



Serge Alain Nitegeka stands in front of his work at Wits Art Museum.  
Photo: Serge Alain Nitegeka.

## REVIEW: 'BLACK SUBJECTS' BY SERGE NITEGEKA AT WITS ART MUSEUM

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*Black Subjects* at Wits Art Museum (WAM) in Braamfontein marks artist **Serge Alain Nitegeka's** first institutional solo in Johannesburg, and a triumphant return to his alma mater. On show until **Sat, Nov 1, 2025**, *Black Subjects* is an immense exhibition from Nitegeka and displays the nuanced evolution of his visual language and thinking on migration, the refugee experience, and the liminality of these experiences since his days as a student at the **University of the Witwatersrand** (affectionately known as Wits) in the 2000s.

### A TWO-DECADE GAP

It is a warm Tuesday night, and the air in Wits Art Museum's interior is thick with anticipation for the opening address from **Serge Alain Nitegeka** and **David Andrews**, Associate Professor at Wits University and Nitegeka's former lecturer. There are the usual faces of art enthusiasts and gallerists, but also plenty of students from the university speaking in revered tones about the artworks, and a few children who will later take particular relish in exploring Nitegeka's staggering installation *Structural Response V*.

In his speech, Nitegeka focuses on his time at the university. Often addressing the students, he confesses that in the lead-up to the exhibition, he felt thrust back into his days studying art. These were days of freedom, to create and interrogate the world, sleepless nights before crits, and what both he and Andrews describe as a 'make do' approach to art – adapting his practice to the materials, tools, and space available to him.

He is an artist who is consumed by the process of creation. As both he and Andrews regale stories at the exhibition opening of his time at Wits, it became clear that the singular focus and dedication that have garnered him international recognition developed as a result of weeks spent in his studio leading up to crits.

When Nitegeka hosts an exhibition, each work is carefully made according to the space available and the particular characteristics of that space. This doesn't only apply to his large-scale installations, but the paintings and smaller sculptures too, with him only beginning much of the practical work once he has spent time in the venue – a challenge when the exhibitions are not in South Africa. While this means tighter deadlines for the artist, it makes the exhibition feel as if it is one complete entity, with each of the works a constituent part of this whole.

## FROM PERSONAL TO COLLECTIVE



*Interior I, II & III, 2025, Serge Alain Nitegeka.*  
Photo: Serge Alain Nitegeka.

Based in Joburg but born in Rwanda in 1983, Nitegeka experienced first-hand the adversities of being a refugee after having to flee to Kenya. The dehumanising effects of refugee camps, the question of belonging, and restricted movement all inform his work. Even now, some 20 years after he first arrived in South Africa and as his paintings and sculptures travel the globe with **Stevenson Gallery**, Nitegeka himself cannot visit these exhibitions as he is bound in South Africa until his pending citizenship case is resolved.

His works are not insular, though; Nitegeka uses his own experiences to interrogate the systems that we inhabit and the damaging effects of migration, conflict, colonialism, and imperialism. He reconciles and embeds these broader, collective experiences within his own. And in his contentions with these structures of domination and control, he centres the black subject and the impact, both overt and subtle, wrought upon them.

## EXPLORING *BLACK SUBJECTS* AT WITS ART MUSEUM

As you enter Wits Art Museum, you are greeted by one of the paintings from Nitegeka's *Fragile Cargo* series, an ongoing project looking at the movement of bodies under migration. The works feature his angular and geometric compositions, and, while abstraction is present, the subjects – painted in a thick and dense black – are far more figurative than some of his earlier works, drawing your gaze.

Nitegeka's paintings often start as representations of his sculptures and installations, allowing a new way of looking at and interpreting them. In *Black Subjects* the central installation is *Structural Response V*, a large-scale structure of 30 six-metre-long wooden beams with small tents huddled beneath them. Across from the sculpture, its forms and shadows have been captured on canvas. The museum's interior, usually cool and expansive, feels dense. Visitors can

carefully weave through the installation to watch a video that Nitegeka started making while at university. Titled *Black Subjects*, the performers navigate his sculptural works.

## AN EMBODIED EXPERIENCE



The scale of Nitegeka's installation makes *Black Subjects* a unique exhibition which needs to be seen and felt in person.  
Photo: Johannesburg In Your Pocket.

The idea of movement – impeded, altered, and free – is central to this exhibition, and the immense work *Structural Response V* thrusts you into the mindset of navigating hostile geographies and political systems. Each movement of ours was interrupted as we walked through the criss-crossing beams, and once we were amongst them, our vision of the museum was not quite obscured, but fractured.

This is where the strength of the exhibition, and Nitegeka's work more broadly, lies. In that he does not allow you to simply pass your gaze over the work but rather thrusts you into the work itself, forcing you to feel the works within your own body. Both Andrews and Nitegeka mention how Nitegeka has always wanted to make work that is able to stand on its own without the artist. This is no easy feat, and in many ways, it is through creating these embodied works that he achieves this. You do not have to know his backstory, or that of the exhibition, to feel a slight sense of claustrophobia when in *Structural Response V*, an itch that something is off, the constant watching of your movements to make it through without bumping into a beam or another person. It is what makes *Black Subjects* such a powerful, albeit challenging, exhibition. Yes, there is beauty in it, but with this comes pain, sadness, and confusion.

In closing his address, Nitegeka half-jokingly says that with this exhibition, the pressure was on as he was now back with the "critics that mattered". In returning to this space where his artistic journey began, Nitegeka demonstrates how personal narratives of displacement can evolve into universal languages that speak to broader diasporic experiences – redefining how black subjectivity is represented and understood in contemporary art in the process.

With *Black Subjects*, he has no doubt gone above and beyond what you might normally see at a commercial gallery. It is an exhibition that deserves an extended visit, allowing one to linger on the artworks, as well as contemplate the many feelings they surface.

*Serge Nitegeka's "Black Subjects" is on show at Wiits Art Museum until Sat, Nov 1, 2025*