



Samson Kambalu, *Nyasaland Analysand*. Installation view: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 2019

Flâneurial Creations: Samson Kambalu's 'Nyasaland Analysand'

Samson Kambalu

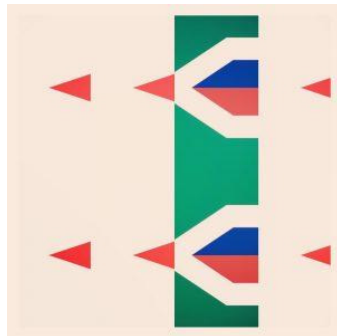
By Tymon Smith

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The anagrammed title of Samson Kambalu's latest show at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, 'Nyasaland Analysand', reveals a lot about the Malawian born artist's practice – playful, thoughtful and gently subversive in its linking of the colonial name of his birthplace with the practice of psychotherapy. A relic of an African past mashed up with a theory developed in the west creating a syncretic relationship that fits neatly into the artist's vision of his practice as a means of addressing identity politics in the post-colonial world through the Situationist technique of *détournement*, in which symbols of a system are hijacked in order to highlight failings or contradictions within that system. It also points to Kambalu's project of trying to come to grips with his own identity as a post-colonial citizen of the world.



Samson Kambalu, *Untitled (Bubble Gum Flag)*, 2018.

For Kambalu, this is perhaps most visible in the many bright, cheerfully coloured paintings in his *Bubble Gum Flag* series – created by smashing together elements of various flags of the world to create new reminiscent but unrecognizable ones. They are flags of a new, imagined world created out of elements of the old world and reflecting the meeting of the artist from Malawi with the world he inhabits in Europe. There's a carefully considered and delicately achieved archness and lightness to Kambalu's work – whether it be in his *Nyau Cinema* series, the flags or the cardboard cut-outs of archive images of members of the King's African Rifles who served Britain in both world wars and brought back from their experiences, western dandy clothes and their uniforms, which they incorporated into the traditional

dances of their homeland. For Kambalu this interaction and reconfiguration of elements from different cultures also reflects another fundamental interest of his practice, that of time.

As he explains, *"In Malawi a large part of the population are still subsistence farmers and they live off the land and they have their own sense of time and I saw that reflected in these dances – they look western and that has a lot to do with capital and work being at the centre of identity. So the exchange is there but there's also a coming to terms with modernity and way of kind of coping with a certain displacement – the men who left to work on the mines or go to war would come back different."*

The cut-outs are arranged in such a way that Kambalu hopes audiences will get a sense of these men, brought back to life in a dance as he first saw them. This invitation to and the celebration of play are core components of all of Kambalu's work and particular in his short *Nyau* films – made on site in various locations around the world where the artist explores new places on foot, camera in his hand

looking for cheeky moments to capture – using himself as the star and strangers walking by as cinematographers. As he sees it, *“Before I started making the films I was always a stranger in these cities because I would go to museums and learn about other people’s culture but when I started making films I realised everywhere I go becomes my own because I have made something out of it and there has been an exchange between me and the city itself.”*



Samson Kambalu, *Dancer in the Woods*, 2018.
Digital video, colour

As a whole Kambalu’s exhibition introduces audiences to new aspects of his practice beyond the Nyau Cinema pieces we’re most familiar with and presents us with an upbeat and gleeful celebration and investigation of what the artist sees as, *“The two different worlds that have to be negotiated by the modern African and this is why I think there’s always an interplay between structure and form and spirit if you like. I’m interested in how these highly structured paintings can animate and almost transcend that structure; in how these soldiers contained in these white cages, eventually as you move around them appear to dance. I think it’s the same kind of trick that these soldiers would have wanted to pull during WWII – to see if they could continue marching but retain a sense of spirit. That’s the challenge – how do I structure myself within the modern world and still retain some of my own identity?”*

It’s a question that’s puzzled numerous artists in similar situations and lead to many difficult and angst-ridden interpretative works but there’s a refreshing and welcome *joie de vivre* to Kambalu’s show that’s hard not to smile at and engage with while also not losing sight of the bigger issues. It’s also a reminder that not everything has to be about work, profit and material enrichment in a time when that message is ever more urgent. It’s work that while it relies heavily on traditions and elements of Kambalu’s Malawian roots also feels modern and invigorated by his impish syncretism.



Samson Kambalu, *Still from Boat X*, 2018. Digital video, colour

As Kambalu points out, *“A lot of things in this work are universal and I think I’m talking about the difference between the world of necessity, which is highly structured and the sovereign, which is our time outside of the world of work or necessity and that’s common to everybody, no matter what culture. There’s time to work in the field and there’s time to recover your universal self.”*

This is a philosophy that, like much of his work has been inspired by Kambalu’s interest in the formation of the identity in the post-colonial world and his memory of growing up in a culture where, as he recalls, *“The ultimate way of being in the world is called the animal because the human being stage is not subject to work, the human being has the same potential as the animals of the bush who only work when they have to.”* That’s the kind of animal we could aspire to be more often in the madcap bustle of today’s digitally furious world and somewhere in Kambalu’s dandy filled, flâneurial creations there’s a clue as to how we might go about it.

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