
AFTER THE FIRE

Memories, bodies and conflicts
in contemporary African art

GROUP EXHIBITION · ELEVEN AFRICAN AND DIASPORIC ARTISTS

ARTISTS	Kwame Akoto "Almighty God" (Ghana); Owusu Ankomah (Ghana); Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (Ivory Coast); Gerald Chukwuma (Nigeria); Godfried Donkor (Ghana); Kayode Ejioye (Nigeria); John Hopex (Nigeria); Alex Peter Idoko (Nigeria); Lovemore Kambudzi (Zimbabwe); Gonçalo Mabunda (Mozambique); Mário Macilau (Mozambique)
VENUE	Black Liquid Art Gallery Via Piemonte 69 — 00187 Rome, Italy
CURATOR & TEXT	Antonella Pisilli
OPENING	Friday 24 April 2026, 6 pm
ON VIEW	24 April – 14 June 2026 — Tuesday to Saturday, 12 pm – 7 pm
PATRONAGE	Embassy of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Embassy of the Republic of Ghana Embassy of the Republic of Mozambique Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe
PART OF	<i>Raw for Peace</i> — art as a tool for reflecting on conflict and peace
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AFTER THE FIRE

Memories, bodies and conflicts in contemporary African art

BY ANTONELLA PISILLI

Black Liquid Art Gallery presents *After the Fire. Memories, Bodies and Conflicts in Contemporary African Art*, a group exhibition featuring eleven African and diasporic artists, on view from 24 April to 14 June 2026 at Via Piemonte 69, Rome. The exhibition is part of *Raw for Peace*, an event dedicated to art as a tool for reflecting on conflict and peace.

There is a moment, in the history of an era, when the word peace ceases to have meaning: not because the world has forgotten it, but because war has stopped being an event and has become a condition. We are in that moment. In Europe, in the Middle East, in Asia, conflicts are multiplying with the speed of those who have nothing left to lose; yet it is the African continent that bears the oldest and darkest weight of this condition — the one the Western world has long ceased to look at, because it no longer surprises it.

Today, in Africa, there is no single front: war is diffuse, fragmented, permanent. It is not fought along a single line, but everywhere and at all times — in the forests of the Congo, in the cities of Sudan, in the outskirts of the Sahel, in the plains of Mozambique. A conflict without a name, without a beginning date and without the promise of an end, consuming lives, communities and cultures with the same relentless constancy with which fire consumes whatever it encounters.

Contemporary African art emerges within this condition, not at its margins. The artists who inhabit it do not observe it from the outside: they carry it within their bodies, their memory, and in the forms they choose to express themselves. And form — this is what art history teaches us, from Goya to Picasso, from Jenny Holzer to Ai Weiwei — is not a neutral container that holds content: it is itself thought, judgment, a position. When Kambudzi overlays the hallucinatory colours of his expressionism onto the violence of apartheid, when Mabunda transforms weapons into thrones, when Kwame Akoto paints war as a cosmic battle between good and evil, they are not illustrating history: they are interrogating it, judging it, rejecting it.

After the Fire brings together eleven African and diasporic artists for whom conflict is not a theme, but the very terrain of existence and research. The title does not promise redemption: the fire has already passed, or perhaps it has never ceased. What remains — the ashes, the scars, the marks inscribed in matter and memory — is the true subject of this exhibition. What art can do is not extinguish the fire: it

is to give it form, to restore to it the human dimension that politics and history systematically strip away, to open a space in which that dimension can be recognised, processed and transmitted.

01

LOVEMORE
KAMBUDZI
ZIMBABWE

Lovemore Kambudzi touches the rawest and most direct point of this investigation. His large painting *Apartheid* — soldiers in camouflage beating civilians in a peripheral village, among shacks and shop signs that could belong to yesterday as much as today — offers the viewer no safe distance: the yellow-green, almost hallucinatory colours, the expressionist density of the figures, the tangle of bodies and batons construct a visual field from which one cannot emerge unscathed.

Kambudzi was born in Zimbabwe but trained and lived for a long time in South Africa, and carries within his work the living memory of a system of institutionalised racial segregation that marked Southern Africa for decades: apartheid not as a closed historical fact, but as a trauma that continues to structure the present, to organise bodies in space, to determine who can be where and with what dignity.

02

MÁRIO
MACILAU
MOZAMBIQUE

Beside him, Mário Macilau conveys the same truth through the opposite medium: a black-and-white photograph of a child with a Kalashnikov pointed at his head, in Mozambique during the civil war, is an image that neither accuses nor aesthetifies, that does not seek effect nor construct a rhetoric of compassion. Macilau photographs as one bears witness: with the awareness that the wound is already there, that it is enough to look at it.

03

GONÇALO
MABUNDA
MOZAMBIQUE

It is from a civil war — the Mozambican war of 1977–1992, one of the most devastating and least remembered conflicts of recent history — that the work of Gonçalo Mabunda emerges, perhaps the most politically dense in the entire exhibition. Mabunda collects decommissioned weapons from that war — rifles, bullets, military components whose function was to kill — and transforms them into sculptures: thrones, masks, monumental figures.

The throne on display, built entirely from deactivated war material, overturns the quintessential symbol of power — the seat from which one governs and commands — into a monument to its own contradiction: power is made of the same things with which it destroys. One is reminded of the Congolese tradition of *Nkisi Nkondi*, nail fetishes in which each nail represented a pact, a wound, a prayer: in Mabunda too, every incorporated weapon is an act of memory, a transformation of damage into meaning. The material of death becomes material for art — not to exorcise it, but to remember that it exists.

04

GODFRIED
DUNKOR
GHANA

The conflict that runs through the work of Godfried Dunkor does not take the form of military violence: it takes the form of money, of stock market figures, of trade routes that have crossed the Atlantic for centuries, first with slaves and then with

goods. In his collages — female figures pasted onto financial newspaper pages, colonial ships emerging from market data, bodies floating among listings and quotations — Donkor constructs a precise and merciless visual genealogy: the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary financial capitalism are not two separate eras, but two phases of the same system of domination, two ways of reducing the human body to a commodity, a resource, an exchange value.

The golden circle framing the head of the female figure is a halo: the historical victim elevated to an icon, the colonised body restored to dignity through the pictorial gesture. Yet the halo does not erase the columns of numbers surrounding it: it absorbs them, contains them, exposes them.

05

FRÉDÉRIC BRULY
BOUABRÉ

IVORY COAST
1923–2014

There is a gesture, in the history of contemporary African art, that is worth more than a thousand paintings: in 1948, following a mystical vision, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré decided to invent an alphabet for his mother tongue, Bété, creating a system of 449 syllables represented by small drawings on cardboard accompanied by brief captions in French. In this gesture — at once linguistic, political and spiritual — the entire anti-colonial scope of his work is condensed: to give African culture an autonomous writing system is to free it from dependence on the coloniser's language, to restore its ability to name its own world in its own words. Bouabré understood that the first form of colonial violence is not military but epistemic: it is the erasure of knowledge, the replacement of one language with another, of one cosmogony with another.

The works on display convey the full measure of this awareness through precise and intentional series. In *Femmes du monde portant leur enfant*, Bouabré chooses seriality as a form of thought: each card depicts a mother from a different nation, recognisable by the flag on her garment, holding a child in her arms. Yet it is precisely repetition that produces the deepest meaning, because the gesture is always the same, at every latitude, under every flag. Andromache holding Astyanax while imploring Hector not to go to war is not a Greek archetype: it is a human archetype, which Bouabré finds and multiplies in every woman in the world. The mother belongs to no nation: she belongs to life.

Where war divides, separates, destroys and multiplies the dead, the mother unites, nourishes and safeguards the world to come. Bouabré opposes to the logic of violence — which is a logic of subtraction — a logic of generation: not the blade that cuts bodies, but the arms that sustain them. In this sense, the series is not a sentimental response to war, but a structural one: the mother as a cosmological principle, a non-rhetorical antidote to the cruelty of conflict.

This series is counterbalanced by *Dieu n'aime pas la guerre* (2012), seven cards in which the flags of the nations of the world are accompanied by the statement that gives the work its title, repeated like an invocation, almost a secular rosary: conflict as a universal diagnosis, moral judgment as response. Alongside the series, three single works complete the exhibition nucleus with even greater

conceptual density. *La grande famille humaine vivant dans la concorde universelle* depicts humanity as a festive, multicoloured multitude — the utopia before destruction.

But it is *La grande sabre du guerrier figurant ses victimes de guerre* that is the most powerful image of the entire section: a large blade occupies almost the entire card, and within the blade itself the bodies of the victims are inscribed, stacked, contained within the weapon that killed them. Violence is not shown in action, but in its anatomical consequence: it is the meticulous drawing, the poetic line, the fragile cardboard — the most delicate medium possible — that bears the most unbearable weight. Gestures of resistance before being works of art.

06

KWAME AKOTO
"ALMIGHTY GOD"
 GHANA

At the centre of the exhibition, as a junction between physical and spiritual conflict, stands the work of Kwame Akoto "Almighty God", a visionary artist who introduces a dimension no other work addresses with such radicality: that of cosmic war, the battle between the forces of good and evil that traverses human history and transcends it. In *By All Means Satan Will Die*, an angelic figure with feathered wings emerges from a blood-red background, crossed by beams of light like rays or projectiles, with a green serpent around its neck and the hallucinated yet unwavering gaze of someone fighting a battle unseen by others. Below, the inscription that gives the work its title and a quotation from the Book of Isaiah on Lucifer cast down from Heaven.

Christian iconography merges with African visual tradition in an image of overwhelming and unsettling power: what Almighty God affirms — with the force of absolute conviction — is that war is not only between armies and resources, between rulers and the ruled, but is above all a spiritual battle, fought in the soul of peoples, requiring a consciousness far beyond politics and history to be understood and overcome. Evil has a face, it has wings, it has the bite of the serpent. And it can be defeated.

07

GERALD
CHUKWUMA
 NIGERIA

Gerald Chukwuma responds to violence with the silence of transformed matter. Large panels of burnt and incised wood, in tones of bronze and oxidised copper, with motifs recalling ancestral cosmogonies and alphabets, are surfaces that visibly bear the memory of fire — not the fire of destruction, but that of purification, writing and the transmission of knowledge across generations.

Burning and carving wood is a gesture deeply rooted in African tradition: it is how stories are fixed, knowledge is passed on, collective memory is preserved against erasure. In Chukwuma, this ancestral technique becomes an aesthetic response to colonialism: the incised signs speak of cultures that resist, identities that refuse to be silenced, knowledge that survives because it is inscribed in matter and does not depend on the language of the coloniser.

08

KAYODE
EJIOYE
NIGERIA

Kayode Ejioye brings conflict into its most contemporary and pervasive form: cultural colonisation, domination no longer exercised through weapons but through brands, logos and symbols of Western luxury that invade the bodies and identities of already colonised peoples. The figure portrayed wears a uniform entirely covered with the Louis Vuitton monogram and a military beret: the overlap is precise and ruthless, almost surgical.

The soldier's uniform and the luxury brand merge into a single attire, revealing what postwar economic and political history has sought to conceal: that military and economic domination have never truly been separate, that war does not end when troops withdraw but continues, in another form, in markets, consumption and aspirations. The body of Ejioye's figure is a battlefield. It always has been.

09

ALEX PETER
IDOKO
NIGERIA

The work of Alex Peter Idoko appears as a ritual of fire, yet here fire is not a neutral symbol: it is the material of destruction, the direct trace of conflict. Through pyrography, the artist does not represent fire: he incorporates it into the surface, transforming it into a field traversed by violence.

In *Strive*, subject and technique coincide. The figure in the foreground blows toward the flames, in a gesture suspended between the attempt to tame them and the ambiguous act of feeding them. The low-angle perspective intensifies the tension: the body becomes monumental, the heat seems to emanate from the image itself. Beside him, a second body lies abandoned, the head resting on the shoulder: a silent presence that introduces the human weight of conflict. It is not a narrative detail, but a fracture within the scene, shifting the image from gesture to experience, from action to consequence.

In Idoko, fire is not purification but memory. Burnt matter preserves the mark of destruction and transforms it into visual language: what we see is not only representation, but trace. The artist's gesture becomes an act of resistance, an attempt to retain on the burned surface what conflict reduces to ash.

10

JOHN
HOPEX
NIGERIA

John Hopex brings into the exhibition the surgical precision of hyperrealism in the service of an image that does not denounce war but interrogates its darkest nature. In *Dangerous Liaisons*, a female figure rendered in black and white embraces a golden bomb with abandon: she does not hold it out of fear, nor out of necessity. She holds it as one holds what one loves. The chromatic contrast — the grey, almost photographic body and the luminous, warm, almost precious weapon — constructs the central question of the work: why do human beings approach war with the same irrational and relentless passion with which they approach their own destruction?

"I find no peace, and I cannot make war," wrote Petrarch in Sonnet 134 of the *Canzoniere*, describing a passion the subject neither understands nor justifies, nor is able to break. It is the same logic that Hopex depicts: power seduces as love

does, promises what it cannot keep, and those who embrace it know it. Is humanity condemned to surrender to the inexorable destiny of war, or can it still choose to withdraw from the malice and greed of those who wield that power?

11

OWUSU
ANKOMAH
GHANA
1956–2025

The exhibition concludes with Owusu Ankomah (Sekondi, Ghana, 1956–2025), whose recent passing renders the works on display even more precious and urgent. His painting, where Adinkra symbols — the iconographic system of Akan culture, used for centuries to transmit values, proverbs and knowledge — cover the entire surface of the canvas while a face barely emerges behind them, represents the culmination of a lifelong research.

Ankomah was not a painter of symbols, but a thinker who used them to construct an autonomous cosmological system, capable of connecting precolonial African tradition with the geometries of crop circles, quantum physics and Eastern philosophy. He developed the concept of *Microcron*: an absolute symbol condensing universes within universes, expressing an eternal and infinite cosmological reality.

“The total number of minds in the universe is one,” he once told me in an interview. In this statement lies an act of faith in the radical interconnectedness of all human cultures, as a response to the violence of racial, colonial and economic separation, through the affirmation of unity. The face barely visible behind the web of signs is not absence, but a presence awaiting recognition. In Ankomah, conflict finds its most silent and radical response: vision as a political act, the persistence of culture as the supreme form of resistance.

After the Fire does not offer resolutions. It is not the role of art to resolve war: that is the task of politics, which often abdicates it. Yet the works on display demonstrate that art can do something politics cannot achieve with the same precision: to restore to conflict its human, individual, bodily and spiritual dimension — the very dimension that war systematically erases by reducing human beings to numbers, to fronts, to collateral effects. And to open, through form, a space in which that dimension can be recognised, processed and transmitted. Not the end of the fire, but what remains after.

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High-resolution images and interview requests available on request.