

SANAA GATEJA INTERVIEWED BY MARCUS CIVIN



Sanaa Gateja, Family Meeting, 2020, paper beads on barkcloth, 81.5 x 75.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Karma.

The Ugandan artist Sanaa Gateja, born in 1950, worked for his country's Ministry of Culture, ran a gallery in Kenya, and studied interior design in Florence and then jewelry in London. It was there that he learned about paper beads, which were popular in England in war years when more precious materials were scarce. In 1990, he returned to Uganda and taught paper bead-making throughout the region, creating economic empowerment opportunities in many communities, especially for women and young people. Around 2015, Gateja started making large tapestries with paper beads as a central element. One group used beads made from leftover posters and flyers from Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Gateja also makes wearable art, sculptures, and lamps. He's working on a chandelier. We met at Karma, where his first New York City solo exhibition is on view.

—Marcus Civin

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I think, unfortunately, most people in the US don't know much about Uganda.

Sanaa Gateja

One of the things I find in how people in the West look at Africa is that they judge before they know. They will talk about animals, yes. They will talk about starving children. They will talk about poverty, but we have such wealth. Uganda is tropical, and everything is growing. You can throw seeds, and they will grow. We should talk about Uganda in that light.

The universities and colleges in Uganda teach with a Eurocentric attitude that has pushed our traditional art forms and materials out of the way. One of the reasons I work with found materials is because in secondary school I never enjoyed painting with the brush the way they taught it. I found it less fascinating than the art I saw in the villages and our environment.

MC

Do you have artists in your family?

SG

I suppose you could say my grandfather was a herbalist. My father used to play the harp when he was young. I have a brother who is very good with language. He can play around with words. Of course, singing is common. In the past, every evening we would get together by the fire, and people told stories or described what they did that day or what they were going to do the next. There were scary stories for the children. Every story had a song in it. It would be the whole group singing. Everybody would sing.

MC

Did you have mentors early on?

SG

I knew metalsmiths who were neighbors when I was young. I knew potters, and I participated in firing the pots. I knew basket-makers and musicians who would come to sing when there was a harvest or a festival. These were my mentors. After secondary school, I joined the Ministry of Culture to sell crafts and art. There was a feeling of national identity after independence, and the government set up centers around the country to collect items to bring to a shop in the city. I got a job helping around the shop. I was very happy there. I started making jewelry and selling it.

When I returned to Uganda in 1990, I introduced the paper bead by training my people. I had exhibitions. NGOs liked what I did. People started to ask me to train women in different parts of the country. In ten years, the women in the north in refugee camps were doing beads; in the south they were too. In Kenya, I went around and taught, and then the whole country was producing beads. The beads went into necklaces and jewelry. Beads have power when worn. They completely transform your posture. It's only me, though, who makes art with them.

MC

Can you describe your working method with the tapestries?

SG

Every piece is made on barkcloth. Barkcloth is my canvas. It's under the beads. This cloth has been a traditional fabric for many centuries. Christians condemned it. They associated it with medicine men. That's a shame. It's a wonderful cloth. It inspires me. I interpret a sketch straightaway on the cloth. I see it there. I might bring a preliminary sketch and put it on the side, but on the barkcloth something else happens.

MC

I wonder if you would tell me about *Voices of Peace* (2023), one recent tapestry on view at Karma. It shows about fifteen gray and green figures with arms that look like feathers. They're assembled on an orange and green ground in front of a white sky. At the back of the group, there appear to be floating, swirling circles with leaves sprouting. These circles might suggest shields, costumed figures, or perhaps some other kind of being. Because you constructed the image from so many small beads, the piece presents a kind of pointillism. It takes your eyes and brain a moment to understand it. It appears to pulsate.

SG

One piece can say a lot. Hopefully, people will see the positive more than the negative. I could have called it "The Fire Next Time" or something like that, but I don't want to. I'm almost preaching peace and environmental protection.

MC

I'm interested, too, in your work *Self Sufficiency*, also at Karma. In it, I think I can make out faces and flowering plants.

SG

That used to be part of one big piece I cut up into six pieces. It was called *The African Journey*. Now every piece has a name—*Family Meeting*, *Look Over Yonder*, *Single Mum*, *Caring*, *Visiting*, and *Self Sufficiency* (all 2020). The African journey is one we all take, including foreigners who come to Africa. It's about survival, pleasure, learning, and interaction. *Self Sufficiency* is about how you don't need much to survive. You can feed yourself. All you need is advancement on top of what you already have and to feed your children.

MC

What is your process like with these works?

SG

I work on the floor. When I'm conceptualizing, I kneel and start to sketch; then I put beads on the barkcloth. I will start drawing the piece with chalk. Chalk allows me to go back and make changes. So, I'm on the floor. I have water jugs full of beads. Those with colors that don't fit my plan, I will paint over. Painting comes at the end. Most of the beads are dyed. We use two types of dye: a vegetable dye and a reactive dye we mix with a natural varnish. I employ about fifty women. Some are rolling paper strips into beads. Others are treating beads. Others are making strings of beads. I call my way of working "unit construction." The bead is one unit, which is a sculpture. I look at the bead by itself as a complete sculpture.

We don't throw away any paper waste. We'll put any scraps in a big tub, put water in, pulp it, and add glue to make papier-mâché. We'll get about six people sitting in the garden rolling the papier-mâché in their hands to make more beads. I collect any kind of paper—office paper, magazines, and school catalogs. Political posters have very good colors. I got the material from the 2008 Obama campaign from a friend who sent it from Chicago. On those beads, you can see pictures of Obama or Joe Biden. But other images are encased in other beads. I call my exhibition at Karma *Rolled Secrets* because of that. All of these beads hold secrets. They are talismans.

MC

Like cocoons. A butterfly could emerge!

SG

I like that you say that because I have a cocoon now in the studio. I'm hoping a butterfly will come out.

MC

It seems to me there might be something poetic or maybe even subversive about bringing artwork made with commercial waste to a highly industrialized place like New York.

SG

You're reminding me of the Karimojong people in Uganda. They make beautiful shields. While I was working for the Ministry of Culture, one day a shield came in that was made out of a Land Rover door. It had the word "Rover" on it. It was a beautiful shield. We can look at something that comes to Africa, and if you look at it with different eyes, you can create something out of it that will probably challenge the original intent. In Africa, we don't waste things. Even stools, when they're broken, we put them in the fire to cook food. I'm an artist who's African who wants to stimulate my people's imagination and create income for them. This is both subversive and very basic. It's constructive. I see a lot of future in looking back and doing things with our traditions and knowledge and bringing money to the people. Colonialism—apart from killing people, taking their land, and forcing them to do things—also affects the mind, especially when you bring Christianity alongside it. I'm not saying Christianity is bad, but it was for Africans because it came as a tool for colonialism. Art can help people be themselves again.