

Art Market

International



Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul, co-founders of Addis Fine Art, which focuses on Modern and contemporary Ethiopian artists, have set up a gallery in London's Cromwell Place hub

African galleries set their sights on the West

With outposts springing up from London to Los Angeles, dealers are taking control and putting their artists on the global map. By Ayodeji Rotinwa

The fates and fortunes of African artists have, until recently, been largely shaped by outsider interests. But now, as the market for these artists grows apace, African galleries are taking a firmer hand in their fortunes by expanding to the West.

The catch-all term "African art" – one created by Western auction houses and dealers – has proven to be a brilliant marketing tactic. A critical and commercial domino effect has been spurred by events such as the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair and seminal exhibitions like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* at New York's Richard Taittinger Gallery in 2015. Curated by Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, the show helped spread the appeal of African artists stateside. Seeing an area ripe for development, US and European galleries started adding African artists to their rosters and last summer, as protests over racial justice swept across the world, interest in African (or Black) art surged.

In the past five years, against the

odds, a cluster of African galleries have set up outposts in Western art-world centres in order to have greater agency in the fortunes of their artists – and, no doubt, to try to avoid them being poached by larger rivals. Last year alone, despite (or because of) the pandemic, Ghana's Gallery 1957 and Ethiopia's Addis Fine Art opened in London, while Nigeria's Rele Gallery launched a Los Angeles space. They join South Africa's Goodman Gallery, which opened in London in 2019; the Ivory Coast's Galerie Cecile Fakhoury, which opened a showroom in Paris in 2018; and South Africa's Stevenson, which has had an office in Amsterdam for the past couple of years. "Being in Johannesburg was too far away; relying on fairs wasn't really sufficient," says Liza Essers, the owner of Goodman Gallery. Essers chose London because: "If you look at the colonial history of South Africa, it made sense to be in a place to challenge those historical power structures, to speak back."

Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul, the co-founders of Addis Fine Art, started out

as art consultants in London while simultaneously running a gallery in Addis Ababa, which they founded in 2016. Last year, Addis Fine Art joined Cromwell Place, the gallery hub in South Kensington. "We need to make sure this region is included in the conversations and narrative around contemporary and Modern art; there's a huge gap," Sile says.

The right roster

The galleries have all made calculated bets with the artists they bring forward. Goodman Gallery works a wide remit, showing emerging and established artists from across the continent alongside non-African artists such as Hank Willis Thomas from the US. Addis Fine Art is more focused, showing contemporary and Modern artists from Ethiopia; its first (and so far only) London exhibition last autumn was of the Ethiopian Modernist Tadesse Mesfin – though nearly 70, this was his first European solo show.

Meanwhile, Gallery 1957 and Rele Gallery take their chances on young, raw talents. Victoria Cooke, the director of Gallery 1957, says its London gallery will be "an extension" of that in Accra – it opened last autumn with a show of the Ghanaian artist Kwesi Botchway, who is at the forefront of an emerging trend among young African artists who are resisting expectations that they must be political or didactic and instead concentrating on portraiture and scenes of black life. In its inaugural Los Angeles exhibition, Rele Gallery showed three promising Nigerian talents, discovered by its founder, Adenrele Sonariwo: Marcellina Akpojotor, Tonia Nneji, and Chidinma Nnoli. All touch on themes of family, womanhood and empowerment.

The cost of doing business

Rele's inaugural exhibition sold out within days and Essers reports that Goodman's past few exhibitions have



Kwesi Botchway's *Dark Purple is Everything Black* (2020); Gallery 1957's London space opened with a show by the Ghanaian artist

done well commercially, too. But running galleries on two continents is neither cheap nor straightforward. Works by African artists are often lower in price than their Western contemporaries – but rents in London, Paris and Los Angeles are steep and bills must be paid. "There has been growing interest in African artists from the global art market, which is of course throwing prices and market comparisons into the spotlight, but our focus has always been first and foremost our artists and our local audiences and collector base," Cooke says. "We try to make our decisions based on this."

Collaborating with other galleries has helped keep costs down for Addis Fine Art: joining the timeshare model of Cromwell Place "reduces our overheads", says Sile, who previously shared a London project space with Tafeta Gallery and is in talks to potentially collaborate with Rele. "We are dealing with a subset of art that is young in the consciousness of the art market," Sile says.

The critical history of African art is rarely discussed on the global stage and for this reason, Essers has founded the South South initiative, bringing together galleries concentrating on art from the global South. Alongside holding selling events, South South is building an archive of the artist histories often left out of Western readings, addressing issues of decolonisation, restitution and racial justice. "There will never be a de-centring or re-centring of the art world," Essers says. "There's a Western art world. We of the Global South can define our own histories, in the ways in which we contribute to the Centre."

• The writer formerly worked for Rele Gallery

Art Basel galleries face travel headache



Art Basel in Hong Kong is offering local staff to oversee "ghost stands"

By Lisa Movius

HONG KONG. Dealers are assessing whether to attend Art Basel in Hong Kong this May (21-23). The city's Covid-19 travel restrictions are unlikely to have eased significantly by then, and many fear content policing will only worsen after lawmaker Eunice Yung called for the censoring of M+'s China-critical art. As of mid-March, fair organisers had not released a list of participants and many galleries are reluctant to pay top dollar to send works to a "ghost stand".

The fair will train local assistants to "answer questions about the works, and act as on-site assistants to help gallery owners", an Art Basel spokesperson says. But they "will not be expected to engage with sales...this will be handled by the gallery teams remotely". Works will be installed by the galleries' art handlers.

Paris gallery Balice Hertling will share a "ghost stand" with Shanghai's Antenna Space. "We are not going there but just sending the works," says Balice Hertling's co-founder Daniele Balice. "We will not send any of our employees there because we don't think it's fair to force someone to be in quarantine for that long."

Several dealers say they are confused about how the assistant system will operate – some are independently recruiting temporary staff who are Hong Kong-based. The city requires visitors from Greater China to quarantine for two weeks, and from elsewhere for three weeks. Anyone returning to mainland China after must hotel quarantine for another 14 to 21 days. Some mainland dealers say they can only obtain seven-day Hong Kong visas which expire mid-quarantine. Last November, Shanghai fairs were able to secure special entries for dealers, though not collectors.

Lisson Gallery is opting out this year. "With the extreme challenges around participation in the fair logistically, it is proving near impossible to staff the fair due to lengthy quarantine requirements on both sides of a trip, and given the way we work with our artists and the value of work that we would typically ship, we cannot see a way to do the fair in a way that would satisfy our standards and the expectations of our artists," a spokesperson says. Therefore, "we have withdrawn from ABHK 2021. We fully expect to be back at the fair next year when the world has opened up again."

Others feel it is important to back the fair now, including Atsuko Ninagawa, the director of Tokyo's Take Ninagawa, which will take a satellite stand: "It is important for us to support Art Basel in Hong Kong because it in turn supports the art ecosystem here in Asia."



Galerie Cecile Fakhoury in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, also has a Paris showroom