



Michael Armitage MATRIX 263 DECEMBER 14, 2016–APRIL 2, 2017
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Based in Nairobi, Kenya (where he was born), and London, Michael Armitage makes paintings inspired by his experiences in East Africa that extend and often overturn canonical histories of European modern art. His signature medium is oil on Lubugo bark cloth, a material harvested and prepared from trees in Uganda and turned into a sacred fabric, often used for making ceremonial garments for tribal leaders. Armitage, however, stretches the cloth across a frame, turning it into the ground upon which he builds each of his lush paintings. The inherent sutures, tears, and textures of the material frequently inform the compositions of his paintings, the subjects of which refer to the political and social events that shape and impact contemporary life in his native Kenya.

Armitage draws his subjects from myriad popular sources; the images he employs often circulate in the media in various forms—websites, newspapers, posters, music videos, etc. For instance, in *Wait* (2015), Armitage makes his own unique representation by interweaving disparate popular sources, ranging from local milk advertisements emblazoned with a glorious sunrise to ubiquitous posters promoting the separatist group the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), to photos of men in an execution lineup. One of these men appears on the right, blindfolded and about to be shot; his relaxed *contrapposto* stance attracted Armitage to the image, which belies the gruesome reality of the scene about to unfold. The artist filters these elements of contemporary daily life through an art historical lens, referencing paintings by Western masters—Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes and Edouard Manet, in particular—to whom Armitage is drawn for their socially reflective, critical, and self-conscious commitment to painting.

MATRIX 263 presents a selection of paintings that collectively reflect on sexuality and gender stereotypes in Kenya and Eastern Africa, where the cultures are closely intertwined. *Kampala Suburb* (2014) is the first painting Armitage made about this subject. In this work, the artist depicts the silhouettes of two men kissing—an act that could be punishable by death in Kampala, Uganda, —known for having some of the most severe laws against homosexuality. As a result, much of the gay community has left Uganda, preferring the more lenient (though far from accepting) country of Kenya, where gay people can face up to fifteen years of incarceration and those suspected of being gay are subject to brutal cultural humiliations. Such is the subject of Armitage’s painting *Muliro Gardens (bench)* (2016), which was inspired by an actual event in Kakamega, Kenya: Police set up a hidden camera near a bench in the Muliro Gardens where couples would go during their lunch breaks to make out and have sex; the intent was to capture the indecent, illegal activity occurring on the bench and publicly shame the couples by releasing the videos online. Armitage imbues the scenario with ambiguity, revealing a tenderness that reads as both erotic and maternal.

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. Blending abstract and figurative styles, Armitage draws upon the modernist language defined by Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso more than a century ago. His palette and expressionistic lines, for instance, recall the

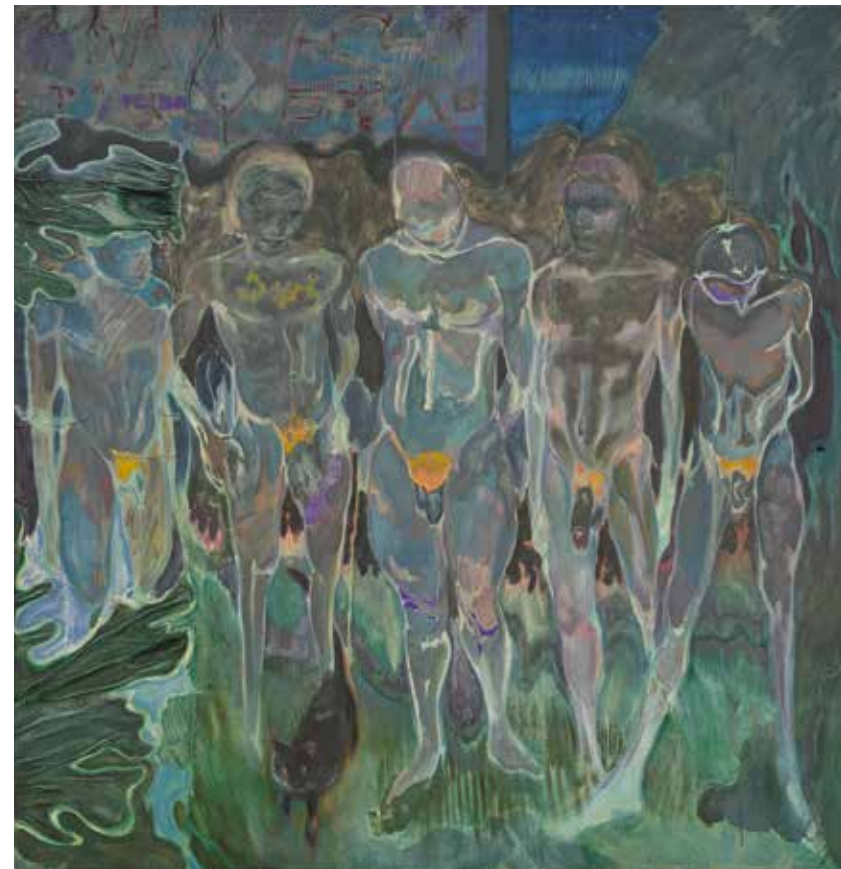
saturated canvases Gauguin made in his adopted tropical outpost of Tahiti, albeit from a decidedly European perspective. Gauguin, however, is more of an agent provocateur than a guidepost for Armitage. Armitage quotes Gauguin—a self-exiled Frenchman who used “primitive” Tahitian culture (particularly its women) as his sensuous muse—in order to challenge the exoticization of the “other” that Gauguin problematically represented.

In *Nyali Beach Boys* (2016), Armitage revisits Picasso’s famed *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907), transforming the now canonical subject: in the updated version, the five central figures, or prostitutes, are men known as “beach boys,” who comb the beaches of Mombasa looking for wealthy female, European patrons. Picasso’s painting drew from “primitive,” influences through his appropriation of African and Iberian masks, which he used for the women’s faces. As the art historian Gill Perry asserts, Western artists such as Picasso and Gauguin, who deployed foreign cultures in the service of modernism, “[raise] difficult questions about the definition of innovation and assimilation in modern artworks, and the relationship between them when the artist borrows from or is influenced by ‘primitive’ works.”¹ In his rendering, Armitage reverses the relationship, reappropriating Picasso’s iconic modern imagery to tell a story about contemporary life in Kenya; thus the appropriation of modern styles comes full circle. Armitage brings another referent into his reimagining of the subject, as well, replacing the basket of fruit—a symbol of female sexuality—in Picasso’s composition with a black cat. At the base of the picture, the ominous cat slides through the men’s feet, an overt art historical reference to prostitution, most famously depicted in Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), where a black cat arches her back near Olympia’s feet, at the end of her bed, reinforcing the reclining beauty’s questionable social status.

Armitage complicates the historical dialectic between Western and non-Western cultures, making work about Kenya (and its extended East African region) from a perspective that is more synthetic and cosmopolitan than that of his antecedents—merging European styles with East African subjects, materials, and understanding. Like Manet, who questioned the norms of daily Parisian life, Armitage trains his attention on the vicissitudes of Kenyan life and its social inequities, political developments, and violent upheavals—all filtered through the artist’s dreamlike, expressionistic aesthetic, which is as poignant as it is visionary.

Apsara DiQuinzio
CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

1. Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the ‘Moderns,’” in *Primitivism, Cubism, and Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles Harrison et al. (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993), 3–4.



Biography

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.

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 HAS BEEN PROVIDED BY WHITE CUBE, LONDON.

Checklist

Kampala Suburb
2014
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
77³/₁₆ × 59¹/₁₆ in.
Private collection

Mangroves Dip
2015
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
87 × 67 in.
Collection of Fondazione Sandretto
Re Rebaudengo

Wait
2015
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
67 × 87 in.
Private collection

Diamond Platnumz
2016
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
66¹⁵/₁₆ × 118¹/₁₆ in.
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London

Nyal Beach Boys
2016
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
96¹/₂ × 92¹/₂ in.
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London

Muliro Gardens (bench)
2016
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
67¹/₈ × 86³/₁₆ × 1¹/₈ in.
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London

FRONT *Kampala Suburb*
ABOVE *Muliro Gardens (bench)*
OPPOSITE *Wait*
BACK *Diamond Platnumz*
Nyal Beach Boys

Photo credits:

© Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube (Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd):
Kampala Suburb, Wait, Nyal Beach Boys

© Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube (Ben Westoby):
Diamond Platnumz, Muliro Gardens (bench)