

# Contemporary African art goes digital

The internet is increasing art awareness, but how will it impact sales of physical works?

**across** all sectors, whether hailing a taxi with Uber or finding a place to stay during your next business trip with Airbnb, new technologies have disrupted traditional models. The contemporary art world is no exception.

New ways to fund, collect, invest in and sell fine art have blossomed. Traditional auction houses like Sotheby's have teamed up with online retail giants such as eBay, as well as collaborated with online art platforms like Artsy. New art investment firms like Arthena give investors the chance to pool their capital and invest in selected artworks. Art:i:curate is a site that allows anyone to donate funds for a particular art project and share in the profit of its sales. In an age when the authenticity of valuable artworks is a growing concern, Verisart offers new ways to digitally certify and verify artworks. These are but a few examples.

## Simple but effective

In this innovative and fast-changing landscape, buying art online is perhaps the simplest of these new propositions, yet undoubtedly on the uptick. In 2015, despite the overall global art market seeing a dip, the online art market grew 24% to the value of \$3.27 billion, according to the latest Hiscox Online Art Report. Auction house Christie's, for example, reported an 11% growth rate in digital sales. Yet the real growth is possibly at the low- to mid-end, rather than in the ultra-luxury market. Last but not least, 92% of online buyers expect to buy more of the same amount of art online in the next 12 months.

There are now dozens of online art platforms globally. Simultaneously, there has been a significant rise of international interest in African contemporary art, with the continent's economic growth also being a driver of the market. Despite these trends, African artists are still under-represented online and traditional galleries have been slow to adapt. I founded Guns & Rain, an online gallery for African art, to fill the gap for an accessible, affordable and thoughtful representation of art from our continent. The demand for online art –



## Bringing Joburg and Zimbabwe to life

*Known for his lively, raw and often dark depictions of urban and country life in Zimbabwe, Admire Kamudzengerere was the second Zimbabwean artist ever to be awarded a residency at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam.*

*Kamudzengerere's work explores identity, masculinity, politics and society, informed in no small measure by the hardships that have marked Zimbabwe's last decade.*



*South African artist Themba Khumalo's cityscapes capture the beauty, energy, fears and grit of Africa's wealthiest city. The vast scale and density of Johannesburg's commuter taxi networks, the relentlessness of urban life and famous landmarks like the Hillbrow Tower all make an appearance in Khumalo's portfolio.*

whether for education or collecting – will only grow as people's comfort levels with digital channels increase. Thanks to the web, Guns & Rain raises the local and international profiles of mostly young emerging artists from southern Africa, primarily South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana. Collectors as far afield as London, New York, Vancouver and Melbourne now enjoy work by these artists.

## A mottled canvas

While the web is helping create a brighter future for African contemporary art, there are still challenges. The Hiscox report notes that there is still resistance among 51% of art buyers to buying art online – and for good reason. Art online is different from a pair of shoes, an accessory or software, because art is tactile, and it involves nuanced, subjective and emotional decision-making. My job as an online gallerist and dealer is to ensure that, despite the limitations of a virtual environment, clients have as much information as they need in order to comfortably make a decision about buying art. As with anything online, it's important to do research, to be informed and to use safe online payment platforms such as PayPal.

The internet is a vibrant and accessible space to start learning about art, and can of course be complemented by visits to southern Africa's many galleries and auction spaces.

Text | **Julie Taylor** Photography | **Supplied**

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