

Leilah Babirye
Ekimyula Ekijjankunene
(The Gorgeous Grotesque /
Die prächtige Groteske)

1 May – 28 June 2025
Goethestraße 2/3 & Bleibtreustraße 15/16, 10623

Opening: Thursday, 1 May, 6 – 8pm



Leilah Babirye, *Nakakeeto from the Kuchu Mutima (Heart) Clan*, 2023–2024, photo: Jonty Wilde

Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin is pleased to present *Ekimyula Ekijjankunene (The Gorgeous Grotesque / Die prächtige Groteske)*, a solo exhibition of new works by **Leilah Babirye** at Goethestraße 2/3 and Bleibtreustraße 15/16. This is the artist's inaugural exhibition with the gallery.

Language and history form the basis of Leilah Babirye's work. Her sculptures and works on paper are characterised by the appropriation and reassignment of terms and categorisations. Her practice is influenced by her own biography, her experiences of homophobia around the world, and the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in Uganda that forced her to flee to the USA. In her multidisciplinary practice, she uses metal, ceramics, found objects, and hand-carved or chain-sawed wood, incorporating elements of traditional West and Central African iconography into a contemporary context. Her sculptures present real or imagined portraits of the Queer community from the African continent as well as her new homeland, representing an ever-growing LGBTQ+ elective family. While she previously worked on her wooden sculptures using burning as a tool of manipulation, she now uses a variety of other techniques including nailing, assembling, weaving and polishing to focus on the materiality of the works, before adorning them with found materials.

The current exhibition presents new sculptures made from wood, glazed ceramic and bronze, as well as a set of drawings on paper. The title both refers to the ostracisation experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community and highlights the beauty of this community and Babirye's work. The concept of the grotesque is of particular interest to the artist, not only for its art historical significance, but for the dualism it sets up between the repulsive and the beautiful. This juxtaposition is reflected in many details within the exhibition, from vibrant dripping glazes paired with used tyres, to smooth burnished wood paired with rusty found objects. Combined with larger-than-life organic forms which simultaneously intimidate and invite the viewer, all of these elements come together in what Babirye calls *Ekimyula Ekijjankunene (The Gorgeous Grotesque / Die prächtige Groteske)*.

The sculptures range from a small group of figures to mask-like heads and faces, and monumental totems. The scale and presence of the works, which symbolically occupy the space around them, is an essential aspect of Babirye's artistic practice. Some of the heads are encircled by voluptuous collars, while other figures sport body or hair ornaments made from discarded bicycle parts, such as chains or tyres – a symbol for the artist of progress and movement. As a motif, the mask simultaneously references West African handicrafts, the style of which Babirye appropriates, and how LGBTQ+

people in Uganda must conceal their identity. For Babirye, transforming discarded objects into something beautiful is an expression of the resilience of the Queer community. Its members are referred to in the Luganda language by the derogatory term *ebisiyaga*, which describes the husk of the sugarcane which is usually thrown away. By deliberately repurposing neglected materials, Babirye reveals the beauty in the supposedly worthless. The set of works on paper in vibrant colours, entitled *Kuchu Ndagamuntu (Queer Identity Card)*, shows individuals from Queer and Trans communities or drag artists who Babirye has noticed in everyday life, on the street or while travelling. She paints them from memory. The portraits function as alternative passport photos, in which freedom of expression and true identity can exist unprovoked.

In the gallery space at Bleibtreustraße 15/16, the sculptures which form *Abambowa (Royal Guard Who Protects the King)*, 2025, are lined up, side by side, on a plinth. *Abambowa* is the name for the highest guard in the traditional kingdom of Buganda. The titles of Babirye's works often refer to names from the Ugandan clan system of pre-colonial history, which are based on plants or animals. In this way, the artist creates a sense of belonging which celebrates the members of the Queer community. The coded term *kuchu* ('queer'), which can be found in some of the titles, is here afforded a dignified meaning.

Babirye's oeuvre unites tradition, history and personal experience into a universal connection. Her work gives visibility and dignity to marginalised communities, celebrating resilience and diversity. Past and progress are not in opposition: 'I always say that if you forget your history, you don't know who you are and where you're going,' the artist states. 'I can't live in the present or look to the future without also looking back, and this back and forth is evident in my work.'¹ Grounded in her heritage, Babirye incorporates references into her practice and uses their artistic transformation as a means not just to survive, but to thrive and flourish.

Leilah Babirye (b. 1985, Kampala, Uganda) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. The artist's work has been the subject of institutional solo exhibitions at the de Young Museum, San Francisco (2024–2025); and Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton (2024). Babirye's work has also been presented in group exhibitions, including the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia; Sainsbury's Centre, Norwich (both 2024); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Whitworth, The University of Manchester (both 2023); mumok, Vienna; The Africa Centre, London (both 2022); Coventry Biennial (2021); Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Bric, Brooklyn (all 2019); Trapholt Museum, Kolding (2016); and Kampala Art Biennale (2014).

Babirye's work is held in the collections of the Columbus Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry; Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson; mumok, Vienna; RISD Museum, Providence; Sainsbury Centre, Norwich; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Xiao Museum of Contemporary Art, Shandong, among others.

¹ L. Babirye, in 'Artist Leilah Babirye: "I want to help people feel a sense of belonging"', *Art Basel*, 7 March 2024.

Further exhibitions and events

BERLIN

Thomas Struth
25 April – 21 June 2025
Potsdamer Straße 77-87
10785 Berlin

Sergey Kononov
1 May – 4 June 2025
Bleibtreustraße 45
10623 Berlin

MARFA

Richard Prince
Posters
May – December 2025
1976 Antelope Hills Road
Marfa, Texas

PARIS

Sarah Crowner
Tableaux en Laine, Pierres en Bronze
26 April – 21 June 2025
46 & 57, rue du Temple
75004 Paris

LONDON

Jake Longstreth
California Landscapes
24 April – 8 June 2025
41 Dover Street
London W1S 4NS

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