

# THEY TOO ARE THE EARTH

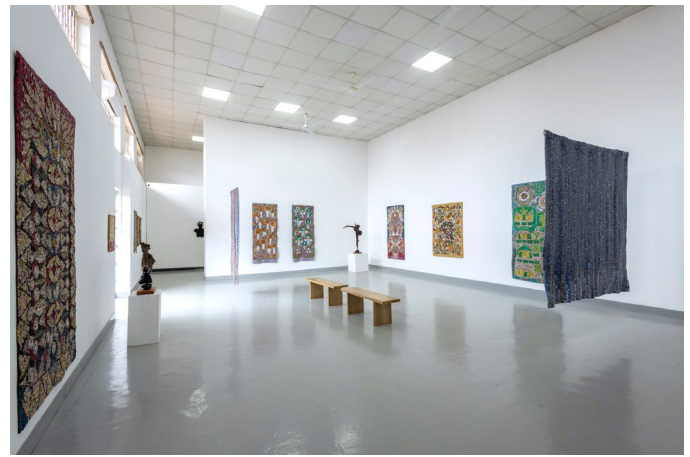
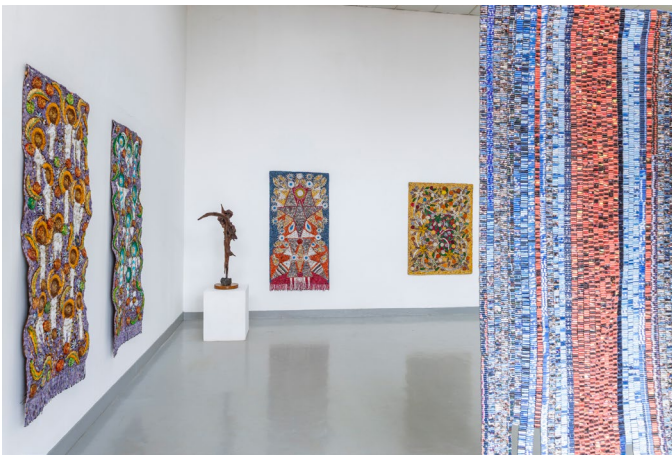
A SOLO EXHIBITION BY **SANAA GATEJA** (B. 1950, UGANDA) AT **AFRIART GALLERY, KAMPALA**

**19 September - 21 November 2026**

Afriart Gallery, Plot 110-112, 7th Street, Industrial Area, Kampala, Uganda | [www.afriartgallery.org](http://www.afriartgallery.org)

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This exhibition brings Sanaa Gateja's practice into renewed focus through an intimate and expansive exploration of material. Across his renowned paper-bead tapestries on bark cloth, new works on banana fibre, and found root sculptures shaped by time and nature, Gateja returns to the materials and processes that have long defined his artistic language, while opening them to new sculptural and spatial possibilities.



Borrowing its title from Niyi Osundare's poem **"They Too Are the Earth,"** the exhibition asks what becomes possible when we look again at the things we have been taught to overlook. In Osundare's poem, the earth is not only soil, landscape, or resource; it is also the lives, labour, wounds, and forgotten presences that sustain the world while remaining unseen. Gateja extends this proposition into material form. Discarded paper, banana fibre, bark cloth, raffia, roots, and weathered wood are not passive matter in his hands. They too are the earth: carriers of memory, history, injury, beauty, and renewed value.

At the centre of the exhibition is the idea of materiality: not simply as texture, colour, or surface, but as a way of seeing, remembering, and transforming the world. Gateja works with ordinary materials found in the environment, materials that are familiar within Ugandan and African life, yet often overlooked. Banana fibre, bark cloth, raffia, discarded paper, and weathered wood are not treated as raw matter alone. They are carriers of memory, labour, history, and possibility. In his hands, they become evidence of how value can be created from what already surrounds us.

This transformation is slow, physical, and deeply attentive. Gateja's practice is built through acts of stitching, threading, joining, binding, cutting, rolling, and assembling. Paper is cut and rolled into beads; beads are threaded and stitched into surfaces; fibres are joined and layered; bark cloth becomes both ground and memory-bearing skin; found roots are recognised, positioned, and allowed to speak as sculptural forms. The work emerges through touch and repetition, through the patient movement of the hand, and through an understanding that meaning is built not only through image, but through process.

This approach has deep roots in Gateja's own life. His relationship to materials began in childhood, growing up in the countryside, where play, observation, and experimentation were part of everyday life. He

recalls children throwing leaves, stones, and pieces of wood into streams, watching what moved, what floated, what resisted, and what sank. What seemed like play was also an early lesson in force, weight, movement, balance, and form. These childhood encounters with nature continue to shape his practice. Gateja's work remains guided by curiosity: picking up, turning over, testing, joining, cutting, threading, and allowing materials to reveal what they can become.

In this multi-dimensional exhibition, Gateja moves between tapestry, fibre work, object, and sculpture. His paper-bead tapestries on bark cloth affirm a language for which he is widely known: a language of colour, rhythm, texture, and accumulated fragments. The banana fibre works extend this inquiry into another organic register, drawing attention to a material deeply embedded in local life and ecology. The root sculptures introduce a more direct sculptural presence, bringing into the gallery forms already shaped by soil, weather, fire, insects, animals, and time. Together, these bodies of work invite viewers to encounter Gateja's practice not as a single technique, but as a broad field of material thought.

The found root and driftwood sculptures extend this inquiry in a powerful way. These are not simply pieces of wood collected from the landscape. They are forms that have already undergone their own transformation. A tree may be cut, burnt, abandoned, or forgotten, yet beneath the ground its roots remain. Over time, they are exposed to weather, insects, fire, animals, and decay. By the time Gateja encounters them, they have already been shaped by nature, by accident, and by human action. His intervention is therefore not an act of domination, but one of recognition. He sees what others may pass by as useless and allows it to appear again as sculpture.

This act of recognition is central to Gateja's broader artistic and philosophical position. For him, Africa's wealth is not limited to minerals extracted from the ground, or to the familiar economies of gold, oil, and other resources. It also lies in the environment, in climate, in language, in inherited knowledge, in traditional materials, and in the imaginative capacity to transform what is close at hand. A discarded newspaper can become a bead. A bead can become a tapestry. A table mat can share a material language with a monumental museum work. A burnt root can become a sculpture. Through this process, Gateja insists that value is not only found; it is made through attention, knowledge, and care.

Gateja's material intelligence places him in conversation with a generation of major African artists who, each in their own way, have transformed material into language. His contemporaries include El Anatsui, Abdoulaye Konaté, Yinka Shonibare, and Magdalene Odundo: artists who do not simply use material as surface, but as a carrier of history, memory, identity, and cultural meaning. Anatsui's metal works, Konaté's textile compositions, Shonibare's fabrics, and Odundo's ceramic vessels each hold their own powerful place within contemporary art. Gateja's contribution stands beside them with equal clarity: rooted in Uganda, shaped by experimentation and observation, and grounded in the transfor-



Sanaa Gateja, *Messenger of Peace*, 2026  
Found Wood and Volcanic Stone, 51x20x65cm

mation of paper, fibre, bark cloth, raffia, and found wood into works of contemporary significance.

What distinguishes Gateja is the intimacy of his material world. His materials are not imported symbols or distant references; they come from the environment around him, from discarded paper, from banana fibre, from bark cloth, from books, from roots and wood shaped by time, weather, fire, and decay. Through them, he offers a deeply Ugandan and African proposition: that value is already present in the things around us, and that art begins when we learn how to see, touch, remember, join, and transform them.

The works also remind us that materials tell stories. A paper bead made from a magazine still carries fragments of image, colour, text, and information. A book transformed into beads becomes a vessel of memory. In one body of work, Gateja incorporates a book on the Ugandan artist Henry Mzili Mujunga, recycling its pages into beads and encasing traces of another artist's work within his own. This gesture is not an erasure, but a form of preservation and transmission. It speaks to artistic lineage, friendship, memory, and the possibility that one artist's material world can live again inside another's.

Gateja's practice has always moved between art, design, fashion, adornment, and interior space. His work refuses the separation between beauty and use, between the domestic and the monumental, between craft and contemporary art. This exhibition builds on that history while inviting viewers to look again. The smaller works, the tapestries, the banana fibre works, the sculptural pieces, and the varied materials offer different points of entry into a practice that has remained experimental, generous, and deeply rooted in place.

To encounter these works is to encounter an artist still playing, still observing, still asking what materials know. Gateja's art proposes that the environment is not passive background, but an archive, a teacher, and a source of power. It asks us to look more closely at what we already have, to understand the intelligence embedded in ordinary things, and to recognise that transformation begins with attention.

### Curator

Daudi Karungi



Sanaa Gateja, *Healing*, 2026  
Paperbeads and Acrylics on Barkcloth, 206x98cm