

The Guardian



Serge Alain Nitegeka – Displaced Peoples in Situ, Studio Study XXVII (2024).
Photograph: Courtesy of artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

CONFIGURATIONS IN BLACK: A STATELESS RWANDAN REFUGEE MAKES ART OUT OF HIS EXPERIENCE

BY VERONICA ESPOSITO
February 5, 2025

Serge Alain Nitegeka was forced out of his home as a result of genocide and now, awaiting citizenship, turns his displacement into art showing at a New York gallery.

Artist Serge Alain Nitegeka became a refugee of the [Rwandan genocide](#) in 1994 at age 11, when he began a years-long odyssey through multiple [African](#) nations, eventually arriving in South Africa, where he remains to this day. During his years in transit, Nitegeka began to create art – first while attending high school in Kenya, where he learned to “make do”, as he put it, a theme the rings throughout his artistic output, and then later through higher education in [South Africa](#).

Nitegeka engages singularly with the genocide, using almost completely abstract, minimalistic means to do so. His paintings and sculptures are dominated by just a few colors – he started with just black, white and red, eventually adding others such as blue, teal, green and gold. These hues are poured into mostly textureless, abstract shapes, making for art that can come across as quite flinty yet also fluid and even dreamlike. They are works that are hard to pin down.

Audiences can now linger over these fascinating pieces at Marianne Boesky Gallery, which hosts *Configurations in Black*, showcasing Nitegeka’s latest visual evolution. The fifth exhibition in the gallery’s decade-plus relationship with the artist, it is a show that rewards patience and repeat viewings.

Through Nitegeka’s many years of traveling among nations – as well as in his years-long wait to attain valid citizenship in [South Africa](#) – he has learned to work with what is at hand, an ethos that has very much seeped into his art. “When I first studied art in Kenya,” he told me, “it wasn’t a well-off school, so we had to make do. That point of making do has been a part of my work, going through university and beyond. It’s a theme, I kind of make do.”

This can be seen in the shipping containers that Nitegeka frequently paint his pieces on, as these were some of the few objects in ready supply to the artist. (Audiences can frequently see the word “Fragile” as stamped on the crates in certain pieces.) Likewise, he has learned to make do by staging exhibitions from afar, as his legal status in South [Africa](#) makes it largely impossible for him to attend his own shows.



Serge Alain Nitegeka – *Displaced Peoples in Situ, Studio Study XXIV* (2023).
Photograph: Courtesy of artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

As Nitegeka started to make art about the genocide in [Rwanda](#), he found himself working with abstraction almost as a self-protective gesture. “It was comfortable, something I could control,” he told me. “Control was something I kept coming back to, I wanted to say a lot with so little. I didn’t want to use things that people could outwardly connect to and say: ‘Oh, this is a story about this and this.’ I wanted to create something that could stand on its own and didn’t need the artist.”

Throughout his years of producing art, Nitegeka has proven himself to be methodical and deliberate in how he advances his style. Starting out working with just black, white and red, over the course of years he slowly added to his palette, color by color. He recalled that the birth of his daughter was a watershed moment that urged him to greatly expand his color choices: “I felt an affinity to get more colors in my work,” he said, “and I went to a hardware shop and looked at what colors I could get. I had them for a long time but never felt comfortable or ready to use them until my daughter was born.”

In the studio, he will sit and stare into his pieces, in conversation with them, carefully trying to discern what color and shape he should apply next. “I’m making decisions based on how things are looking on the surface,” he told me. “There’s no reference material. I’m just working with the colors, how they sit on the surface. Slowly, what is happening, the surface is revealing itself to me.”

Earlier work of Nitegeka’s greatly involved the gallery space itself. He would place enormous networks of long, black pieces of wood that he would build up into intricate obstacle-course-like constructs that audiences navigated through while viewing his art. For a previous show at Marianne Boesky, titled *Black Migrant*, the artist used soil, firewood and objects to create a large installation dominating the center of the gallery space. By contrast, *Configurations in Black* is much more straightforward, limiting itself to Nitegeka’s paintings and sculptures.



Configurations in Black pieces at Marianne Boesky Gallery.
Photograph: Jason Wyche

Largely gone from the paintings themselves are the long, black lines that typified much of his art – these pieces rely much more on blobs of color and sinuous human forms. As to the latter, audiences will see human figures, mostly in two-dimensional black, taking on a variety of poses, including standing straight up, reaching, bending, squatting, reaching, possibly even dancing. Some of them, depicted in brown with more texture and dimension, seem huddled together toward some purpose, their bodies partially hidden by other forms. These figures give the art at times a Kafkaesque feel, these bodies seeming as though they are lost in a maze or shuffling through the gears of a gigantic machine.

On one level, the figures are representative of the journey made by those forced to flee war and repression, the paintings offering a sense of the confusion and ordeal of the journey away from danger. From a more purely aesthetic standpoint, they tend to draw the eye toward nodes scattered across the art works, creating a feeling of busyness and motion that does not exist in the purely abstract pieces in this show.

As much as he has become a celebrated artist, Nitegeka remains stuck in a bureaucratic purgatory, still not legally a citizen of South Africa and so largely unable to travel outside of the country. (He did manage to make it out for a [New York City](#) residency in 2015, where he got “a temperature of the streets” in the Big Apple.) The prospect of yet another exhibition that he cannot be at is one that he is, at least for now, resigned to and prepared for. “At the end of the day the show must go on regardless,” he said. “But it’s not going to be like this forever. It’s just a kind of phase I’m going through.”

Serge Alain Nitegeka: Configurations in Black is on display at Marianne Boesky Gallery in [New York](#) until 8 March