

Art Dubai

Shifting perspectives



Wealth of Nations, installation by Victor Ehikhamenor, represented by Tyburn Gallery, UK

capital, represent one of them. They chose to travel to Dubai for the show with a view to positioning themselves globally. Sile says: "Ethiopia has a burgeoning art scene but it's not where regular collectors would go to find art, so we have to put ourselves front and centre."

Opened in 2016, Addis Fine Art is the only international gallery in Ethiopia, representing artists both at home and in the diaspora. "Addis is a centre for things, not just for Ethiopia but the African Union is there and other international organisations," Haileleul says. "We wanted a place where the artist community could have curated shows, representation directly from Ethiopia and to cultivate the collector base locally. Ethiopians collect paintings, that's been the case for a long while, back to the modernist painters. They are heavily collected by the local and diaspora community. We're trying to see if there is an appetite for photography and new media."

REACHING THE COLLECTORS

Haileleul notes the growth in art institutions from and on the continent in the past five years, with an increase in the number of biennales, public museums and contemporary African art fairs. But he feels – given the size and diversity of the continent – that more work needs to be done on the international stage.

It might not be a surprise, given its proximity, business and cultural ties, that Addis Fine Art has a significant number of collectors from the Middle East: 20% of sales, Sile says, come from the region. But over on the other side of the continent that figure is somewhat lower.

Marwan Zakhem, director of Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana, says only 5-10% of his gallery's sales are to buyers of Middle Eastern origin. "When we talk about Africa we're talking about a big continent and, especially when it's tied to the Middle East, you really have to separate North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. If you look around here there are 70 or 80 galleries and nine or ten representing Africa, but only two are sub-Saharan."

Though this was the gallery's first Art Dubai outing, in January it took over the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai for the duration of an exhibition by Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey. Zakhem notes that the growing status of artists

African and diaspora artists shone at this year's Emirates art fair, making the case for Africa-based galleries to forge links beyond the continent while nurturing a young collector base at home

By **Billie Adwoa McTernan** in Dubai

The 12th edition of Art Dubai kicked off with a dazzling opening in March. Visitors were welcomed with champagne and roses, and given a tour detailing some of the Middle East's major moments in art history. The halls were packed with galleries, including a small but strong contingent showing artists from Africa.

Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul, directors of Addis Fine Art in the Ethiopian

KURNIADI WIDODO

from West and Central Africa internationally is gradually tipping the balance.

"The more we can get Africa-based galleries to come to art fairs like this [the better]," Zakhem says. "There is a huge collector base here, you can tell by how well it is represented, [and] we can't ignore a market like this. We are one of the first and we are ready to invest and be the forerunners. We have the talent, it's just about getting it out there, you need that bridge."

In a bid to build that bridge Art Dubai launched its first residency programme this year with 11 artists from across the world. They included Victor Ehikhamenor from Nigeria and Zohra Opoku from Ghana.

For Ehikhamenor, the Emirati dream was the starting point for an artistic thought process that culminated in an elaborate 8.3-foot-tall piece, *The Metamorphosis of a Tall Dream*. In this work, the world's tallest building, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, is reimagined in the image of the world's tallest masquerade, the Igunnuko of the Yoruba people in Nigeria.

DREAM SEQUENCE

The piece is a mixed-media installation composed of threads, feathers and ropes of fabric that would be recognisable to anyone who has witnessed a masquerade or even fumbled their way through many a West African fabric market. The paper and canvas works Ehikhamenor produced as part of the dream sequence over the course of the four-week residency are layered with his signature arched and rounded inscriptions, inspired from his village in Edo State.

"Some of my iconographies [are] something that is familiar to them because a lot of artists here use calligraphy in their work," he says, drawing on the resonance between the two. "Whereas mine isn't Arabic calligraphy it could

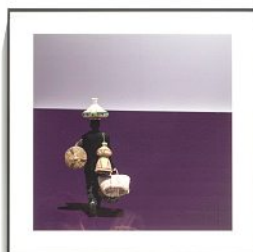
mean that some time in the past there was a relationship between these lines."

Similarities in style could also be observed in the modernist paintings of both the Arab world and West Africa. As Ehikhamenor fused his regular practice

with what he observed in Dubai to explore a narrative, similarly German-Ghanaian artist Opoku continued the conversation she had begun with her body of work 'Harmattan Tales' – pieces examining Muslim women's lives in



TOM DULAT/GETTY IMAGES/AFP



SEBASTIANO PELLION DI PERSANO/COURTESY OF ADDIS FINE ART

Highlights and innovations

THIS YEAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME, Art Dubai included a four-to-eight-week residency programme for artists from 11 countries. To encourage conversations and collaboration, the artists worked in studios across the city to produce work for the fair. Indian

artist Poonam Jain, who is represented by 1x1 Gallery in Dubai, presented work that used labour cards, identical to those carried by millions of the city's migrant workers to clock in their hours at construction sites. Faris Alosaimi from Saudi Arabia considered

home and the idea of development by creating canvases depicting the conflict between the two. Using charcoal, a memory from his youth, and cement, a modern marker of construction, Alosaimi's work looks at what can be lost when society forfeits simplicity for modernity.

In one of the main gallery halls, Voice Gallery, based in Marrakech, presented work by Sara Ouhammadou, Michele Ciacciofera and Eric van Hove. Visitors were inspired by the latter's mixed-media construction of a prototype engine for an electric motorbike



Above:
Visitors at the
Art Dubai fair.
Left: Photographs
by Girma Berta
at Addis Fine Art.
Right: *Pink Circle*
by Modupeola Fadugba
at Accra's Gallery 1957

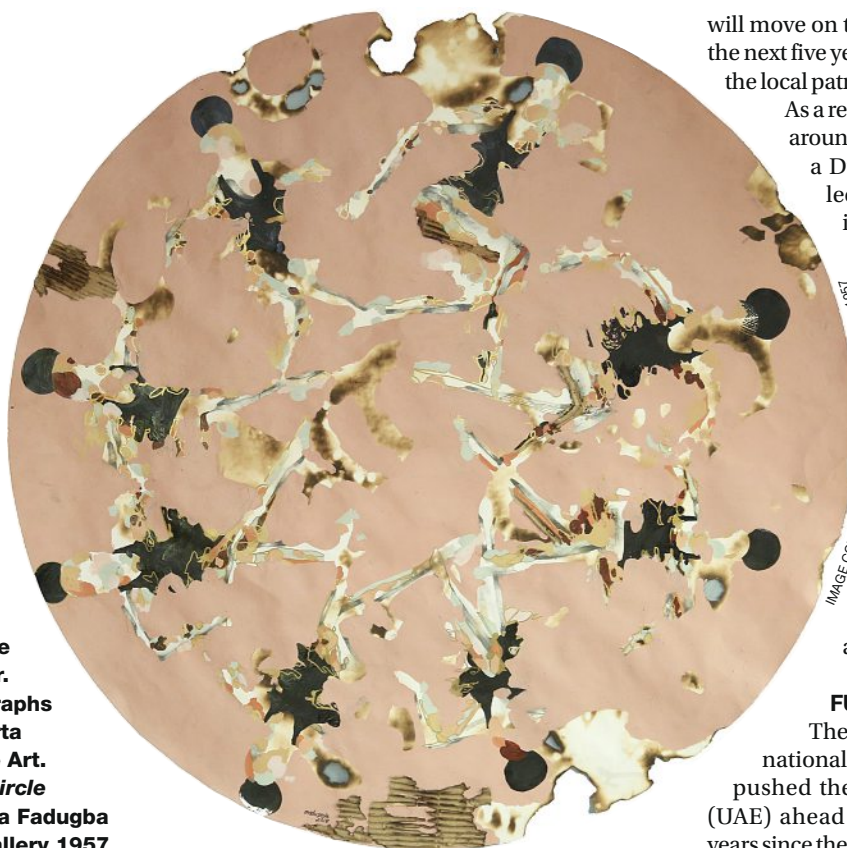


IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALLERY 1957

Accra. Here, her protagonist is a young Sudanese woman working in Dubai.

Opoku is represented by the Mariane Ibrahim Gallery based in Seattle, which has a roster of artists from all over the world. In 2017 the gallery won the inaugural Armory Show 'Presents' prize for its solo stand showing Opoku's 'Unraveled Threads' series. At Art Dubai the gallery's stand had a steady rotation of visitors with pieces selling out within the first couple of days.

In Nigeria a young collector base is emerging. The sale of one of three famous Tutu portraits by Ben Enwonwu for £1.2mn (\$1.7mn) in early March at

the London auction house Bonhams, has piqued interest further, and in Lagos, where there are exhibitions and gallery events almost every week, there is talk of a private museum soon to be opening up.

Abuja-based collector Kola Aina has built his collection over the past eight years with work mainly by Nigerian artists. Up until the last couple of decades, he says, the typical collectors were the professional class, the top lawyers, accountants and consultants. Then oil money began to pour in. "Everyone knows local patronage is really what helps grow the market," he says. "Because the hype passes and people

will move on to maybe Brazilian art in the next five years, but if you don't have the local patrons the market just dips."

As a result of his frequent travels around Africa, Farhad Bakhtiar, a Dubai-based Iranian collector, made his first foray into the contemporary art scene 10 years ago.

In that time he has observed an expansion of interest in art from the continent from his Middle Eastern contemporaries.

A temporary exhibition of his collection in the Alserkal Avenue gallery district included works by Malian painter Amadou Sanogo and Rwandan-Ugandan artist Collin Sekajugo.

FUNDING THE ART SPACE

The initial investment from national institutions is what has pushed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ahead of the curve. In the 50 years since the union began, the creative industries have been harnessed and centred in the three cities: Abu Dhabi – where the Louvre opened in November 2017; Sharjah, which hosts a biennale and book fair; and Dubai.

While the model may have worked for the UAE, Ayo Adeyinka, director of TAFETA art dealership in London, believes African countries may have to take a different approach.

"It's a completely different society," he asserts. "Of course I would like us to replicate what we're seeing here where the powers that be are buying in the expertise and funding the art space, but I'd rather health and education was better funded in any part of Africa – we've got other priorities. I'm not selfish enough to think we should be having a Louvre Lagos when we don't have electricity. Besides, you're not going to have a vibrant art district if you don't have the transport to get you there."

"If we [in the arts] keep doing what we [are] doing in industry, we are building an ecosystem," he adds, noting that more funding could come from the private sector: "What we need is institutionalised communication of the arts to the public, and our museums to be reinvigorated and re-energised with the beautiful works of modern art they already have." ●

using materials found in Morocco, including bone, copper and mahogany. Van Hove says he hopes the locally produced Morocco-made engines will become a sustainable alternative option across the region.

The fair's Global Art Forum focused on

artificial intelligence and robotics, indicating a more conceptual turn in the fair's programming. Discussions were led by writer and curator Shumon Basar and included a presentation by artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries in London Hans Ulrich

Obrist, and a screening and Q&A session with Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu, whose award-winning 2009 sci-fi film *Pumzi* has become a reference point for ideas and conversations about Afrofuturism on the continent. ● **B.McT**