

# CYRUS KABIRU

## Black Mamba



Solo Presentation - Booth 54

**FNB** JoburgArtFair

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The studio of Cyrus Kabiru seems a monument to daily life in Nairobi, Kenya. Kabiru's sculptural assemblages, fashioned out of found objects and discarded materials, trace the rapid growth and change in his hometown. Charged with the signs of previous use, detritus such as bottle tops, coins and empty tin cans are reimagined and reincarnated. Kabiru was originally influenced by his father's challenge to create what was missing during his youth. Whether in response to the promise of a bicycle that never fully materialised, or the desire for glasses denied, the rubbish site across from his childhood home provided endless potential.

Seen as the first spark of Kabiru's enterprising approach, the distinctive sculptural bifocals, *C-Stunners*, are perhaps his best-known work thus far. Although the C-for-Cyrus-stunners are rooted in Kabiru's life story and primarily showcased in stylised photographic self-portraits, there is a suggestion of shifting identities in each work. The material itself informs the construction; the form of each object, the resultant web of references in their amalgamation, encourages imagined stories for Kabiru.

Furthering his interest in everyday relics and storytelling, Kabiru's latest projects revolve around tales of the 'Black Mamba'. With reference to Africa's fastest snake, 'Black Mamba' is a somewhat ironic title for a fixed gear bicycle, once widely popular in Kenya. As the lifeblood of small businesses, connecting people across Kenya, the bicycle was named after its slow approach over the horizon to rural areas.

In *The End of Black Mamba I* (2015), the first of a series of short documentaries by Kabiru, the artist estimates that as much as 80% of the Kenyan population had a 'Black Mamba' in the 1980s and 1990s. Looking to his own family narratives, after Kabiru's grandfather passed away in 1994, his grandmother mounted his 'Black Mamba' on the wall as a memorial. With reference to this increasingly common practice, Kabiru memorialises the "vanishing" of the iconic bicycle in his *Black Mamba* sculptural series.

Similar to his construction of *C-Stunners*, Kabiru's intuitive response to the material allows for a transformation of 'waste' into innovative, yet familiar forms. As a child, when Kabiru's father presented him with only the frame of a 'Black Mamba', Kabiru would transform the shape of this bicycle daily, through research and experimentation. Today, the sculptures remain a playful questioning of function and form rendered disarmingly 'useless'. On closer inspection, the proportions are impossible, a front wheel appears clamped, and there is no way to pedal forward. Bicycle bells feature in unexpected places, perhaps referencing the distinctive bell of Kabiru's father's 'Black Mamba'.

This sense of sound, or even community, is evoked in *Nyatiti (African Guitar)* (2014) for example, as the spokes of the wheel expand outwards to reference the strings of a guitar. These small details, such as discarded keys, tiny beads and stones, disturb the lines of the bicycles' frames and emphasise the varying textures and tones of the materials used.

Flattened bottle caps are a recurring motif in many of Kabiru's sculptural works. These are stitched together in a myriad of colours and branding. The recognisable logos of Guinness, Fanta, Summit Lager as well as Tusker, speak to the diaspora of globalisation – movement and migration referenced again by the wheels of the sculptures. Highlighting the cyclical nature of life, the once ubiquitous 'Black Mamba' bicycle was brought to Africa from China, yet motorised bikes and scooters, again from China, are fast replacing it. Here, not only through his choice of material but also through his subject matter, the politics of globalisation and cross-cultural exchange are highlighted.

The transformative use of found or discarded objects has surged in the work of many contemporary African artists. Working across diverse media and concerns, renowned artists such as El Anatsui, Moustapha Dimé and Romuald Hazoumé challenge prescribed conventions of media, favouring variation and the unexpected. This elevation in the status of 'mundane' materials into art has been linked to the history of found objects and 'ready-mades' in European and American modernism – Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), provides an interesting link here. Such work has also been approached in terms of a Dada-ist interest in the absurd and nonsensical, and a Surrealist experimentation with assemblage and juxtaposition. However, the ideologies behind these uses of found objects are radically different, and such discussion tends to deny the specificities and complexities inherent in the work. Across time and continents, there is a suggestion of a long and cross-cultural history of interest in the use of one's 'environment', or found material.

Like the 'Black Mamba' itself, Kabiru's assemblages sit between old and new worlds, a time passed, yet reimagined. The fragile continuities between the past, present and future are underlined. Whilst fantastical elements and an interest in possible futures has led Kabiru to be linked to the aesthetic of 'Afrofuturism', art writer Sean O' Toole has argued that "if anything, Kabiru is a cosmonaut of the pavement".

Through his media and approach, Cyrus Kabiru's *Black Mamba's* leads the viewer to reconsider the form and function of 'everyday' items, and the symbolism and potential they hold and can create.

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Cyrus Kabiru was born in 1984 in Nairobi, where he still lives and works. His first solo exhibition was in 2008 at the Wasanii Workshop in Kenya and he has subsequently exhibited in England, the USA, Sweden, Holland, Italy, Turkey, South Africa and in his home country. Notable solo exhibitions include *Upcoming* in 2010 at the Kuona Trust in Nairobi, *Cyrus Kabiru* at the Kunstpodium T Gallery in Holland in 2011 and *C-Stunners & Black Mamba* at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town in 2015. Kabiru was awarded the Best Artist Innovation award at the Maker Fair and was celebrated by Guinness Africa and MTVBase in 2012. In 2013, Kabiru was a fellow at TED's *The Young, The Gifted, The Undiscovered* in the USA. That same year, Kabiru also exhibited at the Lagos Photo Festival in Nigeria and his work formed part of *Afrofutur: Adventure with Makers, Thinkers and Dreamers* at Milan Design Week, Milan, Italy. Recent group exhibitions include *Concealed: Selections from the Permanent Collection* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York and *Towards Intersections: Negotiating Subjects, Objects and Contexts* at the University of South Africa Art Gallery in Pretoria.

Kabiru's work is currently included in *Making Africa - A Continent of Contemporary Design* at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, *Africa - Architecture & Identity* at the Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, Denmark and *Beyond Borders*, the 5th edition of the *Beaufort Triennial* in West Flanders, Belgium. Later this year, Kabiru will form part of *Unorthodox* an exhibition at The Jewish Museum in New York, USA and has been selected to represent Kenya in *Lumières d'Afriques*, an exhibition coinciding with the COP21 International Conference in Paris, France in November 2015.

**Cyrus Kabiru**

*Kwagga*  
2015  
Mixed Media  
111 x 184 x 53 cm

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## Cyrus Kabiru

*Wildebeest*  
2015  
Mixed Media  
144 x 145 x 26 cm

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**Cyrus Kabiru**

*Kimberley*  
2015  
Mixed Media  
106 x 183 x 48 cm

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**Cyrus Kabiru**

*Red Carpet*

2015

Mixed Media

66 x 73 x 47 cm

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**Cyrus Kabiru**

*The French Connection*

2015

Mixed Media

69.5 x 58 x 25 cm

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