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ART TALK: Tadesse Mesfin, Tsedaye Makonnen, Addis Gezehagn & Tizta Berhanu at Dubai 2021

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Tadesse Mesfin, *Pillars of Life: My Sisters Keeper II*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 165 x 170 cm; Tizta Berhanu, *Rest in the arms of trust*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm; Addis Gezehagn, *Floating City XXII*, 2021, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 122 x 122 cm; Tsedaye Makonnen, *Astral Sea II*, 2019, Acrylic mirror and fabric, 457.2 x 91.44 cm. (Photos courtesy of Addis Fine Art)

Tadius Magazine

By Tadius Staff

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New York (TADIAS) — This month the 14th edition of Art Dubai took place at Dubai International Financial Centre featuring several artists from Ethiopia and the Diaspora including Tadesse Mesfin, Addis Gezehagn, Tsedaye Makonnen and Tizta Berhanu.

The Ethiopian artists were represented by Addis Fine Art — marking the fourth year in a row that the Addis Ababa and London-based gallery had participated in the global art fair, which was also the first major in-person group exhibition of its kind since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below are bios of the Ethiopian artists courtesy of Addis Fine Art:

TADESSE MESFIN B. 1953

Tadesse Mesfin (1953) is a giant of the Ethiopian art scene. He holds a unique position as both a figurehead of the Ethiopian modernist movement, and as a long-time educator through his role as a professor at the influential Alle School of Fine Art and Design in Addis Ababa. Among the generations of painters he has taught are Addis Gezehagn, Ermias Kifleyesus, Merikokeb Berhanu and Tesfaye Urgessa.

Mesfin's latest work is a continuation of his ongoing series celebrating the women who work as small-holder vendors in markets scattered across Ethiopian cities, who can typically be found standing or crouched down with their agricultural produce scattered in front of them, hoping to entice the eye of potential customers. As a visual paean to them, Tadesse places their occupations and personae front and centre, and the viewer is encouraged to appreciate their importance to the communities they serve.

The paintings, at times, resist the limitations of perspective, with the distant figures appearing to float in space between those in the foreground, their forms often abstracted through loosely defined brush strokes. Only their regal, statuesque poses and facial expressions are clearly discernible. Mesfin has stated that his previous fascination with the West-African tradition of mask-making prompted him to create his own "Ethiopian masks" from the expressions found in the faces of the women occupying his canvases. Their pointed chins and captivating stares are a nod to West-African masks; however, the distinctly Ethiopian features give them their own unique appearance. Each figure is carefully weighted in these paintings with a methodical precision born of decades of practise. There is often a central protagonist who is the focal point, slightly off-centre in accordance with the golden section rules of proportion, counter-balancing the figures in the background.

Tadesse Mesfin's artistic career spans more than five decades. His painterly style has been greatly influenced by his early education under Gebre Kiristos Desta, the pioneer of Ethiopian Modernism and from his seven-year stint in the USSR during the 1980s, where he studied architecture and sculpture in St. Petersburg.

TSEDAYE MAKONNEN ETHIOPIAN-AMERICAN, B. 1984



Tsedaye Makonnen. (Photo: The Artist and Addis Fine Art)

Tsedaye Makonnen is a multidisciplinary artist whose studio, curatorial, and research-based practice threads together her identity as a daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, a Black American woman, doula and a mother. Makonnen invests in the transhistorical forced migration of Black communities across the globe and Feminism. Her work is both an intimate memorialization and protective sanctuary for Black lives. She is the recent recipient of a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, DC Public Library Maker Residency and Art on the Vine's Savage-Lewis Artist Residency (Martha's Vineyard).

She has performed at the Venice Biennale, Art Basel Miami, Chale Wote (Ghana), El Museo del Barrio, Fendika (Ethiopia), FIAP (Martinique), Queens Museum, the Smithsonian's and more. Her light monuments memorializing Black womxn exhibited at the August Wilson Center and National Gallery of Art. In 2019 she was on the front cover of the Washington City Paper's People Issue. She recently curated a group show with Washington Project for the Arts in DC titled Black Women as/and the Living Archive and is publishing an exhibition book. This August she is exhibiting for Park Avenue Armory's '100 Years | 100 Women' with NYU Tisch & Deb Willis, which was recently featured in Vogue Magazine.

ADDIS GEZEHAGN B. 1978

Addis Gezehagn (b.1978), a long-time artistic presence in Addis Ababa, is known for portraying the multifaceted characteristics of the city's residents by detailing the external facades of their homes. In his "Floating Cities/ Floating Towers" series, Gezehagn depicts dreamlike deconstructed and layered renderings of the urban landscapes rising above the ground. These compositions made by layering magazine cut outs with acrylic paint, blend the boundaries of fantasy and reality of urban life, blurring the lines between the past, present and future.

Flattened and reductive, Gezehagn's works imagine cityscapes as towers, or patchworks of colourful doors and gates, the architectural structures seeming to signify a natural, organic network of living spaces. The rootless and ephemeral nature of the layered towers call into question the lives of the inhabitants. Examining the personal and public spaces, the works archive walls and towers destined to crumble, tracing a pattern of classism and social injustice. Gezehagn's works urge us to think beyond homes as functional entities and offer commentary on the socio-economic context of urban life.

Gezehagn currently lives and works in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He graduated from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design with a Diploma and BFA in 2011. His first international exhibition was in 2017 at 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London which was received with great acclaim. Since then, he has gone from strength to strength, garnering more international interest after having his first sold out solo show at Addis Fine Art's main gallery in Addis Ababa in 2018 followed by 1-54 Contemporary Art Fair London (2018) and Art Dubai (2019).

TIZTA BERHANU ETHIOPIAN, B. 1991



Tizta Berhanu, *Different Life in a Setting*, 2019. (Addis Fine Art)

Tizta Berhanu was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1991 where she has lived and worked her entire life. She graduated in 2013 from the Addis Ababa University, Alle School of Fine Arts and Design where she studied under the influential modernist painter Tadesse Mesfin.

Trained as a figurative painter, Tizta uses the medium to introspectively delve into human emotions. The figures in her work often express an array of sentiments, some comfort and embrace one another, whilst others are found isolated and searching in the backdrop of the enigmatic canvases. Her paintings are awash with lucid colours which flow across the canvases through the use of heavy undefined brush strokes. By portraying her subjects expressing love, hate, sadness, and loneliness, the observer is invited into moments of vulnerability and intimacy.

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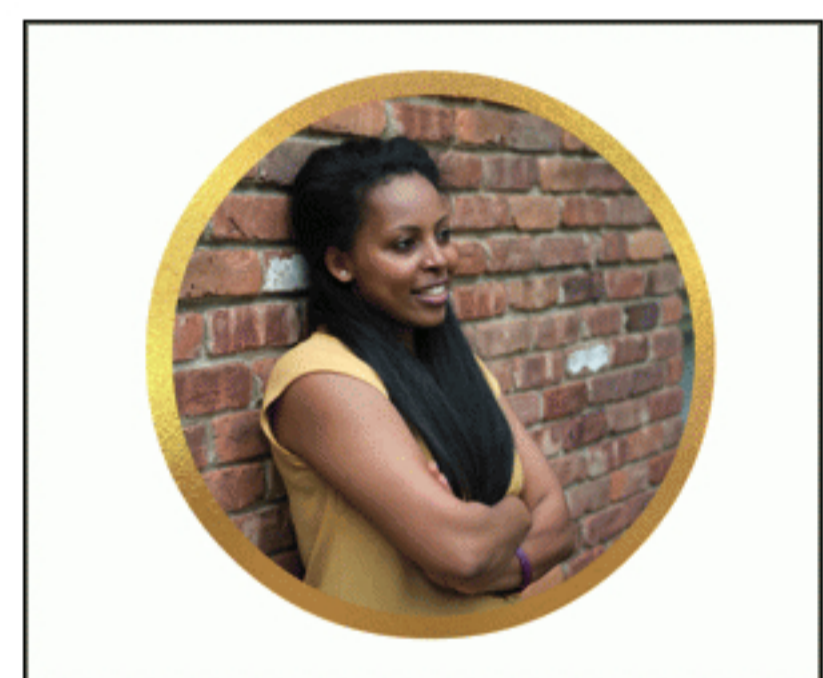


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