



# AFRICA NOW

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*

# VOICES FROM DAKAR

Dakar has long been the cultural jewel in West Africa's crown, but in recent years the city's contemporary art scene has gathered pace, thanks to its biennale and a new generation of artists, gallerists, curators and collectors.

Words by Beetle Holloway



© Thomas de Lacoste

Dakar is no stranger to the arts. Senegal's energetic capital is the westernmost city of mainland Africa and boasts a cultural heritage as deep and vast as the Atlantic Ocean that stretches out from its shores. Dakar was the stage of Léopold Sedar Senghor, the country's first president and a renowned poet who championed black cultural identity through the *Négritude* movement. It was the set for Ousmane Sembène, the 'Father of African film', who brought African stories, voices, languages and perspectives to the big screen for the first time, and also the studio of Youssou N'Dour, whose satin-like voice projected African music across the globe.

The city is also home to a colonial Art Deco market, the UNESCO-recognised island of Gorée, and the African Renaissance Monument, the tallest statue on the continent. Today it is making a name for itself as the hub of a dynamic contemporary arts scene that is emerging from the powerful shadows of the city's cultural history.

For some in the international art world, 'Dakar' is a byword for biennale. First held in 1990, the Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain – now known as Dak'Art – initially focused on literature and visual art before switching to modern and contemporary art from

Africa and its diaspora in 1996. It is now the largest arts fair on the continent. "The biennale encourages creativity on the continent and legitimises African artists," explains El Hadji Malick Ndiaye, the curator of the 2020 edition (postponed due to the pandemic). "It is a corridor of transmission that circulates artistic innovation, creativity and ideas with the outside world, provides a platform for Senegalese artists and the country's diaspora, and enables artists from across Africa to meet each other, re-evaluate their creativity and stimulate their imagination."

The biennale's imprint on Dakar's art scene has gradually increased over the years, with Ndiaye likening its impact to a "snowball, as each edition has a greater impact"; a snowball that peaked in 2018, when more than 1000 artists were featured across 300-plus exhibitions. According to Océane Harati, the founder of OH Gallery, which opened the same year, "the 2018 Biennale was a game-changer. International institutions, artists, the general public... everyone was there. It made me realise that the market was ready, and so was I to finally implement a project after seven years of research."

The 2018 biennale saw a new wave of artists, collectors and

Laeïla Adjovi. *Malaiika Dotou Sankofa #3*. Exhibited in the Ancien Palais de Justice, Dakar, May 2018 during the 13th edition of Dakar Biennale



galleries wash over the city, spilling into its distinct districts and diverse spaces, but Dakar's art scene is more dynamic than simply a biennial event. From the 2014 opening of the street-art 'Museum under the Sky' (Musée à Ciel Ouvert) across the city's historic Médina district to the launch in 2012 of Partcours Dakar, which shines a light on the work of Dakar's myriad galleries, art spaces, museums and foundations every December, the city's art scene has been quietly building for some time.

"Beyond the biennale, Partcours plays an essential role," says Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy, Curator of Programmes at RAW Material Company, a Dakar institution for art, knowledge and society. "The Dak'Art Biennale brings a focus to the contemporary art scene every two years, but obviously things are happening in Dakar all the time and Partcours shines a light on that ongoing work. Although there is a beautiful energy within the art scene here, it remains rather fragmented and so it's vital for us to try and open up to each other, join together and create together."

There is a chasm of difference between 'maturing' and 'mature', with some commentators observing that the city's art scene is still

learning to walk before any attempt at running can be made. "Dakar is certainly off to a good start," says Ndiaye. "The city has become a space for galleries, art centres and artist residencies. The Museum of Black Civilisations has been built. The Théodore Monod Museum [of African art] has been renewed. There are new generations of artists reimagining how we see the world and adding to the creative dynamics of the city, but there is also still a need to develop the market, which remains a long way behind other countries."

For the market to really improve, some argue that Dakar's art scene needs greater state recognition and support, such as the reduction of the 10 per cent VAT rate on art sales and the development of arts education. Others believe that the art world needs to be more accessible, symbiotic and democratised if it is to earn that level of recognition from the state and the wider community. While there may not be one definitive path ahead, what is abundantly clear is the determination of a wide array of passionate voices to drive the art scene forward.

**Delphine Lopez**  
Director, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury

“Being a contemporary African artist in Africa is very complicated. We wanted to change that by creating an ecosystem on the continent so artists can make their careers here. A space to give visibility to young African artists, especially female artists, and continue a creative dialogue with the continent and its diaspora. Setting up in Dakar was a natural choice. It’s a city with a very strong cultural heritage and, for me, the place to imagine the contemporary art of tomorrow.”



Left: Delphine Lopez. Image courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury  
Below: (left to right) Works by Jess Atieno, Mariam Abouzi Souali, Binta Diaw (on the floor). Installation view of *I have this memory, it is not my own*. Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, December 2020



**Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy and Dulcie Abrahams Altass**  
Curators of programmes, RAW Material Company

“Whether private or public, through photography or philosophy, there is a rich abundance of creators and exhibitors of art in Dakar. But there has been a lack of spaces where the knowledge produced through art-making can be explored. We aim to engage with and encourage the symbiosis between civil society and the city’s art world through our programming and publishing. By bringing together various disciplines, engaging in critical thinking about art-making and encouraging the sharing of knowledge, Dakar’s art scene can learn and grow together.”



Above: Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy and Dulcie Abrahams Altass. Photography by Kerry Etola  
Right: Façade of RAW Material Company. © Antoine Tempé Viderot



**Océane Harati**  
Founder and director, OH Gallery

“OH Gallery is not a gallery of contemporary African art, but a gallery of contemporary art in Africa. For years it was foreigners who were most likely to visit art galleries and buy art. As a fourth generation Senegalese, I wanted to create a space that was open for local people to discover, appreciate and – ultimately – collect art. A gallery that was not only accessible, but also informative, educational and fun, bringing together both established and new collectors and helping evolve this young, emerging market.”



Above: Océane Harati  
Photography by Yuri Lenquette.  
Right: OH Gallery, Jeewi Lee, Aliou Diack (on the walls) and Soly Cissé (sculptures on the table).  
Installation view of *Matière*.  
5 December 2020–13 February 2021

**Mamadou Boye Diallo alias Patin**  
Curator, Yataal Art (Expand Art in Wolof)

“Artists come from the streets and that’s where we believe art should be displayed. We’re here to remove the doors to art, literally and physically. By supporting independent street artists, we can encourage free expression. By organising open-air museums, we can inspire the local population. We can show them that art is not about money, but the sheer pleasure of creation. I would love to see a more inclusive biennale. At the moment it’s all ties, shirts and four white walls, but artists also wear rags and paint in bare feet.”



Top: Mamadou Boye Diallo alias Patin. Image courtesy of the artist  
Right: Pape Diop. *Untitled*. 2020. A wall in Médina, Dakar. Art brut. Mud, coffee, cigarette butts, water and other materials. Image courtesy of the artist



**Aliou Diack**  
Artist

"The pandemic took 50 per cent and gave back 50 per cent. The art scene depends on social activity and civil society, but the inability to travel has provided time for reflection and pushed me to create a new form of art. It's not easy being an artist in Senegal and it's always important to create something different. The 2018 biennale provided wider exposure and the new galleries help local artists, but I'm still scared for the new generation. We need a better fine arts school if we are to develop the market."

Above: Aliou Diack  
Image courtesy of the artist  
Right: *La prophétie (the prophecy)*. 2019.  
Mixed media on canvas.  
270 x 210 cm.  
Image courtesy of the artist



**Adji Dieye**  
Artist

"I experienced a diasporic upbringing between Italy and Senegal and was enquiring about the meaning of national identities from an early age. Today it's a core element of my research, with my entire work surrounding the context of West Africa, especially Dakar. It's not only a conceptual engagement but also how the reading of my work becomes more relatable when exhibited in Africa rather than in Europe. The relationship between art and its audience in Dakar is inspiring and inclusive. In many other cities, exclusivity within the art world is more often the norm."



Far right: Adji Dieye.  
Image courtesy of the artist  
Right: Adji Dieye. *Untitled*. 2020.  
Metal and silkscreen on silk twill.  
Metal structure 260 x 55 x 340 cm –  
silk 30 m. Cécile Fakhoury Galerie,  
Dakar. Installation view of *Culture  
Lost and Learned by Heart*



**Serigne Ibrahima Dieye**  
Artist

"At school everyone told me 'you're an artist', but my family opposed it. They didn't understand what it means to be an artist and nor does the wider community in Senegal. For me, it's all about engagement. Everyone has something to say, but they don't always have the means to express it. An artist has the means to speak. Many of them leave for Europe, but I take inspiration from Senegal and wanted to stay to show it's possible to evolve as an artist in your own country."

Above: Serigne Ibrahima Dieye  
*Combat #1*. 2021. Mixed media  
on canvas. 200 x 200 cm.  
Image courtesy of the artist  
Right: Serigne Ibrahima  
Dieye. Image courtesy of  
Galerie Cécile Fakhoury



**Fatiya Diene Mazza**  
Collector

"I like art that makes you think, and while I'm always on the lookout for the next new thing, I am also very faithful when I start with an artist. I will follow them for a while and go on a journey with them. Buying art in Dakar is still a very restrained circle among collectors, gallerists and friends. The market needs to be more democratised and made more accessible, so the person walking down the street has their interest piqued too."



Top left: Fatiya Diene Mazza.  
Image courtesy of the collector  
Left: Sambou Diouf. *La cène  
(The Last Supper)*. Mixed media  
on canvas. 180 x 200 cm.  
Image courtesy of the artist