

canvases

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



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54 countries. Over 1.3 billion people. More than 2000 different languages.

The continent of Africa is a cultural treasure house beyond compare. Yet a history of colonialism and post-independence political and economic turmoil has brought particular pressures to bear. Too often exploited, diminished and stifled by being seen primarily through a Western lens, the voices and representations of the continent's creative forces have been either marginalised or not heard at all. That is now changing, and fast.

In the pages that follow we look at how a new generation of artists from African countries and their diasporas is refusing to accept the prevailing narratives and forging new connections and creative leadership. Inspired by issues ranging from migration and political repression to cultural identity and social upheaval, they are redefining authenticity and abandoning the old routes in favour of new pathways.

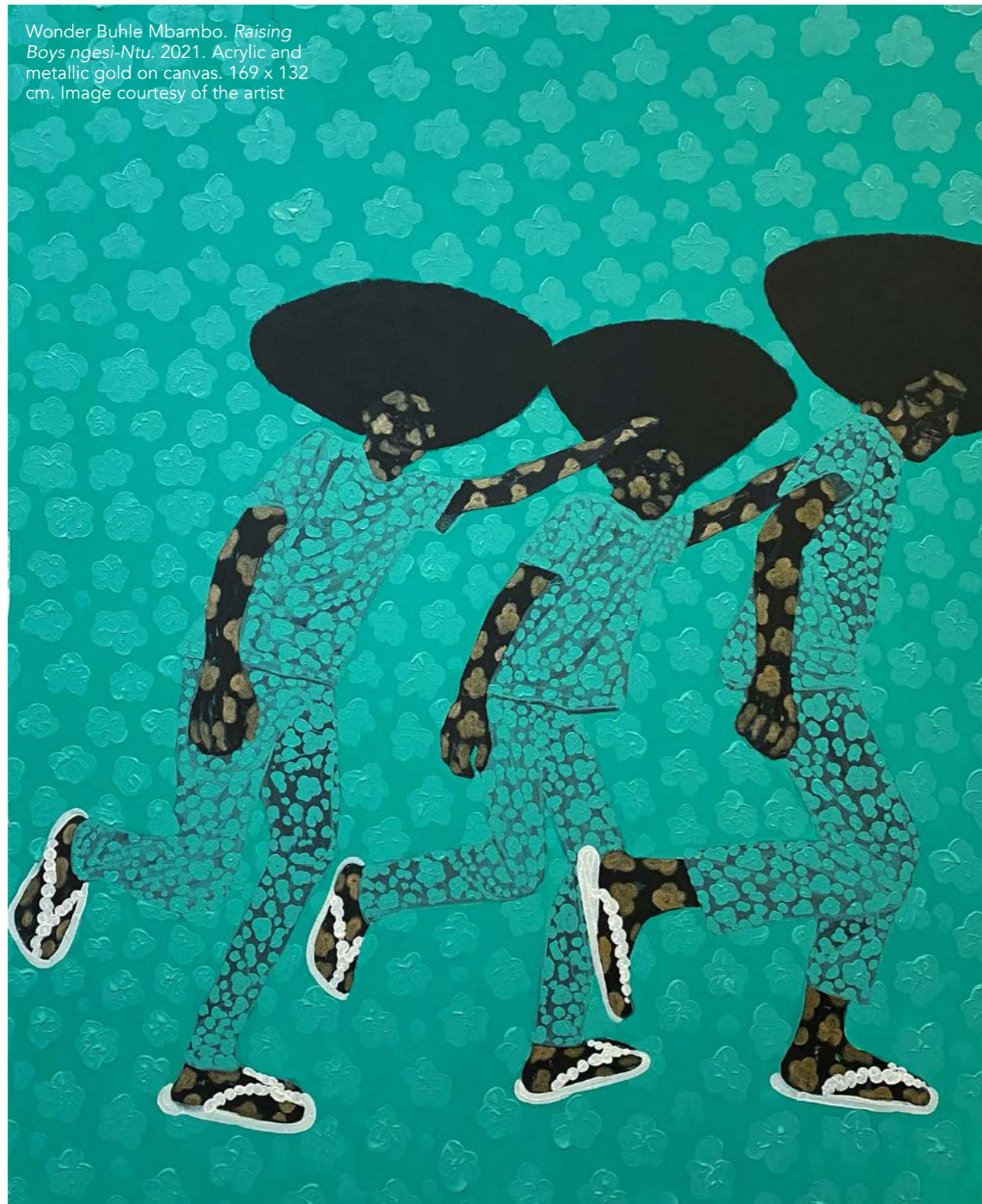
Now is their time to be heard.

Cassi Namoda. Lovers with ardent desires and strong will face obstacles along the way, safety in new lands are few and far between" Cyclone Eloise, 2021 a dedication to all those who have been impacted by climate change in Mozambique and it's neighbours. 2021. Acrylic and resin on cotton poly. 76.2 x 61cm. Image courtesy of the artist and South South

LONDON CALLING

Centuries of colonial and mercantile involvement with Africa helped ensure that vast quantities of African heritage and art treasures ended up in the British capital. As debate continues to rage over their status and fate, London is cementing a less contentious position for itself as a focal point for a rising tide of contemporary African art.

Words by Matthew Wilcox



Wonder Buhle Mbambo. *Raising Boys ngesi-Ntu*. 2021. Acrylic and metallic gold on canvas. 169 x 132 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

El Anatsui monumental installation covering the façade of the Royal Academy of Arts (Burlington House on Piccadilly). 2013. Photography by Kiev.Victor / Shutterstock



Last summer, as Black Lives Matter protests swept the globe, the director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, published a statement declaring the institution's solidarity with the movement. Few doubted Fischer's heart was in the right place, but observers were quick to point out that the British Museum remains committed to the retention of its vast collections of art from around the world – including colonial-era objects from Africa such as the Benin bronzes (see page 162). Sir Antony Gormley, a trustee of the museum from 2007 to 2015, has heavily criticised its curatorial approach, in which the collection of African art largely languishes in the basement, labelling it "a post-colonial iniquity".

"Work on the British Museum's masterplan project has continued to develop during lockdown and provides a unique opportunity to reconsider the display of the collection,

broadening the diversity of voices present in the interpretation of objects in the collection," said Fischer when asked to respond to such criticisms. "This work will give a new and powerful presence to the museum's collections from all parts of the globe [and] greater prominence to Africa."

Amidst fears of major reputational damage, London's other big art institutions have scrambled to assert their progressive credentials. The Tate has been quick off the mark, appointing four new curators (among them African art specialists Osei Bonsu and Nabila Abdel Nabi), while the Courtauld Institute of Art – London's finishing school for curators and art world professionals – recently announced the creation of two new faculty positions in Modern and Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, with specialisms in the arts of Africa and its global diasporas. Professor Deborah



Demas N Nwoko. *Folly*. 1960. Oil on board. 58 x 119.4 cm. Image courtesy of Sotheby's

Swallow, Märit Rausing Director at the Courtauld, acknowledged the "Eurocentric bias of the art history discipline," adding that "We're incredibly excited about these positions, which add to the Courtauld's work in pushing beyond this bias."

The transformation in attitudes towards African art has been a slow process, building off the back of years of scholarship by trailblazing curators and art historians such as the late Okwui Enwezor, director of the avant-garde Haus der Kunst in Munich. It was Enwezor who, in a series of revelatory exhibitions staged in Europe, Africa, Asia and the United States, helped upend the art history of the twentieth century by bringing African artists to new audiences beyond their home continent and encouraging them to forge ways ahead on their own terms. "African artists of the independence period were influential in their home countries for sure," observes the art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu, a professor at Princeton University as well as Enwezor's long-

term collaborator. "But they had little commercial and critical success elsewhere [because] they depended on the precarious support of outsiders, which could only go so far. If anything, the subsequent generations learned the lesson of the Igbo proverb: if you do not wet your lips yourself, the Harmattan will dry it for you! You better help yourself or you might not like what you get from the outsider."

If London's loaded past as heart of empire brings the sort of difficult conversations that some of its institutions are currently grappling with, it has also made it one of the most diverse cities on Earth. The African heritage population of Britain now stands at nearly two million people, with more than half of them living in London alone and making up as much as 25 per cent of the community in some boroughs. While the debate around representation and decolonisation still has some way to play out, and the social media discourse remains as toxic as ever, whisper



Cydne Jasmin Coleby. *Heir Lesley (Her Mudda's Shadow)*. 2021. Acrylic, decorative paper, glitter, androsia fabric and photo collage on canvas. 101.6 cm x 76.2 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Unit London

it, but London has become a centre for African contemporary art.

Evidence of the British capital's sway is easy to find in its auction houses. In 2009 Bonhams inaugurated its *Africa Now* auction, a series of sales dedicated to modern and contemporary African art. In the years since, prices for African artists have skyrocketed. Bonhams' perseverance paid off, says Giles Peppiatt, the auction house's director of modern and contemporary African art. "The collecting base has exploded," he says, explaining the stratospheric success of his sales. "It was a good market ten years ago, but very much focused on South Africa then. The landscape has since changed beyond recognition, with the demand for contemporary art now quite extraordinary."

So, who's buying? "As the success of these sales grows, collectors domiciled in Africa are actually becoming a smaller proportion of the overall collecting base," explains Peppiatt. "We are getting more collectors from South East Asia and

China, and the demand from North America is huge. The museums there are certainly very active. Every time we have a sale, the number of new registrants increases by 50 per cent. Some are institutions, but a lot of them are private collectors. I don't think we've even scratched the surface yet, to be honest." Bonhams' last contemporary African sale was in March 2021 and saw household names such as El Anatsui, Irma Stern and Ben Enwonwu all selling strongly, while *Crucifix*, a 1986 work by Nigerian artist Yusuf Adebayo Cameron Grillo, achieved a price of GBP 237,750 – three times its upper estimate.

In 2016 Hannah O'Leary, previously a specialist in African art at Bonhams, was brought in to spearhead Sotheby's new *Modern and Contemporary African Art* sales. In their March sale this year, six new artist records were set, including for rising stars Joy Labinjo, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami and Jadé Fadojutimi, as well as more established artists such as Demas N Nwoko and Ben Enwonwu,



Kara Walker. *Fons Americanus*. 2019. Installation view at the Tate Modern, London. © Ben Fisher

whose iconic *Atlas* sold for GBP 378,000 – a new world record for a sculpture by the artist. While these prices might still seem modest compared to the big names on the wider contemporary market, they are growing at a rate of 50 per cent year-on-year. One other number stands out from that sale: one third of the buyers were transacting with Sotheby's for the first time.

Following the lead of the auction houses and the creation of dedicated African art fairs such as the game-changing 1-54 (see page 80), the number of galleries specialising in African art has grown tremendously in recent years. Major players include the Jack Bell Gallery, arc Gallery and Unit London, where work by Cydne Jasmin Coleby was recently on show. Discussing this transformation, the Black Caribbean artist explains how, "After centuries of consuming Eurocentric art, the art world is

dying to have new and fresh voices. London has had a strong African diasporic presence for a few decades now and has been metaphorically 'dipping its toe in the water' when it comes to embracing these cultures. So now that there is a push for Black/African people to occupy these spaces, London is more prepared to dive in."

It's a shift evidenced by the number of blockbuster shows starring African artists that have wowed crowds throughout the British capital over the last decade. A watershed moment came in 2013, when El Anatsui draped the façade of the Royal Academy's Burlington House on Piccadilly with an enormous shimmering tapestry entitled *TSIATSIA – searching for connection*. Tapping into this sense of energy and impact, a new wave of diaspora artists – inspired by their own ties to Africa – have sought to



Esiri Erheriene-Essi. *For every pork chop there's a frying pan*. 2020. Oil, ink and Xerox transfer on linen. 135 x 175 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Ron Mandos

make their mark in London. They include the American artist Kara Walker, whose 13-metre-high working fountain, *Fons Americanus* (2019), exploring the history of the slave trade and other exchanges between Africa, Europe and America, made a huge impact in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall on its arrival there in late 2019.

What is it about the British capital that so appeals to African artists? Wonder Buhle Mbambo is a Durban-based visual artist from Kwa-Ngcolosi in South Africa and showed his work last autumn at Unit London's exhibition, *The Medium is the Message*. "Showing in London was important because, for the longest time, we were not really given opportunities to be seen in museums or big institutions," he explains. "Now, with these new platforms, we are able to revise the misleading narrative of who we are as Black people and say this is who we are, in our own language

and representations. I had a conversation with my fellow artist and brother Nelson Makamo and he said what we are doing now as artists can't be truly defined by this era, but it will be more important for the next generation to come."

Whatever the international connections at play, for some artists much of the energy behind the London surge in contemporary African art is intimate and homegrown in character. "Interest in the Black African diaspora has blown up in the last two or three years, off the back of the 'decolonisation' movement," says South London-born painter Esiri Erheriene-Essi, who is of Nigerian heritage. "But regardless of whether the spotlight is on it or not, I will continue to do what I think is really important: making art about my friends. About being Londoners. About how we experience things." ■