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African Art on the Rise in London: 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair

by Rachel Vancelette for Urban Mindz



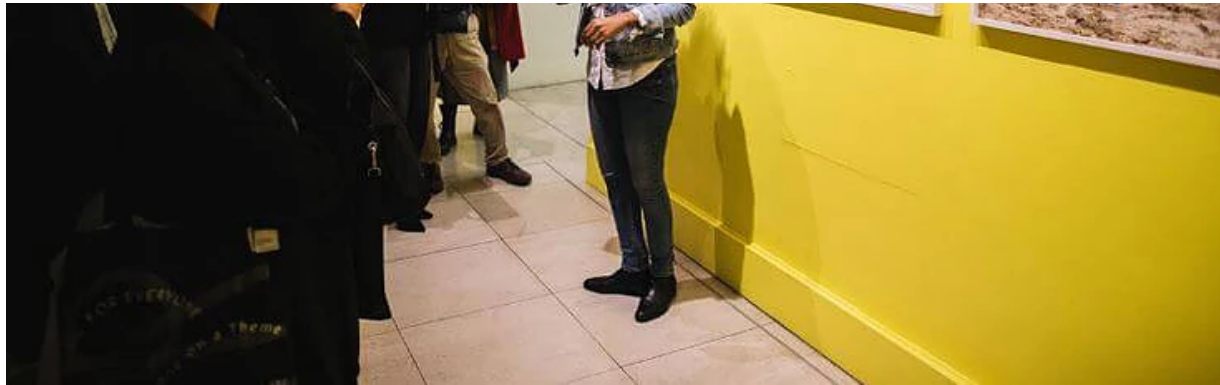


James Cohen Gallery at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London, 2019. Artwork includes: (Left painting) Firelei Baez, *Convex (recalibrating a blind spot)* 2019; (center) Yinka Shonibare, *CBE Aphrodite Kallipygos* (2019); and (right) Elias Sime, *Tightrope: Noiseless 27* (2019). Photo credit: Katrina Sorrentino.

The 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London this October marked the 7th consecutive edition of this unique and powerful fair. The name 1-54 refers to the 54 countries that comprise the African continent and is expressed as a ratio "*one continent: 54 countries.*" The fair, organized for editions in London, New York and Marrakesh, brings together some of the most valued international curatorial minds from galleries to contemporary artists, all focused on the African market and its global expansion.

Seeking international recognition, over 70 African artists from over 19 countries exhibited their contemporary art in 45 galleries at the London fair. This incredible accomplishment had galleries participating in the fair from Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, Kenya, Martinique, Morocco, Nigeria, Portugal, Senegal, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, as well as the United States.

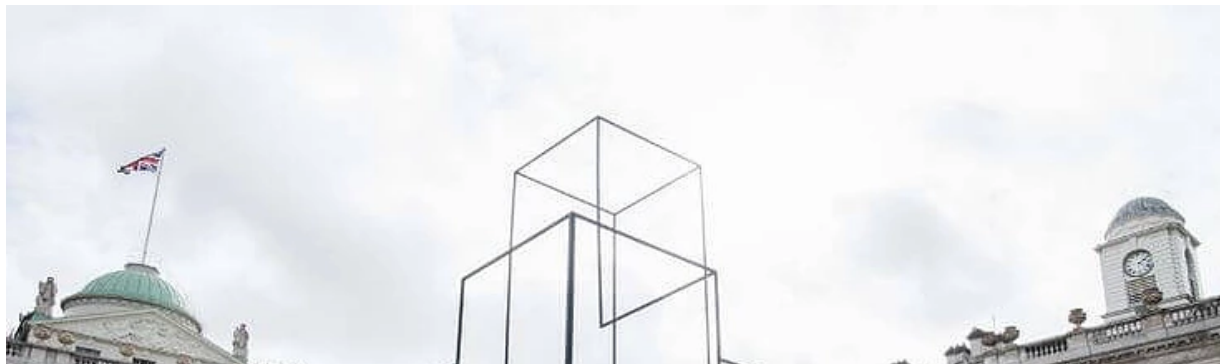




Aida Muluneh presenting artwork from her Water Life series commissioned by WaterAid. Photo credit: Katrina Sorrentino.

Set in London's beautiful historic venue, the Somerset House had over 18,000 visitors weaving in and out of ornate rooms, long hallways and multiple floors to discover artwork displayed over fireplaces, in hallways, doorways, balconies and grand to smaller rooms. It hearkened back to the rich tradition of greeting an art dealer in person to find the next great artist.

Multiple galleries greeted museum trustees, patron groups and international collectors who were investigating and acquiring artwork for their respected institutions and private collections. Sold-out booths required owners to go back into their inventories for more artwork as visitors clamored for more. In the expansive cobble-stoned courtyard of Somerset House, rising star, artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, presented his dominating black iron sculpture which greeted visitors at the entrance of the fair. The work titled *"The Fortress"* was in stark contrast to the architecture of the Somerset House, causing visitors to slow down to take a closer look. The artist stated about the sculpture, "It draws attention to how ephemeral the human constructions that are silhouettes really are."





Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Fortress* (2019) at the entrance of the Somerset House at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London, 2019. Photo credit: Katrina Sorrentino

Touria El Glaoui, Founding Director of 1-54 stated, "We are thrilled to have completed the seventh edition of 1-54 in London. The buzz surrounding art from Africa and the diaspora across the city this year has been especially strong with the opening of the Goodman Gallery and the wonderful Kara Walker commission for the Tate Modern Turbine Hall, and we are so proud to have been a part of it. Record numbers of galleries and collectors have resulted in strong sales throughout."

Glaoui also noted Goodman Gallery's recent opening in London, with locations also in Johannesburg and Cape Town, represents artists whose work confronts entrenched power structures and inspires social change.

The group exhibition titled '*I've Grown Roses in this Garden of Mine*', which opened during Frieze week, is a must-see stop on everyone's calendar. The group exhibition presented superstars such as *Shirin Neshat*, *El Anatsui* and *Naama Tsbar*. Vernissage night at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair was packed with collectors, curators, dealers and art aficionados, buzzing and buying from the vibrant installations. Noteworthy hot artists are *Amina Agueznay*, *Hew Locke*, *Elias Sime* and *Derrick Adams*, to name only a few.

Looking in-depth at the artworks on display throughout the fair one finds refined, unique craftsmanship in an array of seemingly endless possibilities from embroidery, beading, painting, multi-media, carvings, to traditional printmaking and fabrics. The narratives were woven with historical narratives, unique storytelling, emotional representation and artists embracing empowered identity to create a captivating view of discovery for any visitor. Gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde stated,

"African art is the hottest, current art trend, and the



quality is getting stronger by the year. This year, 1-54 was by far the best I have experienced, sales were strong all over, we sold out all we presented by Gerald Chukwuma, Dawit Abebe, Ephrem Solomon, and Nengi Omuku, and most of what we had in stock as well."

The KH gallery's artist Dawit Abebe immediately sold out opening day and its gallery is one to watch as they make waves in global collectors' circles.

Nicole Rafiki, artist, author, editor and first time visitor noted, "I think the fair is a much-needed space for art lovers and artists from the African continent and its diaspora. We definitely need more spaces like that as much as we need a better inclusion at other contemporary art fairs. Moving forward I think it could be interesting for the founders and organizers to look into putting a bigger pressure on the exhibitors to show a bigger variety and representation of female artists who work on different mediums, including photography."

Female artists who were represented in this year's edition included Ethiopian artist Tadesse Mesfin, whose paintings are inspired by her interpretation of ancient Egyptian sculptures and pays homage to the women who work in the marketplace in her home country. Tiffanie Delune was another female artist represented during the fair whose work is inspired by her family history in unique eye-opening, infused colors.





Tiffanie Delune, Patience & Phantasm (2019)

Despite Brexit fears this year, sales at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair were booming, booths continued to sell out, international collectors arrived in droves and attendance was at an all-time high, making 1-54's future fairs highly anticipated!

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