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New Voice With Plenty to Say: Kenyan Painter Michael Armitage Bridges European Traditions and East African Modernism

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Aug 3, 2020 • 1:58 pm

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Artist Michael Armitage. | Photo courtesy White Cube

ONE OF THE MOST THOUGH-PROVOKING figures in contemporary painting, Kenyan artist **Michael Armitage** probes the politics and cultural history of East Africa. His fascinating narrative scenes have a mythical quality and abstract tendencies that draw on aesthetic tensions between European traditions and East African modernism.

In early July, Armitage told the Times of London: "Five years ago I couldn't get anyone to look at my paintings."

Today, the eyes of the international art world are laser-focused on his paintings. Following an important project exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Armitage has a major museum survey opening at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, and he is featured in "Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium," a major group show and exhibition catalog presented by Whitechapel Gallery in London. Practicing professionally for about seven years, Armitage is a relatively new voice with plenty to say.

Five years ago, Armitage joined White Cube gallery in London and began to gain attention. That was in 2015. That year, he was included in group exhibitions staged in London, New York, Beijing, Lyon, France, and Turin, Italy. In 2016, "Michael Armitage / MATRIX 263," his first solo show in the United States, opened at the University of California's Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).



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“Five years ago I couldn’t get anyone to look at my paintings.”
— *Michael Armitage*

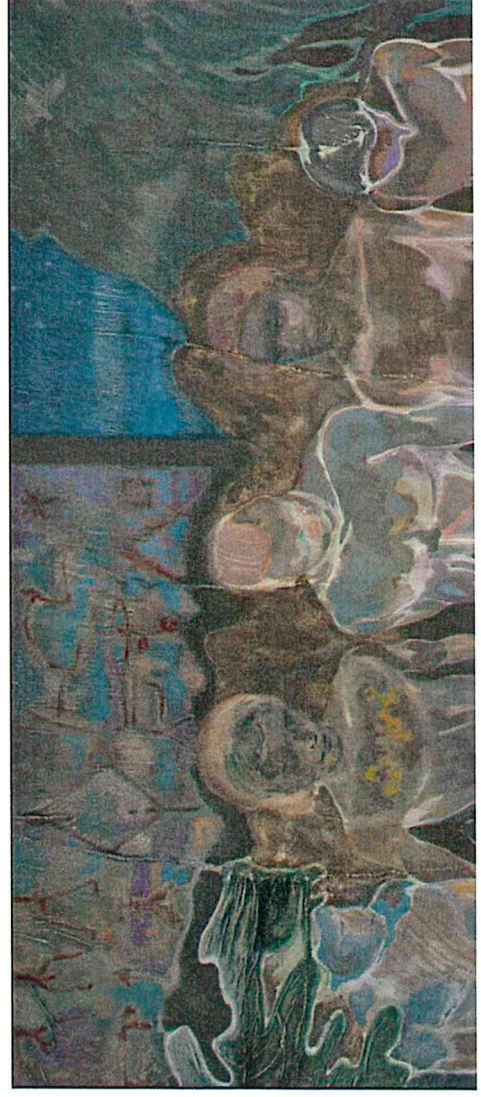
Now, the Haus der Kunst is hosting a major exploration of his work, spanning most of his career thus far. In September, [“Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict,”](#) a solo museum survey dedicated to Armitage, will showcase four groups of work dating from 2014 to the present. Gallery spaces will feature his animal paintings, landscapes, figurative works, and his Kenyan Election Series, eight paintings focused on the [controversial Kenyan elections](#) for president, parliament, and local races in 2017. Marked by irregularities and unrest, the outcome in the presidential vote was disputed and the supreme court ordered a second election.

For the first time, Armitage’s work will also be presented in conversation with his predecessors. The Haus der Kunst show concludes with about 70 paintings and sculptures by East African artists active in the 20th century, including Meek Gichugu, Jak Katarikawe, Theresa Musoke, and Chelenge van Rampelberg.

A new series of lithographs, exploring notions of empathy and care, that Armitage made during the coronavirus lockdown will also be on view. In addition, a new publication is being produced to accompany the exhibition.

The Haus der Kunst show is the artist’s first presentation in Germany. Armitage is also receiving the [2020 Ruth Baumgarte Art Award](#), a prestigious German art prize.

In the meantime, White Cube is presenting an online exhibition. [“Another’s Tongues”](#) features a broad selection of works on paper by Armitage. Made between 2017 and 2020, the ink studies are on view through Aug. 16 (email required to access).



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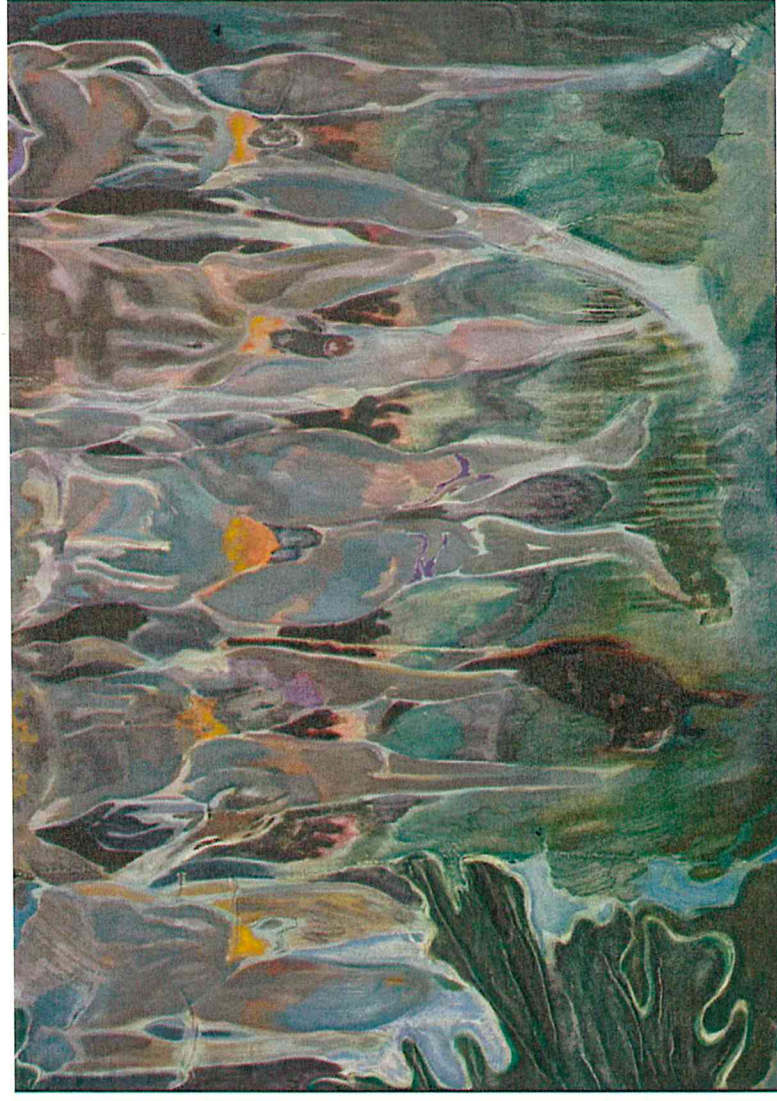
Ernie Barnes Retrospective Brings Renewed Attention to African American Artist Who Found Fame After Playing Pro Football



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On the Rise: 47 Curators and Arts Leaders Who Took on New



MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Nyali Beach Boys," 2016 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 96 7/16 x 92 1/2 inches / 245 x 235 cm). | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by George Darrell



Accomnlira.

Appointments in 2019

**NEW VOICE WITH PLENTY TO SAY:
KENYAN PAINTER MICHAEL ARMITAGE
BRIDGES EUROPEAN TRADITIONS AND
EAST AFRICAN MODERNISM**



**POWERFUL PERSPECTIVE: THESE
BLACK FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE
DOCUMENTING THE PROTESTS
AGAINST POLICE KILLINGS AND RACIAL
INJUSTICE**



MICHAEL ARMITAGE, Installation view of "The Accomplice," 2019 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 220 x 300 cm.), Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa, Feb. 8-June 15, 2020 | Courtesy Norval Foundation, Cape Town

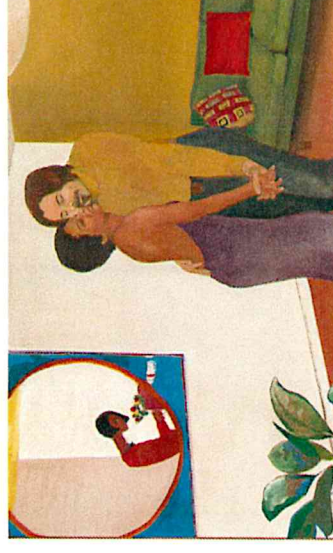
THESE EVENTS ARE SUBSEQUENT to key shows in Africa and the United States. "Accomplice: Michael Armitage" at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town, South Africa, his first show on the continent of Africa, was cut short due to a temporary and ongoing COVID-19 closure.

Last fall, when the newly renovated Museum of Modern Art reopened in October, "Projects 110: Michael Armitage" was among the inaugural exhibitions and the artist's first solo outing in New York. The show was organized by Studio Museum in Harlem Director and Chief Curator Thelma Golden with Legacy Russell, an associate curator at the Studio Museum. The presentation was part of a multiyear collaboration between the institutions.

Eight paintings were presented at MoMA. Two paintings were from the Kenyan Election Series and depicted a single event, a political rally that occurred in the lead up to the elections. "The Promised Land" (2019) situates the viewer within the crowd and "the promise of change" (2018) derives its perspective from the stage. "Nyali Beach Boys" (2016) is a riff on "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon," Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting of five female sex workers, which is in MoMA's collection. Using a similar composition, Armitage depicts five young men, male sex workers,



CURATOR SHAWNIA L. HARRIS IS PLANNING A MAJOR MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE OF EMMA AMOS, FORTHCOMING IN 2021



CONGRESSMAN JOHN LEWIS, THE CIVIL RIGHTS ICON AND LIFELONG FREEDOM FIGHTER, WAS A MUSEUM ADVOCATE WHO RECOGNIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ART AND ARTISTS

scouting a Mombasa, Kenya, beach for European tourists, specifically affluent female ones.

The large-scale paintings are ambitious and complex. The beauty of Armitage's images mask the challenging and sometimes harsh content. Three benches were installed in the gallery space at MoMA. The works warrant sitting down and taking time to observe and contemplate both the subject matter and visual details.

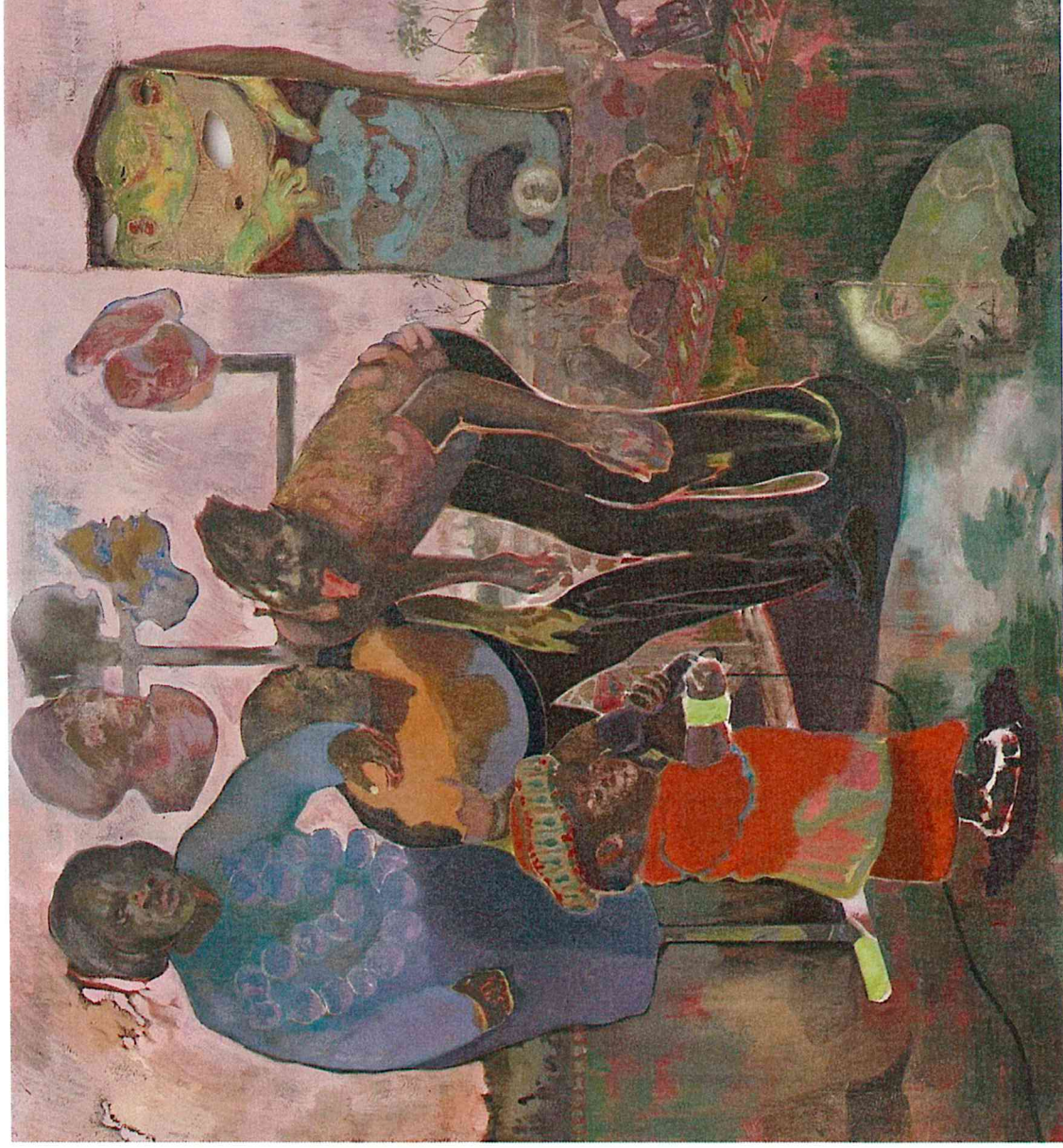
The exhibition description provided some context: "Across this body of work, the artist oscillates between the real and the surreal, the celebratory and the sinister. He merges memories of Kenya with media depictions of East Africa, entangling the personal and the everyday in a web of social and political tensions. Through these compositions, Armitage considers how political reportage, African bodies, and the body politic circulate within systems of global capital, highlighting the fraught relationship between Africa and the West."

"Through these compositions, Armitage considers how political reportage, African bodies, and the body politic circulate within systems of global capital, highlighting the fraught relationship between Africa and the West."



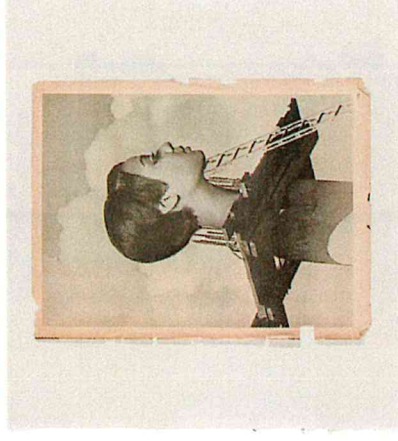
CULTURE TALK: FRANK STEWART ON HIS JAZZ PHOTOGRAPHS, APPROACH TO IMAGE MAKING, AND FORTHCOMING MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE





MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "The promise of change," 2018 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 86 5/8 x 94 1/2 inches / 220 x 240 cm). © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Ollie Hammick

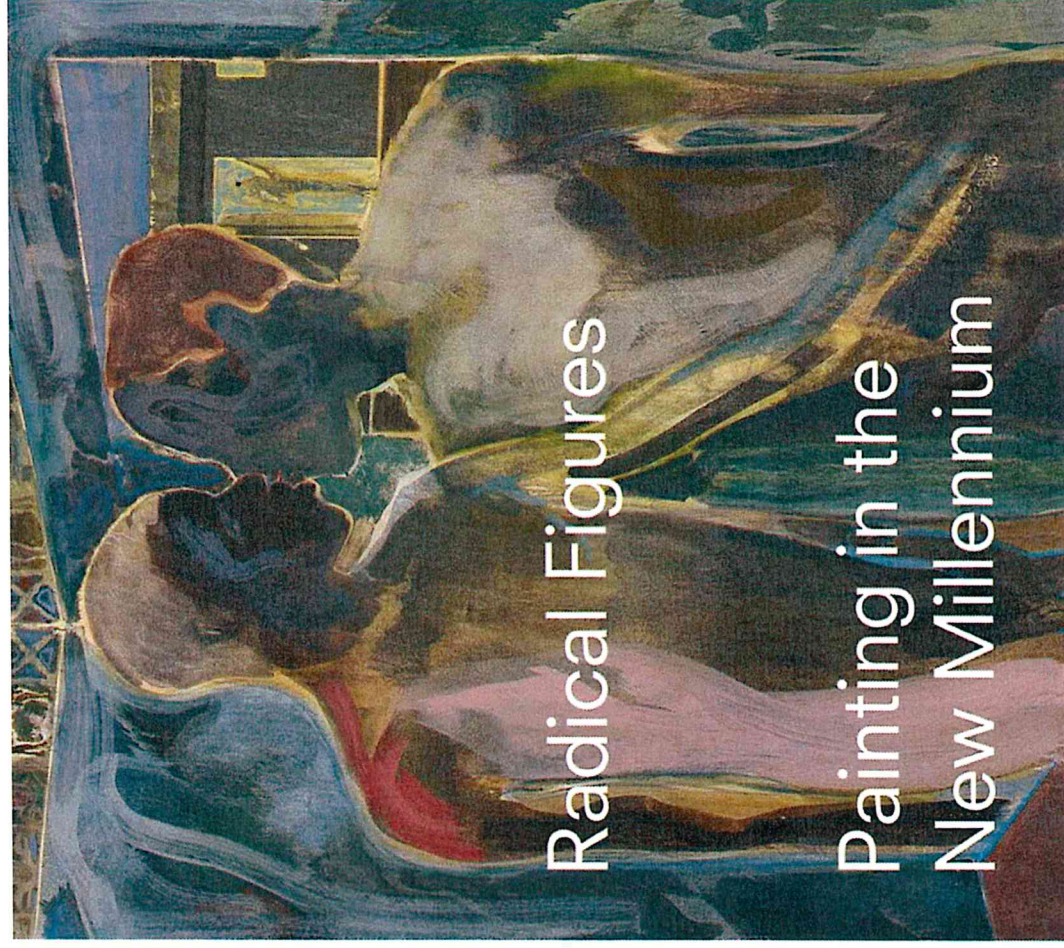
'GIVE ME SOME MOMENTS': LORNA SIMPSON'S NEW COLLAGES CHANNEL THE IMAGINED LIVES AND COMPLEX INTERIORITY OF HER SUBJECTS



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KARA WALKER HAS OPENED HER PERSONAL ARCHIVE, SHOWING NEARLY 270 DRAWINGS



"Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium," Edited by Lydia Yee (142, pages, Whitechapel Gallery). |



ERNIE BARNES RETROSPECTIVE BRINGS RENEWED ATTENTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST WHO FOUND FAME AFTER PLAYING PRO FOOTBALL

Published May 26, 2020, paperback

MORE RECENTLY, Armitage was featured in "Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium" at Whitechapel Gallery. The group show presented works by 10 international artists who concentrate on the figure, including Cecily Brown, Nicole Eisenman, Ryan Mosley, Christina Quarles, Dana Schutz, Tschabalala Self, and Armitage.

"Kampala Suburb" (2014), a painting by Armitage that depicts two figures kissing, covers the exhibition catalog. Inside the new volume, in an interview with Lydia Yee, chief curator of the exhibition, he provided a backstory for "Kampala Suburb" and the meaning embedded in its title.

"'Kampala Suburb' was made at the same time when the Ugandan government was trying to pass some pretty draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws. It was already illegal to be LGBTQ+, but if you knew somebody who was from the LGBTQ+ community, they wanted to make it illegal not to report them to the authorities. For this, you'd go to jail for up to fifteen years," Armitage said in the catalog interview.

"So I wanted the painting to be located in Kampala and I thought about the suburbs because that's where most people are. It was also important to make a tender painting that was about an ordinary scene of a couple of people in love, having a kiss before bedtime. I made the painting thinking it would be shown in Nairobi, where we also have draconian attitudes and laws towards LGBTQ+ people, but the show fell through."

The painting was featured in "Radical Figures" and was also on view at BAMPFA in California.

In a relatively brief interview, Armitage and Yee covered plenty of terrain, also discussing his academic training, preference for making preparatory drawings from video stills rather than photographs, and the significance of animals in his work, among other topics.

"Sometimes they're just animals," the artist said. "I like monkeys as they're a little bit too close to humans, which I find interesting. A lot of the artists I grew up looking at used animals as stand-ins for people as a way of talking through quite difficult social issues without having to paint a person at a time where government censorship was rampant."



50 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, WILLIAM H. JOHNSON'S WORK IS SHOWCASED IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AND RARE SOLO PRESENTATION BY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY



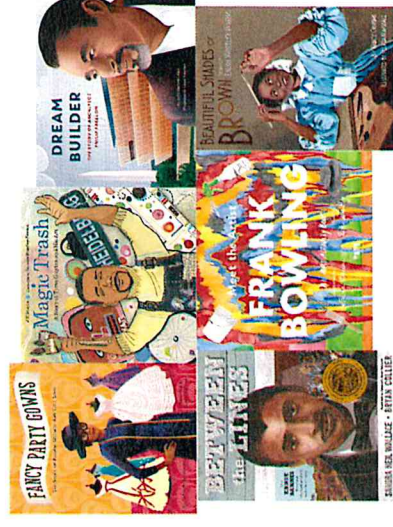
10 CHILDREN'S BOOKS TELL UPLIFTING

“A lot of the artists I grew up looking at used animals as stand-ins for people as a way of talking through quite difficult social issues without having to paint a person at a time where government censorship was rampant.” — Michael Armitage



MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Baboon," 2016 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 59 1/16 x 78 3/4 inches / 150 x 200 cm). | ©

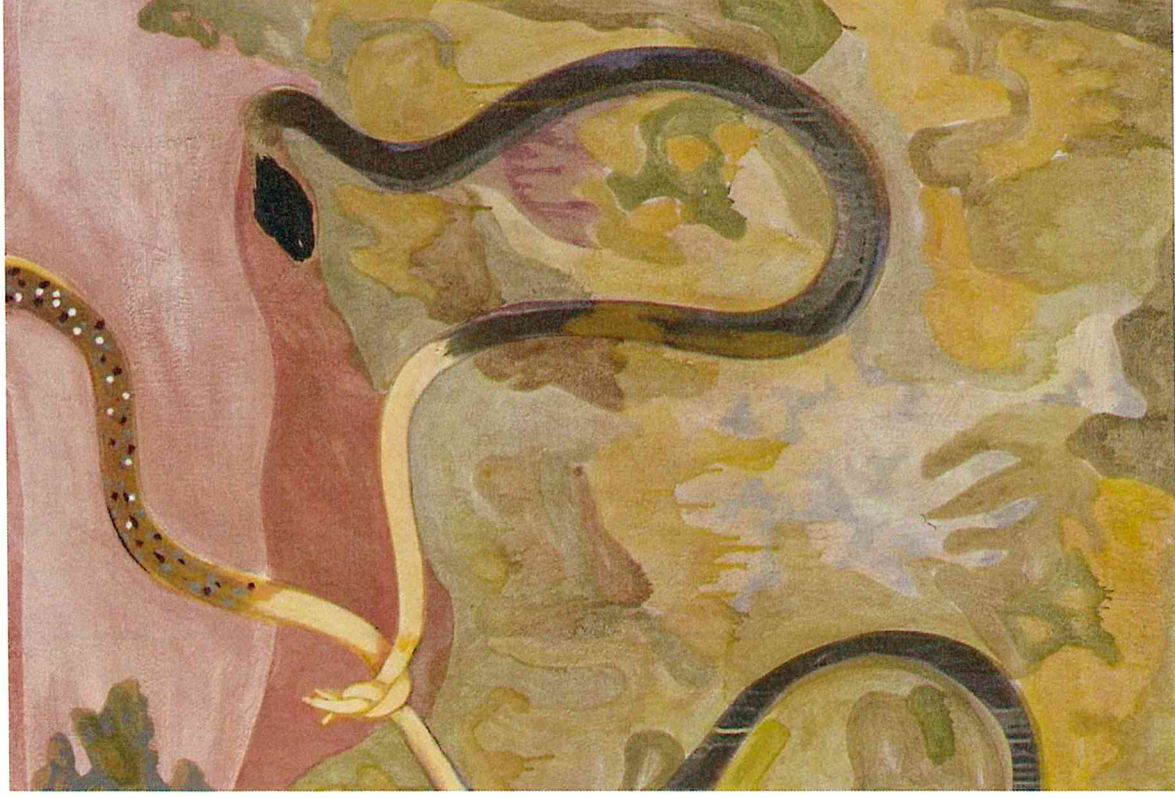
STORIES ABOUT THE LIVES AND WORK OF BLACK ARTISTS INCLUDING TYREE GUYTON, FRANK BOWLING, LAURA WHEELER WARING, AND ERNIE BARNES



ON THE RISE: 47 CURATORS AND ARTS LEADERS WHO TOOK ON NEW APPOINTMENTS IN 2019



Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Ben Westoby



CULTURE TYPE PICKS: 14 BEST BLACK ART BOOKS OF 2019



CULTURE TYPE: THE YEAR IN BLACK ART 2019



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MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Peace Coma," 2014 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 43 5/16 x 29 1/2 inches / 110 x 75 cm). © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Prudence Cumming Associates Ltd

BORN IN NAIROBI, Armitage earned a BFA from the Slade School of Fine Art in London (2007) and received a postgraduate diploma from the Royal Academy Schools in London (2010). He currently lives and works between London and Nairobi.

Several historic and contemporary artists are important to him. Armitage mentions Jacob Lawrence and his Migration Series, El Greco, Francisco Goya, Arshile Gorky, Julie Mehretu, and a number of others.

"Gauguin has been a key artist for me in dealing with the fact that I'm making paintings based on subjects that are from a country that's considered to be exotic. He's also a damn good painter," Armitage stated in the "Radical Figures" catalog.

"Goya is one of the most important painters for me. His subjects and how and why he paints them have been fundamental to my own approach. Cézanne is important in terms of colour and mark, and Seurat for understanding the way colours work together."

He adds: "Chris Ofili's Blue Paintings, for me, are extraordinary. There's also a Kenyan painter called Meek Gichugu who had one outrageous show at Gallery Watatu in Nairobi in the 1990s, which had a massive impact on me." (Armitage says he was only 10 or 11-years-old at the time.)

In fact, a connection to East Africa is ever present in his paintings. Armitage eschews Western linen canvases, instead using Lubugo, a traditional bark cloth from Uganda as his ground. Derived from the bark of fir trees, the surface is irregular—smooth in some areas and rough in others. It often has holes, stitching, ridges, and wrinkles.

He addresses imperfections in the cloth by incorporating them into his compositions. The inconsistencies also affect how he applies his paint. "That's where all the pain and the joy of trying to make a painting really begins," Armitage said in the catalog interview.

He addresses imperfections in the bark cloth by incorporating them into his compositions. The inconsistencies also affect how he applies his paint.

“That’s where all the pain and the joy of trying to make a painting really begins,” Armitage said.

His work is also informed by media images and his own recollections. “The paintings develop quite slowly, usually,” he has said. “Usually, I’ll have an idea and sit with it for a couple of years, maybe. Or a year. Unless, there’s something that happens that feels like it is a bit more urgent and I feel a lot more committed to it and I’ll follow it up much quicker.”

The suite of paintings documenting the Kenyan elections was made over a period of two years based on his observations of a series of rallies that preceded the elections. All eight of the paintings were presented at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019 in the Central Pavilion, part of “[May You Live In Interesting Times](#),” the international exhibition curated by Ralph Rugoff.

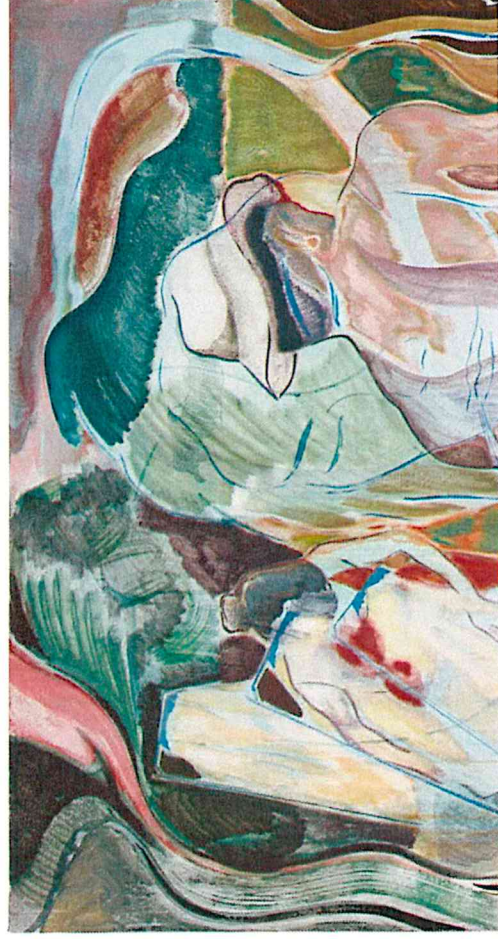
“The rally that I went to was in Nairobi at Uhuru Park and was the main opposition rally at the time,” Armitage said in a [video made for the biennale](#). “When I was there I was struck by the drama of the situation, the performance of the supporters and of the politicians on stage. So I wanted to set out making a body of work that explored some of the ideas that were put forward to the people, ideas like the politician wanted to take his supporters to The Promised Land.”

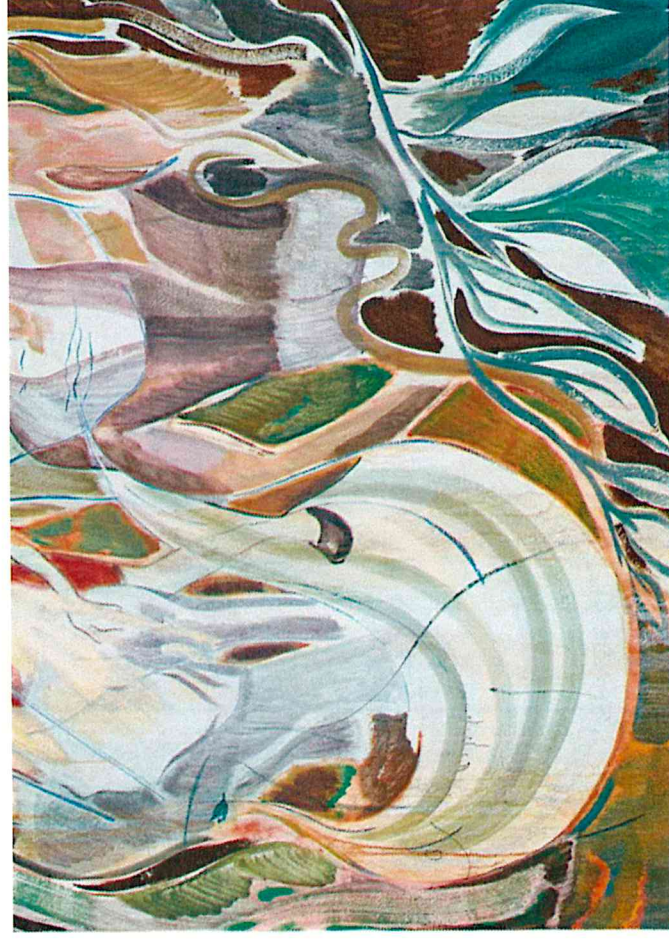
In addition to “The Promised Land,” the election paintings include “Pathos and the twilight of the idle” (2019), “Mkokoteni” (2019), and “The Chicken Thief” (2019). After the paintings appeared in Venice, the group was on view at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town. Two were also featured in the MoMA show.

Biennale Arte 2019 - Michael Armitage



Michael Armitage talks about his paintings featured in the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019. | Video by BiennaleChannel





Sotheby's New York, Nov. 15, 2019 – Lot 408: MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "The Conservationists," 2015 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 67 by 58 7/8 inches / 170.2 by 149.5 cm.). | Estimate \$50,000-\$70,000. Sold for \$1,520,000 fees included. **AUCTION DEBUT**

A WEEK BEFORE the Venice Biennale closed, one of Armitage's paintings was consigned for sale at Sotheby's. The seller acquired "The Conservationists" (2015) from his first exhibition at White Cube gallery, a group show titled "Tightrope Walk: Painted Images After Abstraction."

The painting was produced in 2015, the same year the artist cites as his moment of transition, when people finally started to look seriously at his paintings and recognize the value of his perspective and practice.

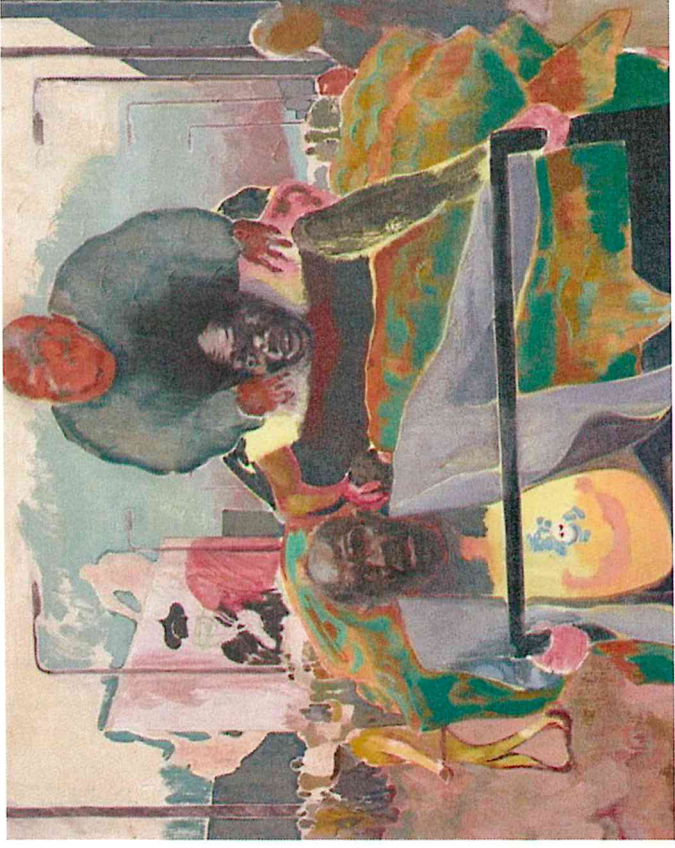
It was the first time one of his paintings had come up for auction and the debut was exceptional. "The Conservationists" was offered in the Contemporary Art Day Auction in New York on Nov. 15, 2019. The estimate

was \$50,000-\$70,000 and the painting sold for nearly 22 times the high estimate: more than \$1.5 million, fees included. (A windfall for the consigner; not the artist.) That large-scale painting, similar to all of his paintings, was executed on bark cloth.

"The material that they're on is called Lubugo bark and that actually translates directly from Buganda as a funeral cloth. So traditionally the cloth is mainly used as a funeral cloth for burying the dead in Uganda by the Buganda people. I was interested in this material because it has a huge amount of cultural significance and weight for the Buganda," Armitage said in the biennale video.

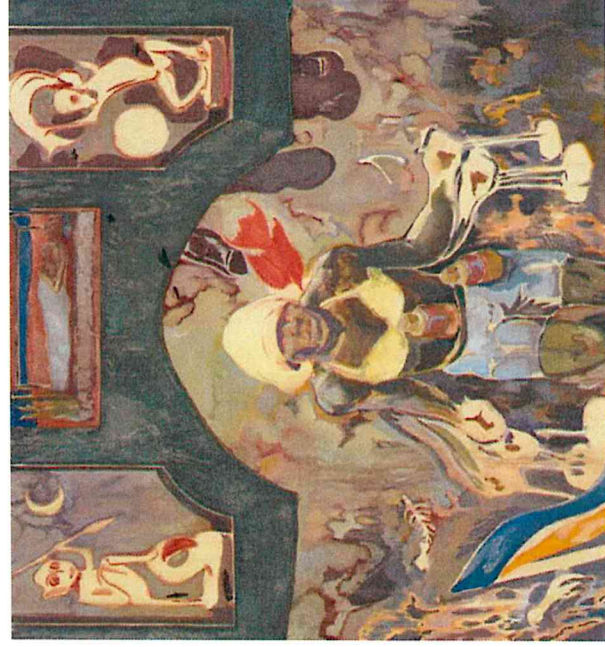
"But where I came across it was in a tourist market and it was being sold as a coaster or a placement. This kind of loss of purpose and meaning and function of the cloth, and its presentation then as a kind of souvenir to remember your ethnic time in East Africa, was interesting. Because basically, it removed all of the significance of the cloth for the people and I wanted to have some element of that within my paintings, that referred to this significant change of culture that's happening as Kenya and East Africa develop." CT

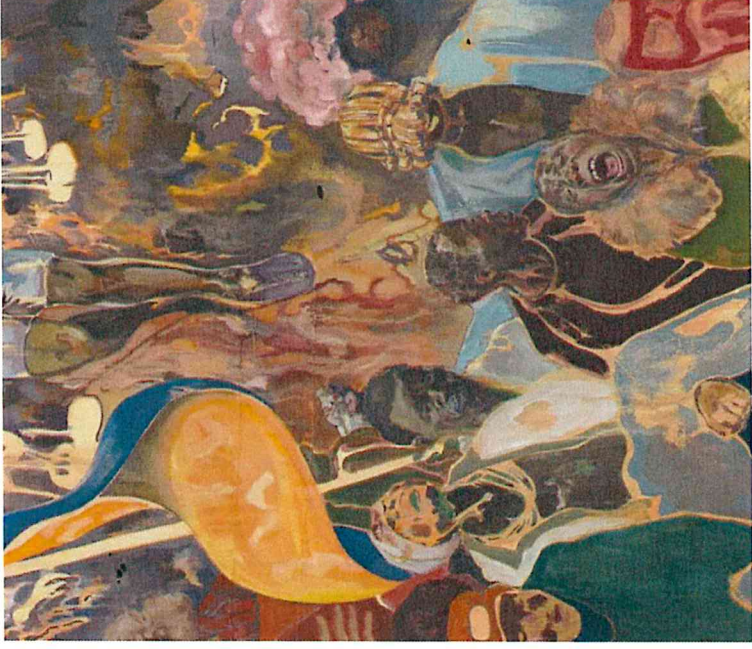
"Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict" is on view at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Sept. 4, 2020- Feb. 14, 2021





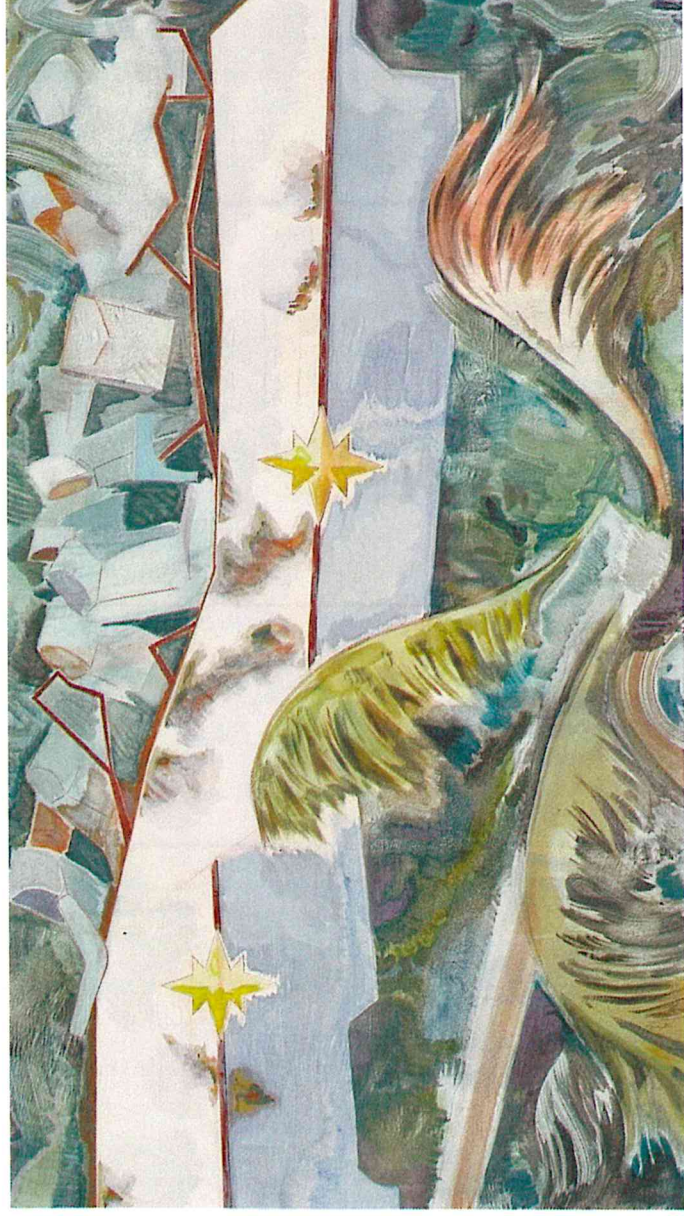
MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Mkokoteni," 2019 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth 86 5/8 x 66 15/16 inches / 220 x 170 cm). | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Theo Christelis



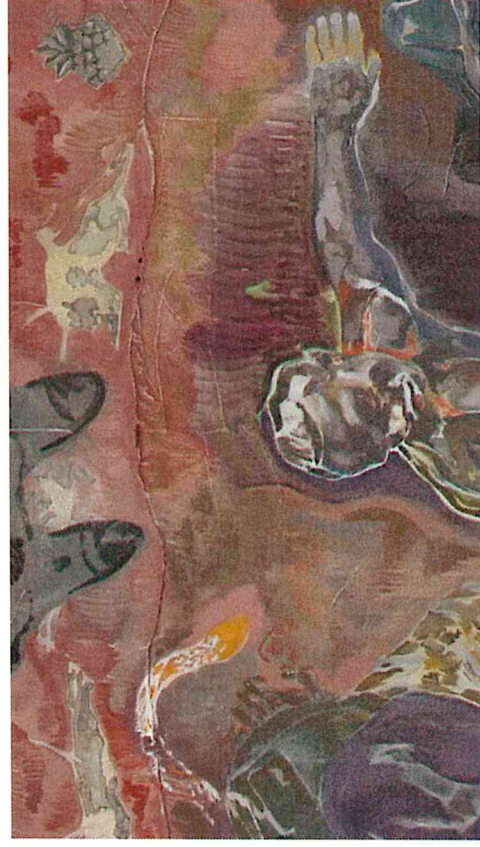


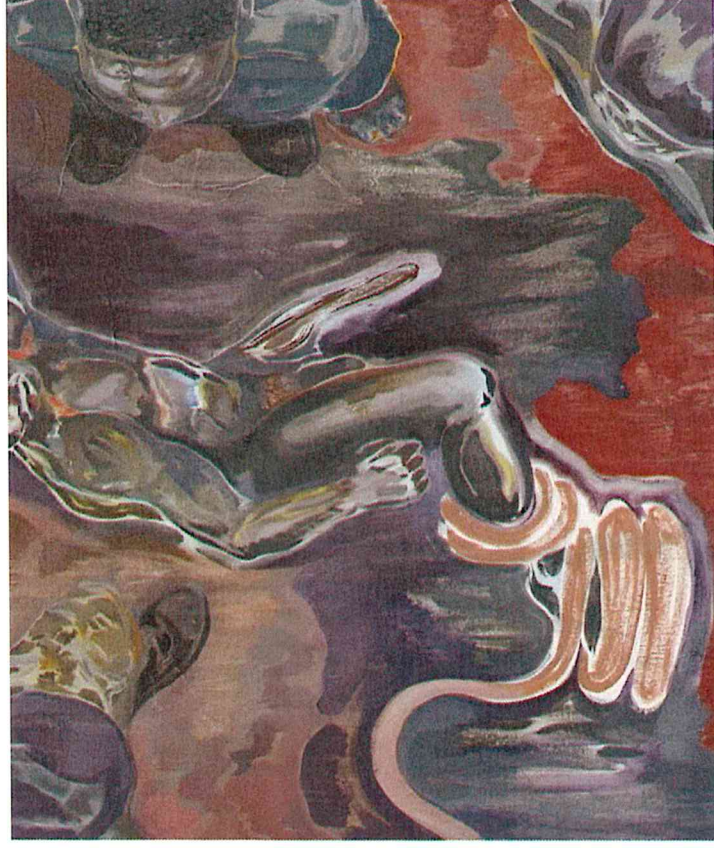
MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Pathos and the twilight of the idle," 2019 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth 129 15/16 x 66 15/16 inches / 330 x 170 cm. | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Theo Christelis



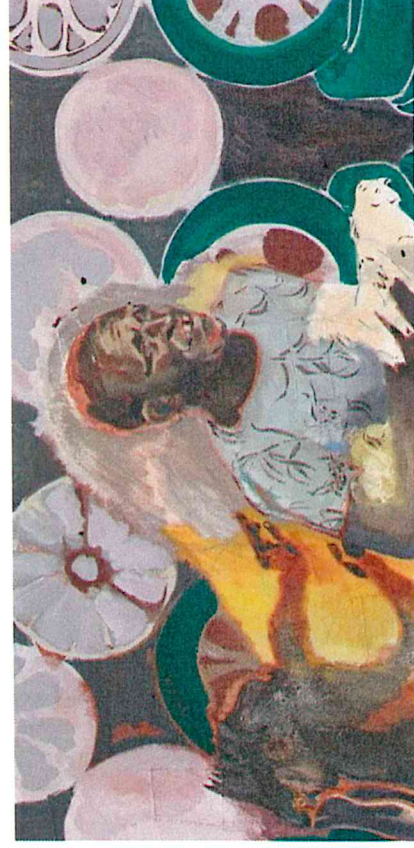


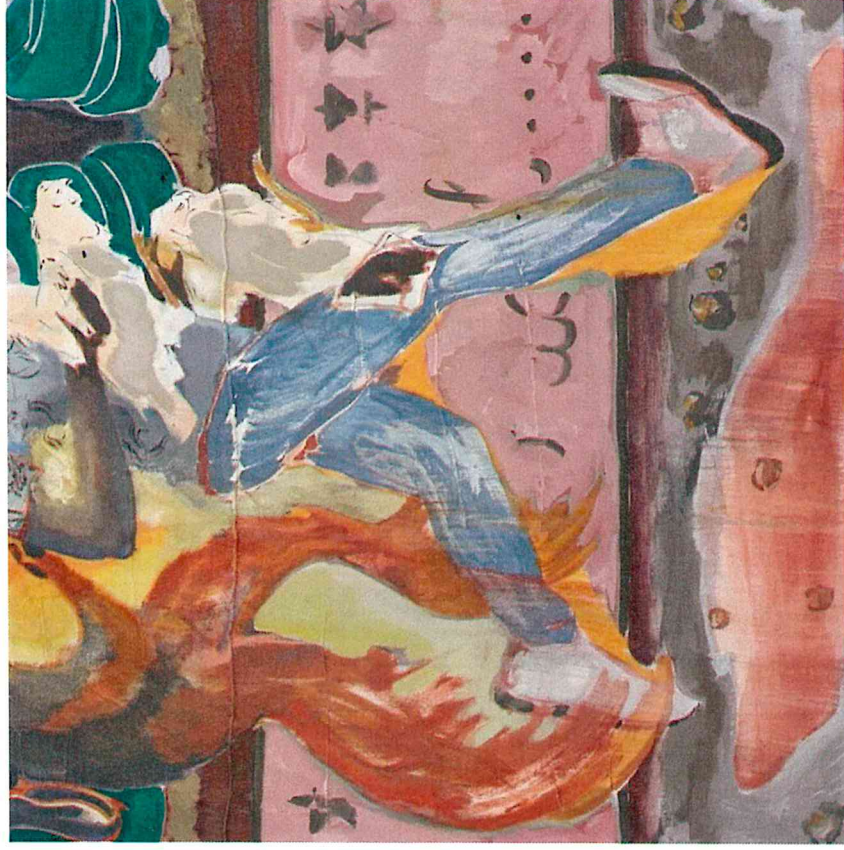
MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "Accident," 2015 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 67 x 87 inches / 170.2 x 221 cm). | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by George Darrell





MICHAEL ARMITAGE., "Nyayo," 2017 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 86 5/8 x 66 15/16 inches / 220 x 170 cm). | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by George Darrell





MICHAEL ARMITAGE, "The Chicken Thief," 2019 (oil on Lubugo bark cloth 78 3/4 x 59 1/16 in. (200 x 150 cm). | © Michael Armitage. Photo © White Cube by Theo Christells

Michael Armitage - In The Studio 2017



A studio visit with Michael Armitage. He talks about his concepts and the bark cloth he uses as canvas. He said "the paintings develop quite slowly, usually." (2017). | Video by Turner Contemporary

BOOKSHELF

"Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium" was published to coincide with an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery that explores the work of 10 contemporary artists: Michael Armitage, Cecily Brown, Nicole Eisenman, Sanya Kantarovsky, Tala Madani, Ryan Mosley, Christina Quarles, Daniel Richter, Dana Schutz and Tschabalala Self. In addition, a painting by Armitage was featured on the cover of the Fall/Winter 2019-20 edition of Studio magazine, published by the Studio Museum in Harlem. The publication included an essay by associate curator Legacy Russell about the "Projects 110: Michael Armitage" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

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