

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

## Leilah Babirye

**Leilah Babirye's multidisciplinary practice transforms everyday materials into objects that address issues surrounding identity, sexuality and human rights. The artist fled her native Uganda to New York in 2015 after being publicly outed in a local newspaper. In spring 2018 Babirye was granted asylum with support from the African Services Committee and the NYC Anti-Violence Project.**

Composed of debris collected from the streets of New York, Babirye's sculptures are woven, whittled, welded, burned and burnished. Her choice to use discarded materials in her work is intentional – the pejorative term for a gay person in the Luganda language is 'abasiyazi', meaning sugarcane husk. "It's rubbish," explains Babirye, "the part of the sugarcane you throw out." The artist also frequently uses traditional African masks to explore the diversity of LGBTQI identities, assembling them from ceramics, metal and hand-carved wood; lustrous, painterly glazes are juxtaposed with chiselled, roughly-textured woodwork and metal objects associated with the art of blacksmithing. In a similar vein, Babirye creates loosely rendered portraits in vivid colours of members from her community.

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. Recently, my working process has been fuelled by a need to find a language to respond to the recent passing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda."

In 2023, Babirye spent the summer in residence at Yorkshire Sculpture Park to create new work towards her major exhibition in the Chapel, opening in 2024. In the last two years, she has exhibited in group shows at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Whitworth, Manchester, UK; Hayward Gallery, London, UK; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria; Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York and The Aldrich, Ridgefield, Connecticut. She created a site-responsive work for 'Black Atlantic', a Public Art Fund project at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, which opened in May 2022.

Other notable recent group projects include the third Coventry Biennial, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, UK (2021); 'Intimate Companions', Mary Heaton Vorse House, Provincetown, Massachusetts (2020); 'Art on the Grid', a Public Art Fund exhibition with JC Decaux on billboards across New York (2020); 'Flight: A Collective History', Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson (2019) and 'Stonewall 50', The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas (2019).

Babirye was born in 1985 in Kampala, Uganda. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She 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 and presented her first solo show at Gordon Robichaux, New York. Her second opened in October 2020 and the gallery also hosted a pop-up exhibition of Babirye's work in Los Angeles, California in February 2022. Stephen Friedman Gallery hosted her first solo show in the UK and Europe in June 2021.

Profiles on Babirye and her practice were recently published in The New York Times, Artforum, The Art Newspaper, Wallpaper\* Magazine, Cultured Magazine, New York Magazine, The New Yorker magazine, Modern Painters, OUT Magazine and Raw Material: A Podcast from SFMOMA (Season 4; Luvvers).

Her work can be found in public collections including The Africa Centre, London, UK; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California; Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, UK; Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-On-Hudson, New York; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island; Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.