

Art World

Pandemic Be Damned, 1-54 Has Kicked Off the 2021 Art Fair Calendar With a Pop-Up in Paris (Despite Travel Restrictions and a 6 PM Curfew)

The contemporary African art fair is on view at Christie's in Paris and online.

Anna Sansom, January 22, 2021



1-54 Paris. Photo by Nicolas Brasseur, Instagram: @nicolas__brasseur).

There was a buoyant mood as the contemporary African art fair, 1-54, opened its pop-up edition in Paris on Wednesday, its 19 exhibitors filling the first floor of Christie's on Avenue Matignon near the Champs-Élysées. The event replaces 1-54's usual February edition in Marrakech, which was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This marks the first time that 1-54, which holds editions in London, New York and Marrakech, is taking place in the French capital. The collaboration with the auction house is a chance for it to test the local appetite for contemporary African art, and

could lead to opportunities for the fair to bring the pop-up model to other Christie's locations in the future.

“Originally, we wanted to do 1-54 in Paris in February but the dates clashed with the French skiing season,” Touria El Glaoui, 1-54's founder, tells Artnet News. “We have a lot of French collectors coming to Marrakech so we thought this would be a great way to engage with our collector base, and Paris is booming at the moment with a lot of galleries coming here.”

Indeed, mega-galleries David Zwirner and White Cube have both recently opened Paris outposts, and other established galleries have been expanding their presence in the city. Almine Rech has just joined Perrotin and Kamel Mennour by opening a second Parisian space on Avenue Matignon, supplementing the one she already runs in the Marais.



Visitors to 1-54 admire Chéri Samba's *Merci, merci je suis dans la zone verte* (2020). Photo by Nicolas Brasseur, Instagram: @nicolas__brasseur).

A “Win-Win” Situation

The collaboration with the auction house forms part of an ongoing partnership: Christie's Education began supporting 1-54 by hosting talks three years ago,

then last October the auction house displayed artworks from 1-54's galleries in its London venue and powered its online edition.

The fair is on view through January 23, and El Glaoui describes 1-54 at Christie's as a "win-win situation." While unsure whether 1-54 in Paris could be repeated annually, she hopes the collaboration with the auction house will bring opportunities to develop 1-54 elsewhere: "I would be very open to trying [the fair] with Christie's in places where we don't have a fair [such as] Dubai or China," El Glaoui says. "We really want our three editions to go back to normal but, in the meantime, if we have a cancelation, it'd be nice to try different cities."

Asked whether the French billionaire collector and owner of Christie's, François Pinault, has proposed to buy a stake in 1-54, she replies: "No, there's no hidden agenda."



1-54 Paris. Photo by Nicolas Brasseur, Instagram: @nicolas__brasseur).

For Cécile Verdier, president of Christie's France, staging 1-54 represents the opportunity to showcase and learn more about African contemporary art. "We don't see contemporary African artworks at Christie's in Paris, and at the moment we don't have a contemporary African art department," Verdier says. While Verdier says it is "too early" to discuss whether Christie's is planning to open a contemporary African art department, she says that this collaboration is "going in that direction."

André Magnin, founder of Paris gallery Magnin-A, which is exhibiting at the fair, also remarks that Christie's is less present in contemporary African art than Artcurial, Piasa, or Sotheby's. "This quality fair will be good publicity for Christie's, and we benefit from Christie's prestige, so it's a good exchange," says Magnin, who has sold works by Romuald Hazoumè (€30,000–€35,000, around \$36,500–\$42,500), JP Mika (€30,000, around \$36,500), and Ana Silva (€4,000, around \$4,900).

Also on Magnin-A's stand is a painting by the Congolese artist Chéri Samba of an exultant male figure on a swirling, abstract green background, priced at €80,000 (around \$97,000). Titled *Merci, merci je suis dans la zone verte* (*Thank you, thank you I am in the green zone*), the artist made it last year when France was divided into green and red zones according to the severity of COVID-19. The gallerist says that Samba came to visit Paris early last year and ended up staying in France the whole year because of the pandemic. He has only just returned to the Democratic Republic of Congo.



Barthélémy Togo, *The Animal Comedy* (2020). Courtesy Bandjoun Station and Galerie Lelong & Co, Paris/New York.

As expected of the first international art fair to take place in 2021, complications arising from public health restrictions caused organizational difficulties for several galleries. Pascale Marie Revert, director of London's 50 Golborne Gallery, was unable to travel over, so she asked the Paris-based curator and art consultant Liyu Yeo to manage her booth. Meanwhile, Yasmine Berrada, co-founder of Casablanca's Loft Art Gallery, hired curator Alexa Wilkie and young art historian Maëva Chanoine to represent the gallery as she could not obtain a visa. "We discussed all the setting up on FaceTime and printed Mous Lamrabat and M'hammed Kilito's photographs in Paris," Wilkie says.

Determined to exhibit, Marwan Zakhem, director of the Accra and London-based Gallery 1957, traveled over in plenty of time. "I did my quarantine ten days ago," he says, smiling. On display are embroidered photographic images, €9,000 each (around \$11,000), several of which have sold, from Joana Choumali's 2016 series "Ca va aller," which won 2019's Prix Pictet. But the dealer was still struggling to get works by Serge Attukwei Clottey to the fair after the opening.

Paris- and New York-based Galerie Lelong is participating for the first time with a solo show by the Cameroonian artist Barthélémy Toguo, including ink-on-paper works, priced €5,000 (around \$6,000), depicting masked animals from his 2020 series, "The Animal Comedy." The artist made them during his residency in Alexander Calder's former studio in the Loire valley.

"Touria invited us as Barthélémy had presented a mobile cafeteria with coffee produced at his creative centre, Bandjoun Station in Cameroon, at 1-54 in London," Nathalie Berghege-Compoin from Galerie Lelong explains. The gallery's sales vary from engravings (€2,000, around \$2,400) to a painting, *Partage VIII*, (€60,000, around \$73,000), made for South Korea's 2020 Busan Biennale.



Emo de Medeiros, *Surtenture (...for the body may vanish but the spirit endures)*(2020). €15,000.
Courtesy Dominique Fiat, London.

Another first-time exhibitor is Galleria Continua, which opened a new space near the Centre Pompidou on Wednesday. “We’re participating out of a desire to be constructive and lend support to those who have the courage to do things,” Galleria Continua’s co-founder Lorenzo Fiaschi says.

Black Lives Matter and police brutality are recurring subjects in the artworks at 1-54, from Emo de Medeiros’s fabric work of a defiant, red-eyed figure at Dominique Fiat gallery to Noel Anderson’s distorted images woven on Jacquard tapestries at Anne de Villepoix.

The fair closes at 5 p.m. daily due to France’s 6 p.m. curfew. But the exhibitors are not fazed by the drawback. Nathalie Obadia, who has sold several drawings (€8,000–€10,000, around \$9,800–\$12,200) from her presentation on Nú Barreto,

remarks: "The more we reduce the number of hours, the more people come from 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and resist."

1-54 Paris is on view through January 23 at Christie's Avenue Matignon in Paris, and online through January 24.