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The Top 30 African Painters You Need To Know Today

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Introduction: Contemporary African painters

Today we take on the African continent, scoping its artistic landscape for the very best African painters you need to know. The contemporary era seems to run parallel with post-colonialism. The decolonization of the African nations in the post-war era resulted in a period of substantial change and upheaval.[1]

As a result, a highly interesting socio-political climate arose for contemporary African art to prosper. African artists have taken the responsibility to define, write or paint their own history and identity. An utmost intriguing symbiosis arises of African culture, the implementation of native media, symbols, and various issues encompassing economic disparity, shaky sovereignty, an uneasy transition to capitalism, a clash of tradition versus globalization, public health and racial conflicts, including the lingering effects of the collective trauma of the colonial era.

Since the turn of the new millennium, African contemporary art has found its way into the international mainstream of the art world. But what about contemporary painting (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-painting-a-complete-overview/>)? As a result, for this article we are pleased to present you an extensive and reasoned selection of mid-career and established artists and artworks.

The top 11 consists of the most important – highest ranked[2] – African painters today including a short biography. As we can only touch briefly on every painter, we have included hyperlinks to monographic publications for further reading. We complete the

top 30 with a visual anthology of 19 highly ranked mid-career African painters in alphabetical order, resulting in the most extensive online resource on the matter.

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So, without further ado, let's discover the best African painters today.

1. William Kentridge



William Kentridge, Triumphs and Laments Procession Silhouette 6, 2016. Indian ink on paper – 38 × 49 cm. Courtesy Lia Rumma, Napoli / Milan.

Arguably the most important African artist up to this day, William Kentridge is one of the most important contemporary painters (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/the-20-most-famous-painters-today-you-should-know/>), and opens our article in true style. Born in 1955 in Johannesburg, South Africa, the iconic artist continues to work and reside in Johannesburg.

One might argue Kentridge is rather a draughtsman or printmaker than a painter. However, due to the expressive character of his works and the ease with which he switches from surface to surface, it is clear to say the diction between painting versus drawing (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/explained-drawing-versus-painting/>) seems to disappear with the South-African master. With Kentridge, painting or drawing becomes a process of recording history. He reconfigures fragments of the past, resulting in a greater understanding of African history, but also of himself. [3]

For further reading on William Kentridge, we highly recommend *William Kentridge* (<https://amzn.to/3DxhThu>) by the *Phaidon Contemporary Art Series*.

2. Marlene Dumas



Marlene Dumas, *The Image as Burden*, 1993. Oil on canvas – 40 x 50 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

~~Our~~ second painter can also be found in South Africa. This time, we travel to Cape Town where none other than Marlene Dumas was born in 1953. Dumas currently works and lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, but remains strongly connected to her home in Cape Town.

Dumas is one of the undoubted most famous painters today (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/the-20-most-famous-painters-today-you-should-know/>). The female artist (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/top-17-greatest-female-artists-of-the-contemporary-era/>) depicts sensually painted figures, taking on often thought-provoking subjects. The starting point for almost any painting is found images or images of her direct environment. Doing so, she evokes first hand emotions with second hand images, examining what is universal, collective and what is personal at the same time.[4]

For further reading on Marlene Dumas, we strongly recommend *Marlene Dumas: The Image as Burden*. (<https://amzn.to/2WwysJy>)

3. Julie Mehretu



Julie Mehretu, Stadia I, 2004. Ink and acrylic on canvas – 271.8 × 355.6 cm. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) San Francisco.

Our top three is completed by Julie Mehretu. The Ethiopian-American artist was born in 1970 in Addis Ababa and currently resides and works in New York. Her monumental paintings can be interpreted as abstract landscapes (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/the-best-contemporary-landscape-painting-a-complete-survey/>), using various media on various surfaces inspired by architectural plans, photography, city maps, and more.

One encounters calligraphy, graffiti or street art in her two-dimensional works with an eclectic character. Mehretu aims to examine history in relation to our urban environment and its socio-political effects. The female artist (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/top-17-greatest-female-artists-of-the-contemporary-era/>) chooses markers, paint brushes, spray cans, pencils, or screen printing as her weapons of choice for these dazzling tableaux.[5]

For further reading on Julie Mehretu, we highly recommend the monograph Julie Mehretu (<https://amzn.to/3lRv85G>).

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4. Michael Armitage



Michael Armitage, Diamond Platinumz, 2016. Oil on Lubugo bark cloth – 170 × 300 cm. Collection Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Up next we have a true *virtuoso*, Michael Armitage. Born in 1984 in Nairobi, Kenya, Armitage is a contemporary painter (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-painting-a-complete-overview/>). living and working between London, the United Kingdom, and his hometown. He is best known for his figuratively (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-figurative-painting-a-complete-overview-and-list/>). rendered oil paintings, painted on a traditional bark cloth from Uganda called Lubugo.

Drawing inspiration from historical events and contemporary media, Michael Armitage combines narratives from both spheres. At the center of his artistic practice, one encounters the visual iconography of East Africa. Doing so, Armitage takes on the harsh

reality of East Africa, encompassing political issues, violence, inequality and extreme disparities in wealth.[6]

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For further reading on Michael Armitage, we highly recommend *Michael Armitage: Paradise Edict* (<https://amzn.to/3usxQU2>).

5. Wangechi Mutu



Wangechi Mutu, Cassandra, 2007. Ink, paint, mixed media, plant material and plastic pearls on Mylar – 135 × 221 cm. Courtesy Omer Tiroche Gallery.

We stay briefly in Nairobi, Kenya, where none other than Wangechi Mutu was born in 1972. The African contemporary painter (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-painting-a-complete-overview/>). currently lives and works in New York City, the United States of America. Mutu takes on various media, encompassing sculpture, collage, film, installation, and first and foremost painting.

The African female artist (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/top-17-greatest-female-artists-of-the-contemporary-era/>) explores violence and misrepresentations afflicting contemporary women. Her distorted feminine forms take on contemporary issues such as globalization, consumerism, inequality, and the continuous search for a new balance between tradition and contemporary life.[7]

For further reading on Wangechi Mutu, we highly recommend *Wangechi Mutu* (<https://amzn.to/3IYw0yi>) from the *Phaidon Contemporary Artists Series*.

6. Kendell Geers



*Kendell Geers, Daemon Est Deus Inversus 299, 2019. Acrylic on canvas – 115 × 95 cm.
Courtesy Goodman Gallery.*

We head south once more to Johannesburg where we encounter Kendell Geers. Born in 1968 in Johannesburg, South Africa, Kendell Geers is a Neo-conceptual artist living and working in Brussels, Belgium. His multidisciplinary practice is marked by the use of language, ready-mades, neon, glass, film, chevron tape or film, resulting in minimalist (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/minimal-art-the-25-most-important-minimal-artists/>). esthetics with a poetic character.

Painting is an important facet of his artistic practice, implementing the aforementioned elements on a two-dimensional surface. He questions value in art, often mocking the notion of originality. He takes on racial or religious stereotypes with sharp humor, questioning moral codes or political implications.[8]

7. Njideka Akunyili Crosby



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Nwantinti, 2012. Acrylic, pastel, charcoal, colored pencil and Xerox transfers on paper – 172.7 × 243.8 cm. Collection The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1983, Njideka Akunyili Crosby is a Nigerian-American painter living and working in Los Angeles. Crosby moved to the United States of America in 1999, however her cultural identity is strongly defined by her country of birth, resulting in a so-called hybrid identity which is a key aspect of her painterly oeuvre.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby draws inspiration from art historical, political and personal references. Her figuratively (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-figurative-painting-a-complete-overview-and-list/>) rendered paintings conjure the complexity of our contemporary existence and experience. Interiors, everyday life and social gatherings are key themes throughout her impressive body of works. However, the artist creates a series of visual interventions by implementing a vibrant effect of patterns and photo-collages derived from Nigerian culture, popular culture or the collective memory.[9]

For further reading on Njideka Akunyili Crosby, we highly recommend *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: The Beautiful Ones* (<https://amzn.to/3AU1jra>).

8. Wael Shawky



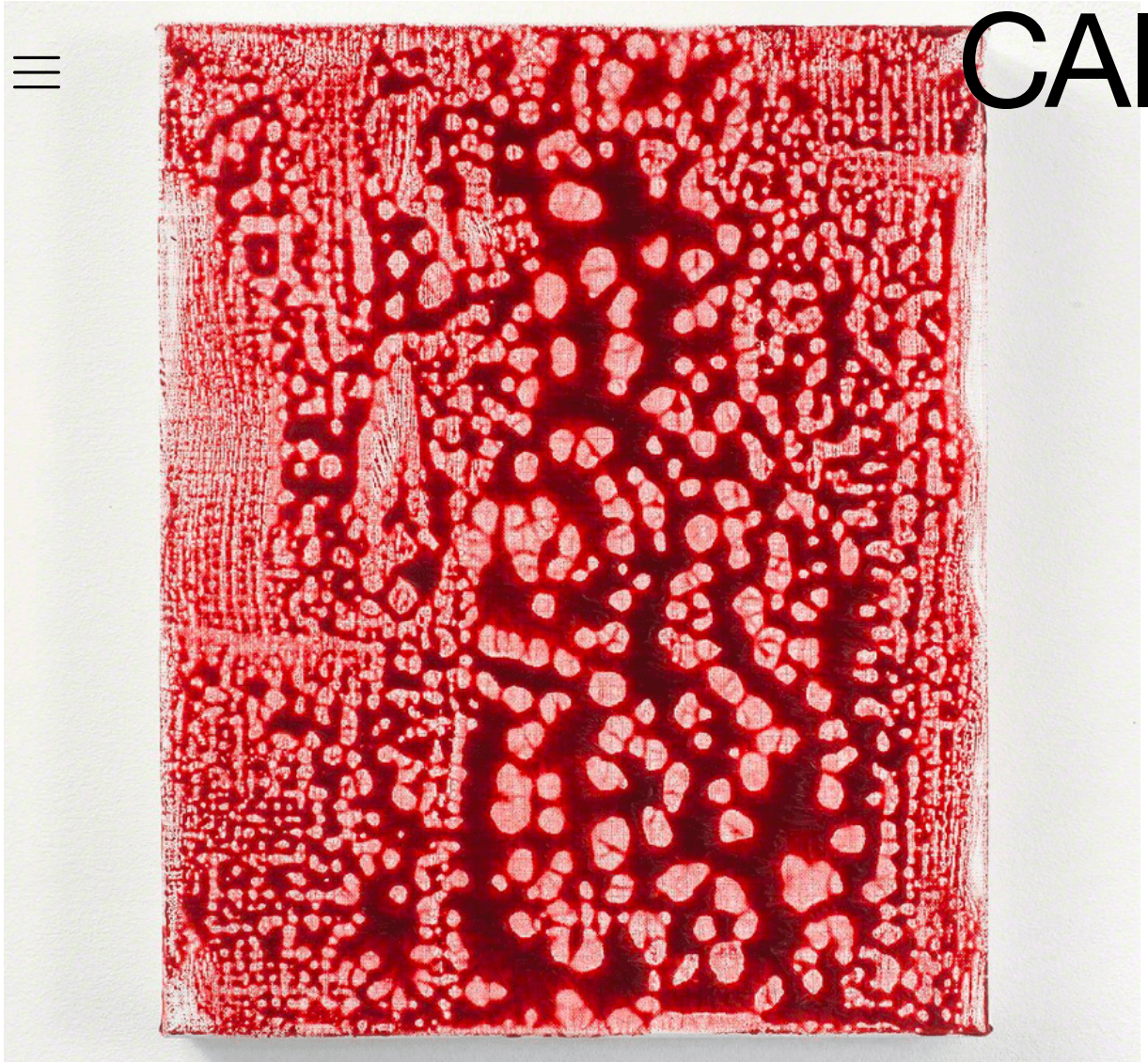
*Wael Shawky, Al Araba Al Madfuna, Paintings, 2019. Oil on canvas – 120 × 150 cm.
Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

We head north this time to Alexandria, Egypt, where Wael Shawky was born in 1971 and continues to work and live. Shawky is another Neo-conceptualist implementing contemporary painting (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/contemporary-painting-a-complete-overview/>) in his multimedia practice.

The starting point for his works is an extensive period of research, before tackling notions of national, religious or artistic identity. He frames contemporary culture using the prism of historical culture. His painterly oeuvre is marked by bright colours, magical scenes and a critical undercurrent.[10]

For further reading on Wael Shawky, we strongly recommend *Shawky: Crusades and Other Stories* (<https://amzn.to/34p6T90>).

9. Adel Abdessemed



Abel Abdessemed, Forbidden Colours, 2018. Mixed media on canvas – 41 × 33.2 × 3.5 cm. Courtesy Tang Contemporary.

North-Africa has even more Neo-conceptual painters to offer. Born in 1971 in Constantine, Algeria, Adel Abdessemed currently works and resides in Paris, France.

Abdessemed creates deliberate actions – or ‘acts’ – by everyday objects or materials which are documented by videos, photographs and more. Afterwards, the Algerian-French artist aims to create a remainder of this specific act, resulting in sculptures or paintings.[11]

For further reading on Abel Abdessemed, we highly recommend *Abdessemed. Works 1988–2015* (<https://amzn.to/3gfWjUD>).

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10. Basim Magdy



Basim Magdy, A Desperate Epiphany Led Us to the Elusive Phantom of Tangled Truths, 2020. Oil on canvas, framed – 167 × 244 cm. Courtesy KÖNIG Galerie.

We return to Egypt, to Assiut to be more precise, where Basim Magdy was born in 1977. The contemporary artist currently works between Basel, Switzerland, and Cairo, Egypt. The Egyptian artist works in painting, drawing, sculpture, video and installation, in which he seems to be in a quest for the absurd.

Basim Magdy creates dreamlike paintings combining familiar elements from this world, while juxtaposing them with absurd elements which are out of this world. Bright colours and an almost science-fiction feeling to it, his painterly oeuvre distinguishes itself strongly with its surreal and aggressive quality.[12]

For further reading on Basim Magdy, we highly recommend *Basim Magdy: Would a Firefly Fear the Fire that Burns in Its Heart?* (<https://amzn.to/35Lj291>).

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11. Barthélémy Toguo



Barthélémy Toguo, Déluge I, 2016. Ink on paper mounted on canvas – 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy Stevenson.

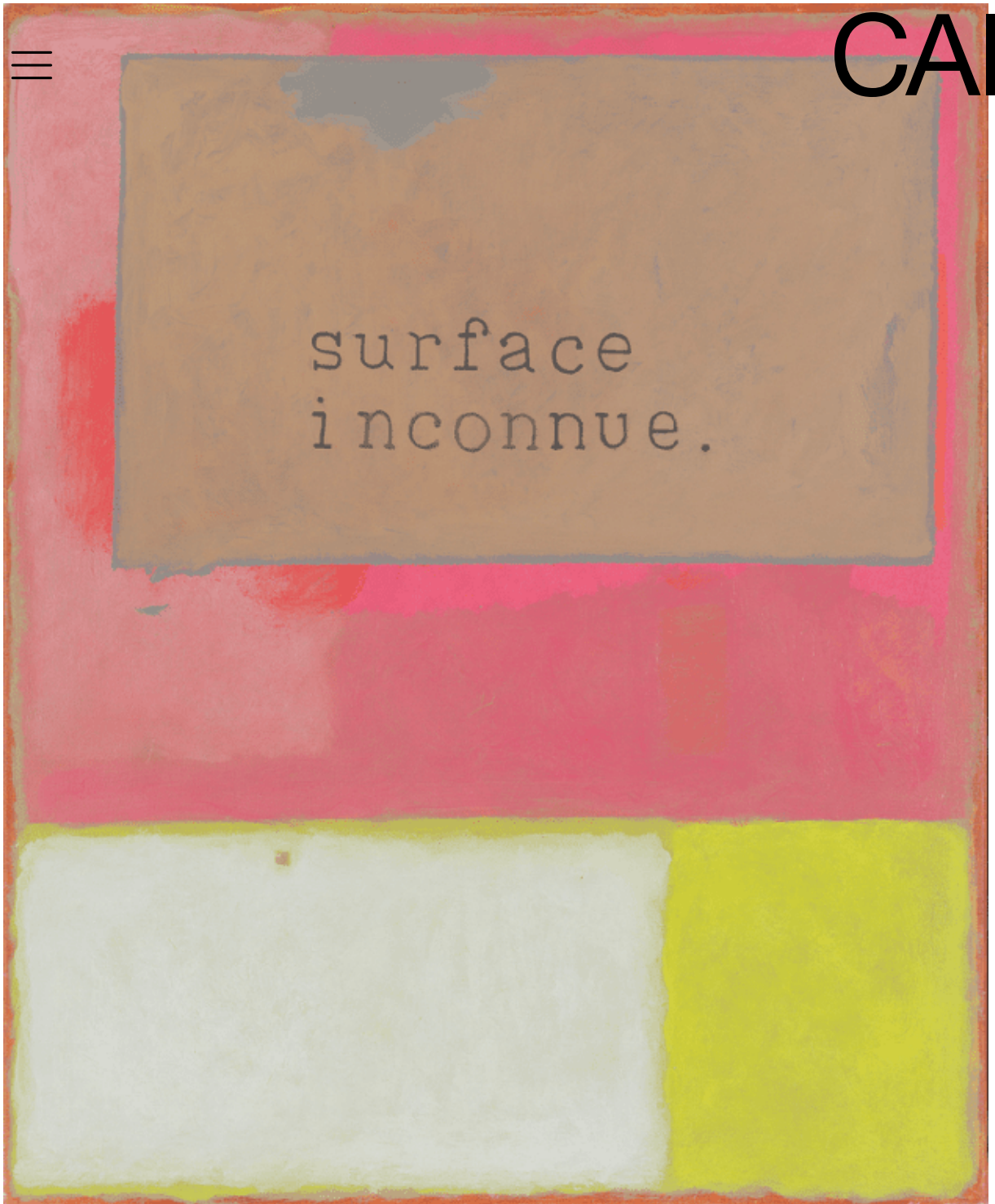
We conclude our top 11 with none other than Barthélémy Toguo. Born in 1967 in ~~Mbo~~Mayo, Cameroon, Toguo is a contemporary artist living and working between Bandjoun, Cameroon, and Paris, France.

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The Cameroonian artist is occupied with installation, performance, photography and intriguing watercolor paintings. He explores the flow of people which is regulated, in a similar way as we regulate merchandise or resources between the West and third world countries. His painterly practice acts as a diary of travel. Human-like shapes seem to transform into animals or abstract elements.[13]

For further reading on Barthélémy Toguo, we highly recommend *Barthélémy Toguo* (<https://amzn.to/3uf4fxw>).

12. Jean-Michel Albèrola



Jean-Michel Alberola, Unknown surface, 2020. Oil on canvas – 65 × 54 × 4 cm. Courtesy Galerie Templon.

13. Ghada Amer

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Ghada Amer, Self Portrait in Black and White, 2020. Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas – 128 × 122 cm. Courtesy KEWENIG.

14. Amoako Boafo



Amoaka Boafo, Cobalt Blue Earring, 2019. Oil on canvas – 210 × 170 cm. Courtesy Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.

15. Aboudia Abdoulaye Diarrassouba

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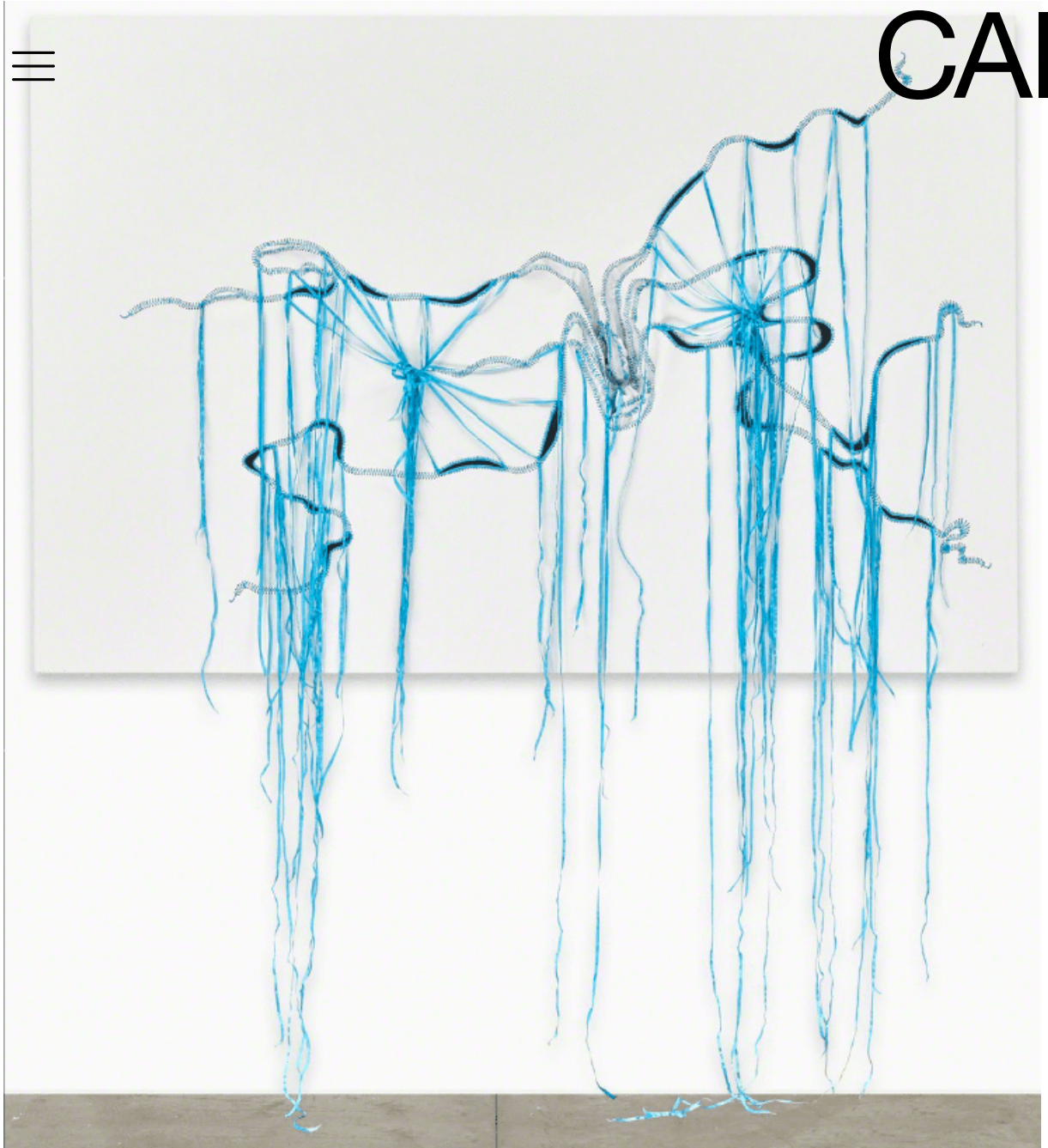
Aboudia, Untitled, 2013. Acrylic, pastel and found paper collage on canvas – 112.1 × 152.5 cm. Courtesy Phillips.

16. Ibrahim El-Salahi



Ibrahim El-Salahi, Flamenco Dancers, 2011. Oil on canvas – 210.3 × 252 × 5 cm. Courtesy Vigo Gallery.

17. Nicholas Hlobo



Nicholas Hlobo, Intlantsana, 2017. Ribbon on canvas – 120 × 180 cm. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin.

18. Kudzanai-Violet Hwami

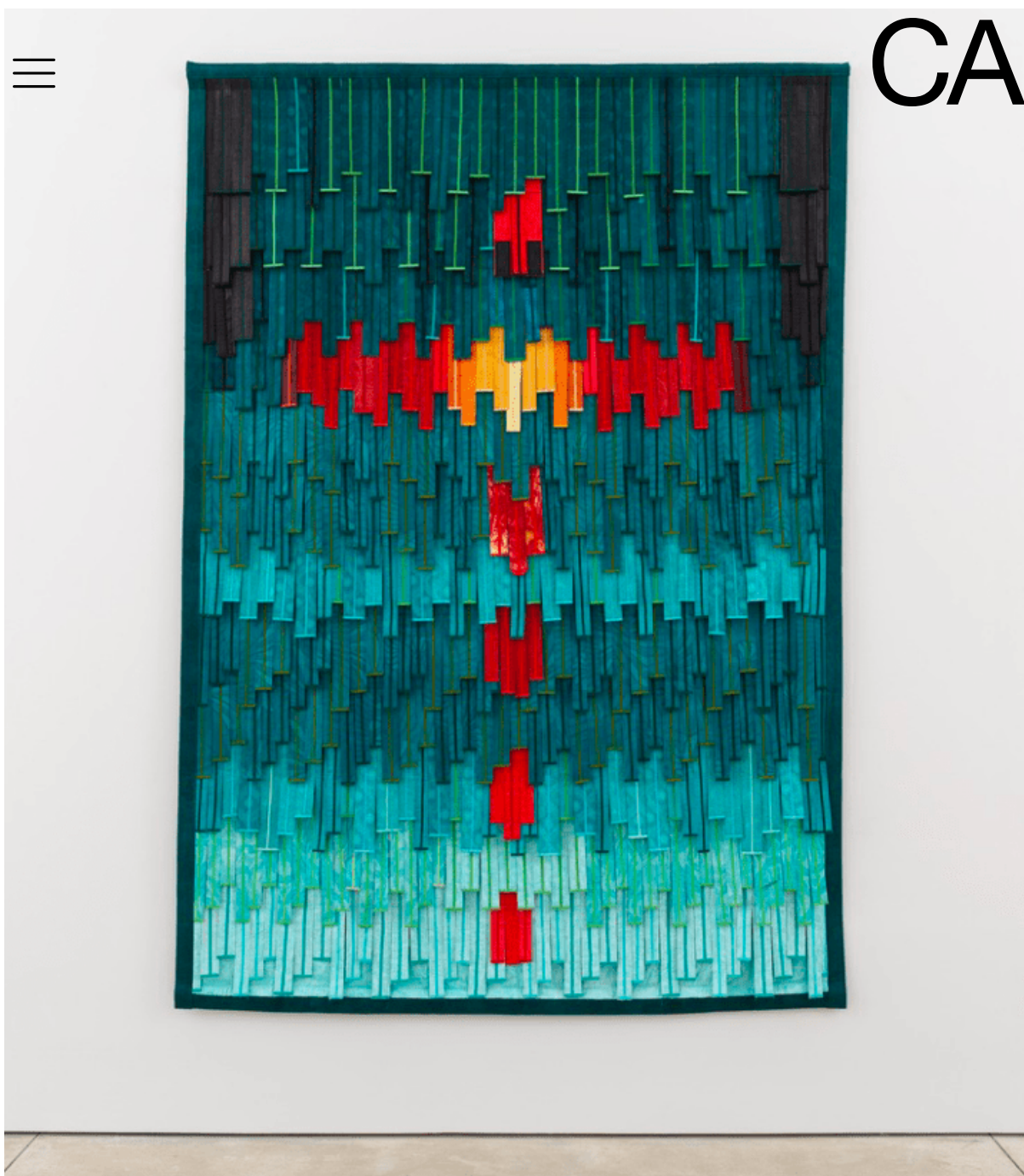


*Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, Sekuru Koni, 2017. Acrylic and oil on canvas – 60 × 60 × 3 cm.
Courtesy Carmichael Gallery.*

19. Abdoulaye Konaté

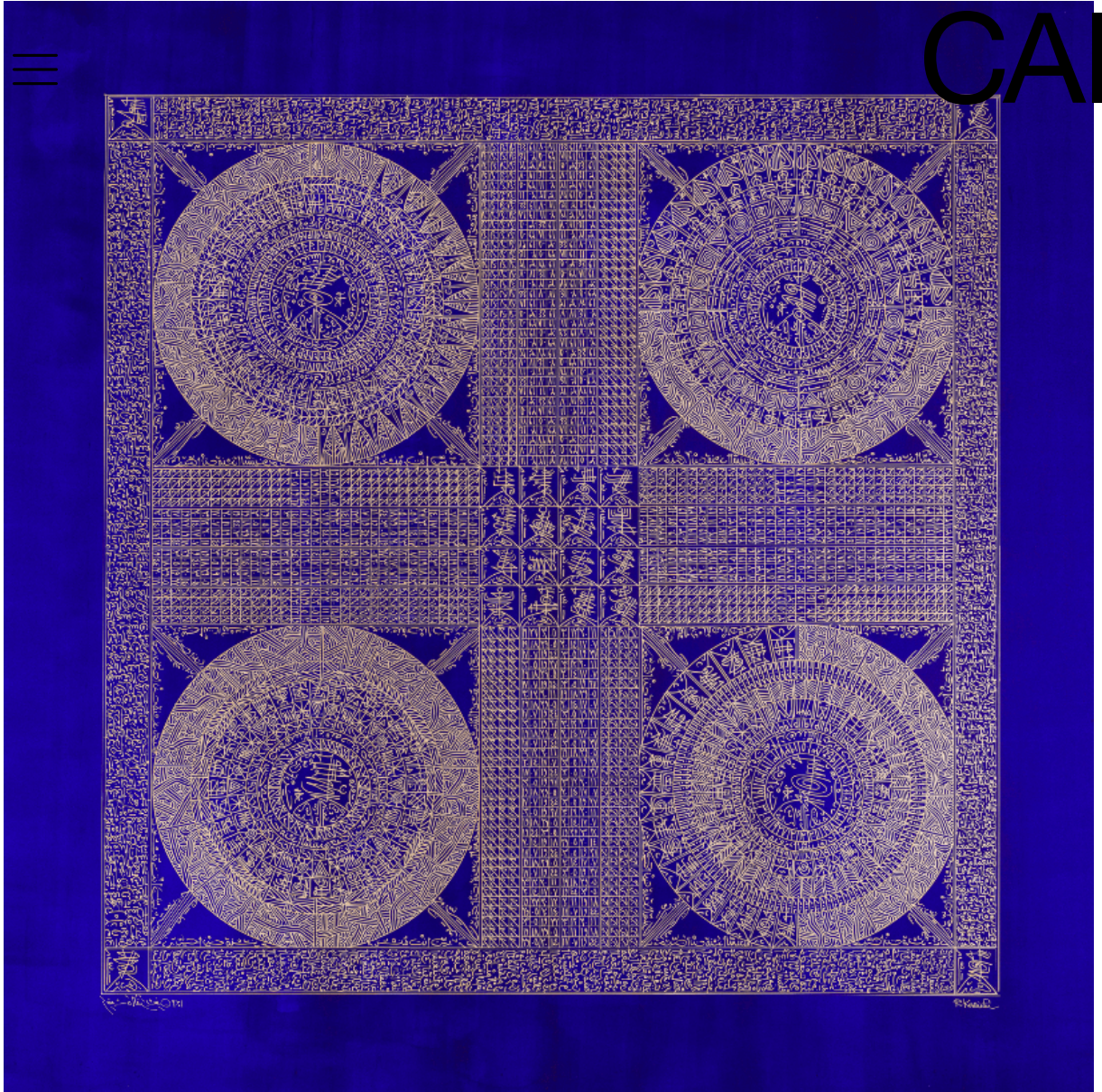


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Abdoulaye Konaté, La croix, 2019. Textile – 268 × 187 cm. Courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.

20. Rachid Koraïchi



*Rachid Koraïchi, La Montagne aux Étoiles III, 2021. Acrylic on canvas – 140 × 140 cm.
Courtesy Aicon Gallery.*

21. Moshekwa Langa



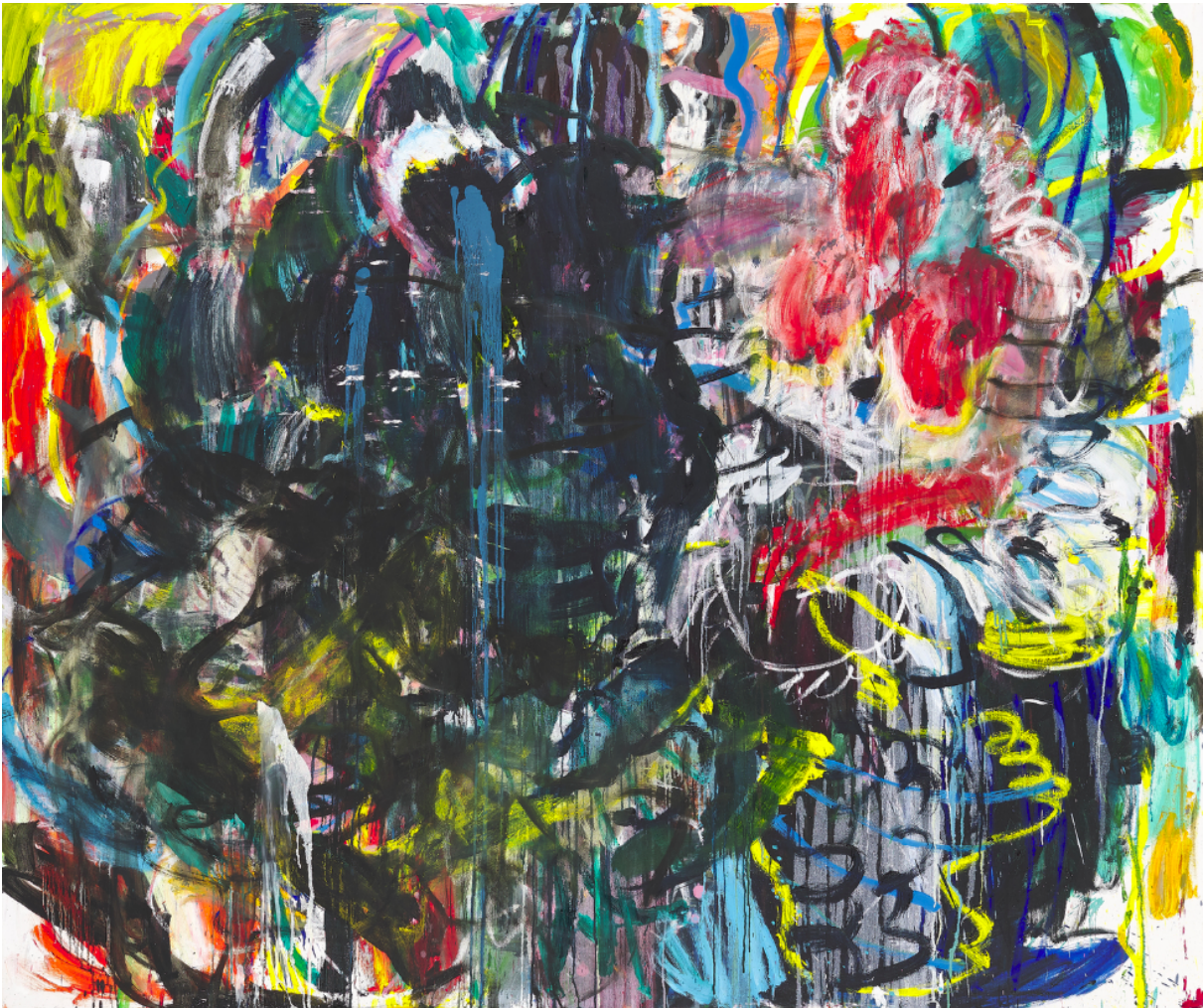
Moshekwa Langa, Untitled, 2005. Mixed media on paper – 140 × 100 cm. Courtesy

Stevenson.



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22. Misheck Masamvu



Misheck Masamvu, Natural Glow, 2019. Oil on canvas – 205 × 174 cm. Courtesy Goodman Gallery.

23. Mohammed Melehi



Mohammed Melehi, Untitled, 2014. Acrylic on canvas – 100 × 80 cm. Courtesy Loft Art Gallery.

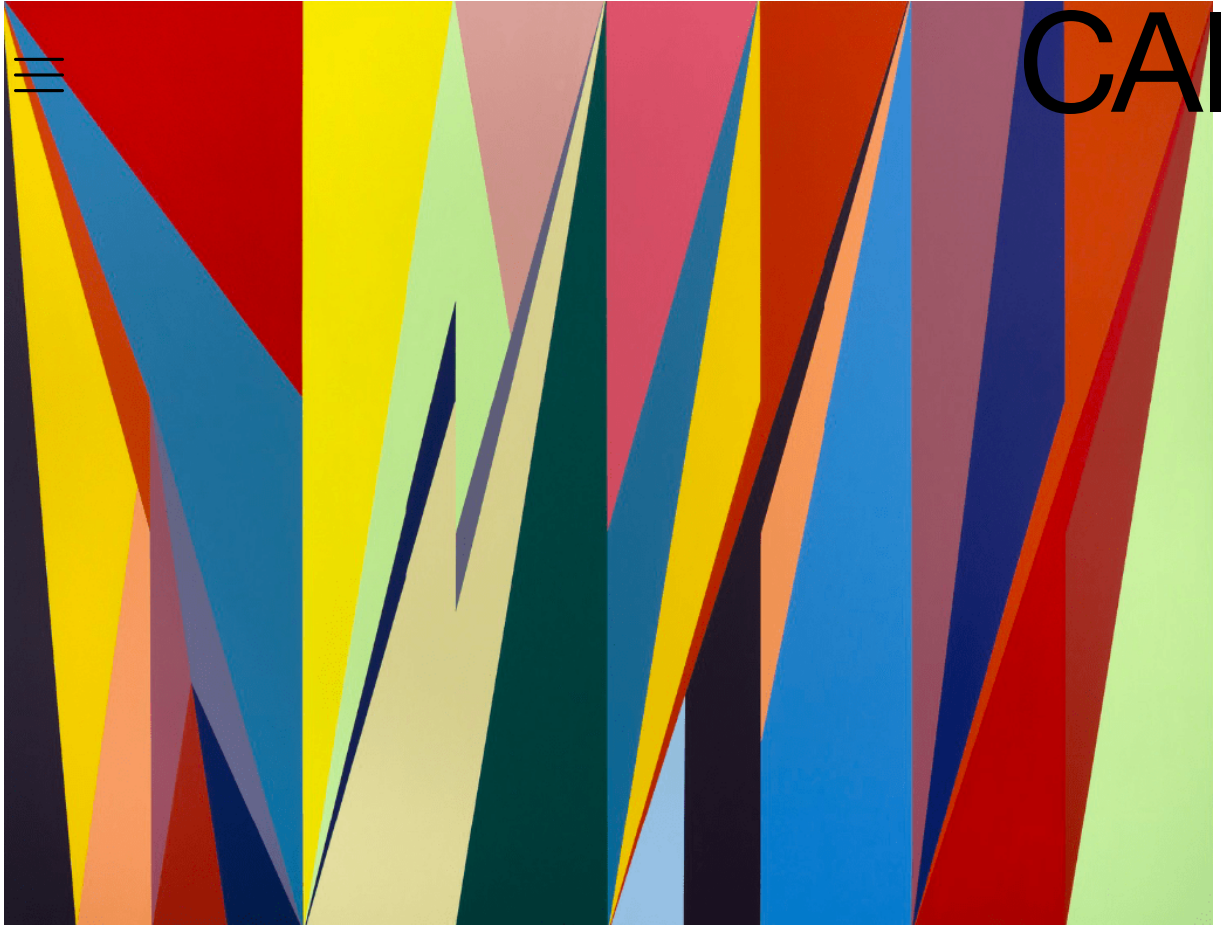
24. Simphiwe Ndzube

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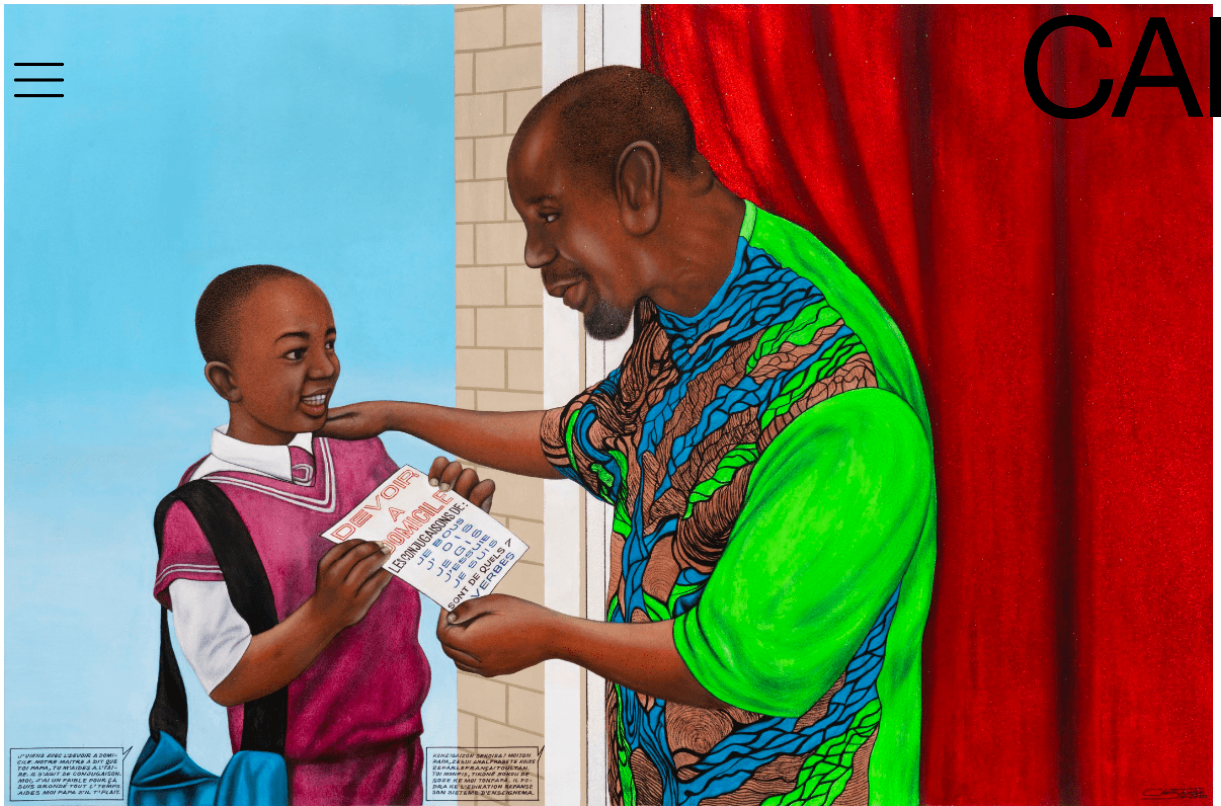
Simphiwe Ndzube, Madolo and the Aardwolf, 2020. Acrylic, collage, duct tape, and fabric on canvas – 149.9 × 149.9 × 6.4 cm. Courtesy Nicodim Gallery.

25. Odili Donald Odita



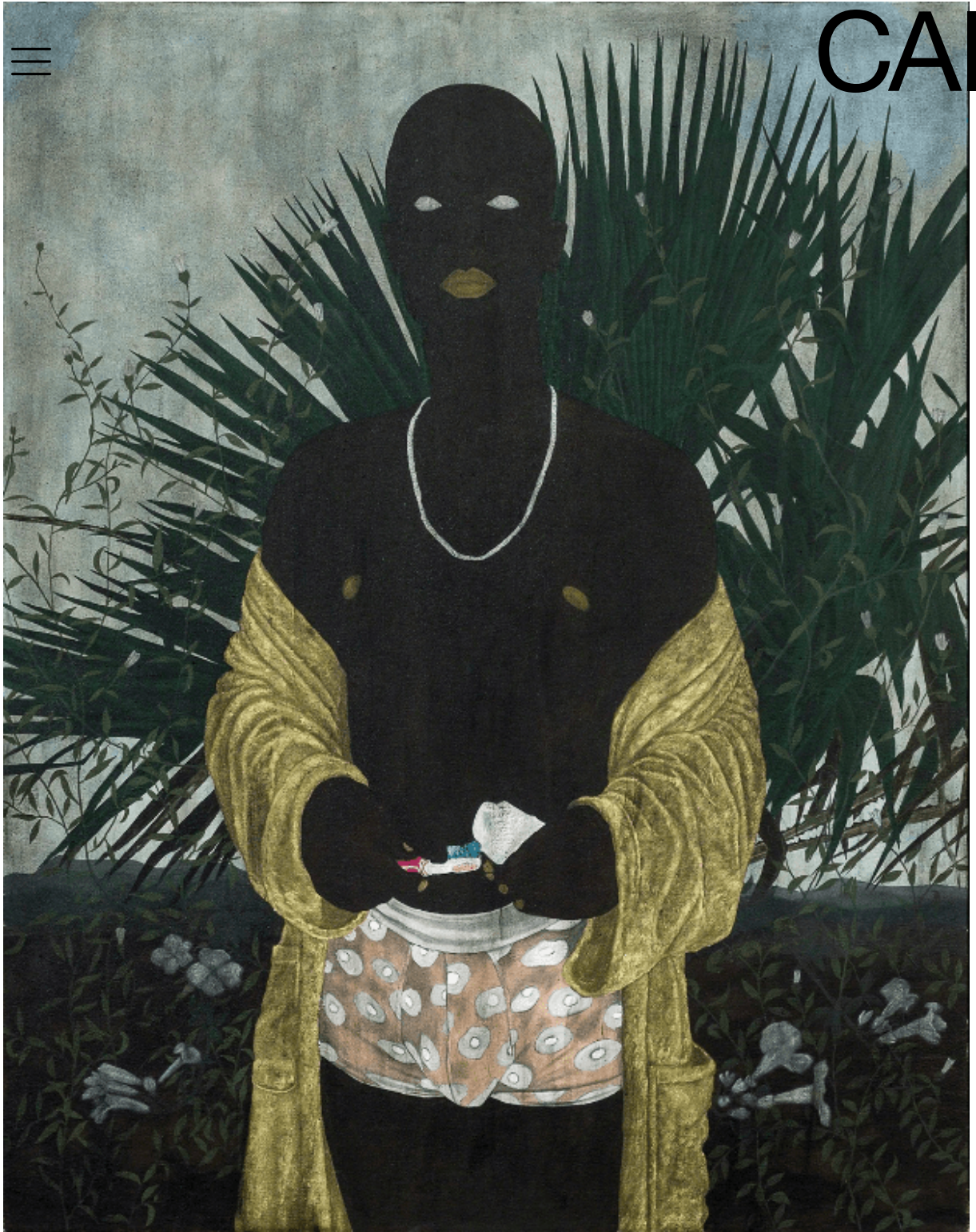
Odili Donald Odita, Heat Wave, 2018. Acrylic on canvas – 204 × 264 cm. Courtesy Stevenson.

26. Chéri Samba



Chéri Samba, Devoir à domicile, 2020. Acrylic on canvas – 135 x 200 cm. Courtesy Magnin-A.

27. Cinga Samson



Cinga Samson, Two piece 2, 2018. Oil on canvas – 118 × 93.5 cm. Courtesy Blank Projects.

28. Penny Siopsis

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Penny Siopsis, World Without You, 2016/2020. Glue, ink and oil on canvas – 39.5 × 50 cm. Courtesy Stevenson.

29. Beatrice Wanjiku



Beatrice Wanjiku, Realms of Existence II, 2020. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas – 160 × 133 cm. Courtesy Gallery Montague Contemporary.



Fahrelnissa Zeid, Untitled. Oil on canvas – 54.5 × 45 cm. Courtesy Dirimart.



Notes:

- [1] Artsy, *Contemporary African Art* at <https://www.artsy.net/gene/contemporary-african-art> (<https://www.artsy.net/gene/contemporary-african-art>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [2] Artfacts at <https://artfacts.net> (<https://artfacts.net>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [3] Julien Delagrang, *The Most Famous Painters Today* (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/the-20-most-famous-painters-today-you-should-know/>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [4] Ibidem note 3.
- [5] Julien Delagrang, *17(+6) Female Artists Who Defined the Contemporary Era* (<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/top-17-greatest-female-artists-of-the-contemporary-era/>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [6] White Cube, *Michael Armitage* at https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/michael_armitage (https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/michael_armitage) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [7] Artsy, *Wangechi Mutu* at <https://www.artsy.net/artist/wangechi-mutu> (<https://www.artsy.net/artist/wangechi-mutu>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [8] Stephen Friedman Gallery, *Kendell Geers* at <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/artists/38-kendell-geers/> (<https://www.stephenfriedman.com/artists/38-kendell-geers/>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [9] Victoria Miro, *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* at <https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/185-njideka-akunyili-crosby/> (<https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/185-njideka-akunyili-crosby/>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [10] Lisson Gallery, *Wael Shawky* at <https://www.lissongallery.com/artists/wael-shawky> (<https://www.lissongallery.com/artists/wael-shawky>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [11] Artsy, *Abel Abdessemed* at <https://www.artsy.net/artist/adel-abdessemed/> (<https://www.artsy.net/artist/adel-abdessemed/>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [12] Gypsum Gallery, *Basim Magdy* at <http://gypsumgallery.com/bio-basim-magdy> (<http://gypsumgallery.com/bio-basim-magdy>) consulted 2/02/2022.
- [13] Artsy, *Barthélemy Toguo* at <https://www.artsy.net/artist/barthelemy-toguo/> (<https://www.artsy.net/artist/barthelemy-toguo/>) consulted 2/02/2022.



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