

An Interview with Touria El Glaoui, founder of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair

on Oct 3, 2016

Africa is a vast and multifarious continent where authoritarian regimes coexist with functioning democracies. It's a melting pot of civilisations, traditions and art and despite the social and political instability rife in many countries; the cultural exchange taking place in the nexus of Africa is undeniable. "The global reception of African art has morphed from the shadows of dusk into the splendour of rose in the course of a decade," wrote exhibition maker Koyo Kouoh. At the time of writing, Kouoh was the artistic director of Europe's leading art fair dedicated to talent from the continent and diaspora, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair.

Presenting the richness of Africa's geography in the variety of art produced by artists represented by galleries from London to Johannesburg, 1:54 brings together the continent's 54 countries under one roof. The fair runs concurrently with Frieze London to challenge the notion of highlighting artists who have already been validated. Instead, 1:54 champions rising stars and established names. In the latest edition running from the 6th to the 9th October, 1:54 remembers the great master of African photography Malick Sibidé in his most extensive European exhibition to date. Ahead of its opening, Candid caught up with the fair's founder Touria El Glaoui to discuss the visibility of African artists and what to expect in the 2016 edition of 1:54.



Touria El Glaoui at 1-54 New York 2016 © Max Lakner for bfa.com

Candid Magazine: 1:54 strategically captures what appears to be a sense of urgency on the part of contemporary art to intervene in and address the visibility of African artists in the mainstream. Was there a specific incident that inspired you to begin the fair?

Touria El Glaoui: You are absolutely right, and this sense of urgency is exactly where the inspiration to start 1:54 came from. Earlier in my career, whilst working in the Telecom/IT industry, I travelled a lot across the Middle East and Africa. As the daughter of a Moroccan artist, I was naturally very intrigued by the local art scenes in those places, and so I always took the opportunity to explore that while I was passing through. I saw how much amazing artwork was being produced and yet, upon returning from the continent, I was struck by the total lack of evidence of this. Upon making this realisation, I decided that a bridge had to be made across these geographical borders; that these artists had to be provided with an international platform.



Namsa Leuba, Zulu Kids #5, Thumbs Up, 2014, Courtesy Art Twenty One

CM: The London edition of 1:54 runs concurrently with Frieze, which tends to celebrate the notion of “greatness” – an idea that’s often defined as white, Western and male. So what were your aspirations when you initially launched 1:54? Have they changed?

TDG: Rather than continue to accept the entrenched categories that were dominating the international markets – indeed, whereby the artists exhibiting would predominantly be white, male and European or American – I felt that a space must urgently be created for contemporary African artists. The first edition of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair was inaugurated in October 2013. Whilst the fair itself has grown and changed organically over time – in October 2016 our fourth London edition will take place at Somerset House – my fundamental aspirations have not changed. 1:54 continues to strive to provide a platform for African and African diaspora artists to be showcased and enter the art market, whilst also educating its visitors about the multiplicity of perspectives that Africa provides. For too long there has been this misconceived idea of a single ‘African aesthetic.’



Emo de Medeiros, Surtenture #09 (...because where the mind wanders is the conundrum of freedom), 2015, Courtesy 50Golborne

CM: What is African art and how important is intentionally when discussing African art?

TEG: Whilst I do recognise that there is such a thing as ‘African art’, for me, it is essential that 1:54 recognises and communicates the huge diversity of work and practices being produced in Africa and its diaspora. Indeed, such diversity is a fundamental characteristic of those places and the perspectives and insights that accompany them. Of course, this is where the title of the fair came from. So often the African continent is generalised under a single visual identity when in reality it is a collection of 54 countries, each with its own distinctive character. If contemporary African art is to be defined in any way, it would be by its differences. In terms of what defines ‘African artists’ specifically, I think it is important to note that many of our exhibitors would refer to themselves first as artists before identifying specifically as ‘African artists’. Some artists live on the continent, others live elsewhere, and others have based themselves on the continent but are not from there. Essentially, artists can speak their identity in any way they choose. For me, it is critical that 1:54 provides a space for the identities of African and African diaspora artists to be celebrated free from categorisation and pigeonholing.



Billie Zangewa, Mood Indigo, 2016, Silk tapestry, 111 x 150 cm, Courtesy Afronova Gallery.

CM: What can we expect from the Malick Sidibé exhibition?

TEG: I am really excited that 1:54 will be collaborating with Somerset House and MAGNIN-A Gallery, Paris, to present Malick Sidibé's first major solo exhibition in the UK. Contributing to the fair's rich programme of special projects, Sidibé's black and white photographic works provide fascinating insight into the lives and culture of Mali's capital city, Bamako, in the wake of its independence in the 1960s; and will present 45 original prints from the 1960s and 1970s around three defined themes: 'Au Fleuve Niger / Beside the Niger River', 'Tiep à Bamako / Nightlife in Bamako', and 'Le Studio / The Studio'. The exhibition will launch at 1:54 and then Sidibé's works will continue to be shown throughout Somerset House's winter season.

By Rhianne Sinclair-Phillips

1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, 6-9 October 2016, Somerset House, Strand, London

<http://www.candidmagazine.com/interview-touria-el-glaoui-founder-154-contemporary-african-art-fair/>