

A Vision and a Mission

The Chicago-based gallerist Mariane Ibrahim is bringing African art to the world—and not a moment too soon.

By Arthur Lubow

Photographed by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.



When Mariane Ibrahim opened a Seattle gallery in 2012 to showcase the contemporary art of Africa and its diaspora, she felt like she was shining a lonely light on the continent. Times have changed. When she moved to Chicago a year ago, she was greeted, she says, by a “reception unlike any I’ve ever known.” Art lovers are now clamoring to see what she presents. “There was a bit of a joke among people working in the field of contemporary African art that it was getting discovered every year for over a decade now,” observes Karen E. Milbourne, senior curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. “But this is different. There is a seismic change happening. It used to be, ‘Look at El Anatsui.’ And now it is, ‘We need structural social change.’”

Although she was successful in Seattle, Ibrahim found the city, where tech overshadows art, constricting. “The artists I worked with were giving me a strong voice, but not Seattle,” she says. Ibrahim was spending at least half the year away, visiting art fairs and meeting with artists. Concluding that she needed to relocate, she considered Los Angeles, Mexico City, and New York, before landing on Chicago. “It’s central, it’s big enough, we have a great institution and great collectors,” she says. “It’s a city with great diversity—30 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 30 percent Black. I thought, I can navigate in this space. I’m away from the noise of New York and the silence of Seattle.”

The Chicago gallery occupies a low-slung modernist building with a dark facade and 6,000 square feet of white-walled interior spaces, in the multi-ethnic West Town neighborhood. Next door is the Monique Meloche Gallery, which highlights BIPOC artists, many of whom are African-American. Together, the complementary galleries

exert a powerful gravitational force. Throughout the Covid pandemic, Ibrahim and her staff have reported to work at the gallery, convening for a daily communal lunch, even though the public at first was not allowed entry. “I feel like I’m working way more than pre-Covid,” she says. “You are constantly available and have to respond immediately. We have made this gallery, this business space, more of a lifestyle.”

Representing 16 artists of African heritage, Ibrahim, who was born to Somali parents in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia, has a keen eye for detecting new talent. She often discovers artists on Instagram; some she finds on her travels. Raphaël Barontini, a mixed-race artist who lives in Paris, met her in Venice during the Biennale. Their connection was forged when she bought one of his collaged portraits for her personal collection at an art fair in San Francisco. “It was one of my favorites,” Barontini says. “She really has an eye. When you show her a series of pieces, she always will go for the best one.” Ibrahim strives for an ecosystem in which emerging Black artists learn from more established ones, nourished by the loyal support of Black collectors. “There’s been so much exceptionalism and wanting to have only one Black superstar artist,” she says. “It’s necessary that the masters and older artists influence the younger artists.”

She takes satisfaction in reporting how one of her brightest stars, the Vienna-based Ghanaian figurative painter Amoako Bofo, drew inspiration from the eminent African-American artist Kerry James Marshall (as well as the Vienna Secessionist Egon Schiele). Having developed his own distinctive style, Bofo is emulated by younger painters today, and he has made it his mission to mentor them. When he collaborated with the fashion designer Kim Jones

on the Dior Men Summer 2021 collection, which was presented in July, Bofo waived royalties and instead asked Dior to help fund an institution to assist young artists in Accra.

The group of artists that Ibrahim represents is “like a family,” says one of them, Ayana V. Jackson, a New Jersey native who has lived for many years in Johannesburg. Most are of the same generation as Ibrahim, who is in her early 40s. And they share a hybrid sociocultural background, with many of them having left Africa to live in a Western country. “We’re dealing with the complexities and dynamics of the Black experience, asking similar questions but in distinct ways,” Jackson said. “We’re springing from the same root, but we’re very different flowers.”

For her inaugural exhibition in Chicago, Ibrahim showed Jackson’s large-scale staged self-portraits, which invoke a Black legacy—both historically and mythically—through allusions to colonial-era photographs and African legends. “There are things she picks up on in my work that she understands implicitly as a Black woman,” Jackson said. “She understands that some of my work comes out of my being an African-American woman who also lives in Africa. I have two legs and an arm on three continents, and she can appreciate that, because she does too.”

Until she was 5, Ibrahim lived in Nouméa, the capital of New Caledonia, where her father worked for a nickel-exporting company. Then, at the urging of her homesick mother, the family moved to Somalia, but only for a short while before impending war drove them to Bordeaux, France. After completing her high school education, Ibrahim studied communications at Middlesex University in London. During a three-year

*This page: Mariane Ibrahim at her gallery in Chicago, in front of Ian Mwesiga’s *Man Standing by the Pool*, 2020. Ibrahim wears a Dior jacket, blouse, skirt, socks, and shoes; Almasika earrings. Opposite: Ayana V. Jackson’s *Cascading Celestial Giant II*, 2019.*





This page, from left: Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze's *at the same time as or in coexistence with*, 2019; Raphaël Barontini's *Eweka I*, 2020. Opposite: Amoako Bofo's *The Pink Background*, 2020. Ibrahim wears a Dior Men sweater; Dior skirt.

CASCADING CELESTIAL GRANT II, 2019, AT THE SAME TIME AS OR IN COEXISTENCE WITH, 2019, AND EWEKA I, 2020, ALL COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND MARIANE IBRAHIM

sojourn in Somalia, she formed a nonprofit cultural organization to preserve the rock-art paintings of Laas Geel, then worked in advertising in Paris. Eventually, she recognized that her calling was to exhibit the work of artists whose heritage resonated with her own.

She opened a gallery in Seattle because her husband, Pierre Lenhardt, landed a job there as a brand manager for Boeing. She says that the relocation to Chicago marked a shift in her approach. "It was one of the first decisions I have made in a completely free, detached spirit, almost like the American settlers," she says. "Most of my life, people have been choosing for me—my parents, my education, my husband." Now her husband is her business partner in the gallery. "It's interesting to have someone who understands you and trusts you, who anticipates what I would like and not like," she says. "He makes everything seamless for me—the operation, the logistics. He makes my focus more focused in dealing with the artists and the collectors."

Ibrahim is only the second Black dealer to be welcomed into the Art Dealers Association of America, the trade group that includes the nation's leading galleries. She is accustomed to cutting an anomalous figure at art fairs. "When you are a Black person showing Black figurative painting on the wall, people immediately think you have a personal connection," she says. "I used to receive comments asking if I was the model in a painting or photograph. It was because they were not making the detachment to realize that I could be separate from what is in the art."

Her breakthrough came in 2017, when she won the inaugural prize awarded by New York's Armory Show for the best booth presented by a gallery less than 10 years old. Her booth, titled *Unraveled*

Threads, exhibited photographs and textile pieces by the German-Ghanaian artist Zohra Opoku. The \$10,000 prize paid Ibrahim back for the rental fee of the booth—and catapulted her, notwithstanding her atypical location in the Pacific Northwest, onto the map of nationally known galleries.

For Ibrahim, such risk-taking is characteristic: a gamble backed by instincts and hard work. "Mariane is just frigging prescient," says Milbourne, the Smithsonian curator. "She is tough as nails and incredibly stylish. After she won best new gallery at the Armory, she was invited to be on a jury and brought in new African galleries. She sees what she needs to do, and she does it. She has all the polish of a French model and an American business head."

Milbourne also praised Ibrahim's relationships with her artists, citing "the equality of spirit and the support she gives them." For Barontini, who will have his first solo American gallery show with Ibrahim in mid-November, Ibrahim acts as a comrade for discussion and a business manager for guidance. When he did a seven-month LVMH-sponsored residency in Singapore, which ended in late July, he recalled, "My contract was dense, so I left it to Mariane to read it all." More important, he says, she comprehends the political and social subtext of his work: "To choose Mariane was to choose somebody who could understand the debates I play with and the references I choose, someone who is aware of the history. She is on the same page as me. We share articles, books, videos. It's an ongoing discussion. It is a way to nourish the work." For his forthcoming exhibition, she provided advice without intruding too much. "She really let me do what I wanted," he says. "She's like, It's your playground; enjoy, do great things."

One aspect of Chicago that Ibrahim particularly appreciates is the new network of collectors. "The Black collectors have emerged, and they are changing the game," she says. "They have a legitimacy in hanging the work in their homes. Blackness is not just a color—it's a history and a lifestyle. The Black collectors from all over the world want to have a piece of the pie. Not to be at the very end, but early on, when the artist is about to make it out there to the public."

She explained that Black collectors relate differently to the art she sells. "The way they inquire about the work, and their questions, are for me intellectually stimulating," she says. "When you are a Black collector talking to a Black dealer about a Black artist, the Blackness has been pushed to the side. It's not an exotic conversation—I like the color of the skin there. The Blackness is gone, and they can say, 'I like how those men are looking at each other.'"

Ibrahim suggests that the 2016 presidential election has accelerated the attraction to Black art. "Since Trump was elected, we've received many more requests of people wanting to know about the artists we work with," she said. "People are saying, We need to support the Black artists. Collectors don't want to be associated with Trump. He is an important ingredient for where Black art is today."

Ibrahim's art-world ascent has been exhilaratingly rapid, and while she relishes the propulsive thrill, she is looking forward to reaching the plateau. "It is like a gold rush," she says. "It's not a trend; it's a momentum. Every time you do a Black African show, it is always more successful than the one that came before it. I don't take any pride in being first. I hope it will pass." ♦