



Large
Print

Michael Armitage:

Paradise Edict

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Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict

The Jillian and Arthur M Sackler Wing
of Galleries

22 May – 19 September 2021

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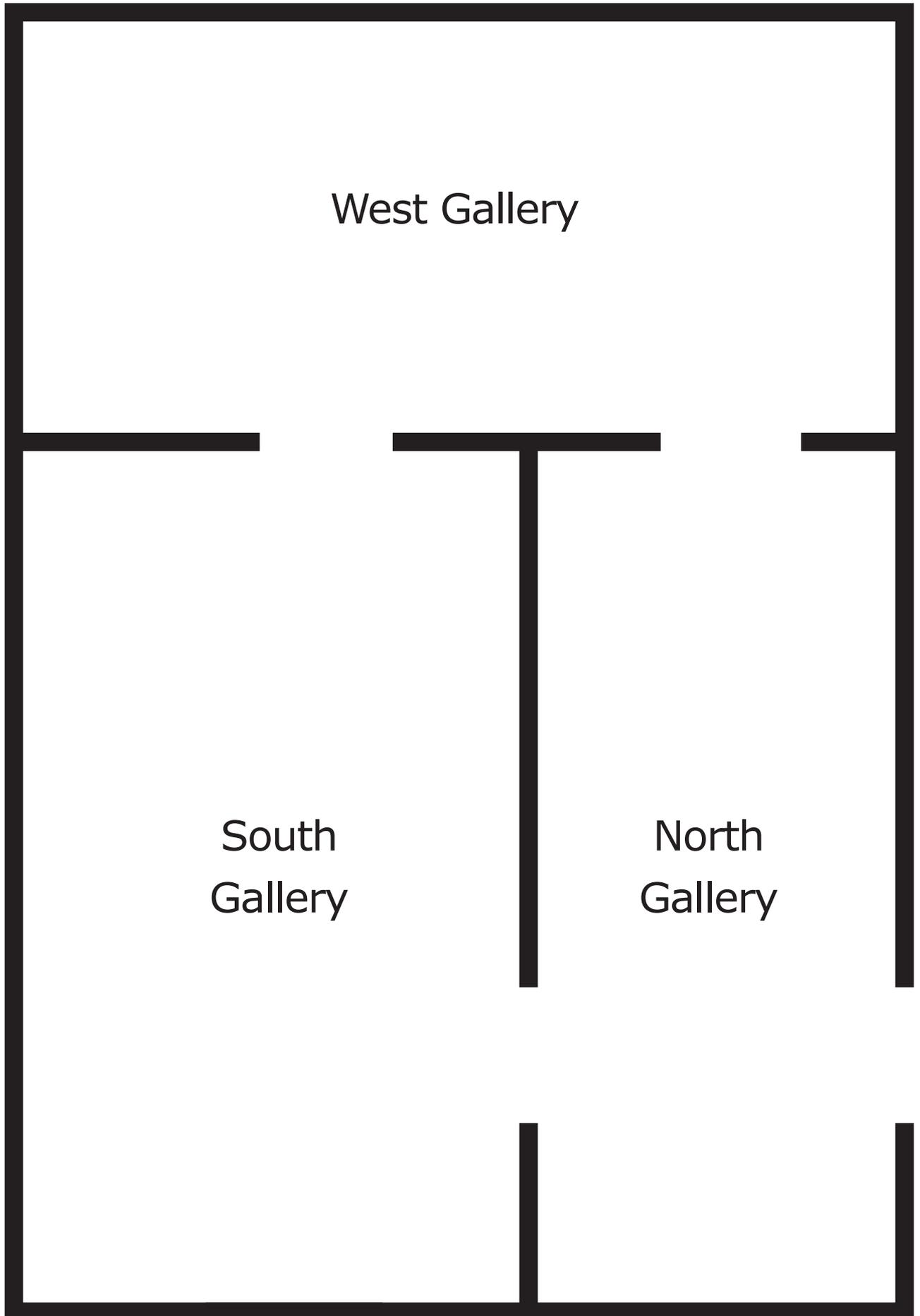
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North Gallery starts on page 4



Introduction to the exhibition

Kenyan-British painter Michael Armitage (b. 1984) explores East African society, politics and culture in his paintings. Born in Nairobi and trained in London, he graduated from the Royal Academy Schools in 2010.

Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict presents a selection of his work from the last seven years, and explores his connections with contemporary East African artists whose works he has selected to be shown alongside his own.

Michael Armitage reflects on his experiences in Kenya and on current events, while drawing on contemporary East African art and European art history.

Bridging artistic traditions, he looks towards the work of Meek Gichugu, Jak Katarikawe and Chelenge van Rampelberg as well as Titian, Francisco de Goya and Paul Gauguin.

In his rich and multi-layered narrative paintings, Armitage questions social norms, religious ideology, politics and cultural clichés. He offers no answers, instead delighting in painting's openness to interpretation.

Armitage works between Kenya and London, but his work is grounded in East Africa.

He paints on Lubugo, a bark cloth traditionally made in Uganda by the Baganda people by beating and drying the inner bark of the Mutuba tree, or Natal fig.

Lubugo, which can be translated as "funeral cloth", is a prestigious material used in Baganda ceremonies. Reinvesting this East African material with a new significance, Armitage destabilises traditional notions of painting.

The Kenyan Election Series

In the run-up to the 2017 elections in Kenya, Armitage joined a local TV crew filming an opposition party rally in Uhuru Park, Nairobi.

The atmosphere he experienced there and the carnivalesque scenes he witnessed inspired this series of paintings in which Armitage explores power dynamics and the links between religious rhetoric, pathos and politics.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Pathos and the twilight of the idle

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy the artist and White Cube

The Chicken Thief

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy the artist and White Cube

The Fourth Estate

2017

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Promised gift to the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham

The promise of change

2018

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Purchased with funds contributed by Daniela Nawi and the Young Collectors Council, with additional funds contributed by Anne Huntington, Alexandra Economou, Anastasiya Siro and Tiffany Zabludowicz, 2018 2018.79

The Dumb Oracle

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy of the Norval Foundation Collection

Mkokoteni

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy the artist and White Cube

The Accomplice

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Acquisition of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Board of Trustees

Introduction to Mwili, Akili na Roho

[Body, Mind and Spirit]

Michael Armitage presents six contemporary East African artists working between the 1960s and the 1990s.

Both formally trained and self-taught, these artists represent the artistic context within which he grew up. Armitage recognises his debt to them: “not only [do] I share many of their socio-political concerns, but the way they [use] Christian imagery and different aspects of local cultures [is] so similar to what I [am] doing.”

Asaph Ng’ethe Macua, Elimo Njau and Theresa Musoke were formally trained; all three attended the School of Fine Arts at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda between the 1950s and the 1960s. Founded in 1937, it was the first art school in East Africa and attracted artists from across the region.

Jak Katarikawe, although self-taught, was mentored by a professor at Makerere University before moving to Nairobi where his popularity paved the way for other self-taught artists.

Sane Wadu and Meek Gichugu are largely self-taught and together formed a collective in reaction to the university-educated artists.

Both groups have often worked closely together, but the emphasis that has been placed on self-taught artists, promoted as the stereotype of the “naïve” African artist, has tended to eclipse their artistic intentions.

‘Mwili, Akili na Roho’ challenges this view and charts a history of figurative painting in East Africa.

Extending his commitment to East African art, Armitage recently founded the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI), a non-profit visual arts space where a selection of these works will be exhibited as a separate show titled ‘Mwili, Akili na Roho’.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

[Films]

Meet the Artist: Asaph Ng'ethe Macua, 2020

A film by Matteo Lonardi

Commissioned by Haus der Kunst and Nairobi
Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI)

Run time: 3 minutes

Meet the Artist: Elimo Njau, 2020

A film by Matteo Lonardi

Commissioned by Haus der Kunst and Nairobi
Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI)

Run time: 3 minutes

Meet the Artist: Sane Wadu, 2020

A film by Matteo Lonardi

Commissioned by Haus der Kunst and Nairobi
Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI)

Run time: 3 minutes

To see the full films, please visit:

roy.ac/armitage-meet-the-artists

Elimo Njau

Dream Landscape

1968

Oil on canvas

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Dr Johanna
Agthe (1941–2005)

Theresa Musoke

Midday Buffaloes at Mweya

c.1967

Mixed media on paper

Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth; Klaus Betz, Kampala

Untitled

Undated

Mixed media on canvas

Muathi and Ula Kilonzo Collection

Jak Katarikawe

This Is Jealousy

Before 1998

Oil on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen Schneider (1939–1997)

The Hunter

Before 1990

Oil on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main

In Love

Before 1998

Crayon on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen Schneider (1939–1997)

Why Are We Dying Every Day?

Before 1998

Oil on hardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen Schneider (1939–1997)

I've Caught You at Last

Before 1988

Oil on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Dr Johanna Agthe (1941–2005)

When I'm Going to Meet You Again?

Before 1998

Crayon on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen
Schneider (1939–1997)

She is Dreaming of Wedding

Undated

Oil on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen
Schneider (1939–1997)

Our Princess, Princess

Bagaya

Before 1998

Oil on cardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen
Schneider (1939–1997)

Untitled

Before 1998

Oil on canvas

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen Schneider (1939–1997)

He Is Beating the Son

Before 1998

Oil on hardboard

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Jochen Schneider (1939–1997)

Sane Wadu

Circus Boy

Before 1988

Oil on paper

Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Dr Johanna Agthe (1941–2005)

Abraham and Isaac

Undated

Oil on canvas

Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth; Sammlung
Kleine-Gunk

Accidental Enmity (Fallen Tree After the Storm)

1980–1990

Oil on canvas

Gunter Péus Collection, Hamburg

My Life

1980–1990

Oil on canvas

Gunter Péus Collection, Hamburg

Pregnant Man

Undated

Oil on canvas

Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth; Sammlung
Kleine-Gunk

Meek Gichugu

No Erotic They Say

Undated

Oil on cardboard

Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute

Fruits on Balance

1980–1990

Oil on canvas

Gunter Péus Collection, Hamburg

Putting a Fruit Away from Home

1980–1990

Oil on canvas

Gunter Péus Collection, Hamburg

Blind

Undated

Oil on canvas

Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute

Like a Vulture

1991

Oil on board

Robert Loder Collection

Untitled (Brother Wise Hooking Wisdom & Freedom)

c. 1992

Oil on canvas

Banana Hill Art Gallery

Asaph Ng'ethe Macua

The Garden of Eden,
Genesis, Chapter 2, Verse 17
2010

Gouache on paper

Courtesy the artist

When the Men Took Power From Women

Undated

Gouache on paper

Courtesy the artist

Wanjuhi

1961

Gouache on paper, collage

Courtesy the artist

In a Hospital Bed

Undated

Wax chalk on cardboard

Courtesy the artist

Split Personalities

Undated

Gouache on paper

Courtesy the artist

GUTHEKIO TI KWENDWO (Being smiled at is not necessarily being loved)

Undated

Gouache on paper

Courtesy the artist

The Genocide

Undated

Gouache on canvas

Courtesy the artist

Paradise Edict

The contested elections in Kenya in 2017 led Michael Armitage to think about the allure of paradise after politicians made biblical allusions with their vow to lead Kenyans to “the Promised Land”.

Armitage explores the cliché of paradise in monumental landscape paintings where he challenges Western stereotypes associated with East Africa. He exposes the exoticisation and the reduction of Kenyan culture to a mere fascination with its breath-taking landscapes and wildlife.

The paintings suggest sophisticated multi-layered narratives, evoking different moments in time. He creates a sense of Kenya’s rich and complex history, from its mythical past in ‘Enasoit’ to its more recent colonial history under British rule with ‘Numbers (Mau Mau)’.

Animals behave and dress like humans in an uncanny way. Drawing on classical myths and tragedy, Armitage also explores sexuality, power and the weight of social expectations in East Africa.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

The Paradise Edict

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Antigone

2018

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Collezione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

Leopard print seducer

2016

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy The Cross/Steele Family Collection

Baboon

2016

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Private collection

Numbers (Mau Mau)

2014

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Private collection, London

Sheath

2016

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Private collection

Enasoit

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy the artist and White Cube

Mydas

2019

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Courtesy the artist and White Cube

Sackler Sculpture Gallery

As part of his current exhibition, Michael Armitage curates an intervention in 'Richard Deacon RA Selects'. The Kenyan-British painter has selected works by three contemporary Kenyan artists: Magdalene Odundo (b.1950), Chelenge van Rampelberg (b.1961) and Wangechi Mutu (b.1972).

Interspersed in the current display, their works open conversations with the sculptures drawn from the RA Collection.

Magdalene Odundo

Untitled

2001

Ceramic

Collection of Dr Brian Harding

Untitled

2009

Ceramic

Collection of Dr Brian Harding

Born 1950 in Nairobi, Kenya, Magdalene Odundo's vessels often subtly evoke the human figure, capturing in their pose familiar stances and gestures, while the occasional clay protrusions suggest human anatomy.

They are also profoundly spiritual: at times memorials to someone who has died, or vested with healing power.

Made from clay, one of the oldest artistic media, they invoke humanity's history.

As Odundo reflects: "What is beautiful about the pot is that it conveys a universal human language, that of spiritual utility and aesthetic."

Chelenge van Rampelberg

Eve

Undated

Ebony

Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute

Born 1961 in Kericho, Kenya, Chelenge van Rampelberg became a self-taught sculptor after attending art workshops run by Gallery Watatu in Nairobi in 1984.

Although she received no formal artistic training, the indigenous art and techniques she was exposed to as a child have strongly influenced her work. In her carvings, van Rampelberg uses a wide range of East African woods, including doum palm, ebony, jacaranda, avocado and sikotoi.

Van Rampelberg was a formative influence on Michael Armitage when he was growing up. He spent much time in her studio and she introduced him to the East African art scene.

Wangechi Mutu

Heeler IX

2016

Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue, rocks, acrylic shoe,
wood (Silver Oak)

Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and
Brussels, and Victoria Miro, London/Venice

Corona II

2016

Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue

Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and
Brussels, and Victoria Miro, London/Venice

Ebola

2016

Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue

Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and
Brussels, and Victoria Miro, London/Venice

Heeler VIII

2016

Red soil, paper pulp, wood glue, rocks, acrylic shoe, wood (Tecoma)

Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, and Victoria Miro, London/Venice

Born 1972 in Nairobi, Kenya, Wangechi

Mutu is an interdisciplinary artist who works between Nairobi and New York.

Through her artwork, Mutu explores the undeniable connection between humanity, all other living organisms and the world we share. Her earth-sculptures, including both the 'Virus' and 'Heeler' series, mark a shift for Mutu, where she integrates ideas connecting histories, materials and value systems.

She recreates the shape of objects associated with malady or the idea of "female vice" and transforms them into powerful symbolic forms representing the curative and regenerative.

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