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12 Contemporary African Artists You Should Know

By Katherine Brooks



"Folks can't seem to come to terms with the fact that African artists have now taken and secured their seat at the dinner table, invited or not!"

Art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu's provocative quote is featured proudly in the catalog for "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner," a group show that recently closed at Richard Taittinger Gallery in New York City. The exhibition, curated by Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, celebrated 12 contemporary artists from Africa who have carved out success in the often too-exclusive world of mainstream art.

The show's title takes a cue from Sidney Poitier's 1967 dramedy of the same name, and nods to not only the growing impact of contemporary African art on the American creative epicenter of New York, but also the kinds of identity politics that affect the ways we view and interact with the global art world.



"Of crucial importance to the exhibition is an earnest desire to question received or fixed assumptions of 'Africanness' as either a cultural signifier or aesthetic primer in the work of contemporary African artists," the exhibition's description reads. "Etched in their individual works are the intimate contexts that motivate their creative preoccupations, as well as the internationalism of their individual practices. Such contexts bear the markers of what is increasingly being referred to as global contemporary."

From Algerian artist Halida Boughriet's portraits of people living on the margins of society, to Ethiopian artist Aida Muluneh's surreal photography, to Madagascar-born Amalia Ramanakarihina's Rorschach-like ink prints, "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner" spans both geography and media. Some of the participating painters and photographers were born in countries throughout Africa, others are of African descent or spent chunks of their childhood on the continent. As the show is quick to point out, the real unifying characteristic that threads the work together is a penchant for using local experiences and histories as a lens through which we can view global issues.

"Their individual works address Africa, but as a vehicle with which they contemplate our changing times," Nzewi writes in the catalog. "The fifty-two works on view demonstrate the intimate contexts that inspire the artists and the sense of internationalism that attend contemporary artistic practice."

While the show is no longer on view, "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner" functions as an intriguing primer on praiseworthy contemporary artists who call places like the Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Kenya home. Behold, 12 contemporary African artists you should know -- let their art speak for themselves:

1. Ephrem Solomon (b. 1983, Ethiopia)



Untitled from the series Forbidden Fruit, 2014. Oil, woodcut on panel, 31.5 x 31.5 in. (80 x 80 cm).

2. Aida Muluneh (b. 1974, Ethiopia)



The Wolf You Feed 3, 2014. Digital chromogenic print on cotton rag, 31.5 x 31.5 in. (80 x 80 cm)

3. Halida Boughriet (b. 1980, France, of Algerian descent)



Bichromie au regard Trompeur from the series Pandora, 2014. Chromogenic color print, 32.6 x 50 in. (82.9 x 127 cm).

4. Amalia Ramanakarihina (b. 1963, Madagascar)



Nenibe 3 from the series Portraits de Famille (Family Portraits), 2013. Color photograph, 19.2 x 15.4 in. (48.8 x 39.2 cm).

5. Onyeka Ibe (b. 1971, Nigeria)



6. Chike Obeagu (b. 1975, Nigeria)



What It Takes to Get a Pet Name, 2014. Acrylic, paper on canvas, 41.7 x 31.9 in. (106 x 81 cm).

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7. Gopal Dagnogo (b. 1973, Ivory Coast)



Waiting the Vote of the Beasts, 2014. Acrylic, pastel on canvas, 58.9 x 58.9 in. (149.5 x 149.5 cm).

8. Uche Uzorka (b. 1974, Nigeria)



Alien Indigene, Alien Citizen, 2014. Ink and pen on Arches watercolor paper, 45 x 39 in. (114 x 99 cm)

9. Beatrice Wanjiku (b. 1978, Kenya)



The Strangeness of my Madness IV, 2015. Acrylic, pastel on canvas, 23.5 x 27.5 in. (58.9 x 69.8 cm).

10. Amina Menia (b. 1976, Algeria)



Ziama from the series Chrysanthèmes, 2009–present. Inkjet print on cotton rag paper, 22.4 x 18.5 in. (57 x 47 cm).

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11. Chika Modum (b. 1980, Nigeria)



Familiar, 2015. Digital print on silk and cotton fabric, thread, Velcro, 19.7 x 19.7 in. (50 x 50 cm).

12. Sam Hopkins (b. 1979, Italy, grew up in Kenya)



Logos of Non Profit Organisations working in Kenya (some of which are imaginary), 2015, Installation
Size: 31.5 x 90.5 in. (80 x 230 cm.)