

Stephen Friedman Gallery

CNN Style

Why being an African artist is so important today

Ekow Eshun

28 August 2019

Why being an African artist is so important today



Ekow Eshun is a British writer, broadcaster, and curator. All opinions expressed in this article belong to the author.

African art is having a vogue moment. People are very interested in it, but there's still a sense of Africa and African art as something of an exotic "other" that sits on the periphery and not really at the center of dialogues and debate. However, it's more important than ever to assert the position of Africa as a place that has something significant to say.

There's a historical tendency to imagine Africa on the edge of history, cultural conversation, and global affairs. But across the continent, there's a powerful interchange of ideas -- about who we are and how we live -- that hasn't been truly globally recognized.

That's changing. This year, Ghana made its debut at the [Venice Biennale](#), the art world's most important event, with an all-star pick of artists. Moments like this shift the narrative, from a position of exceptional otherness to a place where African artists are fully engaged in the dialogue of contemporary art.



John Akomfrah's work at the Ghana Pavilion, curated by Nana Oforiatta Ayim and designed by David Adjaye, at the 58th Venice Biennale. Credit: Courtesy David Levene

The work of artists like British-Nigerian installation artist [Yinka Shonibare](#) and Accra-born filmmaker John Akomfrah show a fascination with narratives of history, memory, place, identity, and race.

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They're interested in telling and retelling the story of the role of Africa and African people on the international stage. At the heart of their search is a desire to present Africa in a fresh way, breaking down prevalent stories and fictions to tell new stories -- of possibility and openness about Africa.

It's not the role of artists -- whether from music, design, architecture, or fashion -- to portray an authentic version of Africa. Their role is to expand our expectations and our ideas of what Africa can be.

Africa is a place of multiplicity. You can stand on a street corner in any given city -- in Dakar, Lagos, or Accra, for example -- and you see different influences, cultures, colors and patterns that come from all over the world. That's what you hear in the music. That's what you see in the films. That's what you see referenced in art as well. Africa isn't a separate part of the world. Some people argue we should not look at African artists as artists from Africa, that we should think about them as artists of the world. Personally, I don't buy that.



"Scramble for Africa" by Yinka Shonibare, (2003) Credit: Courtesy Yinka Shonibare/Stephen White/Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

I think the mistake we make is to assume that if you're an artist from Africa, your job is to faithfully represent Africa to the exclusion of anything else.

Your job, as it were, is to be an African artist, which is just to say that you have the space, the liberty, the luxury, the possibility to draw from Africa and to make of that lineage and that heritage what you will, and to present Africa not as a fixed proposition, but as a state of possibility.