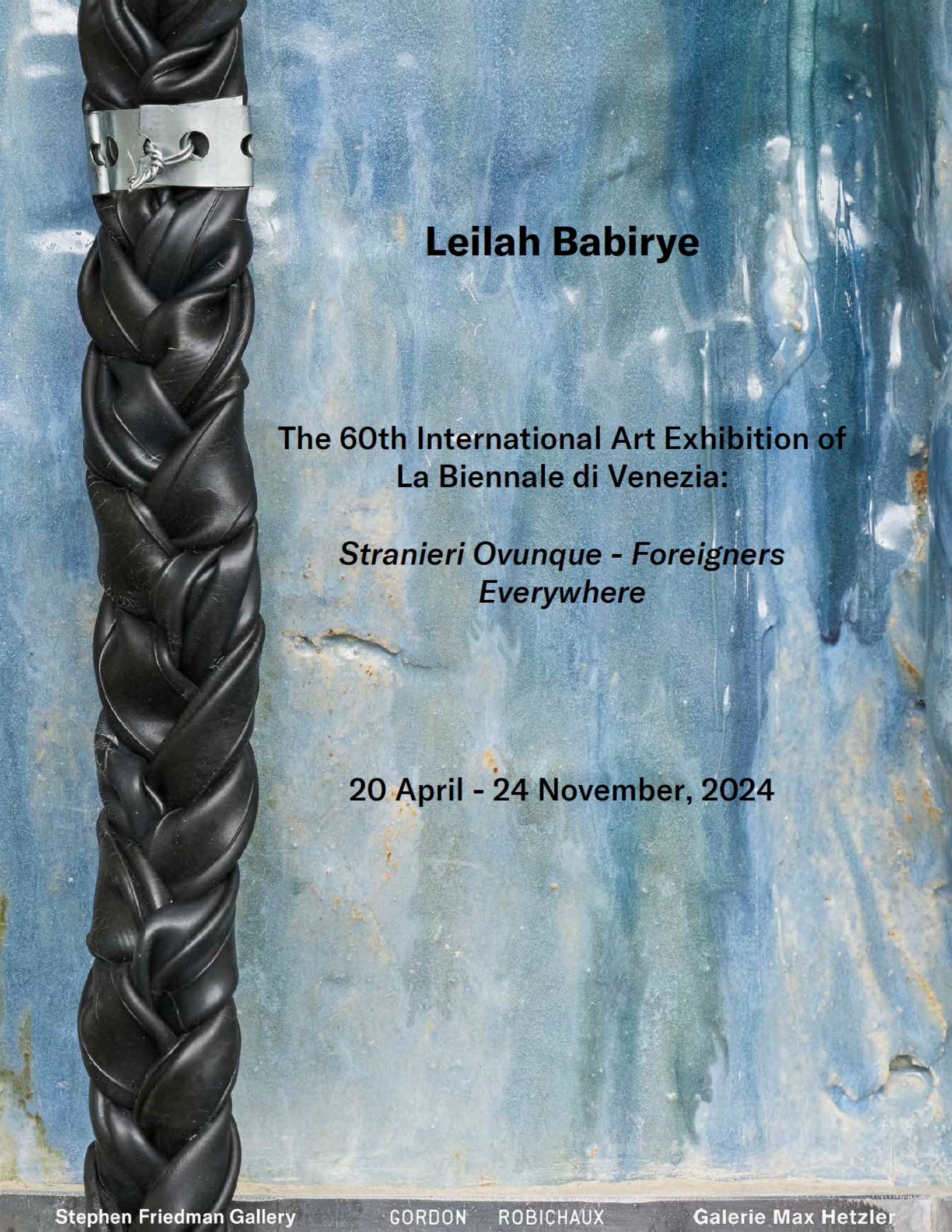




Leilah Babirye

**The 60th International Art Exhibition of
La Biennale di Venezia:**

***Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners
Everywhere***

20 April - 24 November, 2024



Leilah Babirye

Foreigners Everywhere, Arsenale

Leilah Babirye will participate in Foreigners Everywhere, the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Adriano Pedrosa.



Rukirabasaija from the Kuchu
Western Bunyoro Kingdom, 2023
Wood, metal teapots, welded
metal and found objects
260 x 104 x 90cm
102 3/8 x 41 x 35 3/8in



“My work has always revolved around central region of Uganda where I come from, specifically the Buganda region. I concentrate on the clans system where everyone has a clan they belong to. Many of these clans are represented by an animal, which you will notice in the titles of my work. For many years my work has been about rejected queer people in Buganda. I have been using different clan names to create our own queer family. Recently, I have been approached by queer people in other regions around Uganda to be involved in my work. This is why the five works that I created for the Biennale are titled based on clan names from each region. This is so that all queer people in Uganda feel represented. I also made the sculptures double sided or with different faces at every angle as a sign of unity wherever we are all over the world. The works represent unity and solidarity.”







"I always say that if you ever forget your history, then you won't know who you are or where you're going. There's no way that I can be in the present or look to the future without also looking back, and that back and forth shows up in my work."





Ugangi from the Kuchu Acholi Region, 2024
Ceramic, wire, metal electrical conduit,
bicycle tyre inner tubes and found objects
281.9 x 86.4 x 66cm
111 x 34 x 26in

Ugangi forms a pair of teal glazed ceramic busts, each facing in opposite directions. Ugangi's visage echoes that of its wooden counterparts: features are pared down to geometric shapes, with ovals for the eyes and mouth, and a triangle for the nose. Ugangi's hair doubles as an elaborate headdress, with braids formed from repurposed rubber bicycle tyre inner tubes that are wrapped and laid over a striking wire frame. Babirye juxtaposes found objects associated with machinery - metal electrical conduit, wire, and rubber inner tubes - with her artfully glazed ceramic.







"Being an artist is also about taking risks.

Whether I'm working with wood or ceramics, I often don't know how a piece is going to turn out, especially when it comes to working on a large scale and splashing on glazes. Even coming here from Uganda and deciding to stay was a risk – and I embraced it."





Ssangalyambogo from the Kuchu
Central Buganda Kingdom, 2023-2024 Wood,
bicycle tyre inner tubes, nails, welded metal and
found objects
262 x 84 x 72cm
103 1/8 x 33 1/8 x 28 3/8in



Babirye carves rounded organic shapes and sharp, jutting planes, hewn from the natural form of the wood. Finishing touches are important to Babirye, who sits with her sculptures meditatively, making alterations here and there until certain they are complete. Smooth finishes come from blowtorching the wood, burnishing it with wax, and sanding it down. As a part of her final ritual, Babirye bestows Ssangalyambogo with delicate braids and ornate jewellery made of welded metal and found objects. For Babirye, it is an all-involved labour of love.











Inhebantu from the Kuchu Eastern
Busoga Kingdom, 2023-2024
Glazed ceramic, wire, bicycle
tyre inner tubes and found objects
262.3 x 72.4 x 68.6cm
103 1/4 x 28 1/2 x 27in



In her practice, Babirye is in tune with the different properties of her materials, allowing them to guide form; while carving wood is inherently a subtractive process, moulding clay feels additive. “With ceramics you're adding and you keep adding until the clay tells you to stop,” the artist says. ‘Inhebantu from the Kuchu Eastern Busoga Kingdom’ comprises a pair of sculpted heads, fused together at the back of the head. The glaze work on Inhebantu is abstract and frenetic, with rivulets of grey and cream running down the surface of the fired ceramic.









Oyo Nyimba Kabamba Iguru from the
Kuchu Western Tooro Kingdom, 2023-2024
Wood, wax, aluminum, nails, bolts, nuts and washers
251.5 x 68.6 x 61cm
99 x 27 x 24in







Babirye does not make preliminary sketches before carving her sculptures, preferring to be fluid and spontaneous when at work. “Because I don't sketch,” the artist explains, “I look at the tip of the chainsaw as my pencil and the wood as my paper.” In art school, Babirye found inspiration from artisans in Kampala, who sold wooden statues on the street by the hundreds to sustain themselves. “I got in trouble in class because my professors wanted a sketch first,” Babirye says, “I didn't have a sketch because I learned from people who just look at the wood and come up with something. They don't have time for a sketch because they're making money.”









Composed of debris collected from the streets of New York, Babirye's sculptures are woven, whittled, welded, burned and burnished. Her choice to use discarded materials in her work is intentional – the pejorative term for a gay person in the Luganda language is 'abasiyazi', meaning sugarcane husk. "It's rubbish," explains Babirye, "the part of the sugarcane you throw out." The artist also frequently uses traditional African masks to explore the diversity of LGBTQI identities, assembling them from ceramics, metal and hand-carved wood; lustrous, painterly glazes are juxtaposed with chiselled, roughly-textured woodwork and metal objects associated with the art of blacksmithing. In a similar vein, Babirye creates loosely rendered portraits in vivid colours of members from her community.

Describing her practice, Babirye explains: "Through the act of burning, nailing and assembling, I aim to address the realities of being gay in the context of Uganda and Africa in general. Recently, my working process has been fuelled by a need to find a language to

respond to the recent passing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda."

In 2023, Babirye spent the summer in residence at Yorkshire Sculpture Park to create new work towards her major exhibition in the Chapel, opening in 2024. In the last two years, she has exhibited in group shows at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Whitworth, Manchester, UK; Hayward Gallery, London, UK; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria; Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York and The Aldrich, Ridgefield, Connecticut. She created a site-responsive work for 'Black Atlantic', a Public Art Fund project at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, which opened in May 2022.

Other notable recent group projects include the third Coventry Biennial, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, UK (2021); 'Intimate Companions', Mary Heaton Vorse House, Provincetown, Massachusetts (2020); 'Art on the Grid', a Public Art Fund exhibition with JC Decaux on billboards across New York (2020); 'Flight: A Collective History', Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson (2019) and 'Stonewall 50', The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas (2019).

Babirye was born in 1985 in Kampala, Uganda. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She studied art at Makerere University in Kampala (2007–2010) and participated in the Fire Island Artist Residency (2015). In 2018, the artist was granted asylum in the US and presented her first solo show at Gordon Robichaux, New York. Her second opened in October 2020 and the gallery also hosted a pop-up exhibition of Babirye's work in Los Angeles, California in February 2022. Stephen Friedman Gallery hosted her first solo show in the UK and Europe in June 2021.

Profiles on Babirye and her practice were recently published in The New York Times, Artforum, The Art Newspaper, Wallpaper* Magazine, Cultured Magazine, New York Magazine, The New Yorker magazine, Modern Painters, OUT Magazine and Raw Material: A Podcast from SFMOMA (Season 4; Luvvers).

Her work can be found in public collections including The Africa Centre, London, UK; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California; Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, UK; Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-On-Hudson, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Florida; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island; Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Leilah Babirye is represented by Stephen Friedman Gallery, Gordon Robichaux, and Galerie Max Hetzler.