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The Ethiopian Israeli Artist Whose 'Black Art' Gives Power to the People

Nirit Takele says she has always painted about the disadvantaged Ethiopian community; it's not some stream of 'black art' shown for the trendy in New York or London

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Israeli artist Nirit Takele, April 2019. Credit: Meged Gozani

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In the past month Nirit Takele secluded herself in the studio of her home in north Tel Aviv and painted intensively for 10 to 16 hours a day. She did what she had to do in the run-up to the Contemporary African Art Fair in New York from May 3 to 5.

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"Black art has become the hottest thing on the international art scene," she says. "It's more fashionable now than ever, but I'm very torn because, still, these are the rules of the game of the Western

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world .... It's great that there's interest, but I'm not overwhelmed. I've always painted this way and my identity isn't a trend."

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Takele, 33, is one of the biggest successes in the younger generation of Israeli artists with Ethiopian roots. Her first solo exhibition was held in London, and in November 2020 she'll have another solo exhibition in that city's Addis Fine Art gallery. Her works have been bought by the Israel Museum and prominent collectors.

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"I feel that everything is happening in a short time – it's three years since I completed my studies – but that it's a success with roots that's moving at the right pace," she says.

Tal Dekel, an art historian at the Kibbutzim College of Education, is an editor of the Hebrew-language book "The Monk and the Lion" about Ethiopian art in Israel.

"Takele is a successful artist on an Israeli and international level. She has a unique brushprint and has developed an artistic language that is identified with her. She creates large works with dark-skinned sculpted figures," Dekel says.

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"Her painting style is lovely and combines various dark shadows and sophisticated transitions of colors that lend the figures dynamism and volume. Her subjects are Ethiopian folktales and lifestyle as well as current events of concern to the community in Israel. These are subjects that are now being discussed in international art – race, belonging, identity and nationality."

For her part, Takele adds: "Belonging to the Ethiopian community inspires me. Painting is a tool to reflect my culture and also enables me to react to the world around me."

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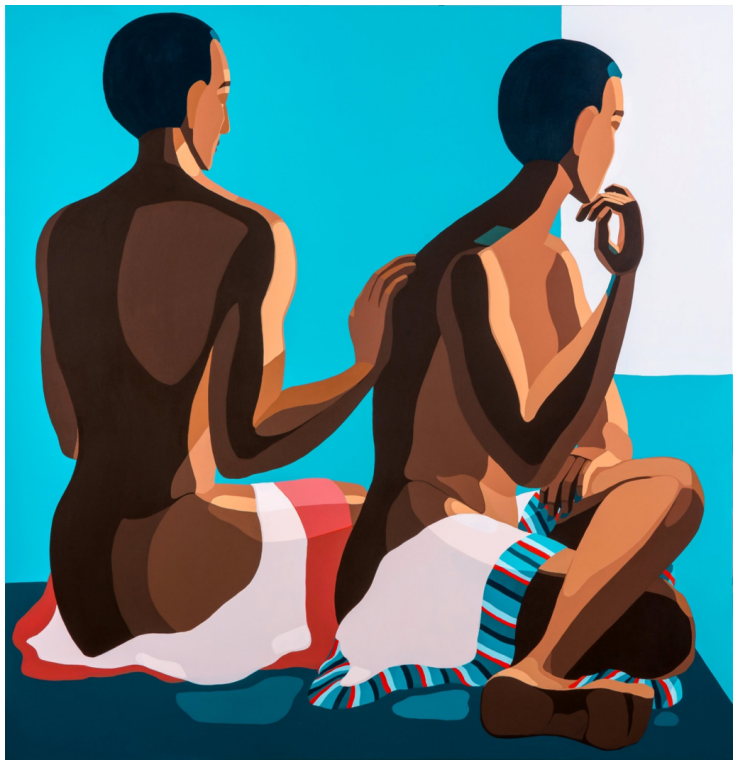

Nirit Takele's 2019 painting of a couple.

She was born in a village in Ethiopia. Her father was a farmer and weaver, while her mother created colorful woven straw baskets. In 1991, when she was 6, she immigrated to Israel with her family in Operation Solomon, a major covert operation to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

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"We walked from the village where I was born and crossed a river to reach Addis Ababa," she says. "There we waited in a camp for several months until the flight to Israel. My only memory from the trip is a picture in which I'm standing next to a lake and a motorboat."

In Israel, she and her family were housed in an absorption center in Rehovot and from there moved to Ofakim in the south. "That was before it was declared a city; it didn't have a single bus line or traffic light," she says, smiling. Takele studied at a state religious elementary school and from grades six to 12 attended an ulpana, a girls' high school, in the settlement of Ofra.

"In sixth grade I took part in a national exam, got high grades and was invited to meet with a committee in Be'er Sheva. They asked me to choose an educational institution and I remembered that in the square outside, a moment before coming in, I heard a few smart girls saying 'Ofra,' so I told the committee I wanted to study there.

"I had no idea where it was, or of its political context. The committee members nodded and said it was a very good school. I didn't have any idea that it was a boarding school and that I had to pack a bag and return home on weekends. I felt I was leaving my

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family."

Only when she arrived did she discover that it was a girls' school. "At first I waited for the boys to come so I could meet them," she laughs. "But I soon realized that there wouldn't be any boys, and the studies were separate." While she was studying there, her family moved to Rehovot, a city about 12 miles southeast of Tel Aviv.

"I grew up there. That's where I spent my childhood. Those were the most important years of my life. The teaching staff was accepting and taught me to ask questions," she says.

"I also discovered that there's freedom there – they didn't measure the length of your skirt, you could walk around with dyed hair and polished nails. They weren't strict about your appearance because they did more spiritual and internal work with us.

Nirit Takele's 2015 painting 'Stork,' which represents the failure of the integration of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society.

"Only when I grew up did I begin to understand the complexity in the settlement's location. During the evacuation of Gush Katif [in the Gaza Strip in 2005], I was in the Military Police and was relieved that I didn't take part in the evacuation. I felt that I was being required to evict my brothers, and I wasn't capable of that."

Art school serendipity

From an early age she loved to draw. "As a child I drew on pieces of paper and on books. During the drawing lessons at the ulpana I was first exposed to Michelangelo – I loved him at first sight and I'm influenced by him. But they always showed us his drawings censored, and there were parts of them I didn't see," she laughs.

During her army service she shed her religious identity: "The questions came up already when I was at the ulpana, and it was a natural process."

After the army she worked for about a year and a half at a chip manufacturing plant in Yavneh; the shifts were exhausting. "I felt that I was turning into a machine, but there of all places my desire to paint was suddenly stirred," she says. "I found a drawing teacher in Tel Aviv and I traveled to her once a week after the shifts."

Takele had trouble deciding what to study. "I went to receive professional guidance and they recommended business administration," she says. "When I left there I stood at the bus stop opposite the Shenkar art school. I looked at the building, I was

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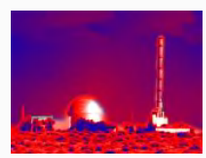

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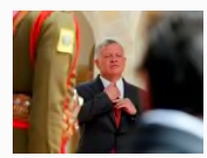

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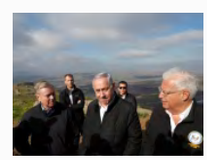

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curious and found out more about art studies. It was about a month before the entrance exams, which required the presentation of a portfolio. I didn't have one.

"So I used the time during the night shifts at the plant, and between pushing buttons I drew with charcoal on paper. I prepared seven drawings from observation and two oil paintings and went to Shenkar. It was nerve-racking to see lots of people who came with huge rolled-up canvases and all kinds of sophisticated sculptures. I didn't think I'd be accepted, but it happened."

The choice of art came out of love but also "because I noticed that many young people from Ethiopia might have law or teaching degrees, but in the end they're blocked because of their origin. I felt that in art I wouldn't be blocked and I wouldn't be judged based on my skin color, but on talent."

Nurit Takele's 2015 work on the beating of an Ethiopian-Israeli soldier.

At the Shenkar School of Engineering and Design near Tel Aviv, Takele was considered promising. "I always received positive criticism from the faculty for my work and a lot of guidance," she says.

In her third year she won the Talia Sidi award for academic excellence. She also took part in a group exhibition at the Ryback House museum in Bat Yam, and a painting she exhibited was bought by Shenkar for the school's collection. During her studies she supported herself as a supermarket cashier and as an independent cosmetician, as well as in the cafeteria of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Already during her studies she placed dark-skinned figures in the center of the action. "It's natural for me to paint figures who are the same color as I am, just as a white Western painter documents himself and his surroundings," she says.

"Also, all the dark-skinned figures that I saw in the works of the great painters were slaves or servants on the margins of the painting. I wanted to make dark-skinned people visible, I wanted to paint the story of the Ethiopian community in color. To bring my culture by myself, to the gallery, to the museum."

The paintings are also characterized by their size. "It suits me physically because I'm tall – 1.72 meters [5 feet, 8 inches]," she smiles. "In that way I can paint in a broad, large and flowing motion." After deliberating she adds: "I also see the members of the Ethiopian community as powerful. The size expresses strength, heroism, muscularity, as in socialist realism."

At the end of her fourth year at Shenkar, Takele exhibited five large paintings (250 x 180 cm) at the final exhibition, including a dying white stork being held by a dark-skinned man, a painting that to her symbolized the failure of immigrant absorption.

Another painting reflected the police brutality against the

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Ethiopian-born soldier Damas Pakada that sparked a protest by young people in 2015. In the work we see three men holding down a young man on the ground. Four of her works in the final exhibition were immediately bought by art collector Serge Tiroche; another impressed collector gave her a donation of 19,000 shekels ($5,325).

Nirit Takele's 'Mikveh' (2016).

The Ethiopians' blood donation

In 2016, when she was 30, she completed her studies and her star began to rise. About 10 months later her painting "Mikveh" was acquired for the Israel Museum. The work explores an experience described by an Ethiopian immigrant in a documentary in which she was forced to immerse in a ritual bath under the withering eye of Orthodox rabbis who doubted her Jewishness. The painting shows women whose wet clothes stick to their bodies as they cover their exposed, black bodies with their hands.

In 2017, Takele won Sotheby's Under the Hammer prize for her painting "Shabbat, After the Prayer" as part of the hothouse for independent artists at the Fresh Paint art fair. The work, which depicts the life of the Ethiopian community in Israel, was included in the public auction of Israeli and international art at Sotheby's in New York and went for $6,785, more than the asking price.

In 2018 she had her first solo exhibition in London at the Tafeta

Gallery. About a year later came her first solo exhibition in Israel, “Three Views,” at Tel Aviv’s Hezi Cohen Gallery, which represents her in Israel. At that event she exhibited the painting “Our Blood Donation” – in the ‘80s, Ethiopian Israelis learned that the blood they were donating was being thrown away for fear that it was contaminated.

“I painted women who collect in a vessel drops of blood that drip from the sky,” she says. “To me that expresses power, the ability to become strong and march forward.”

Do you see a change in the establishment’s attitude toward the Ethiopian community in Israel?

“I personally am on a different track, but I don’t see a change .... The absorption failed, in my opinion, and the situation remains exactly the same. For many years the establishment treated the members of the community as passive people. What has changed is the attitude of the community itself: Many people have stopped being dependent on the establishment and have become more independent. That’s how successes have been created."

What would you say to someone who claims that your success reflects the success of absorption?

“I’m successful but it’s an isolated case. The policy toward us doesn’t change, and the successes are in spite of the absorption policy, not thanks to it.”

A year ago she took part in a residency program in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. “I rented a villa for two months, turned a room into a studio and didn’t stop painting,” she says.

“I painted what I saw on an everyday basis. My style became naive and I captured with my paintbrush the life I saw before my eyes. For me it corresponded with the paintings of Reuven Rubin, whom I love. Usually I paint from my imagination, and there I could paint the reality as it was, without relying on the community’s collective memory.

“The stay there expanded my language of color. I left the pastel colors a bit and started using strong colors including red, yellow and green, inspired by the Ethiopian flag and by the colorfulness of that country.”

What was it like to live there?

“In Israel we’ve gotten used to seeing a single Ethiopian reporter on television, or isolated representations of Ethiopians at the office. There they employ many Ethiopians, of all ages. You realize that it’s possible.”

Takele visited her village too: “The idea that the Jews of Ethiopia were brought to Israel from poverty and the desert was shattered – I saw breathtaking nature, rich flora, a flowing river.”

What’s your dream after the exhibitions in New York and London?

“To exhibit in the major museums in Israel – in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.”

Vered Lee
Haaretz Contributor

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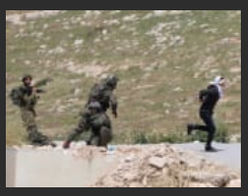

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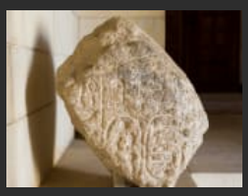

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