

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail

Leilah Babirye: Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda)

Elizabeth Buhe

19 November 2020



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Image: Leilah Babirye, Abambowa (Royal Guard Who Protects the King), 2020. Glazed ceramic, 7 3/4 x 4 x 2 inches. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Greg Carideo.

Entering Leilah Babirye's show at Gordon Robichaux feels like walking into a solemn space loaded with gravitas—a regal court of yesteryear or, at least as I imagine it, Brancusi's studio. This is another way of saying that the 39 wooden and ceramic works and the handful of monotype prints on view here command an extremely powerful sense of presence. This is not the presence so scorned by modernism, which depends on the relationship between sculptures and viewing bodies, but the collective (and equally relational) presence of community. Unlike the dual portraits of nuzzling partners that Babirye showed in the Socrates Sculpture Park Annual in 2018, her figures here are singular. She merges a nonspecific

history of African sculpture with the contemporary techniques in ceramics, sculpture, and graphic design that she learned at Makerere University in Uganda. In 2015, she left that country to seek refuge at the Fire Island Artist Residency in New York and received asylum in the United States the same year. The fact that Babirye was impelled to relocate when she was outed as queer by the Ugandan media, and thus found her life endangered in her home country, makes the sense of kinship within difference that her sculptures exhibit all the more potent.



Image: Left: Leilah Babirye, Nabakka from the Kuchu Civet Cat Clan, 2020. Wood, wax, aluminum, epoxy, acrylic, nails, found objects, 70 1/2 x 21 x 11 1/2 inches. Right: Nansamba O'we Ngabi from the Kuchu Antelope Clan, 2020. Glazed ceramic, found objects, 45 x 22 x 14 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Greg Carideo.

Babirye's sculptures cohere, in part, through their shared formal characteristics. Each features a rough

bilateral symmetry, strong verticality, a palette of muted brown, black, blue, and teal glazes or wax polishes, and rows or tangles of gleaming embellishments in the form of repurposed urban detritus: ropes, bicycle chains, polished soda cans, interlaced tires, and nails. These self-stylizations endow each work with a sense of individuality. The nearly four-foot-tall indigo blue Nansamba O'we Ngabi from the Kuchu Antelope Clan (2020), for instance, sprouts a tumble of hair fashioned from braided bicycle tubes, while caught in the headdress of Nakatiiti from the Kuchu Grasshopper Clan (2020) we find, like a glittering star, a golden mechanical gear. The screen of wire-strung aluminum can lids that veils the face of Nagawa from the Kuchu Monkey Clan (2020) alludes to the labor of scavenging recyclable waste, an activity at one time undertaken by Babirye.

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None of the figures possess gender-identifying features. Indeed, the works' elaborate stylization is in part inspired by drag queen fashion. The destabilization of normative identity inheres in Babirye's titles, too, where she employs both the feminizing prefix "Na," queering Ugandan culture and suggesting a matrilineal orientation, and the term "kuchu," a coded word in the Luganda language that people in the trans and queer community use to refer to one another. Read against the political context in which various works were made, it seems significant that the symbolism of certain adornments has shifted since Babirye came to the United States. The artist acknowledges that while nails hammered into the wooden sculptures formerly announced pain, she now sees them simply as decorative, as in Nabakka from the Kuchu Civet Cat Clan (2020). Similarly, the found padlocks gilding Babirye's sculpted ears were formerly locked shut, to be opened only once equality for homosexual and trans people is realized in Uganda. The locks incorporated in works presented here, however, like Abambowa (Royal Guard Who Protects the King) (2020), are left open, signaling the more accepting attitude towards queer lives that the artist found in America.

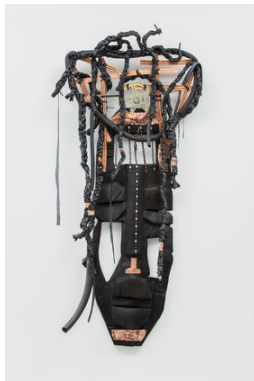


Image: Left: Leilah Babirye, Nakatiiti from the Kuchu Grasshopper Clan, 2020. Wood, copper, nails, found objects, 63 3/4 x 29 1/2 x 8 inches. Right: Nagawa from the Kuchu Monkey Clan, 2020. Wood, wax, aluminum, wire, nails, found objects, 40 x 16 x 3 3/4 inches. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Greg Carideo.

Writer Joseph Henry has noted that queerness "does its best work as coefficient," invoking "queer labor, queer environmentalism, queer justice, queer medicine" and so on.¹ Following Henry's formulation, reading Babirye's work as "queer art"—in which queerness is articulated by form, color, and composition—certainly obtains. But the ostensibly more capacious category of queer activism seems equally relevant, given the artist's commitment to assisting asylum-seekers and to increasing tolerance toward Ugandan homosexual and trans communities. To this end, Babirye has participated in discussions with Ugandan musician-turned-presidential candidate Bobi Wine to foster a deeper understanding and sensitivity for the queer community, and, in collaboration with the African Services Committee that organized Babirye's asylum, she hired newly-arrived immigrants to assist in her Bushwick studio. Rarely do artists succeed so powerfully in aligning their vision with its execution. In Babirye's case, the fact that this is both hard-won and coupled with a good deal of technical skill seems to promise even greater successes in the near future.

Joseph Henry, "Love and Loneliness: Queering Modernisms in Figurative Painting," Momus, August 1, 2019, <https://momus.ca/love-and-loneliness-queering-modernisms-in-figurative-painting/>.