

ARABIA BAZAAR ART

Harper's

ISSUE 34



Omar Viktor Diop's
NEW NARRATIVE

ISSN 2225-0166
9 772225 016005 34
AED 30 OMR 3 BHD 3 KWD 2.5 LBP 20,000
INCLUSIVE OF VAT

Floating city

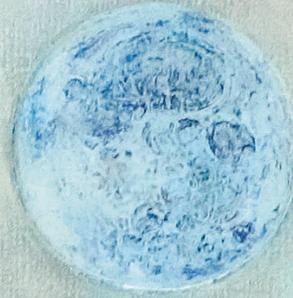
Through his dreamlike portrayals of his beloved city, Ethiopian artist **Addis Gezehagn** tells Rebecca Anne Proctor how Addis Ababa serves as his continual muse



They seem to drift in time and space—colourful little buildings that stand erect and side-by-side. It's as if they were part of a march. Energetically they are stationed in unison and yet in aesthetic they differ size and colour. They are deconstructed and layered, portrayals of urban landscapes that seem to rise above the ground—drifting. This is just one of many scenes from Ethiopian artist Addis Gezehagn's *Floating Cities* series. Upon closer inspection, the viewer will see that they are made by layering magazine cutouts with acrylic paint to blend the boundaries of reality and fantasy in everyday urban life. They also blur the lines between past, present and future to reconfigure a current moment that is somewhere trapped in time—a magical urban space that straddles the rawness of Addis Ababa while also celebrating its fantastical connotations.

A native of Addis Ababa, Gezehagn graduated from the city's esteemed Alle School of Fine Arts and Design with a diploma and BFA in 2011. Long known in his country for his superb abstract skills and evocative renderings of the multifaceted characteristics of the city's architectural structures, Gezehagn had his first international showing with Addis Fine Art in 2017 at 1-54 Contemporary Africa Art Fair in London and in 2018, he had his first solo show at the gallery's space in Addis Ababa and sold out. His mystical urban scenes prompt much interest for their otherworldly qualities and painterly expression. "I used to love drawing as a kid. I loved making mud sculptures and drawing on the asphalt," he remembers. "I would draw in my notebooks or on my hands. I think that developed and turned into what I do now. The artistic ideas I have now have been inside me from the beginning. Cutting and pasting, painting, those were things I did back then. The images of those houses, how they're stacked on top of each other, the way they float, that visual has been a part of me for a long time. I started taking academic art lessons, unifying all those scattered elements. Learning the fundamentals of art in academics made me more disciplined. One of my friend's brothers was an artist. I used to go to his studio and study what he did. He inspired me a lot when I was a kid."

Those initial explorations transformed into the abstract cityscapes that we now behold. Gezehagn's patchwork of colourful doors, gates and architectural structures appear to lead us to a magical network



of living spaces. Organically construed, they are at once rootless and timeless. Their ephemeral nature prompts the viewer to question the lives of their inhabitants. The artist's structures thus examine the personal and the public spaces that make up our lives; the very towers that one-day may crumble, as we too will cease to be. "After I joined Ale I found a lot of inspiration," says the artist. "Teachers I came across were doing incredible things. Academics opened my eyes to a new world. It gave me energy to continue on this path." It was a path down which Gezehagn would find his artistic language. "A city is like music," he says. "There is an element of randomness. The stacking of houses is Addis Ababa. The horizontal sprawl is very real. A floating house is not realistic; it is fantasy. Everybody builds his or her own homes in Addis. They choose their own colours and forms. This lack of uniformity is uniquely Ethiopian. It has variety. It has a lot of colours. So it helps me show things that are brand new, something that lifts off the ground and floats. These visuals are all knit closely together in *Floating Tower*. To me that's the figure of the city."

A visit to Addis Ababa offers the same sense of magic as Gezehagn's works. There's something enchanting in the air despite the rapid changes taking place in Ethiopia. Perhaps it's this intoxicating mix of the ancient with the present, mystical Coptic churches and the altitude that leaves one easily breathless and in awe. The city's cool, balmy air and sweet demeanor of its inhabitants endow it with the feeling of never-never land—a fantasy world like Gezehagn's paintings where past and future cease to exist and cause one to fully embrace the mysticism of the present. That very act may help quell the tension of the city's rapid changes. Gezehagn's homes urge us to think beyond what we see and of homes as functional entities. Here they become metaphors signifying the socio-economic transformations taking place in Ethiopia. "The city is changing very rapidly," says the artist. "I see Addis Ababa as a collection of conflicting and clashing colours, lines and forms that have been built on top of the old city. Residents' lives are very closely woven together. This combination creates a palpably dramatic and artistic layer to these areas. It would be sad to lose this. Concrete towers that may be functional and geometric lack artistry. They are empty and lifeless, their rhythm

Floating City XI
2018. 140x222cm.



Addis Gezehagn
2018



“THE PURPOSE OF ART IS TO REMEMBER AND PRESERVE THE ORIGINAL PRINT.”

predictable. Poor communities have been pushed out of their homes in the name of progress. Their lives have become complicated. Those areas are disappearing more frequently. But the social fabric still remains. The purpose of art is to remember and preserve the original print. I hope the future of Addis is comfortable to the residents without sacrificing the life—the rhythm and colour—of the city.”

Gezehagn’s art thus also serves as way to preserve the beauty of Addis Ababa and the ways of its inhabitants. “People in Addis live on top of each other,” explains the artist. “The fingerprints of residents can be seen everywhere in the city. Houses and buildings that have a unique pattern that can never be found in higher class neighbourhoods. The structure of peoples’ lives share similarities with the structure of their homes. The haphazardness is common throughout. It is unplanned.”

Above: (Left) *Floating Tower IV*; (Right) *Black Floating Tower*
Facing page: *Floating City XIV*, 2019. 162x130cm

istic paintings and I feel that I’m done with that. I want to depict what you could see with your eyes but can’t conceive of otherwise. It’s hard to articulate but the randomness, the madness, I see in these houses is beautiful. The arrangement of the city and these houses is artistically inspiring.”

Through *Floating Cities* the houses of Addis Ababa become like people; they take on life-like meaning. “The houses have their own thoughts, the way they are stacked depicts the life I live,” says the artists. “I know these houses. Seen from the outside, it’s a fantasy. But you have to deviate from the accepted to see something new. That deviation is very important to me.” Gezehagn’s works on canvas are not your everyday landscapes, but lessons in seeing things and life in another way. Just gaze more deeply and presently. ■ addisfineart.com

This organic and almost serendipitous interaction between the buildings and their inhabitants is a trait that also influences the way in which the artist chooses his colours. “The colours in *Floating Towers* that have resonated with me have been antique or earth tones,” says Gezehagn. “Patina shades close to bronze, greenish or brownish shades work well. I can find these in magazines easily. I use them to add spice. They are closer to the colours I want to express. Both *Floating City* and *Floating Tower* are colourful. I find the texture and colour compositions I want in the collage. Sometimes I add colours of the same family to the collage when I paint them. The towers rarely move outside of the colours I initially chose. Other times I layer colours or slightly fade them. I find unexpected colours quite by accident in this process.”

For Gezehagn it’s about finding new perspectives in the most common aspects of everyday life. These could be buildings, roads, people and everyday objects—they all have a life and magic of their own. “I look for new perspectives, new ways of looking, roads I haven’t walked before,” he says. “I’ve explored real-



Addis Gyeduu
2019