

Based in Nairobi, Kenya (where he was born) and in London, Michael Armitage makes paintings inspired by his experiences in East Africa that extend and often overturn canonical histories of European modern art. His signature medium is oil on Lubugo bark cloth, a material harvested and prepared from trees in Uganda and turned into a sacred fabric, often used for making ceremonial garments for tribal leaders. Armitage, however, stretches the cloth across a frame, turning it into the ground upon which he builds each of his lush paintings. The inherent sutures, tears, and textures of the material frequently inform the compositions of his paintings, the subjects of which refer to the political and social events that shape and impact contemporary life in his native Kenya.

For *MATRIX 263*, Armitage debuts a new body of work that reflects on sexuality and gender stereotypes in Kenya. One large canvas pictures the Tanzanian pop artist Diamond Platnumz and his entourage disembarking from his plane on the tarmac. Blending abstract and figurative styles, Armitage draws upon the modernist language defined by Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso. Armitage's palette and expressionistic lines, for instance, recall the saturated canvases Gauguin made in his adopted tropical outpost of Tahiti, albeit from a decidedly Western perspective. In another painting, Armitage revisits Picasso's famed *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), decidedly transforming the subject: in the updated version, the protagonists or "prostitutes" are men known as "beach boys," who comb the beaches in Kenya looking for wealthy female, European patrons. Armitage complicates the historical dialectic between Western and non-Western cultures, making work about Kenya (and its extended region) from a perspective that is more synthetic and cosmopolitan than that of his antecedents—merging European styles with East African subjects, materials, and understanding.

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