



Addis Gezehagn, *White Floating Tower*, 2019. Acrylic and paper on canvas. 170 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Addis Fine Art

Addis Gezehagn with *Floating Tower II*, 2017. Opposite, *White Floating Tower*, 2019

[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]



Addis Gezehagn

Born 1978, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he still lives and works

Addis Gezehagn grew up in Senga Tera, an area of the Ethiopian capital that has morphed from a place where a child could ‘draw on the asphalt and make mud sculptures outside [his] house’ to the forest of towers that now constitutes the central business district. He has witnessed the transformation of Addis Ababa from what the Lonely Planet guide still describes as ‘ancient and mystical... like a magical portal, a gateway to another world’ into one of the biggest cities in Africa. So it’s not surprising that urban landscapes ‘as they rise above the ground’ have become a principal theme in his work.

Inspired not just by Addis Ababa but also by the metropolitan centres of Dire Dawa, Harar and Arba Minch, Gezehagn’s two recent series, *Floating Cities* and *Floating Towers*, depict those places as closely packed rectangular blocks of colour that one might initially take as non-figurative. ‘My paintings can be regarded as semi-abstract,’ he says. ‘But they have been distorted or deformed to add character, both in physical form and conceptually. The colours or shapes may have been altered. The thoughts have been simplified. While some part of it may have been abstracted, the figure is true to life. Houses have their owners’ characters. They are altered by their relationship with the people that live inside.’

Indeed, cities come to ‘resemble their residents’, he says: ‘The cities that attract me are rarely well structured, or finely measured. It might be comfortable to live in a uniform city, but they tend to be visually uninspiring. Cities I like have

their own rhythm, like music. It goes up and down. It has many colours. It’s poetic and dramatic. There is an element of randomness. The fingerprints of residents can be seen everywhere. Fundamental needs may not be part of the equation, but [cities like these have] a visual richness.’

Gezehagn’s works begin as collages. ‘I usually use *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines – there are copies of them wherever I go, and the paper is soft and thin so it bonds well with the canvas.’ This gives them a texture, over which he paints in acrylic, obliterating all but ghosts of the pages he has used with vibrant colour and fine, if not always specific, architectural detail. The colours of Ethiopian cities are, he says, ‘incredibly warm and bold, and that fascinates me’.

He sketches first, he explains, to establish the ‘lines, colours and forms of the thoughts’ that have inspired him, then applies magazine cuttings. ‘I may overlap them or leave them as they are,’ he says. ‘Sometimes, I add colours of the same family to the collage when I paint them. At other times, I layer colours or slightly fade them. I find unexpected colours quite by accident in this process.’

The results are infinitely fascinating and thought-provoking. ‘Addis Ababa has changed a lot, of course,’ he says. ‘Poor communities have been pushed out of their homes in the name of progress. Those areas are disappearing [though] the social fabric still remains for the most part. The purpose of art is to remember and try to preserve that.’

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