



Michael Armitage, *Ascending Ladder*, 2020. Photo: Craig Smith

In his vividly chromatic and at times enigmatic compositions, Kenyan-born artist Michael Armitage sources imagery from childhood memories, momentary impressions of Nairobi and London, and vignettes related to the current political climate in East Africa. The artist is primarily known for large-scale oil paintings executed on raw Lubugo, a rough, Ugandan bark cloth. Often, he stitches together multiple swathes of this textile to form the backing of a single work, refusing to conceal the patchy texture of the cloth. Using a palette of bright, dreamlike hues laid in painterly strokes upon the fibrous weave, Armitage renders poignant scenes of both violence and beauty. Therein, captivating figures—often pulled from news photographs relaying events such as the civil unrest following Kenya’s 2017 elections or Black Lives Matter protests in Western cities—are pictured within mysterious natural environments, surrounded by animals or by veils of atmospheric abstract brushwork.

Armitage’s drawing practice, on the other hand, communicates that magnitude of universal experience through an economy of line and detail. In sweeping strokes of brown ink on paper, he animates elusive faces, gestures, and anatomical fragments, which are decontextualized and compositionally unresolved. Rather than serving as mere preparatory sketches for the larger paintings, these works capture the human condition, in all its complexity, using the most sparing marks and washes. In *Ascending Ladder* (2020), Armitage offers the faintest outline of upright rails, which are just present enough for the female figure to grasp onto as she steps her foot upon a rung and gazes towards an unseen height. Narratively ambiguous, the drawing conveys a sense of resilience and strength, alluding to the physical burdens and responsibilities often placed on Black women. Illuminated from above, the figure projects complete fearlessness in the face of upward struggle.

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