

Studio 54

New York

05.22.15



Left: Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, and 1:54 Contemporary African Art founding director Touria El Glaoui. Right: 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair. (Photos: Alejandro Hincapié).

CONCURRENT WITH FRIEZE, the contemporary African art world had its own village fete: the New York edition of London-based 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, which opened last week at Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Inaugurated during Frieze London in 2013, the original fair drew over six thousand visitors to Somerset House, with that number rising to ten thousand in October 2014. With the New York iteration, founder Touria El Glaoui, daughter of the celebrated Moroccan artist Hassan El Glaoui, intends to establish 1:54 as the go-to platform for African contemporary art.

The journey from Manhattan turned out not to be *that* bad. Everyone I met seemed simply relieved that people were arriving, like one at the beginning of their own birthday party. It became clear that with so much contemporary art going on in the city, a major concern was that no one would make the trek. But interest in contemporary art from Africa has been steadily growing and continues to make its global presence felt: The week prior had seen the inauguration of the Venice Biennale with its first African-born curator, Okwui Enwezor, and with roughly 14 percent of the artists in his show from the continent. This follows Angola's winning of a Golden Lion for best pavilion at the Biennale in 2013.

1:54 offered the chance for primarily European and South African galleries, many of whom had already exhibited together in London, to test the American market. Designed by Rashid Ali in collaboration with London-based RA projects, the fair felt intimate—even within the ecclesiastic-industrial space—and with sixteen galleries representing sixty artists, the excitement and hope of the collective was palpable on opening night, fueled by rum-and-pineapple cocktails.



Left: Conrad Botes stands in front of his mural *Sad Man's Tongue*, 2015. (Photo: James Green) Right: Artists Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze and Fabrice Monteiro, dealer Mariane Ibrahim-Lenhardt, and artist Jim Chuchu. (Photo: Mariane Ibrahim Gallery).

I came upon Oliver Durey and Jack Bell of Jack Bell Gallery standing in front of *Rassemblement*, a dramatic large-scale artwork by Armand Boua from the Ivory Coast that depicted street children in Abidjan, painted on found cardboard using tar and acrylic. The African artist recently debuted at Saatchi Gallery in London as part of the current “Pangea II” exhibition, but this is the first time he has been exhibited in America—a direct result of 1:54.

All led to a discussion about the force and appeal of the smaller, scrappier fair and how it was a much more manageable experience for the visitor and the gallerist alike: excitingly independent while still in the vortex of a much bigger event. With the tall doors open to the garden and the evening light streaming in, we noted how there were similarities between 1:54 and the Untitled art fair held during ABMB, where Jack Bell Gallery had previously exhibited, a hint of the pastoral, even if what lay beyond were dockland wastes rather than Miami Beach.

“54” refers to the fifty-four countries of Africa that this fair gamely aspires to represent. With nearly half of the galleries from South Africa, it was South African artists who were most extensively represented. Indeed, the very first artworks to greet the visitor on entering the building were linocut prints by William Kentridge on dictionary pages shipped from America to South Africa. These works, the product of a remarkable multiyear collaboration between the artist and David Krut Projects, showed that it is possible to replicate the feel of a brushstroke in a lithographic print if there is enough skill and patience involved.

Also exhibiting in America for the first time: South African Conrad Botes, who installed a corridor with a mural of chalk on black board paint around figurative cutout bronze sculptures positioned on wall pedestals. He stood in conversation with African art scholar Dunja Hersak discussing how black board paint is not really a black at all but a “warm, inviting color.” Botes went on to describe the hellish dreamscapes he had depicted on the walls, where acts of cannibalism and self-evisceration abounded, as a “personal reflection on the daily lives of many people living in South Africa,” particularly in the wake of xenophobic violence.



Left: Dealer Gary Van Wyk stands in front of the portraits of Bobson Sukhdeo Mohanlall. Right: Magnin-A founding director Philippe Boutté, artist Omar Victor Diop, Magnin-A founding director André Magnin, and artist Nathalie Boutté. (Photo: Magnin-A).

Along with galleries from South Africa, galleries from Europe were also extensively represented, with a focus on art from Ivory Coast, Benin, Morocco, and Nigeria. Magnin-A Gallery exhibited predominantly artists from west and central Africa. As the creator of the Pigozzi collection of contemporary African art, André Magnin has had a definitive impact on what African contemporary art looks like in the West. On view were a selection of works from a number of artists who he has championed over the years, all in the Pigozzi collection, and now internationally recognized, including Chéri Samba and iconic photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé. There were some surprises, such as the powerful acrylic-on-canvas work by Malian Amadou Sanogo of twisting zoomorphic forms, the first time this artist's work has been exhibited in America. Magnin, who continues to have a definitive role in the contemporary African art world, used the fair as an opportunity to introduce his forthcoming exhibition and publication *Beauté Congo (1925–2015)*, which opens later this year at the Fondation Cartier in Paris and is set to contextualize contemporary art in the DRC for the first time.

One of only two galleries from the US, Axis Gallery of New York displayed a series of early color studio portraits by Bobson Sukhdeo Mohanlall from Durban, South Africa. Mohanlall portrays his young Zulu clientele wearing beadwork, the style of which allows for the pictures to be dated to 1965–75, against the same bright red curtain. Each image is a celebration of the individual photographed, allowing for freedom in self-presentation while still remaining within the defined constraints of studio photography. The intimacy and warmth of the portraits are reminiscent of the contemporary portraits of Zanele Muholi currently on show at the Brooklyn Museum.

Seattle-based Mariane Ibrahim Gallery had on view seven artists who live and work in Africa, four of whom were able to travel to New York for the fair, such as Kenyan artist Jim Chuchu, who came from Nairobi and whose work she was presenting for the very first time out of Africa. Mariane, who had shown in London, enthusiastically welcomed the New York edition of the fair as an “opportunity to present to a new audience” and encourage national interest in these emerging artists. She said that the fair created an important sense of community,

enabling galleries to “have easy conversations, to feel less like outsiders, and to push forward a continent that is waking up to presenting their artists to the world.” How fun is that?

— James Green



Left: Meghan Allynn Johnson, David Krut Projects, stands in front of a linocut print by William Kentridge, executed by David Krut Projects. Right: Dealer Jack Bell and artist Lavar Munroe. (Photo: Oliver Durey).

<https://www.artforum.com/diary/id=52361>