

THE ARMORY SHOW

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Cyrus Kabiru:

Yesterday's Futures Today

by Annemi Conradie and Natasha Norman

Cyrus Kabiru's practice straddles genres of fine art, haute couture, performance and documentary. His output embodies his experience of life in contemporary cities. He is a young artist, building an international career as a sculptor and designer, forging a unique life for himself on the East side of urban Nairobi.

Kabiru is best known for his range of *C-Stunners* that are central to his art practice. These pieces are revisited in this series of spectacles and photographs, *Njia Ya Maisha*, Swahili for "way(s) of life". Each title is prefixed with "*Macho Nne...*", Swahili for the expression 'four eyes', usually a derogatory name for someone who wears glasses. These intricate assemblages are fashioned from urban debris and discarded and obsolete technology, that has been carefully selected and imaginatively re-contextualised. The wearer of the C-stunners is both a bespectacled visionary and 'blinker' by the charms of consumer culture. In their materiality these mask-like glasses are products of, and reflective upon, a world where identities are forged through the buying and discarding of commodities.

The C-Stunners originate from diverse urban spaces that Kabiru observes and traverses, in a flâneur-like manner, both at home in Kenya and during his international travels. In the accompanying photographs, it is always Kabiru wearing his own creations, as if continuing his observation of everyday life from an extraordinary position. In these photographic self-portraits the artist's own face and body animates and authenticates the work. The outcome is a game of subterfuge with the gaze of spectators, where the 'artist-as-brand' is also subject to the, myth-making, potential of the images.

This series presents an on-going distillation of the idea that when humans cover or shield their eyes, they are masked. This mask – be it the bandit's bandana or the celeb's shades – provides both cover and the power of anonymity. The mask transforms the wearer, opening up new possibilities of seeing, or experiencing the world, therefore explaining the art historical conception of Kabiru's work in the context of Afrofuturism. An aesthetic and attitude that emerged during the 1970s, Afrofuturists engage with the effects of modernisation, and explode limitations on the imagination of the future in ways that hold, performative and transformative, potential.

Concentrated on a visual and DIY aesthetic, evocative of old sci-fi films, Kabiru's work aims to shift conventional perspectives or prescribed visions of the world. In this manner his larger oeuvre could be described as Afrofuturist, yet looking closely at the materials in this series and the effect achieved through his bricolage of out-dated technology and urban debris, it is more specifically defined as a Retrofuturist aesthetic.

Internationally popularised by J.J Abrams' 2015 blockbuster *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, and seen in contemporary Diesel-, Cyber- and Steampunk fashions and fiction, the Retrofuturist aesthetic also dates from the 1960s and 70s.

Artist Profile and Biography

Cyrus Kabiru has actively been pushing the boundaries of conventional craftsmanship, fashion, design, art and photography since 2011. Creating sculptural works mostly from found materials, he is best known for his C-Stunner series of eyewear and portrait photographs. Kabiru's practice has rapidly expanded in recent years to include larger sculptures, installations and documentary films. Kabiru was born in 1984 in Nairobi, Kenya, where he still lives and works. His first solo exhibition was in 2008 at the Wasanii Workshop in Kenya. He has subsequently exhibited in England, the USA, Sweden, Holland, Italy, Turkey, South Africa and in his home country. Kabiru sees his work as a call to innovation, as recognised by his recent inclusion in *Making Africa - A Continent of Contemporary Design* at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany in 2015 and now showing at the The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; *Africa - Architecture & Identity* at the Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, Denmark and *Beyond Borders*, the 5th edition of the Beaufort Triennial in West Flanders, Belgium.

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 2010 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 and *Lumières d'Afriques*, organized by the AAD Fund, at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris, France.

Cyrus Kabiru is currently the resident artist at the Han Nefkens Foundation Residency in Barcelona, Spain, where he was also the first artist to participate in the *Flow Series* talks programme, an initiative of the Han Nefkens Foundation and the Antoni Tàpies Foundation. Kabiru is also included in *Brutal Beauty: Violence and Contemporary Design* at the Marta Herford Museum of Contemporary Art in Herford, Germany and *Unorthodox*, curated by Jens Hoffmann at The Jewish Museum, New York, USA

It is both an imagining of the future from the past, and a looking back at the past from the future. By juxtaposing signifiers of past and future, Retrofuturist aesthetics open up platforms for remembrance – occasionally nostalgic, sometimes cynical - of our anticipation for said futures.

Salvaged fragments of old speakers provide a frame for the goggles in *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Maona Chuma (2016)*. Seemingly unfit for this purpose and acting as a filter that obscures the vision it is meant to amplify. A sense of technological incoherence is produced and heightened by the use of audio components to make sight-aids. What this highlights is the primacy of aesthetic over functionality. This is typical of Retrofuturism, which is not about logic or the ergonomics, but about the myth and symbolism of the engines in an imagined future.

Similarly in *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Trump (2016)*, the functional and simply magical are combined. A grate that masks the wearer's mouth suggests a protective filter or amplifier, while the whirling strands that radiate from the spectacles seem to jest about the tycoon's flamboyance. Flashy display meets the used-futures trope in *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Egyptian Peacock (2016)*, where, carefully crafted, wire-plumage fans out from an old and bisected dial.

Kabiru's pieces chronicle the dynamic flows of commodity culture: both the artefacts and brands, and their shifting symbolic value. MacCoffee and Coca Cola packaging - shorthand signifiers of the class aspirations of yesteryear's petit bourgeoisie - are turned into face ornaments or protective talismans in *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Brazilian (2016)* and *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Coca-Cola (2016)*. Brands acquire new meanings and values in different geographic locales, and as fashions change, thus become a kind of currency. The incorporation of tape cassettes and cowrie shells in *Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Throwback (2016)* speak eloquently of this process. Once the epitome of modernity, tape cassettes seem ancient to today's youth. For millennia cowrie shells were used as currency by African, Chinese, Arab and Indian traders, but are now valued predominantly for their ritual significance or as fashion accessories.

Kabiru is very aware of art-market dynamics that revolve around signifiers of pedigree and value. His works conform to these standards and are commodities in and of themselves. Yet, he subtly plays with these conventions by making works from junkshop-finds, and transforming them back into high-end commodities for the art market. In a nostalgic throwback to the 'future of the past' Kabiru's Retrofuturist aesthetic reimagines the symbolic objects of the past, never unaware or uncritical of his own creative role within these cycles of value.

Natasha Norman (MFA) and Annemi Conradie (PhD Candidate) are based in Cape Town. They write and lecture on Art and Visual Studies.

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: **Brazilian Mask**

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Brazilian Mask

2015
Mixed Media
20 x 28.5 x 26.5 cm

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Trump

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Trump

2015
Mixed Media
16.5 x 27 x 22 cm

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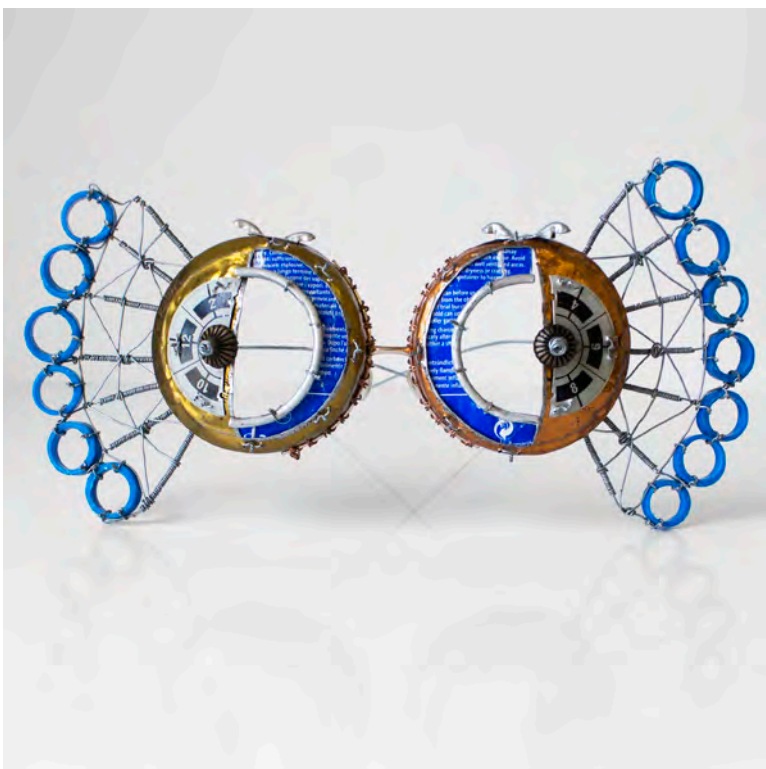


CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Egyptian Peacock

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Egyptian Peacock

2015
Mixed Media
12 x 26.5 x 26 cm

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Throwback

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Throwback

2015
Mixed Media
12 x 22 x 28 cm

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne:
Maona Chuma

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Maona Chuma

2015
Mixed Media
12 x 22 x 28 cm

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: **Coca-Cola Mask**

2016
Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin
Photographic Paper
150 x 120 cm

Edition 1 with C-Stunner



CYRUS KABIRU

C-Stunner: Coca-Cola Mask

2015
Mixed Media
14 x 20 x 26 cm

CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Brazilian Mask

2016

Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin Photographic Paper

150 x 120 cm

Edition 2 - 5 + 2 AP

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Trump

2016

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150 x 120 cm

Edition 2 - 5 + 2 AP

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2016

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CYRUS KABIRU

Njia Ya Maisha, Macho Nne: Throwback

2016

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150 x 120 cm

Edition 2 - 5 + 2 AP

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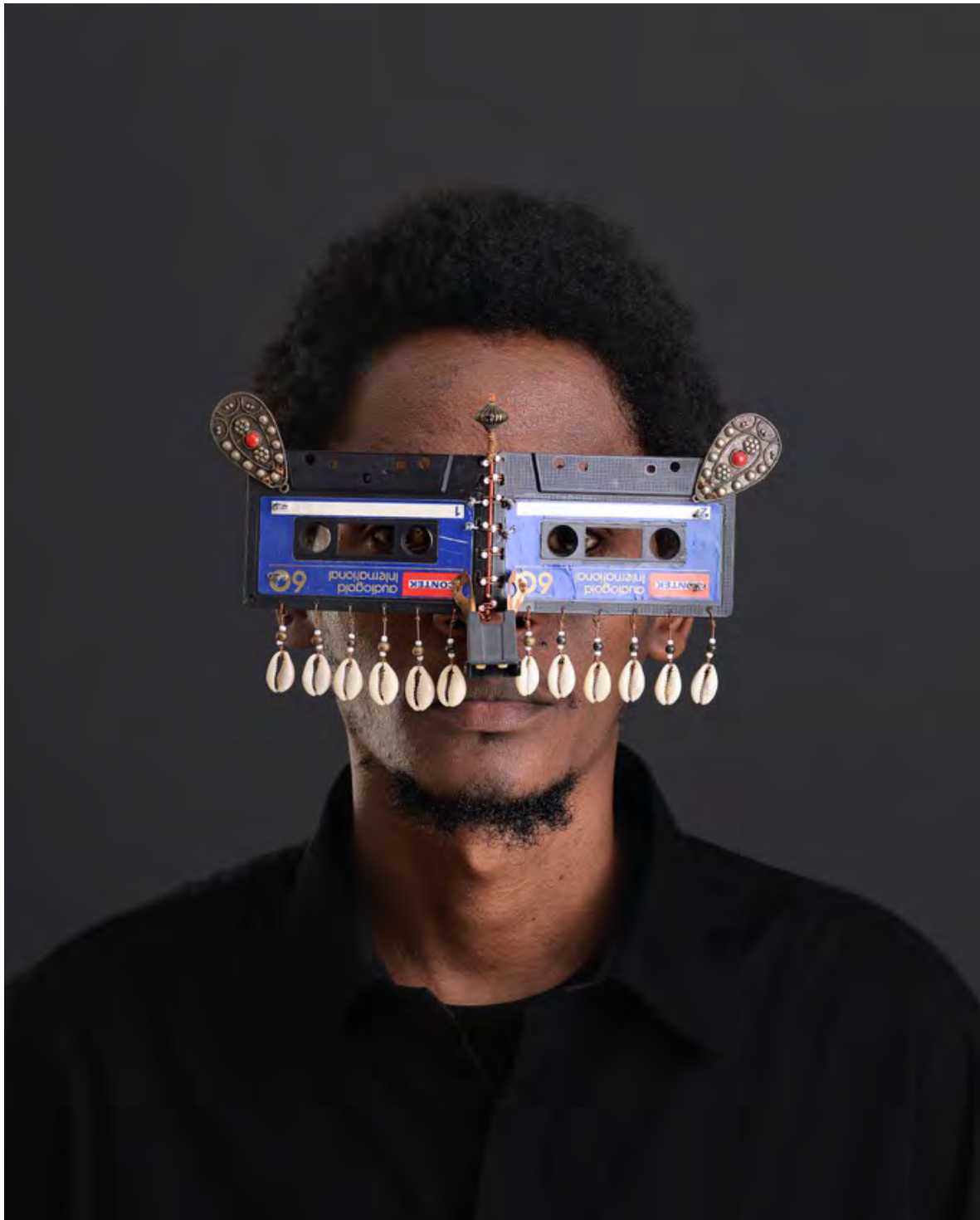
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