

Samson Kambalu: New Liberia; Pre-Raphaelites: Drawings & Watercolours – review

Laura Cumming | 19 June 2021



Samson Kambalu in his short film *Moses (Burning Bush)*, 2015. Photograph: Courtesy of Kate MacGarry and the artist

Modern Art Oxford; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Kambalu, a Malawian fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, tears a strip off Britain's colonial legacy. And precision is all for the pre-Raphaelites

A black man in a hat walks out of an arched doorway in an Oxford college. His movements are strange, stilted as a figure in some early silent movie. But at least he is walking forwards, or so it seems. Tourists part around him, staring, awkward, but they are all walking backwards in the quadrangle – out of step with the professor and his times. For the film is called *Don* (2020), and the black man is the Oxford professor.

Samson Kambalu, born in Malawi in 1975, is a fellow of Magdalen College and a professor at the Ruskin School of Art. He makes very short films, black and white and beautifully epigrammatic, that often deploy the oldest cinematic techniques – jump cuts, reverse motion, stop-start photography – to captivate the mind in a matter of seconds.

A black man (invariably Kambalu) rushes into an English landscape, arms outspread, then abruptly vanishes. It happens again. He is like a plane trying and failing to land. The same

man tries to lift heavy manacles from a quayside, but they appear to take over, dragging him menacingly down. Or he is seen at an elaborate draughtsman's desk, describing great curlicues across a sheet of paper; except that nothing appears, almost as if time was wiping out his marks. *Drawing in the 18th Century* is the title.

Most marvellous of all, at Modern Art Oxford, is a haunting black-and-white fragment in which the man is seen in a water meadow, with hat and dapper cane among the willows. Immediately one thinks of Lewis Carroll on the river with Alice. This gentleman is plucking the leaves from a low bush; or is he in fact magically adding them? He stands back to examine the bewildering illusions. The piece is called *Sculptor*.

// Evidence from a 1915 inquiry into British abuse is laid out for visitors to read into a microphone

These films, condensed as sonnets and with their own conceptual poetry, are all made according to the self-imposed rules of what Kambalu calls “Nyau Cinema”, after Malawian mask-wearing practices. There are 10 rules – audio must be used sparingly, acting must be subtle but otherworldly – but number four is, mischievously, missing. It is a clue to Kambalu's sidestepping wit. His art looks fast, but unfolds far more pensively.

Two lifesize African elephants dominate the first gallery, fashioned out of black cloth that accentuates their voluminous torsos and pantomime legs. The fabric is stitched together from academic gowns, their pleated yokes a perfect simulacrum of elephantine wrinkles. Yet they hardly have heads, these Oxford elephants. In fact, they are part of another world Kambalu calls New Liberia, for which he has created new flags.



The elephant in the room... Samson Kambalu's New Liberia at Modern Art Oxford. Photograph: Mark Blower

Liberia is Africa's oldest republic, and such were the hopes for Malawi, a British colony through the 20th century until the brutal autocracy of Hastings Banda in 1964. The NL banners are also stitched together out of fragments – look closely and you see a map of Wales, Malevich's black square, skylines, electricity, radiant suns, other flags: as graphic an expression of radicalism as you could imagine in fabric.

A cell-sized inner gallery holds a film of the court hearing in which the Italian situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti sued Kambalu for reproducing all the protest documents and samizdat photocopies he had sold, via Christie's, to Yale University. The irony is evident, but the film is worth its two-hour length – it can be seen on YouTube – for its ringing statements about art and freedom of speech.

But this feels like an intellectual detour from Kambalu's own work. At the heart of this show is the matter of hats. In colonial Nyasaland (as Malawi was then known), black men were required to buy and wear hats from the British, but immediately remove them – on pain of violence – if they encountered a white man. Evidence from a 1915 inquiry into this horrendous abuse is laid out for visitors to read directly into a microphone. It is almost impossible to get the words out, not just because of the racist language but because so much of the testimony belongs to men who have suffered so much.

One was the black Baptist minister Reverend Chilembwe, who organised a violent uprising against British oppression in 1915, specifically the exploitation of workers on Nyasaland plantations. His church was torn down, and his body later found slaughtered. Chilembwe appears here – and in Samson Kambalu's proposal for the next Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square – as a tall statue standing next to his white friend, the Reverend Chorley. The men are in identical suits. Both are wearing hats.

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Samson Kambalu: New Liberia is at Modern Art Oxford until 5 September