

AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY AT AUCTIONS

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Research and acquisitions of contemporary African art are the new trend in the international contemporary art scene. Museums, fairs and galleries are all strengthening capacity in this art niche. London has become an art hub for this market and shows of African art are now abundant: in October 2013 the new fair, *1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair* was launched, and contemporary African artists are included in numerous museum shows. In February 2013, the Tate Modern, the leading museum of contemporary art in London, presented two exhibitions of major contemporary African artists: the *Ibrahim El Salahi: a Visionary Modernist* and a series of Meshac Gaba's installations grouped under the title, *The Museum of Contemporary African Art*. African contemporary art is also well sold at auction houses and private galleries.

In the vast production of contemporary African art, photography is the section of the market that received substantial attention from collectors and dealers. According to Ed Cross, an African art specialist from The Auction Room, it provides an accessible way to connect to African art and it is of immediate understanding to a broad audience. The market has also other explanations for the success of photography over other forms of art: African photography can be affordable, is probably undervalued, but can also be very exclusive. Works of young and mid-career African artists are still relatively cheap and therefore worthwhile to arts enthusiasts and investors. However, works of well-established African photographers can be pricey and their value has held on well throughout the years. Compared to other contemporary art markets, the African art market is segmented across three main tiers. The first tier is represented by top-end artists such as

Malick Sidibé, Gideon Mendel, and Okhai Ojeikere who are well established and whose works are highly valued. The second level is represented by artists whose profiles are maturing and prices are on the rise, like Raphael Leonce Agbodjelou, and Mario Macilau. Finally, the third tier is represented by other young, dynamic artists that are not so established but show potential, such as Uche James-Iroha and Francois-Xavier Gbre' to mention a few names. Often, even members of the low-end of the market often have works exposed in international exhibitions and their profiles are on the rise.

Buying photography at auctions can be involving and novel players need to know well the rules of the game to be successful. The bidding process is not straightforward, it has specific rules and costs, and it involves finding out the exact place and time of the offerings. Bidding can be done in person in the sales room after registration or on the phone through an auction house representative. An increasing number of sales are held online as well and simply require online registration before the bidding starts. In the bidding room, bids start low, and the auctioneer subsequently calls out higher prices. When the item is hammered down, it means that no bidders are willing to offer a higher price and the final purchasing price had been reached. However, if the bidding does not reach the secret reserve price agreed between the auction house and the seller, the work will remain unsold. Consequently, the work might be taken off the market or auctioned again at a later date. For every auction, a pre-sale catalogue is published with information on each work coming up for sale as the title, the artist, the size of the work, and the low and the high pre-sale price estimate. The estimate price doesn't include the buyers' premium, which consists



Lot 156, Malick Sidibé, (b. 1935), *Les Vrais Lyciennes, Bal Fin d'Année, Lycée de Filles*, 1966
Selections from The Baio Collection of Photography, New York, Rockefeller Plaza, April 15, 2010, Sale 2407



Mário Macilau, (b. Mozambique, 1984), *A Young Girl With Toy*, 2011

of an additional fee generally twenty percent of the hammer price excluding VAT. Therefore, it is very sensible that the buyer have clear ideas on which works he intends to acquire and how much higher he intends to bid before entering the auction. One important aspect of the market of contemporary photography is that once a project is completed, the printed photographs should be numbered. In general practice, photographs are issued on a limited number and in different sizes. The smaller the number, the better the value.

At present, works of contemporary African photographers are usually included in large sales of photography or contemporary African art. It is still relatively rare to find a specific sale dedicated to African contemporary photography, exceptions include the newly founded, 'The Auction Room', an online auction house based in London. The Auction Room also devotes one auction per year to contemporary African artworks, and it is typically offered in October, which is the prominent month for contemporary art in London due to the numerous fairs, auctions and openings of important museum exhibitions. Sales from their latest auction in October were impressive and virtually all the photographs were sold approximately 20% above their initial estimates. For example, the artwork entitled, *A woman recovers building materials from her shack that had been burnt down the previous day* (1986) by Gideon Mendel from South Africa was sold for £2,350 and had an estimate of

£2,000. Other significant results were reached for the work entitled, *Hercule Africain* (1970) by Malick Sidibé from Mali that sold for £2,233 and had an estimate of £ 2,000; however, his work entitled *Boxeurs en demonstration* (1965) sold for £1,880 despite having an initial sale estimate of £2,000. Finally the work, *A Young Girl With Toy* (2011) by Mario Macilau from Mozambique sold for £1,310 and had an estimate of £1,000. The Auction Room will be holding an auction of *African Contemporary Photography* on 28 May, 2014.

Confirmation of the rising prices of contemporary African art sales are from other market players. For instance, 8Paddle, a newly founded online auction house based in New York, included two works by Malick Sidibé entitled, *Portrait Studio* and *Dansez le twist* in the online auction, *House Sale* on 31 October, 2013. They were sold within minutes of the bidding. Finally, contemporary African art also attracts non-profit auctions, as the one entitled, *Articulate* organized by the charity, Dramatic Need at the Victoria Miro gallery in London in November 2013. At the auction, a work by Mario Macilau entitled, *Taking a Shower* (2012) received the highest number of bids, another clear sign on how African art appeals to a broad audience of art enthusiasts.

Christie's, the well-established British auction house also offers works by the top African photographers as part of larger sales. In



Gideon Mendel, (b. South Africa, 1959), *A woman recovers building materials from her shack that had been burnt down the previous day*, 1986
Est: £2,000 - £3,000

October 2012, Christie's Paris held the sale, *Rendez-vous Interieurs contemporains* that included work by well-established African artist, Malick Sidibé entitled, *Le deux amis* (1971) that sold for €3,250 and had a starting estimate of € 2,500. Another interesting sale was the *Selections from the Baio Collection of Photography* held at Christie's New York in April 2010, which included a Malick Sidibé work entitled, *Les Vrais Lyceennes, Bal Fin d'Annee, Lycee de Filles* (1966) that sold for \$2,500 and had an estimate of \$2,000. The success of African art at international auctions is relatively recent. In November 2002, Christie's Paris included *Les Nouveaux Circoncis* by Malick Sidibé in the sale, *Photographies* and sold for €1,880 despite having an initial estimate of €2,000. Finally, Bonhams holds in May every year a sale called, *Africa Now*, which did include some photography works that sold well above the initial estimate. Regional auction houses are also operating directly on the territory as in the case of Arthouse Contemporary in Nigeria.

Not all the auction houses are engaged with contemporary African art. For instance, Sotheby's is among those auction houses that are not offering works of contemporary photography art yet, but we shouldn't be surprised if they will catch up with it in the near future. Despite its upward trend and favourable market estimates, African contemporary art is still a niche market that is not able to fetch the prices of other contemporary artworks in photography. Apparently

some African artists working with photography are still wary of having their works sold at auctions, but things are fast changing and audacious collectors are snatching very good works at reasonable prices, benefitting from a market that is still easily accessible.

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