

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Stories of African Contemporary Art Are Everywhere at the 1-54 Art Fair

From Ralph Ziman's massive Ziman sculpture to Uthman Wahaab's painterly critiques of technology, this art fair devoted to contemporary African art is packed with fascinating projects of every kind.



Seph Rodney May 5, 2018



Kassou Seydou at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire) (all photos by the author unless otherwise noted)

My experience of the [1-54 contemporary African art fair](#) mostly consists of being awed by all the beauty contained within that (relatively) [small building in Red Hook](#). Stopping in at the first space I encounter I see [Azikiwe Mohammed](#) working on elaborating his design of the lounge, which he conceived as a kind of extension of his *New Davonhaim*e project, the name of which is a linguistic amalgam of the names of the five US cities with the highest concentration of African Americans. As indicated by the adjacent wall text, the essence of his lounge project is, similar to *Davonhaim*e, to create a “town-cum-safe space.” But in addition to the features one might expect at an artist’s lounge — chairs, cushions, tapestries, audio speakers — there is also a cooler

with its lid open emitting light
from its inside like some urban
holy grail.



Azikiwe Mohammed's design of the 1-54
Lounge

Throughout my time here I find myself falling into the narratives behind each of the compelling installations I saw. I want to spend more time listening to the gallerists and taking notes so that I can faithfully describe the work to others. For example, behind the work of [Ralph Ziman](#) is his story of being born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa and developing a deep concern for the tools and technologies of state-sponsored violence, which he witnessed being savagely enacted on the black population under Apartheid. His gallery [Sulger-Buel Lovell](#) has images of a Casspir military vehicle Ziman acquired and repurposed by engaging artisans from Zimbabwe and the

Mpumalanga province of South Africa to cover over its entire surface with panels of vivid glass beadwork, which are arrayed in traditional patterns. Ziman's idea seems to be to turn a war machine into decorative, decidedly *non-*utilitarian object, thus negating its power to psychologically and physically dominate. Amazingly, the entire vehicle was transported over and is set up in the outside garden space.



Ralph Ziman at Sulger-Buel Lovell gallery (London, UK / Cape Town, South Africa)



Ralph Ziman's repurposed Casspir military vehicle in the back garden

Many of the exhibiting galleries



Detail view of the Casspir piece

are from the continent — Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tunisia — with a few also from Europe, but I found wonderful work at a space based here in New York. [Sapar Contemporary](#) is showing [Uthman Wahaab](#) from Nigeria, who makes work about the incompatibility of technological tools for the tasks to which they are applied. His

2018 piece “Revamping Shears I (Hybrid Theory Series)” illustrates this well with its image of a black man attempting to cut his own overgrown afro with gardening shears.



Uthman Wahaab at Sapar Contemporary (New York)

Catinca Tabacaru, which has galleries in both New York and Harare, Zimbabwe is displaying the work of Admire Kamudzengerere and Rachel Monosov, two artists who are represented by the gallery and who together had developed a semi-fictionalized project, 1972, to explore interracial marriage in

Zimbabwe. Their project plays fast and loose with back-dated documentation and personal testimony to insert their “marriage” (which may or may not be legal) into the official governmental records of the country.



Admire Kamudzengerere
and Rachel Monosov's 1972 project at Catinca
Tabacaru (New York, USA/Harare, Zimbabwe)

At [Yossi Milo](#), another New York-based gallery, I happened upon the work of [Kyle Meyer](#), an American artist who takes studio photographs of black, (self-identified) gay men wearing headwraps. After making a large print, Meyer then takes the headwrap used in the photo, and the print, tearing both into strips that he then interweaves by hand to create another portrait. The results are stunningly lovely images in which the faces and bodies of these men waft in and out of perceptibility.



Kyle Meyer at Yossi Milo (New York)

There are only 21 galleries represented at the fair, so I initially felt that I had the time and space to contemplate work (in contrast to Frieze with its armada of about 180 galleries). Yet so many stories behind the works are so captivating as I prepared to write this, I realized I would not be able to tell them all. This is a welcome problem to have: to be overcome by so much beauty I'm not sure how to share it all.



Sethembile Msezane at Tyburn Gallery (London, UK)

The 1-54 contemporary African art



Baya at Elmarsa Gallery ((Dubai, UAE/Tunis Tunisia)



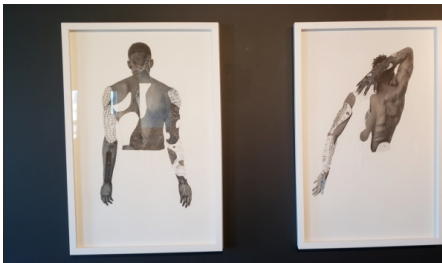
Elias Sime at James Cohan (New York)



Yinka Shonibare at James Cohan



Alimi Adewale at Retro Africa (Abuja, Nigeri



Nate Lewis, Pioneer Works' Fall 2017 Visual
Arts resident

*[fair continues at Pioneer Works](#) (159
Pioneer Street, Red Hook, Brooklyn)
through Sunday, May 6.*