Michael Armitage / MATRIX 263
UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
December 14, 2016 through April 2, 2017

(Berkeley, CA) December 1, 2016 — The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) presents Michael Armitage / MATRIX 263, on view from December 14, 2016 through April 2, 2017. The exhibition features the lush paintings of London- and Nairobi-based artist Michael Armitage, who merges European styles with East African subjects, materials, and perspectives. MATRIX 263 debuts a new body of work in which Armitage reflects on sexuality and gender stereotypes in Kenya.

Armitage trains his attention on the vicissitudes of Kenyan life and its social inequities, political developments, and violent upheavals—all filtered through a dreamlike, expressionistic aesthetic, which is as poignant as it is visionary. His choice of subject matter is inspired by contemporary events in his native Kenya, and he often interweaves imagery he finds in African popular culture, including websites, newspapers, posters, and music videos. His signature medium is oil on Lubugo bark cloth, a
fabric traditionally used to make ceremonial garments, which he stretches across a frame; the inherent sutures, tears, and textures of the material frequently inform the compositions of his paintings.

Blending abstract and figurative styles, Armitage draws upon the modernist language of Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso, yet upends their European approach to non-Western cultures. Armitage’s palette and expressionistic lines, for instance, recall the saturated canvases Gauguin made in Tahiti, which depicted the island and its inhabitants from a decidedly Western perspective. Armitage quotes Gauguin in order to challenge the French painter’s exoticization of the “other.” In his paintings, Kenya and (its extended region) is represented from a perspective that is instead synthetic and cosmopolitan.

The largest work in the exhibition pictures the Tanzanian pop artist Diamond Platnumz, known across Africa for his unique brand of Bongo flava music, and his entourage disembarking from his plane on the tarmac. The lush, blue-green, tropical background seems to undulate on the canvas, with the protagonists—bedecked in bright orange and yellow clothes—contrasting with their paradisiacal environs while also appearing entirely integrated with them. Kampala Suburb (2014), the first painting Armitage made in the series, which addresses sexuality in Kenya, shows the silhouettes of two men kissing—an act that could be punishable by death in Kampala, Uganda. In another painting, Armitage revisits Picasso’s famed Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), but transforms the five central figures into male prostitutes, known as “beach boys,” who comb the beaches of Mombasa looking for wealthy European patrons. Armitage here reverses the historical dialectic between European and African cultures, appropriating Picasso’s iconic modern imagery to tell a story about contemporary life in Kenya.

About the Artist
Born in 1984 in Nairobi, Kenya, Michael Armitage lives and works in both Nairobi and London. He graduated in 2007 from the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London and in 2010 from the Royal Academy Schools. He has had solo exhibitions at London’s Royal Academy of Arts and White Cube (which represents him), and his work was featured in the thirteenth Biennale de Lyon and the Drawing Room Biennial, as well as in group exhibitions at Home, Manchester; Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne; Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York; Yuan Museum, Beijing; Palazzo Capris, Turin; and Beers Contemporary, the South London Gallery, the Drawing Room, Studio 1.1, and Simon Oldfield in London. This is Armitage’s first solo exhibition in the United States.

Support
Michael Armitage/ MATRIX 263 is organized by Apsara DiQuinzio, curator of modern and contemporary art and Phyllis C. Wattis MATRIX Curator. The MATRIX Program is made possible by a
generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis and the continued support of the BAMPFA Trustees. Additional support is provided by White Cube, London.

Above


Public Programs

**Lecture by Artist Michael Armitage**

Saturday, December 10, 1 PM
Included with admission

Copresented by the UC Berkeley Department of Art Practice

In this illustrated lecture, artist Michael Armitage provides a preview of a new body of work, premiering in **MATRIX 263**, that focuses on sexuality and gender stereotypes in Kenya.
**Visitor Information**

**Address**
2155 Center Street Berkeley, CA 94704

**Hours**
Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

**Gallery Admission**
$12 general admission
$10 Non-Berkeley students, disabled, 65+
Free for BAMPFA members; UC Berkeley students, faculty, staff, and retirees; 18 & under + one adult
Free First Thursdays: Free gallery admission on the first Thursday of each month

**About BAMPFA**

Internationally recognized for its art and film programming, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) is a platform for cultural experiences that transform individuals, engage communities, and advance the local, national, and global discourse on art and film. Founded in 1963, BAMPFA is UC Berkeley’s primary visual arts venue with its screenings of some 450 films and presentations of up to twenty exhibitions annually. BAMPFA’s mission is to inspire the imagination and ignite critical dialogue through art and film.

The institution’s collection of over 19,000 works of art dates from 3000 BCE to the present day and includes important holdings of Neolithic Chinese ceramics, Ming and Qing Dynasty Chinese painting, Old Master works on paper, Italian Baroque painting, early American painting, Abstract Expressionist painting, contemporary photography, and Conceptual art. BAMPFA’s collection also includes over 17,500 films and videos, including the largest collection of Japanese cinema outside of Japan, impressive holdings of Soviet cinema, West Coast avant-garde film, seminal video art, as well as hundreds of thousands of articles, reviews, posters, and other ephemera related to the history of film—many of which are digitally scanned and accessible online.

**About MATRIX**

The MATRIX Program for Contemporary Art introduces the Bay Area community to exceptional work being made internationally, nationally, and locally, creating a rich connection to the current dialogues on contemporary art and demonstrating that the art of this moment is vital, dynamic, and often challenging. Confronting traditional practices of display and encouraging new, open modes of analysis, MATRIX provides an experimental framework for an active interchange between the artist, the museum, and the viewer. There have been hundreds of shows at BAMPFA since the program’s inception in 1978, featuring artists such as John Baldessari, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louise Bourgeois, Sophie Calle, Nan Goldin, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Shirin Neshat, Nancy Spero, and Andy Warhol. In recent decades MATRIX has embraced a greater international scope, with the roster including Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Geta Bratescu, Peter Doig, Omer Fast, Tobias Rehberger, Ernesto Neto, Rosalind Nashashibi, Tomás Saraceno, Mario García Torres, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, representing countries as diverse as Finland, Germany, Iran, Mexico, Romania, Thailand, and Brazil.

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