

YSP

Press Release

Leilah Babirye: Obumu (Unity)

23 March – 8 September 2024

Chapel

Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) to present the first museum solo exhibition by Leilah Babirye.



Installation view: Leilah Babirye: *Ebika Bya ba Kuchu mu Buganda (Kuchu Clans of Buganda) II*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (2021). Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo by Mark Blower.

Opening on Saturday 23 March 2024, Leilah Babirye's exhibition *Obumu (Unity)* will feature new sculptures made at YSP specifically for this exhibition, largely from materials found onsite.

"My work is basically using trash, giving it new life and making it beautiful. It is always influenced by where I am working, I will use whatever is there. That's why the work always looks different, because I'm not sure what I'll find. The wood I'm working with here is a soft wood, whereas in New York it's usually pine, which is a harder wood. This gives the sculptures a different feel and contributes to their different personalities." Leilah Babirye

Babirye spent the summer of 2023 at YSP making a clan of seven larger-than-life-size figures in wood and five coloured ceramics. Supported by YSP's technical team, seven sculptures were carved using a chainsaw and chisels from trees that had reached the natural end of their life on site. Babirye describes being guided by the wood itself, sketching the initial forms directly

onto the sectioned tree for carving. Once carved, the figures are refined and their surfaces sanded back to highlight the grains of the tree. The sculptures are then burned a deep black, which the artist used to do to make the works 'disappear', but is now a gesture of celebrating their beauty. Details of the sculptures are treated with a blowtorch and then all the surfaces carefully waxed to acknowledge the skin of the piece and the tree from which it came. The final stage is one Babirye has called 'taking the girls to the salon', in which found elements complete the sculptures, including bicycle chains, nails and copper from a dismantled boiler, as well as redundant silver tea pots.

During her time at YSP, Babirye also sculpted five large ceramic portrait-sculptures, each its own personality. They are created from coiled clay and boldly shaped into fundamental forms in which traces of the artist's strong hands and fingers can be seen, before being fired and heavily coated with dense glazes that on firing contribute to the sculptures' earthy, elemental power. Together the works will make a robust, rich statement in YSP's Chapel, built in 1744, around the time some of the trees used would have begun to grow. Painterly glazes contrast with chiselled, roughly-textured woodwork and metal objects associated with the art of blacksmithing. The artworks become a congregation that celebrates community in all its forms in this beautiful and contemplative space, which has witnessed key moments in now-forgotten lives for centuries.

Babirye's practice originally began as activism, as a gay woman in her home country of Uganda, where being gay is illegal and risks the death penalty. Babirye's use of discarded materials references the prejudiced slang for a gay person in the Luganda language – 'abasiyazi' – which is the part of the sugarcane husk that is rubbish, thrown out. Her practice integrates her own unique approach to making art with her culture and heritage and long-standing sculpture traditions such as mask making. She was partly inspired by the work of Henry Moore as a student, who himself drew from artefacts from the African continent, and whose sculptures are on permanent display at YSP in his home county of West Yorkshire.

Babirye acknowledged at Yorkshire Sculpture Park that she began to make art from real pain but now she feels blessed to be doing what she is doing, to create and adore who we all are.

Clare Lilley, YSP Director, says: *"Leilah's uncompromising sculpture always packs a punch. That these sculptures were created at YSP, with Leilah making the most of what this place has to offer, is very special. For almost 300 years, our Chapel has been a place for community and contemplation, and we're privileged that Leilah has made it a home for her clan of compelling artworks."*

This exhibition is supported by Stephen Friedman Gallery.

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Leilah Babirye, 2022. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo © Mark Hartman.



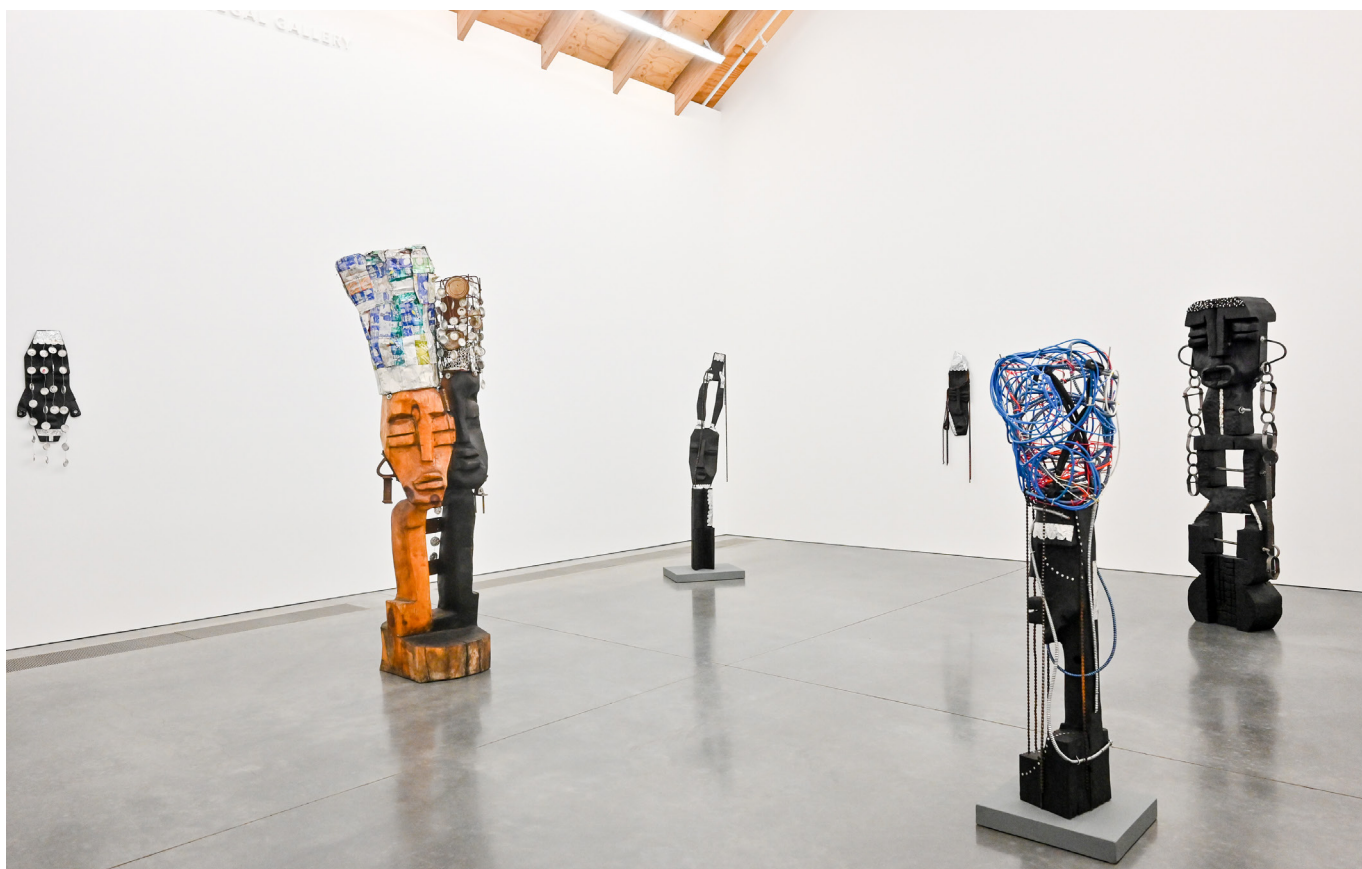
Leilah Babirye, *Gunsinze aliwa Bitono*, 2023.
© Leilah Babirye. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo © Mark Blower.



Leilah Babirye, 2023. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo © Jonty Wilde, courtesy Yorkshire Sculpture Park.



Leilah Babirye, 2023. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo © Jonty Wilde, courtesy Yorkshire Sculpture Park.



Installation view: *Set It Off*, Parrish Art Museum, New York, USA, 2022. Courtesy the artist, Parrish Art Museum, New York, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo © David Benthall.

Notes for Editors

Press enquiries

Mana Merikhy, Sutton / +44 (0)7595 217 618 / mana@suttoncomms.com

Deborah Hastie, YSP / +44 (0)7799 575 558 / deborah.hastie@ysp.org.uk

YSP Communications / +44 (0)1924 832 515 / comms@ysp.org.uk

Download images at ysp.org.uk/press

Listings information

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield WF4 4LG

Near Wakefield and Barnsley – M1 Junction 38

+44 (0)1924 832631 | ysp.org.uk | @YSPsculpture

Open Tuesday - Sunday. Closed on Mondays (excluding school and Bank Holidays) and 24–25 December.

Booking essential, via ysp.org.uk

Social media

Instagram and Twitter: @YSPsculpture

Facebook: @YorkshireSculpturePark

LinkedIn: Yorkshire Sculpture Park

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About Leilah Babirye

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 LGBTQIA+ 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 spring 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.

About Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) is the leading international centre for modern and contemporary sculpture. Welcoming 380,000 visitors in 2022, YSP is an independent charitable trust and registered museum situated in the 500-acre, 18th-century Bretton Hall estate in West Yorkshire.

Founded in 1977 by Sir Peter Murray CBE and since 2022 led by Clare Lilley, YSP is the largest sculpture park of its kind in Europe. It is the only place in Europe to see Barbara Hepworth's *The Family of Man* in its entirety, alongside a significant collection of sculpture, including bronzes by Henry Moore, important pieces by Phyllida Barlow, Roger Hiorns, Damien Hirst, Hemali Bhuta and Ai Weiwei, and site-related works by Katrina Palmer, Andy Goldsworthy, Alfredo Jaar, David Nash, Sean Scully and James Turrell.

YSP mounts a year-round temporary exhibitions programme including some of the world's leading artists across six indoor galleries and the outdoors. Recent highlights include exhibitions by Fiona Banner, Anthony Caro, Tony Cragg, Robert Indiana, Amar Kanwar, KAWS, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, Annie Morris, Giuseppe Penone, Jaume Plensa, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Sean Scully, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Chiharu Shiota, David Smith, Joana Vasconcelos, and Bill Viola.

Across its 45-year history, YSP has worked with over 1,000 artists from more than 40 countries, on varied projects from short-term residencies to major surveys. YSP supports artists at vital stages in their careers and is rare in having the accommodation, workshops and expertise to enable open-ended and risk-taking practice, giving artists space, time and support to think and to develop new ideas.

Over this time, YSP has sought to ignite, nurture and sustain interest in and debate around contemporary art and sculpture, especially with those for whom art participation is not habitual or familiar. It enables open access to art, situations and ideas, and continues to re-evaluate and expand the approach to considering art's role and relevance in society. Supporting 40,000 people each year through YSP's learning programme, this innovative work develops ability, confidence and life aspiration in participants.

YSP's core work is made possible by investment from Arts Council England, Wakefield Council, the Liz and Terry Bramall Foundation and Sakurako and William Fisher through the Sakana Foundation. YSP was named Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2014 and awarded VisitEngland's gold accolade in 2021-22 for an outstanding visitor attraction.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park is a co-investigator in a major AHRC-funded project initiated by the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York that asks 'whether the arts can save human rights'.

Stephen Friedman Gallery



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