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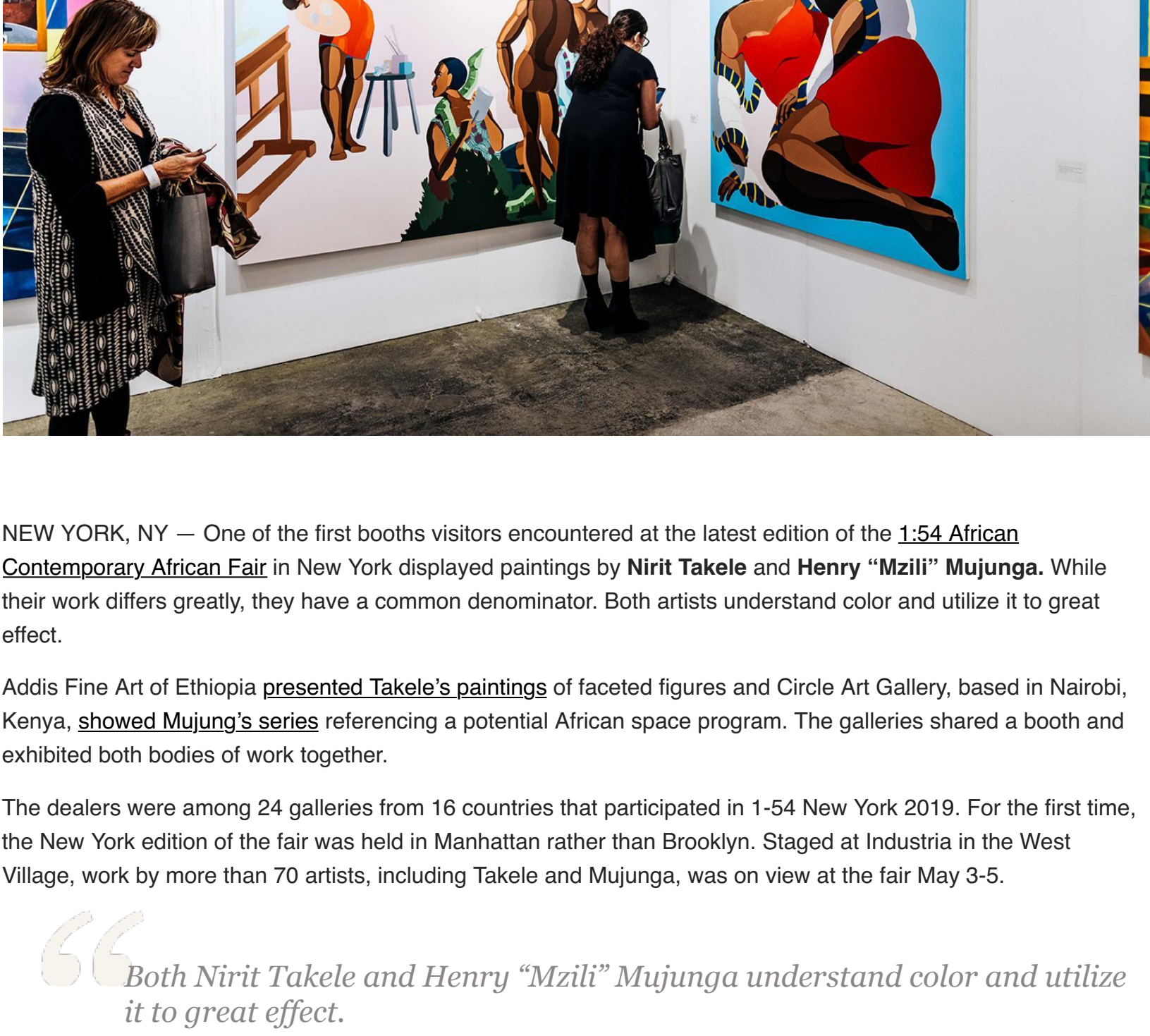
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1:54 Contemporary Africa Art Fair: Paintings by Nirit Takele and Henry ‘Mzili’ Mujunga Display Deft Use of Color

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on May 6, 2019 - 10:58 pm

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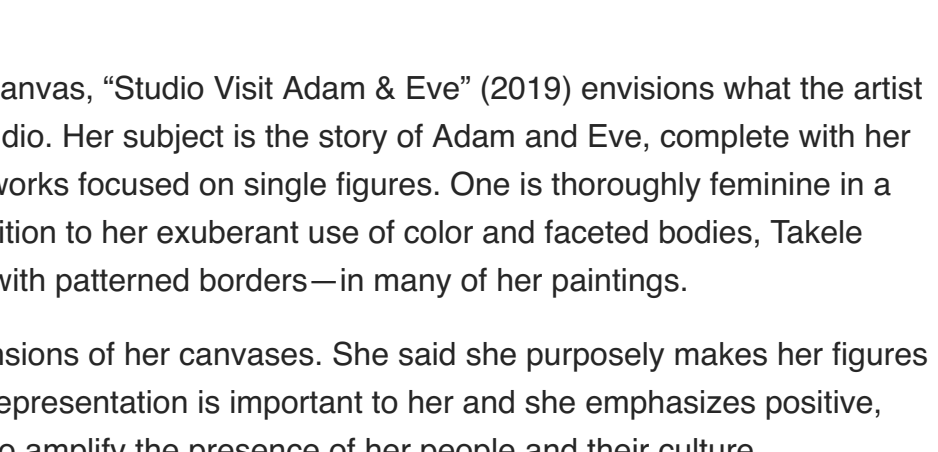
NEW YORK, NY — One of the first booths visitors encountered at the latest edition of the [1:54 African Contemporary African Fair](#) in New York displayed paintings by **Nirit Takele** and **Henry “Mzili” Mujunga**. While their work differs greatly, they have a common denominator. Both artists understand color and utilize it to great effect.

Addis Fine Art of Ethiopia [presented Takele’s paintings](#) of faceted figures and Circle Art Gallery, based in Nairobi, Kenya, [showed Mujunga’s series](#) referencing a potential African space program. The galleries shared a booth and exhibited both bodies of work together.

The dealers were among 24 galleries from 16 countries that participated in 1-54 New York 2019. For the first time, the New York edition of the fair was held in Manhattan rather than Brooklyn. Staged at Industria in the West Village, work by more than 70 artists, including Takele and Mujunga, was on view at the fair May 3-5.

“Both **Nirit Takele** and **Henry “Mzili” Mujunga** understand color and utilize it to great effect.

Takele (shown at right), who lives and works in Tel Aviv, presented four paintings demonstrating her use of flat forms to create figures and scenes. She utilizes color to indicate articulated limbs that call to mind wood dolls. Takele was present in the booth at the fair. She told me the style is her way of blending painting with the dimensionality of sculpture. She appreciates the possibilities of both mediums.

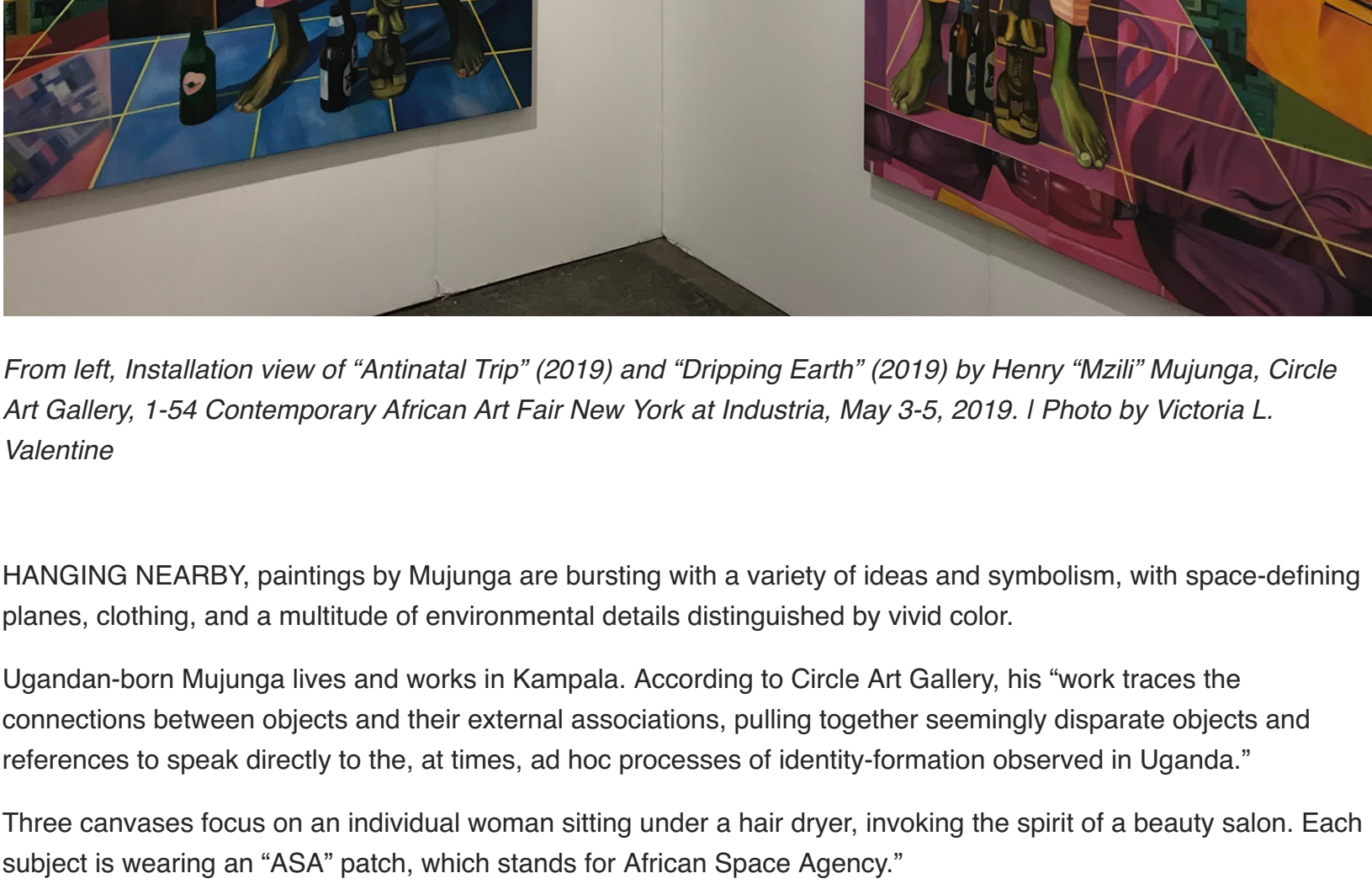


Born in Ethiopia, Takele grew up in Israel. When she was a child, she immigrated to Israel. Her family was part of “Operation Solomon” in 1991, a covert Israeli military operation that evacuated more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews in 36 hours in the wake of political instability and the threat of a government overthrow by rebels.

In 2015, Takele earned a BFA from Shenkar College of Engineering, Design, and Art in Ramat Gan, Israel. Recently, Addis Fine Art hosted the artist for a two-month residency in Addis Ababa. The opportunity connected Takele anew with her roots and home country, and inspired a new body of work influenced by the bright, bold colors that surrounded her.

Her paintings explore a range of topics. A large canvas, “Studio Visit Adam & Eve” (2019) envisions what the artist described as a “serious” female painter in the studio. Her subject is the story of Adam and Eve, complete with her assistant providing lighting for the scene. Other works focused on single figures. One is thoroughly feminine in a red slip dress, another is a female soldier. In addition to her exuberant use of color and faceted bodies, Takele incorporates traditional textiles—lengthy fabrics with patterned borders—in many of her paintings.

Takele’s figures appear constrained by the dimensions of her canvases. She said she purposely makes her figures large to exhibit strength. As a minority in Israel, representation is important to her and she emphasizes positive, diverse characteristics out of pride and a desire to amplify the presence of her people and their culture.



From left, Installation view of “Antinatal Trip” (2019) and “Dripping Earth” (2019) by Henry “Mzili” Mujunga, Circle Art Gallery, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York at Industria, May 3-5, 2019. | Photo by Victoria L. Valentine

HANGING NEARBY, paintings by Mujunga are bursting with a variety of ideas and symbolism, with space-defining planes, clothing, and a multitude of environmental details distinguished by vivid color.

Ugandan-born Mujunga lives and works in Kampala. According to Circle Art Gallery, his “work traces the connections between objects and their external associations, pulling together seemingly disparate objects and references to speak directly to the, at times, ad hoc processes of identity-formation observed in Uganda.”

Three canvases focus on an individual woman sitting under a hair dryer, invoking the spirit of a beauty salon. Each subject is wearing an “ASA” patch, which stands for African Space Agency.”

Danda Jarolmek, founder of Circle Art Gallery, told me the large plastic hair dryer hoods remind the artist of space helmets worn by astronauts and inspired the concept for the series.

The paintings combine characteristics of disparate spaces—beauty salons, sites of self-care that serve as community spaces; private domestic spaces where one keeps their personal belongings, a wardrobe of “traveling shoes,” for example, or a cherished African sculpture; and even outer space, with dark skies and images of Earth and a spaceship visible in the distant backgrounds through open doors and a gap in the walls.

For the painting “Antinatal Trip” (2019), the artist wanted to add some levity to the image, which references his wife during her pregnancy. Jarolmek said the artist described her behavior, at times, as taking on an “alien” personality, hence her green skin. Images seen in the reflective floor channel another dimension. The golden yellow walls behind her are covered in deep purple graphics depicting various yoga positions. The forms remind Mujunga of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The artist earned a BA in fine art from Margaret Trowell School of Industrial Fine Art at Makerere University in Kampala, and also has a post-graduate diploma in education from Makerere. He curated the first edition of the Kampala Art Biennale in 2014.

The paintings Mujunga presented at 1-54 New York are timely. While the information-packed scenes are imagined, his overarching concept is based on a reality in development. Over the past half century, several African nations have invested in space-related science and research. In 2017, the African Union established the African Space Agency and plans for the pan-African effort are moving forward. Egypt was [designated as the agency’s headquarters](#) in February, edging out Ethiopia and Nigeria. **CT**

IMAGES: Top, Installation view of paintings by Nirit Takele, presented by Addis Fine Art, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York at Industria, May 3-5, 2019. | Photo © Brittany Buongiorno, Courtesy 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair; Top right, Artist Nirit Takele, standing before her painting “Studio Visit Adam & Eve” (2019) at 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York (May 3, 2019). | Photo by Victoria L. Valentine

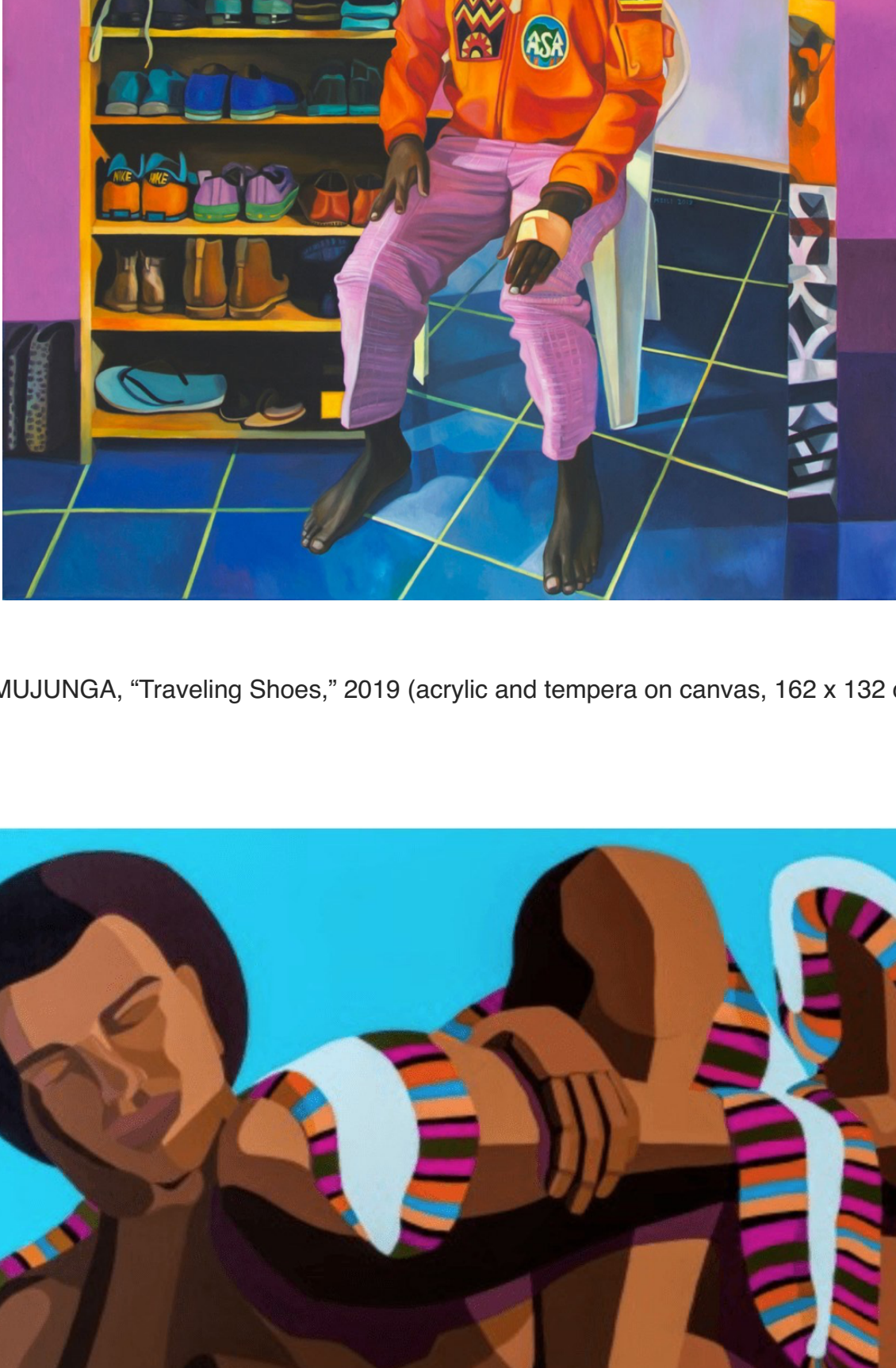
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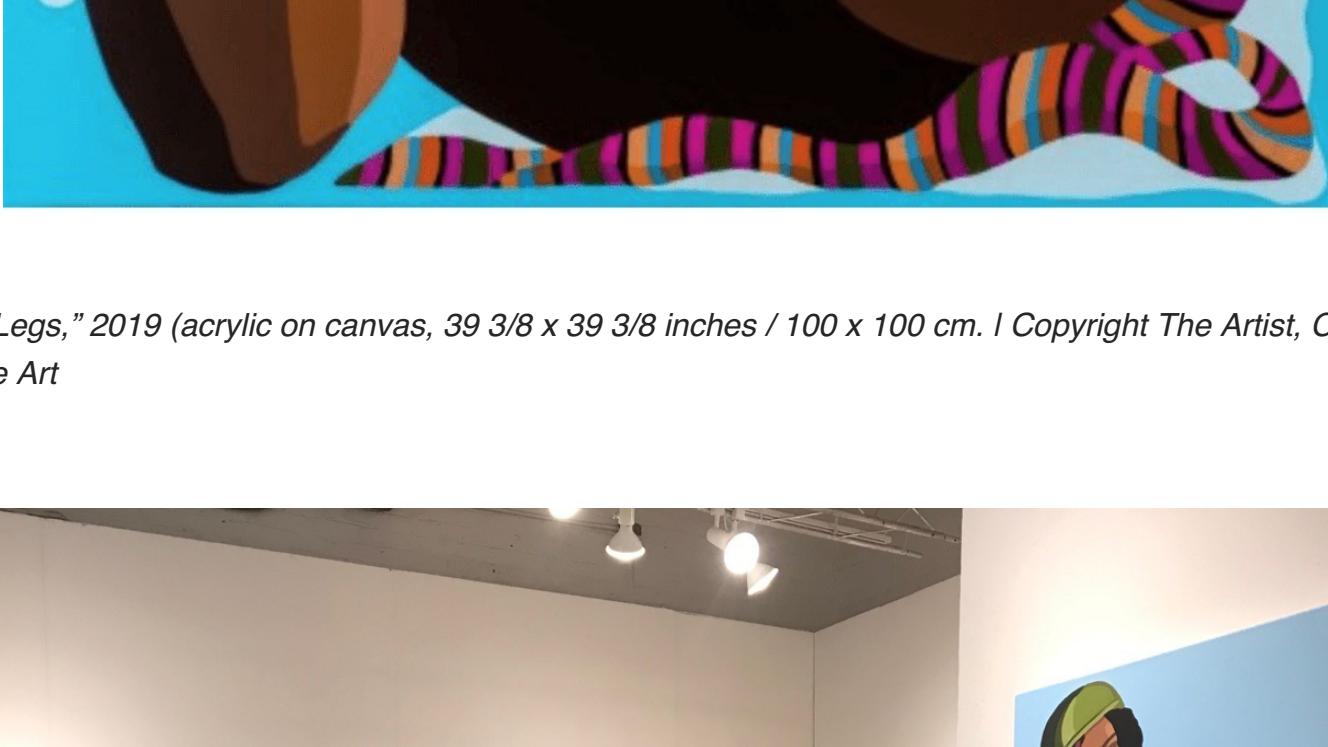
Installation view of paintings by Henry “Mzili” Mujunga and Nirit Takele, presented by Circle Art Gallery and Addis Fine Art, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York at Industria, May 3-5, 2019. | Photo © Brittany Buongiorno, Courtesy 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair



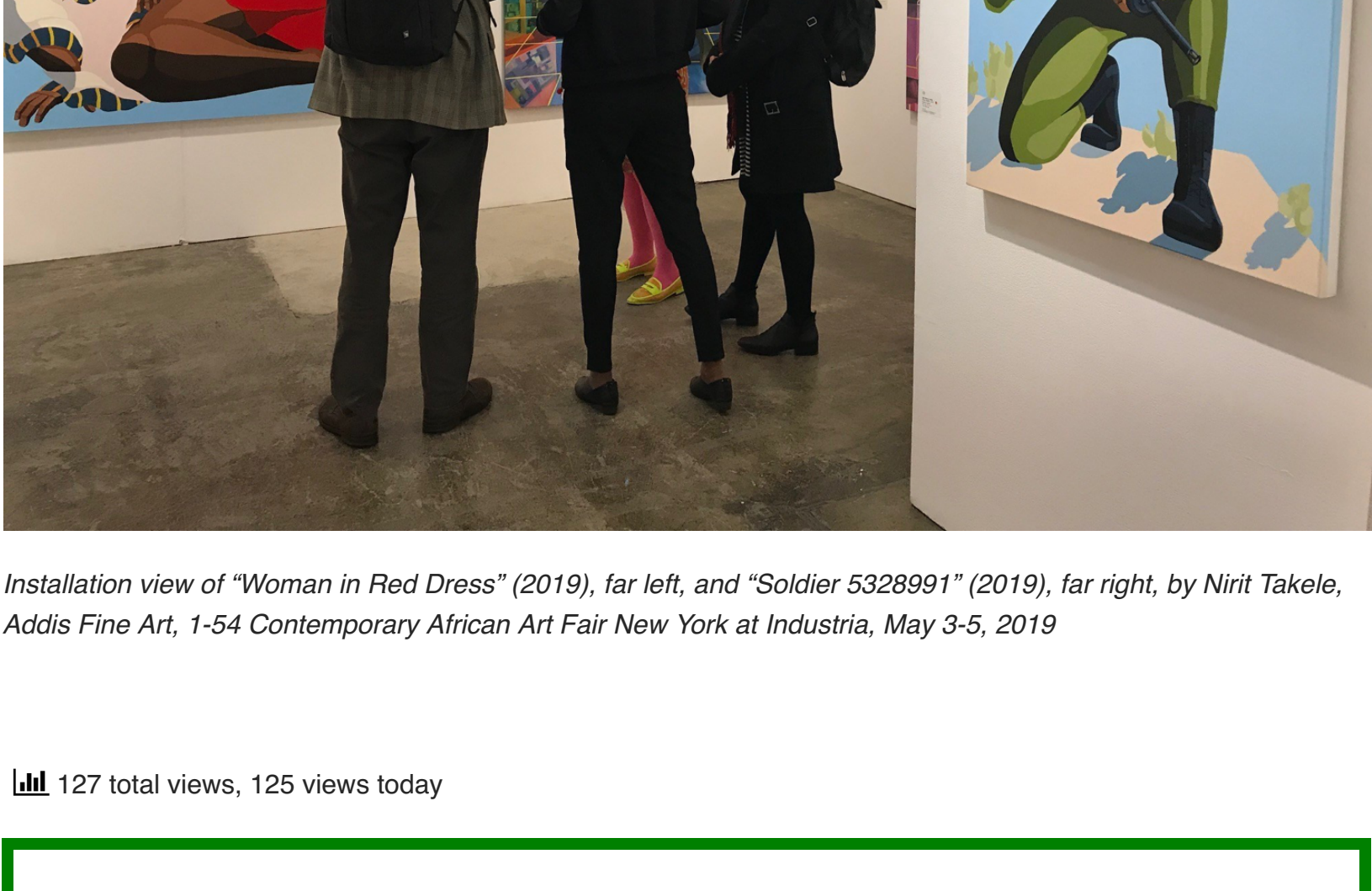
HENRY “MZILI” MUJUNGA, “Afronaut,” 2018 (Oil, acrylics, and tempera on canvas, 170 x 130 cm). | Courtesy Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi/1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair



HENRY “MZILI” MUJUNGA, “Traveling Shoes,” 2019 (acrylic and tempera on canvas, 162 x 132 cm). | via Circle Art Gallery.



“Figure x Legs,” 2019 (acrylic on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches / 100 x 100 cm. | Copyright The Artist, Courtesy Addis Fine Art



Installation view of “Woman in Red Dress” (2019), far left, and “Soldier 5328991” (2019), far right, by Nirit Takele, Addis Fine Art, 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair New York at Industria, May 3-5, 2019

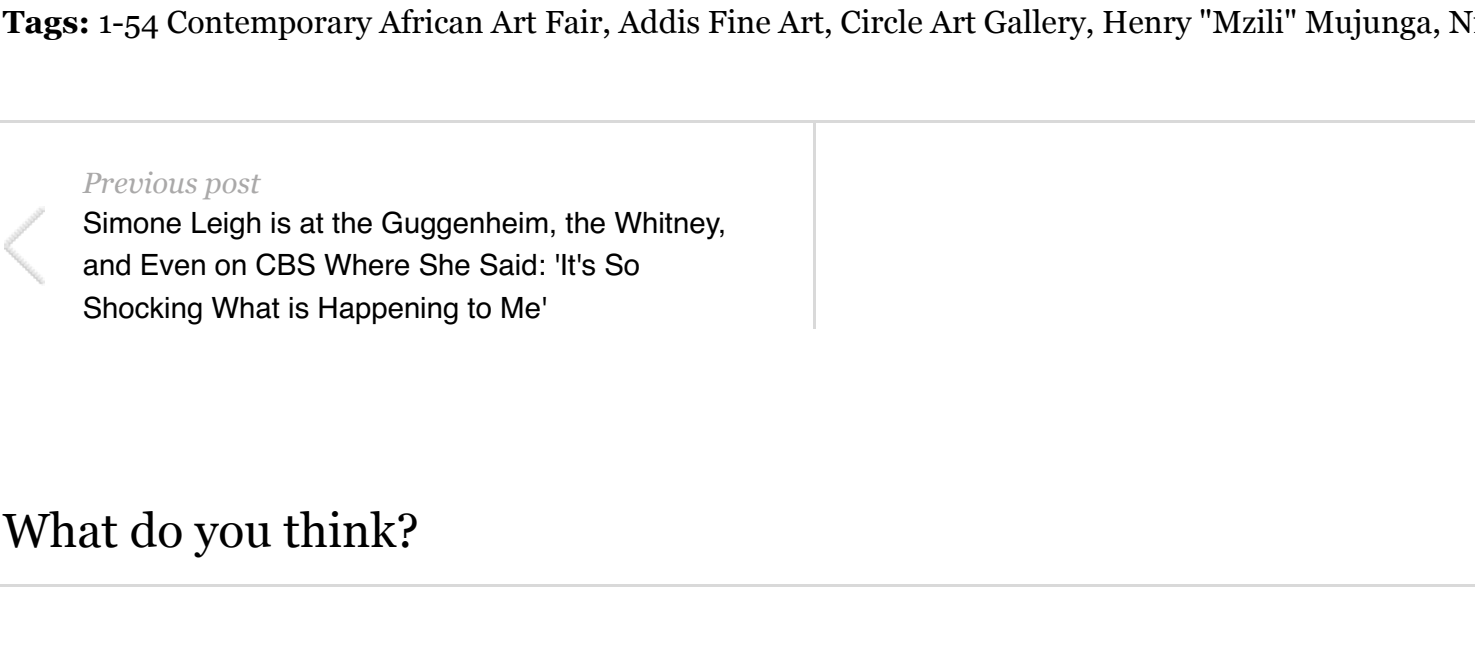
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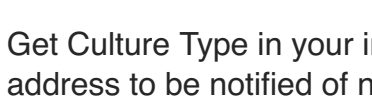
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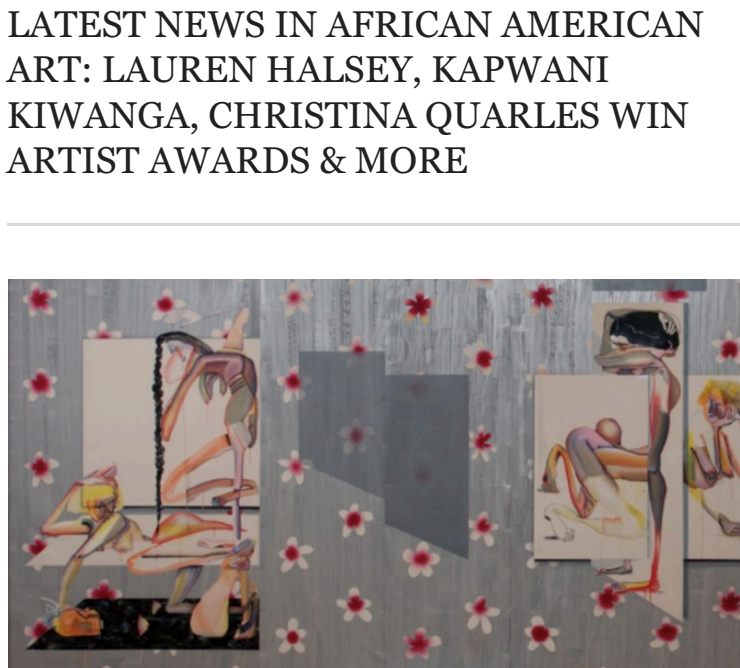
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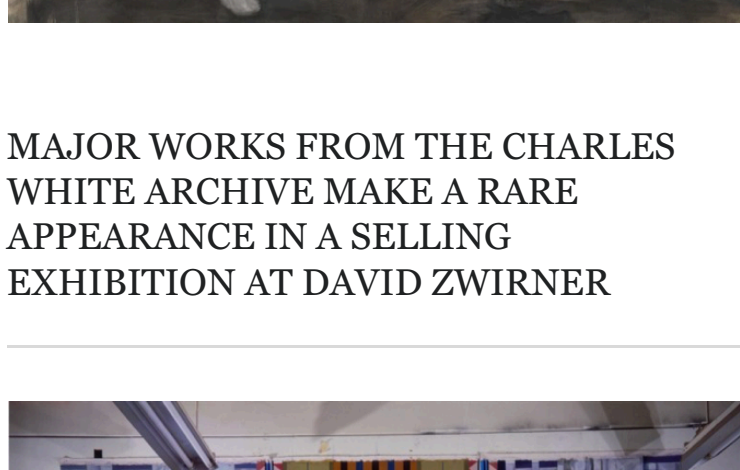
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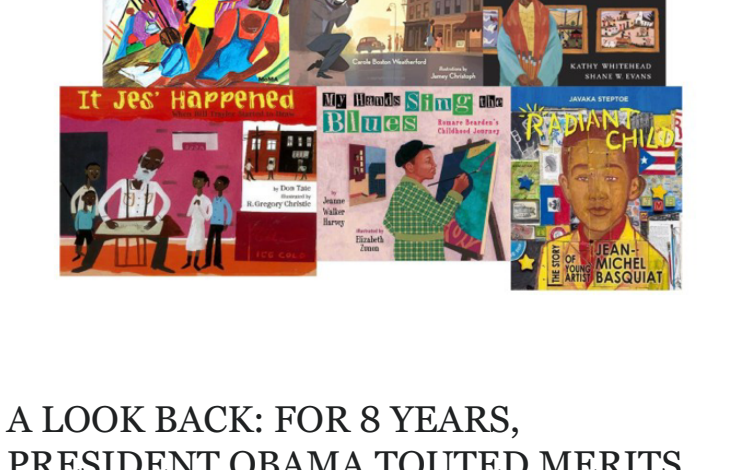
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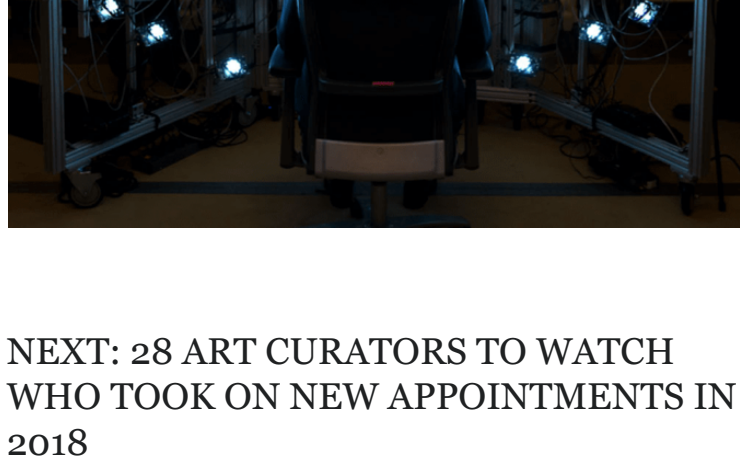
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