

The Grand Canvases of Nirit Takele's Ethiopian-Israeli Experience

Artist Kehinde Wiley, the official portraitist of President Obama, is known for his grand-scale paintings of people of color. Wiley has described how empowering it was when, as a boy, he saw the occasional paintings of black people among the many white subjects that filled the galleries of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “There was something absolutely heroic and fascinating about being able to feel a certain relationship to the institution and the fact that these people happen to look like me at some level,” Wiley has said. Artist Nirit Takele hopes that her work, peopled by members of her Ethiopian-Israeli community, will have a similar impact.

This month, Tel Aviv's Hezi Cohen Gallery is holding Takele's first one-woman show. Within less than a week, all but one of her paintings had sold. Takele, a master of color, fills her paintings with blues, greens, browns, and reds that are simultaneously comforting, bold and demanding. But once those colors have captured your attention, look again. She has a lot to say about what it is to be an Ethiopian-Israeli.

Her larger canvases could cover an entire wall of a room, and she fills them with people who appear to be strong, almost god-like in their invincibility. “Ethiopians,” she says, “are delicately built. But I paint them as powerful to show their inner strength. They come from a culture of kings and noble rulers. I want my paintings to remind the viewer of their grandeur.”

In “Our Donation Blood,” Takele references a painful episode in the life of the Ethiopian Jews soon after arriving in Israel. Three figures sit on a green expanse, collecting blood falling from a red-soaked sky. In the 1980s, the Ethiopian community learned that the blood they had donated to Magen David Adom, the Israeli Red Cross, was thrown away for fear that it was tainted. In acrylic paint on a canvas that measures nearly 7 feet, the artist depicts members of her community collecting that spilled blood,

to drink it and thereby restore their strength.



The artist, Nirit Takele

“I thought my home was in a desert,” said Takele. “When I arrived, I found a place filled with color—red, green, yellow, the colors of the Ethiopian flag! And while I can’t say it felt like home, I felt like a fish IN water. The look of the people I saw was familiar. I was not a dark face among white ones.”

Since Takele’s return to Israel from Ethiopia, she has expanded her palette from largely pastel to one that includes the colors of her native country. Magenta gives way to red; yellow and green are now also found in her

paintings.

Beyond her art, Takele hopes to enrich Israeli culture by sharing some of the oral tales passed down to her by her father. In “The Invited Guest,” Takele tells the story of Aba Gavra-hana, a wise person in the village who was barred from joining a celebratory meal because his clothing was too shabby. He returns to the party beautifully attired. Invited to the table, he proceeds to feed his clothes, and not himself. It is, says Takele, a story that speaks to the importance, or lack of importance, of how one looks. “Look at the man,” said her father, “not his clothes.”

While Takele’s medium is acrylic paint, she approaches her images as would a sculptor. “When I paint, I build the image with different colors so while I am working in two dimensions, there is a sculptural quality to the images. There is a tension between two and three dimensions and tension, too, between the abstract and the figurative. How much do I hold back? How many details do I include?”

So, too, is the constant balancing in her life as an Ethiopian-Israeli. “I don’t like to hear how nicely we have integrated into Israeli life. That comment assumes that the Ethiopians must change to become part of Israeli society. What I am showing is what WE have shared with YOU, how much the Ethiopian Jews have added to life here. I am proud of both where I come from and proud to be part of Israel.”

And, for more on Kehinde Wiley, check out Tablet’s coverage of his past show at New York’s Jewish Museum featuring what our reviewer called [“dignified portraits of men in Israel.”](#)

Rachel Ringler is a writer, museum docent, challah instructor, and cook who has strong feelings about the important role food plays in life, in family and in community.