

CYRUS KABIRU

Pandashuka

13.09.17

07.10.17



small

Cyrus Kabiru: Future Vision, Frozen Past

By Jens Hoffmann

Where human feet have never trod, where human eyes have never seen, I'll build a world of abstract dreams, and wait for you.

-Sun Ra

Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru creates fantastical sculptural objects from recycled materials, scraps, and trash. Growing up in the Kibera slums of Kenya's capital city, Kabiru confronted waste every morning, recalling that he woke to a view of a trash pile out his bedroom window. Using his own inventiveness as an antidote to the limited options and paths that others set out for him, Kabiru mined the refuse of his city to create a visionary alternative.

When he was very young—just seven years old according to his much-recounted origin tale—Kabiru began fashioning glasses out of discarded materials. He admired his father's glasses, and though highly of people who wore them, it seems; when he expressed this to his father, he told the young artist: If you want them, you should make your own. Kabiru did just that, and the elaborate and ingenuous results continue to be his most recognizable and celebrated works.

The *C-Stunners*—"C" for "Cyrus" and "Stunners" for "something stunning"—are Kabiru's otherworldly optical creations. Wearable though decidedly non-functional, Kabiru's glasses are made of metal scraps, found objects, and technological waste. Looking at images of dozens and dozens of pairs of *C-Stunners*, we might spot a few familiar objects: a pair of cassette tapes, in one; forgotten flatwear, in several others; a singular pair of scissors forming again another. But largely, Kabiru's materials are so completely transformed that his objects become something else again. Frequently photographed on the artist (when sold, the sculptural objects oftentimes come with the modeled self-portrait), Kabiru's glasses are altogether alien, and the artist who imagines, creates, and wears them exists as something apart.

Trash Reimagined

Nairobi, Kenya, has an extreme problem with waste. The most populous city in Africa, Nairobi's infrastructure has long been overwhelmed by trash, while a lack of zoning regulations allow for mountains of waste to be kept in locations that have a strong impact on the overall health—not to mention the optics—of the city. Over a decade ago, the UN reported shocking conditions in and around the city's largest dumpsite, called Dandora. Located amid slums in the east of the city, Dandora received over 2,000 tons of trash per day—or 4 million pounds. "[O]ne of Africa's biggest rubbish mountains," Dandora stretches over 30 acres of Kenyan land, sitting adjacent to a water-supplying river, and much too close to residences of some of the city's poorest citizens.

Even last year, Kenya's own Daily Nation was reporting on the struggles of waste management in the capital city, both at the Dandora site and throughout Nairobi. One article opens: "That Nairobi city cannot cope with its solid waste is incontestable. A walk along a few city streets or estates is proof that the city is choking [sic] in its own garbage." The city is so ill-prepared to manage the amount of waste created everyday that trash accumulates in the city streets, crowding out traffic, and transforming many city thoroughways into ad hoc garbage heaps.

Foraging and scavenging through this overwhelming amount of trash has become a way of life for many in Nairobi, a sort of person-to-person recycling system in a city where waste management is poorly managed. For thousands of the city's poorest, the Dandora dump site is a feeding ground, rummage sale, and workplace. They gather and sell recyclable materials, take what they can for their own use, and bring discarded food home to their families. Many do this despite the health risks, the presence of scavenging birds and wild pigs who also forage the dump, and the local cartels that control the Dandora site. They do this to survive.

Kabiru is among the many in Nairobi who rely on trash for their livelihood, but the artist approaches this in a different way, and to a different end. In interviews and talks, Kabiru remembers how he got started on his path as an artist, often speaking about the trash that overwhelmed his home city, and his desire to "give trash a second chance." He talks about a troubled and troubling present, one in which our increasing reliance on technologies creates even more continuous cycles of garbage—technological waste. Kabiru rescues these objects from their uselessness, and reimagines them into something new again. While his aims are not expressly environmental in their focus, Kabiru can certainly be placed among artists who make a political stand by relying on second-hand materials for their artworks.

Kabiru's fondness for the discarded and his belief in reinvention also parallels his own biography. As a poor kid growing up in Nairobi, Kabiru talks about the expectations and options that he saw before him as a child. It was an uncomplicated path—go to school, try hard, pass your exams, go to college, get married, have children—but one that Kabiru never envisioned for himself. Instead, he rebelled at school and at home. Choosing a creative life over one more conventional and understandable made him somewhat unknowable to his family and those he grew up with. His

family, for years, did not know that he was an artist; it seems they just thought he was mostly unemployed. He laughingly recalls parents using him as a cautionary tale—"do well in school, or you'll end up like Cyrus."

Through reclaiming and tirelessly asserting his own desires, Kabiru created a different sort of reality for himself. It is one that stretches far beyond the trash heaps of Nairobi, and into a visionary alternative.

Riding Out of Time

In addition to his *C-Stunners*, Kabiru has been creating customized bicycles for the past several years. Made of similar means—recycled and reclaimed bits of metal, wood, wire, and other materials—Kabiru's *Black Mamba* bicycles draw again on the artist's own biography of desires. The term "black mamba" is used in Nairobi to describe simple, typically black-framed, fix-gear bikes that swarmed the city during the 1980s and 90s. Used for transportation and business alike, the black mamba was a simple, sturdy, and ubiquitous fixture on Nairobi's streets. In his sculptural series, Kabiru reimagines these bicycles that dominated his childhood, adding and subtracting elements to and from the simple black frames.

In some of these works, Kabiru has replaced the wheels with readymade objects—round metal tins of some sort, or wheels scavenged from some other kind of conveyance. In others, he has added adornments to the frames, layering links of flattened bottle caps into the negative spaces, or weaving wire through the spokes of tires to create spiderweb-like designs. Oftentimes the conventional bits have been removed, inverted, or replaced—handlebars and seats and wheels are not always left where they should be. Notably, from the looks of them, at least, all of Kabiru's Black Mambas are rendered unrideable, more form than function.

Alongside the sculptures, Kabiru created a film, *The End of Black Mamba* (2015), that documents the importance of these bikes in the city of his youth. Over the five minutes or so of footage, we watch these bikes weave through the dirt roads, paths, and streets of the city while Kabiru and others reflect. Increasingly replaced by motorbikes, the bicycle has faded in significance, and according to Kabiru, is disappearing from Nairobi. The black mamba, he fears, is becoming a part of history as it fades slowly away from the daily present. At the same time, other figures interviewed in the film contradict this idea: one man, a bicycle mechanic, says he fixes fifteen black mamba bikes a day, concluding that they don't seem to be going anywhere. Another says, while he might use a motorbike to get somewhere quickly, he still rides a black mamba for health and leisure.

Kabiru's attachment to the bicycle, and his insistence on its disappearance, points to a fascinating contradiction that we can trace throughout his practice—a tension between a visionary sort of futurity and a nostalgic desire for sameness that seem entangled in all of his creations. While we know what world Kabiru creates from, what is less clear is the one that he creates for. Is it the present, a moment in which reuse and recycling are the simplest means for the artist to express his alternative vision? Or is it a future world, further devastated by waste, or, conversely, liberated from conventions of bodily limitations?

Abstract Dreams

Other considerations of Kabiru's artistic practice make frequent reference to the concept of Afrofuturism as one way to define and understand the artist's works. Though the term itself did not emerge until the 1990s, Afrofuturism is an aesthetic that can be traced back to authors, artists, and musicians like Sun Ra, George Clinton, Octavia Butler, and even Ralph Ellison. Born out of an acknowledgment of black people's subjugation, Afrofuturism imagines an alternative reality in which black identity is celebrated. Afrofuturist works have often blended some imagined, interplanetary future with tokens from the past as well—from Sun Ra's incorporation of Egyptian-styled costumes and imagery, to Butler's time-traveling heroine sent back into the time of American slavery. Bordering sci-fi, fantasy, and magical realism, the aesthetics of Afrofuturism can be found in creative expressions across genres.

Kabiru's own brand of Afrofuturism likewise blends the materiality of the past with a vision that seems of another world or time. This affinity is most striking when looking at the photographic images of Kabiru wearing his iconic C-Stunners. Typically shot against a blank white or black background, these photographs share a uniform set-up: Kabiru's head and shoulders are seen central frame, his face, unsmiling, is partially obscured behind a pair of oversized, fantastical frames. In many of the photographs, the artist's eyes are hidden completely; in the ones where we are able to see them, he stares directly forward. They are arresting images, striking, and strange. In them, Kabiru displays his transformed creations, and at the same time becomes himself something rather alien.

What is really captivating not only in Kabiru's *C-Stunners*, but in the photographs as well, is the complicated relationship that they convey to time, vision, and reality. The temporal existence of Kabiru's works straddles past and future. Growing out of remnants from a material present and near-past, Kabiru's objects are recognizable as part of our time. But once they have morphed—from bits of metal, wood, and wire into wildly inventive visual compositions—these objects dislocate from the present, calling up an idea of a future in which they might stand as some sort of symbol of the wearer, perhaps, or in which they might find a more practical optical function.

Some, like *Kwa Kubadilishana Utamaduni*, *Macho Nne: At the Dot* (2017), or *Macho Nne - Ferrari Gasket* (2015) are both armor-like and highly

decorative. Metal spokes move outward in a radiating pattern in the first of these, their points forming perfect rectangles while beads placed along their lines perfectly mirror the arcs of the central bridge piece. In the second, a piece of coated piping creates a face-framing (protecting?) u-shape on the outside of the rugged metal component that both guards and extends the wearer's head. In a third of these works, *Mali Ya Mfalme, Macho Nne | Caribbean Lango (Caribbean Gate)* (2016), Kabiru's eyes are obscured behind a maze of yellow beads strung between two wood-and-wire anchors that reach to either side of his face.

Kabiru's *C-Stunners* are conceived of and described as spectacles—tools, traditionally, that help their wearer to see. The choice, then, to cover, obscure, or obstruct the wearer's eyes points to a different sort of vision, one that has perhaps little to do with sight in a literal sense, but that is focused, rather, on seeing in a way that is altogether altered. Kabiru's glasses don't simply enable clearer vision, but they open a portal into an imagined (and unseen, by the viewers who only have the artist's face to look upon) reality. We are left wondering—what does he see? Where has he been transported? When will we—or will we at all—arrive there to join him?

smac



Cyrus Kabiru

Amittai

2017

Steel and Found Objects

150 x 110 x 30 cm

Unique

STELLENBOSCH

1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN

1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

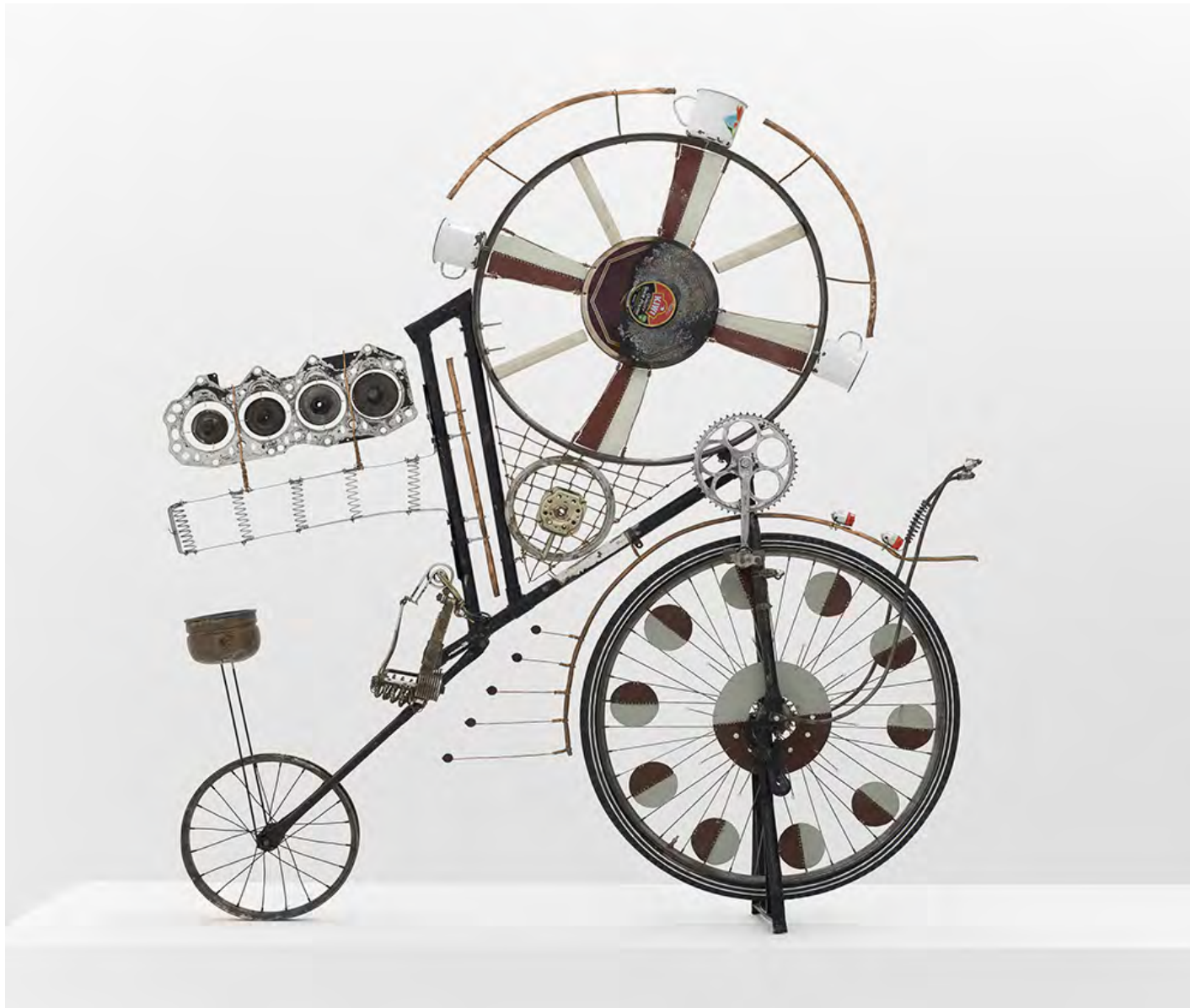
JOHANNESBURG

1st Floor, The Trumpet
19 Keyes Avenue
Rosebank, 2196
T +27 (0)10 594 5400

www.smacgallery.com

info@smacgallery.com

smac



Cyrus Kabiru

Kisululu

2017

Steel and Found Objects

130 x 128 x 22 cm

Unique

STELLENBOSCH

1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN

1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

JOHANNESBURG

1st Floor, The Trumpet
19 Keyes Avenue
Rosebank, 2196
T +27 (0)10 594 5400

www.smacgallery.com

info@smacgallery.com

smac



Cyrus Kabiru

Dentist

2017

Steel and Found objects

145 x 106 x 30 cm

Unique

STELLENBOSCH

1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN

1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

JOHANNESBURG

1st Floor, The Trumpet
19 Keyes Avenue
Rosebank, 2196
T +27 (0)10 594 5400

www.smacgallery.com

info@smacgallery.com

smac



Cyrus Kabiru
The Blue Mamba
2017
Steel and Found Objects
158 x 110 x 18 cm
Unique

STELLENBOSCH
1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN
1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

JOHANNESBURG
1st Floor, The Trumpet
19 Keyes Avenue
Rosebank, 2196
T +27 (0)10 594 5400

www.smacgallery.com
info@smacgallery.com