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Soboleva, Ksenia M: Interview

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Leilah Babirye by Ksenia M. Soboleva

Sculptures that reach for the skies.

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Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY. *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of *Black Atlantic* at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022.

Since first arriving in New York City in 2015, the prolific Ugandan artist Leilah Babirye has established herself as one of the leading voices in contemporary sculptural practice. Working across various media, including ceramics and wood, Babirye's sculptures increasingly reach for the skies, tapping into the utopian promise of queer horizons. Seeking refuge in the United States after being publicly outed as a lesbian through a local newspaper in Uganda, Babirye's work emerges from a place of forced displacement, working through a history of adversity in the process of shaping a comforting present. As a signature gesture, Babirye's work features debris and found materials that urge the viewer to consider the treatment queer people continue to receive (the derogatory slang term for queers in Swahili fittingly translates to "trash"). I first met Babirye in 2018, and have maintained an ongoing dialogue with the artist since. Now that her impressive sculpture *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)* (2022) is on view at Brooklyn Bridge Park as part of the [*Black Atlantic*](#) exhibition, we sat down to reflect on the present and the future of her artistic practice.

—Ksenia M. Soboleva

Ksenia M. Soboleva

The title of your sculpture *Agali Awamu* means "togetherness." What is the story behind this work?

Leilah Babirye

I didn't know much about the Black Atlantic when Hugh Hayden, the co-curator, first proposed this project. When I started reading up on it, I realized it was basically all about the slave trade. I'm from Uganda, which is a landlocked country, so we had few slave-trade routes; it's not a history I was very familiar with. The Hudson River was one of the routes for the slave trade, and when I look at the skyline over Brooklyn Bridge Park from the vantage point of the sculptures, I am reminded of this. But I didn't want to fixate on the dark parts of this narrative. Instead, I wanted to find a positive angle. That's why I decided to make a sculpture that spoke to the experience of slaves liberating themselves, by uniting and working together as a group.

KMS

The sculpture holds both sadness and joy; depending on my own mood when I look at it, the figures seem to be smiling or wailing. This is heightened by the chains tied around them, which could also be read as ornaments—a conscious gesture on your part. Can you talk a bit more about this?

LB

I am fascinated by the ways in which African Americans are reclaiming objects that were taken from them. All the bling bling you see on celebrities like Beyoncé and Rihanna references a history of pain, but it's turning it into something beautiful. The colonizers stole a lot of jewelry, ornaments, gold, and transported them together with the slaves they put in chains. When you look at my work, the chains are referencing this history, but they are also reclaiming it by turning adversity into adornment.



Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY. *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of *Black Atlantic* at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022.

KMS

I read that you refer to these figures as “trans queens.” Your work always features the queer community, but there is a particular emphasis on trans people. Why is that?

LB

I think that the trans community is the most courageous within the LGBTQ+ community and holds the most importance. Of course, everyone is important in their own ways, but the trans community is currently most representative of the struggle for our rights and the most vulnerable.

KMS

Since we first met in 2018, you’ve been working on an increasingly larger scale. Do you envision that your sculptures will get bigger and bigger as your artistic practice progresses?

LB

You know what? I have not yet made a big sculpture. These are still babies! *(laughter)* I like to work in a large scale and give people headaches. I want cranes to carry my work all over the place. Ideally, I’d like to make a sculpture that is forty or sixty feet.

KMS

Taking up space is a political gesture, particularly for queer people of color. What would the dream location for your large-scale work be?

LB

I would love for my work to be part of the skyline, which I guess it sort of is right now in Brooklyn Bridge Park. I also always like having my work in museums, especially with high ceilings. I’d love to have a big museum exhibition where my work reaches through the entire height of the museum, almost as if it’s about to crack open the ceiling.

KMS

Your creative process is very hands-on; you use chisels, chainsaws, wood burning, not to mention that you have to constantly climb around the sculptures. What role does your own body play in this process?

LB

It depends. When I work in ceramics, it actually really calms me down. Ceramics is the only place where I feel like the medium tells you when to stop; clay tells you when to stop because you can't exceed it. At a certain point when you add another inch, it collapses. It's the only material that controls you. I don't like to be controlled; that's why I'm so gay. *(laughter)* Clay relaxes me, makes me compromise, urges me to say please sometimes. When I'm carving with a chainsaw, the experience is entirely different. It feels like work. It's what I love the most, but it's strenuous. I also love polishing. After my assistants do the first polish, I close myself in the studio; often nobody even knows that I'm back there. I think about what I want to add and what I want to take off. And when I'm done, I'm done. I don't want anybody else to touch it. It's my work. I like glazing as well because I can control the glaze but not the aftermath. You never know what's going to happen, how exactly the glaze will turn out. I love that about my work: it's unpredictable, and I can never repeat the same thing twice. It won't be the same.



Leilah Babirye, Agali Awamu (*Togetherness*), 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY. *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of *Black Atlantic* at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022.

KMS

During your first few years in New York, you would collect your materials from the street, including discarded objects, pieces of wood and metal that appealed to you, cans, tires, etcetera. Where do you source your materials now?

LB

Yes, before I would pick up stuff on the streets that I thought was beautiful. Now I go to metal scrap places. There are a lot in Brooklyn near my studio, and I select which items I want to buy. I've also met people who now collect or gather materials for me, such as piles of used bike tires they know I'll want. I've been paying people that collect cans in the street, and I pay them more than what they might get by recycling the cans. It's good to give back, as that was once me.

KMS

What's the experience like of having your work in a public space? How is it different from a museum?

LB

It's been rewarding having my work in a public space, especially in the park. Children have been playing on the sculptures, jumping through some of the voids, the in-between spaces. So many different friends have visited, taken their photos with the sculptures. It's great to see the many images pop up online every day. This October my ceramics will be shown at the Hayward Gallery, a group assembled from different shows, so it will be interesting to see them together. And in November my work will be in a show at mumok where they've given me access to the collection, and I'll show new work mixed with pieces by Constantin Brancusi, Louise Bourgeois, and more.



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KMS

How did you first arrive at the process of wood burning?

LB

Actually, I first started burning plastic. It looked amazing, but I quickly realized that it was really toxic, so I stopped. Burning wood became a way to give it a patina. My nickname in the LGBTQ+ community became Leilah *Burns*. It was like a signature gesture, a code recognized by those who really knew me.

KMS

Your queer identity is so tied to your existence as an artist. You left Uganda, where you had just been publicly outed as a lesbian, in 2015 to participate in the Fire Island Artist Residency. How has your work changed since then?

LB

My work came from a place of pain and has now turned into love. I feel that I have grown a lot over the past few years, done a lot of self-care and healing. I am much happier compared to when I first started making my work, when it was a real mode of survival. Now I truly enjoy my present, and the process of enjoying my present is healing my past.