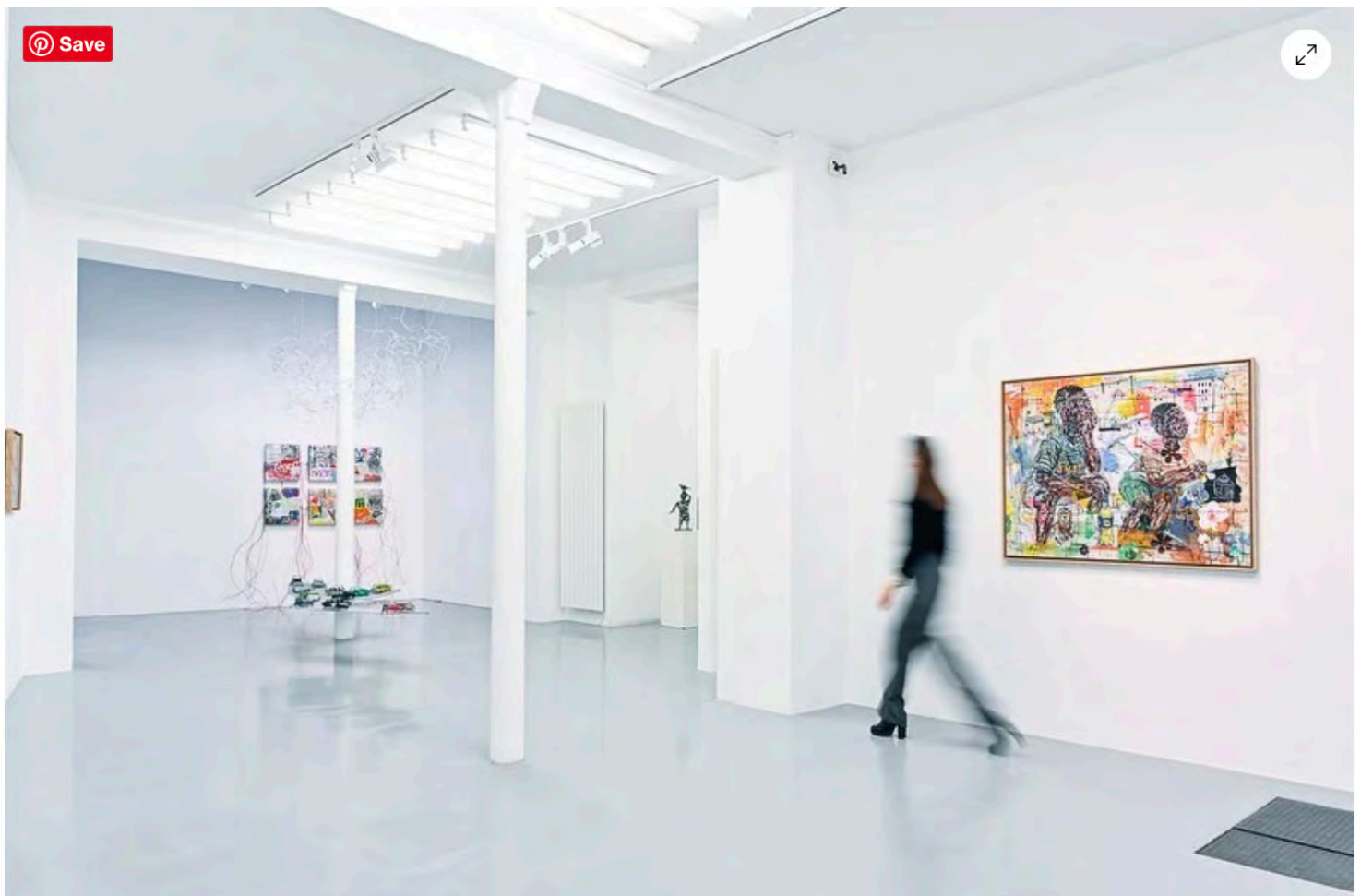


In Conversation with Afikaris Gallery

We often speak of the Arts but not the places that carry them. Known as the art gallery to visit in Paris, during our short stay in town, we made a quick stop at Afikaris a day before their grand opening of a group exhibition. Their founder, Florian Azzorpadi, was kind enough to chat with us and walk through the process of managing an art gallery.



Let's just go from the very beginning; How did Afikaris come to be?

Actually, it started with a passion to know more about what was happening on the African continent with the young generation of artists. Through arranged meetings, I had the chance to meet a few artists I really enjoyed talking with and to see their work. It was a moment you could not help but just to say; "Wow! This is remarkable".

Then, it developed with the hopes of starting a project with these artists and building something together like a team or family. The project started in my apartment, in Paris, the 18th district, which was quite a popular area. Everything occurred in my living room, on the fourth floor, 60 metre square. Can you imagine while we had art pieces as large as 2 metres trying to fit in this small room? The idea was to do our best to promote the work of the artists. Fortunately, we did a great job and it was because naturally, the selected artists were very talented and deserved the exposure.

We opened a proper space in 2020 during covid.

And how was that?

It was interesting. Actually, it was really needed at the time because I could no longer sleep in my own flat. My apartment had an office, a storage room and an exhibition space. At some point, it was too much and I was looking for more space. It was crucial to align the ambition of our artists which meant a more diverse catalogue. Most importantly, to build better exhibitions.

We moved again last year in 2022, to this space Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth. The idea behind this change is again, to show the ambition of our gallery, to promote the more experimental artists and give them the best exposure we can. Building the best exhibitions we possibly can because they are very talented.

I started in 2018 and the same idea remained; to highlight to the best of our ability the quality of the work represented, and also, the intelligence and message of the artists.



Maybe we could head further back because our audience also would be interested to know a little bit more about you Florian. From my understanding, you are the founder of Afikaris, correct? What is your background?

My background? Is it important? [laugh]. I'm actually an engineer. It depends where you start, but I worked mostly as a child because my father is an Antique seller. So I grew up with the art world but it was mostly to support my dad. I also had an interest in science and therefore, I did scientific studies. I did an engineering school in Paris and then, I worked as a consultant.

Then, I worked in a start-up in Africa for 3 years. During this trip, there's something in me that made me say; "I don't want to work and live with people only from Paris". I wanted to be connected to other cultures and other messages. When I travelled, I had the chance to meet so many different personalities.

I was working for this E-commerce company and we had teams in Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, Ivory Coast and Morocco. In my team, we had more than 120 people, everyone with very different stories, cultures, ages, profiles, personalities and religions. Some in conditions they didn't have the same rate of success in their region compared to my previous works in Paris, a place where everyone has a similar background than you. I saw some people with backgrounds that are deemed less valuable in the global work market but undeniably talented. In Nigeria, for example, I was so impressed by the level of intelligence of young people who had almost no formal education but were 'street smart' in a sense. I was supposed to teach them how to do things but actually, it was quite the opposite, I learned much more from them.



You know, when you walk across galleries in Europe, there is a similar narrative being portrayed. What made you feel it would be appropriate to bring the artwork of another continent into this Parisian space?

First, it was for me because I wanted to see the artwork. I was really interested in seeing some artworks I could see nowhere else and so singular and specific. One of the profiles I had met was Jean David Nkot when I travelled to Cameroon in 2018, I was literally shaking when he showed me his artwork, some even 4 metres-long paintings. If I were to bring his work to Paris, I would imagine other people would also want to see it.

That confident?

Of course, there is this confidence... At the end of the day, it is a project, it's a business, there is also the business side of things that you make in your head but also, by talking to other people.

No, it's not true, there is not only one narrative in Paris and other regions. I think we target everyone. For example, you heard about us and you're not from Paris.

Fair enough.

There are so many ways to communicate. Actually, less than 50% of our sales are made in France and therefore, more than half of our buyers are abroad. Even within galleries, there is no single artist with the same narrative, each artist has their own narrative. Every year, we have maybe 10 different narratives and all the difficulty comes from matching with the narratives of the artist.

Describe to us the first exhibition you built; what was the reaction of the general public if you can remember?

The first one was at the very beginning in 2018. It was a pop up in Paris. It was not my best exhibition, of course, but people really liked it and it had a good vibe and was a nice start. Then, my second first exhibition was the first time I presented in a fair and it was very random because I chose a fair in Lebanon. Just before the economic crisis and honestly, people didn't like it and it was terrible. We didn't sell anything, I invested a lot of money and I really wanted to cry but Beirut was nice. Few months after the fair, we sold everything online. So it was a good souvenir. They were nice paintings but not presented in the right location at all.

And then, the third one, the first exhibition we made in a proper space in Paris. We were very proud and artists were very happy as well. The artists who trusted us from the beginning could see the project was taking a nice shape.



How does Afikaris gallery recruit their artists? Speaking to a few galleries, I know everyone can have their own techniques.

There are honestly infinite ways. It's a question with no right answers because there is no proper way. It is really like everything; there is a personal connection. It can be, of course, because you connect with a specific piece part of a show, online, a newspaper and you think to yourself; "Ok, this is really cool!". And then, I do some research and maybe I can have a discussion with the artist and build a connection.

Some artists we met for real. Even Ousmane Niang who is part of this show, I met him in my apartment. Someone brought him from Senegal, he was travelling with one of his friends who was also an artist and he was sitting on a chair in my apartment. We talked but I think I didn't know his work. A day after, his friend showed me his pictures and months later, I travelled to Senegal to meet him again. So I met him in my apartment very randomly.

Then, there are also some people, there are friends of friends, there are recommendations. I mean, there are many ways. It's more about how you decide to say yes or no, and that is more difficult. It must fit in the line but it can also mean that it is very different from the line because you know, sometimes we want to cut, sometimes we want to re-evaluate things. Building exhibitions that are not boring, I want to show artists doing the same things but a bit different. If I have one artist with a very intimate atmosphere, I don't want to have 3 other artists like this in my gallery.

It is also about having a complimentary program all year long. Also, it has to make me happy as well [laugh].

Most important [laugh].

When it is over, we have to say; “Ok. it was a nice show”. Of course, it is a bet as well. You hope that the artist will produce a good show and you hope that the artist is as talented as you hoped. You know, I am the owner, I created this job and I want to work with people I like. I don't have time to work with people I don't like, I don't connect with and who are not respectful and it has happened in the past. The more they are nice, the more it will motivate the gallery and I to do our best.

I mean, I presume there will be a lot of artists reading this. Did you by any chance in the past had artists approaching you for an opportunity?

Almost everyday.

Everyday? Ok and how do you respond to that?

I want to use this opportunity to say sorry because most of the time, I do not reply.

I mean, you're a busy man.

But also, the worst thing is because I don't know what to say. Sometimes, you only receive a PDF and when you are sure, you can reply like this doesn't fit with the lines of the gallery. Other times, maybe you leave it just open. I can tell you 99% of the time, when an artist writes to us, it doesn't go anywhere further. Almost all of the artists we work with, we tend to choose ourselves. But, it happened already in the past. Sometimes, it is really hard to judge without seeing the work for real. Plus without communicating face to face. Except if the PDF is very beautiful [laugh]. Or there is an attached CV with very nice exhibitions however, for young artists with no CV, it's very unlikely. That's why sometimes I prefer not to reply because I'm not sure.

I don't want to be tough because I respect the work of everyone, many emails I receive are very similar things, and I tell myself; “Ok, this is nice but not original enough for what we want to show in the gallery”. In short, this is not for me.

I'm sure our readers will understand where you're coming from. Perhaps let's shift the focus to the artists you actually chose. Would you like to introduce some of them?

Yes, I can start with Jean David Knot. I would say a very important artist of the gallery. Maybe one of the guys who was here from the very beginning. Without him, I would have not done this project since there was a deep connection from the get-go. We still call each other almost everyday. Sometimes he calls me to wake me up on Sunday and I don't reply [laugh]. If he reads this, I would like to tell him to stop harassing me on Sunday morning [laugh].

I went to visit him in 2018 and we formed a deep connection. When we sold the first piece for him, I even delivered the first fridge to his grandparents village, which was bought with the first painting we sold at the time. I remember till this day, we took the truck to Cameroon and delivered it.

From the beginning, I was very impressed by the speech, the technique and strength of his work. Aesthetically, some people would say it's a very specific style, but for me, it's very powerful and it is evolving so well. Also, one of the reasons why it was the first solo show when I had the chance to open a new gallery. The first book we published...

You also publish books?

We publish books when we have the resources. This was a book retracing 5 to 6 years of his «career».

Human Condition ...



We will do much more. We're still waiting for a 10 years of career in 2025. For me he is a very important artist.

Another story I really like is the one from Salifou Lindou, he's also from Cameroon. They are friends. Salifou also started promoting from the very beginning of the gallery in 2018 and he was very famous in Cameroon but not internationally. Honestly, when I met him, he had difficulties surviving. I had to give him money to go to the doctor at the beginning. I remember I had to send X amount through Western Union because he had big financial troubles. He had a tough life and I think we met him at a time when he was a bit lost.

Little by little, we managed to work well together, to develop series, to present his work better and to create stories surrounding his work. It gave him confidence to work on better pieces, bigger pieces, formulate ideas and new series. Actually, the work is getting better and better and the international success came in 2020. Now, it's very successful and he came back to materials he was working with 20 years ago for the last exhibition. Historically, he is a very important artist in Cameroon and the African continent.

I can say I am very proud that now he is doing well with his art and he has the visibility he deserves because he will have a museum show in Italy this year and many institutions are looking at his work. There is big respect between the two of us. It was and still is a big pleasure to work with him. I like this story of Salifou because he is really thankful of the gallery and I am also very thankful of him. He gave us his trust and he has so much talent.

We opened an artist residency this February in Montreuil and we welcome artists mostly working with the gallery or preparing projects with the gallery. It is very useful because the gallery is also about human contact and thanks to the residency, we really spend time with the artists. Not only working time but also, informal time as we take a drink, we talk and spend evenings together. Also, we have ideas and make better projects together, they have a chance to meet other artists and therefore, it's a way to invest in the artist for us. It is free for them, they don't have to pay and for us, it is an investment in the relationship and the development of the artist.



I have to say that's quite impressive being able to create a space and means to the artists you want to represent outside of shows. I think it probably empowers the exhibitions and their work even more.

In the art world right now, there is more space being built for different narratives, faces and voices. Out of curiosity, is there an agenda when it comes to minorities born and living in France vs. minorities from the Africa continent?

First of all, 80% of the artists of the galleries do not talk about it. Their work is not about coming from a minority, they don't explore themes around identity and it is not their focal point. This narrative is more common in English-speaking countries because let's say it's just more significant in the US than in France, for example. English-speaking countries are a bit more influenced by the US and UK because there is a larger diaspora over there. It's a bit less the case here.

An artist like Jean David Knot represents black people but not because they are black. He represents mostly the resources of the continent, the exploitation of the continent and the inequalities. Basically, we are a rich continent with poor people, but there are also rich black people. It's not about identity. Of course, where you are born impacts who you become and that's why you see these maps in his work, but he highlights the ability of human beings to have the incredible strength to build families and communities even in very difficult environments. He will not talk about his personal stories, it is mostly inspired by raising subjects such as his comments about the mining industry which is a very important industry today in our economy. For example, your smartphone recording me is made of cobalt and essential minerals, which are very important consequences at the end of the line of mining, exploitation, etc...

80% of the artists, they have their own narratives and they don't really talk about this and this is what I like. Of course, we have some exhibitions that talk about identity like being a black man in this society. I think it's a bit less than in the US. It's maybe 20% of our exhibitions. We want to show artists with creativity and we don't want to differentiate, there is no difference from the Parisian artists, there are just artists with a message which is their own. Of course, the message is influenced by their personalities, their lives, backgrounds and cultures. If they live in a forest, they would be maybe influenced by such and that's all. What's important is they have unique and interesting stories to share.

If you look at the work of Saidou Dicko, also a very important artist for me. The people (portrayed in his artwork) are black, but it's not the colour of their skin, it's the colour of their shadow. Therefore, the work is not talking about identity at all, even though some people could think it is. It's more about creativity, childhood and adults losing their minds in such a complex world, whilst destroying the environment. And these children are having fun with bottles and fabrics that just reminds us this is perhaps the way to live with each other. The message is about how to live with one another better and not about identity.



That is definitely a perspective we do not hear often. Maybe we can redirect the conversation towards your next exhibition opening this Thursday. Would you like to let us know what spectators are to expect?

We do one group show per year at the gallery. The rest of the year is mostly solo exhibitions. We give the full space to the narrative of the artist because it is difficult to gather artists with a single narrative. However, we do it once a year and in this show which I curated, we wanted to talk about the environment and a way to maybe rethink our interaction with the world. Out of the world centred around humans and to open ourselves to other things on the planet and respect them as well.

In this show, we represent about 14 artists. 11 of them have been working with the gallery in the past years and 3 of them are the first time we show them in the gallery. A great opportunity both to introduce and also work with new artists. I think it's an interesting exhibition. We have one or two works of each artist and it is a good opportunity to discover the universe of several artists in the gallery. I think the show is quite consistent with paintings, sculptures, fabrics, ceramics and nice installations. I hope people will like it.

We open on the 6th of July and it will be displayed until 23rd of September.

<https://www.newwavemagazine.com/single-post/in-conversation-with-afikaris-gallery>