

20.5.–
4.9.22

You, Who Are Still Alive

Michael
Armitage

Kunsthalle
Basel

Note the velvet lushness, the peculiar atmospheres, and the multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives. Note the highly textured surfaces from which emanates an unearthly glow, wrought from the layering of sumptuous but hard-to-name hues (salmon pink beneath a powdery purple-green, for example, might be one possible approximation). Note how viridian forest landscapes meet East African urban life; how recent events tangle with myth; how a 1970s Senegalese film, just like a street conversation, or a news story, or a music video, can inspire a depiction. Note the way the transparency of a face rendered in outline can call into question everything it is surrounded by. Note, as well, the sort of space and time travel that these images consistently perform. Note, perhaps most significantly, the singular aliveness that issues from this Kenyan-British artist's paintbrush, turning fantastical juxtapositions into hauntingly incandescent paintings.

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These qualities are evident in the surreality of a face that doubles and floats above itself, posing the irresolvable question of whether it pictures death, a dream, a traumatic memory, or some liminal space in between (*You, Who Are Still Alive*, 2022). They are present in the portrayal of Warigia, the legendary tenth daughter of the East African Gikūyū people's founding father; she is crawling across a grassy knoll, thongs on her hands as if they were feet, with a giant lizard nipping at her heels (*Warigia*, 2022). They show themselves in the depiction of young boys, high as kites on sniffed glue, their meticulously contoured faces giving way to ethereal mists, each of which then—gorgeously, inexplicably—forms into a flamingo (*Three Boys at Dawn*, 2022). They emanate from representations of animals, slaughtered and sacrificed, their shapes turning into pure color (*Amongst the Living*, 2022). And they are palpable in the image of a head that lies, ever so still, on a patch of grass, cleanly severed from its body (*Head of Koitalel*, 2021). The latter motif is based on the 1905 decapitation of the East African Nandi people's supreme political and spiritual leader, Koitalel Arap Samoei, who had, while alive, successfully thwarted the British colonialist railway expansion across Nandi territory. But the Brits tricked and brutally killed him, and then took off with his head, claiming ever since at every request for its return that it had been lost. How does one lose such a macabre trophy? The rendition is one of the smallest paintings in the exhibition, a bit larger than head-sized, and eerily serene; one spies a man in the background (the guard meant to watch the head or perhaps the perpetrator himself?) washing up in a nearby river: colonial beheading, it seems, is a dirty business.

Through his compositions, Michael Armitage addresses wildly diverse themes—from tribal founding myths to everyday heroisms and from abuses of power to celebratory rituals—each circulating between past and present, historical fact and conjured fiction. Born in Nairobi, in 1984, Armitage received his artistic training in London. He now lives and works between the two cities, acknowledging each as formative to his creative practice. The artist often researches and records life across Kenya—making sketches, taking informal photographs or videos—in order to carry back these impressions and work them into his paintings in London. Except, that is, where nature is involved: starting with this body of work, he employed the technique of plein air painting when turning his attention to the landscapes of Kenya—in a manner similar to how Impres-

ROOM 4

16
Three Boys at Dawn, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 300 cm

17
Holding Cell, 2021
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 170,5 cm

18
Ciru (Kericho January 2008), 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 300 cm

19
You, Who Are Still Alive, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 200 cm

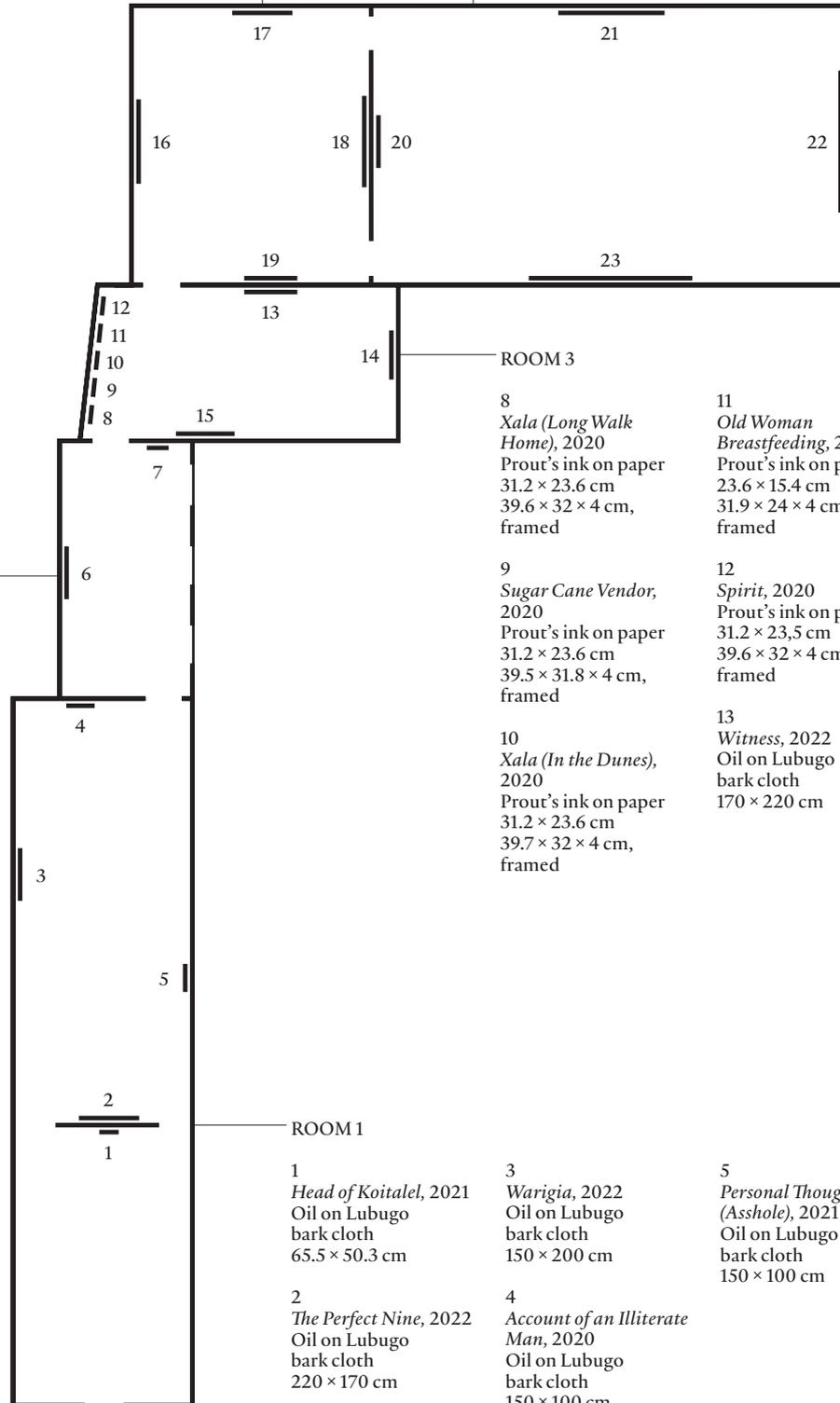
ROOM 5

20
Dead Soldiers, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 200 cm

21
Curfew (Likoni March 27, 2020), 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
250 × 350 cm

22
Dandora (Xala, Musicians), 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 440 cm

23
Amongst the Living, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 420 cm



ROOM 2

6
Mother's Milk, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 200 cm

7
Homecoming, 2021
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
65 × 50 cm

ROOM 3

8
Xala (Long Walk Home), 2020
Prout's ink on paper
31.2 × 23.6 cm
39.6 × 32 × 4 cm,
framed

9
Sugar Cane Vendor, 2020
Prout's ink on paper
31.2 × 23.6 cm
39.5 × 31.8 × 4 cm,
framed

10
Xala (In the Dunes), 2020
Prout's ink on paper
31.2 × 23.6 cm
39.7 × 32 × 4 cm,
framed

11
Old Woman Breastfeeding, 2018
Prout's ink on paper
23.6 × 15.4 cm
31.9 × 24 × 4 cm,
framed

12
Spirit, 2020
Prout's ink on paper
31.2 × 23,5 cm
39.6 × 32 × 4 cm,
framed

13
Witness, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
170 × 220 cm

14
Cave, 2021
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
200 × 150 cm
Pinault Collection

15
Forest, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
200 × 150 cm

ROOM 1

1
Head of Koitalel, 2021
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
65.5 × 50.3 cm

2
The Perfect Nine, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
220 × 170 cm

3
Warigia, 2022
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 200 cm

4
Account of an Illiterate Man, 2020
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 100 cm
Private Collection
Sweden

5
Personal Thoughts (Asshole), 2021
Oil on Lubugo
bark cloth
150 × 100 cm

sionists once captured the particular way in which afternoon sunlight may have hit a haystack or a group of bathers resting near a pond. Armitage's painterly style draws from a variety of art histories and eras (from Francisco Goya, Édouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Sigmar Polke as much as Iba N'Diaye, Jak Katarikawe, Peter Mulindwa, Chelenge Van Rampelberg, and Meek Gichugu). The substrate on which he chooses to paint, however, is an explicit nod to his African heritage. This ground doggedly subverts Western artistic traditions of which he has such ready command. Nearly from the start of his practice, the artist has consistently substituted canvas with Lubugo, a cloth he first encountered in a Nairobi tourist market. Sourced from a fig tree, the material undergoes a labor-intensive process: below the rough outer skin of the tree, an inner layer of bark is peeled off, singed with banana leaves, soaked, softened by the blows of mallets, dried, and stitched together, its irregular pieces revealing visible tears and pits in their uneven surfaces. The artist's choice of material is, literally, foundational: traditionally used in Ugandan ritual contexts, Lubugo, which translates as "funeral cloth," ensures an evocation of death, and along with it of love and loss, that buckles beneath each otherwise vibrantly painted surface.

Notwithstanding all of the works' stunning representational power, it is the holes that prevail in Armitage's paintings. They ensnare you. Each such hole is somehow a wound, but also an aperture, an orifice, a portal. There is a galaxy of them, surrounded by patently stitched joints and thick sutures, raised like keloid scars across a body. This, along with the paintings' puckering, all the more evocative of damaged and hastily repaired skin, prevents any sense of serenity or ease on the part of a viewer. The holes and tears complicate the image, at times interrupting it; at others, they are its determining aspect. These gaps are as much visual as visceral, throbbing through and against the painted image. In the quivering surfaces, the artist doubles down on the anxiety inherent in his narratives.

One senses it, spectacularly, in this exhibition. *You, Who Are Still Alive* features an impressive new body of works, painted over the past three years for this Kunsthalle Basel show, the artist's most comprehensive presentation of recent work to date. It includes numerous large-scale paintings, among them the largest Armitage has ever made, and a selection of delicate ink drawings that reveal his exquisite draftsmanship. Time is a mash-up in his hands;

one finds exposed flesh, fetid jungles, piglets that suckle from dangling human breasts, burning cauldrons, and beasts of burden roaming the land, but also nylon tracksuits, the swish of a Coca-Cola logo, and a PA system. These remind you that Armitage may be a magic realist, but he paints in order to speak *to* and *of* the present. And although in his paintings one might sense a latent threat of violence or evocations of human weakness, the gentleness with which a closed-eyed figure is rendered as if caressed or the way in which a beast's laughably distended pink anus is made to correspond with an actual hole in the painting's surface testify to the painter's generosity, humor, and levity. His is an art of celebration and irrefutable compassion as much as it is one of dire warnings. To fail to notice this would be to miss one of the central stakes of Armitage's project. Because *you*—dear viewer, steward of the planet's future—*are still alive*, and this work incites you to live radiantly, to love indiscriminately, to remember your forebearers, and maybe to even right a few past wrongs.

Michael Armitage was born in 1984 in Nairobi; he lives and works in London and Nairobi.

In connection with the exhibition, a richly illustrated publication with newly commissioned texts in English will be co-published with White Cube in September 2022.

The exhibition is made possible through the lead support of White Cube and, additionally, the generous support of Martin Hatebur.

W H I T E C U B E

The mediation projects were realized through the generous support of the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, the Beisheim Stiftung, and the Canton of Basel-Stadt.

Thanks to

Olivia Bayley, Penny J Beer, Caroline Bourgeois, Irene Bradbury, Anne Pascale Celier, Mathias Clottu, Dorothee Dähler, Catherine Duruel, Anne-Hortense Epifani, Greta Fornoni, Susanna Greeves, Peter Handschin, Martin Hatebur, Matthieu Humery, Merve Iseri, Jay Jopling, Odile de Labouchere, Emma Lavigne, Nasrin Leahy, Honey Luard, Juliana Malzoni, Morgane Mauger, Susan May, Georgia Messervy, Claire Moore, Nakhane, Robert Owen, Mathieu Paris, Thomas Peeters, François Pinault, Elli Pitsili, Julie Redon, Claire Smith, Martin Stoecklin, Galuh Sukardi, Rikard Svensson, and Melina Wilson

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German
(Except on Sundays when the tour is in English)

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, in English
22.5.2022, Sunday, 3 pm
12.6.2022, Sunday, 3 pm
19.6.2022, Sunday, 3 pm
4.9.2022, Sunday, 3 pm

Tandem guided tour, in German
21.8.2022, Sunday, 3 pm
Kunsthalle Basel and SAM Swiss Architecture Museum offer a joint tour of their current exhibitions, highlighting the intersections between architecture and art.

MEDIATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAM

Basel Museums Night
20.5.2022, Friday, 6 pm–2 am
Special program with *Button-UP!* workshop and *Talk to Me*, where you can learn more about the works in the exhibition through one-on-one conversations

Mal•Mal – draw from a live model in the current exhibition, in English and German
25.5.2022, Wednesday, 6–8 pm
Materials will be provided.

Kunsthalle Basel Night, free admission
15.6.2022, Wednesday, 7–10 pm
A special night at Kunsthalle Basel with extended opening hours and free admission

mittwoch-matinée, in German
20.7.2022, Wednesday, 10–12 am
As part of the museums basel event series, the current exhibitions will be explored and discussed together.

Kunsthalle ohne Schwellen, in German
Aug.–Sept. 2022, workshops for people with disabilities
In the half-day workshop, participants explore the current exhibitions and try out different forms of artistic expression.

For all tours and events, registration is kindly requested at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch.

Kunsthalle Basel / Basler Kunstverein is generously supported by the Canton of Basel-Stadt.



Support for Kunsthalle Basel's yearly program is provided by Saint Laurent.

SAINT LAURENT

In the Kunsthalle Basel library, you will find a selection of publications related to Michael Armitage.

Follow us on Instagram and share your photos and impressions with #kunsthallebasel.

More information at kunsthallebasel.ch