



# Cyrus Kabiru

## C-Stunners & Black Mamba

SMAC, Cape Town

Concept and faddish novelty are often narrowly twinned in any artwork. This is particularly true of Cyrus Kabiru's roughhewn sculptural glasses, called *C-Stunners*. But Kabiru, a self-taught artist from Nairobi, started making his wearable glasses when he was three. Prompted by his father, who wore glasses and had to repair them himself, Kabiru initially produced art (he also paints) out of a kind of internal necessity. Later, at school, he realised he could barter his sculptural creations for homework; sensing a career, he set off on self-taught journey as an artist.

Enterprise is deeply coded into how Kabiru thinks and speaks about his work, especially since it has crossed disciplinary boundaries and found favour with European design and fashion audiences. The widespread attention elicited by his *C-Stunners*, a representative selection of which appeared on his first solo exhibition at SMAC, has prompted Kabiru to develop a sound-bite approach to narrating his work. "I give the trash a second chance," he likes to say in reference to his use of cast-off materials. Equally practiced is this statement, "We need to move from selling poverty to selling creativity." A TEDGlobal Fellow in 2013, Kabiru has honed a distinctive pitch that plays well to a TED-influenced generation of global consumers.

And yet, nagging cynicism at his polished media message notwithstanding, there is something likeable about his sculptural work. Perhaps it is has to do with the way this work, which also includes an evolving series of sculptures made from retired single-speed bicycles (known in Kenya as 'black mamba'), typifies an emerging critical regionalism that is intent on overcoming

the burdens of geography. "I am not a Kenyan artist, I am an artist from Kenya," insisted Kabiru during a 2014 television interview. Speaking with TV host Beryl Ooro, Kabiru also repeated his cute refrain about not selling poverty but creativity. But it is what he said next that really struck me. "I don't say where I grew up because I want to sell my creativity." It is the primacy of the thing that matters, Kabiru believes, not geography or biography.

The selection of work displayed in dealer Baylon Sandri's new Woodstock space reiterated this thesis. Shown alongside actual examples of Kabiru's intricately crafted glasses — one features legs like a praying mantis, another has a prominent snout and fan-shaped visor — his exhibition 'C-Stunners & Black Mamba' included 10 photographic self-portraits of the artist wearing his constructions, along with two bicycle sculptures and a short film elaborating the latter's context. "When I make these glasses I am Cyrus, the artist, but when I wear them I am a different person," Kabiru is quoted in the press release. This may well be true, but what is as striking is the relationship between object and artist: Cyrus is always at the back, secondary, a model.

The technical craftsmanship that goes into the making of each *C-Stunner* is negligible, or, at least, this is not where their thrill derives from. As in the masks of Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè, who also serial works with the detritus of the modern city, Kabiru's glasses are each little disquisitions on pleasure. They are intriguing too for the way they elide seeing and being seen, object and performance. In 2013, Kabiru and three artist friends were arrested

while walking through central Nairobi wearing his glasses. They were later released without charge. Performativity is a rote phrase to make sense of this bit of tomfoolery. A line by the "extra-terrestrial brothers" Parliament, from their 1975 song *P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)*, offers greater richness: "Yeah, I dig, let me put my sunglasses on/ That's the law around here, you got to wear your sunglasses / So you can feel cool, gangster lean..."

Parliament, with their zany costumes and space-age influenced mythos, are often cited as early progenitors of the Afro-futurism, a loose theoretical paradigm rooted in post-Civil Rights pop culture that is often misapplied to African artist, most recently Kabiru. If anything, Kabiru is a cosmonaut of the pavement. His work is centrally influenced by the impoverished material world he encounters while walking Nairobi. "When you walk Nairobi there is trash all over the place, the material is all over the place," Kabiru said in his TV interview. "When I walk I don't see waste, I see possibility."

*'C-Stunners & Black Mamba'* is on at SMAC, Cape Town until 14 March 2015.

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Cyrus Kabiru, *Macho Nne 17 Boneless*, 2015. Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin Photographic Paper. 150 x 120 cm. Courtesy of SMAC Gallery.