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ART

## Emotional complexities of Tizta Berhanu's Heber

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Tizta Berhanu is one of the youngest artists defining contemporary Ethiopian visual arts and is ready to show new works at *Heber*, an exhibition at Addis Fine Art.

The emotional spectrum traversed throughout *Heber* is wide: distance, grief and discontent are explored as much as love, intimacy and forgiveness. There is also a theme of circular composition that gives a feeling of completion to the paintings.

These new works show Tizta's evolution as an artist. The subject matter has broadened from her previous focus on romantic love to include familial affection and community. Two figures usually featured in her paintings have multiplied to include several figures in close physical contact.

Touch is a big part of these paintings. Even figures that appear to be in disagreement are in some kind of physical contact. Complete independence and isolation are not possible in the world Tizta has created. Contact and connection are inescapable parts of being human. Considering the physical distancing required by pandemic restrictions, the affection displayed in Tizta's paintings seem to be from an era we all fiercely miss.

In one particular work titled 'Stability', a female figure stands surrounded by couples in intimate embrace. The figures appear more vertical, as opposed to the seated, round arrangement of other compositions. The dreamy atmosphere captures a particular mood, reminding one of a feeling of isolation and distance in the midst of a crowded social gathering. Even in this loneliness, however, a stray hand reaches from the distance to rest on the central figure's arm.

"I often explore loss and sadness. I think the world is a bit tragic. Happiness isn't strong enough. The strongest emotion is love and it's hard to sum it up in words and I think the visual aspect is far more powerful in showing love."

Tizta is a student of human character. Her paintings are deep explorations of emotional landscape. "I study faces and people's expressions. I take photographs and watch movies to catch emotions I want to explore," she explains.

These paintings are monochromatic in Tizta's signature style. However, they are warmer than her previous works, using orange, yellow and red along with the familiar use of blues and greens. The tones are often deceptive; the colors don't often indicate the particular emotion the figures express.

Expertly capturing complex emotions on a canvas without falling into the usual pitfalls of appearing trite or saccharine, Tizta has succeeded in creating paintings that you can't help but empathize with. They circumvent knee jerk resistance to art that demands empathetic attention and instead invite the viewer to connect with openness.

There is a permanence to the emotional connection you see in these paintings. Her older works felt like stolen embraces but these newer pieces are unbound by time. The bold brush strokes and skillful layering of similar toned colors gives cohesion and depth to these paintings. The shadows and dreamlike quality also add a spectacular atmosphere, invigorating the complexity the paintings indicate.

"People don't see it as a serious occupation. There are a lot of limitations on female artists. I heard women stop working after giving birth and I was wary of that." Tizta produced all the works in *Heber* during her pregnancy and as a new mother. The eagerness to show that it can still be done could have driven her to produce more, she posits.

Partnering with Addis Fine Art has given her more opportunities, says Tizta and presented her work to a larger audience. *Heber* will be her first solo show in Ethiopia in 4 years.

Tizta often cites Tadesse Mesfin as a major influence. The outstanding artist worked as a teacher at Ale School of Fine Art for several decades and his works are experiencing revitalized attention beyond Ethiopia after joining the Addis Fine Art team.

Addis Fine Art has been working to showcase the works of several Ethiopian artists at their London gallery and bring their work to art fairs and biennales that are not typically available to artists working alone.

Tizta Berhanu's *Heber* comes at a time when our connection with each other has become more fraught than ever before. In a time that celebrates individualism and distance marks so much social relations, this exhibition serves as a reminder of the importance of touch and connection. Community and togetherness are brought to the front, urging us to lay bare vulnerabilities and seek comfort in each other.

*Heber* will open on Sunday at Addis Fine Art's new location at Noah Real Estate, Atlas and will remain on view until February 13.