

# whitewall

## Gallerist Cécile Fakhoury Finds Hope in Abidjan

By Eliza Jordan

**Galerie Cécile Fakhoury** opened its first site in September 2012. Located in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, the gallery aims to promote contemporary art in Africa and show its artistic diversity. Just two years ago, the gallery also opened two more spaces—in Dakar, Senegal; and a showroom in Paris.

The artists represented by Galerie Cécile Fakhoury have a special way of communicating their personal identities and stories. Through solo and group shows, and international fairs and biennales, their work breaks down barriers of geographical social stigmas.

While isolated in Abidjan during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Whitewall* spoke with **Fakhoury** about how her galleries are responding to change, and how artists routinely keep her hopeful.

**WHITEWALL: How are you doing now amid COVID-19?**

**CÉCILE FAKHOURY:** There are lots of questions and uncertainties and we can no longer plan and organize in advance. It's a massive change, since we had about a year and a half to nearly two years of work planned and underway. We have to adapt, things will change, and perhaps this will be in the gallery's, and even the art world's best interest. Who knows? It will most likely be a difficult economic period, but it is already a period of solidarity, exchanges and connections. So, not everything is negative.

**WW: Where are you finding hope or inspiration?**

**CF:** Most certainly among the artists. I am still lifted up by their work. At the moment they are all working, they are all luckily under conditions where it is still possible to create work and the goal is to maintain this context where they can continue to produce art.

In spite of the complexity of the situation, knowing that our artists are there creating, I tell myself that not all is lost! There is hope! I completely believe in the power of artists. They have the ability to change our visions of the world, so they are already very important at all times, but especially in the current period of crisis.

**WW: Can you tell us a bit about what galleries, museums, artists are facing right now in Côte d'Ivoire?**

**CF:** We are in a limbo of catastrophic predictions, which for the moment are not materializing, and holding onto the hope that COVID-19 is less dangerous in this part of the world. Therefore, it is causing huge uncertainty that is bringing all participants and establishments to a halt. For the moment, galleries, foundations, and museums are closed and we are waiting for the government's instructions in order to organize ourselves. The artists are active, there are initiatives, and there is some help, but on a more global scale, the future unknown is restrictive and worrying.

**WW: Tell us a bit about the environment in Abidjan right now.**

**CF:** Before COVID-19, the Abidjan art scene was developing with more and more spaces dedicated to art and the opening of a new museum in March—**Le Musée des Cultures Contemporaines d'Abobo**. This pandemic is disruptive, and it will probably slow this energy down, but Abidjan and the people of Abidjan has resources and I have a lot of hope that all these initiatives will resume as soon as possible.

**WW: You also have a second gallery in Dakar, and a showroom in Paris. How do you see these cities handling the pandemic?**

**CF:** Dakar is in the same state of uncertainty as Abidjan. We are simply waiting to see how the virus will evolve here. We are currently in an observation period which has frozen all activities. We are waiting to find out how this will evolve in West Africa.

Paris will be partially de-confined on May 11. We hope to reopen our office and showroom two days a week to begin with. It will all be done gradually. We are constantly staying on top of updates and are trying to find our own balance between the desire to reopen and begin our recovery and our civic responsibility that we all have during this pandemic.

**WW: How are your three galleries doing? Is there any virtual programming, or ways the public can support you and your artists during this time?**

**CF:** We are maintaining a closeness with our audience and our collectors thanks to the various digital options we have. We explain the exhibitions and works in more detail in order to give an idea of some sort of reality. We have started a weekly newsletter where it is possible to read and discover rich material about our artists and their works. The idea is to have a constant flow of information in a hope to maintain contact and the wish to support our artists.

**WW: Tell us a bit about the shows happening there now, and how we can see them.**

**CF:** In Abidjan we have an exhibition by the Senegalese artist **Serigne Ibrahima Dieye**. Despite the closure of the exhibition the day after the preview, this exhibition has sold well. The exhibition had been anticipated and, in spite of the virus, collectors were present. We also inaugurated a new space dedicated to the young Ivorian artist **Bamouin Sinzé**. In Dakar, there is an exhibition of collages by **Vincent Michéa**, which unfortunately could not be inaugurated before the start of the crisis. In Paris, we have an echo of the exhibitions in Abidjan and Dakar with works of all the three artists.

We are open by appointment in Dakar and Abidjan with social distancing measures imposed and all the necessary sanitary precautions. We hope to reopen with these same exhibitions when it is again possible so that these works can be seen by the public as was originally planned.

**WW: You recently launched Project Space, close to the Abidjan gallery, for emerging artists. Tell us a bit about this.**

**CF:** It is a space dedicated to young, emerging artists. I started the gallery eight years ago with young artists who have evolved over time, such as **Aboudia** and **François-Xavier Gbré**. I also work with more established artists, such as **Jems Koko Bi** or **Ouattara Watts**. I wanted to reintegrate young artists into our program who have not yet been identified by the public and this new space will allow me to do this again.

**WW: You have lived in Abidjan (the economic capital of the Côte d'Ivoire) for 10 years and have witnessed its evolution. Tell us a bit about how you see this pandemic impacting the art industry there now. How will it evolve again?**

**CF:** I cannot possibly make any predictions as it wholly depends on how long this pandemic will last. Nonetheless, as it stands, art has been present in Côte d'Ivoire forever. The living force of artists will never run out as a result of COVID-19, and as far as those on the art scene and in the art market are concerned, they will somehow start up once again and it will only be a matter of time.

**WW: Tell us a bit about the type of art you're hoping is created during this time.**

**CF:** An interesting selection of creations will come out of this period—of that I am sure. Like I said, artists are still making work at the moment and that is the most important thing for me, to give our artists the opportunity to work. Even if we cannot source all the necessary materials, there can be adaptations and they can work with what they have and restrictions such as these usually bring about original creations and new ideas. History has shown us that marvelous things can emerge from the most dire situations.