

ART

# The 1:54 Fair Surveys the Multicultural — and Multifaceted — State of Contemporary Art in Africa

by SIDDHARTHA MITTER

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**Nontsikelelo Veleko, Trio, pigment print on cotton rag**

COURTESY AFRONOVA GALLERY

When Touria El Glaoui founded the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, the first international fair with a focus on Africa, the market was still reeling from the collapse of prices for Chinese art, as well as a similar phenomenon in India.

“People asked if it was a bubble, like the Asian market,” says El Glaoui, a banker turned arts entrepreneur who launched 1:54 in London in 2013. “But we’re past that now. We’re seeing a constant evolution in awareness of what’s happening with African artists from the continent and the diaspora. It’s not a bubble; it’s just very good art.”



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The 1:54 fair has become a showcase for this dynamic. It is now an annual event in both London and New York, where it opens its third local edition this weekend at Pioneer Works in Red Hook. Featuring nineteen galleries, it is small as fairs go, certainly relative to the sprawling Frieze art fair that comes to town the same weekend. It can capture only a slice of the production taking place in emerging art scenes on the continent — such as Dakar, Accra, Lagos, Nairobi — and in creative hubs like London and Paris, home to vibrant immigrant communities.

El Glaoui welcomes the curatorial challenge. “In such a limited space, it’s important that the galleries are putting up the best show they can,” she says. “And we have to have very strong galleries each year.” 1:54’s roster ranges from

established specialists including Paris's Magnin-A and London's Jack Bell to Mov'Art, a gallery in Luanda, Angola, that made the transition from pop-up shows to a fixed location just a few months ago.

With a program of talks, organized by Cameroonian curator Koyo Kouoh, along with special exhibitions — devoted this year to Malick Sidibé, the great Malian photographer who died in 2016, and the pop-inspired Moroccan portraitist Hassan Hejjaj — the fair has become a one-stop immersion in African creative life. “It’s a beautiful thing,” says the Nigerian painter and installation artist Victor Ehikhamenor. “1:54 has created a space for us to have our own dance, our own swagger, to bring who we are.”

African contemporary art is a term that artists and curators employ despite misgivings. Africa is, after all, a continent comprising 54 countries (hence the name of the fair) plus far-flung diaspora communities, all of which resist generalization. For some established artists, El Glaoui says, being labeled “African” can seem limiting. “But for younger, less visible artists, it’s something that can give them visibility and that they can use as a strength.”

“There’s no such thing as African art, but I need something to call my gallery,” says Ayo Adeyinka, director of the Tafeta gallery in London. He has three young artists in the fair, all Nigerian: Babajide Olatunji, whose hyperrealist portraiture examines the dying practice of tribal facial markings; Niyi Olagunju, a veteran of the Iraq war whose metal sculptures question the African art trade and the mining industry; and Temitayo Ogunbiyi, a U.S.-born artist who moved back to Lagos several years ago and produces drawings, collage, and installations with a conceptual bent.

Another London-based gallery, 50 Golborne, has one of the fair’s edgier rosters, with Dakar-based ceramics and installation artist Cheikhou Bâ; Olalekan Jeyifous,

who lives in Brooklyn and makes collage, sculpture, and digital art inspired by manic and futuristic urban architecture; the Nigerian-American artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji, who works partly on drawings that incorporate thread stitching and partly in video and public performance; and Emo de Medeiros, from Benin, who crafts enigmatic objects from found materials, fabric, and technological detritus — some with video or musical components — and who involves local artisans in his process.

“We have artists who live between continents, just like the modern world,” says Pascale Revert, 50 Golborne’s director. “And there are young collectors who are very interested in their work. We are very far from Africanism or Orientalism, the search for the exotic. This is contemporary.”

A small number of African artists have achieved high selling prices and major exhibitions: El Anatsui, the Ghanaian sculptor and installation artist based in Nigeria; Julie Mehretu, the Ethiopian-American abstract painter; Nigerian conceptual artist Yinka Shonibare. Newest in this circle is Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who lives in Los Angeles; her works mix painting, drawing, and collage to produce textured, emotionally rich depictions of Nigerian domesticity and daily life. In March, one sold at Christie’s for \$3.1 million.

Yet even this top tier is underpriced compared to superstar European and American artists, says Adeyinka, who notes that African art is “cheaper and often better.” And outside the vanguard, the disparities can be even more glaring. “You have established artists in their sixties on the continent who get at most \$50,000, which some emerging artists in the West get in their twenties,” El Glaoui says. “That is a gap we definitely need to bridge.”

For Mov’Art in Luanda, 1:54 marks its first time showing at an international fair. “Angola is relatively isolated, so the value is seeing what other artists are doing and having that exchange,” says manager Lauren Pereira. The gallery is presenting just

one artist, Angel Ihosvanny Cisneros, known as Ihosvanny, who makes mixed-media work that draws on Luanda's busy cityscape. Crucially, local collectors have emerged. "Most of our clients are Angolan," Pereira says.

This development is central to the long-term growth of contemporary art on the continent. "My collector pool is largely Nigerians, and I'm excited about that," says Ehikhamenor. "We have to realize that we have this market to build. If you don't build the market, it fizzles out."

Holding 1:54 in New York builds ties to a major art marketplace, of course, but also to specific segments — Africans working on Wall Street, for instance, as well as

African-American collectors. "New York is an amazing window for us," El Glaoui says. Coming up on her calendar is 1:54's first-ever edition in Africa, early next year in Marrakech, Morocco. "We still need to accelerate getting people engaged with contemporary African artists," El Glaoui says. "If we get to a scenario that is aligned with the rest of the world, then our mission will be complete."

## **1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair**

*May 5–7, Pioneer Works, 159 Pioneer Street, Brooklyn*

Day ticket: \$20. Info: [1-54.com](http://1-54.com)

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