

Arts & Culture

Art 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair – Roundtable: How has Covid-19 impacted African art?

OMAR BEN YEDDER | 08/10/2020 | 0 COMMENTS



The 2020 edition of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London showcases the work of more than 110 emerging and established artists from Africa and its diaspora...

One of the annual highlights of New African's arts coverage is our collaboration with 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, the biggest fair of its kind, held in London, New York and Marrakesh.

Omar Ben Yedder (OBY): How has the current pandemic affected you over the past few months and what is the effect on the positive momentum we've seen in the African arts space these past few years?

Tuli Mekondjo: I have a full-time job at a German private school, which has been reassuring over this period.

I had a couple of exhibitions planned at the Guns & Rain gallery in Johannesburg. We had to take the whole thing online and actually it was well received.

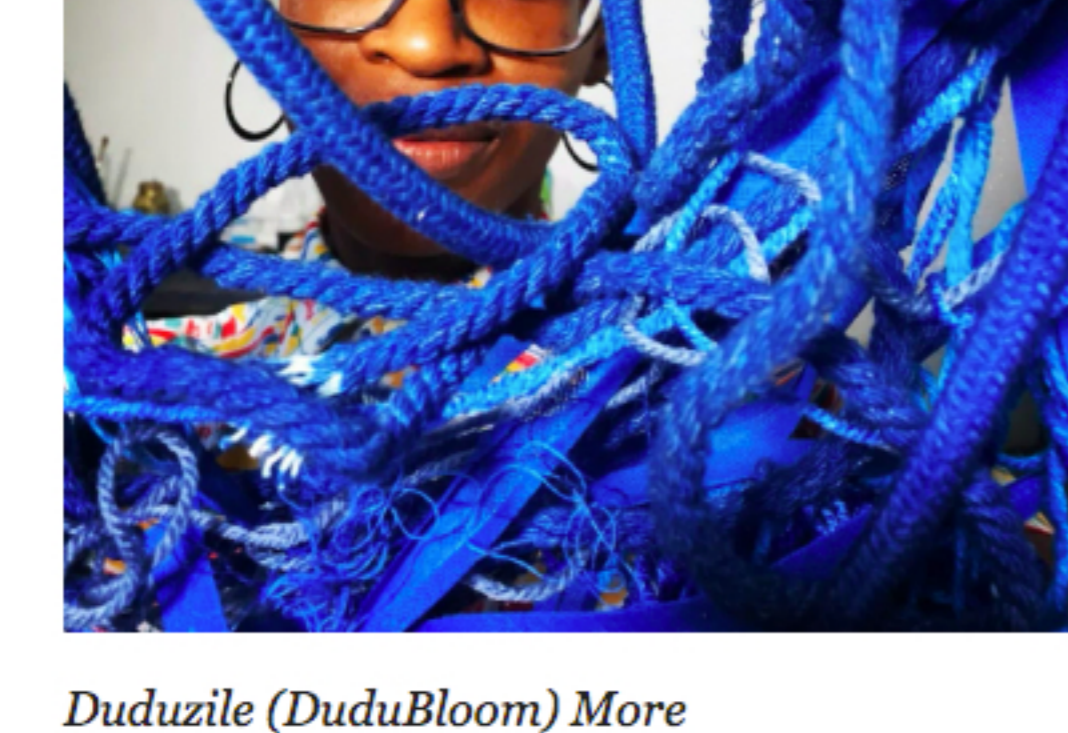
I think Covid-19 is, in a strange sort of way, a blessing in disguise for a lot of artists, who realised that we can actually do things online. But an essential tool in succeeding online is learning how to promote yourself in this environment.

OBY: Has it allowed for more introspection, more time for reflection? Where did you draw your inspiration from?

Tuli: There was a lot of change because of all of sudden there were times of isolation. Also, I had to think a lot about my mental state – not to feel so depressed and portray that in my work.

Dudu More: As Tuli has said, there was a period of adjustment. My studio is away from my home, so working at home was different. And I did have to ask myself where I would be getting my inspiration from.

Luckily when they reduced the restrictions and I was able to go back into the studio, it did help me a lot, creatively speaking, even if I was still isolated and it did have an effect on my mental state.



Duduzile (DuduBloom) More

OBY: How has that impacted your output, has it slowed down? Has it, on the contrary, increased with having more time on your hands?

Dudu: It was, actually, for me, a great way to bond with my work more. There was nothing else between me and my work. The process was a bit more intense.

Touria El Glaoui: I'm not sure if Africa and the continent itself has been impacted differently than anywhere else. I think the art world is impacted as a whole. We've seen a lot of international art fairs cancelling their shows...

I feel like we had a special moment, as you say, but that's why we're pushing to make sure that we continue to have that moment with the digital platforms, such as our New York fair, which we hosted online in May, partnering with Artsy.

On the whole, I'd say galleries reacted really fast to create their own online platforms.

It created a lot of sales for the galleries, in this very particular moment of the lockdown. The only downside that was mentioned to me is that the galleries did not connect with the collectors in the same way.

So on the upside you reach a much wider audience, but it's not the same in terms of building a relationship and connecting with collectors.

But digital is here to stay, definitely, and a great way to access new artists, new galleries – and for us, to actually be even more global in terms of our reach.

So, to answer your question, with regards African art, I think that the momentum and interest is still there.

Rakeb: Speaking for Addis Fine Art, we were in the process of expanding to our new space in London when Covid-19 hit, so for a couple of months we went through a time of adjustment as we, like most galleries, lost the majority of the peak season.

However, as we were already selling digitally before the pandemic, we intensified our efforts and embraced online collaborations with fairs – Art Dubai, Frieze New York & Untitled, Art – to markedly increase our digital sales.

I now feel collectors are willing to look at and buy more art online than before which in our case is compensating to a degree for the lack of physical exhibition sales.

But Touria is right, nothing can fully replace in-person interactions with artwork and artists. We now do a lot of virtual studio visits, videos of artwork and video calls so collectors can interact with artists, artwork and the gallery team.

OBY: The established artists will have their galleries representing them, but for emerging artists, will it not be a lot harder to pierce through?

Touria: It's a bit of both. This is definitely a reality for the younger generation of artists, having less access to platforms to showcase their work right now.

But the flipside is that the younger generation of artists is in a better situation because of all the social platforms and the way they can promote themselves independently.

Even before the pandemic, Facebook and Instagram were definitely platforms where collectors and even galleries discovered and met artists. Unfortunately today, this is the only channel.

Rakeb: In terms of discovering artists, we actually signed and exhibited Tsedaye during this period. Gallery co-founder Mesai and I have a very clear idea of which artists we want to work with in advance, months or years ahead.

Dudu: There has definitely been an increase in online activity, but the net is not as democratic as it may seem. We don't all have the same kind of access [to technology].

Saying that, I've been able to connect with other artists much easier online as opposed to before the pandemic.

Tuli: It's also important for emerging artists, now that we have this platform to expose our work, to use the platforms intelligently.

So it's not just about going online, but making the experience more personal to show their work process, what inspires them, without going over the top either. It's important to help connect with the artist.

Right now in Namibia everybody is going online, it doesn't matter if you are a fine artist or a musician, everybody is doing all their shows, their performances online.

OBY: During the pandemic, we've seen a number of societal movements such as Black Lives Matter, and issues around capitalism and equality, becoming amplified. Do you think we're going to see a different type of art form emerge?

Dudu: Let me just start from the beginning of the pandemic. There was this huge reaction to Covid-19 and everybody was creating artwork that had masks on them and then, [tackling] other issues that were amplified – like Black Lives Matter.

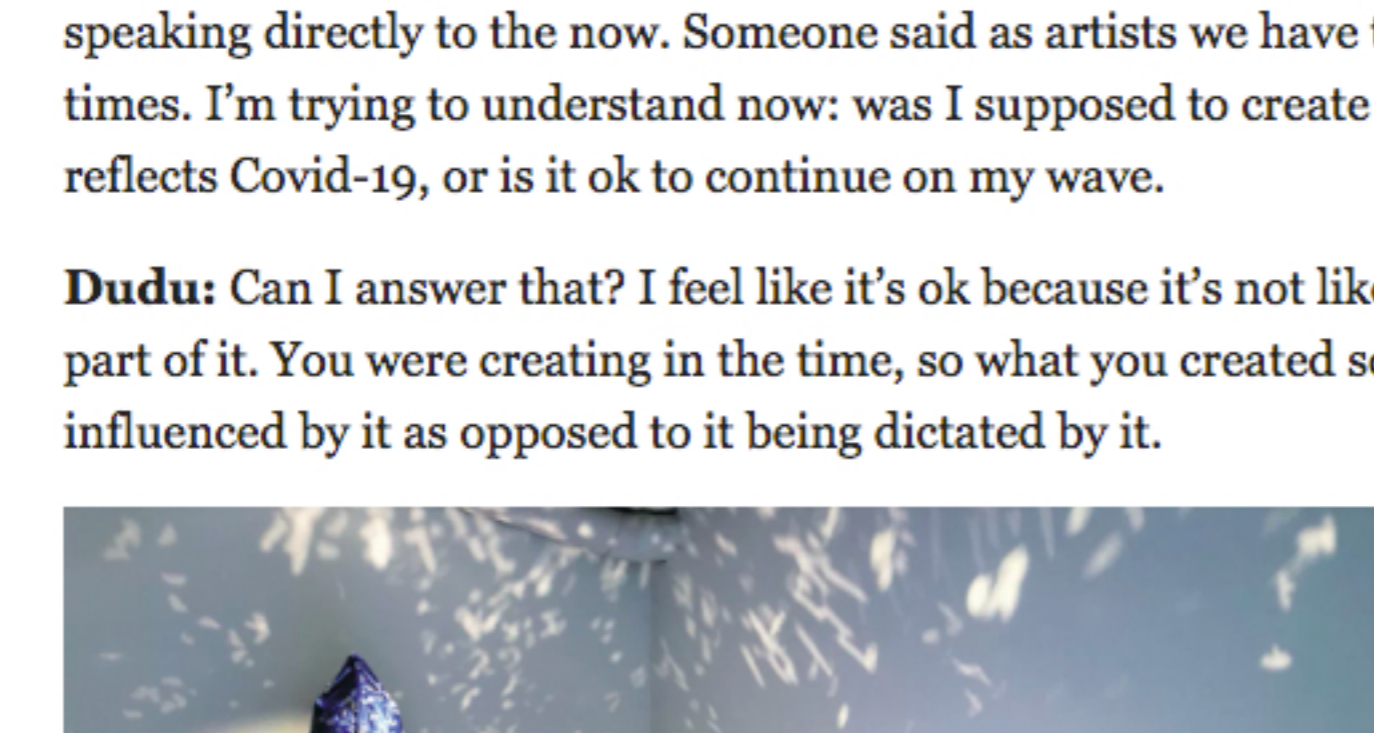
So art has in some way documented what we've been going through. I think that's what it is as opposed to it being a fashion type of thing, or a movement. When the pandemic ends, will there be a new type of style of artwork going around? Probably, yes.

Tuli: I realise that through this whole pandemic I haven't actually created any artwork or pieces directly speaking to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Perhaps it's because it's affecting me in a different way, [with] a mental state where I was always having a whole mental breakdown.

But I'm just trying to question the reason behind not creating a piece actually speaking directly to the now. Someone said as artists we have to reflect the times. I'm trying to understand now: was I supposed to create something that reflects Covid-19, or is it ok to continue on my wave.

Dudu: Can I answer that? I feel like it's ok because it's not like you were not part of it. You were creating in the time, so what you created somehow was influenced by it as opposed to it being dictated by it.



Astral Sea by Tsedaye Makonnen

Tsedaye: For me, this moment feels very different than other recent societal revolutions. My guess is that Covid-19 is one of the catalysts since many people are isolated at home and jobless.

There definitely seems to be a strong re-emergence of a Black liberation movement globally and in the US, where I live. Even among artists and arts administrators – who are demanding institutions and organisations actually live up to their diversity, equity and inclusivity values, and calling them forward after many years of abusing or neglecting the very communities they claim to support.

From my perspective, as an artist there is a synergy right now among us to collectivise, [and] to enact change within a system that upholds violence towards black and brown people. I haven't seen this much support, maybe ever in my lifetime, for artists and also communities of colour and other marginalised groups.

I look to women like Octavia Butler, Kimberley Crenshaw, Adrienne Marie Brown and others for guidance on how to survive these times and also how to change our world for the better for us all.

OBY: For the gallerists, are you saying the way artists are going to engage with collectors, sell their art and get themselves known is fundamentally going to change?

Touria: It depends how long it continues. If we're talking of going back to normal in the next three months or so, we might go back to old habits and how we were dealing with collectors and galleries before.

Right now, I cannot see myself organising a physical fair without an online dimension. This has started with Covid-19 and will probably continue after the crisis.

The online version would allow us as a fair to have access to younger emerging galleries or artists, maybe do shows with them. I really feel this whole online activity is going to take a different angle after the coronavirus but it's here to stay.

OBY: Have you seen a solidarity within the arts world, artists supporting each other, galleries supporting artists?

Dudu: Definitely. We sold prints by artists to create a fund to support lesser-known artists who were not represented so that they can get an income every month.

There has been a lot of solidarity in that sense, and as we said, with the increase in people being online, people are constantly tagging you, constantly citing your name, constantly showing your work – so yes, that has been an enjoyable and sweet part of this.

Tuli: In Namibia, a lot of artists came together and then there was a petition, [which they] handed over to the Minister of Education, Arts and Culture, and that resulted in the National Art Council of Namibia helping the artists to get a Covid-19 relief fund. This fund is supposed to help support individual artists that only rely on their output as artists, to sell their work.

That only came about once the artists mobilised themselves, signed the petition and handed this to the minister. If it wasn't for the work of the artists, I don't think funds would be allocated.

OBY: Art is a form of expression obviously, but it's also a form of escapism, of reflection, of solace for society. Do you think we're missing the influence of art on society, for those who are not in the art world like you are?

Touria: I think that artists have been instrumental in this moment of Covid-19, in being creative, creating content – we've seen it with the 'Don't go viral' campaign.

For the people who are not connected at all with the art world, they've done a really good job in creating content to be more engaging and more approachable.

But I do get the sense that for people in the arts world like myself and also for others who aren't, they have missed going to museums and experiencing art.

And during our webinars and discussions, art that people had collected had provided them with comfort during these times. I have to congratulate all the online exhibitions and virtual tours that museums put together. I think that a lot of people got engaged in being more sensitive about it because the world locked down.

The panellists

Dudu (DuduBloom) More – A visual artist from Johannesburg, who graduated from Artist Proof Studio in 2018. She recently took part in the RMB Talent Unlocked programme, and won the 2019 Cassirer Welz Award.

Tuli Mekondjo – A Namibian self-taught artist, Tuli works with mixed media (embroidery, collage, paint, resin and grain). She explores history and identity politics through the lens of those living in exile during Namibia's independence war. Tuli is represented by Guns & Rain in Johannesburg.

Tsedaye Makonnen – A multidisciplinary artist whose practice tackles her identity as a daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, a Black American and mother. Exhibitions include the Venice Biennale, the Smithsonian and more.

Rakeb Sile – Co-founder of Addis Fine Art, a pioneering gallery based in Addis Ababa and London.

Touria El Glaoui – Founder of 1-54, the leading international art fair dedicated to contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. It has held annual editions in London since 2013, New York since 2015 and Marrakech since 2018.

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