

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Leilah Babirye
Lauren O'Neill-Butler
January 2021

ARTFORUM

Leilah Babirye



Image: Leilah Babirye, *Nantege O'we Ngabi* from the Kuchu Civet Cat Clan, 2020, wood, wax, aluminum, nails, found objects, 51 × 15 × 3".

"Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda" (Kuchu Clans of Buganda), Leilah Babirye's muscular second solo outing at Gordon Robichaux, exemplified her fiercely intelligent approach to materials through a body of work that radiates dignity, spirituality, and prudence. The quickly growing oeuvre of the Brooklyn-based artist not only looks back to the disastrous legacies of British colonialism in Uganda and to twentieth-century European cultural appropriations (Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, for example), but also encompasses progressive ideas regarding alternative forms of kinship, community making, and queer activism.

The show presented mostly faces across twenty-eight variously sized sculptures and four monoprints with specific titles that derive from the traditional Bugandan kinship system. (As of 2009, there were at least fifty-two recognized clans within the Bantu kingdom of sub-Saharan Africa, the oldest of which dates back to 400 CE.) Ancestral lineages remain crucial to the Bugandan people—their clans unite across bloodlines. Members consider themselves siblings in an interconnected family no matter their birth relation. Babirye has not only titled individual works after Bugandan images, which often

denote animals and plants native to Uganda, but she also uses the titles to elevate the Lugandan word *kuchu* (queer)—a "secret word," according to the artist, most frequently used by people who identify as such. Through this acknowledgment of the various backdrops that have shaped her life, Babirye offers a new and august society, one that supports and protects all of its people through respect, which is sadly not the case in her homeland. She fled Uganda in 2015 after receiving homophobic death threats while collaborating with queer activist groups. In 2018, she was granted asylum in the United States with support from the African Services Committee and the New York City Anti-Violence Project. Her art has since evolved via myriad approaches and techniques, including assemblage, carving, burnishing, weaving, and welding, as well as an increasingly precise inclusion of found materials from city streets.

Upon arriving in New York, Babirye earned a living as a bike messenger and collected aluminum cans. These labors are reflected in many of the sculptures, such as *Nagawa* from the Kuchu Monkey Clan (all works 2020), a standout that features a headdress of aluminum can tops dexterously threaded together with wire. Babirye's rough urban materialism is transformed by the silky-smooth patinas and bold washes of glazes in her ceramics and the jet-black polished surfaces of her wooden sculptures. Small hammered pieces of found copper and aluminum become facial ornaments on some of the busts. Take, for instance, *Nabakka* from the Kuchu Civet Cat Clan, in which an outsize visage with an elevated crown of bicycle chains is braced by two tall notched Brancusi-like columns. *Nansamba O'we Ngabi* from the Kuchu Antelope Clan, a large ceramic treated with watery shades of aqua and seaweed green, is supported by a sturdy earthenware base threaded with yellow twisted-polypropylene rope (the sort used for dock lines). The feminizing prefix *na* in her titles is just one way that Babirye challenges her mother tongue—she also upends the Lugandan pejorative slang *ebisiyaha* (trash), a word used to disparage LGBTQ+ people. The overall effect is one that rejects toxic masculinity and the individualism innate to white

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supremacy, as the sculptures refer to the “many transgender women whom we refer to as queens in the kuchu community, who love naming themselves after their favorite aunts, sisters, or women role models,” says Babirye.

While Babirye’s kuchu spin on kinship is undeniably powerful, her focus on dignity as an inalienable human right impressed me the most, particularly at a time in the US when, once again, hatred is on the rise with the disgracefully calculated appointment of queer-phobic judge Amy Coney Barrett to fill the seat of the late egalitarian Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Babirye has already experienced the kind of deadly prejudice in Uganda that’s been promulgated by the Trump administration in America. Her exhibition offered many insights on how to organize and overcome, and on how to enjoy the benefits of choosing a “logical family” (per novelist Armistead Maupin) over one’s biological family.