

Photography, painting and craft at the contemporary art fair 1/54 Marrakech

February 5, 2025 at 3:34 pm



1-54 Marrakech 2025. [Courtesy Mohamed Lakhdar]

•
by [Naima Morelli](#)

[naimamorelli](#)

*Small but well-curated, the 1/54 art fair in Marrakesh aims to be the gateway for African art, while fostering the local Moroccan art scene. **Naima Morelli** reports.*

After a while, art fairs around the world all start to look kind of similar. The same galleries participating, the same immaculate, white booths. Even the artworks would hold no surprise to the eye of the habitu . So why in the world are hordes of collectors still even bothering to get on planes to fly halfway across the world, only to repeat the same experience over and over again?

Go ask that Italian family dressed in sandals and flowy kaftans in the 10-degree Marrakesh winter weather. Automatically associating Morocco with Valtour’s postcard of the summer vacation is a trope, one that will get you frozen feet. With no complaining, lest you be accused of Orientalism.

“Are these gallerists?” I asked a colleague as we are strolled through the dreamy gardens of La Mamounia, where the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair is in full swing. “Oh gosh no, not at all! These are collectors.”

To the trained eye of my colleague, most of the guests of La Mamounia today are not just avid European collectors, but also Arab, Africans and most of all African Americans. All of them are not only interested in purchasing African contemporary art, which is today all the rage, but also telling their friends that they have purchased it in Marrakech.

Having a spectacular, legendary, location full of history also helps with narrative charm around the purchase, as well as with the Instagram stories.

Art Basel Paris 2024 owed much of its success to the Grand Palais location, and 1-54 – a small, well-curated fair – owes much to being held in the legendary hotel, where Churchill passed winters painting Moroccan landscapes, Yves Saint-Laurent spent a rainy summer before installing himself in the city, and actors of all stripes left their heartfelt love letters to the staff; today they are hanging in a dedicated room.





It's also true when thinking of the lure of art fairs that the art world – while being the most unnatural thing you can find – still has its natural cycles. It's a world with no Christmas, but with Art Basel Hong Kong. Repetition is necessary for human beings. And there is comfort and meaning-making in cyclicity.

For the art type, interest and excitement are indeed produced most times to find something unfamiliar in the familiar. There is still the thrill, but not one which is too extreme.

This is something that 1-54 art fair knew all too well when it opened in Marrakech. While 1-54 has established itself with editions in London and a Paris pop-up, its Marrakech iteration holds a unique charm, lent by the city itself and its unique vibe.

Morocco and the international scene

“This place is extraordinary; we love the ‘folie’ of Marrakech,” said Nathan Chicheportiche of Galerie 208, which after 20 years in Paris representing artists from Morocco and China, established a Marrakech space seven years ago. “The energy here is constantly morphing and shifting.”

At the fair, Galerie 208 presented the work of Mahi Binebine, a seminal artist born in 1959. Before becoming a painter, he led an adventurous life, working in a circus before transitioning into mathematics, sculpture and writing. Today, his work focuses on texture and material, creating stark contrasts.

REVIEW: [Call to amplify the Palestinian narrative](#)

“We organised a solo presentation with the artist to celebrate his work,” added Chicheportiche. “This is his last presentation in Marrakech before he opens his own foundation, which will span over 6,000 square metres.”

There is a lot of room to develop initiatives in Marrakech.

At the moment, the city has only one major contemporary art museum, the MACAAL, which is a private initiative. In line with the premises of 1-54, the museum is contributing to affirming Marrakech's role as a premier platform for contemporary African art, a gateway to Africa.

In the future, the aspirations of many individuals for the city is that it will be offering a meeting point for artists, collectors and institutions from across the continent and beyond. All of this – at least for contemporary art – seems for now to be dependent on private efforts, rather than government initiatives.

Gallerist Amina Tazi of Abla Ababou gallery, a space that has existed since 2017 with an eye for emerging talent, decided to participate in the fair as it represents Morocco in the biggest African framework. While in their gallery they also exhibit European artists, for the fair they chose to present Moroccan artists who have

strong ties to traditional materials and techniques, such as Nouredine Amir, who works with natural materials, natural fibres and wool.

The work of Fatiha Zemmouri is another example. The artist works with the earth, and particularly with that of the village she is from. Her canvases made of cracks are inspired by the village which was hit particularly badly by the recent earthquake.

Memories are another leitmotiv, as we can see in the works of Hakim Benchekroun, who takes pictures in abandoned places in Morocco, and superimposes a map on them.

Casablanca and Marrakech

While in the past the main arts hub in Morocco was Casablanca — where the famous eponymous painting school originated — today a lot of galleries are looking with more and more interest at the internationality of Marrakech.



1-54 Marrakech 2025. [Courtesy Mohamed Lakhdar]

“The scene between the two cities is very different,” says Canelle Hamon-Gillet, director of Galerie 38 from Casablanca, which recently expanded to Marrakech. She finds that the fair is a great opportunity to meet a more international public, compared with Casablanca that, while having a more established art scene, is also more local.

In the booth they are putting seminal artists from the Casablanca school side by side with younger artists. The aim is to bridge not only generations, but also emphasise the ties between African artists and local Moroccan talent, with a focus on female artists’ work in the renewal of abstract expressionism.

In the parallel space of Dada there is another gallery from Casablanca, CDA Gallery, which is also very active in Marrakech, promoting a cross-section of artists from both Morocco and the wider African continent.

“We wanted to represent the African diversity, and have traditional painting side by side with work of AI photography and works which include the Zellij, the heritage of which originated in Tetuan,” explained Brahim-Khalil Retnani, the director of CDA Gallery, who finds that there are a lot of cultural exchanges between Casablanca and Marrakech. “However there are different dynamics in terms of market, but mostly of vibe.”

Experimental photography

The mix of traditional mediums and craft alongside experimental photography seems to be a leitmotiv in the fair. A gallery which really focuses on the medium is MCC Gallery, based in Marrakesh since 2020, which specialises in the way photography intersects with contemporary art.



1-54 Marrakech 2025. [Courtesy Mohamed Lakhdar]

In the booth they are presenting three artists: Amine El Gotaibi, Houda Kabbaj and Malika Sqalli. El Gotaibi is doing experimental photography, creating minimalist works and using raw materials with wool and metal in the printing process, to create works which look like small universes.

Sqalli on the other hand, works with a mix of photography and fabrics, creating installations inspired by her experience as a parachutist. “She fabricates landscapes seen from above, using the very materials of her parachutes, to speak about the relationships in our ecosystem and the place that man occupies in this space,” the gallery’s curator Jihane Mansour pointed out.

Finally, the work of Houda Kabbaj is based on a residency that she did in the Moroccan desert for 20 days, collecting pieces of stones and plants, bringing them to her laboratory and using solarisation, a photographic process discovered by Lee Miller.

“I’m very much tied to the materiality of the photographic process,” said the artist. “I feel the photographic medium gives me a lot of possibilities, but it’s the limits that are actually creating the final artwork.”

It seems that while small in number, all the galleries present at the fair are committed to putting the Moroccan art scene on the map.

They want to see more and more art lovers flocking to the Kingdom. “I have high hopes that the scene is going to grow,” said Hamon-Gillet, director of Galerie 38, who is seeing Marrakech blooming with more and more cultural events.

These include a gallery weekend, and an art night which happened on the days of the fairs, in Gueliz, a neighbourhood in Marrakech which hosts a number of galleries, among which are Loft Gallery, which has two floors, and Le Comptoir des Mines, hosted in a modernist building growing on multiples floors.

“Our role as gallerists is precisely to create connections between Morocco and the international art scene,” said Abla Ababou’s Tazi. “To revive contemporary Moroccan art everywhere, elsewhere.”

While art fairs might look all alike, the people and the inspirations for their art are not. Long may that be the case.