

The economics of the art world are weird. It seems incomprehensible that anyone would shell out hundreds of millions on a painting, like the infamous \$450m (R6.5bn) paid for the “Last Leonardo” in 2017 – which may not be by Da Vinci after all. And it’s made worse by the recent cryptocurrency-driven vogue for paying millions for a non-fungible token – which is basically a digital guarantee that a virtual art object you’re buying is unique. Much simpler to understand is where the art world intersects with conventional global economics – the age-old story of the haves and the have-nots.

African art is a great case in point – apart from the looting of cultural artefacts like the Benin Bronzes by Western colonial powers, most revenue generated by African art comes from exports from Africa to the major Western metropolitan markets, with little revenue flowing back to Africa to grow and develop local art markets.

Now, however, the African art market is beginning to take back some of its identity and self-governance. Two major new coalitions are taking different routes to establishing Africa as a competitive force of its own on the global art scene.

The recently launched SOUTH SOUTH is an online community and platform for artists, galleries, curators and collectors from across the Global South – originally an umbrella academic term to refer to an alternative view of geopolitics not centred on the US and Western Europe. The initiative brings together more than 50 galleries from across five continents to offer a central portal for programmes and artists from the various galleries scattered across the world. For its founders it’s an ambitious attempt to set up a different art history and economy. It is essentially an aggregate of commercial galleries, supported by a roster of heavyweight collectors from around the world, that wants to move revenue streams for art sales away from the major Western markets and into the global destinations in which they operate.

A new pan-African initiative, the African Art Galleries Association (AAGA) is attempting to address the imbalance in a different way. Rather than focusing on alternative geographies such as South and Central America and Asia, as well as Africa, it is a dedicated pan-African collective looking to change the art fortunes of the continent’s own beleaguered artists and smaller galleries. But how will it go about this?

AAGA was formed by a loose collective of regional southern African galleries in 2016 with the idea of building up collective bargaining power and knowledge in art sectors on the continent through collaboration between similarly emerging galleries. Its first formal project was launched in 2019 – the Emerging Painting Invitational (EPI), a pan-African emerging painting prize, designed as part competition, part curated exhibition, part art fair, part conference. It launched that year at First Floor Gallery in Harare. In common with most other art events post-pandemic, it has now moved online, and is a collaboration with South African fine art auction powerhouse Strauss and Co, which sponsors the prize and runs an online auction of the work of participating artists.

AAGA is responding, it says, to the need to support the growth and sustainability of contemporary art sectors in Africa in the context of the rise of interest internationally in contemporary art from the continent. This happens via an emerging gallery and artist network that is properly pan-African, with galleries in southern, western and north African regions.

The collective has also formed a signature event partnership with Artsy, the leading US-based arts media and auction platform, to showcase African art for US and global collectors and museums. The online-only event “African Galleries Now” spotlights AAGA’s emerging galleries and African artists in an art fair format happening on June 9 this year.

South African gallery Guns & Rain is one

ART TALK



‘Repetition is sometimes an absent father relearning’ by Thina Dube. Acrylic, soft pencil and charcoal on Fabriano, 70cm x 50cm. Gallery: Guns & Rain, Johannesburg.

ART FOR AFRICA

Two major new coalitions are taking different routes to establishing the continent as a competitive force of its own on the global art scene, writes James Sey



‘Silence’ by Mauro Pinto. Inkjet print on archival FineArt Baryta, 80cm x 120cm. Gallery: Arte de Gema, Maputo.

of the collective’s founding members, and director Julie Taylor sees the main advantages of AAGA lying in capacity-building and economies of scale that are unusual in the art world. “Emerging galleries need the support of a professional community, especially in countries where arts infrastructure is underdeveloped, and where it’s important to set industry standards for professional practice,” Taylor says. “And it can be more financially efficient to team up with other players on a project. For a pan-African project like this, economies of scale are really important and allow us to negotiate important global initiatives like the EPI and our ‘African Galleries Now’ collaboration with Artsy. We’re certainly demonstrating our African talent for collaboration!”

AAGA founder Valerie Kabov, director of First Floor Gallery, agrees: “As galleries in Africa we’re acutely aware that international hype about ‘black art’ assumes an African identity but in fact often excludes African artists from market access. This is why we launched the ‘African Galleries Now’ art fair – to spotlight the work of African galleries which are invested in supporting art on the continent from the ground up and not just jumping on board a hyped movement in the market. So AAGA also has a strong ethical and political motivation.”

The festival

ARTISTS AND THE LAW

Durban gears up for the inaugural Artfluance Human Rights Festival



Dean Hutton stays on message. PICTURE: DEAN HUTTON

In 2017, a work titled #fuckwhitepeople created in 2016 by artist Dean Hutton was the subject of a lawsuit after it was displayed at an exhibition, “The Art of Disruptions”, at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town. The case was brought to the courts by a fringe political party on charges of hate speech that magistrate Daniel Thulare dismissed.

Section 16 of the constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of creativity. Thulare ruled that the poster, displaying the phrase “Fuck White People” in black and white capital letters, did not amount to hate speech and was not racist because it was “within the context of protest art”.

Hutton, a master’s student in fine art at the time, said the work was inspired by black intellectual thought and represented a demand for the “complete dismantling of the systems of power that keep white people racist”. He will be one of the featured artists at the inaugural Artfluance Human Rights Festival presented by the Centre for Creative Arts.

Hutton will be in dialogue with constitutional law expert professor Pierre de Vos. The two will be joined on a freedom of expression panel by filmmaker Hajooj Kuka, who works in the wartorn regions of Sudan training conflict-affected and marginalised communities through theatre of the oppressed and various film projects.

Kuka’s films have screened in more than 100 festivals worldwide, and he has received numerous awards. In 2020 he was one of five Sudanese artists jailed for two months and fined on charges of causing a public nuisance, in what some described as a crackdown on art and activism.

The Centre for Creative Arts issued a statement at the time condemning the arrest, stating that Kuka’s films are a condemnation of war and a tribute to the power of human transcendence – themes that run strongly in the values the Centre for Creative Arts.

Also on the panel is South African rapper, activist and spoken-word and hip-hop artist Iain Ewok Robinson, who uses his art to galvanise people on a range of issues, partnering with civil organisations and drawing attention to their concerns and actions.

De Vos, the moderator, alongside his many other achievements, writes a blog on social and political issues from a constitutional law perspective.

The theme of the inaugural festival, which takes place at the University of KwaZulu-Natal from May 5-8, is “Voices of Hope, Courage and Resilience”.

The panel discussion will screen on Wednesday May 5 at 5pm.

The festival is freely accessible and can be watched via [www.facebook.com/artfluancefest](https://www.facebook.com/artfluancefest) and [www.youtube.com/centreforcreativearts](https://www.youtube.com/centreforcreativearts).

See [artfluance.ukzn.ac.za](https://artfluance.ukzn.ac.za) for the full programme.