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Yerebakan, Osman Can: *Leilah Babirye's Sculptures Dedicated to Queer Bodies Take over New York and Beyond*  
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## Leilah Babirye's Sculptures Dedicated to Queer Bodies Take over New York and Beyond

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Installation view, Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022, in Public Art Fund's "Black Atlantic" at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight and courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.

Leilah Babirye's summer on Fire Island in 2015 was an unrealistic entry into the United States. The artist had traveled from her hometown, the Ugandan capital of Kampala, to Long Island's remote queer haven to attend the Fire Island Artist Residency. "I thought 'wow this must be America—people are all generous and forgiving,'" Babirye recalled. "Just outside, in New York City, I realized everything is different; finding a studio and a place to stay was very challenging."

In the time since, however, bountiful changes have led Babirye's career only upwards: The U.S. granted her asylum in 2018 due to the life-threatening conditions the queer community faces in Uganda; a series of critically acclaimed exhibitions with her New York and London galleries, Gordon Robichaux and Stephen Friedman Gallery, respectively cemented her status as a sculptor to watch on both sides of the pond; and last year, Celine's creative director Hedi Slimane commissioned the 37-year old to make a sculpture for the French fashion house's new London boutique. Plus, the artist recently received her Green Card.



Leilah Babirye  
*Namasole Nababinge, Mother of King Nakibing...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request



Leilah Babirye  
*Nansamba II from the Kuchu Ngabi (Antelope) ...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request

Babirye's totemic ceramic and wooden sculptures embody the overlooked struggles of queer individuals in Uganda. From her Brooklyn studio, the artist carves such works, meticulously imbuing them with both transhistorical and transatlantic narratives, including Uganda's current, harsh crackdown on the LGBTQI+ community. (Gender fluidity was culturally welcome in the East African country until British rule mandated Victorian morals in the late 19th century.)

Today in Uganda, although every newborn is given a name at birth based on the Buganda Kingdom's clans, being outed later in life causes many to be ostracized from their families and denounced of their clan name. Babirye's wooden sculptures and ceramic busts each possess a clan name and stand in for many whose stories remain overlooked, both in the country itself and in the international arena.



Detail of Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight and courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.



Detail of Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight and courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.

Seven summers after her very first experience in New York, Babirye is far from needing a hand. Two of her wood and mixed-media sculptures, titled *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)* (2022), are featured in Public Art Fund's new group exhibition "Black Atlantic." Co-curated by artist Hugh Hayden and Daniel S. Palmer, the show is on view across Brooklyn Bridge Park through November 27, 2022.

Perched along the East River on Pier 1, Babirye's burnt and burnished figures overshadow the Manhattan skyline with their postures and elaborate jewelry of metal and found objects. Reaching around nine feet in height, they tower over passersby, not only with their size but also their radiant representations of the body as a totem of transcendence – and particularly, of queer joy.



Installation view, Leilah Babirye, *Agali Awamu (Togetherness)*, 2022, in Public Art Fund's "Black Atlantic" at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York. Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Nicholas Knight and courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.

"The project prompted me to read more than I ever had before about America's history with slavery and opened my mind for its many details," Babirye said of the show, which takes its title from the British sociologist Paul Gilroy's book of the same name. The thread she found between her sculpture practice and the history of slave trade through the Atlantic was a sense of unity: "My work is about different forms of families and groups of unities, much like those many slaves had to build with each other to survive."

While her larger-than-life sculptures in Brooklyn compete with downtown Manhattan's mammoth skyscrapers, the tallest of them all exhibits another work by Babiryre on its top floor. The "Moleskine Detour New York" exhibition at One World Observatory includes the artist's interpretation of a Moleskine notebook along with 74 other artists. The pages of Babiryre's book, which is titled *I care about you*, are burnt around the edges to an ashy smear and a flaming silhouette, paying homage to the same struggles she encapsulates in large-scale sculptures.



Leilah Babiryre, *I care about you*, 2022. Courtesy of Moleskine.

Some may know Babiryre best for her ceramics. In contrast to the immediacy of carving wood, working with clay leads Babiryre "to stop and patiently wait," she said, adding that she enjoys the meditative process. Babiryre's summer, however, is far from slowing down.

Beyond the city, her work is also included in two women-focused group shows at museums. The first, “52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone” is on view at [The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Ridgefield, Connecticut, from June 6th to January 8th, 2023. The show, organized by the museum’s curator Amy Smith-Stewart and independent curator Alexandra Schwartz, is a recreation of The Aldrich’s seminal exhibition, “Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists,” organized by Lucy R. Lippard in 1971. In addition to works by artists from the original show, it features pieces by a group of 26 contemporary artists who have had breakthrough moments in the last decade.



Leilah Babirye  
*Najjengo from the Kuchu Ngabi (Antelope) and ...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request



Leilah Babirye  
*Navvuvuumira from the Kuchu Mbogo (Buffalo) ...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request

For “52 Artists,” Babirye created an eight-foot-tall sculpture wearing a crown, “almost like a pope,” she explained. The piece will be exhibited alongside works by the likes of [Howardena Pindell](#), [Adrian Piper](#), [Alice Aycock](#), and [Mary Heilmann](#). Babirye expressed excitement to show with “26 amazing artists from another generation,” she said, as well as curiosity about what her peers have created using different contemporary technologies.

Meanwhile, in the Hamptons, Babiryé's work is featured in "Set It Off," curated by Mickalene Thomas and Racquel Chevremont at the Parrish Art Museum, on view through July 24, 2022. There, her sculptures, adorned with found materials, such as packaging and bicycle tires, are being shown with works by her contemporaries such as Torkwase Dyson, Kennedy Yanko, and Kameelah Janan Rasheed. Diverse in their approaches to their work, the overall concert of artists speaks to an urge to dive deeper into materials and open conversations with their surroundings.



Leilah Babiryé  
*Nakammamba from the Kuchu Bakinyooma (La...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request



Leilah Babiryé  
*Nakatotoo from the Kuchu Mpewo (Oribi Antelo...*  
Stephen Friedman Gallery  
Price on request

The show also resonates with the storytelling embedded within Babiryé's work. "I went to bed every night with stories that my grandparents told me, so maybe there is something borrowed from those days," Babiryé recalled. "But ultimately, what drives my work is West African masks which were all created with a purpose—and similarly, my work has a purpose, the purpose of symbolizing the community I believe in." ■