

# African Arts with Taj

## Review News Events

Saturday, 11 April 2020

Covid-19 exposes prospects, challenges of virtual window for art market



Marcellina Akpojotor's 'Closing the Gap' (2019, Acrylic and Fabric on Canvas, 60 x 77 inches), represented by Rele Gallery.

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Covid-19 exposes prospects, challenges of virtual window for art market

Selling art via the internet was not strange prior to the covid-19 pandemic that led to cancellations and postponements of nearly all big international exhibition and auction events across the world. However, the strong interest generated in virtual dispensing of art, in the past one month, suggests possibility of a new dawn ahead in the global art market.

Within a spate of one month, Art Basel, Hong Kong edition; Art Dubai, UAE; 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, New York edition; Art Brussels, Belgium; Art Cologne, Germany; Frieze, New York, among others either postponed to few months into the year or shifted till next year. For some of the events such as Art Basel, Hong Kong and Art Dubai postponement also came with the virtual options. For examples, Art Basel streamed over 200 galleries, just as Art Dubai showed over 500 art pieces online. On the earlier scheduled day opening of March 25, Art Dubai launched its online. A statement from the organisers said the Art Dubai 2020 Online "showcases more than 500 artworks by participating galleries across all fair sections, with some presenting works specifically from their 2020 booth, while others have works from extended artist roster." Participants included Rele Gallery and Arthouse-The Space, both based in Lagos.

Also, within the same period, auction houses like Sotheby's, Christy's, Bonhams as well as quite a number of art galleries got the virtual and select viewership participation windows to avoid large congregating. Traditionally, internet outlets such as websites, Instagram, Facebook, among others have been implored to promote art ahead of physical gathering for viewing, but covid-19 pandemic, within a short period, boosted all that. After Sotheby's Lagos viewing on Thursday, March 12, the auction sales, which was scheduled for its London base could not hold physically, except virtually.


While the level of audience responses for the art fairs are yet unknown, results, in commercial values for the auction houses have been released. Some of them seemed to suggest that the virtual options have prospects. Yes, traditionally, online bidding for auction were common, but getting the entire sales on virtual platform brought new challenges.


At the end of Sotheby's March auction of Modern and Contemporary African art in London, a total £2,359,375 was declared. Apart from viewing by appointments, ahead of the auction, the actual sales was held virtually and via phone bidding.

Some art galleries, which were scheduled to show at few of the cancelled fairs in March also chose the virtual options, independently. TAFETA Gallery, based in London, but represents many African artists was to show at quite a number of cancelled or postponed art fairs across the world. Ayo Adeyinka, director at TAFETA Gallery, during a chat last week though said cancellation and postponement of quite a number of art fairs was disappointing, he however added "we completely understand the position of the fairs."



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lleries, historians can add value to Nigerian art’, by painter, Offo

And should the covid-19 crisis continues, how sustainable is the virtual window being applied as an option? "It is way too early to even begin to discuss the sustainability of a more virtual business environment," Adeyinka whose gallery represents quite a number of Nigerian artists said, "TAFETA for example only launched an online viewing room this week (early April), and it'll take a few shows to review any meaningful data."

In nearly two decades of art fairs resurgence across the world, artists of African descents, home and diaspora have enjoyed impressive global exposures by non-African patrons and gallery owners. Among such non-African owned galleries representing artists from the continent is London-based Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery. At the peak of the covid-19 crisis last month, KH Gallery had virtual opening for some of the artists scheduled for the cancelled art fairs. The experience of the founder and director is more practical in virtual art exhibition. "We filmed it on Instagram, and took lots of photographs to present them to clients," stated Kristin Hjellegjerde. "We have a full digital walk-through option as well."

How exactly was collectors' response to virtual viewing and marketing? "They enjoyed it, but can never replace a real viewing," said Hjellegjerde whose gallery was scheduled to show works of Lagos-based artist, Gerald Chukwuma at the cancelled 1:54 art fair, New York.

Looking ahead and getting prepared for a possible continue lockdown of cities should covid-19 escalates, Hjellegjerde said: "We will work on a more personal approach! I think the space to show is essential to the career of the artists to make a full series of work, among others. Art appreciation, she argued "is about feeling it," physically.

Shortly before the lockdown of Lagos, Ogun States and Abuja, quite a number of art exhibitions in the country's commercial city hub were postponed. Ovie Omatsola, curator at Thought Pyramid Art Centre seemed to have prepared for an opening of limited audience congregating for Next of Kin 2020 exhibition, to be assisted by virtual window. Shortly after postponing Next of Kin 2020, Omatsola said "audience visits to the gallery via appointments and assisted by virtual" may be the option should the Lagos State directive on limited congregating continues into May and beyond.

Bonhams auction in London, held on March 18 actually put the viewing by appointments assisted with virtual options to test. The results of the auction showed that more than 150 buyers registered for online bidding/phone for the Bonhams sale. Sotheby's, also, from March 27- 31 recorded 46% increase in number of virtual bidding during its sales.

In the months ahead – leading into the last quarter of the year – galleries, auction houses and art fair events in Lagos may take the virtual options and limited congregating windows too.

*-Tajudeen Sowole.*

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