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**Samra Mayanja** is a writer and artist. Her work records and fictionalises the narratives that the living conjure in order to deal with loss. She also observes and presents the poetics that life offers us.

Mayanja's work is the residue from translations between writing, drawing, animation, pedagogy, film, installation and performance. Her practice is heavily supported by the instability of these translations and how the limits of each medium give life to the next.

She has exhibited and performed widely, including at MAMA (Rotterdam), Kampnagel (Hamburg) and Eastside Projects (Birmingham) and lectured at Glasgow School of Art, Museum of London, University of Leeds and UP Projects (London).

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*Samra Mayanja: The Living and the Stale is part of The Tetley Jerwood Commissions programme, supported by Jerwood Arts' Development Programme Fund*



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# Samra Mayanja

## *The Living and the Stale*

10 February – 4 June 2023

*The Living and the Stale* is artist Samra Mayanja's first major solo exhibition, exploring what it means to lose and be lost.

Mayanja presents a new body of work in the form of installations, drawings, a score and moving image work.

Mayanja's research centres on secretary-scribe, Ham Mukasa (c.1870–1956), a central figure in brokering relations between Uganda and other nations. In 1902, Mukasa wrote *Uganda's Katikiro in England*, one of the first published travel diaries written by an African person coming to Europe. The text documents the journey of Buganda's prime ministerial figure to England to attend Edward VII's coronation.

In turn, in 2021, Mayanja went on a lone expedition to Uganda, visiting sites significant to Mukasa's life, and at the same time encountering the previously unknown interior world of her deceased father. During this journey, Mayanja produced her moving image work *The Living and the Stale*.

One key site Mayanja visited was Namugongo Cathedral, built upon a historic execution site in Buganda.\* Mukasa was nearly killed there in the 1886 massacre of Christians by King Mwanga II. As such, Mukasa himself was nearly lost, a recurring theme of the exhibition.

Mayanja is also interested in Mukasa's ability to poetically frame – for himself and the reader – things he was seeing for the first time. The images he constructs in the text oscillate between rolling observations, absurd (mis)translations and compelling diaristic accounts.

The exhibition brings together the artist's personal experiences with those of Mukasa. You are invited to enter into the galleries – treated as the inside of a dispersed film – that play out Mayanja's autobiographical journeys as scattered, stuck and expanded narratives.

\*The Baganda are one of the tribes within the region known as Uganda. Their kingdom is called Buganda and their language is Luganda.

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**Exhibition text continues overleaf →**

## Stairwell

The first work encountered is a quote from the narrative developed as a basis for the exhibition, carved in wood and situated on the stairwell. This narrative is played out in the film *The Living and the Stale* (on display in Gallery 6) and throughout the exhibition, spilling out across the galleries in the form of props, re-staged sets, drawings and diagrams. The film opens with the narrator reading: 'The market wants what the market wants', a phrase carved cursively here into wood.

An audio work accompanies the piece, a collection of strange sounds.

## Atrium

The Atrium stages the crocodiles' origin story. Mayanja's interest in crocodiles stems from a story she was told by a tour guide on the Kazinga Channel in western Uganda. The tale went that the local crocodiles were brought to the River Nile by a western scientist, in the hope of increasing tourism. However, upon hatching, the crocodiles started to aggressively attack and eat the villagers on the riverbanks.

Dangerous and terrifying, Mayanja became fascinated by crocodiles as symbols of fear and disgust. Here, an oversized box of crocodile eggs lies empty, the hatched eggs dark portents of possibility and danger.

The large drawing in the Atrium is a collaborative work made with various people, including children, who Mayanja met when travelling around Uganda.

Accompanying this is a smaller series of book covers, titled *Manners on the Escalator*, a re-imagined book that features crocodiles lying in wait underneath the escalators. The text Mayanja believes she can remember, *Manners on the Escalator*, (but can't find any evidence of ever existing) formed part of the 'Way to Be! Manners series' by Amanda Doering Tourville, with etiquette advice for different locations and scenarios – such as *Manners on the School Bus*, *Manners in the Lunchroom*, *Manners in the Library*.

## Gallery 1

In this installation, titled *Long Fall*, the rollercoaster is a metaphor for the filmmaking process, a common reference point for a drama-filled journey. The installation is an example of Mayanja's interest in making visible and physical parallels to the internal, introspective process of filmmaking and writing.

The drawing on the wall, with its accompanying key and tarot card, forms a sort of diagram recording the motion and emotion of various life experiences, the illustrated twists and turns echoing the metaphor of the rollercoaster.

## Gallery 2

*Abba's Eyes* is a response to a story of a young boy who stripped himself of essential possessions for fear of them being stolen. This installation imagines his home after he has removed the windows, window guards and roof tiles.

The title unites this story with Mayanja's own experiences – abba means Grandmother in the Nubian language. Mayanja knew little about her father's history. The life and stories that remained unshared by him and subsequently unknown to Mayanja, became partly known to her upon reconnecting with her grandmother, upon meeting a part of this history – that Mayanja thinks of as sunken.

## Gallery 3

*The Director's Office* is a film set that recreates a surreal version of the director's office in the museum that Mayanja visited daily as part of her research.

It also marks a disruption in the narrative of Mayanja's film, and offers a continuation where there is a pause in filming. The installation houses various film props, and creates a key moment for the unity between the film narrative and the gallery spaces.

## Gallery 4

In Kampala, Mayanja visited the Ham Mukasa archive, an alternative version of which is imagined here with accumulated material from Mayanja's own journeys. It includes a print of Ham Mukasa (left), standing beside Uganda's Katikiro (prime minister, right).

The competing audio works feature recordings Mayanja took of choir singers from outside Namugongo Cathedral, built upon the site Mukasa was nearly killed in 1886. A series of drawings retell the events of Mukasa's escape from execution.

This retelling, accompanied by archival material, plays out Mayanja's interest in things hidden and revealed, things that exist, or existed, but are on the brink of being unknown.

## Gallery 5

Gallery 5 documents a time Mayanja intensely focused on her drawing practice, with a focus on unconscious, constant and repetitive drawing. She used this process to revisit a speculative text, referenced in the Atrium – *Manners on the Escalator*.

Here, the imagined environment is full of crocodiles – scary, even disgusting creatures, completely at odds with the idea of etiquette.

Crocodiles throughout the exhibition represent the dark, ugly aspect of that which we repress and subsequently encounter through concerted introspection.

## Gallery 6

In Gallery 6, Mayanja presents her moving image work *The Living and the Stale*.

Central to this exhibition is the process that underpinned the filmmaking. Mayanja travelled to Kampala and visited the Uganda Museum day after day, for hours at a time; she spent time with staff, the displays, contemplating the material she saw there.

The piece of writing that came out of these visits developed as a hybrid poem, essay and memoir, finally becoming the script of the film.

## Gallery 7

This installation recreates the sparse personal space where a fictional YouTuber records her videos. Her channel invites us to 'Come and take a tour of your own heartache'.

Despite the spiritual nature of her persona, this heartbreak tour guide's bedroom is drab and dull, and her accompanying interior monologue reveals cracks.

## Gallery 8

In Gallery 8, the crocodile eggs reappear. They take the guise of patterned eggs nestling within the broken shards of the giant egg box they broke out of. These supposedly menacing eggs are made from material printed with digitally manipulated images drawn by Mayanja's younger cousins.

In her creative practice, the artist regularly uses vocal improvisation, sometimes using words and also non-verbal guttural sounds to allow voices to move through her, a process central to the audio piece playing here. The audio work ends with an invitation for the audience to join in with karaoke of Shania Twain's 'You're Still the One'.

This room, and the exhibition more widely, explores duality, between funny and scary, the living and the dead, what you share and what you keep to yourself.