

PETER OLOYA





Peter Oloya at  
Pangolin Editions,  
2019

## INTRODUCTION

In 2004, war in the north of Uganda was raging, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was terrorising communities north of the river Nile, committing some of the most unspeakable atrocities. Government forces were trying to track down the elusive guerrillas who could melt away into the bush leaving behind desolation, burnt villages and traumatised people totally dependent on world food programme aid.

By contrast, in the south and west of Uganda, a calm normality presided and in the secure surroundings of the university campus, art students were about to join a workshop led by the then Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation on the bronze casting of sculpture. This is how I met a quiet, earnest and industrious young man who had by far the best display of artworks in his end of year exhibition. We rapidly became friends and through working together I gleaned something of Peter Oloya's personal history.

At the age of eleven, among a group of children, Peter was captured by the LRA; the rebel army in the north of the country. He was forced to fight as one of the boy soldiers this regime was notorious for and over the subsequent two years he was held captive and sent out in combat against the government's forces; it is hard to imagine a worse environment for any young person to grow up in. Later, at the age of thirteen, Peter escaped during a heated battle and made it to safety. It is testament to his spirit that he would go on to forge a personal route to recovery.

The therapeutic benefits of art are well documented but without prior knowledge of that, Peter Oloya instinctively took refuge and comfort in creativity, processing his trauma. As he recovered he started nurturing an impulse that perhaps art could be more than a restorative therapy for him and itself evolve into a powerful means of expression. The innate ability for drawing and sculpture in him developed into a fluent and emotional means of communication and with it he found he had much to say. Putting himself through art school, paying his way by DJ-ing at night and selling toys or whatever else he could make, he successfully reached graduation at the Makerere School of Fine Art with a creative language that stood out amongst his peers.

Over the years since his degree, Oloya has focused on three main themes that have become the lens through which he sees the world: aspects of beauty, culture and modernity and climate. Beauty, one of the defining qualities of art is also a universal means of qualification in advertising, film, television, social media, even toys represent and reinforce attitudes of social norms. Fashion

houses and sports outlets promote body image that can conflict with cultural traditions and ideals. Justly proud of his Acholi culture and a guardian of clan and tribal identity, Peter Oloya straddles the twin realities of his roots and upbringing in a rich and particular cultural heritage, with the sweeping tsunami of a ubiquitous western cultural orthodoxy. Indeed, Peter makes this very dichotomy a fertile area of expression.

Exploiting the celebrated sculptural materials of a local white marble and patinated bronze, Oloya explores notions of beauty and classical ideals and here he introduces us to the semi mythical 'Lawino' or most beautiful girl of an Acholi village. Lawino was given iconic literary status in 1966 with the publication of Okot p'Bitek's epic poem *Song of Lawino*. This seminal work of African literature, originally written in the Acholi Lwo language describes how Lawino struggles with notions of tradition and modernity when her husband marries a second westernised wife. The rejection of traditional values she observes in her husband's attraction to western colonial culture forms the basis of Lawino's lament. Peter's reference to Bitek's magnum-opus goes to the heart of the contemporary African experience and the sense that being of tradition is also to be beautiful.

The ideals inherent in the story of Lawino are given further resonance with several other sculptures in this exhibition: the bride and groom portraits, the sensuous marble heads and the stunning portrait of a Karamojong woman. The Karamojong are near neighbours to the Acholi and have been fierce in the defence of their culture and way of life. Peter depicts a woman exulting in the symbols of her culture. Bedecked in beads crafted skilfully from ostrich egg shells, her hair part shaven and braided with clay with a facial pattern of scarified dots, a permanent and painfully earned customary embellishment to enhance her natural features. Peter's rendition expresses her inner peace and tranquility creating an exquisite serenity and beauty in the sculpture.

The clash and fusion of cultures is further explored in the series of works that share a title of 'Culture and Modernity'. The mobile phone has become an essential accoutrement across the world aside from its practical use for communication. In Africa, it is a primary means of exchanging money for goods and services and so has a status akin to currency itself. It also indicates a certain standing in society, being fashionable, modern and stylish.

Oloya has developed this as a theme and even accorded fragments of discarded phones symbolic and emblematic significance. The traditional currency over many centuries across Africa was cowrie shell money which apart from having commercial value was used for adornment, amulets, charms or fertility symbols. In a witty and apposite creation, Peter applies both money cowries and mobile phone pieces to a bark-cloth dress that resonates with Ugandan traditions as well as ecclesiastical regalia and contemporary fashion in his *Culture and Modernity: Phone Dress*, 2021.

(RIGHT)  
*Aspects of Beauty:  
Karamojong Bride (detail)*  
2021, Bronze  
53 x 22 x 25cm  
Edition of 8





(LEFT)  
*Opoko: Johnnie Walker*  
2022, Burned Gourd  
60 x 22 x 22 cm  
Unique

The phone keyboard is also utilised elsewhere in masks that at first glance may appear traditional but on closer inspection may be representative of a businessman or woman or perhaps of more diverse participants in contemporary African life: the European charity worker, the Chinese road builder or the Middle-Eastern diplomat or others.

The symbolic use of the mobile phone as an emblem is for Peter Oloya a personal shorthand for the idea of 'being modern'. Equally effective as signifiers of 'the modern' are the corporate logos of huge international brands: Coca-Cola, Fanta, Johnnie Walker and in another amalgamation with local traditions he has incorporated these brands onto the universal African container or vessel: the gourd. Gourds or calabashes are the fruit of a pumpkin-like plant that when harvested, emptied and dried make the perfect vessel for water, milk, honey, beer or dry goods. Traditionally, they are decorated using a red hot metal tool to burn abstract designs that are both culturally unifying and personally distinctive. Combining the universal and corporate brands and their logos with the private and cultural, Oloya again finds humour, beauty and relevance in a traditional craft elevated to become go-betweens carrying meanings beyond the immediately obvious.

Of great concern across the continent of Africa are the disproportionate effects of climate change. Torrential rain and floods, prolonged drought and desertification, glacier retreat and deforestation. These concerns are urgently in need of addressing and Oloya pulls no punches in his sculptural admonishments. In one poignant relief a tiny human being lies trapped in caked and drying mud, like the animal carcass of a drought casualty, suggesting the immensity of this human created catastrophe.

In *My Planet My Child II* we are faced with the heart-rending image of a crying child, life-size, arms outstretched and imploring, running naked over parched earth with a tiny seedling in his hand as a small talisman of hope. It is our children who inherit the state of the world as we leave it and Oloya is direct in pointing out that 'Mother Nature' is now in need of parental care herself; be it in the two small maternal figures nursing a vulnerable little planet or in the starkness of his pleading child. Peter Oloya's message is clear and unambiguous, we ignore him at our peril.

RUNGWE KINGDON





*Culture and Modernity:*  
*Phone Dress,*  
2021, Bark cloth, Cowrie  
shells and phone pieces  
174 x 105 cm  
Unique



*Aspects of Beauty:  
Karamojong Bride*  
2021, Bronze  
53 x 22 x 25cm  
Edition of 8





*Culture and Modernity:*  
*Face Mask*  
2023, Wood, hair  
and Cowrie shells  
56 x 15 x 17 cm  
Unique



*I say it's time to completely change and embrace our planet as our own child in need of our love, attention and care, always. My Planet My Child is my global environmental and climate change campaign intended to revert our child-oriented 'mother' perceptions of our planet and position ourselves as its parents...We have not been good children evident by our negative actions resulting in the current climate change and depletion of our natural resources...Even children are expected to grow up...it's time we grew up and protected our "mother" planet Earth. My Planet My Child.*

PETER OLOYA

*My Planet My Child II*  
2023, Bronze  
91 x 45 x 41cm  
Edition of 5





*Culture and Modernity:*  
*Sleeping*  
2023, Bronze  
34 x 28 x 32 cm  
Edition of 8

*Making a new work starts with recording an experience or an idea in the form of text, or drawing in most cases, and I improve it until I am ready to execute it then I select an appropriate medium or media. Sometimes I lose sleep at the emergence of good ideas until I can capture them. Beside my bed are always my sketchbook and pencils.*

PETER OLOYA



*Culture and Modernity:  
Bride Mask*  
2023, Wood, bark cloth  
and phone parts  
53 x 24 x 8 cm

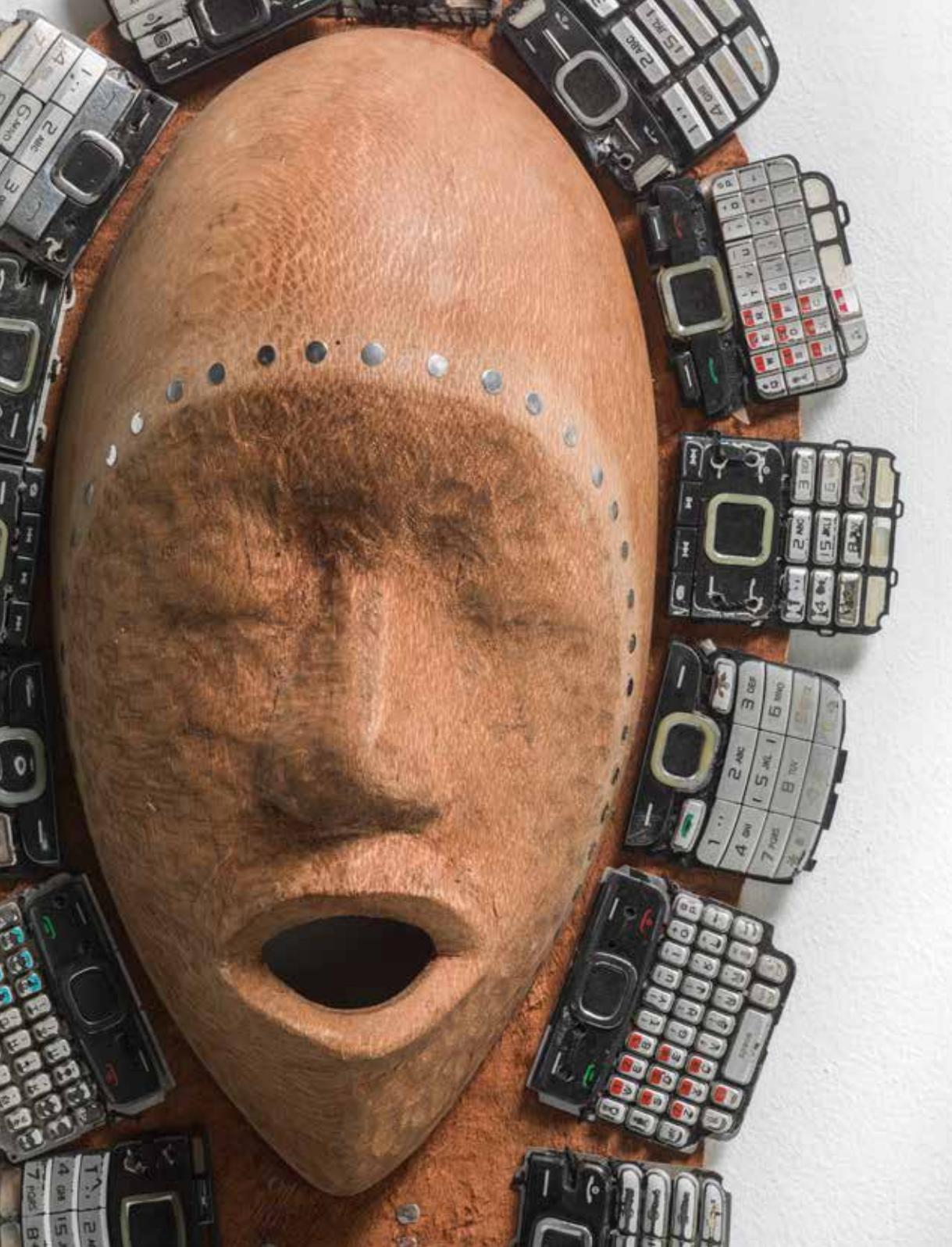




*Aspects of Beauty: Lawino*  
2023, Bronze  
50 x 28 x 28 cm  
Edition of 8

*Aspects of Beauty:*  
*The Mother*  
2022, Marble  
21 x 23 x 34 cm  
Unique





*Culture and Modernity:  
Groom Mask*  
2023, Wood, bark cloth,  
nails and phone parts  
58 x 23 x 8 cm  
Unique





*Aspects of Beauty:*  
*Ocol's Choice*  
2022, Marble  
21 x 21 x 26 cm  
Unique



*Aspects of Beauty:*  
*Karamojong Groom*  
2023, Bronze  
51 x 23 x 26 cm  
Edition of 8





*Aspects of Beauty:  
Lawino II*  
2020, Bronze  
55 x 35 x 37 cm  
Edition of 8

*Lawino (the name for the most beautiful girl) and Anyadwe (daughter of the Moon) were the most commonly used names in school books and in the songs we sang at school. I first heard about "Wer pa Lawino" around 1985 while at St. Mary's Kitgum Boys Primary School from my first English teacher Karamela Lajok Ocoo who happened to be my Auntie and our immediate neighbour as well. She loved telling and reading stories for us most evenings when we gathered at the fireplace in Lemo Village. It wasn't until my early secondary school that I proudly learnt in English class and in a text book about the English version "Song of Lawino".*

PETER OLOYA

*Culture and Modernity:  
Intervention*  
2020, Bronze  
72 x 31 x 6 cm  
Edition of 8





Opoko  
2023, Burnt Gourds  
9.7 - 60 cm tall  
Each unique





*Aspects of Beauty:  
Bride*  
2020, Bronze  
62 x 25 x 7 cm  
Edition of 8



*Aspects of Beauty:  
Groom*  
2020, Bronze  
42 x 25 x 6 cm  
Edition of 8



(LEFT)  
*Kneeling Woman*  
2019, Bronze  
16.5 x 6 x 10 cm  
Edition of 8

(RIGHT)  
*Culture and Modernity:  
The Family - Ogwec*  
2023, Bronze  
26 x 10 x 9 cm  
Edition of 8





*Politrack*  
2023, Bronze  
20 x 18 x 28 cm  
Edition of 8





(LEFT)  
*Culture and Modernity:*  
*Man Playing Lukeme*  
2023, Bronze  
31 x 23 x 24 cm  
Edition of 8

(RIGHT)  
*Culture and Modernity:*  
*Man Playing The Adungu*  
2019, Bronze  
40.5 x 19 x 14 cm  
Edition of 8





(LEFT)  
*My Planet My Child III*  
2023, Bronze  
29 x 14 x 15 cm  
Edition of 8

(RIGHT)  
*My Planet My Child I*  
2023, Bronze  
14.5 x 17 x 11.5 cm  
Edition of 8





(LEFT)  
*Our Fault*  
2023, Bronze  
35cm diameter  
Edition of 8

(RIGHT)  
*The Dialogue*  
2019, Bronze  
10.5 x 28 x 15 cm  
Edition of 8

*I remember well the first object I made was a radio-cassette player. I used clay I got from an anthill in our backyard where we were making small balls for a catapult. The challenge I had with its execution was the aerial and handle that kept breaking off. A radio was a magical box to me, I used to wonder how people got inside it to talk. I loved to watch the radio LED indicators showing the scale of sounds and in that model, I made little holes using a broomstick and fixed fire flies as the sound LED indicators.*

PETER OLOYA



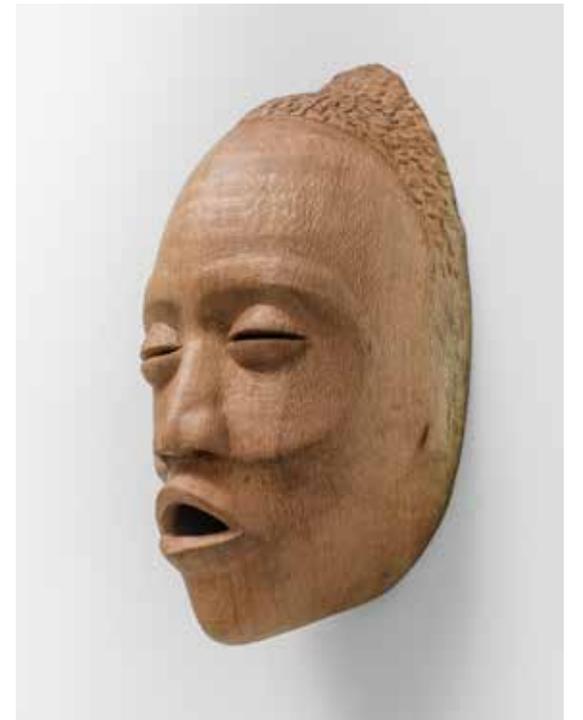


*Culture and Modernity:  
Reason to Raid*  
2019, Bronze  
53 x 18.5 x 25 cm  
Edition of 8





*Culture and Modernity:*  
Mask  
2023, Wood  
32 x 15 x 14 cm  
Unique



*By tribe, I am a pure Acoli from Acoliland in northern Uganda. Acoli are a farming and pastoral people of northern Uganda and southern Sudan. I belong to Lemu Pa Kuru Clan, Lemu Bongolewic village in Acoliland, Kitgum District in Northern Uganda region. I love my culture for it defines who I am, I am Acoli because we are. My Acoli cultural heritage (intangible and tangible), values, beliefs, tradition, customs etc provoke my sculptural aesthetic reactions. They also activate my artistic contribution to critique against bad cultural practices and promote and document the good ones which can positively shape or influence my culture.*

PETER OLOYA

*Culture and Modernity:  
WhatsApp  
2023, Bronze  
55 x 18 x 17 cm  
Edition of 8*





*We desire to bequeath two things to our children,  
the first is roots the second is wings.*

AFRICAN PROVERB

## PETER OLOYA

- 1979 Born in Lemo Bongolewich Village, Kitgum District, Northern Uganda. Number nine of eleven children. Father Oballim Justo was a police inspector who played First Trombone and Base Violin in the Uganda Police Brass & Jazz Band in Kampala. His grandmother Hellen atto Ocula taught him how to make pots.
- 1985-89 Attends Kitgum Boys Primary School. Teaches himself to draw and practices on sand and in his exercise books.
- 1989 -91 Abducted by the Lords Resistance Army as a boy soldier.
- 1993 Returns to Kampala and starts making toys to earn money for the family. Attends Secondary School. Arrested for making a life-like toy Star pistol. Sees sculpture in Sheraton Hotel's Craft Village in Kampala and decides to try making his own. Later supplies Sheraton Hotel with work under Mrs Matha Kanyolo. Also earns money as a DJ and creating his own ArtVision Mobile Disco.
- 1998 Attends Makerere University and attains a Bachelor of Industrial and Fine Arts degree.
- 2003 Meets Rungwe Kingdon and Claude Koenig at a sculpture workshop at Makere University. Founds AFOCOD Art for Community Development (CBO) focusing on art therapy and life skill training in art and craft for young people.
- 2007 Awarded a commission to create a bronze Crested Crane as a Ugandan state gift presented to Queen Elizabeth II during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala.
- 2008 Selected to go to Lolui Island, Lake Victoria with the Ruwenzori Foundation, sculptor Peter Randall-Page RA and The London Sinfonietta as part of 'Rock Music Rock Art'.
- 2008 Commissioned by the BBC to create trophies for the East African *Faidika na BBC* competition to make BBC African Footballer of the Year trophies.
- 2009 - 2019 Selected to create the BBC African Footballer of the Year Award trophies.
- 2019 Awarded the Pangolin London Sculpture Prize supported by the PJLF Arts Fund. Visits London and Pangolin Editions foundry.
- 2020 Commissioned by the BBC to design the new BBC African Sport Personality of the Year trophy. Completes first collection of bronzes from the residency but Covid causes his exhibition to be postponed.
- 2022 Attends stone carving workshop at Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation.
- 2024 Solo exhibition at Pangolin London. Continues to live and work in Kampala & Kitgum.

## SPONSORS

Pangolin London would like to thank a number of sponsors without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.

### PJLF

#### PJLF ARTS FUND

The Paddy and Joan Leigh Fermor Fund have kindly helped to support Peter Oloya's residency at Pangolin London. Intended to offer artists the opportunity to cast in bronze as well as the time to make a body of work the Pangolin London residency programme first began in 2008.

#### RUWENZORI FOUNDATION

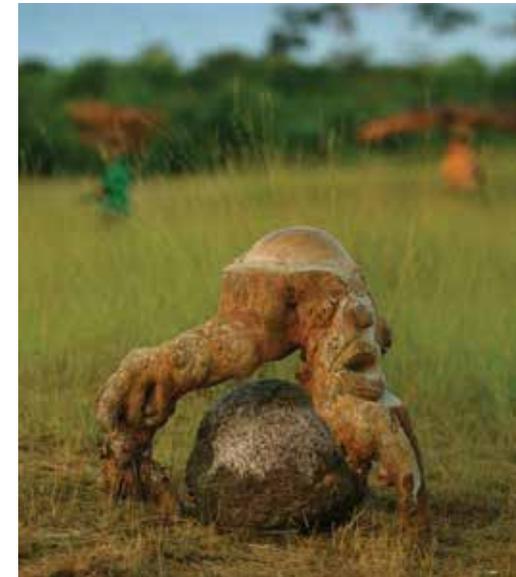
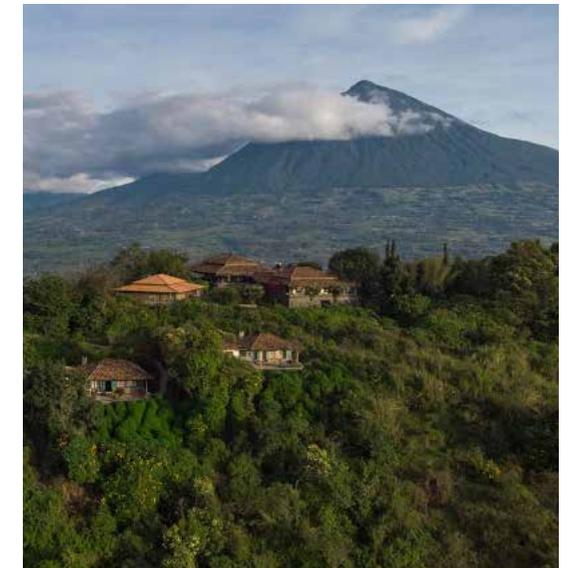
The Ruwenzori Foundation is a registered charity set up in 2004 with the aim of enabling cultural and educational exchanges between artists in Africa and the UK. It funds residencies and workshops and provides the infrastructure, facilities, materials and training needed to meet its objectives. [www.ruwenzorisculpture.com](http://www.ruwenzorisculpture.com)

#### RUWENZORI FOUNDERS

Located in the foothills of the Ruwenzori Mountains, Ruwenzori Founders are the only foundry in Uganda dedicated to casting sculpture and working with artists. [www.ruwenzorifounders.com](http://www.ruwenzorifounders.com)

#### VOLCANOES SAFARIS, UGANDA.

Volcanoes Safaris have kindly supported the printing of this catalogue. Founded by Praveen Moman in 1997 Volcanoes Safaris have been at the forefront of reviving gorilla and chimpanzee ecotourism in Uganda and Rwanda for the past twenty-seven years. [www.volcanoessafaris.com](http://www.volcanoessafaris.com)



Clockwise from top left: Peter Oloya carving at the Ruwenzori Foundation; View of Virunga Lodge, Volcanoes Safaris; The Ruwenzori Foundation, Uganda; Peter Oloya, *Spirit of the Gong*, Lolui Island.

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Pangolin London  
Kings Place, 90 York Way, London, N1 9AG  
T: 020 7520 1480  
E: [gallery@pangolinlondon.com](mailto:gallery@pangolinlondon.com)  
[www.pangolinlondon.com](http://www.pangolinlondon.com)

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