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1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Somerset House, London

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'Untitled' (2015) by Aboudia at Jack Bell Gallery

The name of this fair, currently at Somerset House in London, refers to the 54 countries that make up the single entity of Africa. And in this small gathering of just 37 galleries, there's a sense of that rich diversity.

African art is hot: Thursday's sale at Bonhams saw a clutch of world records for African works. At 1:54, too, the sophistication level is high: the slick, the lyrical, the wry and the fiercely political combine with a knowingness about the dangers of cliché, or tribal-inspired kitsch. Only a few glossy sentimentalised works let the side down.

There are as many French voices as English ones to be heard at 1:54, as galleries from France make much of the running. Highlights include Paris's [S]itor gallery, for instance, which hosts Ndary Lô, a Senegalese sculptor based in Dakar, whose iron

figures evoke Giacometti but have a distinctive emotional power of their own. And at Magnin-A, a dreamily mythological sequin tapestry by William Adjété Wilson, of half-Togolese parentage, depicts twinned masks with slender curling fishtails.

From the abstract to the political: at Maïa Muller, another Parisian gallery, Sudanese artist Hassan Musa uses high-shine fabric to depict a laughing Barack Obama beneath the banner “I Have a Drone”.

Everywhere these artists are playing with and commenting on the objects and materials that make up the quotidian lives of Africans: beer-bottle tops, rusty nails, discarded plastic, fabric scraps, even bullets.

Photography manipulated, over-painted, reworked, seems to be a dominant genre, showing perhaps the tension between the real-life and the fantastical, the material and the spiritual, in these worlds. A chilling extension of that collision comes with the fantasy child-sized coffins in the shape of a Pepsi bottle or a phone made by Paa Joe and Jacob Tetteh-Ashong of Ghana, at Nigerian gallery Art Twenty One.

To October 18, 1.54.com

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