

Reflections on the *Kenyan Rally Series*

Could there be a better figure of a thief than Antonio Ricci, the desperate father trying to save his family from starvation in Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film, *The Bicycle Thief*? Michael Armitage's painting on *lubugo* bark cloth, *The Chicken Thief* (2019), stands two meters tall but—with its concentration on the running man—seems far bigger. The thief is a figure of unusual dignity. His resolute stride is not that of a sprinter, but a marathon runner, jeans torn at the knee, apparently aflame. Flying inches above a pool of red—petrol perhaps, or blood—he maintains a firm grasp on two voluptuous white birds. His face has an expression of triumph as if he knows his pursuers are far behind.

But disrupting the figurative scene is the macabre daemon at his back, part bird, part baboon, with fingers like blazing pistols. Its bottom limbs are more wings than legs, glistening in the air, ragged as prawns. The figure seems to feed the thief, or perhaps to be fed by him, through burning yellow sheets of radiation.

A centerpiece of the exhibition, *The Chicken Thief* is one of a narrative suite of eight oil paintings and a selection of preparatory ink drawings produced by Michael Armitage in response to a 2017 opposition party rally in Nairobi, before the contested Kenyan elections. Though based on the artist's raw observations and video footage (his own and that of photojournalists), these works do not define Armitage as a chronicler of Kenyan socio-political life. He is clearly more interested in the poetic or philosophical significance of his visual material than in its purely documentary value. And so he is typically drawn to what takes place away from the political stage: the moving human dramas or “subplots” that distract from and question the dominant political narrative, telling different, often competing, stories. The powerful expression of emotion on so many of the faces in this series—particularly in *The Dumb Oracle*, *Mkokoteni*, and *Pathos and the twilight of the idle* (2019)—or the demonic, flaming creature in *The Chicken Thief* or the image of the young man surreally hovering above the flames in *The Accomplice* (2019), far from representing real people and events, become gestural and uncanny. No longer historically specific, they depict something disturbing about our—all too—human condition.

South Africans will inevitably notice the motif of the tires, presented as decorative green background in *The Chicken Thief*, only to return, set alight and shedding oily smoke, in the significantly wider panel of *The Accomplice*, three meters from one side to the other. *The Accomplice* depicts this form of lynching with no obvious moral evaluation: there is no obscuring or interpretive veil of horror. Two men, one in a green and the other in a white shirt, are facing off, one's ominously outstretched hand shaded in livid red. Meanwhile a smaller figure, likely the accomplice, is trying to leap from the blazing fire. As is not uncommon in Armitage's paintings, the figures are as perfectly choreographed as in a composition by Matisse.

Perhaps the smaller figure is a boy and the two men are arguing about whether his complicity deserves the full measure of the penalty. According to Armitage, painting “is a way of thinking through something, trying to understand an experience or an event a little better and trying to communicate something of the problem to others.” What problem or experience is being thought through in the scene of violence alongside the blazing tires in *The Accomplice*? Perhaps the “problem” is communicated more powerfully by what is happening in the background, and on the margins, of this violent scene? It is here that the painting's moral ambiguity lies, and now the accomplice is perhaps not the young man seemingly being

lynched but all who collectively witness the event without intervening or showing moral outrage.

So, while the young man may be burning to death, there is a crowd waiting behind a barrier or on a lower level, seemingly oblivious to the atrocities being committed in the foreground of the image. Two helmeted soldiers or riot police in camouflage observe from a distance, disturbingly detached from the events. The figure on the left appears to have his hands nonchalantly in his pockets. The helmet of the figure on the right is at first sight a globe (the world looking on impassively?), but on closer inspection we see the edge of the visor and realize that the continents and swirling seas are reflections of the blaze on shiny metal. Finally, the two windows in the wall facing the viewer seem on inspection to be paintings rather than windows, converting the scene of murder into a theatre and suggesting Armitage's revision of the dangerous idea that all the world's a stage, and men and women only players. In this ideologically charged environment, some are playing with fire.

Perhaps, much like W. H. Auden in his poem "Musée des Beaux Arts", which also tells the story of a burning boy—the figure of Icarus in Breughel's famous painting—Armitage is depicting the unthinking indifference of human beings to the tragic suffering of others. This is distinct, of course, from the benign indifference of animals, like the torturer's horse innocently scratching its behind on a tree in Auden's poem or the baboons in Armitage's painting, possessed of the natural good sense of animals and more interested in grooming and the possibility of food than the unfolding human drama. In this sense, *The Accomplice* is a profoundly philosophical painting.

Among the eight oil paintings on exhibition three bear titles of high gravity—*Pathos and the twilight of the idle*, *The promised land*, and *The promise of change* (2018). These three works are vivid and dynamic, drawing more obviously on Armitage's experience of the political rally in Uhuru Park, Nairobi, than works like *Mkokoteni* (Swahili for "cart") or *The Dumb Oracle* (2019). They have a comprehensive quality, moving from grotesque and frightening faces, like the Goyaesque figure with the protruding tongue in *The promise of change* or the shouting man revealing corporeal tongue and teeth in *Pathos and the twilight of the idle* to the peaceable baboon, his pink penis exposed, at the center of *The promised land*. The animal is bothered neither by the Molotov cocktail smoking out its guts on one side, nor by the tree stretched to breaking point on the other. The impassive baboon, sitting on an opened book or newspaper, is a creature of unusual interest. One is reminded of the aphorism in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Dawn of Day*,¹ in which the philosopher likens the thinker who wisely interrogates custom or value to an old baboon. The amoral beast in the center of the image seems deeply imbued with such wisdom.

The recurring image of the frog or toad in Armitage's paintings undoubtedly has East African mythological associations but in this context also has philosophical resonance. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (Part 1, Section 2),² Friedrich Nietzsche alludes to the mainstream tradition of painting and drawing between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the artist uses the "frog" perspective (*Froschperspektive*), a low angle of perspective that serves to amplify what is in the foreground of the image. This is typically used, for instance, to make a figure of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*, trans. John McFarland Kennedy (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 32.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 34.

authority such as a king, judge, priest or general appear large and powerful, while the viewer is made to feel childlike and impotent. From a different point of view, for example a higher vantage point, the composition would change, and the same figure of authority would lose his dominance. The term “Froschperspektive” also denotes narrowmindedness, an apt demonstration of Nietzsche’s point that the “frog” perspective involves a valuation by the perceiver. It is merely a perspective, only one among many different ways of seeing.

This sort of play with perspective is a distinct feature of the paintings in *Accomplice*. The toads in Armitage’s paintings are disproportionately large, whether displayed on the opposition party banner in the tree high above the crowd in *The Fourth Estate* (2017) or looming surreally above the face of the opposition leader on a banner, its face hollowed out by lacunae in the bark cloth, in *The promise of change*. In the latter, there is also a toad on stage before the illustriously dressed male leader holding the microphone. Ironically, his “frog” perspective does not magnify the figure of authority but diminishes and infantilizes him. He is not much bigger than the amphibian himself. By contrast, the three uncanny figures to the left of the ruler in regal red robes and headpiece are disproportionately large, the female figure in particular. They seem to mock or bear silent witness to the falsehoods uttered through the microphone, the leader’s empty promises of change. Drawing on whatever material allows exploration of a particular philosophical question, and ignoring cultural hierarchies, Armitage is a completely contemporary, syncretic painter, indebted in turn—or sometimes all at once—to popular culture, social media, African mythology, Western art history, and East African modernism. Where he draws on a Western art-historical tradition, revealing an indebtedness to, for example, Paul Gauguin, Francisco Goya, and Édouard Manet, this relationship is one of “utility,” as Armitage puts it, rather than straightforward influence. It has been noted by Owen Martin that Armitage also has a deep affinity with East African artists such as Meek Gichugu, while Edward Tingatinga, Jak Katarikawe, and Sane Wadu are other important influences.³

Armitage’s choice of *lubugo* bark cloth rather than canvas, with its European cultural associations, is an important aspect of his practice. The most significant cultural product of the Baganda people of southern Uganda, *lubugo* is made from the inner bark of the ficus tree (“Mutuba” in Swahili) and is historically employed in sacred contexts, including as a shroud for the dead. As the artist explains, the word “lubugo” in fact translates as “funeral cloth” or “shroud.” The making of *lubugo* is an art, a way of producing textiles more ancient than weaving. The sections of bark are softened by burning banana leaves on top of them and then preserving them in banana leaves overnight when they are not being worked on.

Armitage first encountered the cloth in a tourist market in Nairobi, in the prosaic form of souvenir place mats. He was intrigued by the way the material had lost its original purpose and cultural significance, almost to the point of bathos. By situating the fabric at the center of his own life as an artist, he strives to honor and reinstate its symbolic value, at the same time democratically blurring the boundary between art and craft.

To hear Armitage speak intently about the manufacture of *lubugo*—the way the bark is stripped from the tree and then beaten and stretched over a number of days to form a rough canvas, pitted with holes and imperfections—is to see the significance of the material to his work and the way in which the gravity of his art is generated by a deep involvement with the

³ Natasha Bullock, ed., *Michael Armitage: The Promised Land* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2019), 14.

creative practices of the past, present, and approaching future on the African continent. The traditional holy material has been absorbed into Armitage's everyday practice in a way that telescopes history and art, individuality and collectivity, descent and affiliation.

The combination of different physical and psychic materials in the works on display is not seamless, in the sense that it tricks you into a false unity, but cumulative. The *lubugo* cloth, roughly stitched by the artist himself, adds a texture and significance to each of the paintings on display, subtly asserting its material presence. The careful layering and rubbing of the paint, too, is the result of a dynamic interaction with the imperfections of its substrate. In this way Armitage foregrounds the construction of the paintings as much as their narrative content. Impasto layering in some sections contrasts with others where the paint has been rubbed away to reveal the bark cloth beneath it or where the fabric itself has disintegrated to create strangely shaped holes. In this way meaning is simultaneously created and erased, made and unmade, shrouded and revealed, like a form of palimpsest.

Armitage's preparatory drawings inform his larger compositions, but the artist is more expressive and experimental, less representational, in the medium of painting than in the severer lines of drawing. While far sparer than any of the paintings, the drawings nevertheless have an integrity of their own. They also go some way toward showing the degree of invention, experimentation, and calculation at work in the paintings, as they echo historical events but also transcend them.

The occasion of the exhibition, *Accomplice* at Norval Foundation, Cape Town, earlier this year was significant in two ways. It was the first time Armitage's paintings and drawings had been displayed together. It was also, more importantly, the first time any works in this series had been exhibited in Africa. Now, in turn, Haus der Kunst will present *Paradise Edict*, the first exhibition of the artist's work in Germany. The exhibition, like *Accomplice* before it, invites you to a challenging encounter beyond the familiar.

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