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How diaspora lifted Africa at Art Dubai 2017

By Tajudeen Sowole (Just back from Dubai, UAE) | 29 March 2017 | 3:48 am



From the modest photography

pieces by a diaspora Nigerian artist, Otobong Nkanga, that were shown in the booth of Paris, France-based In Situ Gallery, the African flavour at Art Dubai 2017 in the UAE, offered a welcome treat inside the fair's Contemporary space.

But further down the extreme end of the same space at Madinat Jumeirah, came some daring, bold paintings of Ethiopian artist, Dawit Abebe. The paintings, which loomed over the space from a distance, were shown by London, U.K.-based Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery. The strength of contemporary African artists at a global space such as Art Dubai was no doubt boosted by the diversity contained in the two presentations: each artist was represented by galleries from other non-African climate.

Almost a similar tone of diversity was seen at the modern section: paintings by Manuel Figueira (Cape Verde) and Ernesto Shikhani (Mozambique) were shown under the representation of Lisbon, Portugal-based Perve Galeria. However, the expanding space of Nigerian art – as a leading force in Africa and the diaspora – was louder as the exhibited artists, Ben Osawe (1931-2007) and Muraina Oyelami, b. 1940 as well as the gallery, Tafeta, London, U.K., are of Nigerian origin.

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Less than 10 African artists and one gallery – from four countries – at a global space such as Art Dubai was no doubt an under-representation of what the continent could produce. Art Dubai 2017 featured 93 galleries from 43 countries. With increasing poor state of most African countries, the diaspora strength came to the rescue at this year's Art Dubai.

The relatively weak numerical representation of African art or art from Africa at Art Dubai or any other major international event of global strength is not exactly a concern, at least for now. Content, rather than volume, should be of focus, given the rising opportunity that abound abroad for artists of the continent to explore. Clearly, the narrative is changing from the old concerns such as lack of space. And as regards the usual worry of poor presentation or representation of art from Africa by outsiders, the Art Dubai fair, so far, suggests great prospects for artists of the continent to assert their rich creative authority on the world's expanding art space.

Two small and three medium-sized paintings by Oyelami, as well as, one rare painting and five bronze works of Osaw adorned the Tafeta booth at Art Dubai – Modern. In two black-glazed pieces titled Owl and Untitled, the depth of the artist's sculptural energy is released through the thematic windows of masks and wild life. Osawe, who had the Benin legendary culture of bronze casting as a background, further extends his mastery of the medium in Head and another Untitled.

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Used as the cover picture on the Art Dubai – Modern website, One Apartment, (1969, Oil on hardboard, 50×60.5cm) by Oyelami stresses the artist’s strength as one of the masters in Nigerian modernity. With doors, window blind and what looks like a kind of exit, Oyelami displays his mastery of simplified art as a therapeutic balm on the canvas. Two days into the fair, One Apartment was “shy of \$10,000 to an Emirati collector,” director at Tafeta, Ayo Adeyinka disclosed.

Also, ArtTalks, based in Egypt made an impressive sales at the Modern Galleries. “Art Dubai 2017 is our first ever art fair, and we’re delighted with how it’s gone – we’ve sold 5 works, ranging from 1500 to 80,000 dollars,” Cherine Chafik of ArtTalks enthused.

Though a first time experience for Tafeta as a gallery, not so for the director, Ayo Adeyinka. He was a member of Lagos-based Mydrim Gallery, which showed master printmaker, Dr. Bruce Onobrakpeya at the 2015 edition of Art Dubai. “It’s another great experience coming here again, he said ahead of the sale.

Nkanga is also not a strange name to the UAE art environment; she had a performance at Sharjah Biennale 2013. For her works at this year, the performance identity continues, but in photography texture. In lamboda prints, two series titled War and Love Booty (2015-2016) and The Alternative (2005-2016) were shown by Paris, France-based In Situ Gallery. How did an artist largely known more in performance, attract the representation of In Situ? “Her work is well known,” director at the gallery Fabienne Leclerc said. “We showed Nkanga’s tapestry two years ago, when we started representing her.”

With over 12 painting pieces, shown by Lisbon, Portugal-based Perve Galeria, Figuera, b.1938 appears to have his strength in painting. But in a tapestry titled Beach Serenity, an artist of minimalist character exists as he applies geometric expression in a unique form. In fact, his geometric style is as amazing as beach experience being depicted.

At the end of the fair, on Sunday, March 18, the gallery recorded encouraging sales: “Works were sold between 3,000 – 12,000 USD to private collectors and there were a few further interested institutions,” said Carlos Cabral Nunes, Manager/ Curator, Perve Galleria “We were invited to show all the remaining unsold works from our booth at an institution in Riyadh through an introduction from a visiting collector.”

And that a conservative environment as the UAE showed and sold daring display of flesh, in Ethiopian artist, Abebe’s paintings appeared like a shift. The works were “a great success” said the representing gallery, Hjellegjerde. In fact, the gallery disclosed few days ago that “we sold out the booth.

Whatever fresh look one experienced at this year’s event, the fair’s new director, Myrna Ayad, was proven right; she promised such during the fair’s preview. Shortly before leading visitors through the galleries, Ayad assured a house full of writers that the new era of Art Dubai was in the directorial hands of someone who is familiar with the event as well as the host city. She stated that having “lived all my life in Dubai and covered” all the ten editions “as a writer, except this year’s,” her knowledge of the city and its art behaviour comes as an asset in lifting Art Dubai to a higher level.

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As the first year in the next decade of the fair took off, managing the increasing number of participants without losing its global diversity would be as crucial, International Director, Pablo del Val, also assured the preview guests during a tour of the galleries.

Perhaps a new beginning – in consolidating on the success of previous 10 editions – already started as the fair’s sponsor, The Abraaj Group recorded its first female winner, a Bangladeshi artist, Rana Begum. Unveiling the massive floor sculpture that won Begum The Abraaj Art Prize, a Director at the investment multi-national organisation, Fred Sicre, boasted of the camaraderie that exists between Art Dubai and the sponsor.

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As a growing 21st century centre for art and culture, the city also used the 11th edition of the Art Dubai to unveil one its newest projects, Art Jameel. Another art fair? No; Art Jameel is designed as not-for-profit “organisation that supports arts, education and heritage in the Middle East.” The only art fair link to Art Jameel is its director, Antonia Carver, who, perhaps, was brought to lead the project, having contributed so much to the success of Art Dubai. Carver was fair director for six of the 10 editions.

Still on the expansion of the city as a centre or hub for art, a growing concentration of art galleries known as Alserkal Avenue also used the occasion of the 11th Art Dubai to launch a new project.

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