

# Michael Armitage *in conversation* with Hans Ulrich Obrist

**Hans Ulrich Obrist** — It's fascinating how, even on this gloomiest of days, there's a magic light in your studio. It's really dark outside now and we still don't need any artificial light.

**Michael Armitage** — Yes, it's a lovely space, the way it holds the light. Actually, it's the perfect light. I think that's one of the good things about London: it has perfect weather for painting.

In other words, gloomy weather is the perfect painting light.

Yes, perfect. You can actually see everything. When it's bright you can't see anything because it's so white.

You have a lot of research materials—photographs and films—here in the studio. Sometimes you begin a painting with ink drawings.

Yes, some paintings are incredibly close to particular drawings, but it's not always that it happens like that. Some are made from an amalgamation of photographs and others are from life; some are made with coloured pens and watercolours and just made up; and then some are made from other people's paintings—for example, *The Flaying of Marsyas* (2017) was based on a Titian painting.

Besides Titian, who are the painters who inspire you?

There are so many different people I look up to. The main ones from Western art history would have to be Manet and Goya. Velázquez is up there, and Frans Hals. I like Gauguin a lot for his problems. For me, being in London and making paintings about Kenya, Gauguin was a necessary presence to consider.

And which living painters?

The list is extensive. One of my favourite living painters is probably Chris Ofili, but I find it quite difficult to quote a living artist in the same way because there aren't these set ideas that art history creates which you can undermine. Meek Gichugu's paintings from the early nineties are among my favorites too. And I've been thinking about Goya a lot, particularly how he builds the paint up and how

he's able to describe things with such economy, but, at the same time, his paintings are so visceral.

There are many direct and indirect references to Goya in your work. What was your first encounter with him?

I remember it like it was yesterday. The first time I ever took an art trip was to Madrid, with my partner at the time, and we went to the Prado. I'd heard about this guy, Goya, but I thought he was a contemporary artist. I'd just seen Gary Hume's door paintings, and when I heard about Goya's *Pinturas negras* (Black Paintings) (1819–23), I had this image of a kind of minimalist black door. But when I walked into the room with *Atropos* and all of the other *Black Paintings*, I was like, "Bloody hell, this isn't a minimalist door painting! [laughter] This is something else." I was completely blown away. It destroyed the rest of my trip, because I didn't see anything apart from the Prado. That was my first encounter with Goya. I've been back a couple of times to see him again. I think, when I was making *The Promise of Change* (2018), Goya's work *The Strolling Players* (1793) in the Prado—the one with the figures on the stage, and a dwarf with a kind of strange nose mask thing—was on my mind. Actually, looking at Goya has changed how I draw: the understanding that you can make something that's seemingly quick, but is in reality built up slowly. Goya obviously came back and back and back to many of his drawings.

And you do the same: you return to them many times, but they appear very quick.

Exactly, but very few actually are. When I made *Necklacing* (2016), I'd been thinking about how Goya used caricature in *Los desastres de la guerra* (The Disasters of War) (1810–20). Goya is always so present for me.

*Necklacing* is an amazing painting. Where does the imagery come from?

Something I saw when I was twelve. I was waiting outside the cinema with my sister, and this guy came running past—he had a tyre around his neck. I remember laughing and saying to my sister, "How bizarre is that?" I thought it was incredibly funny and quite surreal. But I soon saw he was being followed by a gang of guys with a lit torch. He must have been a thief and he was running, trying to get away before they lit the tyre and burnt him alive.

Is that common in Kenya?

"Necklacing" is what they call it in South Africa, and it was something I wanted to deal with in that painting. When I was about sixteen and I found out that those guys were probably going to light the tyre that was around him, that really shifted everything for me. A tyre burns slowly, and it would have eventually killed him.

When I was thinking about making that painting, it took me a long time to figure out how to deal with this memory. I didn't want it to be just about a moment of violence. I wanted there to be something quite absurd also.

*The Dispute* (2015) is an earlier painting also about violence—domestic violence.

That started when I heard stories about women who were attacking their husbands, particularly Kikuyu women. I wanted to make a surreal image about this phenomenon and was able to when a friend told me his mother had attacked his father with a clarinet and broke it on him, which must have hurt a lot.

A form of self-justice?

Self-justice or oppression, or maybe both. That's one of the few paintings I've made where there's actually an act of violence happening in the painting. I find that very tricky. I'm not sure about making paintings about this in a place where there are so many clichés.

And it all goes back to Goya, especially *The Fourth Estate* (2017).

The whole way I painted it is just stealing from Goya. I put him in all of my paintings.

That painting is so much like the Goya etching *Disparate ridículo* (Ridiculous Folly) (1815–24) [rep. p. xx]

Completely. *The Fourth Estate* came from an election rally in Kenya, and when I described the scene in a radio interview, I felt like I was describing that exact etching.

Was it the election in Kenya that also prompted the series *The Promised Land* (2018)?

I'd been thinking for a while about making some work around the presidential elections and power dynamics. Initially, I was thinking about what's given and what's taken between the leader and the people who follow him, and what you forfeit and what you get from that relationship. I wanted to look at two election rallies—the final rally of the incumbent and one of the opposition—just to see what the difference in the conversation was. But the day before, they cancelled the last day of rallies, so I couldn't go to both of them. So I just went to the opposition rally, which was in Nairobi.

Do all those elements about the power dynamics feed into that series?

Yes, basically it came from this idea of the Promised Land. Raila Odinga kept saying he was going to lead everyone to Canaan, to the Promised Land, and I kept thinking, “Yes, but what is that?”

He was promising utopia.

Yes, or at least an idea of utopia, but it's absurd for Odinga to be proposing that in a context that's incredibly fraught.

I'm reminded of *Crowds and Power* (1960), the book by Elias Canetti. It's a book on the crowd and interesting in relation to the crowds in this series of paintings.

Ever since I began going to political rallies I've been thinking about crowds, the kind of performance and change in identity that comes with them.

Canetti defines crowd dynamics in terms of four attributes and explores how they shape everything from political rallies to religious events to music concerts, and how they shed light on the complexity and true meaning of power: first, the crowd always wants to grow; second, within it there is equality; third, it loves density; and lastly, it needs direction.

I suppose a crowd without direction is looking for trouble. Something that's unified is incredibly powerful and kind of stultifies the individual personalities of everybody in it.

Which gives the people in the crowd a sense of equality.

A perceived equality, at least.

In your drawings, though, there aren't any crowds.

Sometimes there are things in the drawing that I end up trying to copy in the painting, but I feel like the paintings need to be something in themselves and the drawings should also be something in themselves. What I find a bit difficult is the way the drawing almost limits the painting. I find it very awkward when there's too much closeness. There are a couple of times where I've taken on crowds in the drawings, but I always try to get some kind of a character into them.

So that's why the drawings are fragments. Do you ever exhibit your drawings?

I showed four drawings once, but otherwise I hadn't wanted to show them until Ralph Rugoff asked me to put some in the Venice Biennale and that has made me have to contend with exhibiting them.

But you always keep them, so it's like an archive.

I have loads of boxes. I feel like they hold my imagination. Some of the drawings are ten or fifteen years old—the stuff I did for my BA. Sometimes they come back and I'll use them to start a painting. Before I moved to this studio, I used to keep a single wall just for drawings to think about.

And what prompted you to begin making ink wash drawings?

The ink is quite recent—it's probably been about two, three years. I wanted my drawing to have a bit more relationship to the brush. I was thinking of the marks in the paintings. I don't paint very much when I'm in Kenya. It took me a long time to get used to a brush again every time I came back to it, so the ink wash is just a way of keeping that fluidity.

How much time do you spend in Kenya?

Usually three to four months a year. I make all the drawings when I'm in Kenya.

Do you have a studio there?

I do. It's just that the paintings take so long to make. I have half- or quarter-started paintings sitting around in that studio, but I'm never there long enough to finish them.

In the paintings, there's an interesting three-dimensional element: sometimes it looks like collage; sometimes there's a hole.

The holes are just part of the material, the bark cloth. I just keep them instead of stitching them up.

The material you paint on isn't canvas?

No, it's bark cloth. It's really beautiful. It comes from Uganda—it took me a few years to find it. I was really struggling with painting on canvas. I wanted something that would in some way subvert the action of painting on top of it, but would locate it in East Africa. So for about three or four years I tried painting on a woven palm leaf mat, but it didn't have any subtlety. One day I found this material in a tourist market and I started playing with it. But then when I tried to buy some, I found that if I wanted anything that was bigger than a coaster, I had to go to the United Nations because the material is protected through UNESCO. I tried for about six months and I still couldn't get any because they kept passing me to somebody else, to somebody else, to somebody else. Finally I asked my uncle, who's from Uganda, and he said, "Why didn't you ask me before?" and put me in touch with his brother-in-law, who then put me in touch with these guys who make it for me.

How do they make it?

Basically, it's the outer bark of a tree. It's an extraordinarily delicate process. They scrape the skin off from the outside first, and once they've peeled it off, they lay dried banana leaves on it. Then they burn it so it's very lightly singed on one side. Then they soak it and clean it. Because of the singeing, one side is a little bit darker than the other. And then they beat it for the whole day, and it turns from being relatively stiff to this. Then they lay it on one side. And the side they expose to the sun just gets darker and darker the longer it's in the sun. They use it as a burial shroud and for lots of other things. Culturally, it's Uganda's most significant product.

And what is it actually called?

Lubugo cloth, which means funeral cloth. I think for a long while they thought I was an undertaker or something—for very tall Ugandans. I asked them when I went to see them initially if they wanted to know what I was planning to do with it but they couldn't care less. It was an amazing find. In the beginning I didn't want to cover it, because it's such a beautiful colour.

Has it ever been used for painting before?

Yes, it has, but I haven't come across it being used in this way.

The holes, then, are in the material?

Yes, in the material. And some of them are repaired. All these repairs are very delicately done by them, usually with a blade of grass. They sew it all back together and you get really beautiful repairs that look a bit like scars.

They're like scars on a body.

Those are my attempts at sewing or the stitches I put into the cloth. But, yes, I want to make work that has a relationship to a cultural history. That's really important for me, certainly in terms of locating the narratives and the conversations, and to be able to do it without having to think about how to do it every single time. It's just a way of making that part of the work so I can talk about other things.

It's something a viewer could overlook, because they'd assume the material is canvas.

Yes, it has a slippage.

When would you say your student work ends and your catalogue raisonné begins?

Probably 2012. There's a painting, *Peace Coma* (2012).

So that would be the first work in your catalogue raisonné?

Yes. I've kept it for that exact reason. It was a bit of a eureka moment for me. It has all of the different elements that I'd been trying to bring in, like underpainting, and everything I was thinking about began to work in that painting. I wanted an absurdly tropical image, something humorous, something quite basic, as a way of dealing with cliché. The title alludes to the term "peace coma" that was made up by the foreign press when talking about our post-election violence at home. They were talking about the way in which the local press dealt with it, which was by not stirring up hatred, and how they wanted to quell all the high emotions.

So the local Kenyan press was trying to be a tranquiliser?

Exactly, which I think is actually very responsible of them, given what could have happened. But the foreign press didn't like it and so they said Kenya was falling into a "peace coma." That made me think of snakes.

So that's where the snakes appear for the first time? It's not a plant, more like an octopus or some form of growth. This kind of imagery comes back again and again.

I'm not sure. It started with snakes. I suppose I think of them as a disturbing presence in some way but it's evolved and become its own thing. In *The Flaying of Marsyas*, for instance, I wanted to make a painting of a violent scene that was part of a narrative that wasn't to do with East Africa. The title refers to the Greek myth of Apollo flaying Marsyas. I guess I was just trying to shift the location. But the thing that's quite strange is that I took it straight from a tree being stripped for its bark in Uganda. I'd been looking at a lot of photos and footage of how you skin things.

So this comes back to your technique of using lubugo cloth?

It was actually the first time I primed the cloth and then painted in this way. Before, I was painting in a much flatter way. The technique has developed since, but it started with this painting. It's definitely the beginning.

You wouldn't have shared works that you made before it?

No. There's a lot of dodgy stuff. [laughter] I think *Inauguration* (2013) was the first painting with figures. It came because I was watching the inauguration of the president in Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

So the idea to incorporate politics into the work was already there?

It's always been there. I just didn't know how to deal with it in my earlier work in a way that was open. I don't ever want them to be political paintings, as such, like propaganda or something like that.

That's what Gerhard Richter always says about the *October* (1988) paintings, that they're not paintings about terrorism. His position on the Baader–Meinhof Group is ambiguous. Most of your paintings start with something personal, a story from a friend. How did the title *Kampala Suburb* (2014) come about?

It started when a friend of my sister's asked me if I knew any gay bars in Nairobi and I said to the guy, "Look, while you're here, just don't tell anyone. Just be quiet. It's much safer for you like that." I didn't think about it or question it because it's your standard go-to response. But then I thought how absurd it was and how I had never questioned how wrong it was that something like that would ever come out of my mouth. I started thinking about all the different cultural influences that go into making that standard. At the time, the Ugandan government was putting into law rules that would make it illegal if you knew somebody was gay, like a neighbour seeing something, and you didn't say something to the authorities.<sup>2</sup> You could then be liable by association and put in jail for fifteen years. I decided I wanted to make a very everyday, natural image of two men in love. It was supposed to be an intimate moment in the most unthreatening place possible, at home in the suburbs.

Are the laws in Kenya as bad as they are in Uganda?

No. We have so many issues, but Kenya acts as a sort of haven for people to seek refuge there. From Yemen all the way to South Africa, people come to Kenya. Although this doesn't mean that Kenya is open and accepting of the LGBTQ

1. Uhuru Kenyatta was inaugurated as the president of Kenya on April 9, 2013.

2. The Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed into law in Uganda on February 24, 2014.

community. There were these two boys who were accused by their neighbour of being gay and they were taken and forcibly anally searched. They had forced blood tests to check if they were HIV positive. According to our new constitution this was a violation of the boys' rights as Kenyan citizens, but, with a challenge brought by the Christian Law Society, the courts effectively ruled against the constitution, allowing for the discrimination and abuse of the two boys by the authorities to be considered legal. The case was put before the Supreme Court, and it was argued that it was against the boys' rights as Kenyan citizens, as provided by the new constitution, which says we're all equal and, as such, have rights. In 2019 the Supreme Court, through a convoluted attempt at justifying its decision, which wasn't unanimous, ruled against the boys again, once again contradicting the Kenyan constitution.

I interviewed the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina and, of course, he talked about these new draconian laws.<sup>3</sup>

To have someone so public and appreciated come out is incredible. He was an extraordinary man. He was such a key voice for literature. It's less so within visual art. For example, I have a friend who runs a gallery at home, and she was trying to keep it as open a scene as possible, but when one of the artists put a Gay Pride flag up, he and his friends were beaten up on the way to the show. They weren't doing anything more provocative than that, so, sadly, things like that still happen.

And is this violence religiously motivated?

The only reason we really have these issues is because of the American Christian missionaries who came over in the 1970s, and this is well documented by Binyavanga. I would say that many of the very productive creatives in writing and film in Kenya are gay and making work around that. The films they're making are extraordinary. There's a group called the Nest Collective, headed up by Jim Chuchu, that made a film, *Stories of Our Lives* (2014), that tells everyday stories from Kenyans who are gay.

Film is important to you. You've done many drawings inspired by the films of the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène.

There's a lithograph called *The Long Walk Home (Xala)* (2020) of guys walking that comes from Sembène.

How did you discover Sembène?

3. Binyavanga Wainaina (1971–2019) was a Kenyan writer known for his memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011). He came out publicly in 2014 amid a surge of anti-homosexuality laws being passed in Africa.



When I was in Zanzibar, I was at a festival. I think it was the premiere of his film *Moolaadé* (2004) on the continent. It caused a huge outrage.

Why did it cause such an uproar?

It's about female genital mutilation. Zanzibar is a Muslim country and very conservative. They nearly stopped the whole festival after the screening.

Do you have any unrealised projects or dreams that you want to accomplish?

I want to do something public in Kenya. I'd love to do a mural or some sort of commemoration piece. The only problem is that my process is so slow, and I don't know how patient people are with public projects taking so long. I usually give myself a year and a half to do a group of paintings. The major project I founded in 2020 and am working on is the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute or NCAI. It's an educational space and a permanent exhibition space with a historical element, as well as a more experimental element. I think it's something special. The educational part of it is really important to me.

