

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Omenka

Leilah Babirye: Ebika Bya Ba Kuchu Mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans Of Buganda) li

26 May 2021



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Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to present Leilah Babirye's first solo exhibition in the UK and Europe opening 4 June 2021 and running until 31 July 2021.

Leilah Babirye: Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda) li brings together large-scale ceramic works, wooden sculptures, masks and vibrant paintings on paper. The exhibition includes the largest ceramic sculpture that the artist has ever created which is presented for the first time in the gallery's private garden. Babirye's powerful works are a testament to her fiercely intelligent approach to the transformation of found materials. Her oeuvre examines the legacies of British colonialism in Uganda and the traditional clan systems of the kingdom of Buganda, encompassing progressive ideas regarding alternative forms of kinship, community and LGBTQI activism.

The artist fled Uganda in 2015 after being publicly outed in a local newspaper. 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.

Central to the exhibition is Babirye's new series of ceramic works depicting figures that are imposing in scale. Babirye creates the works by coiling and moulding the clay by hand, gradually building the shape and height of the sculpture. After the work is fired, Babirye begins in a painterly fashion to splatter, drip and splash the work with glaze using unorthodox methods. Upon witnessing her artistic process, American art critic Jerry Saltz commented, "It is important to break the rules in ceramics more than in almost any other medium, because it is alchemy and of the earth and is belly-magic."

Babirye's visceral large-scale wooden sculptures are whittled, welded, burned and burnished. The works are embellished with "jewellery" of found materials such as cans, nails and wire. Babirye's choice to use discarded materials in her work is intentional – the pejorative term for a gay person in the Luganda language is 'ebisiyaga', meaning sugarcane husk. "It's rubbish," explains the artist, "the part of the sugarcane you throw out."

While specific titles of her work profoundly reference her traditional Bugandan kinship system, Babirye imagines and creates her own community. By employing the term "kuchu"— a "secret word" of Swahili origin that those in the queer and trans community use to address each other — Babirye playfully imagines an alternate history unified in its support and protection of its people. The vividly coloured paintings on paper in the exhibition are portraits of real and imagined subjects from her native Uganda. Also presented are ceramic wall-based masks which are bathed in lustrous, painterly glazes and adorned with wire and found objects.

Describing her practice, Babirye explains: "Through 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." Through this acknowledgement of the various rich cultural heritage and experiences that have shaped her life, Babirye's work envisions a new society, one that is inclusive and supports all of its people with respect.

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Leilah Babirye (b. 1985, Kampala, Uganda) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Babirye is also represented by Gordon Robichaux, New York, whose second solo exhibition with the artist opened in October 2020. Her work will be included in the 3rd Coventry Biennial from 8 October 2021 to January 2022 in various venues across Coventry including Herbert Art Gallery & Museum.

Babirye studied art at Makerere University in Kampala (2007–2010) and participated in the Fire Island Artist Residency (2015). In 2018, the artist was granted asylum in the US. Later that year she presented her first solo exhibition at Gordon Robichaux, New York. In 2019, Babirye's work was included in Flight: A Collective History at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson (curated by Serubiri Moses) and in Stonewall 50 at The Contemporary Arts Museum (CAMH), Houston, Texas. In 2020, her work was featured in Intimate Companions at Mary Heaton Vorse House, Provincetown, and in 'Art on the Grid', a Public Art Fund exhibition with JC Decaux on billboards across New York City.