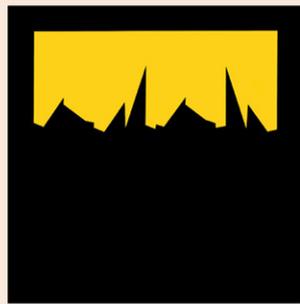
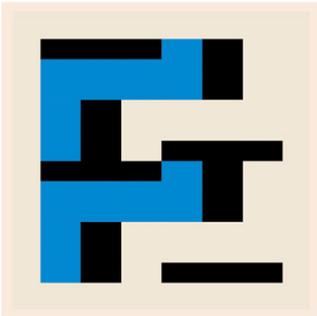


MODERN ART OXFORD

EXHIBITION NOTES



**Samson Kambalu:
New Liberia**

▲ Kambalu explains that 'ancestral' is a European simplification - initiated Nyau primarily bring energy from the 'pre-ontological void', the liminal space between life and death.

“My work is inspired by where I come from, Malawi. In Malawi we have a strong masking tradition called Nyau, and it’s a very playful approach to life. In my work, play is very important. Play and creativity, or creative play.”
– Samson Kambalu

Samson Kambalu (b. 1975 Chiradzulu, Malawi) is one of South East Africa’s most significant contemporary artists. Recognised for his profoundly playful films and installations, through *New Liberia* he asks how our individual freedoms can manifest, or be curtailed, by the specific place and moment in history we live in.

Kambalu was born into the first generation of the Republic of Malawi, following over 60 years of British colonial rule (c.1891 – 1963). Self-determination via education was a political priority for the newly independent country, and within the Kambalu family home. Kambalu’s unique exhibition draws on elements of his childhood and his current life as a professor at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. He plays with the powerful influence of images on the public imagination: photography, early cinema, and edited footage, along with the visual symbolism of flags, costumes, and statues.

Installation view of Samson Kambalu:
New Liberia, 2021.



New Liberia is a series of installations exploring notions of social freedom. Kambalu’s work is informed by early films, the itinerant cinema of his childhood, research into emancipatory movements, and his interpretation of *Nyau*, the secret society of the Chewa people that populate Malawi. Notably, the Nyau perform short energetic dances for the traditional Gule Wamkulu (The Great Dance) wearing ‘masks’ (costumes assembled from cut-up materials) to communicate ancestral[▲] wisdom with the aim of generating harmonious communities in times of transition.

John Chilembwe's Church at Mbombwe, Chiradzulu, Nyasaland in February 1915. Courtesy of the David Stuart-Mogg collection.

In the Upper Gallery, Kambalu imagines a Gule Wamkulu initiation ceremony to mark today's shifting attitudes towards social justice. Visitors are greeted by two Nyau elephant chiefs, heralded by multi-national flags, with cinema signs describing artists at work. Here, spiritual and academic community rituals merge as the *Drawing Elephants*, made from cut up Oxford University gowns, evoke ancestral knowledge. This evocation includes the social philosophical insights of John Ruskin (1819–1900), conveying the importance of both art and education as ways to see the world afresh. The flags of *New Liberia* are spliced together from real national flags and become symbols of a united diasporic global community. Kambalu's cinema signs contain text which advertise the actions* of drawing and sculpting, which are the subject of two of his Nyau films in the final gallery.



Central to the Middle Gallery is a sculpture Kambalu proposes for the empty Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London. It celebrates the national hero of Malawian independence, John Chilembwe (b. 1871, Chiradzulu – d.1915), who called for Malawi (then named Nyasaland) to become independent from British rule 50 years before it was achieved.

The sculpture is recreated from the last photograph taken of Reverend Chilembwe, with his friend Reverend Chorley, as they stand together to promote the Providence Industrial Mission; the church established by Chilembwe where he preached self-respect and personal responsibility. At that time, a black man could be violently punished for being near a white man without removing his hat, and sometimes shoes, to signal his perceived inferiority. Chilembwe found the British government's exploitation of Malawians increasingly unbearable. In 1915, Chilembwe organised an uprising, attacking the most abusive plantation owners. British officials killed Chilembwe, and tore down his popular church for photographic propaganda. Chilembwe became legendary.

On the gallery walls the photographs and texts from the courtroom inquiries following the uprising bear witness to injustices that still resonate. Kambalu's sculpture, designed in 2019, honours Chilembwe, and imagines the two

● Drawing in the 18th Century (Synopsis), 2021 and Sculptor (Synopsis), 2021.

figures as Nyau dancers, secretly wearing the most important costume of the matrilineal Gule Wamkulu, the antelope form of the great mother ancestor - the origin of all people.

“The kind of playing we are doing here is what Nyau culture would describe as gule wamkulu, 'the great play'. It's a form of play on a universal scale.”
- Samson Kambalu

In the small gallery, Kambalu suggests the space is a prison cell containing his controversial book, *Sanguinetti Theses* (2015). For the *Theses* Kambalu photographed the protest art archive of Italian Situationist writer Gianfranco Sanguinetti (b. 1948, Pully, Switzerland), an action for which Sanguinetti sued him in 2015. On the walls are scribbled drawings by Sanguinetti. These playfully imply that someone has recently spent time in this room watching the legal trial as seen on the screen. Kambalu's successful defence was that the *Theses* was created on the principles of collective ownership as advocated for in Sanguinetti's work, which draws from cultural traditions preceding capitalist property law.

In the final gallery, Kambalu shows expressions of individual freedoms in public spaces as joyfully transgressive acts. In *Nyau Cinema* (2012 - ongoing), Kambalu performs as a liberated 'everyman', wittily demonstrating how creative forms of freedom can spark social connection. *Nyau Cinema* is informed by film presentations that show an awareness of the viewer. As a young person, Kambalu delighted at the rapid live editing done by Malawian projectionists, who would splice together highlights from different Western action films in response to lively and proactive audiences. This experience is a key influence on Kambalu's work, as well as the creative exploration by film makers of Early Cinema (c.1890–1910s). For example, Thomas Edison often made films less than a minute long that featured simple actions by vaudeville performers playing directly to the camera.

In *Nyau Cinema*, Kambalu works within a framework of 10 rules. As a Nyau he does not represent himself as an individual within the films, but instead performs short 'rants' of free expression in public spaces. He chooses locations in real life that could pass as film sets. Off camera the artist talks to intrigued strangers, who then sometimes hold the camera to film his activity.

The central podium in the gallery offers visitors a chance to briefly re-enact an exchange about hats, which happened during the 1915 courtroom inquiry into the uprising led by Chilembwe during which he called for 'a second Liberia'. This is to give voice to the seemingly small yet politically significant disputes around the performativity of clothes and social power in colonised Malawi. At that time simple acts of self-respect, such as wearing your hat as you please in public, were demonstrations of personal freedom and colonial resistance.

In 'New Liberia' Kambalu invites us to value our freedom of choice as we decide how we navigate the life we have been born into.

Upper Gallery

'New Liberia comes out of the time lag between aspects of early 20th century Malawian modernist cultures and various current emancipatory social and political movements.' – Samson Kambalu

In this gallery, Kambalu imagines an initiation ceremony for *New Liberia*, a utopia of social justice and independence from oppression, in which we can joyfully express our freedom and shared humanity.

The Upper Gallery installation presents multi-national flags that surround two ceremonial Gule Wamkulu elephant 'masks' constructed entirely from disassembled Oxford University gowns. Deconstructed cinema signs recall Kambalu's fascination with early cinema and watching Hollywood films in Malawi, where celluloid rolls were often cut up and edited into new and absurd sequences by projectionists. Their illuminated displays describe two of his own Nyau Cinema films in which the artist performs acts of artmaking.

1. *Drawing in the 18th Century (Synopsis)*, 2021
Poplar, black valchromat, fluorescent lights
Courtesy of the artist

2. *Elephant Quilt I*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

3. *Sculptor (Synopsis)*, 2021
Poplar, black valchromat, fluorescent lights
Courtesy of the artist

4. *Square Country*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

5. *Paper Cup Nation*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

6. *Elephant Quilt II*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

7. *Supermarket Republic*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

8. *Nation With A Nice (Meaning Racist) Neighbourhood*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

9. *Twin Nation*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

10. *Blue Primer State*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

11. *Monad Republic*, 2021
Sewn polyester and cotton, wood
Courtesy of the artist

12. *Drawing Elephant I*, 2021
Oxford MA gowns, cotton thread, wool, wood, castors, oil paint
Courtesy of the artist

13. *Drawing Elephant II*, 2021
Oxford MA gowns, cotton thread, wool, wood, castors, oil paint
Courtesy of the artist

Middle Gallery 1

'Chilembwe left a series of arresting photographs that have inspired fidelity to his egalitarian cause. These photographs are no less powerful than a good mask inspiring people to self-respect and radical political action.

underrepresented people in the history of the British Empire in Africa, and beyond.

14, 15, 16 & 17
Kinetic Church (Providence Industrial Mission), 2021
Digital print on Digimura RP paper
A series of archival photographs of John Chilembwe's demolished church (1915), altered and reproduced by the artist, with permission from the David Stuart-Mogg collection.

Extracts from *Voices from the Chilembwe Rising: Witness testimonies made to the Nyasaland Rising Commission of Inquiry*, 1915, ed. John McCracken (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015)

18. *Antelope – Ghost maquette for the Fourth Plinth*, 2021
3D printed model
Courtesy of the artist

21. *Sanguinetti Cell*, 2021
Installation

Piper Gallery

The ten films displayed here are selected from Kambalu's series titled *Nyau Cinema* (2012 - ongoing), in which the artist performs as a liberated 'everyman', wittily demonstrating how freedom of expression can spark social connection.

Within this space, a central podium invites visitors to briefly re-enact scenes from the inquiry into the Chilembwe uprising of 1915, an anti-colonial protest in Malawi referred to in Middle Gallery 1. Extracts from witness testimonies made to the inquiry give voice to the seemingly small yet politically significant disputes around the performativity of clothes and social power in colonised Malawi (then called Nyasaland). Under British colonial rule, simple acts of self-respect, such as wearing your hat as you please in public, were demonstrations of personal freedom and colonial resistance.

24. *Fast Talker*, 2017
Digital film, colour
20 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

25. *Strip Lander*, 2019
Digital film, colour
31 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

26. *Snow Man*, 2014
Digital film, colour
31 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

27. *Plato's Cave*, 2019
Digital film, colour
58 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

28. *Bacchus*, 2013
Digital film, black and white
36 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

31. *Nyau Cinema Rules*, 2013
Courtesy of the artist

32. *Sculptor*, 2020
Digital film, colour
46 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

33. *Nyasaland Rising Commission of Inquiry, 1915*
Live multi-media installation

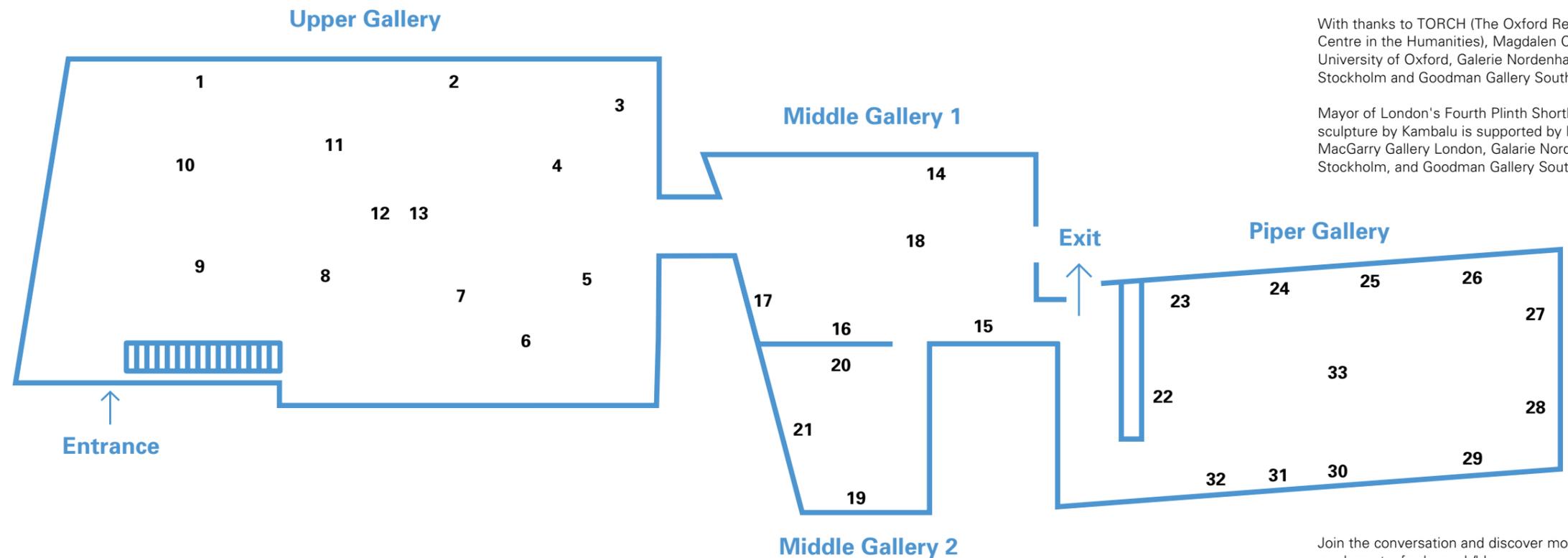
Artist thanks

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Mayor of London's Fourth Plinth Shortlist sculpture by Kambalu is supported by Kate MacGarry Gallery London, Galerie Nordenhake Stockholm, and Goodman Gallery South Africa.



Chilembwe's performative political activism has inspired my own approach to conceptual art, photography, and filmmaking.' – Samson Kambalu

Kambalu's proposal for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London is based on the last photograph taken of the American-educated preacher John Chilembwe (1871–1915) and his friend, English Missionary John Chorley, standing together in support of Chilembwe's popular church. Kambalu's statue honours their bid for equality, and poignantly makes visible the

Middle Gallery 2

19. *A Game of War: Kambalu v Sanguinetti Trial at Ostend*, 2021
HD video
2 hours 10 mins 45 secs
Courtesy of the artist, Twee-eiige Drieling and Mu.ZEE Oostende

20. *Sanguinetti Theses*, 2015
Book
Courtesy of the artist

22. *Don*, 2014
Digital film, black and white
52 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

23. *Cathedral*, 2016
Digital film, colour
28 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

29. *Drawing in the 18th Century*, 2017
Digital film, colour
31 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

30. *Amistad*, 2014
Digital film, colour
58 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

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Please ask our Visitor Assistants if you have any questions.



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