Michael Armitage at the Royal Academy – no British painter under 40 promises more

The Kenyan-born artist’s new exhibition ‘Paradise Edict’ is the real thing: engrossing, fun and packed with ideas

Every museum reopening in this merry May fortnight has its own thrill, but a special, sumptuous excitement is the emergence on the public stage of a new mature force in painting. After so long without coming face to face with fresh-made, ambitious painted statements, the Royal Academy’s Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict is the real thing: engrossing, fun, packed with ideas — and almost transgressively gorgeous.
First view from the door, into a gallery of monumental figures: a sulphur-yellow monkey unfurls a curtain to reveal a seated black nude. Legs wide apart, she brushes her thigh with a fig leaf, covers nothing else, stares straight at you, yet also seems to gaze beyond. Black skin, so many nuances of browns, orange, hands and feet gold-touched, is framed by a frieze of fish, birds, an octopus and a red-white striped divan. The monkey, tail morphing into another arch of drapery, is busy tying up an embroidered fringe that reads “All She Wants Is to Get Married”. On the other side of this opulent curtain, a dream bubble of a domestic prison: a window with two figures locked behind an ornamental grille.

Titled “Antigone” — that most defiant of trapped classical heroines — this nude is an odalisque reimagined for today as a drama of disclosure and concealment, interiority and social constraint. It declares a painter gifted and audacious enough to dare comparison — in saturated tropical colour, brilliant graphic linearity and delicious decorative design — with Matisse.
Gauguin’s exotic erotica is in this mix too — his women in reverie in “When Will You Marry?” for example. Behind the magnificent, mad figures flanking “Antigone” is an ape in a bikini (“Leopard Print Seducer”) and “Baboon”, a reclining muscular male nude with animal face and, covering his groin, a bunch of bananas as competing erect phalluses. It is an absurd composition, a mockery of fantasies of the athletic male black body — yet made lovely by the jungle colour harmonies and the figure laconically fused into a leafy, watery, enclosed world.

Second view from the door: a vast purple tree rising over the towers of a city and a tumultuous crowd leads your eye through sprawled sinuosities of branches and twigs where a row of African figures perch. They are variously costumed in extravagant green headdresses, pink veil, jaunty baseball cap, and the line-up concludes with the banner of a huge toad. “The Fourth Estate” is the star of a gallery devoted to Armitage’s fantastical renderings of corruption in Kenya’s 2017 election campaign, with rallies in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park reimagined via Goya — here the owlish characters clustered in a tree in the etching “Ridiculous Folly”. In “The Promise of Change”, voters — one of them a Goya grotesque with protruding tongue like a parched dog — congregate around a scarlet-robed toddler wielding a microphone. Hideous toad posters soar into rose-violet skies.

Armitage, born to English and Kenyan parents, trained at London’s Slade School of Fine Art and later at the Royal Academy, from which he graduated in 2010. “Have you read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*?” he recalls his tutors asking. “That was the context in which they were coming to my work. It was incredibly frustrating, but it also made me think, ‘Well look, if I’m going to get pissed off with people always seeing my work through this lens, I’ve also got to take responsibility for the language I’m using. This made me question everything’” — from his sources to his surfaces, he adds.

What a difference a decade makes. At 37, Armitage mesmerisingly manipulates western historical models and transcends east African ones — as shown here by a homage gallery of small works by older, often self-taught Kenyan and Ugandan artists. Within British art, his immediate influence — like that of almost all younger representational painters — is Peter Doig’s hallucinatory figuration; but Armitage confidently evolves his own darker vocabulary and themes. In melting dream narratives, people and animals blend into seductive landscapes that wrongfoot you by the clash of beauty and charged political storytelling, or worse.
All this functions through his unique surfaces: lubugo, a textile made from Ugandan tree bark that is stripped, flattened and stitched, leaving irregularities, ruptures, dents. It slows the absorption of oil, allowing thin glazes, multiple rich layers and a rubbing that exposes disintegrated areas of fabric. It simultaneously confers material weight, physical immediacy and symbolic resonance — lubugo was traditionally used for shrouds, hiding the body that Armitage lays bare.

In “Numbers (Mau Mau)”, figures spilling out into pools of paint, lost in abstraction, each holding up a digit, are a response to the history of 1950s anti-colonial uprisings when, in British reprisals, prisoners were allocated numbers — and abstracted into statistics.

An agile, rushing youth in jeans clutches a pair of voluptuous white birds, flames at his feet, in “The Chicken Thief”. He is surrounded by luscious pink and green circles that appear decorative but are ominous. In “The Accomplice”, the spheres become tyres giving off oily smoke as they burst into flame and a young man tries to leap from the fires of a lynching. A group behind a barrier takes no interest, soldiers stand detached; but in the reflection on their shiny metallic helmets, the fire swirls into a pattern of the globe: we are all accomplices.
If Armitage is a moralist, it is in the general Voltairean sense; he doesn’t hector and believes that “we’re all going through the same shit in different covers . . . however specific you get in art and however much there is a vernacular . . . maybe the more specific you get, the more open and accessible it is to a wider audience because you end up speaking of something that is true — the ‘human experience’.”

The multicoloured Eden of the titular “Paradise Edict” is the local made visionary: the scene is based on Kenya’s coast close to the Somali border, looking on to the Boni forest, both “extraordinarily beautiful”, Armitage records, and violently contested by Al-Shabaab and the Kenya Defence Forces. Here he interleaves dense plant and animal life with silhouettes of tortured figures, wraiths of bound legs, a snake writhing from an anus formed by a hole in the surface — fertile, abundant nature inseparable from depravity, today and through history and myth.
Armitage stood out in recent shows — the Whitechapel’s *Radical Figures* last year, the 2019 Venice Biennale — but this superbly choreographed exhibition fully displays the gripping seriousness of his project. He reinvigorates contemporary painting by borrowing from and subverting modernism in the light of postcolonial viewpoints and current collective traumas — Gauguin’s problematic so-called “primitivism” especially — as perhaps only a black painter can. No British painter under 40 has achieved or promises more.

*May 22-September 19, royalacademy.org.uk*

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