Mariane Ibrahim (Fig. 1) conducted this interview by phone in the summer of 2018, as Touria El Glaoui was preparing for 1-54 Contemporary Art Fair’s sixth iteration in London (Fig. 2).

Mariane Ibrahim (MI): Okay, so tell us about your personal relationship with art and Africa in general.

Touria El Glaoui (TEL): As you know, I am Moroccan … I was born in Morocco, so I feel very connected to the African continent in general because of my roots, but I am also very connected to art as I had a father who was an artist. He created a channel for me to learn about the arts in our family home and he gave me my first arts education. We would pose for family portraits in his studio; his art was always a complete part of our family and our family life. I also had the chance to travel with him to museums and see a lot of art, which is probably very unique because in Morocco as a child I didn’t have any of the museums or structure that you might find in Europe or the United States to cultivate this art education. I think living with an artist and being able to live with him through his different art experiences and adventures was really helpful, educational, and gave me a real love for art. I think later on, with this love for the arts and this passion, I was able to travel for work and form my own art education, discover some artists of my own and develop my own art taste. This led me to creating 1-54 and really wanting to be involved with art on the continent.

MI: So, regarding that relationship that you had with your father and his artistry—being with a father who’s an artist is sort of different than being in the art business and being on the side of his representation and his market—so when was the first moment you decided to create an art fair?

TEL: So, there were different moments, the things I did for my dad’s work, before creating the fair, they really helped me understand how to develop my own platform. For example, supporting his relationship with galleries and museums, as well as supporting him by starting a catalogue raisonné —it helped me understand the early path of his career that I previously wasn’t really familiar with and how important visibility was while he was living in France or, of course, later when he lived in Morocco. I realized that this international visibility was part of the reason for his success. Beside his talent, it really helped with being more established in Morocco. At the same time, I supported him with a retrospective in Casablanca and then in London with an exhibition of Winston Churchill and my father’s works at a museum called Leighton House. It really

Touria El Glaoui

Interviewed by Mariane Ibrahim

Mariane Ibrahim has hosted acclaimed exhibitions from leading and emerging artists including Amoako Boafo, Clotilde Jimenez, Maimouna Guerresi, Ayana V. Jackson, Lina Iris Viktor and most recently Florence Démousthène. Seven years after founding her namesake gallery in Seattle, she officially launched her next space in Chicago in 2019. The gallery has had an international presence at art fairs with acclaimed and prize-winning presentations. Ibrahim’s mission is dedicated to the elevation and advocacy of diverse global artistic practices, with a particular spotlight on Africa and the diaspora. Ibrahim is driven towards expanding the confines of the creative landscape and has curated international exhibitions including a collaboration with David Adjaye at the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art at Harvard University and a group exhibition, Ravelled Threads, at Sean Kelly.

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Touria El Glaoui, the daughter of artist Hassan El Glaoui, was born and raised in Morocco and completed her education in New York before beginning a career in the banking industry as a wealth management consultant. After ten years in that field she relocated to London, where she initiated 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in 2013. She has since launched the fair in New York in 2015 and in Marrakech in 2018. 1-54 is now a world-leading platform dedicated to contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. Parallel to her career, she has organized and co-curated exhibitions of her father’s work in London and Morocco. She has spoken widely and chaired numerous discussions on contemporary African art and women in leadership at leading institutions and events globally. She was listed among the 50 most powerful women in Africa by Jeune Afrique magazine in 2015, 2018, and 2019. She is Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la République Française since February 2019. touria@1-54.com

Touria El Glaoui (TEL): As you know, I am Moroccan … I was born in Morocco, so I feel very connected to the African continent in general because of my roots, but I am also very connected to art as I had a father who was an artist. He created a channel for me to learn about the arts in our family home and he gave me my first arts education. We would pose for family portraits in his studio; his art was always a complete part of our family and our family life. I also had the chance to travel with him to museums and see a lot of art, which is probably very unique because in Morocco as a child I didn’t have any of the museums or structure that you might find in Europe or the United States to cultivate this art education. I think living with an artist and being able to live with him through his different art experiences and adventures was really helpful, educational, and gave me a real love for art. I think later on, with this love for the arts and this passion, I was able to travel for work and form my own art education, discover some artists of my own and develop my own art taste. This led me to creating 1-54 and really wanting to be involved with art on the continent.

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helped me understand a bit more the big realm of the art world.

Obviously, those are experiences I have used to create 1-54. But 1-54 is also the product of my experiences traveling around Africa while working in telecoms, where I was developing and selling different technology solutions to different countries in Africa. These professional trips, in the five years prior to starting 1-54, helped me understand a lot more of the African art market. I was fascinated by the art scenes I was discovering, and I started thinking of putting it all together at the end of 2011–2012 when exactly at the same moment I was really enjoying myself creating and cocreating this show for my dad in London.

MI: So why choose London over Paris, or a city in Africa? I know now, I mean I'm just going back in the past, not, think about the future.

TEG: So funnily enough, you know, the first concept for 1-54 that I had—the first idea put down on a piece of paper, was to actually have a rotating event on the continent, so I would have a fair that would move around Africa based on the country that wanted to host the fair. And obviously, the more you work on a business model and the more you work on a different part of the business, you realize that you want to have the highest number of known factors as possible to somewhat predict an estimate, such as of the cost of the event, but also to understand more of what's going into it, understanding the collector base and what would be the clients of my business. So, I eliminated the idea of rotating it in Africa quite fast just because of all the variables in each destination that were unknown. And then the fact it is based in London, I considered different European capitals because the idea was to really give artists from the continent visibility within the international market (Figs. 3–5). So then I considered Paris because of their strong relationship with Africa but it was less familiar territory compared to all the other environments that could make the fair a success. I also knew that I needed quite an international city to launch 1-54 and I was more familiar with the surroundings in London because I was living in London. I'm quite sure now that it was the right decision in terms of trying to do it in parallel to Frieze and choosing London as a very international capital. These were two constructions that were very important but I think the idea of choosing London—it had an important relationship with Africa but I really feel that it had a much more international reach than France, or Paris to be specific.

MI: I think, I mean I agree with you. I think London is a more appropriate environment for contemporary art rather than France, which is more anchored in modern art and also traditional African art. But, when you started—there are very few art fairs that have this broad idea of the continent. First of all, you don't use the term "Africa" in your title, it's "1-54." It's not the city. It's not the London/African art fair. Why did you choose a number rather than the whole, you know, label? I just want you to say it because people are tired of me saying the same thing.

TEG: I mean you know that the fair is called “1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair” [laughs] and to be honest, originally it was for people to understand what it was about, now everyone remembers it as 1-54, which is great, and this is exactly the point of having the sketchy number.

But if I go back into why we called it 1-54, it was definitely to highlight the power of the continent. Oftentimes people talk about Africa as if it's not some powerful continent but one country.
“Fifty-four” was definitely to make sure that people understood that we are talking about fifty-four countries and I wanted to make sure it was catchy, to title the fair in a way that you would remember the fair itself. I think, the title of having a number was something that was important to me as it is also difficult to choose one language in Africa. I think it’s not more French or more English or any of the other existing languages in Africa and I felt that underlying, there’s an understanding of fifty-four countries. It would initiate a conversation, a perception on the African continent but also encourage people to think about the continent in a way that is more nuanced, and I think it’s also perfect because it’s really highlighting the multiplicity of narrative of voices and perspectives which is definitely more complex than just a singular African image.

So, I really believe it’s a mixture of trying to find the catchy name that talks to an art audience as well as an African audience and also, translate all the things we’re trying to present at the time and we’re still trying to present today.

MI: Because we know others use acronyms for—[laughs] maybe we can call it “Africa,” you know, kind of. So, when you started the fair, you started in London and we went through that, now you’re operating in three continents. First you are in New York, I mean, America through New York, and then African through Marrakech—how did it come for you to expand in such a short year, as where for other art fairs it takes a little bit of a longer time to be able to operate at different networks and how do you explain this rapid growth and success for 1-54?

TEG: Well, the growth is definitely a result of the support we’ve received from other exhibitors, but also from the different audiences that we have, the patrons and different sponsors who allow us to have the fair continually.

But I feel that our model is very different, we’re probably the only fair that is privately owned and does not have other groups, such as investors, involved, so the timeline for decision making is very short and as the founder I know what the mission is and I’m still very dedicated to it, which is improving the visibility of artists from Africa in the international market, and for me there is no question about that. To be able to do that for the artists and the galleries, and to be in what is considered the capital of the world is really an honor.

So London is the fair where we’re touching the European market, but the only way to go and get the museums and older American collectors interested in what we were doing was to actually be in the U.S. So that’s how New York came about, and to be honest, the fact that we are an intimate boutique fair makes it easier because we don’t have to pack up 300 galleries, for example. We started small and now have a reasonable number of galleries, but we grew based on the success of each edition. So London is a model where we started small, we were hoping to grow, we grew every year, and are getting bigger.

And that made it possible to open a window of visibility in New York, which I think was extremely important when we started out...
in 2015 and I’m really happy that this year we’re going into our fifth year anniversary in New York (Fig. 6, cover). It’s very competitive but it’s also instrumental to be there because I know we’re not reaching the same institutions and people from London. We target a completely different audience in New York. We are also touching on a different collector base in the U.S. which is completely different than London. We have the chance to appeal to African American collectors in the U.S., which is not the case from London.

And in regard to Marrakech, it’s always been our dream, as I said; the first idea of 1-54 was to be on the continent. So now I have a much better understanding of how important it is to build a collector base in Africa, but it was always a decision to be in Africa. It was just a question of timing, of gathering enough information to know if it was going to be possible for the fair to make it there. Which was first, as a commercial platform, successful, and if we could build a model that was to be sustainable in New York and in London, then it was about visiting a couple of cities that I thought could be a possible home for 1-54 in Africa, would be welcomed by people that were hosting us and also welcoming to people who wanted to come visit the fair. I also knew that the collector base in Africa was not strong enough to sustain the galleries participating to 1-54 alone, so I wanted to make sure it was a city that would attract international collectors to subvent whatever we were lacking in the city we chose. London came about because I knew more of the variables. It’s a city where the institutions, the art partners, but also that I knew very well that didn’t have a fair, so that’s also one of the factors. I’m a big fan of the fairs in South Africa and also Nigeria, and I felt that we needed to find a home in Africa where we were not competing with the amazing work that those fairs are doing in their country. So, it was the best choice, Marrakech is very close to Europe and has a direct flight to the U.S. It made very, I’ll say, “business sense” to be there. We had an amazing offer with our partner that we couldn’t refuse. So, all those different variables came in place to make it a success for us and to be able to function on the continent.

In terms of measuring success, we look at the visibility artists and galleries are getting after showing at 1-54 and how we have contributed to that. For example, several artists who can now be seen at much larger fairs were first shown, within a fair environment, at 1-54. Such as Bille Zangewa, who was at Frieze with black projects last year, was initially shown at 1-54.

**MI:** Thank you. I would also like to go through another important element of 1-54 which is, of course, a discovery of your talents and artists and the fact that they are growing and growing and growing interests of Black artists in general across, you know, all continents. But what had made people actually see and come to 1-54 is the level of conversation, and it’s the curatorial platform and it’s all of the focus on talks and programming, and all of that is also made within a group of professionals that you surround yourself with. But the fair is also commercial, but it doesn’t operate like the other art fairs. It’s more or less—correct me if I’m wrong—by invitation? And your selection committee has no dealer—why choose this business model where all of your competitors mostly are working with professional dealers that would advise the fair on who to reach out and can also share the network of collectors?

**TEG:** So, I had the chance to meet Sheena Wagstaff, curator at the Met Breuer. We had a discussion on what I was planning to do with 1-54, what was the vision, and she really made me realize how important it was, what I was doing, that there was not just a commercial aspect to it. She made me realize it was probably the first time a lot of these artists would be exhibited internationally and it had to be done with all this construction in mind. I think that stuck with me because I had not realized the commitment I was putting myself into before I had this discussion with her, and I feel like if we chose this model, also that there was so much more that people didn’t know yet about contemporary African Art but also about the artists, about the continent.

Following the idea that art was just more than just an investment and you can engage with art at a different level, we really wanted to encourage the development of critical discourse (Fig. 7). We do this through 1-54 FORUM—a program that encompasses keynote lectures, “in-conversation” artist talks, panel discussions, book launch and an associate film programme, traversing critical subjects and activity within the sphere of contemporary African art, its market, institutions and independent art spaces. Thematic discussions drew on perspectives from across and outside the African continent to navigate key social-political and cultural contexts surrounding the frame of 1-54. That’s why we had Koyo Kouoh start the fair with us, establishing 1-54 as a political platform for discussions, for panels as well as artist conversations (Fig. 8). I think it really helps give gravitas to 1-54 and what we’re trying to do, a stronger understanding of the world we’re presenting. I feel like having such a model helps the galleries develop their exhibition programme: with the curatorial aspect and bringing their artists over.

Our choice of galleries shown at 1-54 really has to be selective because of the kind of understanding we’re looking for. The galleries also try to make the most of our guidelines to improve
themselves and to make sure they can also think about what they will be proposing at the fair every year in order to be stronger. They make sure they always have our approach in mind rather than just a selling/commercial platform. And I have to say, since then we have had galleries that have really invested over the years, bringing their artists and making sure they are a part of these 1-54 FORUM discussions, public programme, wanting their artists to do special projects with us and really thinking about different projects rather than just selling art. It might not be the most profitable business model for us, but it’s definitely the model that we’re committed to because there’s so much that we want in terms of visibility and understanding the continent.

MI: So I want to get back to you as a person, as a business woman. There are very few women, let alone owning, and running and directing. What are the challenges you face running the type of business predominately dominated by men?

TEG: Well I think there’s something empowering in being a woman and being able to do this and having the support of many individuals who want to see a more equal art world come into being and wanting women to assert their presence in that way. I think that the challenge that we all face is trying to do all this in a male-dominated industry and it comes with different difficulties. But at the same time, I think, when it comes to challenges, we all face the same. I really believe that, I think starting a business or being in the arts is quite a challenging journey and I don’t believe it’s an easier one for men. But I do think there is more challenge and reward for being an independent model, for example, and not having investors but being able to have the freedom to think innovatively and develop what I believe is a sustainable and fair trajectory.

So, I feel like I never considered myself, even when I started, to be the only woman doing what I am doing or questioned why women have never done it before. But I really feel like today I find a whole network of support because I’m a woman and I have done it, which is very exciting too, even though I feel like I’m less, I don’t know how to say it, enjoying the surprise factor of having the identity of a woman. For example, other people’s surprise implies that they don’t expect you to be able to do it. But I really am appreciative of the sustainable support network of individuals who want to see an equal art world. As a woman I strive for an equal art world, and particularly as someone with the power to make changes, from an artist’s perspective, I feel like it’s almost my duty to reflect that—we are very conscious about the number of women present at the fair in terms of artists, we are also trying to reflect that even if the global reality is that there are less women in the art world from a professional perspective, from an artistic perspective for all those types of angles. I think that everyone has a duty to make sure representation is equal.

MI: There has been an article about that idea. I agree with you, don’t think that, Oh my god this is because you’re a woman and you can be competitive enough and be on the same level but, because there has been so many discrepancies, you kind of have to overcome that discrepancy in psychology and also organizational and business, and you’re also surrounded by quite a lot of women working with you. But recently there has been an article coming out of a woman who anonymously has been helping other female artists who were—

TEG: I’ve read it, yeah—

MI: yes, do you feel that you get more support from women in different contexts, or is it something that is not gender biased?

TEG: The reality is that the amount of support I get from different relationships I have built over the years is honestly gender neutral. There are more men in higher positions so I’m facing more men on a day-to-day basis in terms of sponsorship, in terms of leadership in museums, in terms of gallery directors. But I would say that the recognition of being a woman in the art world comes from women, being invited to speak for a woman’s network or—I guess the applause or the recognition is definitely often more from women groups, women networks, or women-focused platforms than from platforms for men. Which, in a way, makes sense but at the same time I also appreciate being invited in a more neutral platform, because it’s also a recognition of what you do from a more global point of view rather than checking boxes, you know, she’s a women, she’s founded a fair, if they could add Muslim as well, they would …

MI: They aren’t too much handicaps?

TEG: No, no, but what I’m saying is you don’t want to check some kind of list, but more be recognized by the quality of what you do, you know, which I think is important for 1-54.

MI: Yeah, I agree with you. We are still a long way from a form
of balance and equal representation. In the continent, the art galleries face challenges operating at an international level and I think you have given voices to them from remote countries that are not necessarily participative. And yet, we know that there is a rising market for African artists, so how could they sort of benefit from all of these opportunities, and by that I mean, you have a gallery as an example, a gallery that is based in Zimbabwe and is operating within that kind of geographic, but we know that the artists have been appealing to bigger collectors, but then they have to travel and they have to make—overcome all of these expenses, and being able to bring the artists to their attention before somebody snaps them [up]. So how do you, I would say, facilitate through your platform that response through this immediate inquiry, this immediate need for this time of artist in other platforms?—I don't know if I'm clear or not.

**TEG:** It's clear. I think honestly the key is collaboration: for the galleries, for the artists; especially to be able to operate internationally. Alone it is very difficult, it's very difficult even for international galleries based in Europe or the U.S. So, I do believe that collaboration is instrumental for galleries or artists to expand on opportunities especially cross-continental exchanges with international galleries if they cannot promote their artists internationally because of financial means. There's definitely possibility in sharing some of their artists and getting something else out of it. It is unfortunate that the story of most of the galleries discovering artists is that the artists then move on to bigger platforms, a move important for their evolution and their career. And I know it's unfair because the gallery discovered the artist, after putting in all this investment into them, by participating in fairs, setting them up in residency programs, and there the artist might meet other curators or galleries, which is when the artist has opportunities to move on to bigger things. But saying all that, collaboration still brings more visibility and it creates visibilities, so it's also about creating smart ways to collaborate and definitely strengthening their structures.

The most common challenge galleries on the continent are facing is not having a strong collector base, but they are also in charge of building this because it is very important for the profitability of their gallery and I think, until they know the collector base in their own country is much stronger, they will need to depend on collaborative experiences. These might not be the most profitable for them but, from what I hear, 70% of their sales come from participating in international events and international art fairs, so I know it is a bit of a vicious circle, but there are ways to collaborate which promote equal collaboration, like our 1-54 Special Project. In our first couple of years, we were also collaborating with galleries who didn't have the means to come to 1-54 and we helped them with grants, showing them how to do the grants that would support their participation to art fairs.

I hope the galleries learn from those experiences and systems to make sure that they can do it on their own. Sometimes this is not the case—for example, we would support a gallery's first time here, but then the gallery would not do much to support themselves afterwards. But, we have had others who have been extremely successful, who have benefitted from every international collaborative opportunity they could be involved with. The idea is to inspire different collaborations, and it's not only the galleries that needed it the most who have worked together, because I know a couple of galleries that are collaborating because they want spaces in London, for example, so you have a gallery with a space in Nairobi collaborating with a gallery in London to share the space in London. You have a gallery in London and a gallery from Addis collaborating in a space in London, you have a gallery from Ghana exchanging with a gallery from Dubai in order to show artists from Dubai. So, it's about being welcoming, supportive, and then thinking out of the box. Today Africa is very connected, due to wi-fi, so there's also a better understanding from the artist's perspective on where they could learn more, be a resident somewhere or find ways to get applications for a residency program, and I know for a fact that most artists have been amazed by these opportunities. Every time I hear they've done an amazing residency program, or they have been granted an awarded something, I know that they have done a lot of research and collaborated throughout the journey in order to have more international visibility. So, if there's only one word to that question: collaboration.

**MI:** I mean, I think that it's essential, that term of collaboration. And also we have seen the different presence in a market that you have to be and sometimes the collaboration can also lead to the artist—a gallery taking this artist into those other art fairs and because they have seen it in 1-54 they're like, oh this is really interesting, and then these mainstream art fairs and galleries are kind of looking at what's going on and the excitement of the public into this art and also through the galleries. I'm sort of a perfect example, because I have just done a collaboration with Sean Kelly involving all of the art dealers from 1-54 and presenting their artists into a sort of a neutral space because it doesn't represent them and it's not artists that I represent except for two, so now the mainstream art galleries are more inclusive of African galleries, which means...
that there might also be some conflict maybe with your fair. Can an art fair become mainstream with non-African programs? And do you think that the main focus of your fair should have more and more African galleries that will not call African galleries but sort of divide them into—how do you deal with all of these issues of what we all want is Africa to come out of this geographic context, but in the end, on the other hand, Africa can also be utilized and fetishized in mainstream art fairs.

TEG: So to be honest, we are a specialized art fair, there’s no other way to call 1-54, but the idea was to create a platform to address the noninclusive nature of all the other art fairs, and if we look at the reality of things today, we’re still so far away from a balanced representation. So I do believe at the moment there is still a place for 1-54 and I wouldn’t want a platform that is not relevant in any kind of way. I believe this is the same story as the artists, with other galleries moving on to bigger fairs, and for fairs it is the nature of things. I don’t see it as something that conflicts with what we do.

1-54 has different facets, but that doesn’t mean that we’re completely disconnected from a wider social concern. We are here for artists from Africa and its diaspora, but we’re also able to bring different experiences that resonate beyond the geographic boundaries that you described. I always said in the past that if there is no role for 1-54 to play anymore then our vision and mission is finished. I would be the happiest if 1-54 did stop completely because it would mean there was equal and positive visibility and I wouldn’t still count the number of African artists in the larger fairs on my fingers, this is reality of things at the moment, who knows what the art market will look like in three or four years. For the time being I don’t think 1-54 is losing its relevance—I think it’s actually just touching the tip of the iceberg and we want Africans to be proud of being a part of an African project instead of always trying to reach out for international name, not being proud of 1-54 or thinking that being a part of an African category is something diminutive. We want 1-54 to be something that they’re excited about. While talking to October Gallery—one of the oldest galleries in London and one of the first galleries to represent El Anatsui and Romonald Hazoume and now representing a new generation of artists who are doing really well in the market—I’m really happy to hear that their bestselling artists at auctions or at fairs that it’s really cool to be at 1-54 and they are asking October Gallery to take part (Fig. 6). I’m very proud that they are just excited to be at 1-54. But one day if I feel that our role is accomplished, and our mission is finished, or we aren’t able to reinvent ourselves in a way that we still have a platform for the continent and its diaspora, then I would not have a problem thinking of another role for 1-54 or closing this chapter.

MI: But maybe one of the—because there’s so much possibility and there’s so much coverage to be made, as we know there are more and more artists coming the scene because we’re talking about an entire continent, as much as you’re focused on contemporary art, you also introduce some African designers for your lounge. Is there any ambition or project or something that you have in mind in expanding to modern art? You most often find the modern artist and what we can call our masters more in the Sotheby’s and so on auctions than you can find them in a dedicated art fair.

TEG: So, we have crossed over into some of those works at times, I don’t think there’s a rigid line for us to go into this or not. In the past we have had galleries showing modern artists, but it is more complex if the galleries are not in charge of the estates of the artists, as the pieces are usually part of the secondary market, so then we get into the market of the auction house which is quite different. I know some fairs do it really well, like Dubai with their modern section, and we see the Armory Shows doing it really well. Today I feel there’s not enough of a demand at 1-54 to have a particular section, but for Mikael Anderson Gallery, which presented Ernest Mancoba, it worked really well for them and it was really relevant to have the artist present at the fair, but their relationship to the artist was very clear. We’re always looking for new ways to expand, move ourselves, and make sure we offer a different perspective to our audience and people who visit 1-54. So, I would say why not, but as long as the galleries are dedicated to modern artists or have a clear vision of focusing on just modern artists. The gallery’s booth should be dedicated to one or the other. Every time we have a booth that has both modern and contemporary, it is not the most successful. When we have had solo shows of each it has worked really well, and people were truly interested. It works really well for Frieze Masters, but you have to have galleries that are just into modern art and are the best dealers of those artists, but I think—maybe I’m wrong—but we have less of those galleries on the continent and even internationally.

MI: I mean I’m fascinated and, when you look at the Frieze Masters, how much stage they make by only focusing on a theme, but I agree with you, its solo project has much more impact than its mixed. So talking about the presentations, in 1-54, what...
are the highlights in 1-54 London 2018 and what you’re looking for and hoping for with this edition.

TEG: The amazing thing is that over the years we booked more and more of our summer space in Somerset House, London, which we’re very excited about. I think London is the most exciting one for us because it’s our most ambitious project due to the courtyard and the size of the installation we do in the space. And this year I have to say we have had the chance to show the Meditation Tree from Ibrahim El Salahi, which is going to a beautiful, a huge sculpture of a tree that he has produced especially for 1-54. It’s also, for us, an opportunity to honor, in the open, these masters in the form of an ambitious project that they’ve never had the chance to work on before. Having him in the courtyard is a real honor and it’s also probably the most exciting special project we’ve worked on with the galleries.

I’m also very proud of our collaboration with Somerset House, the collaboration results in an exhibition at every London edition. This year it’s our third major exhibition with them, the exhibition is kept up for three months after the end of the fair. This year we’re really happy to be able to present Athi-Patra Ruga’s first major UK solo show. The exhibition is called Of Gods, Rainbows, and Emissions, and I think it’s going to be an amazing exhibit with an artist we have worked with from the beginning of 1-54. And it’s exciting to have this generation of artists presented and to be able to have a solo show presented in London. As much as we can say that his art is quite established, Athi has not previously had the opportunity and it’s amazing that we’re able to share this solo show in London and it’s going to be seen for three months.

What I’m also very proud about is that these exhibitions are extremely successful for Somerset House in terms of audience and visitors, it’s amazing to know there’s a larger audience that is still excited to see an African artist when were not there, so that is, for me, the most important part; we’re appealing to a larger, more popular audience over three months that is not specifically here for an art week or not specifically here for Africa. It is very exciting, as you say, to have attention of the mainstream on that level.

Obviously, we’re very proud of our 1-54 FORUM and Ekow Eshun’s participation as 1-54 FORUM curator—he has taken over from Koyo here in London for the first time—and there are some great contributors. This year 1-54 FORUM is being supported by Christie’s Education, which is partly why 1-54 FORUM is able to offer an extensive programme. We have Rashaad Newsome coming over from the U.S., we have Gaylene Gould, and obviously different curators, such as Marie-Ann Yemsi, coming over, and Renée Mussai. So, I think 1-54 FORUM is bringing some really strong names. We also have Shiraz Bayjoo who is doing our Lounge Commission, Larry Achiampong is creating an immersive exhibition, and also significant organizations such as the 198 contemporary arts who will be participating as a part of Special Projects. To be honest it’s a very strong year, I’m very excited that it is as compelling as last year, where we were celebrating our fifth anniversary, and I think there’s a bit of an excitement for everyone to be in London for some reason. I don’t know if it’s because this is where we started but people really enjoy Somerset House and our partnership with the space gets better and better every year.

MI: So yeah, I think there’s this ultimate big question and everyone keeps saying all the time—which also annoyed me—it is comparing Africa like some sort of short term trade and it keeps getting bigger and much more powerful, I have a few art galleries who have been telling me, you know, every time people come into our gallery the first thing they look for is a Black artist and we feel like we don’t have that to provide so it’s all the more for you. So, you know, is the African arts, as we can see very much in American arts, so just at the top of its level and it just keep pushing boundaries—is it something that is just trendy or is it something that is going over timeless, everlasting?

TEG: Well I feel at the moment it’s both, but it’s definitely timeless. In many ways because people are true to themselves. Art from Africa has always been a fascination of the West; it has inspired so many artists, designers, different aesthetic movements, so I don’t think it has ever been trans—I think the proliferation of conversations about what we were talking about before, about appropriation, politics, and authorship happening now, reflect that really well. It has been existing and thriving in very different forms even before we recognized it as a part of the global art market, so I believe it is timeless and I do believe it is something that we have helped give visibility to, and we are living in a time where we are able to give visibility from a digital prospective, from a media perspective. If you take each moment of time, at least in the last hundred years, there has always been huge amounts of inspiration coming from the continent, so I would definitely choose the word “timeless” rather than a “trend.”

MI: And I hope so. Thank you very much.