Collecting ✓ Added

The trio creating 'Portals' across a tumultuous year

Breaking with tradition, three international guest curators step in to guide the next Art Basel OVR

Feedback

A Portal of Gold Artists Lara Tasse Ermann, Chiapas

Gareth Harris JUNE 12 2021

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Online viewing rooms, the virtual selling spaces created by art fairs, mushroomed early in the pandemic when collectors, curators and art-world players were hunkered down at home. But do these rooms, or OVR, still have mileage? Keeping the art trade interested in digital ventures has been a challenge, especially with intense speculation around the return of real-life art events; Art Basel is scheduled to go ahead this September in Switzerland with Covid-19 restrictions in place.

Rather than earlier OVR presentations which were overseen solely by selection committees, Art Basel's latest digital iteration, OVR: Portals (*June 16-19*), has asked three established curators to also help select the 94 participating galleries, giving the event scholarly kudos. The curatorial trio is Magali Arriola, director of Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; Christina Li, a curator based in Amsterdam and Hong Kong; and Larry Ossei-Mensah, co-founder of the "creative collective" ARTNOIR and curator-at-large at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York.

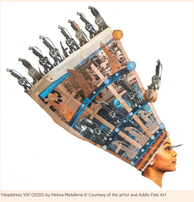
'Steak for Dessert Part' (2021)

'The Access to Excess' (2021), both by Troy Makaza © Courtesy of the artist and First Floor Gallery

Li and Arriola say over email that their vision for OVR: Portals was informed by the tumult of the past year. "If 2020 taught us anything, it is that we shouldn't take anything for granted . . . We see how [the artists'] works challenge structures of power and inequality throughout history," Li says, which helps us understand our place in a diverse society.

The curators, who communicated via email, Zoom and WhatsApp, have clear motivations (online fair platforms need to stay fresh after all). Arriola says her priority was "to trigger conversations and bridge different contexts" regarding how people around the world have dealt with 2020's events.

To Ossei-Mensah, "It was important to me personally that we had galleries that are active in Africa, running serious programmes and showcasing the best and brightest visual artists." Contemporary African work is a burgeoning sector of the global art market.

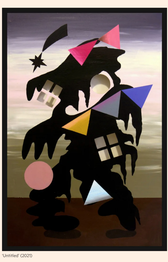


'Headdress VIII' (2020) by Helina Metaferia © Courtesy of the artist and Addis Fine Art

Ossei-Mensah is championing the Zimbabwean artist Troy Makaza, who is represented by First Floor Gallery in Harare. "We want to shift preconceptions of what contemporary art from Africa can be in a critical and engaged way," say gallery directors Marcus Gora and Valerie Kabov.

They say Makaza's kaleidoscopic works made from painted silicone strings sit between painting and sculpture and that the works speak "powerfully and authentically to the current cultural and political moment in Zimbabwe in a way which connects globally". The prices for their selection, including "Big Man Syndrome: Part 1" (2021), range from $5,000 to $12,000.

Addis Fine Art, which has spaces in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and London, will show works by Tariku Shiferaw, Helina Metaferia and Tizta Berhanu under the title "100 Days of Introspection". Metaferia's collages stand out, drawing on the complexities of her Ethiopian-American heritage. "I tell overlooked stories that centre Black bodies in positions of power and vulnerability," she says online.

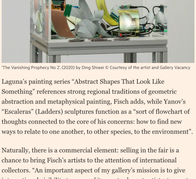


'Untitled' (2021)

'Dos chicas (Two Girls)' (2020), both by Fernanda Laguna © Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nora Fisch

The gallery's curatorial concept is inspired by the two great social upheavals of our time: the pandemic — prompting a "crisis of intimacy due to lockdowns", say gallery founders Rakeh Silz and Mesai Halleluel — and the experience of black people in the US, which came to the fore following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020.

The post-pandemic reality is detectible too at Galería Nora Fisch of Buenos Aires, one of five galleries participating in an Art Basel fair for the first time. Fisch stresses that this particular edition appeals with its curatorial focus on the profound changes unfurling across societies worldwide. "The artists we are presenting — Fernanda Laguna, Juan Tessi and Osias Yanov — address this theme from the perspective of gender expression and they do so in a complex and non-didactic way," she says.

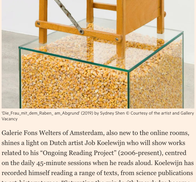


'The Vanishing Prophecy No 2.' (2020) by Ding Shiwei © Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Vacancy

Laguna's painting series "Abstract Shapes That Look Like Something" references strong regional traditions of geometric abstraction and metaphysical painting, Fisch adds, while Yanov's "Escaleras" (Ladders) sculptures function as a "sort of flowchart of thoughts connected to the core of his concerns: how to find new ways to relate to one another, to other species, to the environment".

Naturally, there is a commercial element: selling in the fair is a chance to bring Fisch's artists to the attention of international collectors. "An important aspect of my gallery's mission is to give international visibility to some of its most relevant artists, to create a larger audience for them and build up their markets," Fisch says. The works available are priced between $7,000 and $16,000.

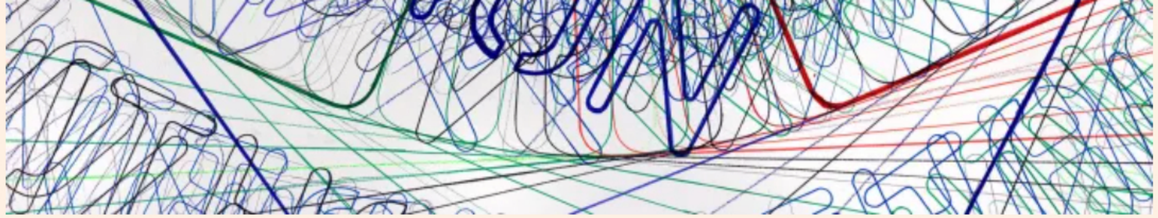
Gallery Vacancy of Shanghai, another Art Basel digital newcomer, is showing works by Chinese artist Ding Shiwei, including video "The Vanishing Prophecy No. 2" (2020, $12,000), and a wood and brass piece by New York-based Sydney Shen ("Die_Frau_mit_dem_Raben_am_Abgrund", 2019, $15,000).



Die_Frau_mit_dem_Raben_am_Abgrund' (2019) by Sydney Shen © Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Vacancy

Galerie Fons Welters of Amsterdam, also new to the online rooms, shines a light on Dutch artist Job Koelewijn who will show works related to his "Ongoing Reading Project" (2006-present), centred on the daily 45-minute sessions when he reads aloud. Koelewijn has recorded himself reading a range of texts, from science publications to art-history tomes. "Saturating the mind with knowledge became a daily intellectual exercise," the gallery says.

Whether the trend for digital offerings actually appeals to collectors and art-world players is debatable. New York-based art adviser Nilani Trent says that her clients do not have time to scroll through art fair online rooms. "It's far more effective for sales when a gallery sends me the checklist in advance and I can then forward that on to my clients," she says.



'Higher Contradictions' (2017) by Job Koelewijn © Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Fons Welters. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij

Trent does acknowledge that "picking a theme allows the gallery to contextualise its artists in new and thoughtful ways. Guiding collectors to see art in a different light is a win for everyone." Belgian collector Alain Servais bluntly points out that he has "no plans to ever open an OVR now that I can experience art in real life again".

Real-life art fairs will return but OVRs have revealed the need to expand access to contemporary art, says Ossei-Mensah. A hybrid in-person/digital approach for fairs will "allow for a truly inclusive experience regardless of geographic location", he says. How the future art fair model melds both the virtual and physical worlds remains to be seen.

June 17-19, artbasel.com