

# WASWAD THE REANIMATOR

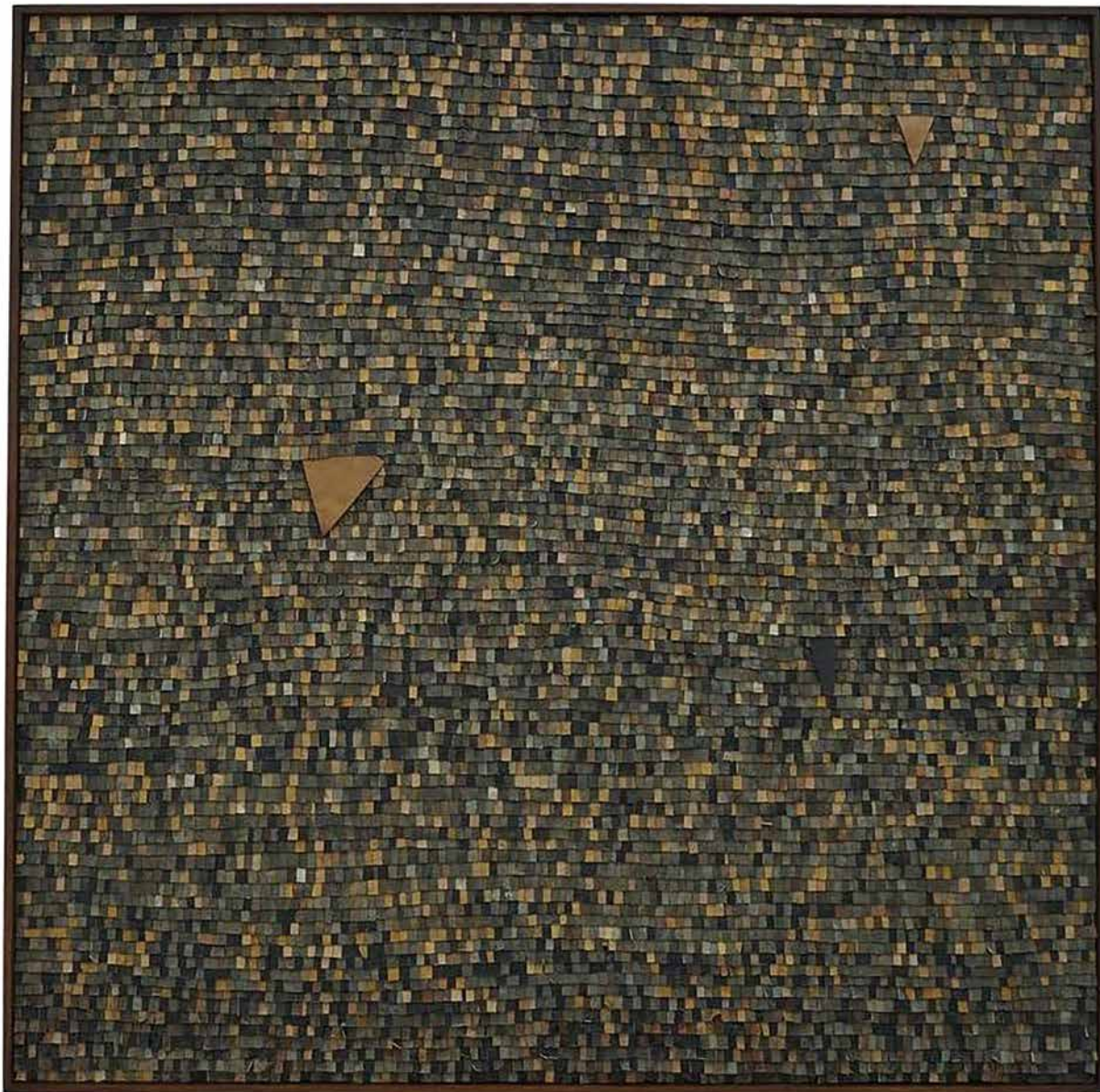
Carol Boram-Hays

**W**asswa Donald Augustine a.k.a. Waswad (b. 1984), is a reanimator: taking materials derived from once living organisms and breathing new life into them through the creation of sculptures, installations, and two-dimensional works. Each creature that emerges from the studio has its unique personality, ranging from cautious to joyful to frenetic. These are not creatures from the world with which we are familiar, however; instead, they seem to be coming from a new era. It is as if Waswad is taking the process of evolution into his own hands. Inspired by current social, political, and economic events and conditions, the forms and attitudes the creatures assume are meditations on the way in which technology is changing humanity, with the materials serving as metaphors for their physical and emotional states of being.

The artist says that his interest in making things began as a child. He loved watching automotive design shows on television and building kites with his father.<sup>1</sup> After completing his studies in sculpture at Kyambogo University in Uganda in 2007, he has exhibited his work throughout Africa, including at the first International Biennale of Sculpture in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in 2019, and in Europe and Japan. He also runs Artpunch Studio, an exhibition and studio space in Kampala. While over the course of his career he has worked in a wide range of media, his current practices center on



**Wasswa Donald Augustine a.k.a. Waswad**, *Okolimong II*, 2020. Mugavu (albizia), ebony, and copper pipes, 53 x 31 x 46 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald



*Immortal Objects 4 (Multicolour)*, 2020. Leather on plywood, 120 x 121.5 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald

black-and-white drawings and paintings, sculpture, and installation.

Waswad is among a number of artists working around the globe to consider a future where humans are transformed through technology and/or evolution into “transhumans.”<sup>2</sup> While the idea of chimera has a long history in human art and literature throughout the world, the idea of “transhumanism” dates to the middle part of the twentieth century, when futurists such as the English evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley began to posit that

the human species will begin to transform itself into something else through processes of accelerated evolution, usually enabled by advances in science and technology.<sup>3</sup> The “transhuman” is a being that is an evolutionary bridge between human beings and their new speciation. In more recent years, theorists such as Nick Bostrom have come to embrace the idea of using technologies to accelerate what they see as improvements to the human condition, including the body itself.<sup>4</sup> While many transhumanist thinkers acknowledge that new technologies such as genetic



engineering, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence do come with risk, they usually feel that the reward of exploring these technologies outweighs the risks and that, on balance, scientific advances have improved life for humans.<sup>5</sup>

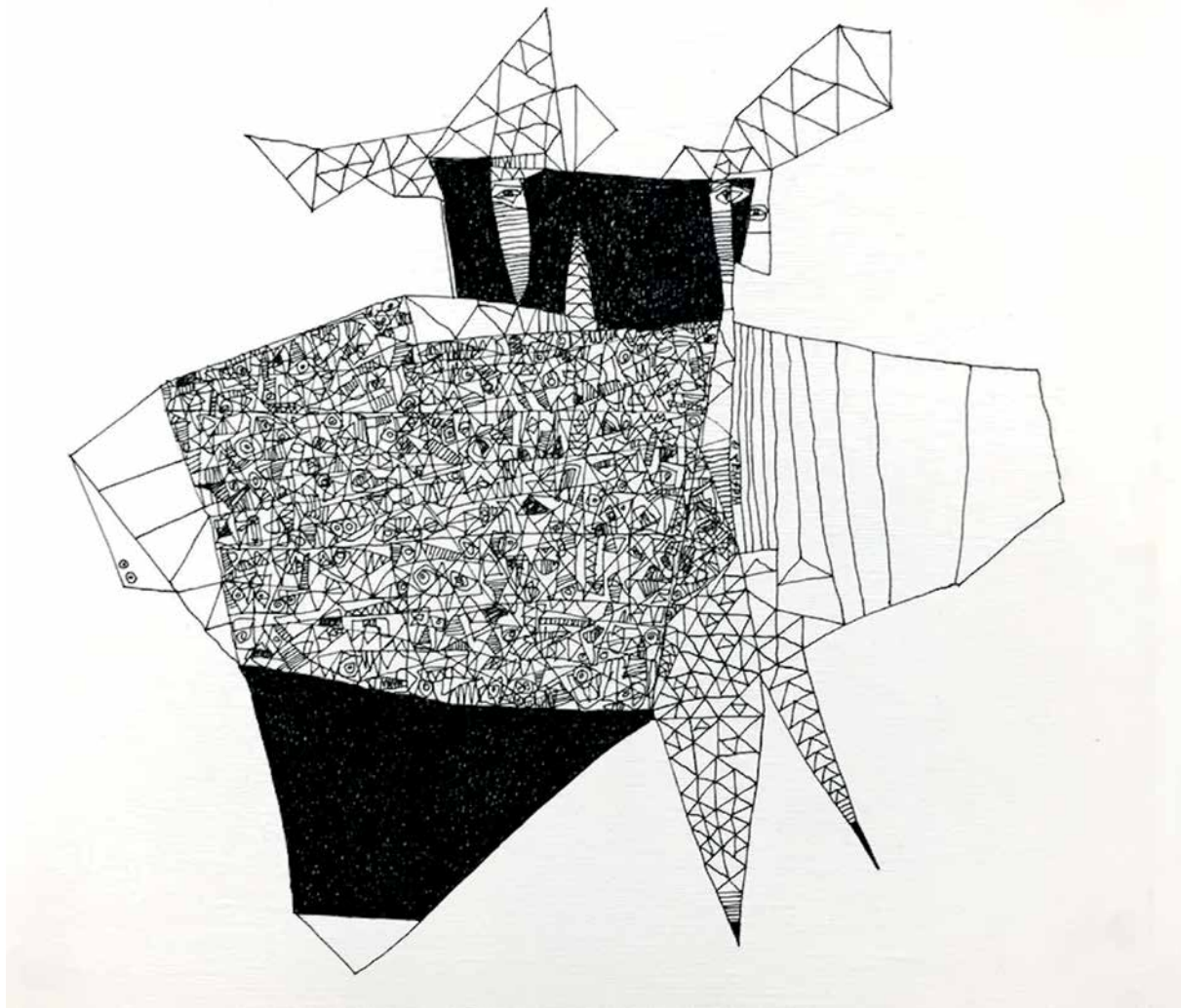
Nevertheless, there are some transhumanists who take a more ambivalent stance about the prospect of manipulating the evolution of humanity. For instance, Philippe Verdoux argues that there is “no consistent correlation between the development of technology and the improvement of human well-being throughout history” and, in fact, goes on to propose that it is technology that has created the problems that technology now needs to solve.<sup>6</sup> At the same time he acknowledges that the development of technology is unstoppable but contends that humans should take a more critical approach to the application of new discoveries and tools, because they increase the risk of our self-annihilation.<sup>7</sup>

Like Verdoux, Waswad presents a more ambivalent vision of the future, recognizing both the inevitable application of new technologies to the human condition as well as its dangers. In his statement for the exhibition *Degenerative Evolution of the Living*, held at Absa Gallery in Johannesburg in 2018, Waswad describes his vision of a future where humanity uses technology to improve itself, with unintended consequences. The process starts when evolution creates highly intelligent life forms called “humans” that begin ruling over other life forms around them. The intelligence of the humans allow them to make new discoveries and technological advancements, but they become frustrated that their biological evolution does not seem to be keeping pace with their other advancements. To help hasten the biological changes they desire, humans begin to tweak their DNA, pushing the ethical boundaries of transgenic manipulation and cloning in secret labs. When experimentation with DNA is still not progressing fast enough to satisfy the desire for greater intelligence, humans also begin to enhance themselves through artificial intelligence. Soon these new “self-propagating, super-intelligent humanoids” become commonplace. These new humanoids eventually come to control the humans who created them, the latter becoming “manimals” that are, in turn, subjected to DNA manipulation by the humanoids. The humanoids create manimals with variations such as feathers,

elements of plants, tails, et cetera and give them new names. The humanoids cage the manimals and use them like domestic animals as pets and for food in laboratories. Ultimately, humans devolve to become subjects of the humanoids they created and so become “transhuman.”<sup>8</sup>

Works such as *Immortal Objects 4* (2020), *Kirimuttu I* (2019), and *Okolimong II* (2020) are intended to represent the remnants of human life left in these creatures hundreds of years in the future. Moving back and forth between different media, the two- and three-dimensional facets of Waswad’s work compliment and extend each other. Featuring black line work on bright white backgrounds, the two-dimensional works seem to be portraits of his creatures. These portraits are closed compositions that suggest the individual personalities of the creatures as well as the ways the creatures move about the world. Some of the creatures have geometric features, while others have fluid qualities. The wood sculptures marry different types of wood into works that give three-dimensional form to the creatures suggested in his paintings and drawings. The bodies, usually of the creatures, are done in one type of wood, while the appendages are done in another. Though they are not direct translations of the two-dimensional work, the sculptures exhibit similar movements and personalities. The animated forms, executed in beautiful woods with smooth surfaces, seduce both the eye and the hand. Somewhere between the paintings and drawings and the wood sculptures are a set of pieces where the artist has affixed a series of leather tabs to a flat background in square compositions. What unites all three of these bodies of work is a sense that the artist is capturing the essence of a being that is existing somewhere between the animate and inanimate.

Though humans may, through their obsession with technology, believe themselves to be removed from nature, they still are reliant on natural processes and/or materials. As Waswad notes, “But in the long run, for example, when you look at plastic, it doesn’t rain from the sky, the human beings are its maker. But these human beings also get the raw materials to make these things from nature. So, in one way or another, we come to this earth and find what’s there and tamper with it, make many new things out of whatever is around.”<sup>9</sup> Waswad does not

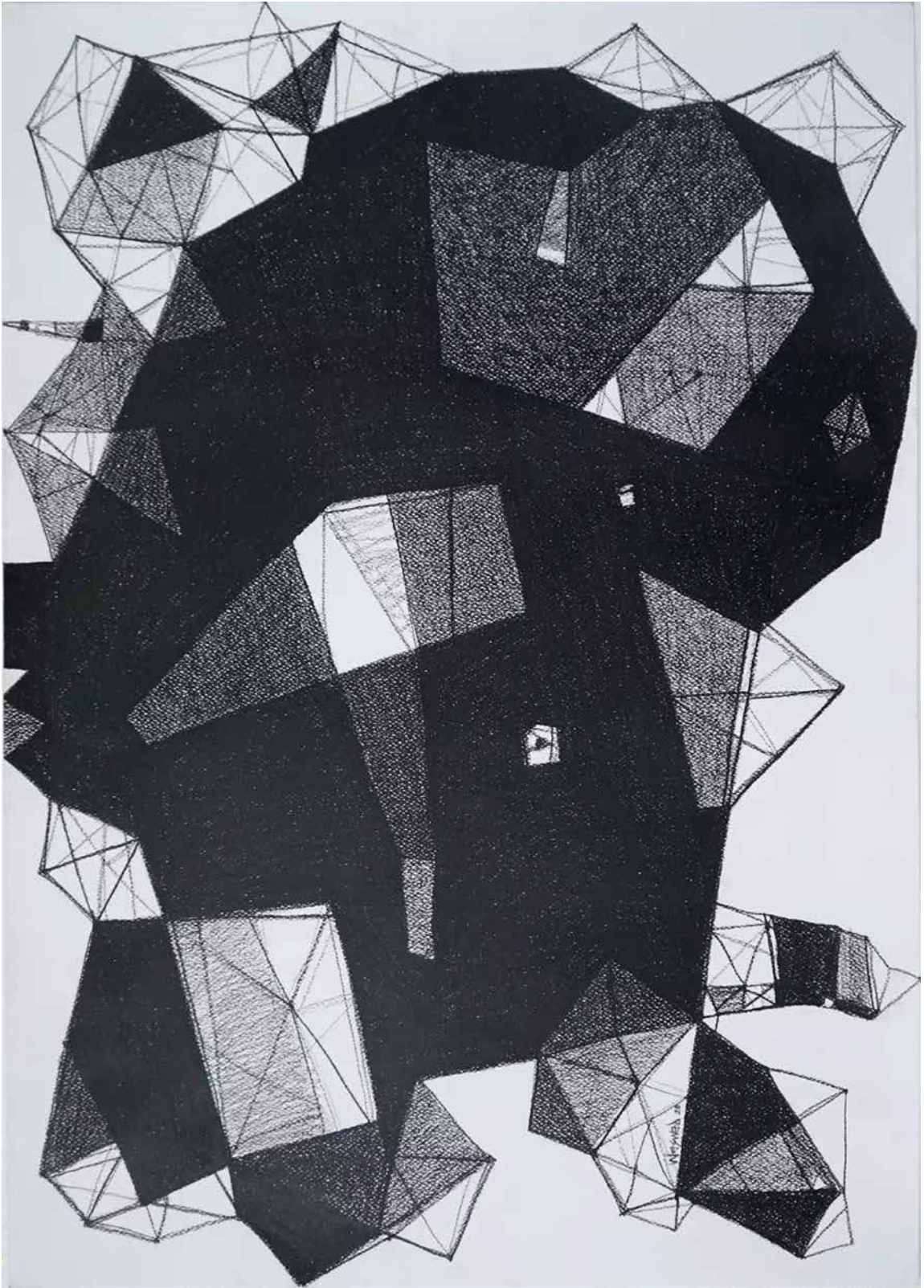


*Kirimuttu (Cojoined Twins)*, 2019, from the *Transhuman Series I* (2018). Ink on paper, 32 x 21.5 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald

desire or believe that it is even possible to turn back the clock on developments in technology but is interested in considering the future of the fusion of technological and natural change that can happen to living things. Indeed, both technology's and nature's ability to change and adapt are important sources of inspiration for the artist.

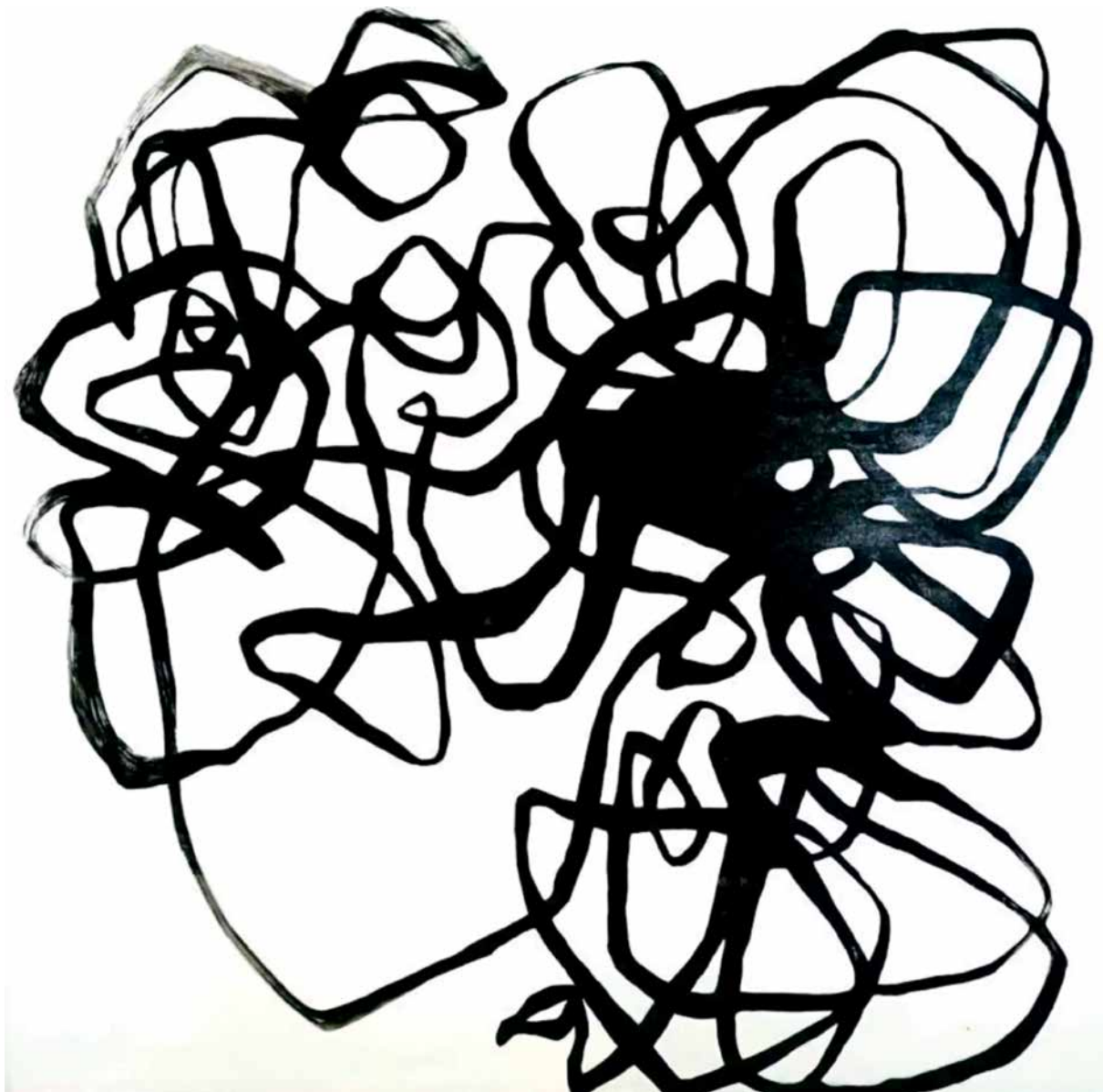
With this interest in living things, it is not surprising that Waswad says that he prefers working with organic materials, usually materials that come from the remains of a manufacturing process or made available due to natural processes, because he feels he can better relate to them. The way in which Waswad takes leather scraps from a nearby processing facility and gives them new life in the *Immortal Objects* series (2020) is a good example of

how his work speaks to both technological changes and natural processes. In this series, he takes sections of goat and cow leather of varying colors and cuts them into rectangles of a similar size. He then affixes them to a plywood background on one edge, with the opposite end hanging free. The hide and its explicitly variable textures have obvious connections to once living bodies, and their diverse earthen colors remind viewers that the skin came from distinct individuals. Having slightly ragged edges, the tabs are layered so that the ends project slightly from the surface, suggesting both scales or feathers and pixels in a digital image. In some of the pieces, the tabs are arranged in straight, horizontal arrangements, while in others, such as *Immortal Objects 4 (Multicolour)* (2020), the horizontal lines waver. There are also



*Kizungirizi (KXO) (Spaceship KXO)*, 2020. Charcoal on paper, 70 x 50 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda.  
Photo: Wasswa Donald





*Still Life II*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald

places where the artist adds a larger triangular tab that evokes a shedding scale or feather and the growth and/or imperfections of an organic being. In contrast to the references to the living body, the mechanical rigidity of the square frames into which the tabs are placed and the flat spaces that these pieces occupy undermine this assumption. Waswad has taken these organic materials, preserved through mechanical transformations, and given them new life in a state of suspended animation imprisoned in a rectilinear frame.

In his two-dimensional work, Waswad also explores a range of potential transformations that can occur at the intersection between the technological and natural. Unlike the leather works that make use of natural colors, all of these flat works are done in black pigments, with the figures set in a plain white space, an approach akin to mechanical diagrams. In one set of works, the figures are rendered in ink with lines that have a consistent weight and density and are composed of smaller shapes that are generally geometric. The robotic nature of the approach is



*Untitled*, 2017. Mugavu (albizia) and ebony, 46 x 37 x 32 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Piasa Auctions, Paris, France. Photo: François Mallet Photographie 2010–20





Ntale, 2019. Mugavu (albizia), ebony, and copper pipes, 36 x 26 x 26 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald

softened by lines that waver and the asymmetrical arrangements of elements. In works such as *Kirimuttu (Conjoined Twins)* (2019) strange figures stare out at the viewer as if caught by surprise. Though their bodies have angular forms and their methods of movement are puzzling, their eyes have humanlike gazes. In charcoal renderings such as *Kizungirizi (KXO) (Spaceship KXO)* (2020), the thicker lines and shaded regions pick up the rough surface on which the drawings are done, giving the figures a more rugged feel and a vibratory quality. Composed of bolder geometric forms overlaid on each other in active arrangements and crowding the edges of the compositions, the singular figures in these works are bold yet have a vulnerable quality. Executed on a much larger scale, Waswad's paintings such as *Still Life II* (2020) have a very different feel. Though still

only using black lines on a white surface, the elements in these works are composed of loose spiraling lines that do not have a consistent density and width. The spiraling lines are formed into semicircular compositions of singular beings that have a frenetic energy. While the elements in these paintings do not reference the figure as directly as do the creatures in the ink and charcoal works, the beings are animated with an energy that imparts to them an animalistic quality. In spite of the different approaches that the artist takes in each of these media, all the figures he represents reference organisms that originated in nature but have been transformed by unknown forces.

The body of work in which Waswad's most uncanny transformations occur are his wood sculptures. According to an interview with the artist by Joe

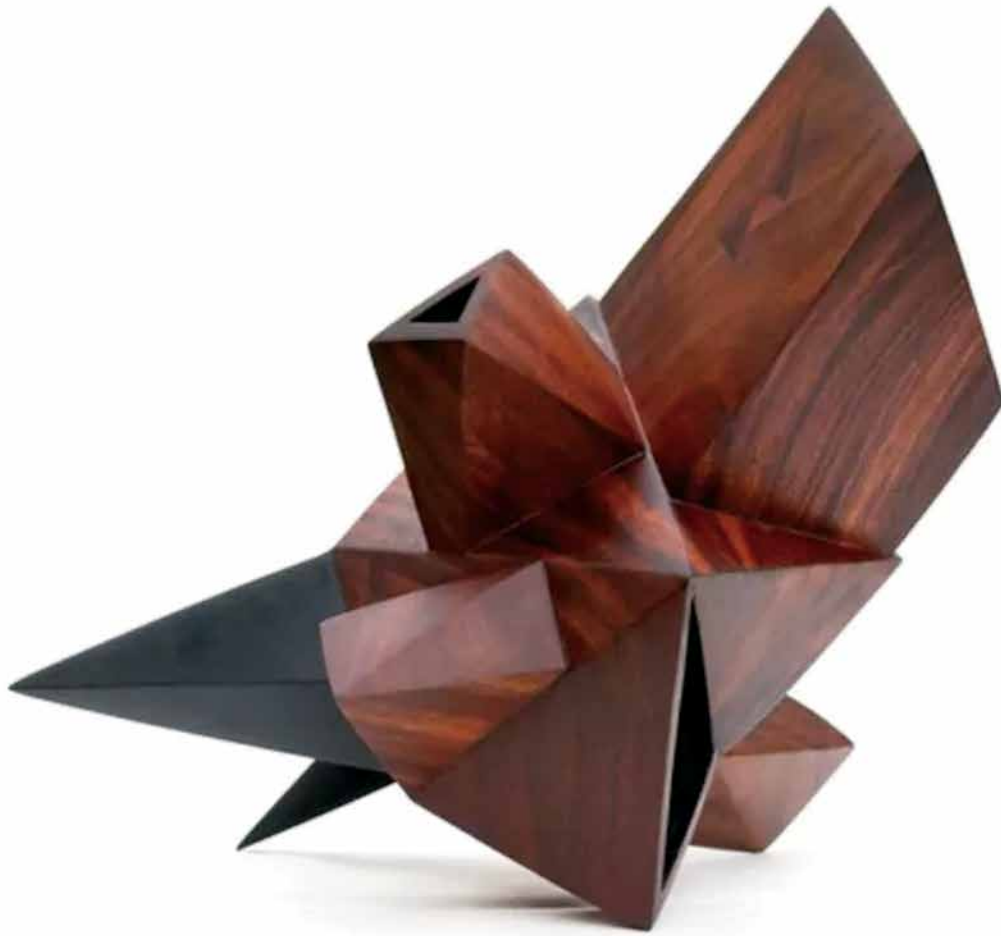
Pollitt, the wooden works are part of a series called *TMWA* (2017), an acronym for *The Most Weird Animals*, in which Waswad represents new types of beings that are evolving in order to adapt to their environment.<sup>10</sup> These new environments and the creatures that inhabit them have both political and ecological dimensions. The works are made from combinations of mvule, mugavu, teak, and ebony woods that the artist sources from trees that either have been damaged or have fallen naturally. The types of wood the artist uses not only have an intense beauty but also carry interesting histories. Teak is a wood that was first introduced to Africa by the Germans in the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> During the colonial era, teak farming expanded across the equatorial regions, including areas of South Sudan. Ebony is sourced from areas of Uganda that border Congo. Both of these woods are highly valued—teak for its ability to resist rot and ebony for its density and beauty. Because they grow in proximity to regions of political and social unrest, the woods are sometimes used to fund the conflicts going on in their respective regions.<sup>12</sup> These are woods that are connected to colonialism and the political, social, and environmental transformations it brought to the continent. In contrast, mugavu (or *albizia*; genus: *mimosa*) is a wood that is commonly found growing wild in Uganda. It is regularly used for firewood and charcoal production, and its bark is scraped for medicinal uses.<sup>13</sup> Waswad says that it is considered a “giving tree,” and he regards it as one of his favorites.<sup>14</sup> Deeply connected to life in Uganda, mugavu can be read as a metaphor for the people and history of the country.<sup>15</sup>

The earliest of these wooden works have organic bodies of the reddish mugavu wood, with appendages and legs made from ebony. In pieces such as *Untitled* (2017), the wooden creatures have compact cores supported on long, spindly legs that suggest uncertain movements. In others, such as *Okolimong II* (2020) and *Serwaniko* (2019), the mugavu bodies are composed of globular elements that sometimes sit directly on the ground and other times rest on legs of various lengths. Sculptures like *Okolimong II*, a name from the Pallisa district in Eastern Uganda, have forms that percolate with a kind of primordial energy. Many of these pieces also feature additional ebony appendages that drip over or droop from the body of their forms, as in *Ntale* (2019), a male name

from the Lion/Mpologoma clan in Uganda, as if these creatures are emerging from a type of larval state or arousing from slumber. Waswad says that these forms embody the early stages of transhuman evolution, where the creatures retain more connections to the organic world and have slower movements. More recently, in works such as *Mwasa Lwazi (Rock Breaker)* (2020) the artist has begun employing conglomerations of cubistic elements in the bodies of some of his creatures, representing the later stages of this evolutionary process, where the animals are becoming more like the machines around which they are surrounded.<sup>16</sup> This imparts them with a more frenetic temperament and seemingly stronger physiques. The bodies of these figures are further enhanced by the insertion of copper piping cut off flush with the forms at various locations, creating the impression of eyes or orifices and increasing their organismal qualities. All of these sculptural beings have individualized postures and seem to move in their own unique ways.

The titles of these pieces are important to the works and are part of Waswad’s creative processes. Inspired by a range of sources and personal interactions, some are derived from people who have helped the artist in the production of the piece or the sourcing of the wood; others come from interesting stories Waswad has heard from a friend or driver.<sup>17</sup> The titles, usually in Luganda, allow the works to connect to his immediate audience and site the origins for the inspiration of the pieces locally. While these works speak to the concerns of many people around the world, they are also intended to be objects that manifest the reflections of a changing world from local perspectives, suggesting a range of emotions that include trepidation, excitement, passivity, enthusiasm, and exhilaration.

Speaking about his 2020–21 exhibition *Down in Napak* at Afriart Gallery in Kampala, Waswad says, “My work looks at the contribution of science and technology in a developing country, Uganda, and the fear and sacrifices that come with it.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly the history of science and technology on the African continent is fraught with complexity. Developers, both on the continent and abroad, have introduced innovations in many areas, including metallurgy, medicine, agriculture, and industrialization, but these changes have also sometimes been accompanied by costs such as



Mwasa Lwazi, 2020. Mugavu (albizia) and ebony, 40 x 37 x 44 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Artpunch Studio, Kampala, Uganda. Photo: Wasswa Donald

deforestation, the exploitation of humans based in racist ideologies, and pollution.<sup>19</sup> Currently, some places on the continent are also in the position of technologically leapfrogging other regions around the globe in areas such as communications and alternative energy by being able to directly implement new developments without having to dismantle and transition from old systems. While certain changes have been welcomed, others have been met with skepticism, especially in communities that have historically experienced the negative impacts of technology and its development. For instance, Waswad refers to conversations he has had with people about how COVID-19 might be linked to 5G telecommunication systems, how vaccines may

contain microchips, and how artificial intelligence will bring about the end of the world.<sup>20</sup>

The creatures in Waswad's work speak to this complex relationship. They are beings that are evolutionary in-betweens, changing to adapt to the new conditions of their lives. Unlike the dispassionate and/or menacing metallic robotic figures in many visions of the future, the modest scale, organic materials and forms, and unique postures of Waswad's creatures make them seem more possibly part of the world with which we are somewhat familiar. These are not invincible, automaton-like monsters but have the vulnerability of biological bodies and the individual personalities of living things that react to the world in distinctive ways, adapting to both the



positive and negative aspects of technological, social, and historical change. Though he cites a diverse range of influences, including contemporary and African architecture, minimalist sculpture, African barkcloth-making practices, science, and technology, Waswad says that it is the deeper and invisible science of evolution, which allows nature to adapt to changes brought on it through technology, that is his greatest inspiration.<sup>21</sup>

Working with materials such as wood and leather that were derived from once living entities, Waswad reanimates these substances. When speaking about working on pieces for his 2018 exhibition *Degenerative Evolution of the Living*, he says that he imagined himself as a scientist creating new organisms and documenting the changes these beings are undergoing.<sup>22</sup> The locally sourced materials give the pieces a physical, bodily connection to Uganda, and the Luganda titles evoke particular emotional responses in the face of social and environmental shifts. More broadly though, the hybrid technological and natural quality of these pieces resonate with many global anxieties about the current changes going on in the world, as the wider impacts of the Anthropocene age are becoming increasingly obvious to all of us.

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### Notes

- 1 Wasswa Donald Augustine a.k.a. Waswad, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2021.
- 2 The term *transhuman* was first used by the French priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *The Future of Man*, published in 1959. In this text, Teilhard envisions a future where machines will be linked in a worldwide network that allows humanity to develop a singular consciousness that would ultimately merge with the divine.
- 3 Julian Huxley, in his article “Transhumanism,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 8, no. 1 (1968): 73–76, asserts that the human species should actively seek to improve itself through scientific and social factors via a process of “transhumanism,” which would allow humanity to move beyond its current state and open up new possibilities for the future of existence.
- 4 Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30, Issue Supplement: Ethical Issues for the Twenty-First Century (2005): 3–14.
- 5 Philippe Verdoux, “Transhumanism, Progress and the Future,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 20, no. 2 (2009): 49–69.
- 6 Verdoux, “Transhumanism,” 50, 54.
- 7 Verdoux, “Transhumanism,” 58.

- 8 Matt Kayem, “Waswad on the Future of Man,” Africanah.org: Arena for Contemporary African, African-American and Caribbean Art, May 4, 2018, <https://africanah.org/waswad-on-the-future-of-man>.
- 9 Matt Kayem, “Tracking Down Waswad,” Africanah.org: Arena for Contemporary African, African-American and Caribbean Art, July 12, 2020, <https://africanah.org/waswad-down-in-napak>.
- 10 Joe Pollitt, “To Live Is to Become: Wasswa Donald,” Unseen Art Scene: The Invisible Made Visible, April 14, 2017, <https://africanartists.blogspot.com/2017/04>.
- 11 Ole K. Hansen et al., “Worldwide Translocation of Teak—Origin of Landraces and Present Genetic Base,” *Tree Genetics and Genomes* 13, no. 87 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11295-017-1170-8>.
- 12 Janaki Lenin, “New Report: Illegal Logging Keeps Militias and Terrorist Groups in Business,” Mongabay: News and Inspiration from Nature’s Frontline, June 30, 2014, <https://news.mongabay.com/2014/06/new-report-illegal-logging-keeps-militias-and-terrorist-groups-in-business>.
- 13 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 14 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 15 Pollitt, “To Live Is to Become.”
- 16 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 17 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 18 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 19 Some examples of the challenges brought to Africa by new developments in science and technology are documented in “Some Issues of Environmental Concern in Kampala,” *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 77 (2002): 121–38, in which Samuel Vivian Matagi details problems with industrial waste and pollution and invasive species; “The Historical Interface between the State and Medical Science in Africa: Kenya Case,” in *Evidence, Ethos and Experiment: The Anthropology and History of Medical Research in Africa*, ed. P. Wenzel Geissler and Catherine Molyneux (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 353–72, in which Kenneth S. Ombongi examines the history of biomedical research and policy during the colonial and post-independence eras in Kenya; and “Supertransformers: Iron Smelting and Gender,” in *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths*, ed. Allen F. Roberts, Tom Joyce, and Marla C. Berns (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2019), 72–81, in which Candice Goucher discusses the ecological impacts of advances in iron smelting on the continent.
- 20 Waswad, e-mail message to author.
- 21 Kayem, “Tracking Down Waswad.”
- 22 Waswad, e-mail message to author.