

Ghana gains first commercial gallery for contemporary art

Institutional boost for country's rising art scene, but still only a handful of local collectors

OPENINGS

Accra. On 6 March – independence day in Ghana – a group of more than 50 men and women, dressed in their mothers' clothes, led a crowd of spectators from the street into the Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City in Accra. This performance by Serge Attukwei Clottey marked the opening of Gallery 1957, a 140 sq. m space tucked inside the newly built hotel, and Ghana's first commercial gallery dedicated to contemporary art.

There are a handful of organisations that already sell art in Ghana, but Gallery 1957 (named after the year the country gained independence) is the first to offer the full range of services expected of a commercial gallery, from exhibition and promotion to cataloguing and archiving. It is also the first gallery in Ghana to offer representation; so far its stable includes the emerging artists Jeremiah Quarshie, Yaw Owusu and Zohra Opoku.

Creating one-offs

Other artists, such as Ibrahim Mahama and Clottey, are producing one-off exhibitions and commissions for the gallery. Prices for Clottey's wall hangings, created from squares of plastic jerrycans, range from squares of \$5,000 to \$35,000.

"Many artists' first reaction is to leave Ghana, but they always come back," says Gallery 1957's founder Marwan Zakhem, the Lebanon-born British entrepreneur and collector. "We want to help them establish long and successful careers at home." Zakhem, who sits on the board of the Tate's Africa acquisitions committee, intends to introduce the new generation of Ghanaian artists to an international audience already familiar with big-ticket names such as El Anatsui and



Mahama – for example, at art fairs such as 1:54 in London.

Zakhem says there are around five major collectors in Ghana, but they account for no more than 10% of his business; other collectors are foreign. His aim is to grow the local pool. "We don't really have an art market in Ghana," says Seth Dei, a former investment banker and Ghana's biggest collector. "Art is evolving here, but it's still a bit underground."

Dei collects cutting-edge contemporary art as well as Modern paintings and traditional sculpture, but most Ghanaian collectors are "still conservative", says Odile Tevie, who co-founded the non-profit Nubuke Foundation 10 years ago to support young artists. Despite prevailing tastes, she estimates that 60% of artists in Ghana today are making performance and video works.

The 31-year-old Clottey is a pioneer in the field, having founded the GoLokal performance collective in

Serge Attukwei Clottey (left) and GoLokal dress in their mothers' clothes for a performance of the Ghanaian artist's My Mother's Wardrobe at the opening of Gallery 1957

2012. "To begin with, it was a challenge – even artists in my community didn't recognise performance as an art form," he says. But after his performances were broadcast on television, people began to approach Clottey, asking to participate.

Public performances will play a significant part in Gallery 1957's programme. Nana Oforiatta-Ayim, the gallery's creative director, says that there will be an accompanying public exhibition for every show she organises at Gallery 1957. "It's important not to lose touch with the raw energy in the streets," she says.

An exhibition of works by Zohra Opoku is to open there in May, while 16 new paintings by Quarshie are due to go on show in August. Quarshie has not yet sold his work on the open market, but counts Cherie Blair, the wife of the former UK prime minister Tony Blair, among his collectors.

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