

## A RESILIENT CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART COMMUNITY FACES THE CORONAVIRUS STORM

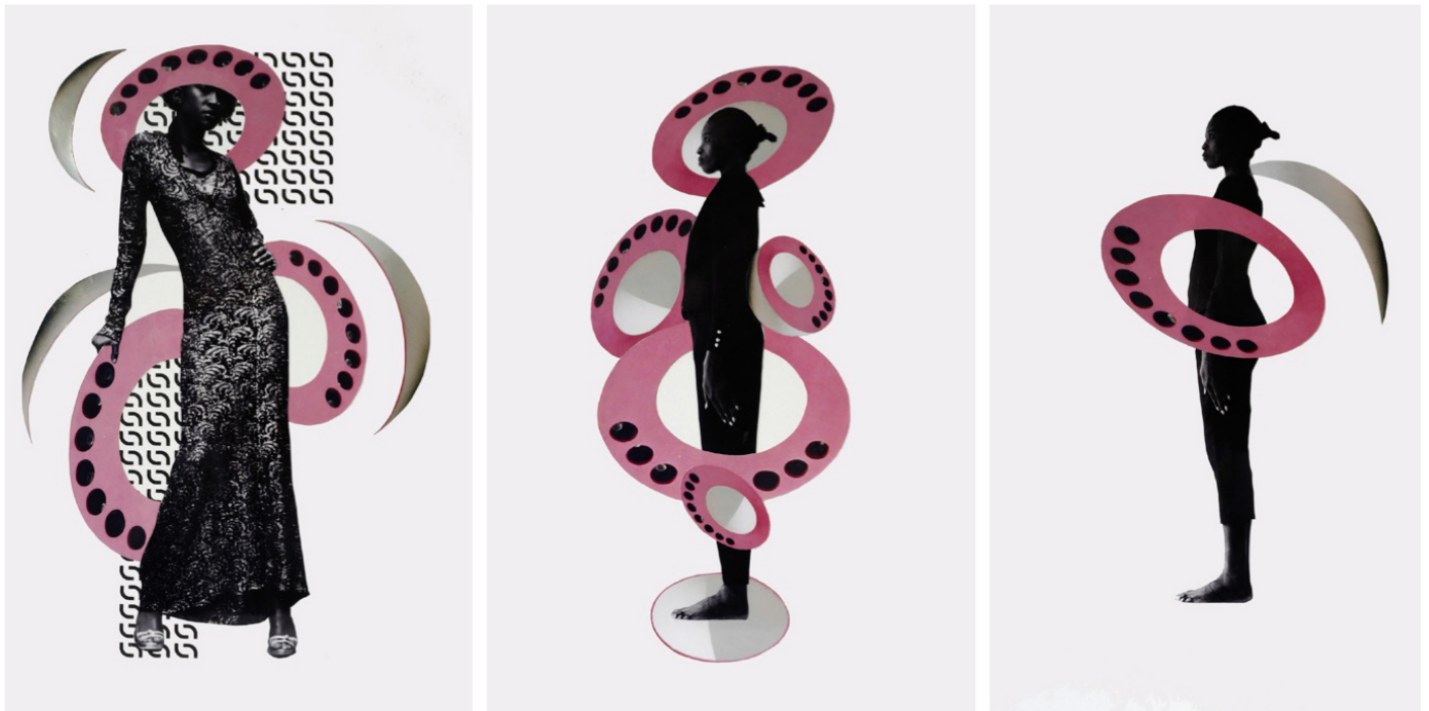
**Museums and galleries: shuttered!** Art fairs and biennales: postponed indefinitely! Previews, artists' talks, and performances: cancelled! The extreme measures taken to dampen the swift spread of the coronavirus pandemic have brought the art world in its present form to a screeching halt. Unwittingly, the confinement measures have also exposed the fragile financial health of numerous art and cultural organisations and precipitated the closure of others. Suddenly, a question that would have seemed unfathomable only a few months ago, becomes reasonable: if some of these long-standing institutions cannot outlive this crisis, what would become of the budding contemporary African art scene?

The year 2020 was expected to be a promising continuation of the previous one, which saw new records established at auctions, unprecedented attention directed towards the work of Black or African artists, and greater diversity within museums' curatorial teams. In February, [Artnews](#) reported that representatives of prestigious art institutions were in attendance at the Marrakech edition of the specialist fair, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, with the intent to diversify their collections.

**Then came March** and the global spread of the coronavirus!

In line with the sanitary measures outlined by various authorities across the world, some galleries opened only by appointment while other organisations implemented social distancing measures through controlled entries. But soon, even these procedures proved inadequate, and the curtains came down on March 19th. That day, in quick succession, art galleries announced their temporary closures in droves while the New York edition of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair was deferred to 2021. In Senegal, the highly anticipated 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the Dakar Biennale, a long-running contemporary African art exhibition, was postponed.

Later that afternoon in the London offices of the auction house Bonhams, the planned Modern and Contemporary African art auction was one of the last art events to be held live. It generated £1,8 million, the equivalent of \$2 million (premium included), but came short of the pre-sale estimate of £1,9 million to £2,8 million. Giles Peppiatt of Bonhams indicated that he "was pretty satisfied in light of the conditions." He mentioned other high-value private transactions and pointed to the auction achieving 75% of the value of the pre-sale estimate as a positive indicator. On the whole, he insisted, "the market is very strong, very strong indeed." It is too early to predict the impact of the pandemic. However, he surmised it would have less impact on the contemporary African art market than on the mainstream contemporary art market for reasons that are twofold: "The contemporary African market has not had the type of meteoric rise" seen in other segments nor has it attracted buyers primarily seeking investments.



Vincent Michéa, *Série Hôtel Ivoire N°1, N°4 et N°5*. Courtesy Galerie Cécile Fakhoury

**The high dependency on international collectors** is not unique to Retro Africa. In an [op-ed published](#) in November 2018, in the French daily, *Le Monde*, curator, and director of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of Dakar Biennale, Babacar Mbaye Diop, asserted: “the real market for African art is in the West. Its heart beats in London, Paris, and New York.” Some may disagree with that statement, pointing to South Africa or the dynamism of Nigerian collectors. Still, it makes the cancellation of the Dakar Biennale all the more dispiriting. “Dak’art,” as the month-long program of exhibitions is familiarly referred to, with its sprawling off-programming (up to 300 shows in 2018), has been a vital space for artistic experimentations, encounters, and dialogue. According to Ms. Lopez, director at Cécile Fakhoury Gallery in Dakar, the local art scene has evolved significantly in the past two years, and this edition particularly, “was expected to be a milestone event after the organisers had made fundamental structural and curatorial changes.” It is, she continued, “one of those rare occasions when people come to the continent, come to Senegal, come to Dakar to see in situ what we have come up with as opposed to artists going to Europe to showcase their work. [...] Symbolically and ideologically, it is a powerful moment.”

Dak’art 2020 is – or rather was – a space of African artistic agency smothered before it could even come alive by the interconnectedness of our world that brought to its shores health issues birthed elsewhere. With isolation and border closure the new social norm for individuals and nations, the theme of this year, “*INDAFFA / FORGER / OUT OF THE FIRE*,” echoes through the streets of Dakar, to the echo chambers of our empty museums and galleries as both an ominous premonition and a talismanic incantation for resilience.

**Resilience has been rooted in narrative and deeper contextualization** at Cécile Fakhoury Gallery. With four exhibition spaces in Dakar, Paris, and Abidjan, (Ivory Coast) where a second space opened just days before the lockdown, the gallery has been hit particularly hard. Serigne Ibrahima Dieye's first solo show in Abidjan was put on hold barely a week after it opened. The gallery in Dakar didn't get thus far. Vincent Michéa's exhibition "Toi Seulement," intended to be a mid-career retrospective, was hung but never opened to the public. The gallery recovered from these setbacks and reached from behind their closed doors to their collector base through "a substantial newsletter that includes an interpretative reading of selected artwork, access to an online catalog, and the various inspirations that informed the work of a specific artist. [...] These are other perspectives and frames of reference that allow us to go deeper and beyond a simple biography, a text, and some images," explained Ms. Fakhoury in a phone conversation.

These new perspectives also involved re-appropriating an old material: paper. The gallery has opted to go beyond the digital realm, and released catalogs of past exhibitions. "I think it is an incredible way for exhibitions to travel and exist through time." The project has been in the making for two years and seems particularly prescient now. Commercially, sales have continued behind the lockdown doors of the galleries, and Ms. Fakhoury remains confident: "we will find ways to showcase and promote the work of our artists." As for the artists, she said she engages with them daily, and "they have continued to work, and that's the most important thing. Their studios are also their places of residence. They are at home, and they are working." On a reflexive note, she continued, "the disruption has triggered new reflections, exchanges, and discussions. [...] We are going towards a new landscape that will be very interesting, that will beget new things."

**There is a profound sense that the art landscape will emerge**, somewhat changed from the shadow it has been forcibly plunged into, even if no one can quite predict the exact nature of these changes. Many have been calling for an overhaul of the art infrastructure for some time. In the last few years, the timid voices lamenting the cost of international fairs have grown louder. **Climate change activists** have called on the whole art industry to revisit its ever-expanding model of international art fairs and biennales underpinned by a high volume of air travel. Some artists, **curators**, and dealers have questioned what they perceive as a continuous marginalisation of African art through the existence of specialist platforms. Others have vented at the revenue model and the inequities that it generates. The list of the fault lines that run through the art architecture is long. This health crisis and the predicted economic crisis have the potential to be a moment of reckoning for the art world. The small, nascent, and nimble African ecosystem likely has some inherent abilities to adapt, adjust, and innovate.

Commenting on their geographical context, Ms. Fakhoury said, "I have a gallery in Africa, and I am disconnected from the big art market in Europe and the US. I have always had that idea of doing things differently. It was a real choice to start and stay in Africa instead of going to where the art market was established and structured. [...] I think there are maybe new things to invent, even at our level, at the level of the continent or a regional level. I want to stay very positive."

These new modalities, which are being formulated and tested through the heat brought on by the health crisis, will be the real long-term legacy to investigate in the future. For the time being, even if the lockdown is proving challenging for small galleries and young artists, it has also been an incredible catalyst for innovation and prompt problem-solving. Artists, dealers, gallery owners, and directors are all, for now, uncoordinatedly resolute in their determination to forge a way forward, "out of the fire."