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This Queer Sculptor Fled Uganda, and Her Art May Save Her Life

After being threatened and demonized in her home country, lesbian artist Leilah Babirye has been tirelessly expressing herself as she's fought for asylum in the United States.

BY R. KURT OSENLUND
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When I call Leilah Babirye en route to our interview in Manhattan's West Village, she answers, and starts wailing into the phone. Her bike was just stolen, and though she tried to chase the thief, she wasn't fast enough. For Babirye, a lesbian Ugandan artist who's been seeking asylum in the U.S. for more than two years, this isn't just a theft of property -- this is an assault on her livelihood. Through Uber Eats and other services, Babirye depends on her bike as a full-time delivery person, and she depends on that modest income to make ends meet.

And yet, when I get to Babirye roughly 20 minutes later, her tears are dry, and her face is restored to express the what's-next endurance of a woman who fled her native country for fear of death. "On we go," she says, inviting me to accompany her to a nearby bike shop, where much of our conversation takes place.

The replacement bike Babirye really wants -- one sturdy and durable enough to take her from her small room in the Bronx to daily delivery stops all across Manhattan -- is $400. That's $100 more than the amount on the debit card she was given by the African Services Committee (ASC), a New York-based nonprofit, when she first moved to the city. That $300 card was all she had to cover her provisions for three months. But Babirye was grateful.

"They've done a lot," she says of the ASC. "They helped me get a work authorization, which can take up to six months. They helped me get insurance. They gave me access to a food pantry. And that debit card was so important, because although a lady was housing me at the time, I still needed things for myself."

Given what she's been through, Babirye's steadfast optimism is both humbling and shocking, but it's safe to assume it's partly due to the great help she's received in America and abroad. Raised in Uganda's capital, Kampala, she grew up in a country where homosexuality is criminalized, and queer people can get lengthy (or life) prison sentences if civilians don't kill them on the street.

Keeping her orientation a secret for most of her life, the artist, now 33, graduated in 2010 from Kampala's Makerere University, where she majored in sculpture. She became an activist around the same time. Enraged by the hypocrisy of Uganda's politics and media ("They'll lie in newspapers about the price of sugar, but they won't help minorities," she says), Babirye came out to a select few and went back to Makerere for an advanced degree, imbuing her work with queer themes and symbolism. Using found objects (wood, metal, plastic), she'd make sculptures of trans people, or two married men, then burn sections with a torch as an act of defiance.

"My friends started calling me Burns," Babirye says, referring to the same friends she'd hang with in discreet, frequently raided gay bars. "You had to prepare for whatever was going to come," she says, "because anytime you were there dancing, somebody could say the police were outside. So we had holes in the bar, and would jump out and run."

Many of Babirye's new professors frowned upon, or forbade, her emboldened work. But one didn't, and gave health and philosophical tips. "She told me, 'You're gonna get cancer -- stop burning the plastic,'" says Babirye, who finds a poignancy in making art from trash, a metaphor for how queer Ugandans are made to feel. "My professor said, 'You're doing this out of pain, but you're hurting yourself and polluting the environment. Is that how you wanna fight back?' It made sense. I wanted to fight back, but I really wanted to show beauty."

Through her connections in the community, Babirye soon found support from Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), a legal but non-government-sanctioned human rights group led by activist Frank Mugisha, a man who was arrested during Uganda Pride 2016, and, last August, penned an aching essay for The Guardian condemning the event's cancellation in 2017. SMUG helped connect Babirye to other artists and queer people (via community meetings held in secret locations), and also began to commission her work, the sales of which marked the first time her father -- whose name she won't mention -- saw value in her dreams. "When he saw that I could actually make money from my art, he started telling my family members to make art, too," Babirye says.

But most of that positivity was crushed in 2014, when Ugandan media launched a witch hunt against queer people, publishing hundreds of photos of suspected "homos" -- Babirye included -- in local newspapers. Word spread fast. Threats ensued. Babirye's family was mortified. With the help of SMUG, Babirye stuck it out in Kampala a bit longer, even exhibiting work in the first-ever Kampala Art Biennale. But in the summer of 2015, she chose to take advantage of the coveted spot she landed with the Fire Island Artist Residency (FIAR), the first U.S. residency exclusively for LGBTQ artists. "It was a difficult decision," Babirye says, but when she left for the residency, she had no intention of returning home.

Today, at the bike shop, Babirye has about $200 she can put toward the bike she wants (enough to put it on hold), and that's largely thanks to generous people she met on Fire Island. The queer mecca, which welcomed her with open arms, was her first impression of the U.S. "I thought that's what all of America would be like!" she exclaims. "There were gay people everywhere!" Two of them were Sam Gordon and Jacob Robichaux, founders of the Gordon Robichaux agency, which champions artists of all types, and offers them exhibition space at its Manhattan-based venue. Gordon and Robichaux met Babirye around the same time she was creating a mirror sculpture during her residency (she dedicated it to the drag queens she met on the island), and they've been helping to support her, financially and artistically, throughout her American journey. "What has always struck me about Leilah," Gordon says, "is that, in one person, she embodies so many of the issues that are so urgent today. She's seeking asylum as a black lesbian artist and activist, and making art that embodies all of that."

Since meeting her, Gordon and Robichaux have helped Babirye secure a host of projects and exhibitions. These include a printmaking residence at NYU's Endless Editions space last August, inclusion in Brooklyn's National Sawdust Artists-in-Residence Refugee Orchestra Project last November, a showing at Miami's NADA Art Fair last December, and displays at the Gordon Robichaux space itself, where, last June, her work prompted New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz to name her one of the best artists of 2017.

Outside the bike shop, Babirye shares that the deposit she just gave the cashier came directly from Gordon. She also leans down, picks up a piece of metal off the curb, and puts it her pocket. For a sculptor whose choice medium is found objects, New York is one gigantic and free art supply store. "People save everything in Uganda," Babirye says. "Here, it's crazy what people will just throw away."

She pulls out her phone and produces a picture of her latest work in progress, a vast multimedia mural made of wood and things she's nailed to it, like signs, placards, paper, and a metal stove top. (She's no longer burning plastic.) She says the working title of the piece is What We're Left With, and she gathered and transported all of its materials herself.

Of course, while Babirye has found opportunities to make her art and express herself freely, she's also been facing the uphill battle of remaining in the U.S. About a year and a half ago, another serendipitous meeting made that battle a little easier.

At an art auction benefiting the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Babirye crossed paths with Christina Rosalin Pena, a Board of Immigration Appeals Representative at New York City's Anti-Violence Project who, while not an attorney, is authorized by the Department of Justice to practice immigration law. The daughter of a refugee, and queer herself, Pena was drawn to Babirye's case as soon as she heard her story.

"She was there showing her work, and we started chatting, and I told her I'd worked on some Ugandan cases before," Pena says. "We knew people in common, like SMUG's Frank Mugisha, and when she told me she was unrepresented, I was like, 'Oh my God, you have to come into my office.' She called me the following Monday, and we accepted her into our program."

Though her job has gotten harder under Trump, Pena believes that Babirye has a winning case. She says that's true of only 40% of asylum seekers, but Babirye's merits are hugely in her favor. And, naturally, there are the dire circumstances to which Babirye would be returning if her case is denied. "The conditions in Uganda are some of the worst in the world," Pena says. "We're talking about a country where being gay, though not legally punishable by death, is essentially a death sentence. If you're from a country like this, and you go to the asylum office with your documents, and you speak to an asylum officer and meet the elements, you're likely to win your case."

Though Babirye is not a citizen, the fact that she has an asylum case in process is essentially protecting her, and she keeps Pena's business card and her receipt from the Board of Immigration Appeals on her at all times. And at least one reason for her desire to stay in America is devastatingly personal. In a confession that brings her to tears, she says that after moving to this country, she received a letter from her father telling her she was disowned, and warning her to stay away from her family. "He even told me that if I died," Babirye says with difficulty, "that he wouldn't want my body returned there."

But Babirye's art and undaunted spirit sustain her. Expecting to help resolve Babirye's case this spring (just in time for another Gordon Robichaux exhibition of the artist's sculptures), Pena is building an index of her work and media coverage of it, because she thinks it solidifies her appeal.

"Leilah's art is so innate and fundamental to who she is as a person," Pena says. "Her art and her sexual orientation are so tied together, you can't divorce one from the other. I really want to incorporate that theory into her case. She expressed herself through her art, while expressing her sexual orientation and her political beliefs, and she was targeted for that."

In speaking to Babirye's resilience, Pena invokes her client's ever-present bicycle, which truly has kept her moving. "Whenever we have an appointment, she comes in on her bike, all sweaty with her backpack, and we discuss her case and then she goes back to work," Pena says. "It's a survival job that's allowing her to pay rent, and it gives her more time to do her artwork. Because that's what's really important to her."

Says Babirye, "I never really wanted to fight the government or fight people who are homophobic. I really just wanted to teach the importance of people like us. If we educate as much as possible, we might make people believe in us and like us the way we are. My art is a big way of showing that to the world."

***Editor's Note**: In February, shortly after this story went to press, Leilah Babirye won her case, and was granted asylum in the United States.*

Photography by Serichai Traipoom.