

# 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair: the female gaze

By Charlotte Jansen

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A special exhibition brings together six African artists foregrounding women's perspectives in diverse ways



Rahima Gambo's 'Ruth Amina and the three Aisha's play "In and Out"' ( 2017)

Naked female bodies writhe and intertwine in Phoebe Boswell's video installation "I Need To Believe the World is Still Beautiful", a highlight of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, whose New York edition opens on May 4. The work comprises footage of women who were invited to strip off and move at the artist's London studio — an act of protest inspired by the work of Audre Lorde, the self-described "black woman warrior poet" who urged women to turn silence into action. For Boswell, born in Nairobi and raised in the Middle East, reclaiming the power of female nudity from the male gaze is an urgent issue.

The British-Kenyan artist is just one of the women putting forward a "female gaze" at 1-54. At the fair and its spin-off projects, African artists are attempting to redefine the way we look at women, countering the idea that the female gaze is a western-centric movement.

"We have a lot of special projects focused on women," says 1-54 director Touria El Glaoui. "It's exciting to have this concentration and it's relevant, too. But it's something we have always been conscious of: if we don't make an effort to have a balance, it won't happen. This is a global issue."

Other notable works at the fair that foreground the female perspective include ethereal paper-cut portraits by Nathalie Boutté (presented by Magnin-A) and photographs by the young South African artists Phumzile Khanyile and Lebohlang Kganye (at Afronova gallery), both of whom refer to their own family albums to explore the role of women. At 50 Golborne gallery, the Ivorian artist Joana Choumali presents ça va aller, a series of pictures she took on her phone of people she met on the street in the aftermath of the 2016 Grand-Bassam terror attack, which are embroidered with DMC cotton thread — reclaiming a traditionally feminine technique to express her feelings about the killings.



Fatoumata Diabaté's 'Singe Sage Sikasso' (2011), from the series 'L'homme en animal'

Photography is a focal medium for the female gaze. In the 20th century, the major names to emerge from Africa were male — Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé, Samuel Fosso, Hamidou Maïga, Sory Sanlé — but today there are female visionaries in the field achieving visibility at international galleries and art fairs. One of them is Fatoumata Diabaté, a young Malian photographer whose Studio Photo de la Rue is a Sidibé-style street studio for the current generation — a homage to her predecessor's Bamako base in the 1950s and 1960s, complete with backdrops and props.

Diabaté is one of the women at New African Photography III, an exhibition that is part of the 1-54 programme and held for the third year at Brooklyn's Red Hook Labs in collaboration with Nataal, a London-based media platform and magazine for contemporary African culture. It features six women from the African continent and diaspora with diverse takes on the idea of the female gaze.



Keyezua's 'Afroeucentric Face On' (2016)

Among them is Keyezua, an Angolan artist living in Luanda, whose striking pictures reference the high-gloss aesthetic of fashion photography as well as local craft and textile design to tackle taboo subjects, including female genital mutilation and the female orgasm. The works on show come from her 2017 series Fortia, in which she performed a series of rituals wearing intricate masks made in collaboration with a group of disabled men, each mask representing their individual experiences. Keyezua's father was disabled, and the series is intended as a way to reimagine disability.

The Abuja-based documentary photographer Rahima Gambo portrays the complexity of postcolonial identity in her native Nigeria in vignettes of life across the country. A series of portraits of students in the north-east, where the terrorist group Boko Haram has been active, explores the friction between religion and colonial education; another documents gay Nigerian men living in exile abroad.



From Alice Mann's series 'Drummies' (2017)

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In Africa, photography is “the medium of the younger generations,” says El Glaoui, “and in terms of visibility and access for international collectors, photography is easier [than other artistic media] if you live in Africa.” Social media, she adds, has also increased the popularity of photography among artistic practices on the continent.

Reflecting on the role of female African photographers, Keyezua explains, “Holding the position of the one behind the camera gives me the power to focus on womanhood without turning the female body into an object of lust, sex and vulnerability. It is important to continue to grow as a black woman to understand which definition will be mine.”

May 4-6, 1-54.com/new-york

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