

1-54 in Paris Draws Art Lovers for In-Person Showcase of African Contemporary Art

Wilson Tarbox

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A visitor to 1-54 Paris 2021 observes works by Noel W Anderson. Photo by [Nicolas Brasseur](#). Courtesy of 1-54 Paris.

The inaugural Parisian edition of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair took place at Christie's headquarters in the 8th arrondissement from January 20th to 23rd (an online version, [on Artsy](#), continues through the 31st). It was the first time since its founding in 2013 that the fair had come to the French capital, a

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decision that was made following the postponement of its annual February edition in Marrakech.

At a time when all museums in France remain indefinitely closed, the ability to view works of art in person felt quite extraordinary. To pull it off, strict sanitary measures were imposed. Entry required tickets reserved in advance and corresponding to specific time slots. Upon arrival, visitors were directed up a double marble staircase and through a one-way circuit of rooms generally reserved for Christie's auction previews.



[M'hammed Kilito](#)

[*Aves Pacis*, 2018](#)

[Loft Art Gallery](#)

€2,800



[M'hammed Kilito](#)

[Tangier Alley](#), 2017

[Loft Art Gallery](#)

€2,800

Despite these limits, opening day was a buzz of activity. With only 20 participating galleries, 1-54 Paris was a welcome change from the gigantism characteristic of most pre-COVID-19 international fairs. Yet it still managed to offer an impressive array of work from the African continent and its diaspora.

Among the works that caught my attention were two series of photographic portraits, the first by Moroccan photographer [M'hammed Kilito](#)

(showing with Casablanca's [Loft Art Gallery](#)) and the second by Ghanaian photographer

[Prince Gyasi](#)

(showing with Paris's [Nil Gallery](#)). Kilito's diptychs pair images of Moroccan youth with deserted urban settings. In one, *Tilila* (2018–19), a female figure eyes the viewer suspiciously, her medically induced skin hyperpigmentation echoing the faded geometric pattern on the door in the adjacent image. Gyasi's portraits, meanwhile, focus primarily on the youth from the Jamestown neighborhood in Accra, presenting

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them in hyper-saturated, otherworldly environments. In a photo titled *New Deal* (2021), a figure dressed in a silver jacket, futuristic headphones, and a pair of 2000s-era wraparound sunglasses, set against an

Yves Klein

blue background, stares directly into a glowing device that he holds aloft like some sort of strange artifact. Together these works suggest both the vitality and diversity of African youth and their persistent exploration of identity.



[Prince Gyasi](#)

[New Deal](#), 2021

[Nil Gallery](#)

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At the end of the circuit through Christie's were two installations that, together, embody much of the history and polemics of African art. The first was a series of brightly painted *aloalo* poles by the Mahafaly sculptor Efiainbelo, being presented by the nonprofit Azé, with support from dealers

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André Magnin and Emmanuel Perrotin. Originating from Madagascar, these sculptures are modern incarnations of an ancestral funerary craft that symbolically recounted the lives of the deceased. Efiainbello renewed this tradition through his use of bright contrasting colors and the diversification of traditional iconography. The second was a monumental loose canvas by Roméo Mivekannin

, upon which the artist painted a recreation of Théodore Géricault

's iconic *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), populating the scene with Black figures. Mivekannin's work was co-presented by dealer Eric Dupont and Galerie Cécile Fakhoury.

The former body of work speaks to the colonial legacy of African art history. Aloalo poles first appeared on the international art market following the French colonization of Madagascar in 1896. In 1989, during the Centre Pompidou's infamous exhibition "Magiciens de la terre," it was precisely this formula of the traditional tribal work updated to satisfy the tastes of modern Western audiences that was proffered as the avant-garde of contemporary African creation, much to the dismay of many contemporary African artists. In the years since, the work of artists like

Bodys Isek Kingelez

(shown here by Magnin-A) and

Ouattara Watts

(showing with Galerie Cécile Fakhoury) have found institutional recognition with works that affirm their status as contributors to a truly international modernist tradition.



Roméo Mivekannin, installation view at 1-54 Paris 2021. Photo by [Nicolas Brasseur](#). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, and 1-54 Paris.

It is now widely acknowledged that these artists are not derivative imitators of Western avant-gardes, but working in their own original veins of modernism. The question has become: Why aren't these artists more visible? What is to account for the relatively minor space their works occupy in museums, galleries, and on the auction block? It is precisely these questions that a work like Mivekannin's—drawing from the canon of Western art history and photographic archives—seeks to address.

The interrogation of African identity and the search for adequate forms of representation, be they artistic or political, are themes common to much of the works in 1-54 and even speak to the fair's *raison d'être*.

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Bodys Isek Kingelez

Tour Moderna, 2005

Magnin-A

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[Ouattara Watts](#)

[Door of the Cosmos #2](#), 2018

[Galerie Cécile Fakhoury - Abidjan](#)

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“When we began in 2013, sales of contemporary art from the entire continent of Africa accounted for less than sales from the country of Romania,” 1-54’s founding director Touria El Glaoui said. “We have made some progress in recent years, but there is still a long way to go.”

After a record-breaking spike in sales of modern and contemporary African art 2017, the sector has trended downward. In 2018, auction sales of African modern and contemporary art accounted for \$48.2 million, a drop of 13.4% from the previous year, according to analysis by [ArtTactic](#). Then came COVID-19.



[Nu Barreto](#)

[Breath](#), 2020

[Galerie Nathalie Obadia](#)

Contact for price

Yet despite much speculation as to the pandemic's impact on the sector in the long term, the gallerists that I spoke to were far from pessimistic.

“The year 2020 was our best ever,” Pauline Chiche, a director at [Galerie Nathalie Obadia](#), reported gleefully. “We had a tremendous increase in online sales, we saved money by attending fewer international fairs, and even the number of people physically coming into our gallery increased. This was no doubt due to the fact that our Parisian space is located near the Centre Pompidou. But since the museums are all closed right now, we have been absorbing a lot of their public.” The Paris edition of 1-54 crowned Galerie Nathalie Obadia's good fortune with several sales between €8,000 and €13,000 (\$9,700 and \$15,800) of works by Guinea-Bissau-born artist [Nu Barreto](#)

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, whose mixed-media drawings allude to the extreme poverty of parts of the continent.



[Romuald Hazoumè](#)

[Fridgi](#), 2003

[Magnin-A](#)

Contact for price



[Amadou Sanogo](#)

Untitled, 2020

[Magnin-A](#)

Contact for price

André Magnin, who is something of a legend with regards to the promotion of African contemporary art in France, concurred with Chiche's assessment. "Collectors have more time on their hands now that everything is closed and you can't travel to go on vacation," he said. "As a result, we've had more online sales, photography has generally done better than painting, and we have attracted new collectors, especially from Africa."

The galleries that have fared best during the health crisis are generally larger and more established, with robust online presences and cadres of faithful returning collectors. The smaller local galleries, however, have suffered.

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[Epheas Maposa](#)
[*Salty Covenant*](#), 2020
[31 PROJECT](#)
€6,000



[Souleimane Barry](#)
[*Ambiance nocturne*](#), 2020

“The [nationally imposed] curfew put an end to our cocktail parties and evening openings,” lamented Anne de Villepoix, founder of the namesake gallery in Paris’s 11th arrondissement.

“We tried to replace these events with breakfasts and lunches, of course, but it hasn’t been the same. It is hard to rally the same enthusiasm, and most people are working during the day.”

The pandemic brutally interrupted what was supposed to have been a triumphant first exhibition at Villepoix’s gallery of the work of Burkina Faso–born painter

Souleimane Barry

. For her, and numerous galleries like hers, the in-person nature of 1-54 represented an important opportunity to, as she put it, “reconnect with a live public and to see their reactions to the artists’ work.”



[Souleimane Barry](#)



[Epheas Maposa](#)
[*Wet Dream Fantasy*, 2020](#)
[31 PROJECT](#)
€6,000

Indeed, 1-54's physical edition provided visitors with the ability to appreciate the sensual and tactile qualities of painting that are often lost behind the computer screen. For the Paris gallery [31 Project](#), this aspect has translated into a boom in sales of the work of young Zimbabwean painter [Epheas Maposa](#)

. During the fair's run, the gallery sold six of his eight colorfully expressionist paintings that lined the mezzanine level of Christie's former hôtel particulier for a lump sum of €45,000 (\$54,800).

It is too soon to say if COVID-19 may have, paradoxically, reversed the fortunes of the stagnant market for

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modern and contemporary African art. What the response to 1-54's in-person edition did make abundantly clear, as Magnin put it, is that "art and culture is a necessity that we are starved of at the present moment."

Browse the online edition of 1-54 Paris, which continues on Artsy through January 31st.

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