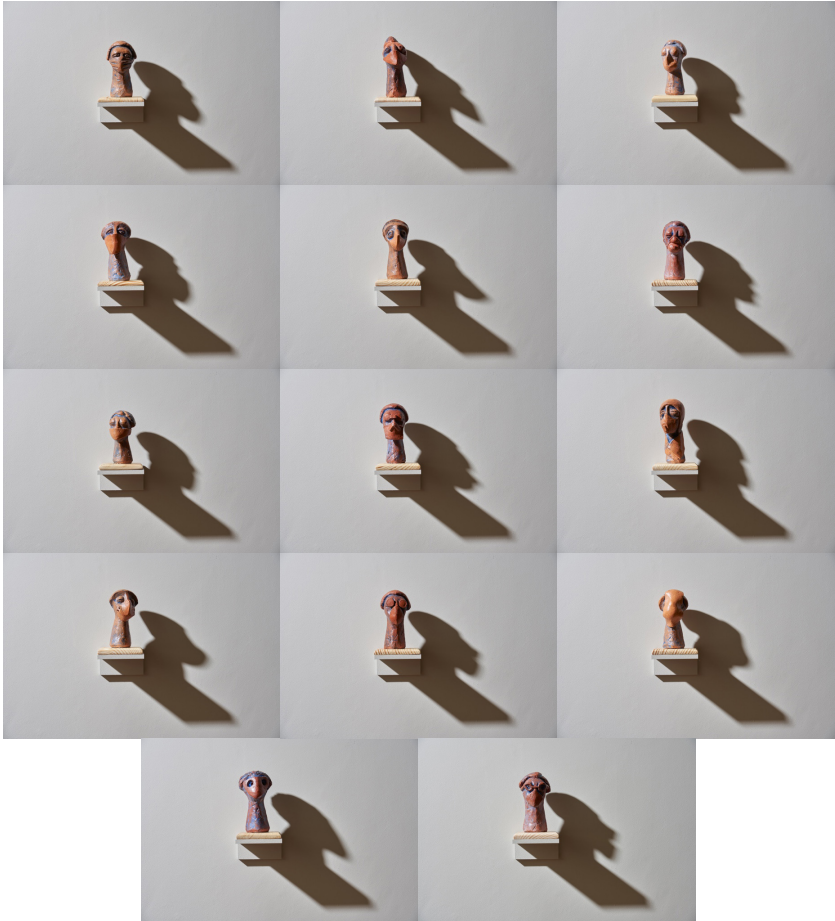


# Keeping Safe From COVID-19, 2020

Lilian M. Nabulime



My recent body of work, *Keeping Safe From COVID-19*, responds to the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to impact communities across the globe. Based on the context of my immediate surroundings and personal experiences, I made miniature terracotta figurines adorned in masks that symbolize the ability to

protect oneself from the pandemic. The notion of wearing masks to keep safe from the disease has incited a variety of emotions among the public in Kampala, Uganda, where I live and work. Masks are a recurring motif in this series. Each sculpture features a distinct mask and facial expression as a way of exposing people's mixed responses to the action of wearing a mask. I designed the masks so that they vary in size and texture. Some of the masks appear as thick and heavy while others are thin and light. On several of the figurines, the mask is worn tight around the face while on others the mask fits more loosely. A few masks cover the entire face of the figurine while others are worn halfway down the face. This discrepancy represents emerging groups of people who have acquired the habit of wearing masks only when they want to or believe that it is necessary. My work questions how and why different designs and fits of masks instigate a variety of reactions among people. In what ways do emotional responses to masks depend on a person's age, social status, and vulnerability to the disease? In particular, I am interested in how the act of wearing a mask documents the behavioral practices of people living in the urban area of Kampala, including the interactions between individuals and law enforcement.

How public behavior reflects different backgrounds and worldviews is a subject that I have previously explored in my work. In the 2018 series *Dreams and Consequences*, I navigated the subject of behavioral norms by studying the practices of young people on university campuses. I investigated how the manner in which young people behave on campus consequently impacts their perceptions, feelings, and emotions. I examined the behavioral patterns of people in my proximity through repeated interactions across campuses. Although I hoped to continue this kind of close study in *Keeping Safe From COVID-19*, I did so while maintaining social distancing from those I was observing. I sought to construct a visual narrative that is both authentic and relevant to my personal experiences.

I chose terracotta as the medium for this series because of its fragility. Before it is fired, the clay is workable with significant plasticity and can be manipulated to create any type of form. After the clay is fired, the resulting terracotta may last for ages, but it can also break easily if it were to fall on a hard surface. The material's fragility symbolizes the vulnerability of the public to

threat of the pandemic. Not only may they fall ill to the disease, but their emotional state — which may already be may volatile — can be exploited by those who surround them.

Masks not only deter the spread of the virus, but they also partially conceal the identities of individuals. In my community in Uganda, I have observed how this disguise has changed people's relations to one another. A key sign of respect in my community is to greet others upon passing them, especially if the person is an elder or a relative. The mask, however, has made it more difficult to identify and greet those we pass. My work explores the notion of wearing masks to keep safe from the pandemic and the wide-ranging emotions evoked by such a novel practice.

In addition to experimenting with the visual elements of the mask through their shape and texture, I also played with hues of blue on the terracotta to add more depth to the figures. The bright patina draws the viewer's eye to the sculptural forms and enhances their beauty. The blue color embedded into the surface of the figures enables them to glisten around the mask.

The fourteen terracotta figures remind those who encounter them to wear a mask for their own safety and the health of those around them. Their collective display prompts viewers to remember the many emotions that masks may elicit, including sadness, confusion, frustration, and anxiety. Our responses to these feelings may shape our futures.

*Dr. Lilian M. Nabulime, Ph.D., is a Senior Lecturer and former Head of the Sculpture Department in the School of Industrial and Fine Arts (CEDAT) at Makerere University in Kampala. Nabulime earned a Ph.D. in Fine Art from Newcastle University in 2007. Her research focused on sculptural forms as a tool of communication for women living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda. In her artistic practice, Nabulime uses ordinary objects such as soap, sieves, clothing, mirrors, cans, metal parts of cars, and other found materials to address specific social issues related to disease, gender, and the environment. Through her work, Nabulime attempts to push the meaning of art beyond its visual quality to instead raise awareness about issues facing society, and promote discussion among viewers.*

*Nabulime has been awarded numerous fellowships, including the Commonwealth Fellowship Award (UK, 1997, 2012), Robert Sterling Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center (USA, 2011), African*

*Stones Talk Sculpture Symposium (Kenya, 2011), British Academy International Visiting Fellowship (UK, 2009 and 2008, and a Residency Award by Mind Power Projects at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Living Classrooms in Baltimore, Maryland (2015). From 2019 to 2020, Nabulime was a Residency Artist at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design's Ceramics and Glass Department in Jerusalem, Israel. Her work has been exhibited in both solo and group exhibitions in several countries including the United States (2015-2013), Rome (2009-2010), the United Kingdom (1997-2016), Denmark (2007, 2014, 2017-2018), Norway (2020, 2006, 2004), Sweden (2001, 2014, 2018), Rwanda (2014), Belgium (1997), Kenya (1995-2004, 2016, 2017), South Africa (1995), Mozambique (1995), Namibia (1998), Zimbabwe (1995), Algeria (2009), and Germany (1998). Her most recent commission (2021) seeks to raise awareness about the risks and responses to schistosomiasis in Uganda and other communities in the Great Lakes Region.*