

Namsa Leuba's 'Zulu Kids, Strength', one of the works on show at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair



## CONTINENTAL SHIFT

Energetic, experimental and expressive: the women who are putting African art on the map

BY FRANCES HEDGES

African influences are deeply embedded in Western art, from the stylised figures and angular, mask-like faces in the work of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse to the expressive use of colour in Paul Klee's Tunisia-inspired paintings. Yet it is only in the past decade or so that artists from the continent have risen to prominence in their own right, as critics and collectors have finally woken up to the dynamism and diversity of their work. This month, visitors will flock to Somerset House for the second London edition of the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, which celebrates the variety of artistic talent across Africa's 54 countries. Its founding director Touria El Glaoui says that exhibitors share a 'fresh and different' approach attributable to their relative freedom from European influences and market pressures. 'These artists generally haven't been trying to please anyone, so they inhabit their own unique creative world,' she observes.

Once inaccessible, that world is now becoming more open to the Western art community, with institutions including Tate, Victoria Miro and the Saatchi Gallery giving increasing representation to African artists. Already, auction houses are vying to benefit from this nascent market's commercial potential: Sotheby's announced the appointment of Hannah O'Leary, formerly the leading specialist in African art at Bonhams, to launch a dedicated London sale in 2017. Excitingly, women rank among the continent's top-selling artists: the South African painter Marlene Dumas broke records when she sold her piece *The Visitor* for \$6.3 million at Sotheby's London in 2008.

Greater political and economic stability in certain African countries, alongside increased government support for the cultural sector, has fuelled some of this artistic growth. Thanks to its relative prosperity, South Africa has for a long time had a flourishing art scene: it is home to world-famous institutions including the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and the more recently established Stellenbosch Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery. Now, other countries are following suit: the British collector Marwan Zakhem founded Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana, earlier this year to provide a platform for emerging African artists, particularly those who work with non-traditional media.

Zohra Opoku, an Accra-based installation and performance artist of German and Ghanaian descent, is one such talent. Opoku, who credits Gallery 1957 with allowing her to reach a wider audience, explores the preservation of cultural heritage through textiles. Her 2014–2015 work *The Billboard Project*, which features video footage of clothes hanging on billboards across Accra, poses questions about how Africa's rich fabrics are bound up with the



Above: Virginia Chihota's 'The Root of the Flower We Do Not Know' (2014). Left: Marlene Dumas's 'Embarrassment' (1991)



Bazaar  
ART

identity of its people, and what happens when these traditions become subsumed by Western influences. Themes of masquerade and camouflage are prevalent in her work, which she suggests may stem from her position as a semi-foreigner in both Germany and Ghana. 'I enjoy playing with the concept that what you see isn't always what you get,' she says.

Fashion also inspires the Malawian artist Billie Zangewa, who describes her work as 'a conversation between textiles and landscapes'. Her tapestry-like silk creations combine architectural motifs with flora, fauna and portraiture. 'Over the years, I have become more preoccupied by what it means to be a woman in Africa,' she explains. 'I have found it cathartic to tell some of the darker stories and, through them, reach a point of self-acceptance.' Her 2010 piece *The Rebirth of the Black Venus*, which transplants Botticelli's *Venus* to Johannesburg, challenges the objectification of the black female body while celebrating its goddess-like beauty.

An equally intimate insight into the lives of African women can be found in the art of Virginia Chihota, who is Zimbabwean but has worked in Libya and Tunisia. Her introspective, dreamlike silk screens and prints convey the sense of isolation and cultural dislocation she has felt when moving through centres of political and social disruption, as well as addressing the universal theme of relationships. 'I look to express the human form in its joyous moments and anxious times,' she says.

In speaking to both a local and an international audience, Chihota is one of a growing breed of artists who are influenced, but not defined, by their cultural and geographical roots. The Also Known As Africa fair, which launches in Paris this November, will celebrate that global outlook by exhibiting Africa-themed art from all around the world. 'I have never wanted to put African artists in a box labelled "Africa",' says its founder Victoria Mann. 'Anyone can take inspiration from the continent, whatever their birthright, heritage or geography.' □

*The 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair* ([www.1-54.com](http://www.1-54.com)) is at Somerset House, Strand, London WC2, from 6 to 9 October. Also Known As Africa ([www.akaasfair.com](http://www.akaasfair.com)) is at Carreau de Temple, Paris, from 11 to 13 November. Virginia Chihota: *Come Forth as Gold* is at Tivani Contemporary ([www.tivani.co.uk](http://www.tivani.co.uk)), 16 Little Portland Street, London W1, until 29 October.



Above left: Zohra Opoku's 'Handwash Only' (2012). Below: Chihota's 'Kuzvirwisa' (2016). Right: a Guerrilla Girls poster

HOW MANY WOMEN HAD ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS AT NYC MUSEUMS LAST YEAR?

Guggenheim	0
Metropolitan	0
Modern	1
Whitney	0

1985

SOURCE: ARTBYHERGIA.AFRICA/1985-86

HOW MANY WOMEN HAD ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS AT NYC MUSEUMS LAST YEAR?

Guggenheim	0
Metropolitan	1
Modern	2
Whitney	1

2015

SOURCE: MUSEUMS VISITORS

THE FIGHT GOES ON

A group of anonymous art activists bring their continuing struggle against sexism to London

In 1984 New York, a group of young female artists were embarking on careers in the art world, only to discover that all the money and opportunities were going to white men. In response, they disguised themselves in gorilla masks and put up provocative banners, stickers and posters, including one that asked: 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?' Thirty years on, those women, the Guerrilla Girls (and some new recruits) are exhibiting a specially commissioned banner at the Whitechapel Gallery. There will also be works spanning the group's three decades and a talk by the Guerrillas themselves.

TERESA FITZHERBERT  
*'Guerrilla Girls: Is it Even Worse in Europe?'* is at the Whitechapel Gallery ([www.whitechapelgallery.org](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org)) from 1 October to 5 March 2017.

Above: the Malawian artist Billie Zangewa's 'Constant Gardener'