

## Arts

# Colin Gleadell

## Art Market Focus



# How art saved a former boy soldier's life

It is hard to think of a less auspicious background to a career in the arts than that experienced by the young Peter Oloya. Aged just 11 he was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and turned into a rebel boy soldier. But today, at the age of 44, and having turned to art as a means of overcoming those traumatic experiences, he is enjoying his first solo exhibition in the UK in a leading sculpture gallery, conveying ideas of beauty.

In 1989, northern Uganda was in the midst of violent upheaval following the Ugandan Bush War between the president Obote's National Liberation Army and the newly formed rebel LRA who were known for the forced recruitment of thousands of children and adolescents that they trained to fight as soldiers. At the time Oloya and his family had been placed by the government in a displaced persons camp ostensibly for their security from the rebels. Tales are legion of how the LRA conducted revenge killings and burned villages to the ground.

Oloya described his abduction that year to *The Telegraph*. He and his mother, his aunt, who was feeding a baby, and his cousin were out in the garden when "three sweating men appeared from three different directions pointing their rifles at us and telling us not to try and run... one of them rudely ordered for our hands to be tied except for my breast-feeding aunty. My mother's hands were tied first. I will never forget her look into my eyes when her hands were being fastened.

"The memory of my mother crying while we were being beaten still gives me goose pimples," he tells me now. Then he had to endure the mental torture of being told, falsely as it transpired, that she had been killed.

"The teaching," he says, "was rude and crude punctuated by beatings at every failure. The focus was on obedience, use of firearms



and "tek cwiny" – bravery to fight. We were all warned against trying to escape as punishable by death. The fear was constant to me, especially when I was separated from my mother."

But two years later, wounded in battle, he escaped to make it back to his home city of Kampala, where he managed to pursue his

education and develop artistic skills learned from his grandmother, who was a potter, making toys for sale to pay for his education. He also made money running a mobile disco using dancehall, pop and reggae records he had collected. A chance visit to a smart hotel where sculpture was being sold inspired him to make his own.

Then, in 2003 at a sculpture workshop held by the local Makerere University, he was discovered by Rungwe Kingdom and Claude Koenig of Pangolin, the foundry in Gloucestershire which made bronze casts for eminent artists such as Lynn Chadwick and Damien Hirst, and were setting up the Ruwenzori Sculpture

Foundation with the help of the Tate and Royal Academy to promote art and ecological interests in Uganda, providing the first bronze foundry in the country and subsidising a medical clinic. With their encouragement he was commissioned by the Ugandan government to create a sculpture of a crane for Queen Elizabeth II.

## Why dealers can no longer rely on the Old Masters

According to analysts ArtTactic, the Old Master market survived last year's downturn better than any other fine art category, with auction turnover down by 4 per cent compared to the fine art market in general at 27 per cent.

Whether that can be sustained must be in doubt after the first major sales of 2024, for Old Masters in New York. Sales at Sotheby's and Christie's, estimated to bring at least \$40 million, returned just \$28 million – 56 per cent down on last year.

A self-portrait by van Dyck, bought in 2006 for just \$2,600, did sell at Sotheby's for \$2 million, but a Rubens portrait, estimated at \$3 million, was not sold, while half the lots at Christie's failed to find buyers. Still, a c.1564 bronze sculpture of a sleeping nymph by Giambologna soared four times over estimate to a record \$6 million, and a pastel self-portrait by Élisabeth Vigée le Brun, which cost the seller £16,000 in 1984, fetched \$3.1 million – a record for a work on paper by any female Old Master.



**Record-making: Élisabeth Vigée le Brun's self-portrait sold for \$3.1m**

## A new platform for Elton John's prized collection

It's 24 years since Elton John announced he was going into recovery from alcohol addiction, and 22 since he bought a 13,000sq ft penthouse in Peachtree Road, Atlanta, close to the Triangle Club which played such a vital role in that process. During that time, Elton filled the apartment with everything from a Damien Hirst heart-shaped Valentine painting



(\$350,000), a Banksy flower thrower triptych (\$1million), a tapestry by Tracey Emin (\$80,000), and an array of classic photos such



**‘I used art as a kind of therapy to get through difficult times’: Peter Oloya**

Art, he says, saved his life, so he set up a charity, Art for Community Development, supported by his art sales to provide art therapy for other former child soldiers who had been abducted by the LRA. Later he was commissioned by the BBC to make the African Footballer of the Year trophy.

“Art is my reason for living,” Oloya told BBC Swahili. “In fact, it has given a structure to my whole life. I have lived through war and experienced death throughout my early years, and I used art as a kind of therapy to help get me through those difficult times. In fact, it continues to help me to this very day.”

**‘The memory of my mother crying while we were beaten still gives me goose pimples’**

Oloya’s art is a mixture of traditional Acholi and western influences – powerful figurative heads modelled in clay, cast in bronze or carved in wood or marble, with local African elements – exotic shell jewellery, vegetation displaying the effect of climate change, or technological signifiers of the age such as the mobile phone which acts as both status symbol and means of exchange in Africa.

Recently, Pangolin granted Oloya a residency in England and use of its foundry. The results can be seen this month in its London gallery where prices range from £500 to £15,000.

*Peter Oloya: a Journey From Adversity to Artistry is at Pangolin, London, until March 2. Info: pangolinlondon.com. Art market focus will return on Tuesday March 5*

**Well-heeled: Elton John’s famous boots could sell for \$5,000**

as Irving Penn’s 1950 black and white *Vogue* cover (\$100,000), many of which were exhibited at Tate Modern’s *The Radical Eye* exhibition in 2016. The works are joined by familiar stage props and memorabilia from rainbow-hued sunglasses (\$2,000), high-heeled platform boots (\$5,000) and a grand piano (\$430,000). The apartment was sold last year for \$7.2million and its contents have been split into eight sales from February 21 at Christie’s in New York estimated to bring over \$10million.

**A surreal new show that’s full of surprises**

**Exhibition**

**When Forms Come Alive**

Hayward Gallery, London SE1

★★★★★

By Alastair Sooke

What an invigorating, joyful show the Hayward Gallery’s new exhibition proves to be. Its subject is sculpture from the past 60 years – and there’s barely any bronze in sight. Rather, the curator and gallery director Ralph Rugoff traces a lineage of what he calls “restless sculpture”: abstract forms that engage with “movement, flux and organic growth”, and rebuke “rigid geometries”. Blobby menhirs – seemingly slapdash, yet mischievous and irresistible – by two of the 21 artists, Franz West and Phyllida Barlow, exemplify this genealogy, and give a pleasing counterpoint to the gallery’s hard-edged Brutalist edifice.

If Rugoff’s thesis sounds vague – works here range from Ruth Asawa’s ethereal hanging sculptures, like ghosts of a lava lamp’s innards woven from metal wire, to EJ Hill’s model of a rollercoaster with pink neon tubing for a track – that’s because it is. Yet, there is invention aplenty (bath foam, beeswax, amber resin and wasp venom are among the list of surprising materials) – and, if you’re after it, abundant skill.



Material world: Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Mylar)* 2011/2018 is one of the sculptures featured in the Hayward’s exhibition

In *Pumping* (2019), for example, Eva Fabregas hooks up 12 speakers pulsating with bass-heavy electronic music to gigantic bulging pastel-coloured worms, like a palpitating pile of monstrous entrails. Are we in a gallery – or a nightclub’s bowels?

If you wished, you could snap your way through this exhibition in 15 minutes, post the results on social media, and be done with it: a wall of foam by Michel Blazy, cascading imperceptibly from whirring apparatus, like a machine for producing clouds, provides one of many arresting moments. Several works have a slick, Instagramable

quality. *Skylight* (2006-14), a sculpture of tutu-like lampshades that endlessly curtsy as they yo-yo from the ceiling, could be a centrepiece for a flash hotel’s foyer.

Still, I recommend taking your time to relish the subtleties and energy of these “alive” forms, such as the grain and texture of Matthew Ronay’s painted wooden works, which resemble sex toys made from coral. Elsewhere, swelling, colourful shapes erupt from the rough-hewn clay bases of Teresa Solar Abboud’s sculptures like crabmeat spilling from a claw. I also loved the intricacy, and strangeness, of Marguerite

Humeau’s fascinating sculptures inspired by bracket fungi and termite mounds, which smell gloriously of honey, and, accompanied by an eerie saxophone soundtrack, evoke a throbbing, insect-like otherness.

The Hayward has form when it comes to staging exhibitions with a surreal, even bonkers quality – as anyone who remembers 2008’s Psycho Buildings (with its outdoor boating lake on the roof terrace) can tell you. Putting on a show like this is the gallery’s happy place.

*From tomorrow; southbankcentre.co.uk*

**Britain’s best-known cabaret act have the last laugh**

**Comedy**

**Fascinating Aïda**

London Palladium, W1

★★★★★

By Dominic Cavendish

The funny thing about Fascinating Aïda – self-identifying as “Britain’s raciest and sassiest musical cabaret trio” – is that they started in 1983, amid the punk-ish uprising of alternative comedy.

After four decades, it’s almost a joke in itself for three women (the original members were Dillie Keane, Marilyn Cutts and Lizzie Richardson) to have flown the flag for genteel, revue-like light entertainment of a sort that would have been sanctioned in the 1940s.

You could call their material Cowardesque, if Noël had lived into the age of “bags for life” and mobile speed-cameras, though there are obvious affinities with Victoria Wood. Well, the Aïda-ns (now comprising Keane, Adèle Anderson, who joined in 1984, and soprano Liza Pulman, a relative



Imperishable survivors: Liza Pulman, Dillie Keane and Adèle Anderson

newcomer, just 20 years into her stint) have had the last laugh: yesterday’s trailblazing youth have become forgotten or fogeyish while yesterday’s old fogeys look like imperishable survivors.

They appeal to the muted majority, probably those who, between cheery book groups and coffee mornings, quietly fret about what will become of them – and the country too – and are in need of rallying mirth of a wistful hue.

That attitude is on display in the opening oldie, *We’re Next*, which mock-happily, and 1920s flappily, hymns the prospect of oncoming oblivion; infirmity is indicated by “terrible stiffness where you don’t want it, and never where you do”. *We’re Not Done Yet* rebounds in up-tempo glee at how good their generation has had it and how stuffed the next lot are. Despite some potty-mouthed moments, they steer clear of offence-giving.

With accompanying piano (mainly tended by Michael Roulston) lending a church-hall vibe, at their best, well-drilled and well-dressed, the trio satirically tap common experience with a cut-above finesse. Occasionally, we get full-blown sentimentality: *Old Home* is a parting, aching glance at a beloved house. More than occasionally, the carousel of numbers rather stupefies through its mechanical efficiency – more snoozily trilling than thrilling.

Back at the height of the financial crisis, their topical songs seemed to have more to say. It does feel as if they’re ducking today’s culture wars. How about a song about microaggressions? A glance at the programme tells us that Keane, whose world-weariness is its own theatrical pleasure, is fed up with people suggesting subject-matter. Fair enough – after so long on the road (including two farewell tours), they’ve earned the right to do as they please, and even outstay their welcome. We’ll still miss them when they’re gone.

*Touring until March 28; fascinatingaida.co.uk*