

ARTISTRY IN AN OASIS

International art fairs, world-class museums and a thriving vibrant design district – Marrakech has evolved into a global arts mecca. By Vivia Beaumanis

Meryanne Loum-Martin is greeting her guests, here at her candlelit compound at La Palmeraie in Marrakech.

Among those in attendance are His Excellency Dwight L. Bush Sr., the U.S. ambassador to Morocco under President Barack Obama, and Bozoma “Boz” A. Saint John, Uber’s chief brand officer. Loum-Martin ushers them into her vast lush gardens, designed by her ethnobotanist husband, Gary Martin. On the agenda — free-flowing cocktails (no wine, hard liquor only), a sit-down dinner for 180 and a fabulous Congolese band. Welcome to the arts scene in Marrakech.

I’m in town for the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair — three days of gallery exhibits, forum talks and countless parties — and first stop is at Loum-Martin’s posh residence on the desert edge of the town. A design doyenne of French-Senegalese descent who arrived in Marrakech three decades ago, Loum-Martin was among the first in the city to revamp the historic riads (traditional luxurious

houses with interior gardens or courtyards) into elegant holiday villas. Frequently splashed across the pages of décor magazines, photos of her elegant bohemian interiors caught the eye of chic voyagers like David Bowie and fashion designers Giorgio Armani and Yves Saint Laurent, who famously had made this Moroccan wonderland his second home. No longer the best-kept secret of the very well-travelled, Marrakech quickly became known as a destination and hub with the perfect blend of exoticism, hedonism, beauty and artistry.

“The arts define us, and Moroccans needed a platform for creative expression,” says Vanessa Branson — sister of business magnate and philanthropist Richard — who’s co-hosting the evening with Loum-Martin. Branson is the founder of the non-profit organization Marrakech Biennale Association, which hosts the eponymously named cultural festival showcasing the best of local and international artists. Her involvement attracts a glittering roster of A-list artists as well as collectors. >

Jardin Rouge is a 14,000 square foot artist’s in-residence on the edge of Marrakech where contemporary and street artists are afforded an unique environment to create their art. Photo: Fanny Lopez/Montresso Art Foundation





“Having worked in the arts for decades, I understood the role they play as a bridge between cultures,” she explains. “It seemed important to make it into a world-class event.” When Branson’s Marrakech Biennale was on hiatus for 2018 due to funding snafus, 1:54 successfully stepped into the breach and is now slated as an annual event. With the Biennale returning for 2020, the two events — 1:54 and Marrakech Biennale — will overlap every other year, making February in Morocco an exciting month on the international art, and social, calendar.

“It’s been an important goal to host 1:54 on the African continent. We couldn’t think of a better place than Morocco, which has one of the most dynamic art scenes,” notes Touria El Glaoui, 1:54’s founding director, who had presented earlier editions of the art fair in London and New York.

“Marrakech has an enduring creativity that never ceases to inspire,” adds Loum-Martin. “And, from Fondation Louis Vuitton [and] Fondation Cartier to private galleries and art fairs, the genius of black artists is now being acclaimed everywhere. Being of mixed race, I’m very interested in developing the black audience to attend events celebrating black artists and [in] making 1:54 into a real rendezvous for people interested in African culture and art.”

Toby Clarke couldn’t agree more. “Africa is a hotbed of creativity and innovation. Like all regions, there’s great variance in quality, but the artists we represent are seeing huge interest and sales. The market is very strong,” says Clarke, director of London-based Vigo Gallery, which is home to an impressive roster of international artists that includes major African names. “We have a particular interest in the African diaspora and represent artists at the top end of this market who are important in their own right. [British-Trinidadian] Zak Ové is doing incredibly well. We’ve sold his work to major collectors and institutions, like the British Museum and Newark [Museum] and have waiting lists for his doily works, which are more accessible than his large-scale installations.”

Clarke, who’s in town too for 1:54, also espouses the brilliance of Oxford-based Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi. “Top-level curators feel he needs to be represented in important museum collections to give a fuller picture. Much of what the great 20th-century European and American artists achieved has debts to African art and, at 85, El-Salahi is now seen as one of the most important living African artists, the godfather of African and Arabic modernism. There’s enormous demand for his work; about a third of it, if not more, ends up in museums. In the last few years, the MoMA, Tate Modern, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Sharjah Art Foundation, the Guggenheim Doha, Newark Museum and the British Museum — [all] have acquired his work.”



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Also on the gallery tour is Robert Devereux, a founding shareholder of the Virgin Group. He is seen perusing the paintings of Dominique Zinkpè, who was born in Cotonou, Benin, a West African nation, and whose work he has acquired. A serious collector, Devereux was known to have sold all his British pieces to invest in African contemporary art. Nurturing local contemporary-art organizations through his charity, The African Arts Trust, Devereux now counts among his treasures the works by Turner Prize nominees, such as London-based painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, who is of Ghanaian descent. Around the corner, the space for the (S)ITOR gallery of Paris-based collector Sitor Senghor is lined with collage-like paintings by New York resident Ouattara Watts, whose talent caught the eye of Basquiat in the ‘80s. Watts, >

ABOVE: French-born painter and one of Jardin Rouge’s artist-in-residence, Kouka, at work. Photo: Alizée Thily/Montresso Art Foundation OPPOSITE: There’s something colourful around every corner at the Musée Yves Saint Laurent Marrakech. Photo: Samia Akhtar

TOP: The Montresso Foundation contemporary art space highlights street artists like FenX, JonOne and Cédrix Crespel. BELOW: French artist David Mesguich's *Fallen Selfie* sculpture. Photos: Courtesy of Montresso Art Foundation

who was born in Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, went on to exhibit everywhere, from the Whitney to the Smithsonian, landing solo shows at Gagosian Gallery in New York City.

African art is not the only genre celebrated in Marrakech, however. In the French colonial neighbourhood of Gueliz, a profusion of galleries owned by expats — David Bloch, 127, Noir sur Blanc, Matisse, Re, Tindouf — have cropped up, all within walking distance of one another. On a grander scale, the city's glossiest new addition — Musée Yves Saint Laurent Marrakech — opened in October 2017 with a permanent retrospective of the designer's signature work alongside a sun-splashed café, a 130-seat auditorium, gallery and event space and a 5,000-volume research library dedicated to fashion, botany and Berber design.

On the fringes of Marrakech, 45 minutes away, is where the impressive Montresso Art Foundation is located, spread across a 32-acre olive grove. It was launched in 2005 and Jean-Louis Haguenauer, a French businessman-turned-collector, designed the entire place himself. Contemporary sculptures are scattered about, while peacocks and stallions roam the grounds — an immense space so gorgeously laid out that it was featured in *Architectural Digest*. Home to a monolithic 14,000-square-foot gallery space and Jardin Rouge, Montresso offers a residency program for both established and emerging modern artists who are housed, fed and provided with materials, assistants and studios, as well as connections with international curators and collectors. In exchange, the artists leave behind public works that speak to contemporary art practice while honouring their traditional surroundings.

At the much-lauded VOICE Gallery, director Rocco Orlacchio is of the viewpoint that Morocco is a bridge between the African and European cultures. For his gallery, he'd selected a warehouse-like space in Sidi Ghanem, formerly a stark industrial zone outside of the city and now a thriving vibrant design district and artists' enclave with stylish shops and lively bistros, as well as innovative art spaces. "I've always wanted a gallery. I thought Marrakech was a great place to create one, that everything was possible here," says Orlacchio, who moved here from Naples in 2011. "A gallery could help young local artists, and inviting artists from abroad [will] create new exchanges. Foreign





Bold paintings of women from French contemporary artist Fenx, were a part of his *A en rougir !* collection, created during his time in residence at Jardin Rouge in 2014. Photo: Adnane Zemmama/Montresso Art Foundation

artists — like [Algerian-born, Cameroon-raised] Eric van Hove, [Parisian-born] Sibylle Baltzer and [Tokyo-born] Megumi Matsubara — have been living here for years. Now, with Moroccan artists and a new generation of art lovers, it's the opposite of the diaspora. Lots of them are coming back. They want to live here."

Casablanca-born Laila Hida is among the growing phalanx of young Moroccans who've returned from abroad, adding another layer of inspiration and initiative to the lively local arts scene. After a 10-year stint in Paris as a producer for fashion shoots, Hida moved back home in 2011 and opened Le 18 in the medina. Offering four programs annually — each comprised of an exhibition and a symposium and spanning a month or two — Hida provides a venue for young artists to share their work

and connect with established artists, curators, critics and collectors.

"Le 18 is not only for artists; it's [also] a place where people share, question and inform themselves," she says. "It's as vibrant as Marrakech, and its collaborators reflect that." She then references a slew of like-minded projects that have cropped up across the medina — Swiss-Moroccan Ke'ch Collective (kech-collective.com), which supports cross-cultural dialogue via contemporary art and design, and Queens Collective (queenscollective.org), which offers live-in community art space with an LGBT slant.

These art spaces are important, Hida points out. "People want to experience other aspects of the city. They no longer come to Marrakech just for the exoticism, but for the sheer bounty of what we have to offer." □

THE DETAILS

HOW TO GET THERE

Connect to Africa and take advantage of TAP Air Portugal's newly-launched "Portugal Stopover" program. Spend up to five nights in Lisbon, and use the handy mobile app loaded with city tips. flytrap.com

WHERE TO STAY

Royal Mansour is luxury at its finest. A 12-acre oasis, the hotel is home to a magnificent spa, three Michelin-starred chef Yannick Alléno, and 53 private riads drenched in exquisite Moroccan art. royalmansour.com

WHERE TO EAT

Book a late dinner at Bo-Zin. While the city's favourite boite is more about mood than the food, reserve a 9:30pm table — ask for one off the main bar — for the perfect perch for après supper good times. bo-zin.com