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African art – 1:54 art fair returns for its second US edition

By Emma Crichton-Miller



Touria El Glaoui at Somerset House in London©Victoria Birkinshaw

With interest from private collectors and museums, contemporary work from Africa is in hot demand.

On a springlike evening in April at Jack Bell Gallery in the heart of St James's, London, Karen Hampton is looking dazed. A Los Angeles-based artist, whose mixed-race ancestors emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1765, she is exhibiting outside North America for the first time.

A weaver since the age of 17, Hampton uses textiles, stitch and pigment to create works that chart histories of African Americans, through the lens of her own family. Her art sprang out of loneliness. "I was having difficulty working out how I fitted into the textile world," she says. "I have only ever found four or five African-American weavers."

Jack Bell spotted her powerful pieces in *The Journey North*, an exhibition at Wellin Museum of Art in upstate New York last autumn. It was Hampton's first solo show in 10 years. Next week Bell is showing two of her recent works in New York, as part of 1:54 New York.

1:54 is a fair founded in 2013 to promote contemporary artists from Africa and the diaspora. It was set up in London by Touria El Glaoui, the daughter of the Moroccan painter Hassan El Glaoui, and named for the 54 nations that make up the continent.

After two successful editions in London, El Glaoui took the plunge and opened in New York last May (“The galleries were keen to go,” she says). She chose the rough-edged 1866 warehouse Pioneer Works, in Brooklyn, as its setting. “The point of New York was to go in as a pop-up. We knew it was a cultural capital, but we didn’t know if there was a space for us,” she says.

The fair chose 16 of the stronger galleries from Europe, Africa and the US, and curated two special projects. There were also panel discussions with African-American artists and museum curators. Sales were generally good, El Glaoui reports, especially in the \$2,000-\$15,000 bracket.

Jack Bell has exhibited at 1:54 from the start. He has been promoting African artists for more than six years, including Ivorian painter Aboudia, Boris Nzebo, based in Cameroon, and eminent Beninese photographer Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou.

“We made good sales in the US and met more American private collectors,” he says. “But the main thing in New York that blew us away was the museum curator presence and the media interest.”



Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou’s ‘Untitled’ (2011), Jack Bell Gallery

Mariane Ibrahim gallery, based in Seattle, has also exhibited with 1:54 from the start. It showed photographers Fabrice Monteiro, Maimouna Guerresi, Jim Chuchu and Ayana V Jackson, as well as large delicate drawings by the Nigerian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze.

“Sales went well and the press coverage was great for our artists,” says gallery director Mariane Ibrahim-Lenhardt. “It didn’t feel like an art fair in its commercial sense. It was a hub for collectors, artists, curators and gallerists to discuss projects, collecting and collaborations.”

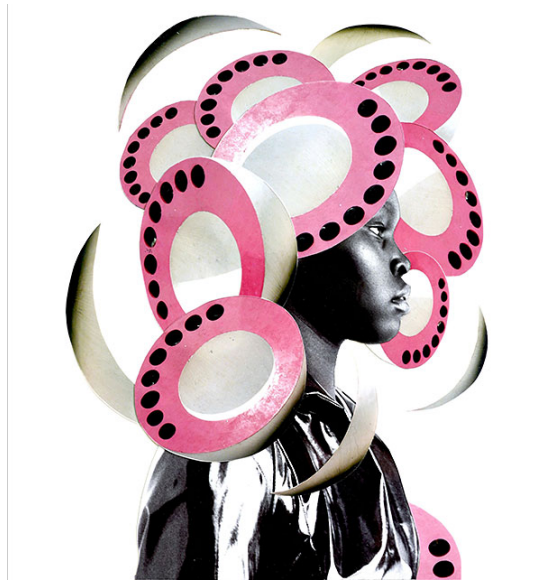
The artist Julie Mehretu, born in Ethiopia and based in New York, who took part in one of the panel discussions, commented on the valuable platform 1:54 offered African-American artists. “We sometimes don’t put ourselves into global conversations, but when we do, we discover many commonalities.”

Since then, interest from the market and from museums has grown, boosted by last year's Africa-focused Venice Biennale. This year's Armory Focus — a curated section of the Armory Show that spotlights a different region each year — was entitled African Perspectives. It featured two 1:54 galleries, Mariane Ibrahim, which showed Amanze, and the Abidjan-based Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, which showed the Ivorian photographer François-Xavier Gbré.

Fakhoury has found American collectors more cautious than those in London, where, “when I started in 2013, it was very fast, very dynamic”. But she is convinced that “the US is really important for what I am doing.”

Exhibitions such as *The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists* at the African Art Museum in Washington DC last year have broadened the audience for contemporary African art. *The Ease of Fiction*, spotlighting four African artists living in the US — Amanze, Duhirwe Rushemeza (Rwanda), Sherin Guirguis (Egypt) and Meleko Mokgosi (Botswana) — is currently at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina. And the Brooklyn Museum is hosting *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, featuring 25 contemporary artists from Africa and the US.

“Most were discovered at the 1:54 London Fair,” says Ibrahim-Lenhardt.



Vincent Michéa's 'Star Wek 3' (2016) at Cécile Fakhoury

It made sense for 1:54 to return. As Richard Taittinger, who opened his New York gallery last year, puts it, “We believe very much in emerging markets in the US.” He has just closed *Rapaciously Yours*, the first major US solo exhibition of South African feminist artist Frances Goodman, with a confirmed sale to the Smithsonian in Washington DC.

His is one of 17 galleries from nine countries to exhibit this year, and will show new work by Goodman, including several of her striking acrylic nail sculptures. Taittinger points out that, perhaps in contrast to London, in New York, “Collectors don’t separate out African-American art and contemporary art from Africa — they see it as all connected.”

Sitor Senghor of Paris gallery (S)itor is also taking the plunge, presenting two Senegalese artists: the Giacometti-like sculptures of Ndary Lo and the dreamlike paintings of William Sagna. He says that the “huge diaspora of Nigerian and Ghanaian collectors buying their own artists has given visibility to the whole scene”. Senghor hopes the opening of a solo show of Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè at Gagosian in Paris last week will stimulate interest in France, which is still suffering, he believes, from a colonial “malaise”.



Ndary Lo's 'Taarou' (2009) at (S)itor

El Glaoui acknowledges that, while 1:54 London can present 14 galleries from the African continent, only five African galleries will be represented in the New York fair. However, there will be 22 artists from Africa, including such internationally acclaimed figures as Sammy Baloji, William Kentridge, Edson Chagas and Otobong Nkanga. Goodman Gallery will show new paintings by Zimbabwean artist Misheck Masamvu in the 1:54 Lounge.

1:54 has launched two further collaborations. “Transmissions” reaches back to Africa, screening daily highlights from the Dakar Biennale, which is running concurrently. And “1:54 Performs” — in collaboration with Performa, New York’s performance art biennial — will show a performance work commissioned from Jamaican-born artist Dave McKenzie, “This ship would set sail, even anchored as it was”.

It marks 100 years since pan-African leader Marcus Garvey arrived in New York City, full of hope in uniting the interests of all Africans, everywhere.



Aida Muluneh's 'Sai Mado/The Distant Gaze' (2016) at David Krut Projects

1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, New York, May 6-8, 1-54.com

Photograph: Victoria Birkinshaw