In Context: Frieze London and 1:54

By Siobhan Keam
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Whether we like it or not, the context of an artwork radically impacts how we engage with it. Inevitable questions arise: Is it in a white-cube gallery? Is it a solo show or a group show? How does it fit in with the artist’s previous work? Where is the artist from? All of these questions frame how we view a work. And then there’s the phenomenon of the art fair, another context entirely. A strange combination of commerce and art-appreciation, art fairs are consciously aimed at collectors, yet also an opportunity for the public to see an impressive array of art in one place. Frieze London and 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair were both open in London over the same four days (4 – 9 Oct, 2016), presenting the perfect opportunity to reflect on the way context influences engagement with a work, in two settings that were at once similar and vastly different.

Frieze London was a distinctly international affair. The European blue-chip galleries (White Cube, Hauser & Wirth etc.) were a strong presence, surrounded by galleries predominantly from the United States, Asia and South America. Apart from the two South African galleries exhibiting, Goodman and Stevenson – and Gypsum Gallery, Cairo – there was a notable absence of African galleries. Of course there was the occasional artist being represented by an international gallery (like Meschac Gaba’s poignant and topical Memorial for Drowned Refugees, 2016, at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery stand), but on the whole artists from the African continent were largely underrepresented. And this was not for a lack of talent, as was evident by the range of works on show at 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair.

Goodman and Stevenson, two of the top contemporary South African galleries, became by default the representative voice of not only a country, but a continent. Goodman chose the high-end retail approach, showcasing a selection of pieces from artists including Kendall Geers, Candice Breitz, Mikhael Subotzky and Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. Stevenson, on the other hand, decided to show a collection of works by Penny Siopis, a stalwart of the South African art scene. There are most likely financial merits to Goodman’s strategy (one adopted by the majority of galleries at Frieze), but from the view of a non-collector, the single artist approach was far easier to engage with. Emulating an exhibition rather than a showroom gave more credence to the individual works, encouraging interpretation and engagement rather than simply monetary exchange.
Stevenson’s ‘A Painting Looks’, framed as a “mini-survey” of Siopis’ œuvre, included works from as far back as 1982 (Column Cake) as well as more recent works like The New Parthenon (2016), a video work also on show at the Taipei Biennial. The selection of Siopis’ work showed her continued preoccupation with intensely personal subjects, while simultaneously commenting on the political situation of South Africa and the wider world. For instance, The New Parthenon bridges the gap between the personal and the political by interrogating Siopis’ personal Greek heritage through anonymous footage of a Greek man (the gallery statement wonders whether it might be her father but the question is never answered), while at the same time commenting on the current refugee/immigration issues in Europe (the Syria conflict, Brexit etc.). With ‘A Painting Looks’, Stevenson seemed to use the opportunity of showing at Frieze London to encourage engagement with Siopis’ work, rather than just as a means to sell it.

That being said, there were works on show at Goodman that drew the crowds. A large neon sign by Alfredo Jaar, Be Afraid of the Enormity of the Possible (2015), seemed to be a popular choice for shooting an Instagram pic. Another highlight of the Goodman stand was Samuel (Standing), Vaalkoppies (Beaufort West Rubbish Dump) (2006), by Mikhael Subotzky. The work combined his classic gritty photography with a pane of shattered glass, appearing to have been violently smashed, or perhaps shot through with a bullet. The layered work created a mosaic of glass pieces that both obscured and drew your attention to the image behind it. In contrast to some of the big, shiny Anish-Kapoor-like works on show at Frieze London, Mikhael Subotzky’s work exemplified the unapologetic political engagement that South African artists are internationally lauded for.

1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair was a reprieve from the craziness of Frieze London. Smaller, more specialised and somewhat easier to engage with, 1:54 was on show for the fourth consecutive year in Somerset house. Each gallery was located in its own room, making the common problem of visual noise from surrounding gallery stands less of an issue. There were a number of South African galleries making an appearance, including CIRCA/Everard Read, Barnard Gallery, AFRONOVA Gallery, and SMAC. For similar reasons that made Stevenson’s stand so engaging, the SMAC gallery stand was one of the highlights of 1:54. Pegged as a ‘special project’, Passage exclusively featured the works of young South African artist Alexandra Karakashian. It included large and small monochrome paintings created using engine oil, with one of Karakashian’s trademark Oil Painting installations in the middle of the room. Her seemingly abstract paintings grapple with topics as broad as migration, nationality, history and ecological crises, all explored in the medium of used oil (and in one instance, salt). By focusing on one artist, SMAC foregrounded the conceptual underpinnings of the work, making it easier to engage with the artist’s practice instead of simply glossing over the pieces as abstract black-and-white paintings.
Located just behind SMAC, AFRONOVA Gallery’s stand had some of the most intriguing politically-themed works on show, including Billy Zangewa’s Domestic Scene (2016) tapestry, Senzeni Marasela’s delicate watercolour Waiting for Gebane (2015–2016), and a series of bold photographic portraits by Jodi Bieber. Unfortunately, the individual works were lost on the stand, filled as it was with a large selection of these works and more. The relatively small, intimate works explored vital issues of race, representation and feminism, and could have done with considered curatorship (and definitely more space) to bring out these concerns. On this occasion, the old adage ‘less is more’ rings true.

Alongside the South African galleries, there were a multitude of African and European galleries participating in 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair. These included ARTLabAfrica (Kenya), Galerie Mikael Anderson (Denmark), October Gallery (England), Galerie Ceciel Fakhoury (Cote d’Ivoire) and many more. The artists on show ranged from those currently based in African countries to artists from the diaspora, interrogating their experience of multiple nationalities. Despite the fact that these locations, nationalities and contexts are so varied and different, there were similarities and trends.

One of these was the emphasis on recycling materials, as seen in the works of Maurice Mbikayi and Niyi Olangunju. Mbikayi uses discarded computer parts and other found objects to create sculptures and costumes used for public performance and photographic works; Niyi Olangunju reworks traditional African sculptures, cutting them in half and painting the inner surfaces with precious minerals mined from the artefact’s country of origin. Politics of country and place were also present in many of the works, with artists such as Goncalo Mabunda using AK47 in his imposing throne-like sculptures, a reference to the violent civil war of his home country, Mozambique.

As a fair of ‘Contemporary African Art’, the artists and galleries present were placed firmly within their context on the continent. The works by South African artists were in conversation with artists from countries including Uganda, Tunisia, Malawi and Sudan, not to mention the diasporic artists living in the US or Europe. South African artists’ engagement with the deeply political issues of race, representation, history and gender identity were enhanced by the relationship with other artists from Africa and the diaspora exploring similar issues. The fair offered a snapshot of contemporary art from the African continent, of which South Africa was one voice amongst many.

The context of Frieze London, on the other hand, seemed to gloss over the context of place, space and politics. You could easily wander around Frieze without knowing where the galleries or artists are
based, and indeed it didn’t seem to matter. The works on show were part of the global art conversation, which declined to contextualise the works as conditionally as 1:54. While for some this might be seen as a good thing (there are many artists today who rile against classification based on nationality), it can also dilute the impact of the individual work. Mikheal Subotzky’s shattered work, for example, is intensely political, yet at Frieze it was all too easy to wander past it as just one of many works on show, where the next big and bold work grabs your attention before you have a chance to peer beneath its shiny surface.