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1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair Returns to London's Somerset House After Six Years

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Boasting three locations across three different continents as of the beginning of this year — in London, New York and Marrakech — 1-

54 Contemporary African Art Fair returns to London's Somerset

House where it first started six years ago, on October 4 through to 7 (VIP preview October 3), as part of the city's annual Frieze Week calendar.

Out of the 43-strong list of participating galleries (a small increase from last year's count of 42 exhibitors), 16 are from Africa with representation from across the continent, including Addis Fine Art (Ethiopia), Galerie Cecile Fakhoury (Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal), Gallery 1957 (Ghana), MOVART Gallery (Angola) and SMAC (South Africa). Among returning exhibitors are ARTCO Gallery, ArtLab Africa, Jack Bell Gallery, MAGNIN-A and October Gallery, all of whom have maintained a presence at 1-54 since its very first iteration. The fair also welcomes 11 newcomers, including Galerie Nathalie Obadia, which boasts spaces in Paris and Brussels. It will be making its debut with a solo presentation of Youssef Nabil. Meanwhile, the London-based Kristin Hjellegjerde, who recently expanded to Berlin will be showing a group of works by Dawit Abebe, Cheikhou Ba and Ephrem Solomon.

Even before 1-54's arrival, Somerset House already had a strong program of exhibitions and events, and in Fall 2016 expanded to incorporate artist residencies and studio spaces. So it's perhaps not surprising that the fair also seeps into other parts of the Neoclassical building with "Of Gods, Rainbows and Omissions," the first major UK solo exhibition of the South African artist Athi-Patra Ruga, which opens during 1-54 and remains on view until January 7. The exhibition brings together "an important body of work that is deceptively beautiful, playful and quite often funny," the exhibition's curator, Jonathan Powell, said, "but presents a serious political challenge to exclusionary constructions of history and knowledge — within South Africa and beyond." As Ceri Hand, Director of Programs, notes, this type of programming ensures that Somerset House can "give the artist an excellent introduction to enthusiastic peers during the fair, and then to reach a much broader audience in the following months."

As identity politics appear to have returned to mainstream discussions and the public consciousness, Ruga's work opens up an alternative vision and "anticipates what is already happening," Powell said. "Identity is becoming a hybridized, trans-cultural construct that flies in the face of nationalist ideology and populist dogma."

There will be a possibility to gain more insight into Ruga's work during Forum, 1-54's parallel talks program, which this year is curated for the first time by Ekow Eshun, the chairman of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and creative director of Calvert 22 Foundation. Although the full details of Forum were not available at press time, Eshun said in an interview by phone that this year's program would be "informed by the idea of freefall." Expanding on the concept,

he pointed to earlier cultural precedents that could be found in “the novels of Toni Morrison, Steve McQueen’s art, which feature black figures in motion, or observations by Arthur Jafa... The idea is that even moments of freefall have led to moments of kinship, invention and artistic expression.”

Although the talks program is not strictly circumscribed by this notion, the timing is pertinent given the current period we are currently experiencing of “overt hostility to ideas of multiculturalism and cultural hybridity, whether it be Brexit, the Windrush scandal, or Trump,”he said.

Forum will include talks and performances by figures such as the New York-based artist Rashaad Newsome, Larry Achiampong, as well as the academic Alessandra Raengo, who will discuss the methodologies around her research group “liquid blackness,” which Eshun described as “an influential way of articulating and exploring ways of understanding blackness through visual culture.”

On the topic of how such discussions sit within the context of a commercial art fair, Eshun said that “Forum is crucial in thinking about the role African artists and those from the diaspora can play in shedding ideas on cultural practice, but also interrogating ideas of African-ness, blackness, and trying to bring depth and acerbic thinking to how we understand questions of identity and memory.”

Elsewhere, 1-54 moves beyond the confines of the fair booths with Vigo Gallery’s presentation of a sculpture (“Meditation Tree,” 2018) by the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, one of the most significant figures in African and Arab Modernism. His sculpture will be in the central fountain court that welcomes visitors to Somerset House.

Larry Achiampong, one of Somerset House Studios’ resident artists, offers up an immersive installation consisting of “Sunday’s Best,” 2016, a video that explores how belief systems within the diaspora have been shaped by colonial histories. Achiampong will also have a painting on display from his “Holy Cloud” series, 2013, altered family photos referencing issues of racist misrepresentation. By fusing the domestic and the religious, Achiampong explores Christianity’s role in colonialism and diasporic communities based in the West.

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