



The Perrotin gallery's exhibit at Art Paris last month, where it was a first-time participant. Mohammed Badra/EPA, via Shutterstock

By Farah Nayeri

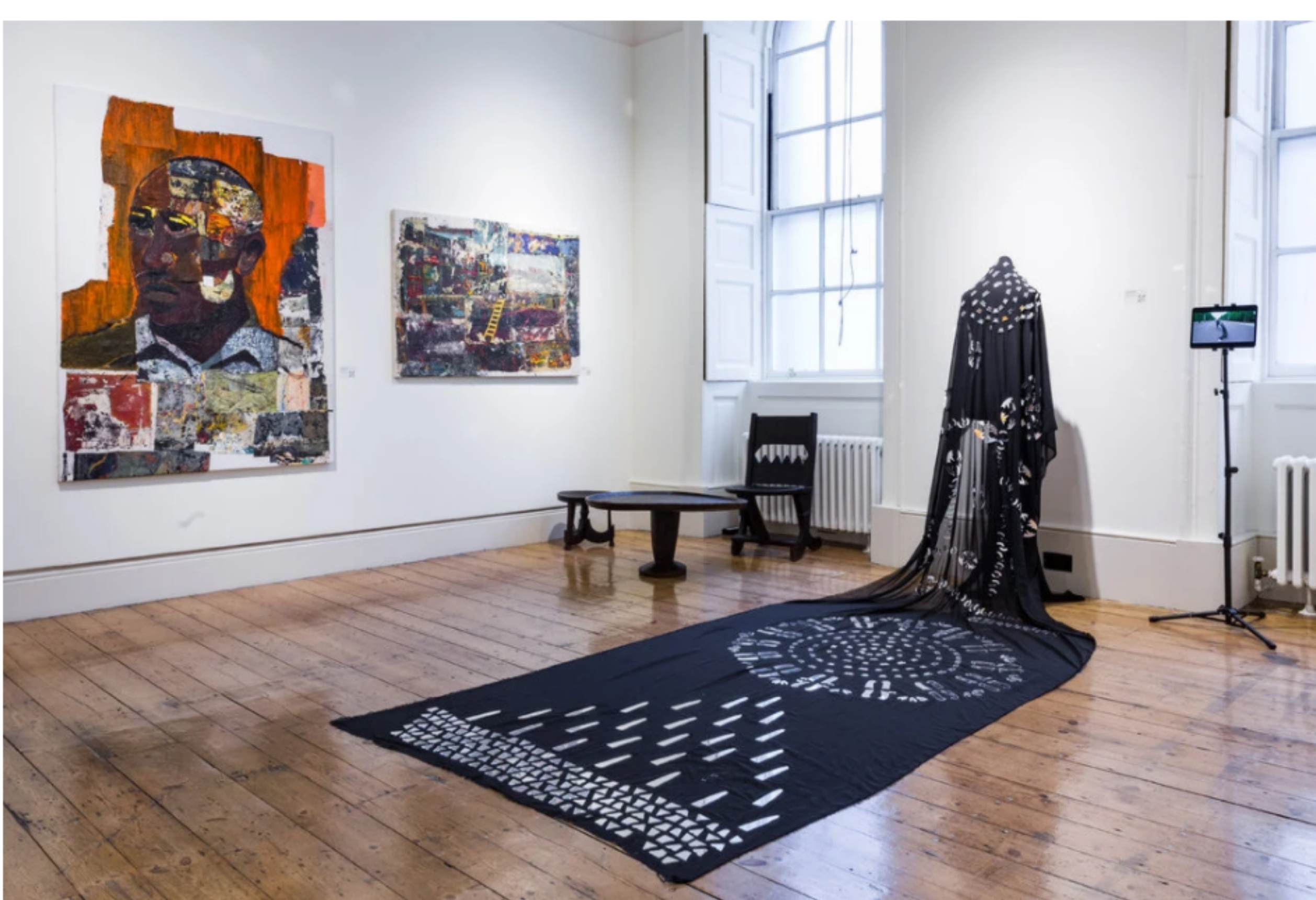
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Wearing a yellow face mask designed in Ethiopia, the gallerist Rakeb Sile greeted a trickle of visitors to her booth one recent morning at the [1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair](#) in London. [Addis Fine Art](#) — the gallery of which she is a founder in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa — had on display a colorful cityscape, a portrait painted on fragments of used canvas and a gem-studded black cape worn in a recent performance-art piece outside Buckingham Palace.

“With the right precautions, we just have to keep things moving,” said Ms. Sile, who is of Ethiopian descent, referring to the pandemic. She said the gallery owed it to its staff and artists, and to the 1-54 fair, which was founded in London in 2013 and is now also held in New York and Marrakesh, Morocco.

“The narrative on Africa is always so flat, and very, very shallow,” she said. “Somewhere like this, you can come in and really discover things that you just never thought you would discover.”



A performance-art costume and other offerings by Addis Fine Art in London at this month's 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Addis Fine Art

The pandemic has led most of the world's fairs to cancel en masse and instead have online editions. These include Art Basel, in Hong Kong, Basel, Switzerland, and Miami Beach; FIAC, which was to have taken place in Paris this week; and the Frieze Art Fair in London, which usually coincides with 1-54.

The context could hardly have been tougher. The virus has caused severe restrictions on travel and crowds, two defining features of any international fair. According to a midyear [art-market survey](#) on the virus's impact that was published by Art Basel and UBS Global, fair cancellations in the first half of 2020 have led to galleries' generating only 16 percent of their sales at art fairs, down from 46 percent during the same period last year. Nine of 10 galleries predicted no second-half recovery in this sector of the business, and only a third forecast a sales increase at fairs next year.

Once Frieze went virtual, 1-54, which ran from Oct. 8 to 10, could have canceled. It was helped by its smallness and its location at [Somerset House](#), a stately 18th-century building in central London with a warren of interconnected rooms that allowed one-way traffic. Though the fair, at capacity, drew only 3,000 visitors this year (down from 18,000 in 2019) and featured 30 galleries (down from 45), several booths sold out, including Ed Cross Fine Art, which featured ruglike textile works by the Welsh-Ghanaian artist [Anya Paintsil](#). The fair itself broke even.

“In a world where people are more and more worried about large gatherings, about safety and about the prospect of getting sick, we have to think about more intimate formats, and ours happens to be one such format,” Touria El-Glaoui, the fair's founding director, said after its end. “We're already small, and already flexible, unlike a fair in a convention center that hosts more than 100 galleries.”



“Floating City XVIII, 2020,” by the Ethiopian artist Addis Gezehagn, at the 1-54 fair. Addis Fine Art

Ms. El-Glaoui said she hoped to go ahead with the New York edition of 1-54 next May — and to hold it in the photographer Annie Leibovitz's former studio, the Caldwell Factory, as had been planned for this year before its cancellation.

Discounting also helped make the fairs happen. Viennacontemporary, which offered half-price booths, ended up hosting 65 galleries in total, down from 110 last year. Art Paris gave a 15 percent discount to established galleries and 14 newer ones, and gave the latter the proceeds of its ticket sales, a total of 110,000 euros (about \$129,000). A total of 112 galleries participated in the Paris fair this year, down from 150 in 2019.

Art Paris was the first fair to take the post-lockdown plunge and proceed as normal, occupying the domed turn-of-the-century Grand Palais from Sept. 10 to 13. This year's edition drew about 57,000 visitors, down 10 percent from last year. It also had first-time exhibitors that included the high-profile gallery Perrotin and multiple six-digit sales, among them those of a drawing by Giacometti and two sculptures by César.

Art Paris was long perceived as a largely local art-world outlier. But “what was previously singled out as a weakness in my case — that the fair wasn't international enough — turned out to be an advantage,” said Guillaume Piens, its director since 2012.

“Purchases were mainly by French collectors, challenging the commonly held belief that France has few collectors and that we'd be nothing without American buyers,” he added. “Things have changed a lot.”

Mr. Piens said he was right to have resisted turning Art Paris into a clone of other large, global fairs, where visitors see “practically the same things,” regardless of where they go, and “it's like driving down the same highways, with the same names and the same galleries all over.”

Johanna Chromik, artistic director of Viennacontemporary, also noted that local — meaning Austrian — collectors made that fair a success this year, accounting for half of sales, up from the usual one-third. The Vienna event, which ran from Sept. 24 to 27, also caters to Austria's neighbors, especially the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary.

Putting on the fair was difficult, Ms. Chromik said — “you can imagine how many sleepless nights I had” — but she added that collectors were “highly motivated” and “really buying; we had solid to really good sales this year.” Many visitors had not been to a fair since the Armory Show in New York in March, so they were pleased “to see art for real, in three dimensions,” she said.

Collectors' enthusiasm was confirmed by the UBS/Art Basel report. Despite the virus, 82 percent said they planned to attend exhibitions, art fairs and other events in the ensuing 12 months. More than half hoped to attend events both at home and abroad. And 59 percent of the high-net-worth respondents said that the virus had increased their thirst for collecting.

So fairs seem here to stay, the events' directors said; there will just be fewer of them.

“I don't believe in returning to how we lived before 2019,” Ms. Chromik said. “We learned from this year.”

She said some of the practices introduced at Viennacontemporary this year — like shared booths, of which there were about half a dozen — could well continue.

What the Covid-19 pandemic has made clear, said Mr. Piens of Art Paris, is that the last several years featured “too much foie gras and too much Champagne, resulting in a giant indigestion.”

Mr. Piens added, “We're all on a diet now.”