

Putting West African Art in a Global Spotlight

With galleries in Ivory Coast and Senegal, Cécile Fakhoury has built a platform for regional artists and collectors. Her next stops: Paris and FIAC.

By **Ginanne Brownell**

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Around the same time in 2017 that the French president, Emmanuel Macron, promised that the repatriation of African artifacts from French museums would be a “top priority” for his government, Cécile Fakhoury discovered a number that truly shocked and unsettled her: About 90 percent of the sales from her gallery in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, were to international collectors.

Considering that her reason for setting up Galerie Cécile Fakhoury had been to sell West African contemporary art to regional collectors and help strengthen a local art scene, it felt to her that history was repeating itself.

“When I got this number, I was like, ‘No, it’s not possible,’” the French-born 37-year-old said recently on a video call from Abidjan. “My vision at the beginning was to create a platform in Ivory Coast, in West Africa, on the continent. To build something from the continent for the continent, for the artists living and working there, and at this point, it was completely unbalanced.”

Ms. Fakhoury, who had been participating in international art fairs since opening her gallery in 2012, decided she needed to “find another way” to work. So in 2018, she opened an outpost in Dakar, Senegal, a city that not only was a hub for the regional art scene but also had a strong cultural infrastructure that included the influential Dak’Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art.



Cécile Fakhoury in Abidjan in 2019, the year after she opened her second outpost, a gallery in Dakar, Senegal. Issam Zeljy

That expansion granted Ms. Fakhoury the chance to meet a number of West African art collectors to “balance a little more our turnover.” It was also good timing, she said, because a number of collectors from across the continent were rethinking their collections.

“It had been very local with Moroccan collectors collecting Moroccan artists, Nigerian collectors collecting Nigerian artists, South Africans collecting South African,” she said. “But I saw that collectors were starting to be more structured, more open and starting to collect from outside their countries, which means a lot.”

What has also come to mean a lot for her collectors and artists is that Ms. Fakhoury has been able to balance being grounded in the local art scene with expanding back into the global art market. This week, she is opening her new gallery in Paris with a show “Un pied sur terre,” which will highlight emerging artists including Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux and Marie-Claire Messouma Manlanbien and well-established artists including Ouattara Watts and Jems Koko Bi. She will also take part in FIAC, the Foire Internationale d’Art Contemporain, for the third time.

“It shows that a young gallery, created just 10 years ago, can place itself at the same level of ambition and quality as the mastodons of the sector [such as] Gagosian or Perrotin,” Bassam Chaïtou, an influential Senegalese collector, wrote in an email. “It is important that the aesthetic canons that will define what makes African masterpieces of tomorrow also come from the continent and not simply dictated by the mega Western galleries.”

At FIAC, Ms. Fakhoury will be highlighting the work of the Senegalese artist Cheikh Ndiaye with his first solo show in Europe. Mr. Ndiaye, who works in Dakar and New York, said what initially drew him to her gallery was her desire to be an important international gallery that was located in Africa.



Cheikh Ndiaye's "Sainte Sarah," 2021, an oil on canvas, is among the works to be shown at FIAC by Galerie Cécile Fakhoury. Gregory Copitet, via Galerie Cécile Fakhoury

“I also liked the idea that my first gallery be African,” he wrote in an email, “and that I could somehow approach the international art world from the African continent and not the opposite direction, which usually happens.”

With her percentages now recalibrated — 40 percent of her collectors are from Africa and 60 percent from elsewhere — the time felt right to expand outside the continent. This comes on the heels of last year’s opening of a project space in Abidjan specifically focused on more emerging artists and large-scale noncommercial installations.

“She is really thinking long term with her priorities,” said Alicia Knock, a curator of contemporary art and research at the Pompidou Center in Paris. “Even though she is opening up this space in Paris, it is not the center of her action, which is really to develop a strategy in West Africa and expand in what she is doing.”

The Paris art scene is nothing new to Ms. Fakhoury because she grew up very much a part of it. Her parents run Hervé Peron, a modern art gallery, and she spent much of her childhood going to museums and auctions. After obtaining a master’s degree in art studies at the Institut d’Études Supérieures des Arts, she did work placements at galleries including David Zwirner and Chantal Crousel. She moved to Abidjan in 2011 with her husband, whose father is the prominent Lebanese-Ivorian architect Pierre Fakhoury. That was an instant introduction to the country’s art scene.

Ivory Coast was just coming to the end of a second civil war, and the idea of opening an art gallery “became very fast and very obvious” to her as she saw “there was room to create something around art.”

She said there was nothing tangible in how she decides what artists to work with. “I am looking for a voice that is strong enough,” she said, adding that she was expanding her network of artists to include those from other parts of the continent — and the diaspora — including Jess Atieno, a Kenyan, and Algeria’s Dalila Dalléas Bouzar. “I am always thinking: ‘What would I think about this work in 15 years? In 40 years?’”

Simon Njami, an independent curator and critic who curated Dak’Art’s 2016 biennale, said he found it “very courageous” when he heard that Ms. Fakhoury was starting a gallery in Abidjan. “Cécile is intuitive,” he added in an email. “She works with people whose works she likes, and that is how she can defend them so strongly.”

Ms. Fakhoury’s dedication to the local and regional art scene has won her many fans who are also keen to see the West African artistic infrastructure grow and develop. Franck Hermann Ekra, an independent art critic and curator who works in Abidjan and Paris, called Ms. Fakhoury a “good partner for this project” of changing the narrative on African art.

“She’s in a field where the artists are not backed by an art system, you don’t have reviews, you don’t have any museum and when you create a gallery in such a system you have to fulfill that lack of infrastructure,” he said. “You have to make people aware in mind and in conscience that those artifacts belong to them.”

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