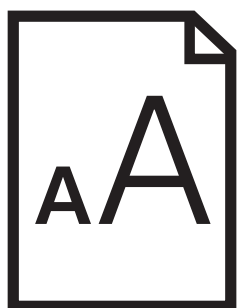


**LEILAH BABIRYE:
EMBAGA YA NAKI NE
NAKI (Wedding of Naki
and Naki)**

**CYNTHIA DAIGNAULT:
VALLEY**

On View

Aug 27, 2026 –
Jan 18, 2027



Large Format
Text



Leilah Babirye: Embaga ya Naki ne Naki (Wedding of Naki and Naki)

“My work represents real people. They have real names. I also believe they breathe. I believe they have scars. I believe they’re human beings. I believe that they speak. They all hold the purpose of somebody. They represent a clan member. They are my queer people.”

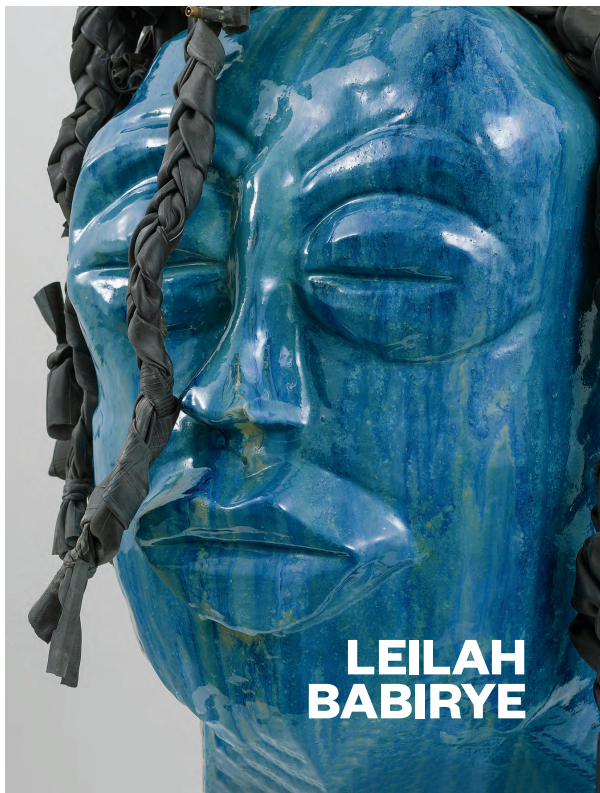
Introduction

Leilah Babirye (b. 1985 in Kampala, Uganda) creates evocative figurative sculptures through her deft carving of wood and expressive work with ceramics. In a process the artist refers to as “taking the girls to the salon,” she embellishes her sculptures with ornamental headdresses and jewelry made from discarded everyday items like bicycle gears, chains, and inner tubes. Her use of debris is a reference to *abasiyazi*, a pejorative term for a gay person that translates to “rubbish” in Luganda, one of the major languages spoken in the artist’s home country. Babirye reclaims these materials, drawing on technical traditions from Western and Central Africa to create sculptures that uplift and celebrate LGBTQ+ identities — an ethos driven by her own experience fleeing Uganda after being outed as gay in the context of the country’s harsh anti-homosexuality laws and seeking asylum in New York City. In her work, Babirye imagines an alternate reality where the LGBTQ+ community is represented in Uganda’s past, present, and future.

Leilah Babirye: Embaga ya Naki ne Naki (Wedding of Naki and Naki) premieres a new body of sculptures in a vivid installation imagined as the wedding of Naki and Naki. In the naming traditions of Uganda, the prefix Na indicates that a name is feminine, with Naki being a nickname for longer traditional names for women. Babirye often titles her works using the ancestral clan system belonging to the kingdom of Buganda, which historically ruled much of present-day Uganda. Traditionally consisting of 52 clans, each represented by a plant or animal and illustrated here, this system traces ancestral lineage and assures marriage outside family lines. In this imagined wedding, bust-sized sculptures encircle a same-sex couple —Naki and Naki—embracing at the center. Surrounding the wedding party are towering figures in charred wood that represent the relatives and ancestors who have populated the artist's practice from the beginning. The ensemble reflects the range of techniques Babirye has developed over the past decade, from carving and burning wood to shaping and glazing clay. Their titles often include their clans, familial roles, and the word *kuchu*, an identifier that emerged within LGBTQ+ communities in Uganda as a positive self-descriptor for queer people. By commingling seating with the sculptures, the exhibition invites visitors to join the celebratory gathering in honor of the couple at its center.

This project, as with all Babirye's work, champions the freedom to love whoever and however one wishes.

The exhibition is accompanied by the artist's first book, which is available in the ICA Store.



Credits

Leilah Babirye: Embaga ya Naki ne Naki (Wedding of Naki and Naki) is organized by Ruth Erickson, Barbara Lee Chief Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs, with Max Gruber, Curatorial Assistant.

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Andy Warhol

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

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Artworks

Omugole Omukyala Namirembe Kaddulubale (Peaceful Bride of Mwanga II), 2020

Wood, wax, nails, wire, glue, and found objects

Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

Promised gift of Steve Corkin and Dan Maddalena

The royal court of Mwanga II (r. 1884–1897), the last independent ruler of the kingdom of Buganda, figures large in Babirye's practice. Mwanga II has often been discussed as having had same-sex relationships and promoting them within his court. This history forms a key link for Babirye between Ugandan heritage and LGBTQ+ identity. This sculpture depicts the *Kaddulubale*, who historically held the highest-ranking status of the king's wives, mediating disputes among spouses and playing an important role in funerary arrangements upon the king's death. Babirye adorns this figure with gleaming sheets of aluminum that stand out against the charred wood. A ceremonial veil made of can lids draws attention to the bride's face, and oxidized

metal hardware dangles from her earlobes. Babirye's use of cans is connected to her early experience in the U.S., when she collected and recycled them for income. Completing this arrangement is a grand, figure-eight shaped crown wrapped in lengths of worn bicycle chains. The juxtaposition of these repurposed materials with the bright aluminum gives the impression of a bride who is serene and worldly in her elegant regalia.

Nakazzi from the Kuchu Lungfish Clan, 2020

Wood, wax, aluminum, nails, and found objects

Collection of Fotene Demoulas and Tom Cot

In 2020, Babirye created her first large-scale sculpture in charred wood — a major step in the development of her practice. To celebrate this occasion, the artist dedicated *Nakazzi from the Kuchu Lungfish Clan* to her late mother, also a member of the Lungfish clan. A chain-linked necklace hangs around the towering sculpture's elongated neck, the statement piece in an ensemble of hardware-based jewelry. Nakazzi's cheeks are accented by trails of hammered nails, which recall *nkisi nkondi*, ritual sculptures created by the Kongo people of Central Africa. In this tradition, nails and blades are driven into

the nkisi to call for a spiritual intervention. By incorporating this technique, Babirye places herself within a powerful art historical lineage. Additionally, by appending the figure's clan identity with the affirming word *kuchu*, a Swahili term meaning “same” adopted by queer Ugandans, she asserts LGBTQ+ presence in her personal heritage and its resonance within a broader history.



Nkisi nkondi (Nail and blade oath-taking figure), 19th century, Kongo. Wood, metal, glass, textile, pigment, rawhide, vegetable fiber, feathers, porcupine quills, and tusk. de Young Museum, San Francisco. Museum purchase, gift of Mrs. Paul L. Wattis and the Fine Arts Museums Acquisition Fund.

Nalongo Nkugwa from the Kuchu Lungfish Clan, 2022

Wood, wax, nails, bolts, washers, aluminum, bicycle chains, and gears

Collection of Alexandra Stanton and Sam Natapoff

Many of Babirye's best-known works depict royalty from the past and present. However, family has always been an important subject in her practice. This sculpture depicts the artist's late mother, Nalongo Jennifer Nkugwa. In Luganda, *Nalongo* means "mother of twins," and, indeed, Babirye has a twin sister. Babirye elevates the figure with a voluminous headdress of diagonal, raised ridges and bright, hammered aluminum, and an elaborate earpiece made of bicycle parts. The latter is a reference to the artist's job as a bicycle messenger when she first lived in New York City while applying for asylum. Babirye's combination of rusted and shiny components, including brake rotors, cassettes, chains, and rings, endows this sculpture with both humility and magnificence.

Nabakka from the Kuchu Lungfish (Mamba) Clan, 2022

Wood, wax, bolts, washers, screws, wire, aluminum, nails, steel plates, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found object

Collection of Adelle Chang

Babirye created this sculpture in dialogue with influential modernist sculptors Alberto Giacometti and Louise Bourgeois. Inspired by these artists' thin, elongated forms and figures, Babirye connected two pieces of untreated wood with steel plates, creating a body which seemingly disappears when viewed head-on. The void in the center of the sculpture reflects the artist's enduring interest in negative space. As she explains of working with wood, "When you're carving you have to listen . . . It tells you, 'Mama, stop.'" Named after a friend of the artist, *Nabakka's* hair rests gently on the floor. The braided inner tubes unravel in three, trident-like strands, each punctuated by a pressure-release valve.



Installation view, *mixed up with others before we even begin*, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, 2022–23. Photo by Oliver Ottenschläger © mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien

Agali Awamu (Togetherness), 2022

Wood, wax, steel, aluminum, nails, bolts, nuts,
washers, wire, bicycle parts, and found objects

Courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux; Galerie
Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

This sculpture was created as part of a site-responsive commission for the exhibition *Black Atlantic*, organized by Public Art Fund at Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York City. The exhibition's title is drawn from sociologist and scholar Paul Gilroy's landmark 1993 book exploring Black diasporic experience and the formation of cultural identity. While reflecting on this commission, Babirye aimed to create a work that evoked a sense of community among Black people across the world. The sculpture's looming form stood along the East River in 2022, against the high-rises of the Manhattan skyline. Babirye describes the figures in *Togetherness* as "beacons of freedom that welcome an international LGBTQ+ community." In this installation, the work represents a gathering of relatives, elders, and chosen family at the wedding of Naki and Naki.



Agali Awamu (Togetherness), 2022. Installation view, Black Atlantic, Public Art Fund, Brooklyn Bridge Park, Brooklyn, NY, 2022.

Naki and Naki, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wood, wax, wire, copper, nails, and
bicycle tire inner tubes

Courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux; Galerie
Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

The couple of Naki and Naki share a female name, a single body, and a kiss. Babirye's representation of same-sex couples as joined sculptures dates to one of her first commissions, created for Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens in 2018, the same year she began working seriously with ceramics. Since then, Babirye — a twin herself — has reproduced this merged form in a range of materials and scales. Unique to this sculpture is the milky glaze that thickly coats the work with a cake-like surface, further uniting the two figures as one. In her earliest ceramic works, Babirye approached the medium by carving as she had in wood. She advanced her techniques working in community clay studios throughout New York City, where she continues to produce her ceramics. Instead of dipping and painting her selected glazes, she generously pours — an approach that creates rivulets of variegated color and expressive drips from her figures' features

and appendages. Affixed to these “queens,” as Babirye refers to them, is a veil woven from scraps of rubber, one act by the artist, among many, to reclaim and uplift what has been rejected.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Adyeeri (Generous One) from the Tooro Kingdom, 2026

Wood, aluminum, wax, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found objects

Kobusingye (Daughter of Peace), 2026

Glazed ceramic, wire, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found object

Gabunga, Head of the Mamba (Lungfish) Namakaka Clan, 2026

Wood, wax, aluminum, wire, nails, chicken wire, whisks, springs, and found objects

Nakisagala from the Njovu (Elephant) Clan, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wire, copper, and bicycle tire inner tubes

Kaamuswaga, Chief of Kkoki County, 2026

Wood, wax, aluminum, copper, wire, nails, screws,
carabiner, pipe and mounts, chicken wire, bottle
caps, and found objects

All works courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux;
Galerie Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Nabwato from the Njovu (Elephant) Clan, 2026

Wood, wax, aluminum, wire, nails, bicycle gear,
cooking utensils, chain, and found objects

Nabiwempe from the Namungoona (Pied Crow) Clan, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wood, wax, wire, aluminum, nails,
and bicycle tire inner tubess

Nayiga from the Ngabi (Antelope) Clan, 2026

Wood, wax, copper, wire, nails, chicken wire, bottle
caps, and found objects

All works courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux;
Galerie Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Nakisanje from the Mmamba (Lungfish) Clan, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wire, copper, and bicycle tire inner tubes

Babirye's ceramic works span a wide chromatic range. This brilliant mustard yellow with hints of greens and blues stands out from the group, its colors swirling and pooling in the curvaceous terrain of the work's surface. As distinct as each figure appears, Babirye also revisits certain shapes and expressions across her robust body of work. Elongated necks and enlarged ear lobes — markers of distinction in many African cultures — signal the various ways that symbolism and meaning are conveyed through the body. Coded self-presentation is particularly important to many queer communities, providing a sense of belonging and protection from exposure. Babirye also endows her figures with definitive strength and power, as with this figure's gaping open mouth that recalls an utterance or speech act, perhaps confronting the silencing and censorship of queer individuals.

Nakikanga from the Nkejje (Haplochromis Fish) Clan, 2026

Wood, aluminum, wax, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found objects

Nabweteme, Princess from the Nkima (Vervet Monkey) Clan, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wire, and bicycle tire inner tubes

All works courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux;
Galerie Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT *Nakirembeka from the Heart Clan,* 2026

Wood, wax, aluminum, copper, wire, nails,
screw, chicken wire, aluminum can,
rubber tire, and found objects

Babirye carved the wooden busts presented on the pedestals during her time at Miami's Fountainhead Arts Residency in February 2026. She returned to her New York studio to complete them, a process that includes burning, waxing, and finally adorning the sculptures with various metal elements and found objects collected from her neighborhood. While smaller in scale, they share the planar dimensionality present in the large-scale sculptures installed around the perimeter. Babirye draws on the deep history of direct carving within African sculptural traditions, but she makes her primary cuts using a chainsaw, taking inspiration from the women sculptors who taught her at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA), Uganda's

most prestigious art school and a leading center for art education in East Africa. Babirye describes the act as “cutting down the violence of homophobia,” linking the technique to queer world-building. Atop these busts, the artist builds elegant hats and headdresses — fitting attire for the celebratory occasion.

Nabyoloola from the Ntalaganya (Forest Antelope) Clan, 2026

Glazed ceramic, wire, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found objects

Nakabazzi from the Kasimba (Genet Cat) Clan, 2026

Wood, wax, copper, wire, nails, bottle caps, bicycle tire inner tubes, and found objects

Abboki (Wise One) from the Tooro Kingdom, 2026

Wood, aluminum, wax, bicycle tire inner tubes, gears, and found objects

All works courtesy the artist; Gordon Robichaux; Galerie Max Hetzler; and Salon 94

