

Stephen Friedman Gallery

ArtForum
Leilah Babirye
Gilda Williams
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Leilah Babirye's ceramic head *Nansamba II* from the Kuchu Ngabi (Antelope) Clan (all works 2021) is a powerful, astonishing sculpture. With eyes closed, apparently lost in bliss or meditation, the magnificent piece, some four feet tall, patiently allows multiple washes of glossy blue glazes to stream down its huge smooth face. *Nansamba II*'s elaborate hairstyle is a tall and tangled wonder, rising almost architecturally about one and a half feet above its scalp. Constructed from old bicycle-tire inner tubes, this spectacular bouffant refers to, among other things, the artist's former employment as a food-delivery cyclist and her respect for waste materials, which she often repurposes. The mass of braided or twisted rubber is interspersed with weathered bits of hardware—hinges, metal rings, wire loops, and the like. With its ocean-blue colour, its matted seaweed-like plaits, and, seemingly, a catch of shiny flotsam and jetsam trapped amid its tresses, *Nansamba II* looks as if pulled from the sea, looks as if a surviving totem from the mythical underwater Afrofuturist city of Drexciya.

Babirye, like *Nansamba II*, belongs to the antelope clan, one of fifty-two Bugandan family-based groups in the artist's homeland of Uganda. Since 2015 she has lived in the United States, having fled her country after being publicly threatened under its severe anti-LGBTQI+ laws. A queer activist as well as an artist, she works in multiple media, often at great scale, producing labour-intensive works by welding, burnishing, chiselling, carving, nailing and more. A photograph of the artist at work shows her expertly wielding an electric saw to sculpt a massive tree stump.



Image: Leilah Babirye, *Nansamba II* from the Kuchu Ngabi (Antelope) Clan, 2021, glazed ceramic, bicycle-tire inner tubes, found objects, 48 × 29 × 31".

In this show, at least, Babirye's ceramic heads came in three sizes: large, like *Nansamba II*; medium, like *Nakawaddwa* from the Kuchu Ngabi (Antelope) Clan, in moss green and wearing an elaborate three-tiered crown fashioned from a found ceiling-light fixture adorned with dangling bike chains; and small, like the row of twenty-two roughly moulded, nine-inch-tall heads that form *Abam-bowa* (Royal Guard Who Protects the King). The effect was perspectival, as of faces gradually coming into focus, from the crowd of table-top-size guards, sculpted in broad strokes, to the more detailed midsize group, arranged like eight head-only spectators in bleachers and finally to isolated larger-than-life heads such as

Nansamba II, which offer long, satisfying looks at exquisite semi-sleeping faces and hairstyle varieties. Also in the show were immense wooden figures, around eight or nine feet tall, with contrasting surfaces of charred wood and bright metal, plus wall masks of ceramic and singed wood, again sporting rubber braids and metallic detailing. Eight colourful drawings of close-up faces, which the artist calls "Queer Identity Cards," depicted semi-imagined people whom the artist "befriends" in the act of drawing them. As a whole, the exhibition seemed to produce an idealized extended family.

Don't Touch My Hair (2019), Emma Dabiri's survey of the rich and often oppressive story of Black hair, discusses the tradition of braiding as a social ritual expressing love and care. An invitation to friendship, symbolized by hair braiding, seems the overall spirit behind Babirye's artmaking. Curiously, many of Babirye's actions on her materials mirror those Dabiri describes imposed on African hair: burning, smoothing, twisting, chopping. Among the wonders of Babirye's work is how rather forceful processes result in figures that appear so serene, so cherished and composed. Another extraordinary paradox is how Babirye's art addresses urgent twenty-first-century concerns—inequality, persecution, the squandering of resources—while seeming to arrive from somewhere beyond time, from some long-overlooked history only now being written.