history, into long before it became a protectorate of the British Empire, from 1894 until 1962. Her work does not glorify this precolonial past. Instead, it prompts us to imagine new possibilities for the here and now based on a sense of spirituality and prudence that is already interwoven into the clan system. Part of Babirye’s research has focused on the history of sexuality in Africa, specifically in the Bugandan kingdom. Among her myriad discoveries are the longstanding and historic nature of terms that describe queerness. In a studio visit, she explained to me that despite ample documentation on this subject, there are still many contemporary conservative and homophobic people in Uganda who claim that queerness is ‘un-African’, and something simply imported from the West. However, it was the penal codes introduced by British colonialists in Uganda that led to the criminalisation of homosexuals, which in turn led to the long history of homophobic legislation. This reached a fever pitch in 2013, when local newspapers, tabloids and television channels began to call out LGBTQ+ identifying citizens and activists, including Babirye. In describing her practice, Babirye has said, “[t]hrough the act of burning, nailing, and assembling, I aim to address the realities of being gay in the context of Uganda and Africa in general.”⁴ Her sentiment brought to mind a quote from the writer Sandra Cisneros: “We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire and the people we love are burning.”⁵ The singed surfaces of some of Babirye’s wooden sculptures have an almost visceral relationship to the ideas and histories behind them.

In 2015, after Babirye fled Kampala, she headed directly to the Fire Island Art Residency in Long Island, an organisation that supports LGBTQ+ visual artists and poets. Melanie Nathan, the executive director of African Human Rights Coalition, has aptly summarised Babirye’s escape: “Given how hard it was for people to get out of [Uganda] this was a miracle.”⁶ After the month-long residency, which was a transformative experience and a major culture shock, Babirye wanted to stay in New York. With support from the African Services Committee, she found a place to live and began to build friendships around the city. She earned a living as a bike messenger and collected aluminium cans. Most importantly, she continued making art. These labours are reflected in her sculptures through their thickly woven braids of rubber inner tubes, stacked crowns of bicycle chains and head-dresses of aluminium can tops dexterously threaded together

with wire. Small, hammered pieces of found copper and aluminium also become facial ornaments and jewellery on a few of the busts. Her rough urban materialism is transformed, however, by the silky-smooth patinas and bold washes of the glazes in the ceramics, as in the earlier mentioned *Nansamba O’we Ngabi from the Kuchu Antelope Clan*, and the jet-black polished surfaces of her wooden sculptures, such as *Nagawa from the Kuchu Monkey Clan*. In the latter, a wooden mask is shielded by a few strands of threaded can tops that function like a traditional beaded crown, meant for royalty treated like a goddess and whose face must be concealed when in public.

For her summer 2021 solo exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London (her first in the UK and Europe), Babirye presents her largest ceramic and wooden sculptures to date — some over two-and a half metres/eight feet tall, such as *Namasole Nababinge, Mother of King Nakibinge from the Kuchu Royal Family of Buganda* — alongside new masks and vibrant acrylic paintings on paper that showcase a range of the queens. To produce a series of these towering ceramic figures, Babirye builds upon an additive coiling technique, looping and moulding the clay by hand, gradually assembling the shape and height of the sculpture. After firing the work, she then splatters, drips and splashes it with various glazes using both painterly and unorthodox methods. In these pieces, there is a sustained merging of geometric abstraction and naturalism, bringing to mind the mask-like faces and erect bodies in work by other artists, such as Elizabeth Catlett’s bronze sculptures.

In her *Kuchu Ndagamuntu (Queer Identity Card)* paintings, Babirye communicates a straightforward realism by depicting her subjects as ambiguously gendered, lipstick-wearing, bearded queens. Through bright and viscous applications of acrylic, the artist inscribes queer lineages into the ancestral lines of the Bugandan people — a related set of mono-prints from 2020 was titled *Kuchu Series (Queer Ugandans)*, for example. The paintings emphasise how transgender people are, as Babirye has said, “the face of the LGBTQ+ community” right now, in a world in which they also encounter more discrimination, lack of legal protection, poverty, violence, and a dearth of healthcare.⁷ Moreover, these loving works underscore that change cannot come too soon for trans people and that mere visibility is not enough, as it can also come with real risks to safety, especially for trans individuals who are part of other marginalised communities.

During our studio visit, Babirye mentioned that she is ready to make even loftier monumental works and I’m sure she will; it is just a matter of time and space. But while her sculptures have grown in scale, the ideas underpinning them have remained consistent. In borrowing from and transforming the long history of the Bugandan clan system, Babirye has continually challenged the idea that we are isolated individuals encased in discrete bodies, bound by direct bloodlines and national borders. Her work has persistently emphasised that humans are implicated in a shared, universal world. While living through the coronavirus pandemic, we have felt this sense of implication deeply — perhaps more than ever before. The pandemic has cemented our sense that humans are connected, that we have responsibilities to care for one another, and, more importantly, for the Earth that sustains us.

Even as we’re implicated in this shared world, resources are not equally shared due to vast racial, economic and social inequities. Indeed, as the virus has continued to spread, and as our everyday interactions have been put under a microscope and revealed to be a matter of life and death, extensive structures of injustice have come to a tipping point once again — and must be addressed and overcome. Through devising alternative notions of queer kinship and community-making, Babirye’s work points to what has long been missing from our shared world: dignity. So long as hatred and bigotry persist, too many people will continue to see their own stake in this common world ignored or rejected.

“The political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common,” contends Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe.⁸ Such a movement will be, for Mbembe, “a decolonization [which] is by definition a planetary enterprise, a radical openness of and to the world, a deep breathing for the world as opposed to insulation.”⁹ In regarding dignity as a shared status, Babirye’s art unlocks this open place for such deep breathing, and that is something we could all use more of right now.

1 Jeremy Waldron, ‘Dignity, Rank, and Rights: The 2009 Tanner Lectures at UC Berkeley 29’ (New York University School of Law, Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Working Paper No. 09-50, 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1461220> (accessed 2 June 2021).

2 Gordon Robichaux press release for *Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda)*, October 2020.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Stephen Friedman Gallery press release for *Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda)*, June 2021.

5 This quote can be found at <https://www.sandracisneros.com> (accessed 2 June 2021).

6 Leilah Babirye and Melanie Nathan in conversation at Rebecca Camacho Presents, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmgQsfk3f2E> (accessed 2 June 2021).

7 *Ibid.*

8 Achille Mbembe, ‘Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe’, interview by Sindre Bangstad and Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, *New Frame*, 12 May 2021, available at <https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe> (accessed 2 June 2021)

9 *Ibid.*