



# CONTOURS OF BEING

Paintings & Sculptures by Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime: A Retrospective

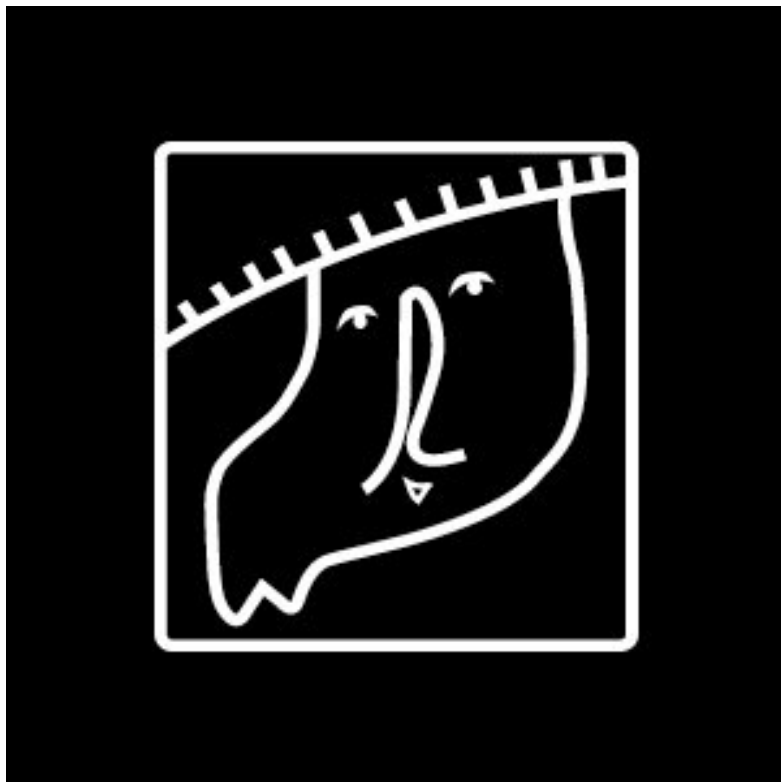
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Paintings & Sculptures by Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime

Curated by Rodney Muhumuza

(August 23 to September 30, 2025)



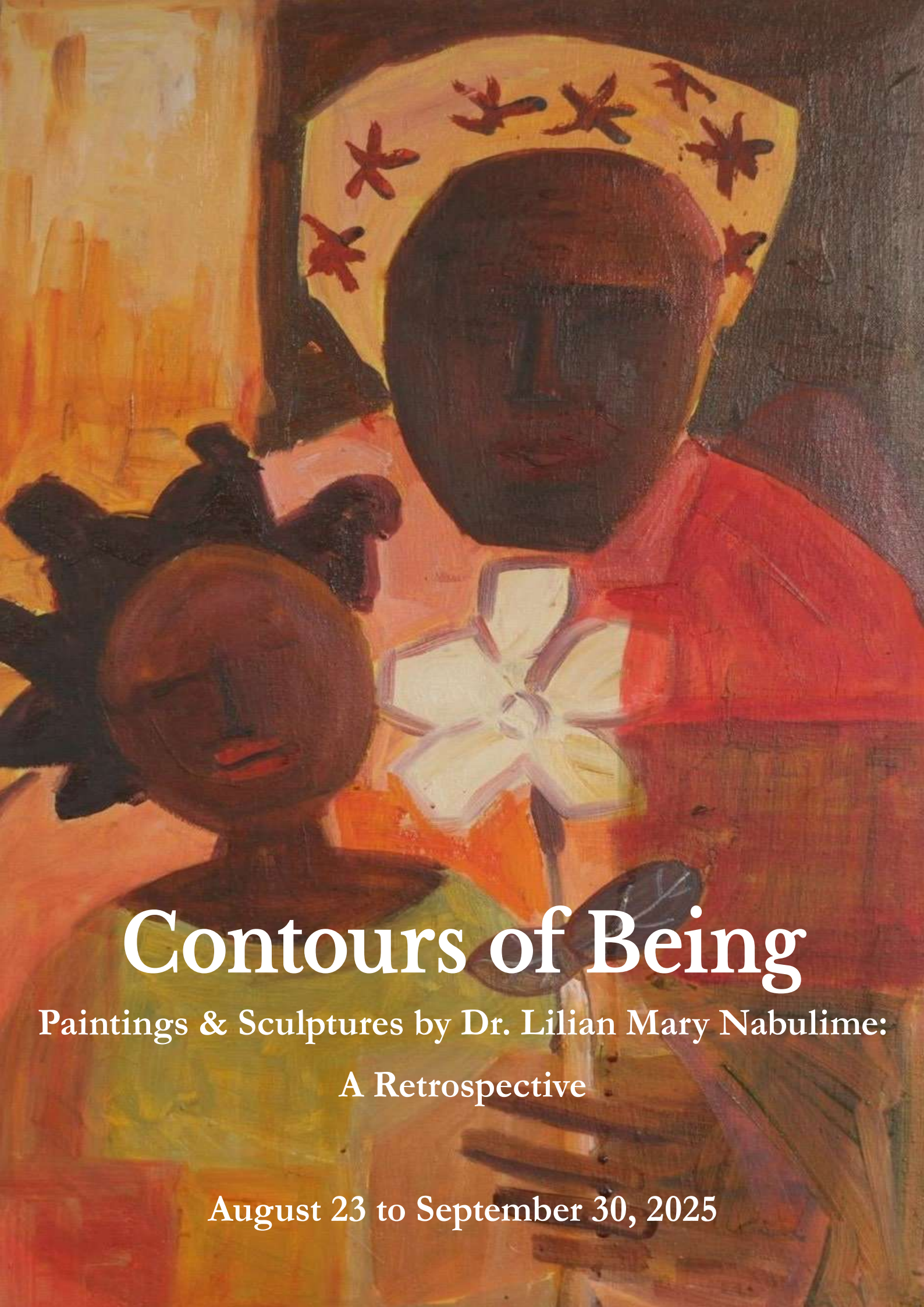


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# Contours of Being: An Overview

**Paintings & Sculptures by Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime**

**Curated by Mr. Rodney Muhumuza**

*(Aug. 23 to Sept. 30, 2025)*

**T**he exhibition presents paintings and sculptures by Lilian Mary Nabulime, a long-established artist in Uganda. The show, titled “Contours of Being,” is a major retrospective of the work of a legendary artist and teacher. While Nabulime is best known as a sculptor of almost peerless rank in Uganda, she is also a terrific painter whose pictures have rarely been seen in public. Her sculptures and paintings on canvas are united for the first time in a show that captures Nabulime in all her glory: as a terrific observer of human nature and a creative whose work forces us to perceive what’s good and what’s not so good in us.

In a firm way, Nabulime’s entire career can be almost summed up as an interrogation of the human impulses that affirm or undermine existence, a quality that marks her as a universal artist. And if her works are almost always beautiful to behold, as indeed they are despite the ugliness they renounce, it is because Nabulime is also a constant aesthete, usually trying to find fragments of beauty even in the turmoil of existence. The best of Nabulime reminds us that humans are unable to be still, for reasons they can or can’t control, and because we know few moments that are totally devoid of fear or worry. Thus Nabulime’s striking imagery, whatever the medium, gives shape to the contours of being.



Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime at her private gallery space in Kyanja, Kampala.

# Lilian Mary Nabulime (PhD): At a Glance

## Bio:

- Born in 1963 in Kampala, Uganda.
- Educated at Makerere University (BA, MA), where she trained under the acclaimed sculptor Francis Nnaggenda, and at Newcastle University, where her doctoral dissertation focused on sculpture as a force for communication in the lives of women affected by the virus that causes AIDS.
- Taught for many years at Makerere University's Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts, achieving the rank of senior lecturer and heading the sculpture department.
- Retired from Makerere University in 2024 but remains active at her studio and private gallery space in Kyanja, Kampala.
- Founded the L.M. Nabulime Foundation, which is dedicated to raising awareness and preserving the art of sculpture.

## Notable Solo Exhibitions:

- 2023, *Olugambo (Gossip)*, Xenson Art Space, Kampala, Uganda
- 2023, *Embodying Social Being*, Almas Art Foundation, Somerset House, London, United Kingdom
- 2022, *UNSETTLED*, Zwartzusters Monastery, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2021, *The Art of Bronze Casting*, Makerere Art Gallery, Kampala, Uganda
- 2018, *Sculptures (1993-2018)* by Lilian M. Nabulime, Afriart Gallery, Kampala, Uganda
- 2014, *Arts in Public Health for Global Benefit*, Candy Land Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden
- 2009, *Sculptural Expressions: Women and HIV/AIDS*, Makerere Art Gallery, Kampala, Uganda
- 2006, *Sculpture and HIV/AIDS*, Heddal Welfare, Norway
- 2004, *Letters to Women*, Bergen Museum, Norway
- 2004, *Lilian Nabulime Sculpture*, The English Martyrs Art Gallery, Hartlepool, the United Kingdom

## Notable Group Exhibitions:

- 2025, *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica*, Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, United States of America
- 2024, *Beyond Sculpture*, Afriart Gallery, Kampala, Uganda
- 2021, *N'ezikookolima* Christmas Collective Exhibition, Seyna Art Gallery, Entebbe, Uganda
- 2020, *My Mother Is Forgetting My Face*, Entrée, Bergen, Norway
- 2019, *Seniority First*, Afriart Gallery, Kampala, Uganda
- 2018, *Africa Now: Contemporary Art by African Women*, Trenton Museum Society, New Jersey, United States of America
- 2015, *Spirit Africa: Films and Art Festival*, Reginald F. Lewis Museum, Baltimore, United States of America
- 2012, *KLA ART 012*, Kampala Contemporary Art Festival, Kampala, Uganda
- 2010, *Change their World Through Art: Contemporary African Women Artists Use their Artistic Voice to Mobilize Their Communities*, University of Maryland, United States of America
- 2002, *Rhythms Dots, Stories and Skylines Exhibition*, The Beacon Whitehaven, Cumbria, the United Kingdom
- 2001, *Art as Communication*, Promega BioPharmace Centre Madison, Wisconsin, United States of America
- 2000, *Progress of World's Women*, United Nations, New York, United States of America
- 1998, *Global Reflections: Nine Women Artists*, United Nations Art Gallery, New York, United States of America
- 1994, *Sculptures*, Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, National Museum, Nairobi, Kenya

## **Notable Fellowships:**

- 2019 - 2020, Artist in Residence, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, Israel
- 2015, Mind Power Projects Award, Maryland Institute College of Art, Maryland, United States of America
- 2012, Commonwealth Fellowship Award, Durham, United Kingdom
- 2011, Robert Sterling Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center, Vermont, United States of America
- 2008 - 2009, British Academy International Visiting Fellowship, United Kingdom

# Unstill

The best of Lilian Nabulime's work reminds us that humans are incapable of being still.

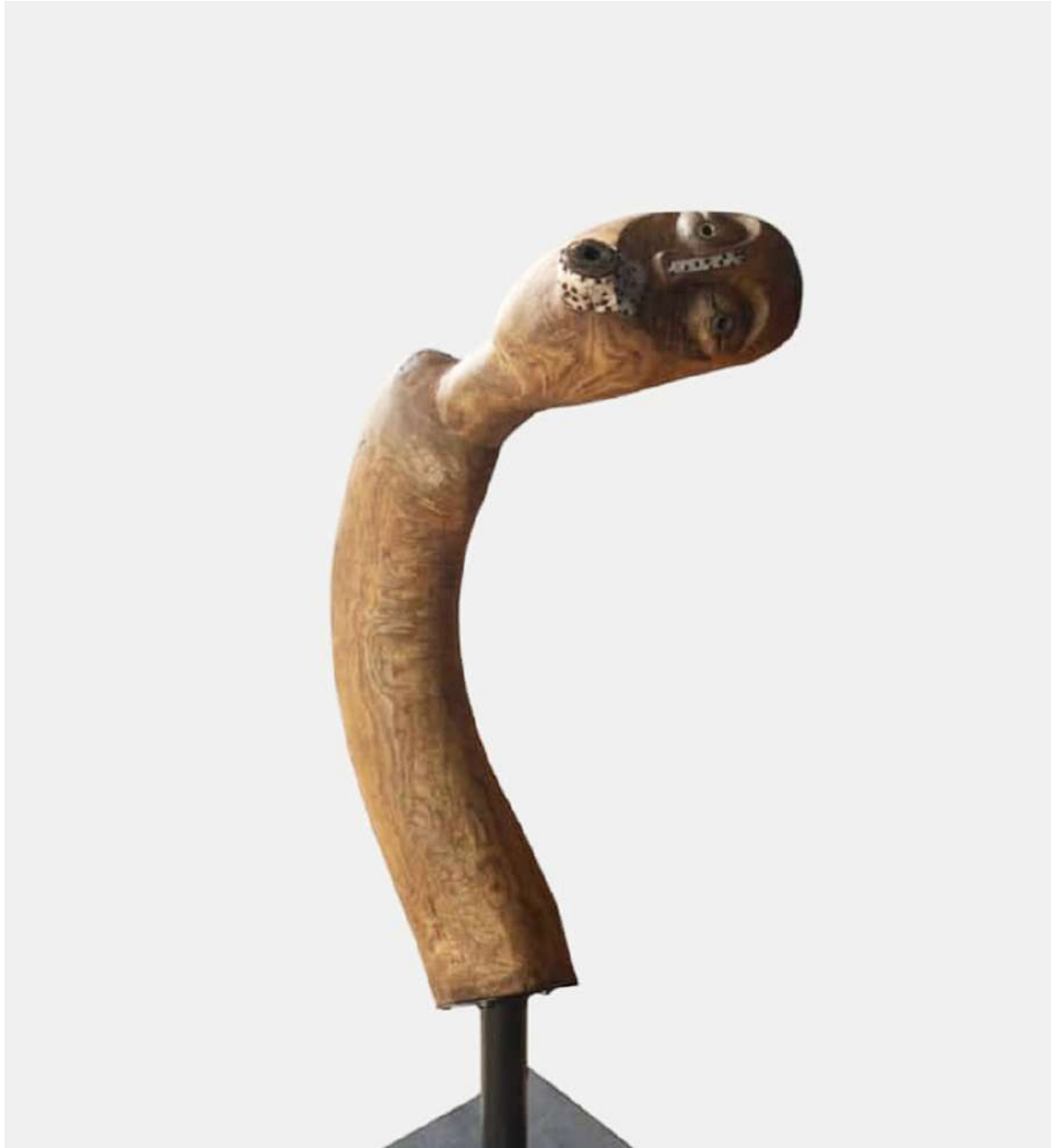
*Rodney Muhumuza*

## I

One afternoon inside a ground-floor gallery at Xenson Art Space in Kampala, with her solo presentation underway in October 2023, Lilian Nabulime wanted to know what I really liked about the relatively small sculpture that I had reserved for myself. The piece, titled *Emboози z'Okumizigo*, was executed in a minimalist style rare for Nabulime, who in recent work tends to give her figures extreme facial expressions that can seem to verge on the absurd. The unadorned sculpture of the figure whose womanly shape is contorted by the force of words emerging from her, coming from her mouth, appeared more evocative of the curse of rumormongers than the monumental pieces that depicted loud-mouthed lunatics.

I told Nabulime all of the above as we both examined the sculpture, and I saw that she seemed further drawn to the piece as I spoke of it, the artist feeling its wooden contours here and there as if all of what I was describing could somehow be touched like a solid thing. Indeed, all the pieces in the *Olugambo (Gossip)* show – from the giant terracotta sculptures of figures that stood like phallic phenomena to monumental wooden pieces like the deformed face of *Never Argue With a Fool* – were solid works, for one thing because in their presentation it was possible to see the sheer amount of labor that had gone into creating them, for another because it was clear the pieces were the handiwork of a superior sculptor.

Nabulime, for the uninitiated, is among the greatest Ugandan artists of all time. She has achieved her legendary status in roughly three decades during which she also taught at Makerere University, where she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees, and from which she retired in 2024 as a senior lecturer. For much of that time she did not get all the



Lilian Mary Nabulime, *Embooji z'Okumizigo*, 2023, wood, 114 x 44 x 14 cm.

credit she richly deserved, a fact that can be seen in the underwhelming number of local exhibitions she garnered between 1990 and 2010. But in the last decade the world has become aware of her unique gifts, so that her sculptures are now in permanent collections by storied groups such as the Art Institute of Chicago. Most collectors are drawn to her wooden sculptures, which can take several years to complete and which, when they are executed to their full potential, show Nabulime in all her glory: as a sharp student of human nature as well as a teacher of what's permissible in ordinary human interaction. And because this artist is ever looking to express the bad habits in us that are hard to overcome, or those which we can only overcome by being *ourselves*, as it were, inevitably she succeeds in fashioning artworks that evoke the maddening drama of existence.



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Ssebo*, 2011, wood, 156 x 210 x 90 cm

That being the case, it is hard to find a Nabulime piece that could possibly be described as boring. They are as interesting and as revelatory as we have come to expect her work to be: *Ssebo* is a geometric interpretation of the travails of the Ugandan opposition figure Kizza Besigye, who has tried unsuccessfully to be president since 2001 and presently languishes behind bars for alleged treason; *Perplexed* describes an elderly-looking man who seems to be at his wit's end; and all of what we know about the comportment of false witnesses seems enshrined in Nabulime's sensational *Rumormonger*.

Nabulime's work affirms what we know to be true: that human beings, even when they try hard enough, are unable to be still, beset by anxiety or concern, and knowing very few moments in their lives that are truly free of fear. This is, for me, the object lesson, even though, quite apart from the searing beauty of Nabulime's artworks or their subversive quality, there's much else to admire in an oeuvre that, I discovered only recently, includes oil paintings and even textile works that have rarely been seen in public.

## II

Nabulime lives and works in Kyanja, the Kampala suburb that for years has been her home. Her private gallery space, set at the end of an expansive and well-tended garden, is full of treasures new and old, from gigantic wooden monuments that can only be lifted by construction equipment to relief sculptures that celebrate the joys of womanhood. When I visited the artist for the first time earlier this year, my idea was to put on a retrospective show celebrating Nabulime as an outstanding wood-carver. But then she let me into her inner sanctum and started pulling out her oil paintings one by one, each new piece more impressive than the last, so that finally even I couldn't sit still as I scrutinized the treasures that had been gathering dust. Only three paintings – pieces whose images appeared in a 2023 monograph published by the Almas Art Foundation – had enjoyed the dignity of hanging on a wall, with the rest consigned to the darker spaces of Nabulime's property. She had the sense that her paintings were significant and perhaps even as valuable as the sculptures, of course, but it was also apparent she had not thought of the pictures as effectively sculptures on canvas and, therefore, quite special. Moreover, adding to their



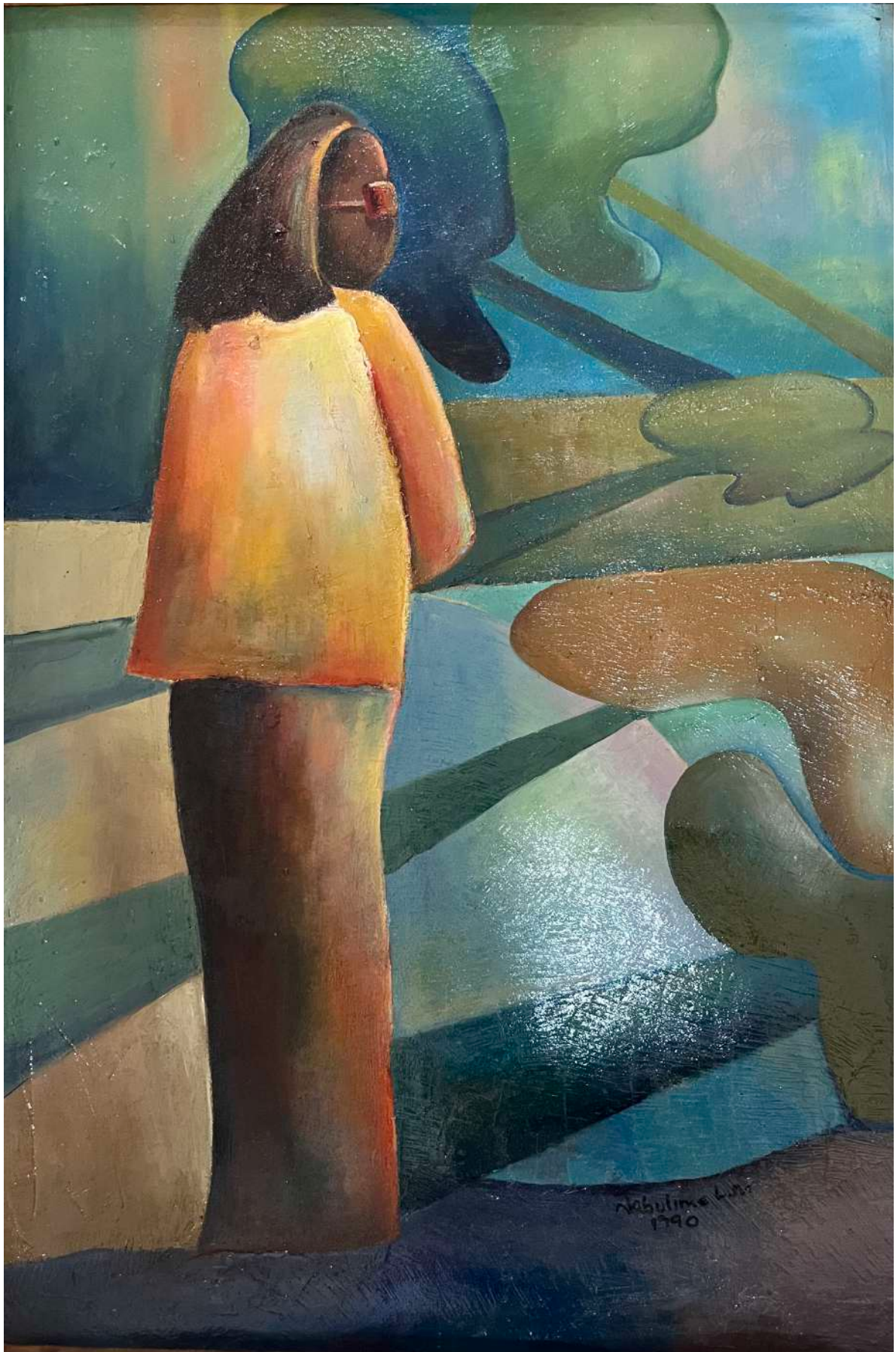
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Swimming*, 1993, oil on canvas, 62 x 53 cm

rarity, many of the paintings were made in the early 90s.

Many artists, even great ones, are good at one thing. If they can draw or paint, for example, they probably are not gifted as sculptors. But a few are known to achieve strength at both, and I think now of Professor George William Kyeyune, until recently Nabulime's colleague at Makerere University, an accomplished sculptor who is, by my lights, Uganda's greatest living painter. But Nabulime, unlike Kyeyune, has not painted a canvas in such a long time, which is why it felt like a miracle to encounter original paintings by her that were so compelling in the way they amplified her practice as a sculptor. For me, it was a revelation to see how this sculptor could paint if she wanted to, and it was pleasing to discover that there was in her brushwork much to commend it.

Her painting style fuses a naïve sensibility with abstract expressionism in pictures that charm for their wonderful bursts of color and their zany compositions. At the same time, there is in her paintings, as in her wooden sculptures, the same wrestling with the anxieties of existence, the inescapable forces that condition us to go this way or that, to say this or that. But while these forces are sharply described in Nabulime's sculptural work, this is not the case in paintings that succeed because of that. In *Swimming*, a picture executed in 1993, we see the image of a man's face emerging from the depth of what could be the sea – or maybe a swimming pool, if one wishes – and he is battling whirlpools and eddies that could overwhelm him at any time. The painting is classic Nabulime, who time and again shows us that man is a creature on the move, physically and in every other way, constantly trying to forge ahead even if it is at the expense of others.

*Waiting*, a picture made in 1998, evokes similar feelings: the image, Nabulime said, was provoked by the memory of a woman the artist once saw in Berlin who stood waiting for an automobile to arrive. Waiting, as we all know, is one of the near-constant states of human experience: waiting for the lunch-time bell to ring if you are a student, waiting for the doctor to call you if you are a patient, waiting for speeding cars to get away if you are trying to cross the road, waiting for the visitors to leave if you are an impatient host, waiting for your wife to come into bed at night, waiting for this, waiting for that. A painting like *Waiting* is brilliant because it captures the agony of waiting for something that may never arrive, and Nabulime nails it by putting the solitary figure in an incongruous background of colorful cloud-like forms, as if she who is waiting is actually ensnared.



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Waiting*, 1998, oil on canvas, 86 x 60 cm

As Nabulime said during her *Olugambo (Gossip)* show at Xenson Art Space two years ago, people in the transitional state of waiting are as dangerous as they are vulnerable. “In places where transactions involve long lines and lengthy sitting around and waiting, people are likely to start talking,” she said. Precisely because they are unable to be still even when they can’t go anywhere, they must turn their attention to others for entertainment at the very least. Nabulime was at pains to point out that she made a distinction between gossip that is considered ‘positive’ and that which is negative, in that not all unprincipled talk is hurtful to others. Positively gossiping, she said at the time, allows one to “let off steam,” and it can also “build bonds and empathy.” But she warned that gossipy conversation almost



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Womanhood*, 2015, relief sculpture, 61 x 28 x 2.5 cm

always is “destructive on many levels.”

Nabulime spoke as one who has been the victim of idle talk by others who said terrible things after her husband died of AIDS years ago, and she continues to be stigmatized by some who cannot believe she is not infected with HIV. Not surprisingly, the evolving community response to AIDS over the years is one of her favorite themes in works that force us to visualize our weaknesses as human beings. It is hard to find a family in Uganda that has not been affected by AIDS, a disease that plagued our parents’ generation and now conditions our lives. Nabulime is urging us, in the best of her work, to look out for others, to treat others as we would like to be treated. It’s an honorable sentiment, and we will do well to listen to this simple but profound message from an artistic master of our time.

In *Contours of Being*, a retrospective show I am curating for Kampala’s Weganda Gallery, Nabulime’s sculptures and paintings are united for the first time in a public exhibition. Even if I say so, it’s a terrific achievement: we see the intellectual seriousness of her practice, we see the elasticity of her compassion, we see the intensity of her vision, we see everything that underscores her importance. One also suspects that her artistic impetus emerges in part from her strong faith as a Catholic woman – because, as the Bible says, there is always room for repentance. A few times as I chatted with Nabulime, she was apt to quickly pivot to another topic when our conversation threatened to cross the line into what she might describe as ‘negative’ gossip. She generally practices what she preaches.

Nabulime, who in 2007 earned her doctorate for a dissertation on sculpture as a force for communication in the lives of women affected by AIDS, has spent her whole career trying to modify destructive human behavior by shining a spotlight on it. I sometimes think of her work as an ongoing interrogation of the impulses that affirm or undermine existence, a quality that marks her as a universal artist. Her works speak to us all. And if they are almost always beautiful to behold, as indeed they are despite the ugliness they renounce, it is because Nabulime is also a constant aesthete, usually trying to find fragments of beauty even in the madness of existence.

# The Artworks



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Love*, 1998, oil on canvas, 64 x 39 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *My Family*, 1998, oil on canvas, 69 x 61 cm



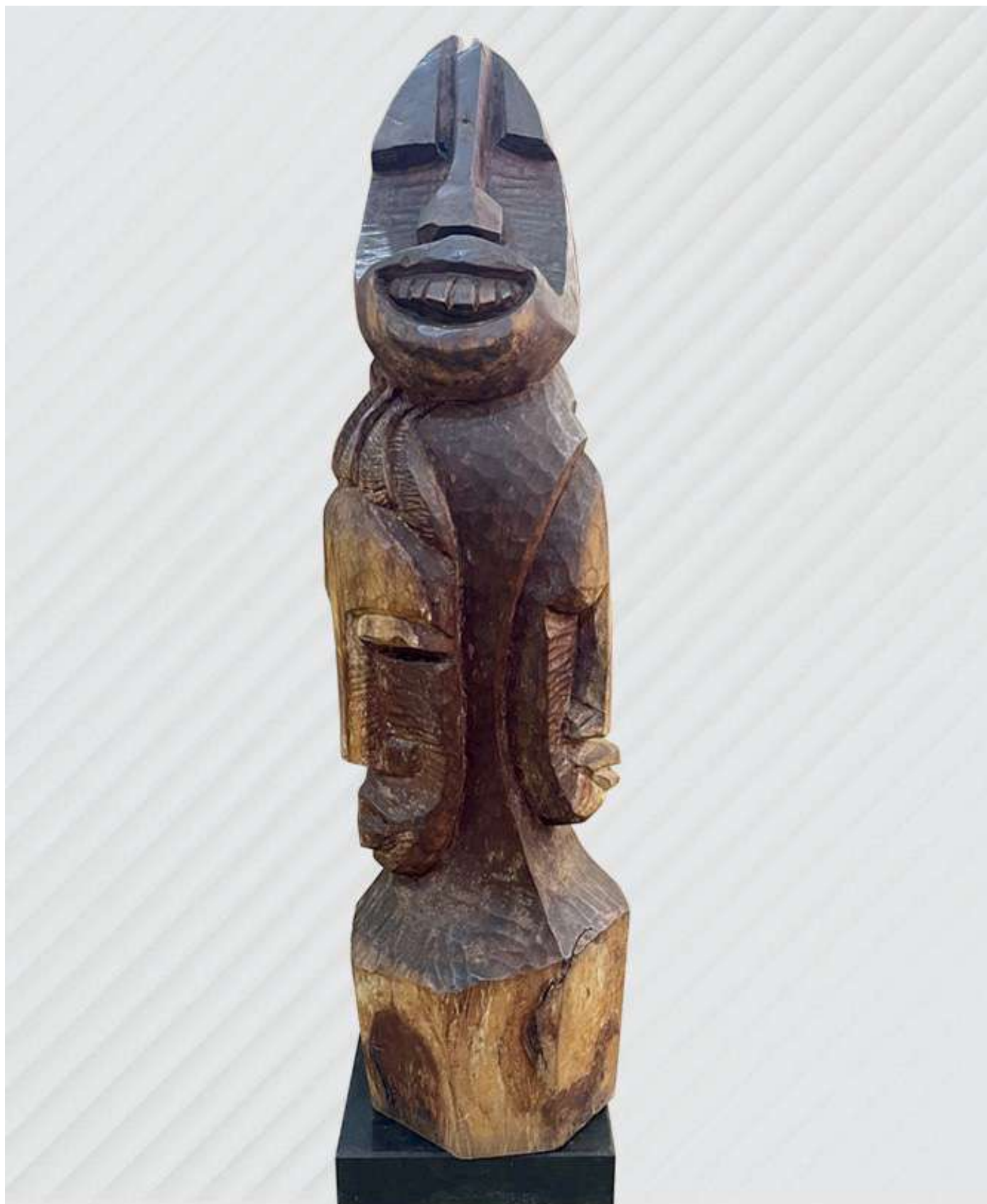
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Bride Price*, 2000, oil on canvas, 57 x 57 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Ssebo*, 2011, wood, 156 x 210 x 90 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Maama*, 2011, wood, 120 x 64 x 66 cm



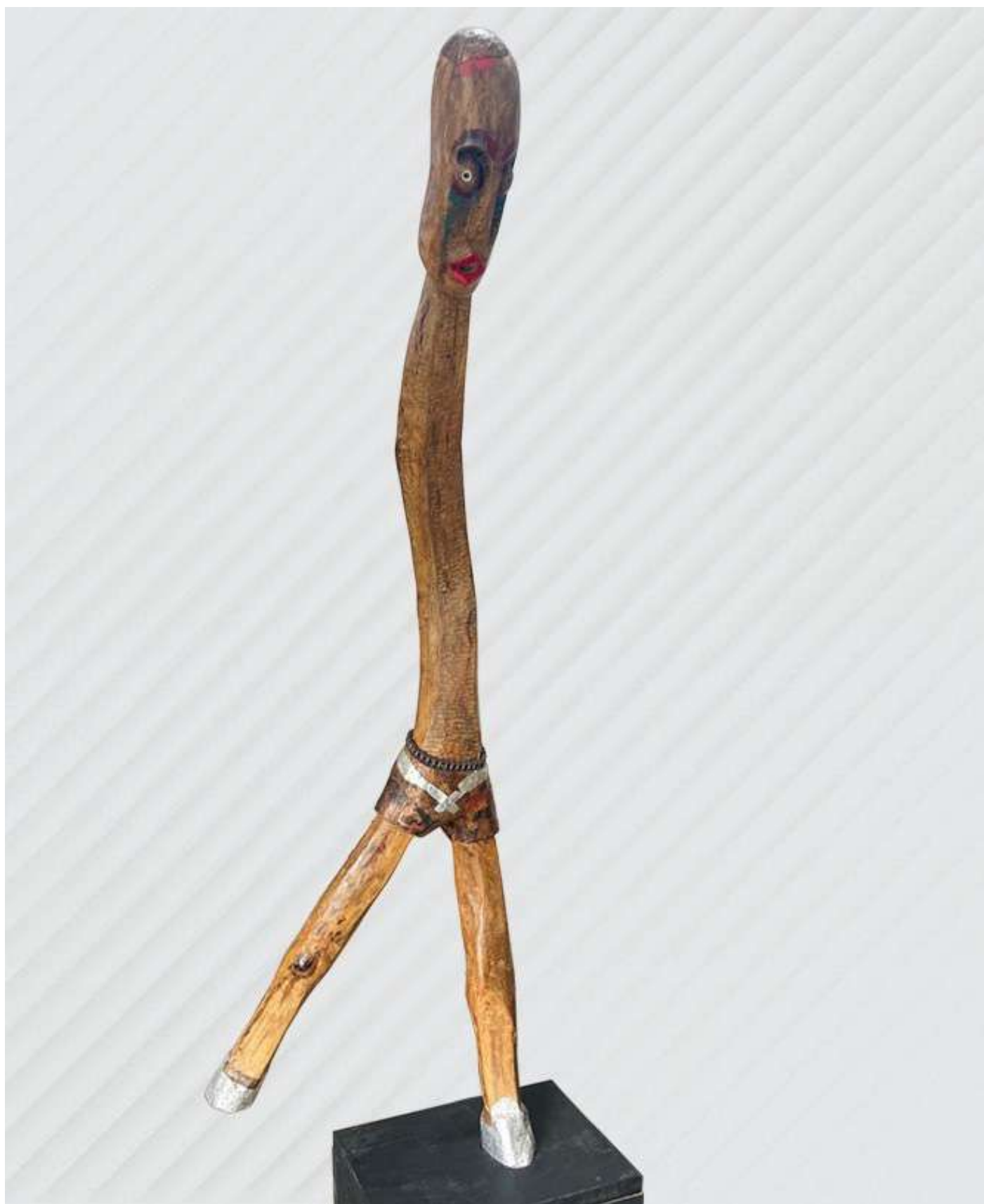
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Polygamy*, 2011, wood, 111 x 29 x 35 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Swimming*, 1993, oil on canvas, 62 x 53 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Confident*, 2016-2017, wood, 31.5 x 41 x 131 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Mpulidde*, 2023, wood and metal, 205 x 30 x 48 cm



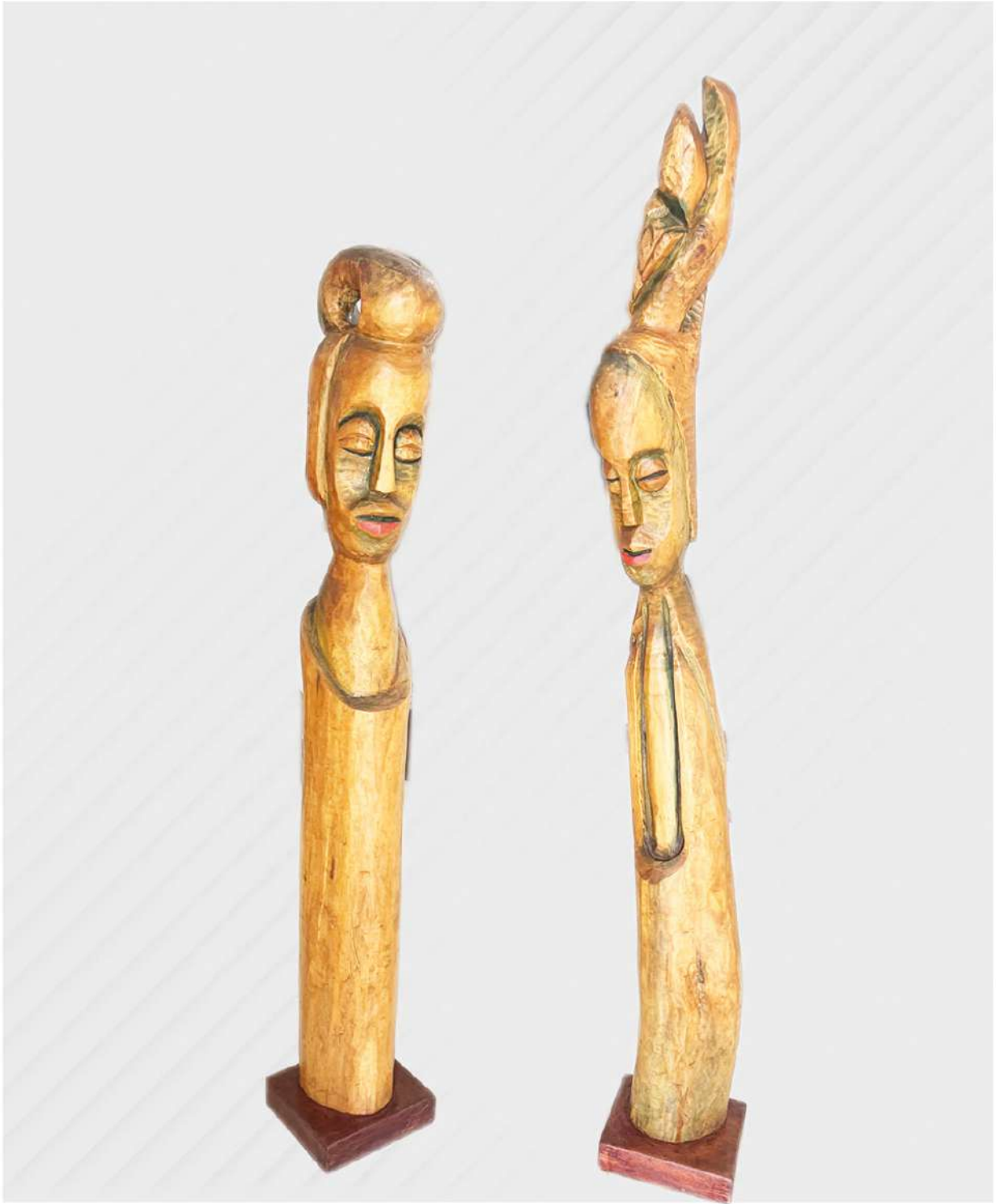
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Mother and Daughter*, 1990, oil on canvas, 130 x 60 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Perturbed*, 1990, oil on board, 42 x 48 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Reflection I and II*, 2015, aluminium casting, 20 x 19.5 cm each



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Women in Discussion*, 2014, wood, 145 x 22 x 12 cm; 133 x 23 x 14 cm



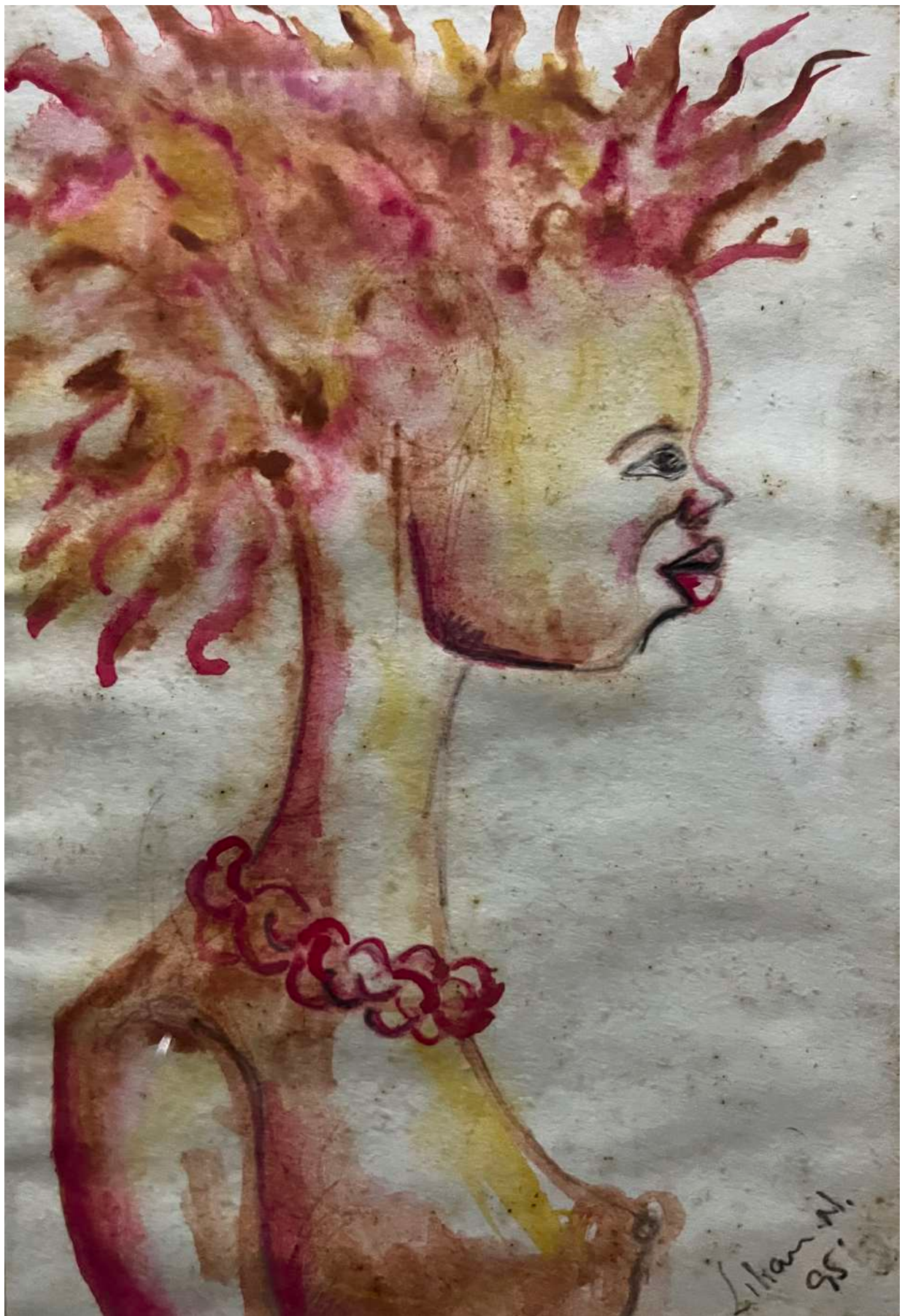
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Breastfeeding*, 1993, oil on board, 24 x 25 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Thoughtful*, 2013, print on paper, 27.5 x 20 cm



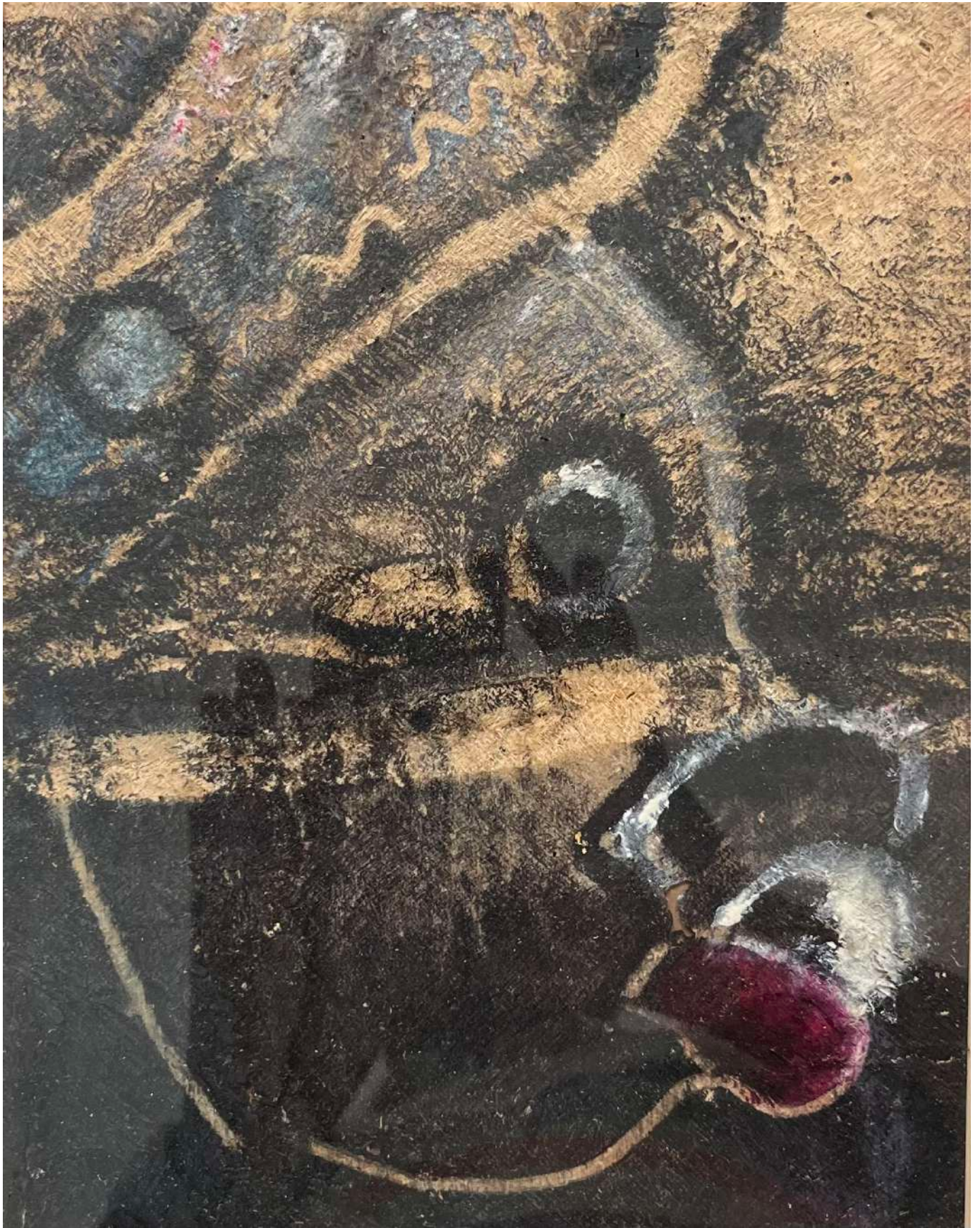
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Soul Searching I*, 1995, watercolor, 20 x 14 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Soul Searching II*, 1995, watercolor, 20 x 14 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Let's Talk*, 2001, watercolor, 22 x 32 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Fish Lips*, 2013, print on barkcloth, 24.5 x 19 cm



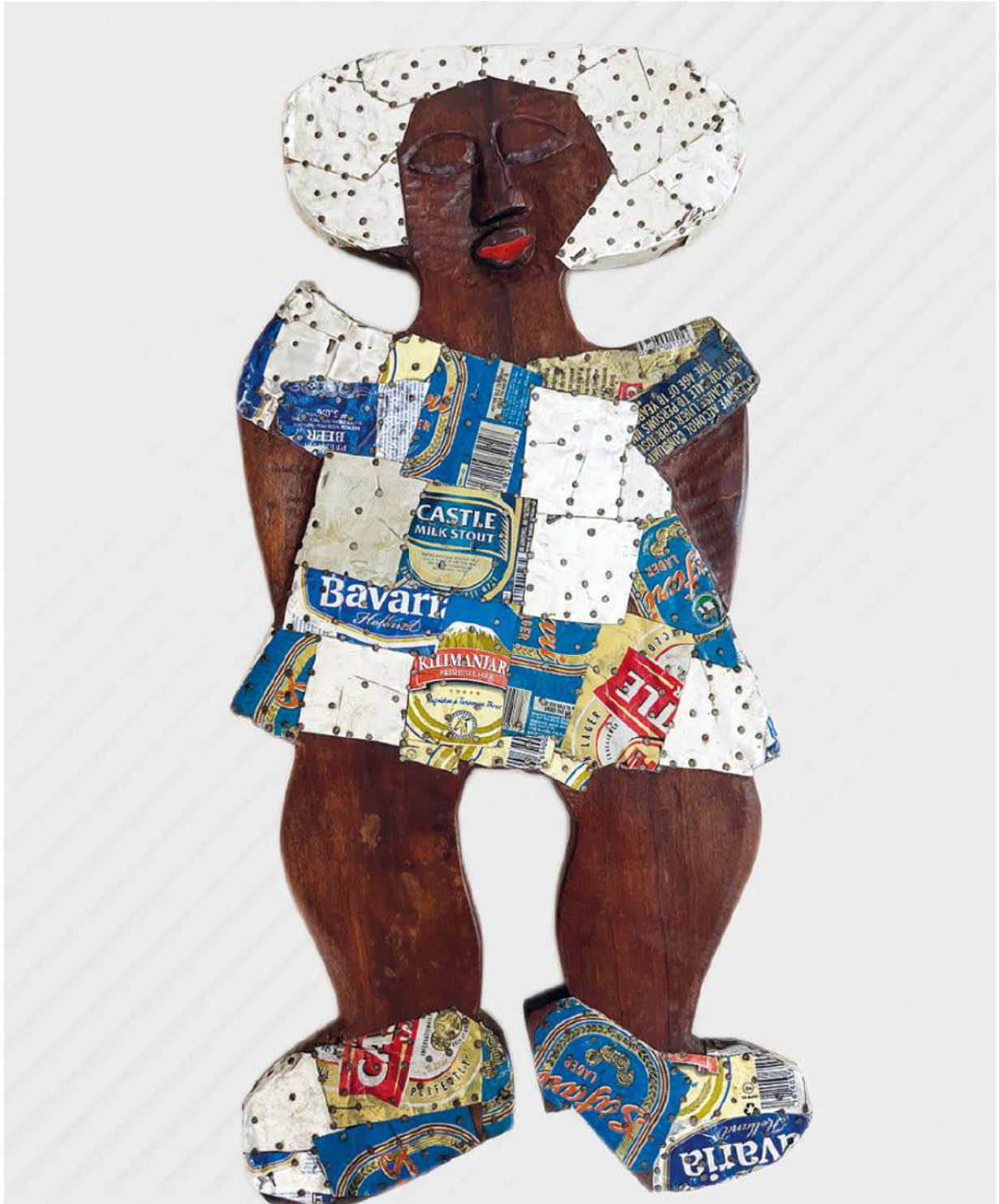
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Grandson*, 1995, oil on board, 30 x 20 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Grandma*, 1995, oil on board, 29.5 x 19 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Womanhood*, 2015, relief sculpture, 61 x 28 x 2.5 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Jolly Girl*, 2016, relief sculpture, 61 x 28 x 2.5 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Whistling Boy*, 2010, relief sculpture, 64 x 31 x 2.5 cm



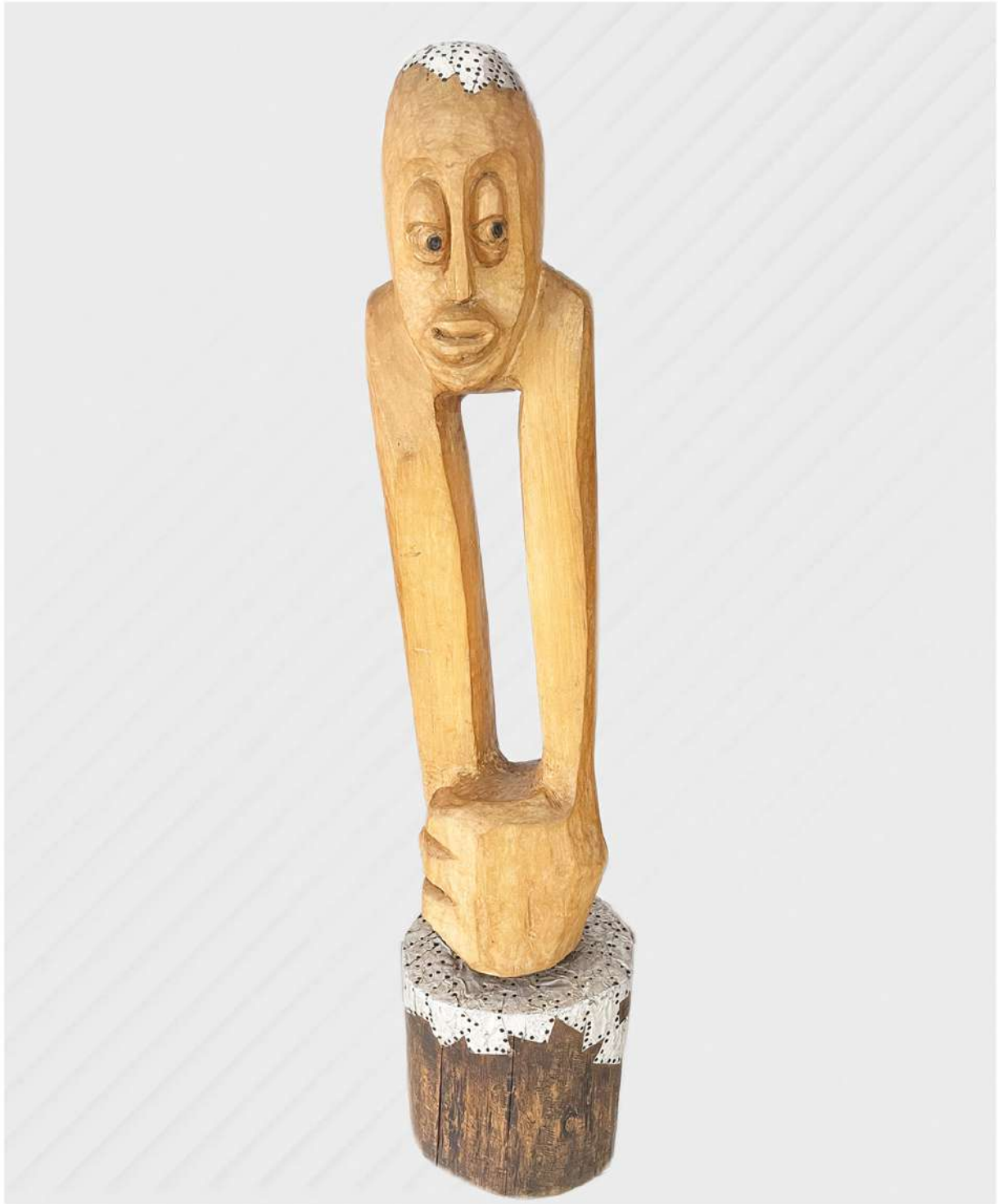
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Unit*, 2001, mixed media, 88.5 x 33.5 cm



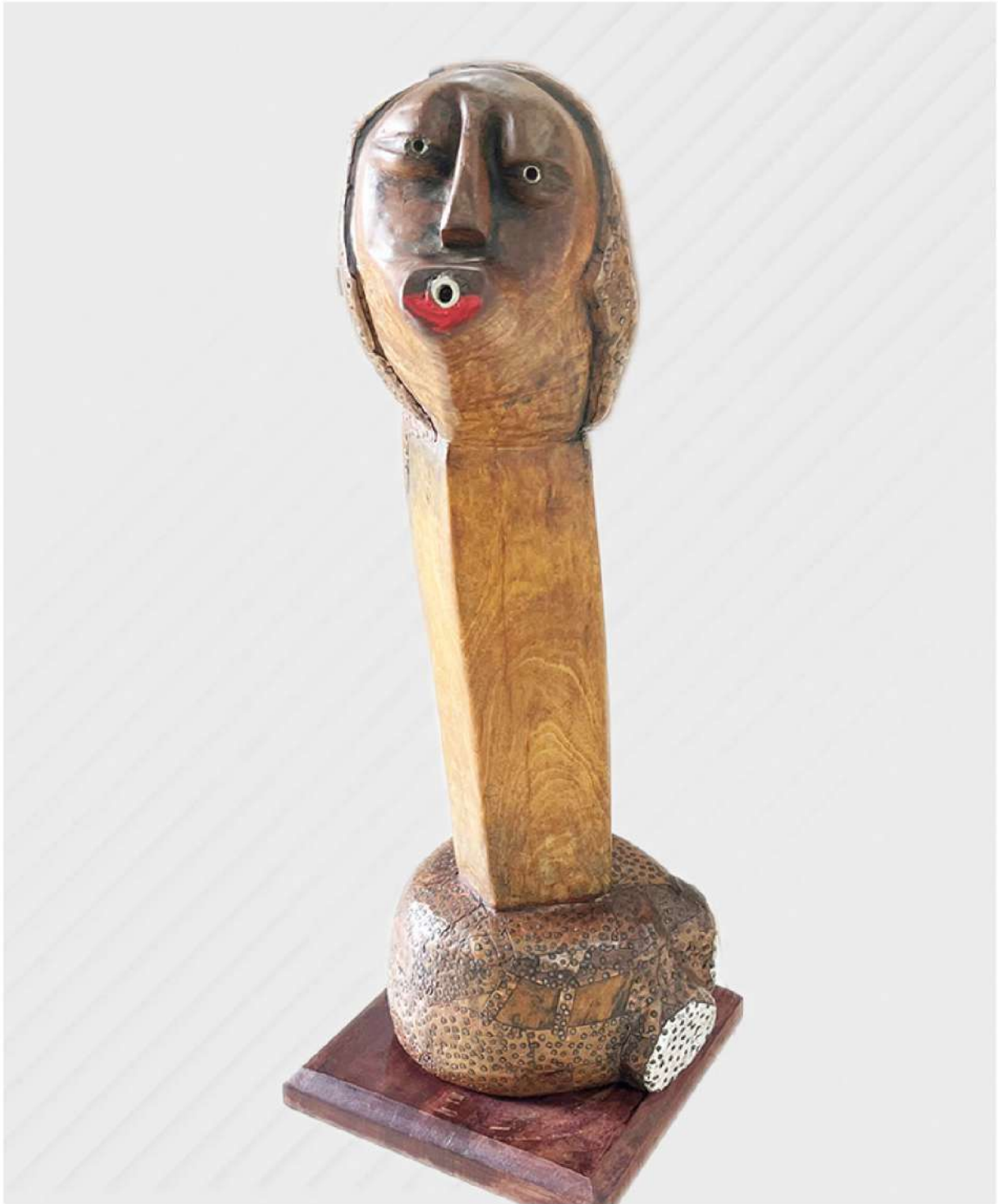
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Currency*, 1998, mixed media, 79 x 58 cm



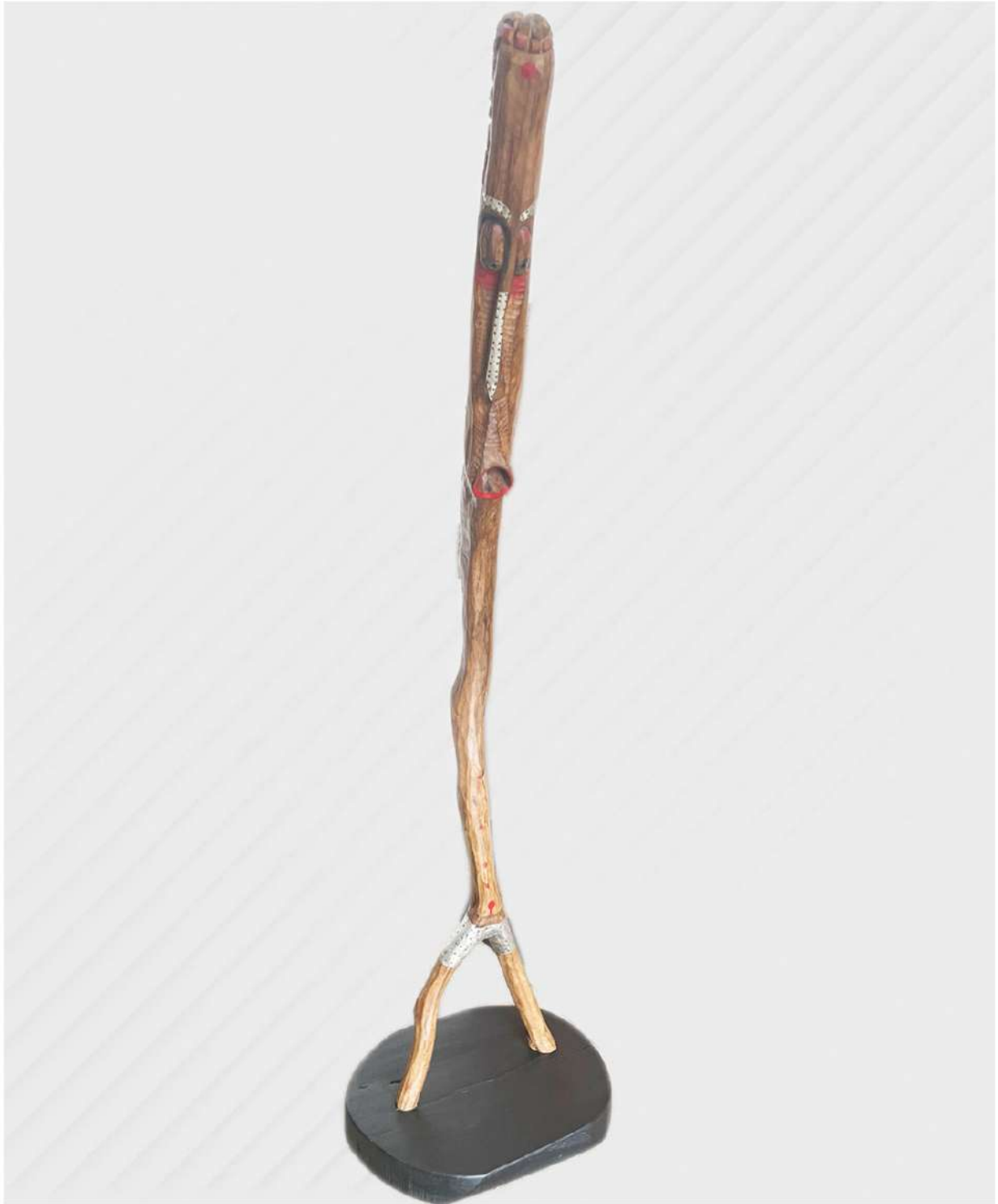
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Togetherness*, 2001, mixed media, 54.5 x 43.5 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Perplexed*, 2010, wood & metal, 137 x 22 x 22 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Mob*, 2019, wood, aluminium & copper sheets, 78 x 27 x 27 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Tambula nga Kinawolovu*, 2023, wood & metal  
180 x 7 x 25 cm



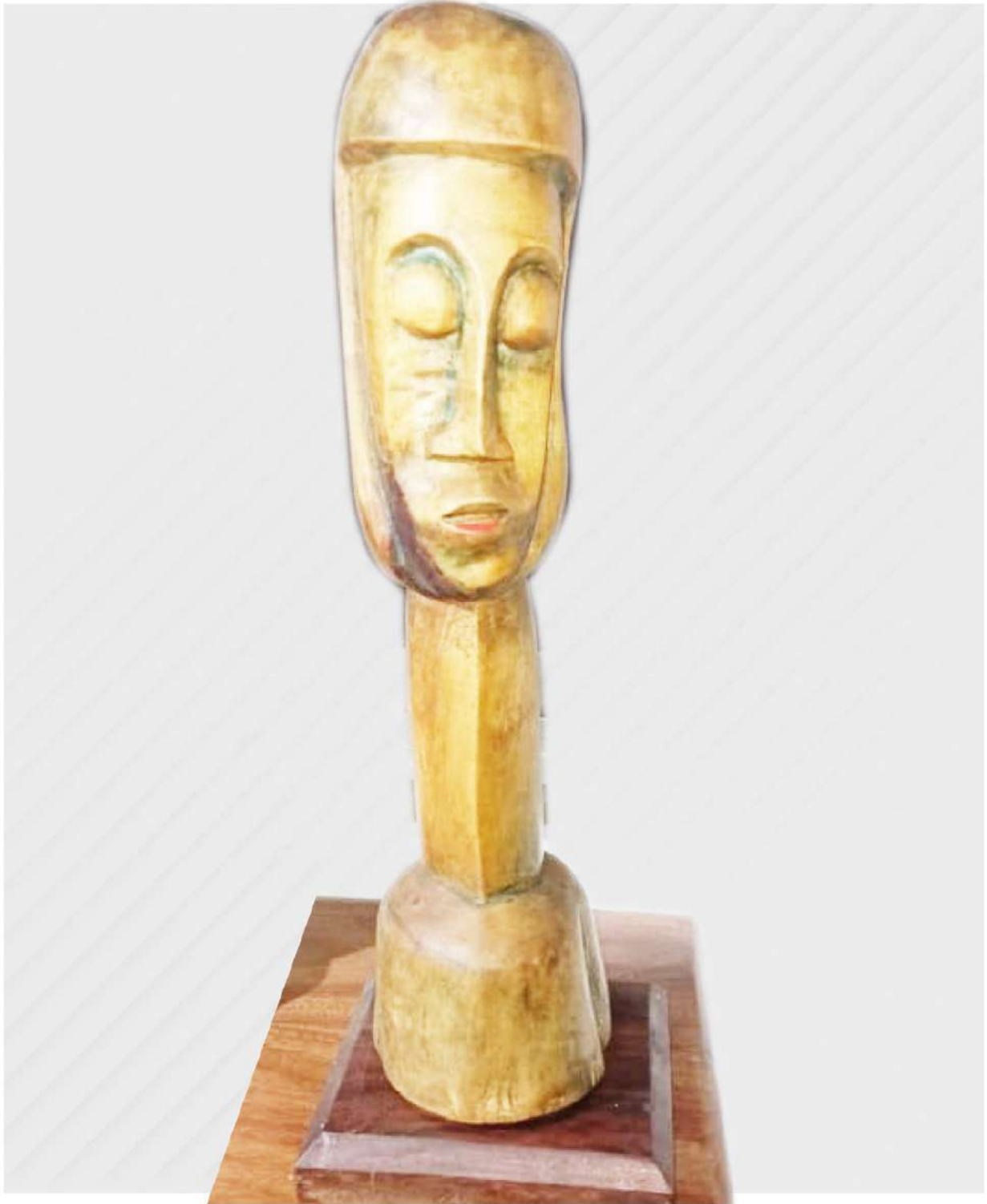
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Untitled I*, 2024, wood, 95 x 9 x 16 cm



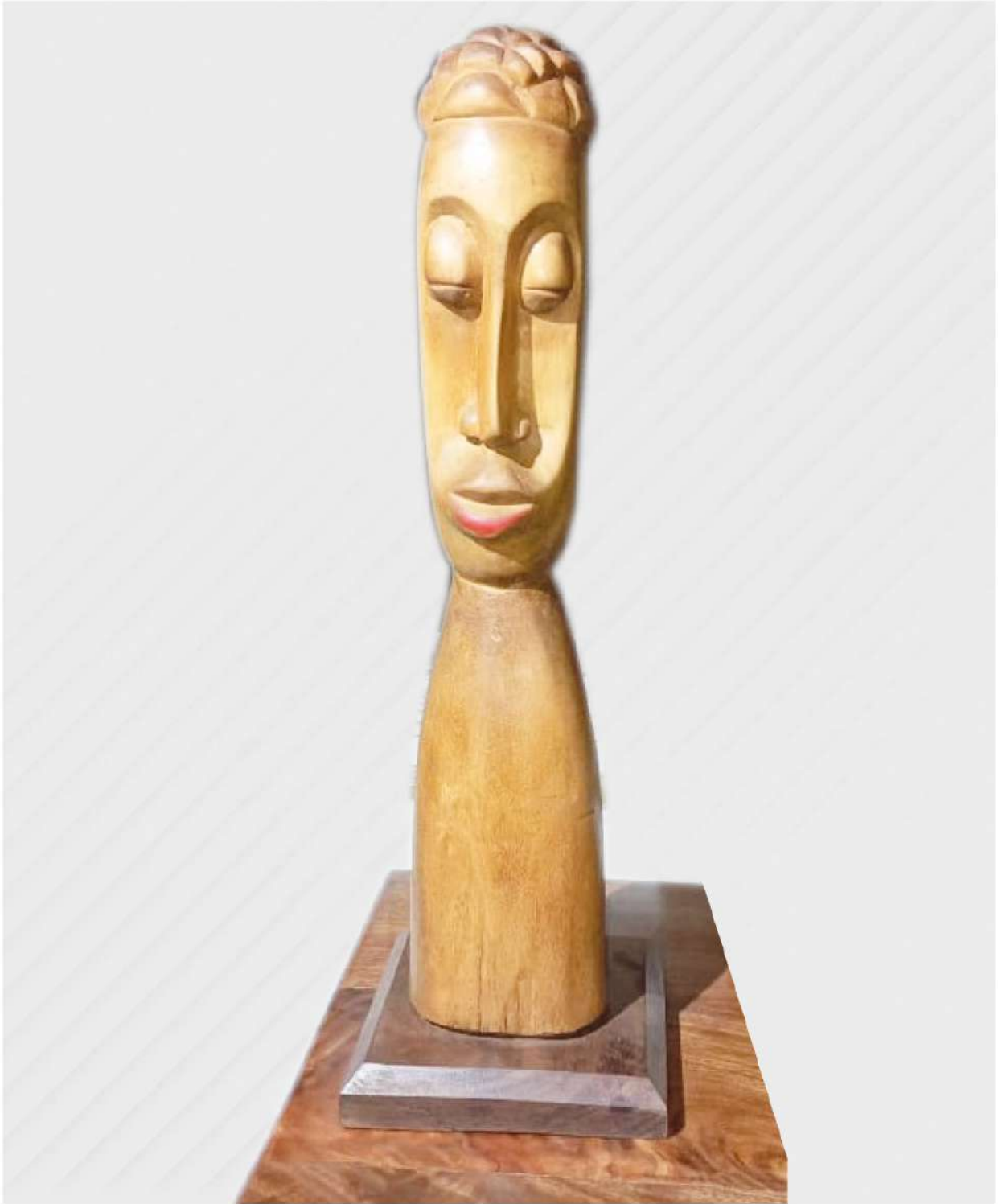
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Untitled II*, 2024, wood, 92 x 8 x 15 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Untitled III*, 2024, wood, 98 x 8 x 16 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Agnes*, 2019, wood, 71 x 20 x 20 cm



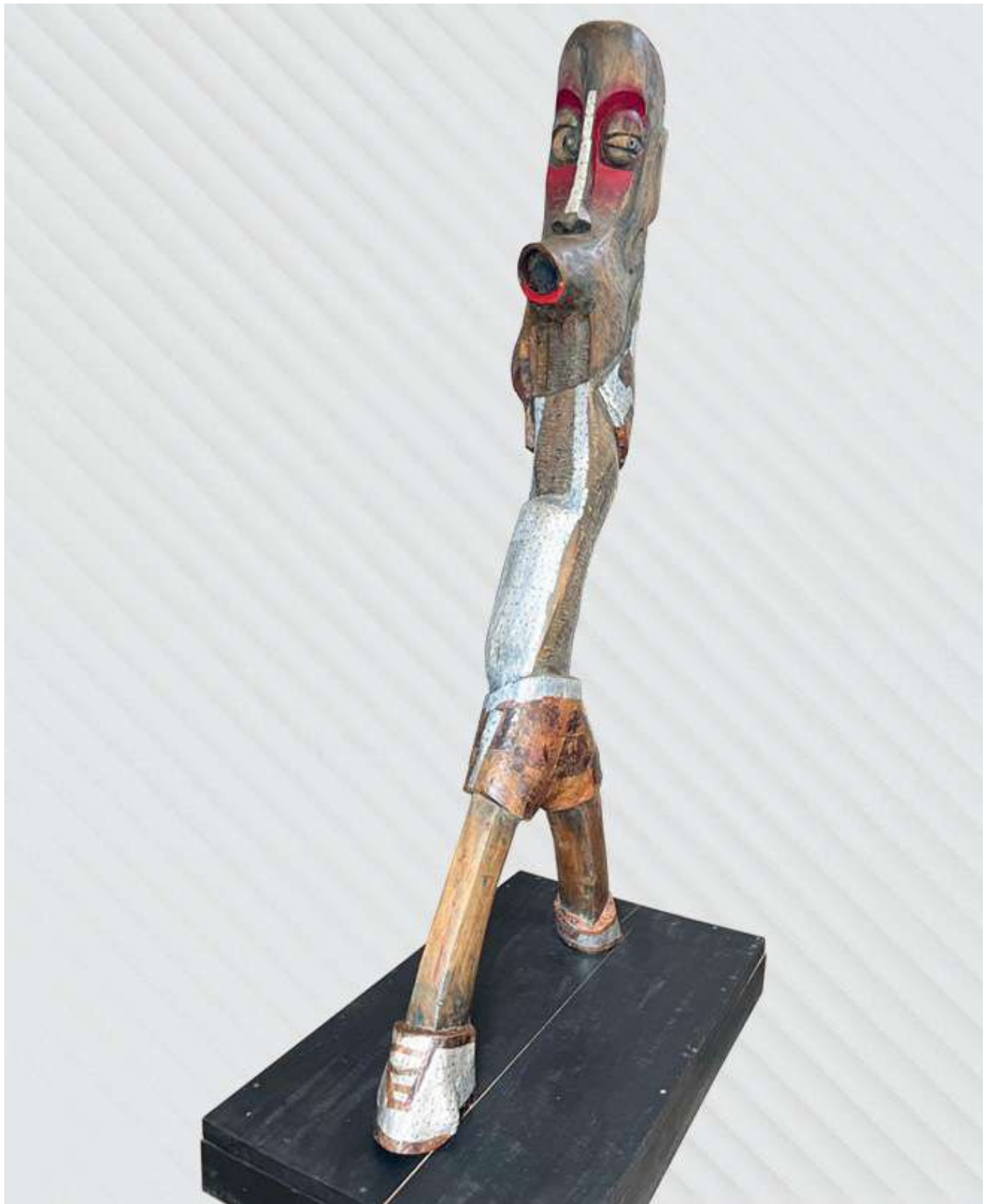
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Pretty*, 2019, wood, 63 x 20 x 20 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Expression Series*, 2017, terracotta, 13 x 7 x 8 cm



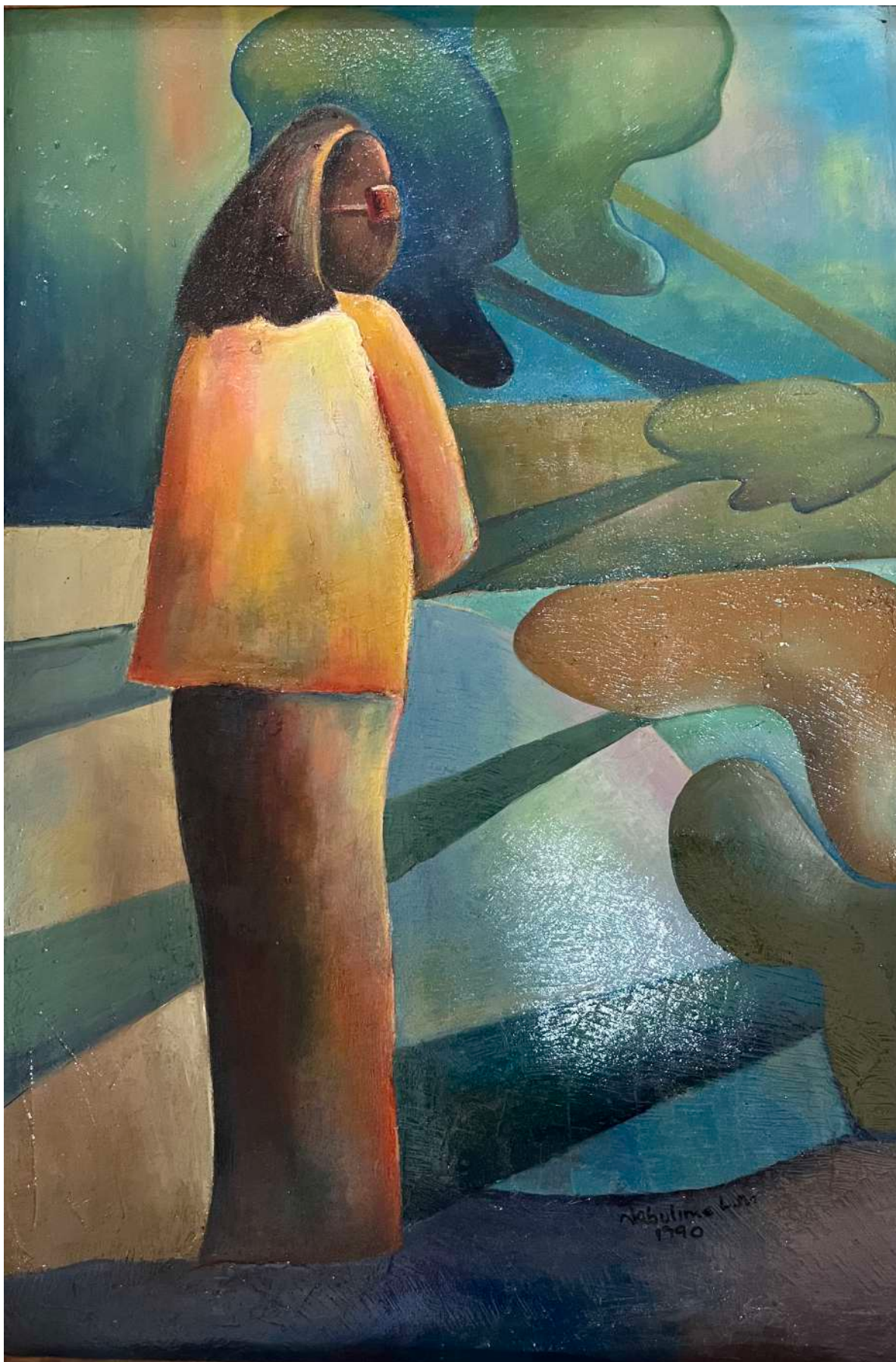
Lilian M. Nabulime, *Expression Series*, 2017, terracotta, 13 x 7 x 8 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Rumormonger*, 2023, wood & metal, 193 x 81 x 35 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Oh!*, 2023, wood & copper, 106 x 45 x 43 cm



Lilian M. Nabulime, *Waiting*, 1998, oil on canvas, 86 x 60 cm

