



Title

Acaye Kerunen

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/acaye-kerunen>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Gabriella Nugent: 'Acaye Kerunen', *Burlington Contemporary* (28th February 2025),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/acaye-kerunen>

About the author(s)

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Cover image:

Acaye Kerunen

by Gabriella Nugent • 28.02.2025

The title of the first solo exhibition dedicated to the work of Acaye Kerunen **FIG.1** in the United Kingdom – *Neena, aan uthii (See me, I am here;* 15th January–22nd February 2025) – is an ode to the many women involved in the artist’s practice. At Pace Gallery, London, Kerunen’s new body of sculptures were elevated above the ground and suspended on walls **FIG.2** **FIG.3** or plinths **FIG.4**, creating a direct confrontation with the viewer that demanded an acknowledgement of their presence. Her work is not only a tribute to her matrilineal lineage – from whom she learned the skills of embroidery, weaving, folding, coiling, sewing and assemblage – but also to the female artisans who supply the materials that are integral to her practice, such as palm leaves, sorghum and millet stems, sisal, raffia palm, grass, banana fibre and rinds and bark cloth. *Neena, aan uthii* compelled viewers to acknowledge these women, who have struggled to find a location for their craft market in Kampala and whose livelihoods are under threat from the structures of patrilineal land ownership and monoculture farming. More widely, the exhibition title suggests the invisible domestic labour performed by women that maintains the operations of everyday life, most often for others.

While Kerunen borrows from the techniques and materials preserved by female artisans, she simultaneously dismantles the utilitarian purpose of their products. In her sculptures, the women’s wares, including baskets, textiles and sun hats, are rendered functionless. Through this transformation, Kerunen challenges the instrumentalisation of women’s labour and proposes a kind of liberation premised on creativity and the ability to dream. She previously explored these ideas in the installation *Ayelele* **FIG.5**, which was presented in the group exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles Art* at Barbican Art Gallery, London, in 2024.¹ *Ayelele* is created out of raffia, stripped banana fibre, palm leaves and sisal, woven and knotted together and suspended from the ceiling. The work title plays with the possibilities of craft, referring to both a sound of elation and joy but also a cry for help. In this interview, Gabriella Nugent spoke with Kerunen about her practice, the specific context from which it emerges and the women who sustain it.

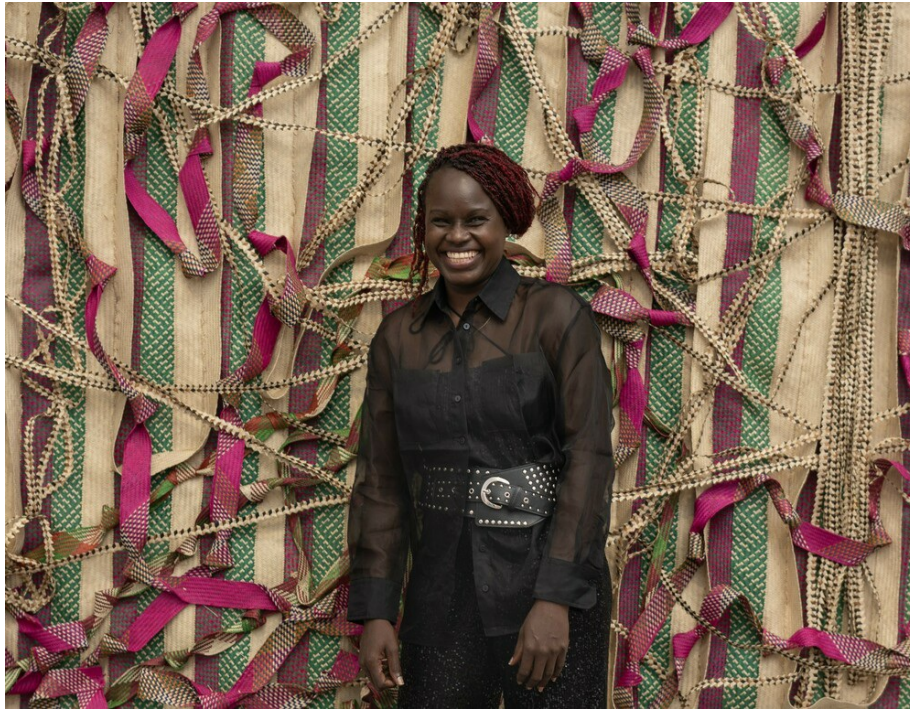


Fig. 1 Acaye Kerunen at Pace Gallery, London, in 2025. (Courtesy Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

Gabriella Nugent: How did you prepare for your exhibition *Neena, aan uthii*?



Fig. 2 Installation view of Acaye Kerunen: *Neena, aan uthii* at Pace Gallery, London, 2025. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

Acaye Kerunen: All in all, the show was around two years in the making. I hardly ever sketch, not because I can't, but because it's something that was shamed out of me. Because I never drew in straight lines. I never coloured within the lines. I wasn't able to draw concise conventional shapes. At the time, when I was in

school and I took art for a bit, that was like the Holy Grail of being chased away. Eventually just the shame of not fitting in got me out.

What that means for my practice now is that I have these ideas in my head. I sit with them for a very long time. Sometimes I'll take random pictures of a street corner or of the way the light is playing on a plant or the sunshine outside, or I'll be listening to music and these shapes, colours and forms will be playing my head. When I said I'd been thinking about the show for two years, it was all these things. I knew the colour patterns I wanted to deal with. I knew the makers I wanted to work with. I knew the materials I wanted and which dyes. This sat with me for a very long time. And then the landscapes of the works were on my wall for a very long time. I would just sit and stare at them. If there was an AI-generated cypher or something, it would be crazy to see what's running around in my mind in those moments. And then between those moments is the courage to actually start the work, to touch the material and start appending them in right ways.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Acaye Kerunen: Neena, aan uthii* at Pace Gallery, London, 2025. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy Pace Gallery; photograph Damian

Griffiths).

GN: I want to ask about the techniques that are central to *Neena, aan uthii* and your work more generally, which include embroidery, weaving, folding, coiling, sewing and assemblage. Where did you first encounter them?



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Acaye Kerunen: Neena, aan uthii* at Pace Gallery, London, 2025. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

AK: In my childhood. My mum is very much a part of my practice, and my extended family – aunties and everything. The biggest school, and most intense education and learning that I received, was from observing them.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Artat* Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024, showing *Ayelele*, by Acaye Kerunen.

2023. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph Jo Underhill).

My practice – the knots, the appendages, the braiding, plaiting and especially the stitching – is a meditation and management of challenges, but also a way of finding a path towards liberation. A lot of these processes are about charting new paths – new paths that I feel in my skin and my blood, but sometimes, the words to articulate them are blurry. When I touch these materials and I start to work with them, the way starts to reveal itself. Being that it's mostly a solitary, and lonely, practice between my head and the material I'm working with, that's easy, because I don't owe anyone an explanation.

GN: You typically work with a range of materials. Could you tell me more about this process? How did you come to acquire these materials and become involved with their preparation?



Fig. 6 *Karibiire (Uniting)*, by Acaye Kerunen. 2024. Black mutuba and raffia, 200 by 120 by 20 cm. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

AK: All the raffia in my work comes from a single source, a single weaver. I met Nankabirwa Getrude in Kampala seven or eight years ago. At the time of meeting her, I'd just go and look at her work at a weekly craft market and buy her things. It sits where Captain Frederick Lugard set up camp on one of the hills of Kampala during one of his colonial excursions. It's called Fort Lugard, and even still has the huge artillery tube that was supposed to be a strategic launchpad for bombing any threat. This small space has been turned into a problematic heritage site, in the sense that it sits right opposite the Kabaka's Palace. Next to Fort Lugard is a mosque that was originally called the Gaddafi National Mosque,

because the Libyan leader financed its refurbishment. It's a beautiful place; it traps the sun in the way that the ovular shapes of Arabian architecture are able to do. It's a beautiful place to view Kampala.

At the time of the mosque's refurbishment in 2016, there was this move to turn this space, which was being used for the craft market, into something else. The makers had previously been sent out of most of the public spaces in town. We hardly have any parks like in London and other places. They've all been taken up and overrun by the terrorism of concrete.

GN: Has the craft market been in existence a long time and moved around frequently?

AK: Before it finally found a home at Fort Lugard, it'd moved around the city a lot. The problem is the gendered access, or lack thereof, to spaces for fluid markets or products. When, in the name of development and transformation, Kampala City Council comes to send people away, 90 per cent of the people who populate these markets are women living on the edges of society and community. They're either purveyors in-between people who sell products on behalf of makers, or the makers themselves who are women leaders travelling on behalf of their collectives every Friday.

Gertrude is one of these women, but, even in the market, she's the only supplier of raffia. Raffia features in almost all craft work, as well as in all my work. It naturally occurs in swamp areas. It also fixes the soil. It attracts particular natural fauna and herbs and medicines. It's quite the plant. Raffia is now under threat despite Uganda being one of the biggest sources or confluence of water bodies. Although it's landlocked, we have twenty-seven natural water bodies, and that's not counting how much underground water we have very close to the surface. We're almost an island, but not quite.



Fig. 7 *Kiki*, by Acaye Kerunen. 2024. Raffia, palm and banana fibre, 167 by 150 by 16 cm. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

So anyway, in comes horticulturalism and monoculturalism, mainly rice, palm growing and flowers. For this to happen, these agricultural companies come and clear out the swamplands and uproot the naturally occurring vegetation. They douse the place in chemicals and genetically modified seeds. In Gertrude's area, in Kyotera, towards the Uganda-Tanzania border, there's a lot of land being given up for rice farming. The other issue is women don't have ownership to customary land. Even if they're born into a place, they can't own the customary land that men have access to and ownership of. Men in the family cut deals with short-term financiers. They're offered a lot of money within the context of the village, and, often being short-sighted, give the land away and there goes an entire livelihood.



Fig. 8 *Kaka Lengu (Place of Beauty)*, by Acaye Kerunen. 2024. Raffia and palm leaves, 230 by 95 by 45 cm. (© Acaye Kerunen; courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery; photograph Damian Griffiths).

GN: How did you come to visit Gertrude?

AK: One day I asked her, ‘so this raffia, does it grow as a tree or on branches hanging down?’. She looked at me shocked in a way that she might look at a child who’s grown up in the diaspora and thinks that chicken is grown in the supermarket. She said, ‘you need to come, you need to come and visit me’. Gertrude lives in NkokoNjeru, which is in the Buikwe district bordered by Naalubale. Kyotera is where the other mat weavers come from whose work is featured in the exhibition, as well as where the barkcloth comes from in my work. The wetlands in the areas are all suffering the same fate.

I hired a car and a team and did the whole dynamics of managing a production independently. We set out, and I got there and found that she’d collected a few of her neighbours, who are also makers.

They had prepared Omuwumbo, a mound of a variety of foods and tubers that're steamed in banana leaves. There's plantain, amazing plantains steamed for six hours and then mashed. And then you have sweet potatoes, arrowroot, some pumpkin and cassava, and then they'd slaughtered some free-range chicken, and had wrapped it up. Then there was some peanut butter, peanut paste. And, yes, the ultimate was to eat the food together. As Gertrude went through the layers, she talked to me about why every component is a prayer and incarnation for the prosperity of the home and for a woman to gain authority in her leadership of the home and over the man.

When they're preparing the banana, they put a single banana, unpeeled, on top. I asked why and she said, 'because this is the one that breaks the man's back'. She said, 'when the banana starts out like a typical green plantain, it's very stiff. It's prominent. It's obstinate. It's not going to go anywhere. The only way for it to break is if you push very hard'. But then she said, 'you see, by the time we're done with this food, this banana will be so soft and pliable. It will gush out of its own skin when you press it'. But her point to me was that you have to learn your soft skills. It's a process. Yes, it's time specific. Yes, it's labour intensive, but there's joy to that labour. She used the words that 'a man needs to taste time on his tongue every evening'.

I'd gone through a moment of feeling very opposed, aggressive even, towards the domesticity that I'm very adept and skilled at, of food preparation or service, because growing up it was oppressive. I'd burnt out at being servile.

GN: Would you say there's a parallel between domestic sculpture, say the process of filling and layering the banana leaves, and your process of working?

AK: Yes, and then subjecting it to heat and time – and agency!

GN: There seems to also be a fundamental difference because you've spoken about how women's craft has historically been confined to utilitarian purposes...

AK: Functionality.

GN: Exactly, time used for a specific outcome. In the work included in your exhibition, there are reference to these utilitarian objects created by women, for example, baskets in *Karibiire (Uniting)* FIG.6, sunhats in *Kiki* FIG.7 and textiles in *Kaka Lengü (Place of Beauty)* FIG.8, but in each work, the objects serve no purpose. Their functional utilitarian nature has disappeared. I was wondering if you could speak about this process of making and unmaking or undoing the utilitarian aspect of craft.

AK: In 2006 I wrote a poem, which I returned to and completed in

2021, and one of the major lines was 'I will not kneel again'. The stanzas that I added in 2021 read:

Dear Mother, I will not kneel again!
See me! I am between the worlds in your eyes and my
own eyes.
My eyes are safer, cradled in my two palms.
I am seeing well on my own.
The path before me is as clear as your sorrowful tears
My knees are not like before, they are softer.
I will not kneel again mother.
I love the sound of my feet walking away from your
cradle,
The burning husks of your gaze no longer scald me.
My knees have spoken their pain and torture.
I can greet just fine mother, without kneeling.
Shift your gaze from me mother; I am off my knees.
Look away from the eagle, the writhing serpent,
The owl that I am becoming.
Lest sand settles into your blinking eyes from my
flapping wings
The view from my eagle eye perch is beyond your
heartbeat.
The wind called my name and I moaned in response.
The wind caresses my skin and I moaned again- loudly.
When the wind held my erect tits between its teeth,
I bobbed by breasts instead, in playful abandon,
Moving instead in serpentine gyrations.
I am okay to feel my own feelings now mother, not
yours.

Within the spiral of the basket, you taught me to
weave,
I coiled a new cycle for myself
stepping in time with my own pulse of time. Even when I
walked by the waters edge, I took off the lesu of your
voice in my head
My curves and skin stared back at me
The water kept flowing with the sunrises and sunsets.
Lifted by the curves of seasons of knowingness into the
next cycles of me.
The water the water did not judge me, it flowed on, the
water held me, and then it let me go in crescendo notes
of I.
Beyond the ripple where I fell in my teardrop, the
water held me
The water did not repeat me into another cycle of you
mother.

I will not kneel again in the boiling soup of your time,
Or silently writhe in its oversalted broth on my tongue.

I will not kneel my mind into the learned curve of your
knees as it rests resolute in time on the ground.
See, the coils of this basket lift with the wind calling my
name
In the cut of my umbilical cord at birth mother, we were
separated
I will not wait to be buried in pain again before I can
walk anew on this new path opening before me.
I have crawled on my knees
I have cringed in the cradle of your bosom
I have ensnared in care,
Milk passing into blood,
Blood passing into sweat and water.
I cannot stare at the wounds between my legs for ever
maa.
I will not kneel again.

Because if kneeling is a function or an obligation of respect, then it must be universal. If it's not, then I chose not to be a part of that exclusive inclusion for women only, because it's a subjective obligation, performative, mostly to women in Uganda.

When these utilitarian products are impressed on a woman as the epitome of her artistic and creative process, something happens to the mind. It's just like trying to create. I have a theatre and production background – for a long time I've been an independent maker, producer, director, dramaturg and costume designer. Sometimes you act in the play as well because the actor that you want isn't quite getting it and you can't afford the one you want. All that means is that when you make the mistake of creating art from a budget point of view, you lose the right, because the art is about how you're going to afford it rather than the message.

If you're thinking about it from the point of view of function and budgeting, you lose the creativity. In the same way with these materials, the reason why I take them apart, contort them, shape them and realign them and strip them – sometimes I even punch needles through them to create a new texture and a new look – it's simply because I'm... what can I call it? We talk a lot about decoloniality, but I depatronise it. I take away the male gaze. I render the male gaze inaccurate and pointless, because when that happens, the women – the makers and weavers – are able to take a long purposeless gaze at the work of their own hands, to allow their mind to wander, to dream, to ponder, to decipher, to rediscover the magic in their creation and in the same way for mine.

For that reason, I've never wanted my work to be shown on the ground. It's always elevated for the simple reason that as beautiful as the materials are, they're conveyors of oppression. Because of the context and background that they emerge from, they're meant to augment a life of servitude by women. A lot of the time, for the

women to use or hold these products in their hands, they must be on their knees. For me, this is an act of radical worship for these generations of making, of artisanship. To conserve it and to manifest beauty.

The simple goal is to allow the butterflies to emerge. That's the ultimate purpose. To see a world where butterflies are abandoned and roaming freely and flying. That's the magic of it. And, of course, that doesn't take away from the fact that the food has to be bought, the sugar has to be bought, the tea to be stirred, the coffee, which they grow in their backyards, has to be grown. It doesn't take away from all that. All it says is, there's enough room for all these needs and purpose.

GN: Ideas of balance and precarity permeate your work. There are a couple of sculptures on plinths in your exhibition that look like they could topple over.

AC: There's beauty in discomfort. Fragility is a recurring theme in all my work. In their fragility, they're very strong.

Footnotes

- 1** L. Johnson, W. Fray-Smith and A. Pinatih: exh. cat. *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, London (Barbican Art Gallery) 2024.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ