KUB 2023.03

**Michael Armitage
Pathos of the Twilight and the Idle**

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Michael Armitage’s pictures are loaded with stories and experiences. The British-Kenyan painter makes history paintings from the perspective of the present. They address political events in Kenya as much as they engage with Paul Gauguin’s tropical visions, Francisco de Goya’s images of atrocity and misery, and influences from East African art. How do you respond to the colonial gaze? Armitage’s drawings and paintings offer a possible answer. His pictures depict over-life-size images of people and immense panoramas – uneasy scenarios in fascinating colors. Earth tones and neon shades, pink and violet are typical. Death, dream states, and trauma permeate the works, but so do questions of faith and political resistance. The image carrier is a special feature. Armitage uses “Lubugo” as a painting ground – a material traditionally made from the bark of the Ugandan fig tree, which is burned, beaten smooth, and stitched together into a supple, stretchable cloth.

**And so it is, 2015**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Compared to other paintings, this one in vertical format is considerably more structured. Michael Armitage painted a balustrade. Two microphones are set up on a yellow podium for an address. In front of the stage, arms can be seen raising glass spheres with animal motifs into the air. Armitage exposes the rhetoric of political seduction in this work: speeches by political leaders essentially amount to what is expected of them. The artist depicts the figure speaking as a silhouette, as an impression and blank space, bleached out and abraded, similar to a frottage.

Courtesy of the artist and KADIST collection

**Holding Cell, 2021**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The colors are cold – blue or gray like slate. Layers of people with closed eyes interlock like the teeth of a zipper. They are wrapped in cloths and immobile as if in cocoons. The figures’ pale heads tower up in ghostly fashion. Their gestures and faces have fallen silent. The picture rouses memories of piled up corpses. We find ourselves somewhere between life and death and something imagined.

Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

**Dandora (Xala, Musicians), 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

A landscape expands into a vast panorama. It is Michael Armitage’s largest painting to date. In the foreground, a group of musicians has gathered into a semicircle. One figure is strumming on the strings of a yellow xalam lute, another is drumming on a tambourine, others are singing. On the left, a man is dragging a goat out of the picture. Many of the faces are vividly rendered. Armitage derived the motif of the group from a 1975 film by Ousmane Sembène denouncing the corruptness of the West African governments. Music and community are the themes of the painting, as are pollution and poverty. The audible and olfactory come into focus. In the center of the painting, a pig springs from the head of one of the figures. To the right of it, a cow’s anus is conspicuously on display. A seam of the tree-bark cloth that Armitage uses as a painting ground runs vertically downward from it like feces. In the middle ground, streaks of green and purple well up like rivulets of a poisonous swamp. Dandora is, in fact, a huge landfill site in Nairobi. Tons of trash are dumped there every day. People scour through it, looking for electronic waste, used plastics, and

metals to resell.

Courtesy of the artist and Pinault Collection

**The Fourth Estate, 2017**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Several people have climbed onto the branch fork of a massive purple tree trunk. They are sitting there as if in a nest. The Lubugo bark cloth is raw and patched. Holes gape like in the

artworks of Alberto Burri. A person on the left holds a banner. The tree climbers belong to a crowd of people at a rally in Nairobi in 2017 who have gathered to see the top candidate of Kenya’s largest opposition party. Michael Armitage, who was on-site for a radio interview in Uhuru Park during the mass gathering, rendered the motif on the banner in surreal manner as a crouching toad.

Courtesy of the artist and The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

**Pathos and twilight of the idle, 2019**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

How can a ruling power be confronted? With aggression and a readiness to fight or with disguise, carnival, and clownery? The title of the painting, which also preceded the entire exhibition in Bregenz, alludes to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) and to resistance derived from passion. A figure with a saffron-yellow turban has dressed up in a brassiere. He carries canisters of teargas and holds slings in his hands. Below him, several fellow protestors have gathered into a dense crowd. They wear wigs and colorful costumes and carry a blue and yellow flag to demonstrate against the abuse of power and corrupt politics. Michael Armitage’s models for the pictorial content in this work include religious motifs. The man laid out in the upper center of the picture was adapted from Hans Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–22) in Basel. The entire composition is reminiscent of Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin into heaven, popularly known as the *Assunta* (1516–18), in the Frari church in Venice.

Courtesy of the artist and Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Purchased with funds provided by Paul Attanasio

**Tea Picker, 2023**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

This painting is noticeably smaller than the other works. Scale is also the point in terms of its content. A person’s financial income is often the factor that determines his or her esteem.

Tea pickers represent an occupational group that performs hard, poorly paid work and is particularly underappreciated within Kenyan society. Michael Armitage has portrayed a

neighborhood tea picker. Like a giant, two-headed balloon, a mirrored bust in complementary colors floats above the landscape. Doubleedged, the public and inner images of the tea

picker are juxtaposed with one another.

Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner

Private Collection

**Warigia, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

A girl wearing a pink dress props herself up on a stone. Behind her is a lake whose still waters reflect the plants on the opposite shore. The painting refers to the origin myth of Kenya, which the author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o adapted into a novel. *The Perfect Nine*, of 2018, is a story written in verse that weaves together folklore, allegory, and adventure. God created the founding father Kikuyu and led him to Mount Kenya, where he showed him the land that was to become the homeland of his people. God gave Kikuyu a wife, Mumbi, and they had ten daughters. Nine of them – the “perfect nine” – became the ancestors of the Kikuyu clans and the entire Kikuyu people. Warigia, the tenth daughter, was born with a disability. Michael Armitage depicts her at the movement when she is about to stand up for the first time after coming out of the lake. The monitor lizard behind her is a mythical witness. She becomes the epic’s unexpected heroine.

Courtesy of the artist and The George Economou Collection

**Conjestina, 2017**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

A naked woman stands broad-legged in the center of the picture. She has positioned herself like a monument and nonetheless appears vulnerable. Behind her, monkeys stare, making malicious grimaces; on her shoulder appears a nightmare that could have sprung from the dark fantasies of Johann Heinrich Füssli or Francisco de Goya. The person portrayed is Conjestina Achieng, a Kenyan boxer who achieved great athletic success. She became Africa champion and fifth in the world middleweight rankings. After the end of her athletic career, she suffered from psychological problems and became the victim of a smear campaign that accused her of having a connection with evil spirits and defamed her as a witch.

Courtesy of the artist and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Collection SFMOMA

Accessions Committee Fund purchase

**Baikoko and the mouth of the Mwachema River, 2016**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The Mwachema River flows via shallow tributaries into the Indian Ocean. Armitage has rendered the offshoots greenish yellow. On the shore are women in pale pink dresses with their hair pinned up. They are dancing Baikoko, an erotically charged Tanzanian dance. Baikoko stands for women’s self-empowerment and is used by mothers, for instance, to find a suitable wife for their sons. The dance was banned by the government. It nevertheless gained popularity in 2015, when the pop musician Diamond Platnumz included the ritual hustle in a music video. The complementary color contrasts in this picture are derived from Paul Gauguin’s *Vision after the Sermon*, from 1888.

Courtesy of the artist and the Collection of Yuz Foundation

**Exorcism, 2017**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

A horizontal seam runs across the picture. Ist composition is inspired by Meek Gichugu’s fairground scenes and Edgar Degas’s *Young Spartans Exercising*, from 1860. The wall of a city rises up in the background. Its forecourt is lined with onlookers who form a semicircle in the left half of the picture. They are women in long garments and veils. Like the painter, they are watching a spectacle taking place on the open field, highlighted in shades of pink and yellow. The women swing colorful scarves; in some cases, their bodies twist and writhe. Michael Armitage witnessed a Muslim exorcism in Tanzania. Those involved in the exorcism were seized by convulsions, ate grass, screamed, and gestured wildly or surrendered motionless to the will of the shaman.

Courtesy of the artist and Harry G. David Collection

**Strange Fruit, 2016**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Blood-red foliage blazes under a blue sky. Where the colored fields intersect near the top of the image appear the soles of a pair of feet. A figure sits between the entwined branches of a tree. In 1939 Billie Holiday recorded the protest song “Strange Fruit,” which was directed against racial segregation in the United States. The sorrowful song links the oppressive atmosphere of the South with the suffering of slavery and racially motivated violence. It is an indictment of lynchings committed by White perpetrators: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” Michael Armitage draws parallels to acts of violence in the present day. Over half of Kenya’s population today is under twenty-five years old. Considerable conflict and fighting over resource allocation exists between the generations. In some cases, young adults even accuse their parents of witchcraft in order to subsequently claim the parents’ assets for themselves. Particular sensation was caused by the instance of a woman who was killed by an angry mob because of such an accusation.

Courtesy of the artist and Private Collection

**Amongst the Living, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The picture extends in width as in Cinemascope. A band along the upper edge shows a scene painted in perspective, where people have gathered. Otherwise, the painting is defined by large areas of color. In the foreground we see an open fire. The red smoke disperses like a river of glowing lava. To the left of the center, a mutton hangs from a wooden tripod. Other dead animals lie ready for ritual sacrifice. Spirituality, faith, and transcendence are the themes of the painting. Similar to the way the seemingly isolated parts of the picture are linked by meandering shapes, humans find a way to connect with the supernatural world through cult and ritual.

Courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Gift of Nicholas

Leonidas Goulandris

**Lacuna, 2017**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Two men are working on a boat. One stands akimbo, the other pulls the boat into the

water with a rope. The heads of two women appear above the stern, their faces like

ghosts. They seem like ancestors kept alive in memory. Across from them, on the left, is

a giant male head looking straight out of the picture. His eyebrows form the end of a meandering trail that watches over the boat like a genie in a bottle. In this reserved image,

Michael Armitage limited himself to a sandcolored, pale green, and gray palette. Some

of the lines are reminiscent of marquetry or the transparent portraits of Francis Picabia. The

softened contrasts and liquified forms recall the work of Jak Katarikawe, a painter born in

Uganda in 1940.

Courtesy of the artist and Private Collection

**Mother’s Milk, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Michael Armitage looks for the uncomfortable, the traumatizing, and thus breaks with customary ways of seeing. What happens, when it isn’t the animals that provide humans with

food, but us who see to their sustenance? A woman is harnessed into a wooden framework.

She is suspended face down over an enclosure. Inside appear piglets that the woman is breastfeeding. Armitage has painted the image in clear contrasting colors. The yellow of the ground forms the backdrop for the woman’s body and the animals. Her skin shimmers in various nuances of red and pink.

Courtesy of the artist and Christen Sveaas Art Collection

**Witness, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Monkeys hold up a mirror to us humans. Their behavior is uncomfortably familiar to us. Michael Armitage is interested in articulating the psychological effects of this relationship. His painting prompts a change of perspective. It is about the memories of a monkey. The animal, derived from a motif by Albrecht Dürer, sits chained to a terrace. The monkey becomes a “witness” – as the title suggests – to the human condition. Thought bubbles rise from his head. Human heads surround him like intrusive ghosts.

Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

**Forest, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

Several of Michael Armitage’s paintings lure us into dreamy vegetation. The landscapes appear paradisiacal and soulful. But holes and seams in the Lubugo litter the canvases like wounds. Their scars disrupt the idylls’ atmosphere of well-being. At first glance, *Forest* lacks this sort of ambiguity. Armitage painted a tropical forest that is intoxicating. Plants grow out of a body of water in deep violet. From there, their colored sap flows in complementary contrasts. Flowers in orange sprout from a bough in delicate purple and against a backdrop of wet green. But isn’t the appearance of the enchanting thicket deceptive here, too? What does tropical beauty signify for societies that – as a result of slavish exploitation and colonial violence – are still confronted with clichéd images and stereotypical attributions?

Courtesy of the artist and Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel

**Three Boys at Dawn, 2022**

Oil on Lubugo bark cloth

The painting is crisscrossed with fine lines. If it were not for the rough surface of the bark cloth, the work could be taken for a silk painting or batik. Posing in the center of the picture are two flamingos, rendered in a beautiful linear shape. The boy’s heads inhale their scents like drugs. Michael Armitage alludes to mind-altering and libidinous effects in this work. The young men depicted have inhaled glue and are dozing away in the morning dawn.

Courtesy of the artist and White Cube