

## Contemporary African art fair tests Paris market



Mous Lamrabat Fresh from the garden of compton, 2019. (Courtesy Loft Art Gallery)

- The fair is staging a physical and virtual edition at Christie's Paris this week

DUBAI: While the coronavirus rages on, most art fairs are continuing within the digital sphere. International travel is, of course, still challenging. The process of mounting an in-person event, abiding by government protocols, quarantines and safety measures, is an extraordinary effort in the current situation.

Yet the show goes on for 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, which debuted in London in 2013 as the first major international art fair dedicated to contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora.

It now shows regularly in New York and Marrakech. The latter, which launched in 2018, has been postponed for 2021. Instead, 1-54 has expanded to the French capital, opening yesterday until Jan. 23 at Christie's Paris on Avenue Matignon.

It is also hosting an online showcasing of 20 international galleries from Africa and its diaspora on the auction house's website, where the fair will have access to Christie's 300,000 online subscribers.



M'hammed Kilito, *Tighmert Kids*, 60 × 60 cm, 2016. (Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery)

“We have overcome numerous challenges to deliver a fair at this time, but it has been worth it,” said Touria El Glaoui, founder and fair director of 1-54. “Given the unique challenges we faced, we needed an equally unique approach that was designed to be realized in these circumstances, so 1-54 Paris at Christie’s was created. Our partnership with Christie’s has been essential to the success of the physical fair and the digital platform, 1-54 Online.”

The first art fair to be staged physically in 2021, it includes galleries such as Galerie Cécile Fakhoury from Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire and Dakar, Senegal; Paris-based Galerie Lelong & Co; MAGNIN-A, also from Paris; Galerie Gallery 1957 from Accra, Ghana and London; Paris-based Nathalie Obadia; Loft Art Gallery from Casablanca, Morocco; Luce Gallery from Turin, Italy and THK Gallery from Cape Town, South Africa, among others.

The online component, powered by Christie's, enables global audiences to view and buy all the works presented as well as easily organize shipping through new technology from the fair's partner fine art shipper, Convelio.

The fair has not diluted its vibrant programming. The 1-54 Forum talks program, curated this time by Le 18, an independent Moroccan cultural platform, takes place online and throughout February.

Hailing from North Africa are two galleries: Loft Art Gallery from Casablanca and Galerie 127 from Marrakech. The latter is showcasing works by French Moroccan photographer Mouna Saboni.



M'hammed Kilito, Tangier Alleys, 60 × 60 cm, 2017. (Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery)

The Casablanca gallery is displaying works by Moroccan-Belgian photographer Mous Lambrat, known for his whimsical images merging Eastern and Western references; M'hammed Kilito, an up-and-coming Moroccan photographer renowned for his portraits and snapshots of everyday life in Morocco, and Ivorian artist Joana Choumali, who exhibits her delicately embroidered photographs revealing scenes around her hometown of Abidjan.

“The participation of Loft Art Gallery in 1-54 is important for our policy of internationalization of the gallery and also as a form of resistance to the current climate,” said Yasmine Berrada, co-founder and director of Loft Art Gallery.

“Since the beginning of the pandemic we have had to use additional efforts to adapt and continue to defend our artists and resist through art,” Berrada told Arab News. “In this spirit, we launched the hashtag #ArtSpreadsHope.”

She added: “We congratulate Touria El Glaoui on her courageous initiative. This important step allows us, despite the digitization of the art world, to return to meet the public and enjoy these moments of exchange and sharing.”

While the French fair is a “one-off” event, according to El Glaoui, it does exemplify the dynamic fair’s habit of expanding into new markets — not a bad idea considering the UK’s recent break from the EU. While the art market is still discussing various post-Brexit ways of doing business between the UK and EU, 1-54 Paris is certainly a way to test a new market and under difficult circumstances.