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The Brutal Exploitation Behind the Belgian Art Nouveau

Sammy Baloji demonstrates how the architectural movement — and implicitly, Belgium as a country and culture — was underpinned by the colonization of the Congo.



Anna Souter October 28, 2024



Installation view of Sammy Baloji, "...and to those North Sea waves whispering sunken stories (II)" (2021) (all photos Rob Harris, courtesy Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art)

LONDON — When Belgian Art Nouveau gained widespread public recognition at the International Exposition of 1897 in Brussels, it quickly became fashionably known as “Style Congo” because of its use of the country’s motifs and materials, such as the tropical hardwood afzelia. While this elegant architectural style gained popularity, Belgium’s King Leopold II was enacting a brutal, exploitative regime against the Congolese people after colonizing 770,000 square miles (two million square kilometers) during the so-called “[Scramble for Africa](#).” The

regime relied on forced labor to extract minerals, rubber, and ivory, and became infamous for its routine use of amputation as a punishment when Leopold's production quotas were not met. He even set up a "human zoo" on the grounds of his palace, "exhibiting" 267 of the Congolese people he enslaved.

Sammy Baloji doesn't swerve away from the shocking human stories of this period of colonial violence in his exhibition at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, but he focuses instead on drawing out its pervasive and enduring legacies — including extraction practices and the Belgian Art Nouveau movement — across the Democratic Republic of Congo and beyond.

For instance, the exhibition opens with the newly commissioned work "Still Kongo I-V" (2024), which consists of five aerial photographs of dense forest in Yangambi, Congo, drawn from the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. The images show how Belgium mapped, territorialized, and designated Congolese land as resource rather than ecosystem. Through comparisons with earlier and later photographs, these images further chart the environmental damage wreaked on these forests through logging and mining. The photographs are displayed in specially designed frames of afzelia wood, carved with Congolese motifs appropriated by the Belgian Art Nouveau movement. By merging these elements, Baloji effectively demonstrates how the architectural movement — and implicitly, Belgium as a country and culture — was underpinned in economic as well as aesthetic terms by the colonization of the Congo.



Installation view of *Sammy Baloji* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art

Baloji's works are highly allusive and layered with research and aesthetic references. In his film "The Future that Never Was" (2023), for instance, he intersperses shots of the second largest rainforest in the world with footage from both the local colonial-period environmental monitoring center and its post-colonial successor. Baloji questions whether the colonial past can ever be left behind, and consequently whether there is any hope for repairing the world's climate and ecosystems, when the infrastructure of contemporary conservation practices remains so closely indexed to colonialism.

The histories of Belgian colonialism in Congo are not as widely known in Britain as its own imperial past, and the act of bringing these difficult legacies to greater prominence feels important during this wider moment of reckoning. It feels notable, for instance, that activists in Belgium are **attempting to tear down statues of Leopold II** at the same time that protestors are arguing for the removal of statues of slave owners across British cities. Baloji attempts to unravel a legacy that is as unwieldy as it is problematic, reweaving a new climate-conscious narrative in the process.



Installation view of *Sammy Baloji* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art

Sammy Baloji continues at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art (Saint James's, New Cross, London), through January 12, 2025. The exhibition was curated by Oliver Fuke.

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