



Beats of Beads

The AFRICAN
STUDIES
GALLERY
הגלריה ללימודי אפריקה

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The **A F R I C A N**
S T U D I E S
G A L L E R Y
הגלריה ללימודי אפריקה



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Beads and ornamental beadworks have played an important role in the lives of African people. They reflect group identity, age, gender and social status, and are a vehicle through which people store, exchange and transmit wealth. But they were always related to fashionable desires as well. With the advance of commerce with Europeans at the end of the 19th century, the variety of multi-coloured glass beads imported from Venice, Bohemia and the Netherlands allowed the various ethnic groups of the region to refine styles and symbolic statements through colour and pattern. Nevertheless, beadworks have rarely been the subject of thorough and systematic study because in the West they were considered as handicraft or ornamentation rather than art.

In 1871 the Welsh explorer Henry Morton Stanley travelled to the heart of the African continent in search of Dr Livingstone. In preparation of his caravan he endlessly deliberated as to which kind of glass beads he would carry as currency. According to European travellers of the time, the types of beads requested by the various ethnic groups he would encounter, would vary even with the space of a month. Fashion and tastes were depicted by these observers as the main reason for rapid changes in the demand. Stanley, writing to *The New York Herald* on 4 July 1871, complained that 'the Women of Africa are as fastidious in their tastes for beads as the women of New York are for jewellery'.

Beats of Beads presents beadwork from several groups of pastoral and agro-pastoral groups of East Africa. It shows the different styles demonstrates that the popularity of beadwork never waned. Each ethnic group – and sometimes even different villages within the group – adopt unique colour combinations and develop their own typical styles. With the passage of time they have also incorporated new materials and created a vibrant fashion scene that stands the test of time.

Beats of Beads was conceived from an initiative by Eti Dayan whose goal is to construct a museum that will preserve the beadwork traditions of East Africa. Dayan, who for the last twenty years resides in the Maasai

Mara region in Kenya, is a passionate environmental and cultural preserver. Not too long ago she noticed that with the disappearance nomadic cultures their rich beadwork tradition is facing extinction. Consequently, her main objective of late is to try to preserve the tradition of beadwork in East Africa. With this intention, she travels from one ethnic group to the other, usually at festive times, documenting the garments and those who wear them. In *Beats of Beads*, these artworks were juxtaposed with Dayan's documentary photographs in order to provide a context for their usage and to show their cultural significance.

The artworks of Cyrus Kabiru illustrate the importance of bead works in contemporary East African aesthetics. He collects stories, rhymes and scraps, and interweaves them into works of art that embody the diverse traditions of his homeland Kenya. Kabiru is a Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya. The Kikuyu are known as avid storytellers and Kabiru says that as a child, the gifts he would receive from his grandmother and grandfather were folktales. Each story – some real, some less so – would accompany him while collecting recycled objects and while creating artworks inspired by them.

The beading of stories into works of art also characterized his art residency in Israel, when he visited various places – the Western Wall, Masada, or sun-drenched Jaffa. All planted story seeds within him that accompanied him while collecting recycled objects and later on sewing them together into an African-Israeli artwork.

This exhibition was made possible by Dayan's life experience and passionate knowledge about the people among whom she shares her life with.

We also owe a special thanks to Abigail Lubliner for lending objects from her vast collection of African Jewellery. And to extend our gratitude to Serge Tiroche and Africa First a residency program that supports and promotes contemporary African Art.

Idit Toledano



Above: Samburu woman
Below: Arbore Girl

Above: Elderly Karamoja woman
Below: Samburu/Rendile woman



Beadwork

Beadwork is done by women and, with a few exceptions, is very much defined by gender. The adoption of multi-coloured glass beads in the late 19th century, with the advance of commerce with Europeans, allowed East African women to refine body ornaments through colour and pattern. Nuances in the ornaments of ethnic groups in the region became a concrete indicator of ethnic affiliation and intra-ethnic status. Consequently, one can learn much from the appearance of a girl or a woman about her place in the society, her marital status, age, number of children, and so on. Self-presentation is important for young men as well, for whom changes in ornamental styles are associated with the series of male groupings.

Nowadays women are no longer interested in wearing beaded leather, they replace it with cheap industrial cloth to which they attach the old beadwork that was removed from the leather. Each piece displayed in the exhibition is therefore, the last to exist.

At present, economic changes and the influx of tourists in the region have caused a major shift in the economic uses of ornamental beadwork. Beadwork enables women to become wage-earners by selling ornaments or by wearing personal beadwork and posing for photographs for a fee.





Maasai Purku (Kenya), headgear



Maasai Purku (Kenya), necklaces



Pastoralism

Pastoralists are nomadic livestock breeders – cattle, camels, goats, and so forth – who hold a food-producing strategy depending on the management of their animals for meat, blood and milk, but also skin and transport.

In a pastoral system, the group devotes itself to the management of the herd and wanders according to the amount of grazing and water required for its animals. As a result, relationships between the members of society revolve around their animals. Moreover, ownership of cattle symbolizes wealth and mark social status, and because of their prominent place in these societies, they feature prominently in their myths and rituals. Consequently, many events in the life of pastoral are regulated in order for animals to be sacrificed, purchased, borrowed, or given as bride price or compensation for murder, etc.

Since environmental conditions shape creativity and artistic form, pastoral nomadic people create art which is light-weight, portable and almost always associated with the body. Their art is personal in being close to the body in the form of clothing, jewelry, amulets, and also because it is generally made by the one who uses it or someone of close association with that person.

Today there are very few pure pastoralists as the hardening of political borders, expansion of crop agriculture, and building of resorts' fences reduces ability to move. Pastoralism is mitigated by agriculture or with other non-pastoral occupations.



Bana (Ethiopia) Girl's Belt

Bana (Ethiopia)
Girl's loincloth



Turkana – Belt made of Dikdik's (type of an antelope) bones and beads



Samburu – Girl's Jewellery



Pokot – Woman's Jewellery

C-Stunners

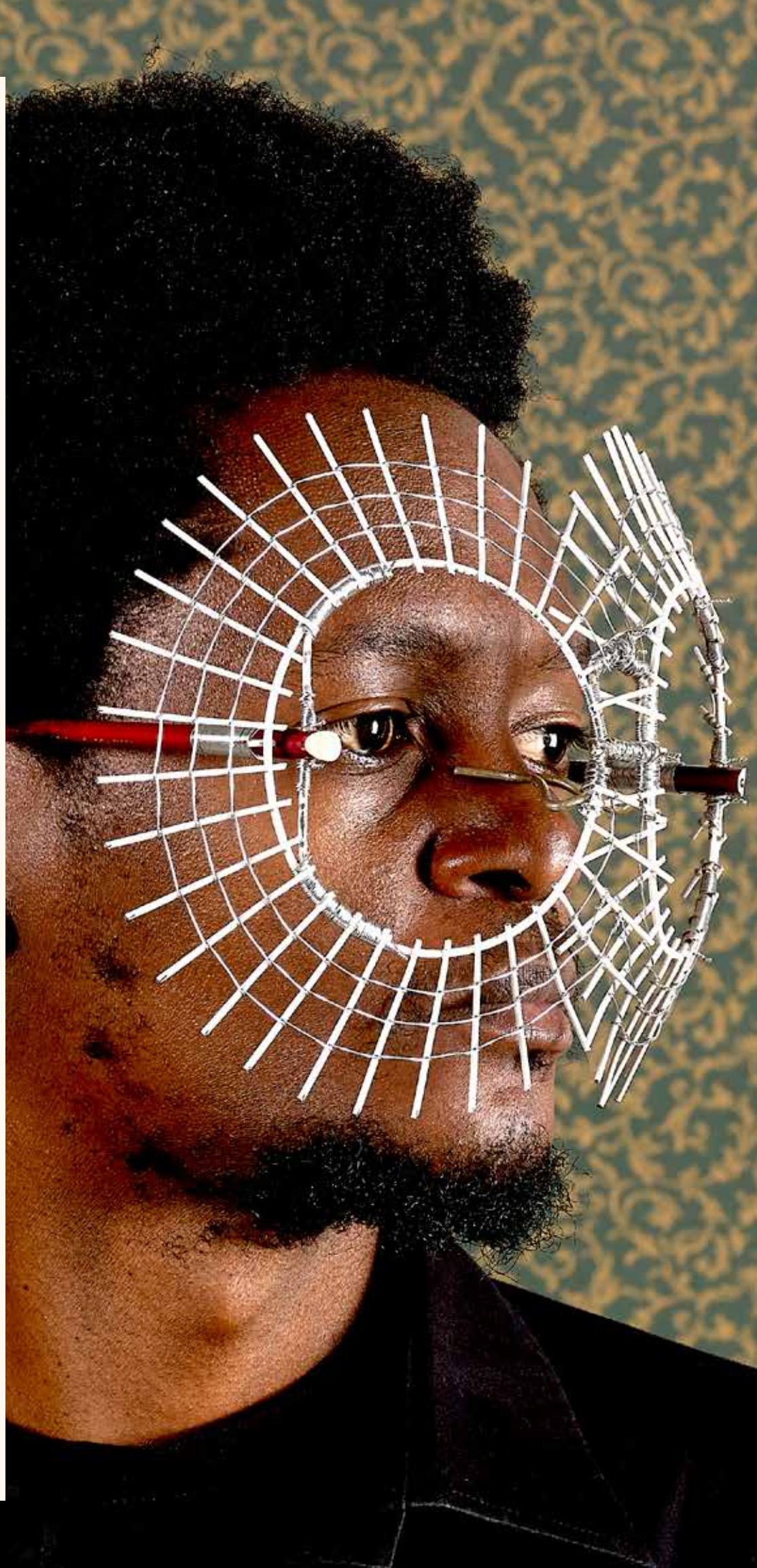
Cyrus Kabiru's ongoing series of what he calls 'C-Stunners' is a series of wearable eyewear sculptures that defies boundaries between art, performance, fashion, and design.

Kabiru has been creating spectacles since childhood: first as toys for himself and then, later on, for his classmates as a way of trading his way through schoolwork. His passion for glasses comes from his father's aversion. As a child, his father was severely punished for breaking a pair of glasses that his parents bought him with great effort and sacrifice. When Kabiru was about seven years old, while playing with his father's glasses, his father said to him: 'Cyrus, if you want to wear the glasses, maybe make your own.'

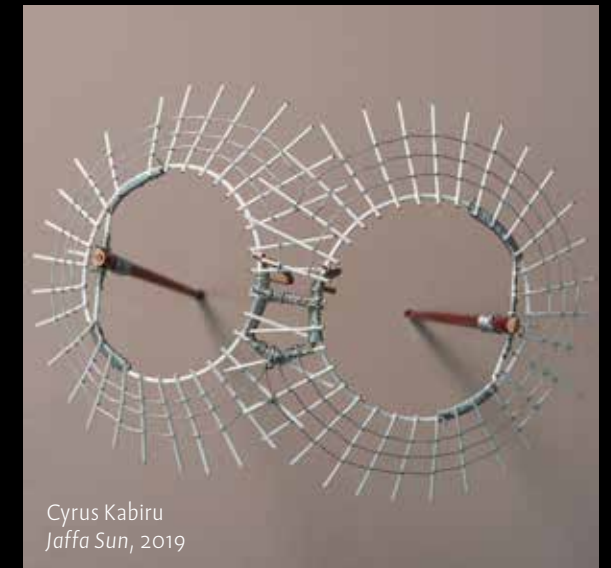
The C-Stunners are made from recycled material and found objects. Kabiru collects trash from a dump site in Nairobi situated opposite his childhood neighbourhood and assembles into these forms, giving this material, as he says, 'a second chance'.

Cyrus Kabiru
Jaffa Sun, 2019

Installation comprising two unique mounted prints and a wearable C-stunner made from recycled materials
25 × 18 × 25 cm



Maasai Kisongo (Tanzania)
Wedding Jewellery



Cyrus Kabiru
Jaffa Sun, 2019



Maasai (Tanzania)



The African Studies Gallery

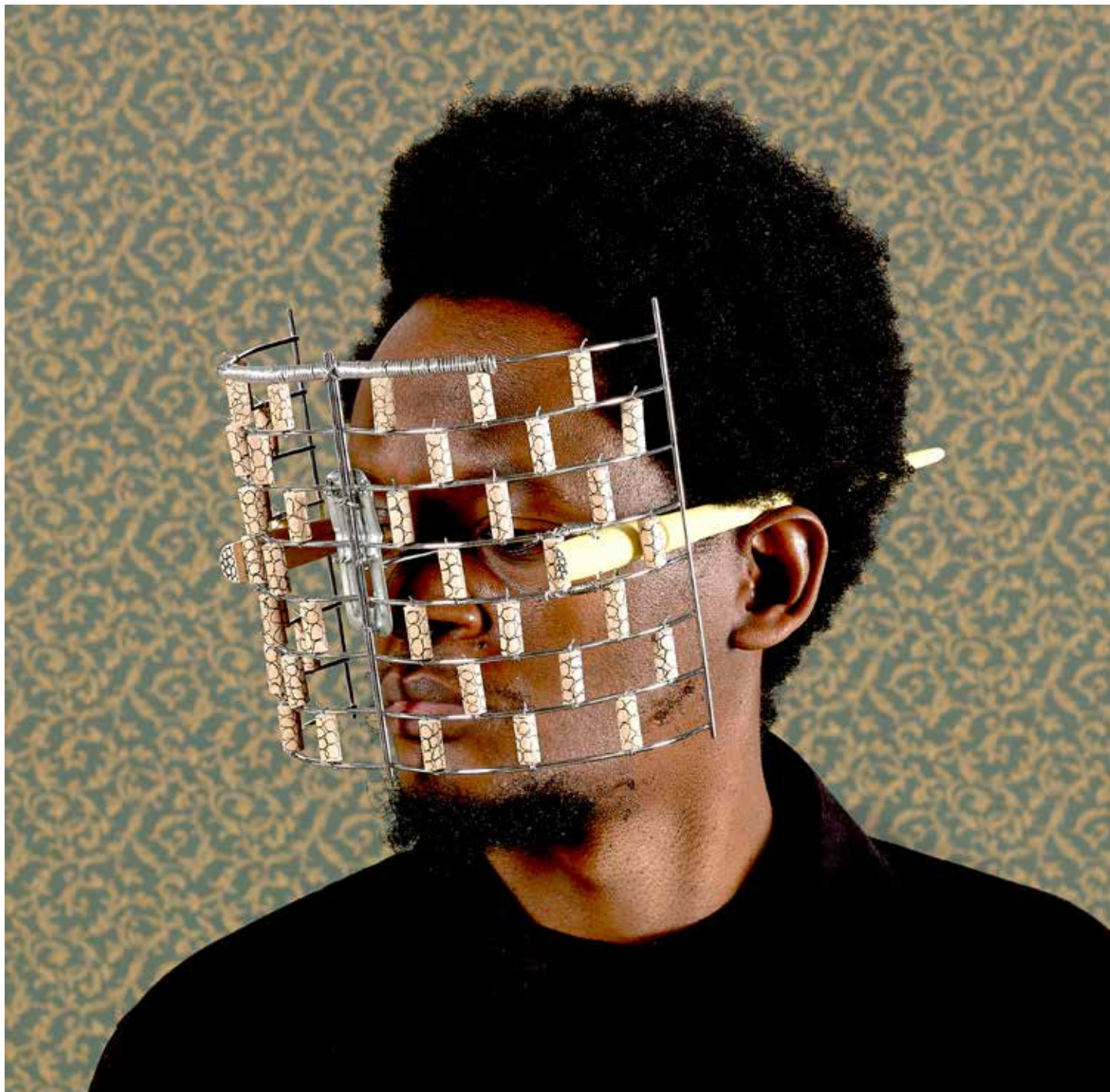


Top left: Young Hamar children; top right: Modern and Tradition: Ursula Joanne in beadworks; below: Young Karamoja women



Nyangatom child's loincloth

Nyangatom young married woman's loincloth



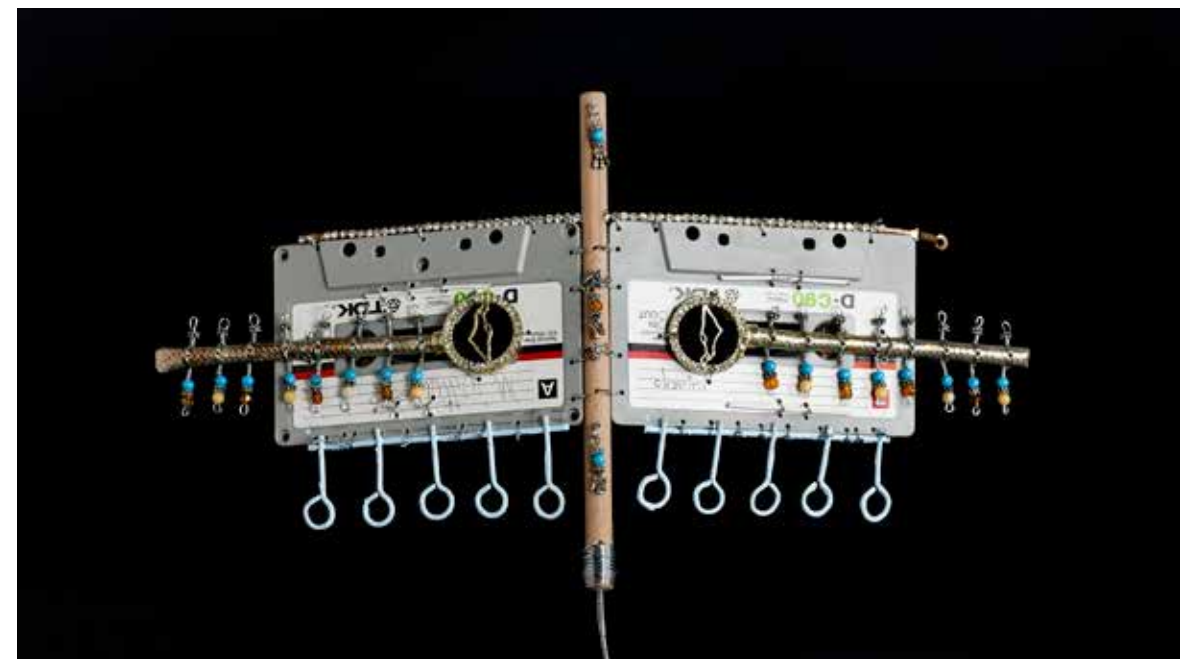
Cyrus Kabiru
Masada, 2019

Installation comprising two
unique mounted prints and a
wearable C-stunner made from
recycled materials
25 × 18 × 25 cm



Cyrus Kabiru
Famous Wall, 2019

Installation comprising a
unique mounted print and
a wearable C-stunner made
from recycled materials
17 × 19 × 28cm





Cyrus Kabiru in his studio preparing *Jerusalem*.
Menora (overleaf) can be seen in the background of the top-left photo.



Cyrus Kabiru
Jerusalem, 2019

Lamp, wood bars, wire and found objects
 130 × 185 × 180cm

Overleaf
 Cyrus Kabiru
Menora, 2019

Wood, forks and plated cups
 65 × 125 × 27



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