University of Glasgow
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NATIONAL GALLERIES SCOTLAND

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The Making of Michael Armitage's *Nasema Nawe*

Introduction

This work placement is a technical analysis of Michael Armitage's materials and techniques used in his painting *Nasema Nawe*, collected in National Gallery of Scotland.
Michael Armitage (born 1984) is one of the most exciting contemporary British artists. He paints with oil on Lubugo bark cloth, the traditional funeral cloth in southern Uganda; he paints people and nature in East Africa with vibrant colours and fluid brushstrokes.

Michael Armitage, Nasema Nawe, 2016
Oil paint on Lubugo bark cloth, 200.60 x 330.80 cm

Methodology

The methodology of this research is a combination of scientific analysis, study of academic research on related topics and study of artist's interview.
The scientific methods include:
· X-Ray fluorescence (for analysing pigments)
· Infrared radiation (for detecting drawing underneath the paint layers)
· UV light (for determining organic materials and surface varnish)
· Visual examination of Lubugo bark cloth

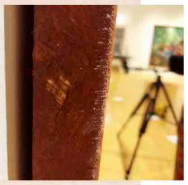
Lubugo Bark Cloth

Lubugo making, an ancient craft of the Baganda people who live in southern Uganda, is listed as the intangible heritage by UNESCO. The cloth is made from the inner bark of Ficus natalensis and beaten by grooved wooden hammer.

The Lubugo used in *Nasema Nawe* is very thin. It has a natural reddish-brown tone. The surface is full of texture: beating marks left by the hammer, folds, holes and sewing seams. Armitage glued the bark cloth onto a canvas which is then stretched onto the current stretcher.

By using Lubugo as his painting support, Armitage locates his works to East Africa, where he grew up and keeps focusing on.

Detail from the upper-left corner of *Nasema Nawe*. Folds, wrinkles and sewn seams on the bark cloth.



Unframed side of *Nasema Nawe*. Canvas exposed through the gap of thin bark cloth. White dots on the right are from the ground layer directly above the cloth.
Photo: Wenbo Li

X-Ray Fluorescence

XRF (X-ray fluorescence) is a non-destructive analytical technique used to determine the elemental composition of materials. The technique is widely used for pigment analysis.

There are many advantages of XRF: no samples need to be taken from the painting; it is fast to collect data and easy to operate.

There are limits of this technique as well. Most significantly, XRF is not suitable for detecting organic pigments, and it cannot distinguish signals from different layers of the painting.

Based on the result of XRF analysis, pigments that can be determined in Nasema Nawe include titanium white, cadmium yellow, cadmium red, cobalt blue, viridian, phthalo green, burnt umber, iron oxide red and yellow.

The result indicates that Armitage uses common pigments in contemporary oil painting, but his way of application makes his work unique.

XRF analysis for a green area in Nasema Nawe.
Photo: Wenbo Li

Infrared

Infrared radiation is often used to see through paint layers. It passes through paint until it reaches something that absorbs it. Carbon-rich materials such as charcoal and carbon black pigments (often used by artists in drawing the design) are very absorbent of infrared radiation. Therefore, infrared is good at revealing underdrawings of a painting.

Drawing in colour pencils can be seen from several figures in *Nasema Nawe*. This is explained by Armitage's way of working: he collects materials in East Africa and builds his archive of drawing; when he starts working on an oil painting, he will transfer the drawing to the bark cloth, which can be done in colour pencils.

Unfortunately, such drawings in *Nasema Nawe* are not revealed in Infrared image, possibly because the pencil is not composed of a high amount of carbon or the pencil trace is too light.

Drawing in purple pencil from the dress of a figure.
Photo: Wenbo Li