

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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Sara Roffino
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Social Network: A Ugandan Artist Carves a Space Beyond Prejudice

The smell of burnt wood hits me as soon as I enter the Bushwick backyard where Babirye Leilah is working. She's sitting on a stool, her short dreadlocks tucked into a newsboy cap, and bent over an assemblage of two-by-fours that she's slowly scorching with a welding torch. Recent works—various mixed-media masks; books chained together and charred black—are arrayed on tables along the fence in the makeshift studio. Scraps of wood, metal, and wire are scattered around. It has been quite a journey from East Africa to this outdoor studio in Brooklyn. The artist Sam Gordon, whose yard this is, hands me a sheet of paper. In the center he has drawn Leilah's name in a circle, with dozens of other names branching out from it—a diagram that is meant to give me context for the people likely to come up in our conversation. It includes members of New York City Council, the African Human Rights Coalition, and the Center for Constitutional Rights, to name but a few of the organizations where Leilah has made friends and connections since leaving her home in Kampala, Uganda and arriving in New York in the summer of 2015.

"I'm a traditional carver—carving wood, making faces, making humans. That is what we're taught in university, but I became wild when I really wanted to show my point," recalls Leilah, who came out as a lesbian in college. Her ever-present smile belies the gravity of her story. "Gay people are called rubbish in Uganda, so I thought, how about if I collect rubbish and make work with it?" Following the completion of her undergraduate degree in sculpture from Makerere University in Kampala, Leilah was selected to participate in AtWork, a program that distributes notebooks to artists, which then become part of an exhibition of their work. "I started producing stronger work at this time," she says. "I started burning a lot of my works— burning up the pain, taking out the frustration. A kind of therapy." As Gordon describes it, "Leilah juxtaposes found materials and objects—marginal bits of detritus, scraps of metal, chains, and locks— with traditional forms of Ugandan art making and craft, including carving and burning wood. Her process is very physical, driven by finding and transforming materials into sculptural Photographs by Zack Garlitos objects that resonate with her social and political experience."

In 2012, Leilah had returned to university in Uganda to pursue an advanced degree. Her desire to brave topics of sexuality in her work was deeply at odds with the country's intolerant political climate. In 2011, David Kato, Uganda's leading gay rights activist, had been gruesomely murdered in his home. In 2013, an anti-homosexuality act, which ordered life imprisonment for prohibited acts, was passed by Parliament. Though the law was ruled unconstitutional in 2014, the vitriol it perpetuated was wide-reaching and longlasting. (American pastor Scott Lively is currently being charged with crimes against humanity for his role in inciting violence against gays in Uganda, in a case brought about by the Center for Constitutional Rights.) "The first time I went to class there were five professors in the room," the artist explains of the reason she stayed only a month in the program. "I told them I wanted to talk about lgbtqi issues and they asked me to explain what lgbtqi stands for. I said, 'lesbian.' One walked out. 'Gay.' Another walked out. 'Bisexual.' Another walked out. By the time I finished everyone had left."

In 2014, Leilah, along with more than 100 others, was publicly outed when photos of people thought to be gay—her picture among them—were printed in newspapers alongside such invective headlines as "Hang Them" and "Exposed: Uganda's Top 200 Homos Named." "I started renting in rural areas, farther away from town," the sculptor recalls, recounting the fear she experienced, along with her friends, many of whom ran across the border to a refugee camp in Kenya. Amidst this chaos and subsequent estrangement from most of her family, Leilah continued her practice, and in 2014 she was selected to participate in the inaugural Kampala Art Biennale.

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"I was told by the director of the biennial that I couldn't talk about the gay aspect of my work," she says. "I had to change the stories behind the works to be accepted into the show." The pieces she presented were all sculptural assemblages—grim testaments to the suffering and violence around her. In one, Barbie Doll, a plastic head with blonde braids and red paint smeared on its face is perched atop a scrappy cross; in another, a heavy chain hangs in front of pages from a book, which are singed along the edges and mounted on a wooden panel. An additional assemblage featured a rusted wire grid fixed to boards on which text ("We are safe here"; "There's peace here") was written; a closed lock in the center of the work barred entry to something unknown.



Image: A series of ceramic sculptures, including Jesus, 2016, on the right. Photo: Zack Garlitos

By the summer of 2015, Leilah had managed to secure a spot in the Fire Island Artist Residency, the first and only residency for LGBTQI artists, located in the historic gay community off of Long Island. "Leilah's work completely stood out," says Chris Bogia, who co-founded the residency in 2011. "I just knew the jury was going to be as excited as I was when they were making their decisions." And they were. The only question to be resolved was how Leilah would get to the residency, as no funds were provided for transportation. Through a friend, Bogia reached out to Kehinde Wiley, who agreed to pay for Leilah's travel. As soon as the younger artist arrived, her practice changed. "Before coming to the residency she really dealt with the social and emotional bondage inflicted upon her by her surroundings in Kampala. It was quite grim and really raw," says Bogia. "Almost overnight, her work became very celebratory and colorful and wild."

Leilah's artwork has maintained the rough, self-taught aesthetic of her earlier pieces, but the shift toward something a bit lighter, and perhaps more joyous, is immediately apparent. Her references remain mostly outside of contemporary discourse, but it's hard not to see a shared language with Melvin Edwards— even though Leilah was previously unaware of his work. By the end of her month on Fire Island, the artist had decided not to return to Uganda. Working with the African Human Services Committee, she submitted an application for political asylum that is currently in process.

Crashing with friends, as well as people she's met through the African Human Rights Coalition and Sexual Minorities Uganda (smug), Leilah spent her first year in New York working in shared and borrowed studios. In March of 2016, she met Ektor Garcia, who at the time was an MFA student at Columbia. Garcia's self-described "dissatisfaction with the exclusivity of high-level art education and the lack of true diversity" prompted him to start a renegade ceramics club—not sanctioned by the university—which drew anywhere from three to 12 people per meeting. "I hoped to establish a rogue underground school where we could all share meals, stories, and skills," he says. For Leilah, the opportunity to use the studios at Columbia was incredible. "I worked like crazy," she recalls. "I knew I had no time because I was just sneaking in to the studio, so I would make like five masks, glaze them the next day, and then fire them."

Over the summer, Melanie Nathan, executive director of the African Human Rights Coalition, organized a crowdfunding campaign for Leilah, which helped raise over \$4,000. Among the supporters were artists Collier Schorr, Eve Fowler, and Math Bass. Bill Arning, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, also contributed. "I am a great believer in the power of the Fire Island Artist Residency to create a sense of fellowship

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among a global community of queer image makers,” he explains. “Organizations like that are making a change that is long overdue, which is teaching each generation that there is a tradition of queer image making that goes back well before the invention of the term ‘homosexual,’ and that can be found across cultures. No art school with black, Latino, Arab, or Asian students who wanted to learn their cultural heritage would be unable to find that history—yet gay students, most often born into straight families, are almost always left to their own devices.”



Image: The wood and ceramic sculpture Prince Yoruba, 2016, left, with Silenced Smile, 2016, an assemblage of carved wood, nails, and other objects. Photo: Zack Garlitos

In addition to the artists who supported Leilah's crowdfunding campaign, there are many others behind her. Ceramic Club, founded by artists Trisha Baga and Pam Lins in 2007 to “dismantle and oppose professionalism,” recently collaborated with Greenwich House Pottery to offer Leilah a scholarship at the West Village institution, where she was able to use the studio from September through November. And Gordon, who in addition to offering his backyard as a studio, collaborated with fellow artist and curator Jacob Robichaux to include Leilah's work in the exhibition “Sites of Exchange: Lavender Diaspora,” at Clifford Chance US LLP's New York and Washington, D.C. offices this past summer. The firm's LGBTQ committee supported the production and materials for her sculptures and invited Leilah to speak at the opening reception. Two of the firm's attorneys commissioned pieces, and Gordon and Robichaux are helping Leilah find other collectors for her work. In October, Leilah collaborated with the artist Hunter Reynolds in a performance at the Bronx Museum as part of the “Art aids America” exhibition where the two created an interactive space based on various Ugandan ritual traditions. She was also included in “When Things Fall Apart: Critical Voices on the Radars,” which ran from February through October at Denmark's Tapholt museum.

The community that has grown around the artist is no coincidence. Trailing off in thought about just how it is she has managed to make it here—from collecting cans in the streets for cash at the start, to acknowledging the friends who are helping her—she says, “I know I can survive, because at least I can console myself with art. I can console myself with the people around me.”