



Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict

The Jillian and Arthur M. Sackler Wing of Galleries

22 May – 19 September 2021

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The Royal Academy of Arts presents *Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict*. Born in Kenya in 1984, Michael Armitage graduated from the RA Schools in 2010 and now works between Nairobi and London. In his paintings, 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 Jak Katarikawe, Meek Gichugu 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. The exhibition includes 15 of the artist's recent large-scale works, alongside a selection of around 35 works by East African artists chosen by Armitage.

Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict spans the last seven years of Armitage's work, featuring landscapes, allegorical figures and paintings inspired by the 2017 Kenyan general elections. His works are painted on *lubugo* bark cloth, a material traditionally made in Uganda from the inner bark of the Mutuba tree or Natal fig by the Baganda people. *Lubugo*, which can be translated as 'funeral cloth', is a highly prestigious material used for ceremonial purposes. Armitage adapted his technique to paint on this organic and irregular material instead of canvas or panel which are traditionally used by painters.

The exhibition is organised in three thematic sections, opening with a series of paintings inspired by the contested 2017 general elections in Kenya. In the run-up to the elections, Armitage joined a local TV crew filming an opposition party rally taking place in Uhuru Park, Nairobi. The atmosphere Armitage experienced and the scenes he witnessed inspired him to paint a series of works including *The Fourth Estate*, 2017 (The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection, Promised gift to the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham) and *The Chicken Thief*, 2019 (Courtesy of the Artist and White Cube). In these works, he explores power dynamics, and the link between religious rhetoric and politics, also revealing his close observation of human expressions and gestures.

The following section, entitled '*Mwili, Akili na Roho*' [Body, Mind and Spirit], showcases six contemporary East African artists working between the 1960s and 1990s. Armitage has chosen them for their importance in shaping figurative painting in Kenya and their significance to his artistic development. This group includes both formally trained and self-taught artists: Asaph Ng'ethe Macua (b. 1930), Elimo Njau (b. 1932), Jak Katarikawe (1938/40 – 2018), Theresa Musoke (b. 1942), Sane Wadu (b. 1954) and Meek Gichugu (b. 1968). Their works explore themes concerned with society, politics, sexuality and religion,

which are also reflected in Armitage's paintings. This section was curated in collaboration with [Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute](#) (NCAI) which Armitage established in 2020.

The final section, *Paradise Edict*, focuses on Armitage's figure paintings including *Mydas*, 2019 (Courtesy of the Artist and White Cube), uncanny animals posturing as humans such as *Leopard print seducer*, 2016 (Courtesy The Cross/Steele Family Collection) and East African landscapes such as *The Paradise Edict*, 2019 (The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection). The landscapes are overlaid with ghostly figures, suggesting a more complex history and mythological associations than Western stereotypes which, in exoticizing Africa, limits its history and culture to a fascination with wildlife and landscape. Instead, Armitage's paintings betray an underlying tension and evoke sophisticated multi-layered narratives.

As part of this exhibition, Armitage also curates an intervention in the RA's sculpture display: *Richard Deacon RA Selects*. Armitage 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, the works open conversations with the sculptures drawn from the RA Collection.

Biography

Michael Armitage (b. 1984) lives and works between London and Nairobi. He received his BA in Fine Art from the Slade School of Fine Art, London (2007) and has a Postgraduate Diploma from the Royal Academy Schools, London (2010). Recent solo exhibitions include: Haus der Kunst, Munich (2020), The Norval Foundation, Cape Town (2020), Projects 110, Studio Museum in collaboration and at MoMA, New York, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney (2019), Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2019), South London Gallery (2017) and Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK (2017). In November 2020, he won the Ruth Baumgarte Award that recognises figurative artists.

Organisation

Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict is organised by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts, London. The exhibition is curated by Anna Schneider, Curator, Haus der Kunst with Dr Anna Ferrari, Curator, Royal Academy of Arts.

A selection of works from the '*Mwili, Akili na Roho*' [Body, Mind and Spirit] section of the exhibition will be shown at the [Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute](#) (NCAI), a non-profit visual arts space founded by Armitage in 2020 and dedicated to the growth and preservation of contemporary art in East Africa. The date will be announced in due course.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with contributions by Elsbeth Court, Imraan Coovadia, Anna Schneider and Dimona Stöckle; and a conversation between Michael Armitage and Don Handa.

Dates and Opening Hours

Open to public: 22 May – 19 September 2021
10am – 6pm Tuesday - Sunday (last admission 5.30pm)

Admission

From £13; concessions available; under 16s go free ([T&Cs apply](#)); Friends of the RA go free. The BNP Paribas *AccessArt25* programme will offer 17-25 year olds, who have previously attended an event, free access with a special promo code.

Tickets

Advance booking is essential for everyone, including Friends of the RA. All visitors must have a pre-booked timed ticket to enter the building. Tickets can be booked in advance online (royalacademy.org.uk) or over the phone (0207 300 8090).

Images

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Safety measures

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