



All eyes are on Africa, there’s no doubt about that. Major museum openings on the African continent over the last two years, including the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakech, and the upcoming Palais de Lomé opening in Togo in April, underline the growing interest and need to solidify modern and contemporary African art history. There’s been much interest in the Africa game outside of the continent as well.

In 2009, Bonham’s held its inaugural ‘Africa Now’ auction, echoing the economic development on the continent. In May 2017, Sotheby’s London held their first sale of art from Africa, plunging into a still predominantly under-explored region. Other auctions have followed suit, including Swann Auction Galleries in New York and Piasa in Paris. And let’s not forget the groundbreaking exhibition at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris entitled *Art/Afrique* in 2017, showcasing the Jean Pigozzi collection of African art on the top floor of its Frank Gehry–designed museum.

While the rest of the world is certainly having an African moment, the Middle East has long held trade routes with the African continent. Oman in particular, with its historical ties to Zanzibar in East Africa, its former capital during the 19th century, has left remnants of its empire across much of the Horn of Africa coast. The UAE, with its strategic geographical location, similarly reinforces its attraction as a trade hub along the modern day Silk Road, a fact that Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, president and director of Sharjah Art Foundation, reinvigorated when she re-opened the Africa Hall in Sharjah in September 2018. The original institute, which was inaugurated in 1976 and demolished in 2015 due to safety concerns, references the venue’s first cultural and political event, namely, the Arab-African Symposium, which opened on 14 December 1976. Next door to the Hall, Sheikha Hoor is launching the Africa Institute, a think tank for African Studies in the region.

Sheikha Hoor has long witnessed the breadth of cultural links between the UAE and African countries, particularly in places like Sudan and Tanzania. Over the years, she has worked with art historian, curator, and critic Salah Hassan to stage several African and African Diaspora-focused exhibitions, including the Ibrahim El Salahi show at the Sharjah Museum that later moved to the Tate Modern. There was also the Khartoum School exhibition in 2017 on Sudanese Modernism, and the Egyptian Surrealism show staged in Cairo in 2016.

The last two years have witnessed a growth of similar African art shows and collaborations in Dubai. Last January, Alserkal Avenue’s Lawrie Shabibi staged an exhibition of works by Ghanaian artist *Serge Attukwei* Clottey in collaboration with Gallery 1957 from Accra, Ghana. There was also the *Africa by Design* pop-up exhibition featuring works by a selection of Africa’s leading designers at Alserkal Avenue in October 2017. Most recently, Al Quoz-based Akka Projects, a space dedicated to promoting contemporary art from Sub Saharan Africa, staged *Africa... & the 54 other countries: Focus on Kenya*, another pop-up exhibition at Alserkal Avenue offering, one might read, a subversive message: Africa is not a country. This month, Akka Projects, in collaboration with the Ismaili Centre in Dubai, will host *Inspiring Change: A Photographic Journey of Mohamed ‘Mo’ Amin*, revealing a series of poignant works by the late Kenyan photographer.

Tastes of contemporary African art can be found at a variety of events and exhibitions this March in the UAE. At the Sharjah Biennial 14, entitled *Leaving the Echo Chamber*, a number of artists from Africa and the Diaspora will show their work, including Candice Breitz from South Africa; Meschac Gaba from Benin; Algerian-French Mohamed Bourouissa; British-Nigerian Leo Asemota, and Otobong Nkanga with Emeke Ogboh from Nigeria and Belgium. African American and African British artists include Jace Clayton, Lubaini Himid, Torkwase Dyson, Isabel Lewis, and Hannah Black.

Art Dubai, once again, has its fair share of African names. Addis Fine Art from Addis Ababa returns to the fair for its second consecutive year, with a booth showing works by Ethiopian painters Tadesse Mesfin and Addis Gezehagn. “Both have, in their own right, inspired a generation of Ethiopian artists through their artists innovation, and have recently seen a swell of demand for their work globally,” says the gallery’s Rakeb Sile. “Due to Ethiopia’s cultural and economic links to UAE and the Middle East, Art Dubai is a very important fair for the gallery to introduce our artists to collectors and institutions in the region.”

Cape Town-based SMAC Gallery will take part in the fair for the first time, showing new work by Alexandra Karakashian and Gareth Nyandoro. “Art Dubai is a new frontier for SMAC, having not exhibited at a fair in the region before,” said its director Baylon Sandri. “While it is important for the gallery to introduce the artists we work with to new audiences, it is equally important for us to support the notion of the Global South, which is being featured at this year’s fair.” Indeed, the fair’s inaugural Bawwaba section will address themes of global migration, socioeconomic structures, and identity as a gateway into artistic notions of the ‘the Global South’ through 10 solo presentations from around the world.

Other Art Dubai participating galleries from the African continent include first-time participants La Galerie Atiss from Dakar, Senegal, and Galerie MAM from Douala, Cameroon, who will share a booth at Art Dubai, featuring a selection of works by Sanaa Gateja, Oumar Ball, Hyacinthe Ouattara, Patrick Joel Tatcheda Tonkeu, and Aliou Diack. Hailing from Marrakech and taking part for the second consecutive year is Voice Gallery, which will present five artists: Hamdi Attia, M’Barek Bouhchichi, Michele Ciacciofera, Salvatore Emblema, and Eric van Hove.

There is now a strong African footprint in the region—one that continues to expand. The UAE, with its central position as a hub for the arts in the Middle East and its longstanding multicultural mix of residents, embraces the idea of the Global South, providing those nations and its artists a multitude of platforms through which they can dialogue with the rest of the world, fostering new cultural, artistic, and economic discourses between the two regions.

(Image credits)

Gareth Nyandoro, *Jedza welders*, 2019, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 196 x 140 cm

Hamdi Attia - *The Gulf reversed*

Alexandra Karakashian, *Conditions Towards II*, 2019, oil and salt on sized paper, 154 x 105 cm



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