Rakeb Sile & Mesai Haileleul *Addis Fine Art gallery in Addis Ababa and London*

Interview
June 2, 2021

We are so excited about this collaboration between CFHILL and Addis Fine Art! As founders of Addis Fine Art, what does 'From Modern to Contemporary' mean in relation to your gallery's mission and the artists you work with?
Rakeb: From Modern to Contemporary is an exciting opportunity for Addis Fine Art to showcase the very best of the artists that we represent and work with. As the gallery has a focused and curated program, the exhibition came about naturally, and reflects the diversity of our roster. We work with established modernists such as Tadesse Mesfin and Lulseged Retta, but also nurture emerging talent from the region, like Tizta Berhanu and Selome Muleta. Bringing all these artists together in one space gives audience an abbreviated look at the history of Ethiopian art and the developing talent in the region today.

You both took very different paths to the art world. Rakeb, I know you worked in the corporate sector before, and Mesai, you had your own gallery. Could you tell me about the history of the gallery, and how you agreed to open a gallery in Addis Ababa and London?
Rakeb: My journey into the art world began as a collector. As an Ethiopian, I took a particular interest in artists from my country, and the more I visited Addis Ababa as a collector, the more enticing the bustling art scene there became to me.

There is an art school in Addis Ababa — it is an important part of this conversation — called the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design. It is the oldest fine art school in the Horn of Africa. I would often visit the school in the hope of learning more about the Addis scene, and I soon became convinced that there was something special and unique about the artists studying and earning their degrees there. As a result of my visits to the school, I eventually met Mesai, who helped me really understand the works I was collecting and their historical contexts.

Mesai: I lived in Los Angeles for forty years, but I first began to take an interest in the arts around twenty-five years ago. I founded my own gallery in LA, which focused on Ethiopian art. To be honest, although there was some degree of interest in the artists I was exhibiting, particularly from the Ethiopian community, wider interest was limited. This experience really taught me a lot about the art world's receptiveness to "African art", and how to run a gallery. It was around 2015 when Rakeb contacted me and first broached the idea of working together. We discussed Ethiopian art and began hashing out plans to open a gallery that would focus on Ethiopian contemporary art. We produced a couple of preliminary projects in London before going ahead and setting up the gallery.

Rakeb: I found Mesai's gallery online, and travelled to LA to meet him. At the time, I needed a mentor who could help me better understand my collection, and Addis Fine Art came about as a result of these conversations. Talking to Mesai made it clear to me how much he knew, and how much the rest of the art world was missing out on. In its infancy, the gallery business mainly revolved around advising and the odd curatorial project. Not long after we founded AFA, we saw interest in African art increase, particularly here in London.

The opening of the gallery happened organically, as Mesai had also recently decided he was ready to move back to Addis Ababa. We could have opened a gallery anywhere in the world, but we both felt that we had to root it in Ethiopia, with a brick-and-mortar gallery, so that we would be able to interact with the artists there in person on a daily basis. The gallery in London was opened to allow us to introduce these artists' work to the international art market. But it is the Addis Ababa gallery that allows this gallery to carry out its real mission: nurturing the artists and the whole ecosystem on the ground.

If you had to pick a single one, what would you say is this gallery's crowning achievement?
Mesai: I have been personally acquainted with many of the artists we work with for 20 years or longer. Seeing the likes of Tadesse Mesfin become successful artists whose works are exhibited internationally is my greatest source of pride. His story was known here in Addis Ababa, as he has been an educator at the Alle School of Fine Art for a long time, but he always wanted to see his beautiful paintings be collected and appreciated by people all over the world.

Rakeb: To echo Mesai's point, I am the most proud of the work this gallery has done to highlight artists from Ethiopia. Ethiopia has a long and illustrious history of painting, and many of its fine painters are alumni from the Alle School of Fine Art who were directly taught by Tadesse. We saw it as our mission to connect these dots for an increasingly engaged international audience and showcase the talent that has emerged from Ethiopia and its diaspora. Today, we have widened our lens and begun to work with more artists from the region, and we also hope to draw attention to the very best artists from neighbouring countries like Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia.

Could you tell me a bit about the theme of the exhibition, and about how you decided on the four sections you allocated the various artists to?
Rakeb: From Modern to Contemporary is a multi-generational survey of contemporary artists from Ethiopia and other countries in the region, including Eritrea and Sudan. The exhibition is structured along thematic and chronological lines, and has been divided into four sections: The Modernists, The Contemporary (mid-career), The Diaspora, and Emerging Artists. This is by no means intended to be a definitive art history of the region, but rather a snapshot of the generations of artists who are working there today, including those artists who Addis Fine Art has been working with since our inception. In many ways, this exhibition is as much a reflection of the gallery itself as of the artists we work with.

The Modernists section encompasses the works of Lulseged Retta and Tadesse Mesfin, two artists who share a common narrative of having Ethiopia to study in the USSR before returning to pursue careers in Ethiopia.

Tadesse Mesfin, *Pillars of Life: Patience II*, 2020, Oil on canvas

Mesai: The artists in The Contemporary section, which is the largest section in the exhibition, are a broad cross-section of painters and sculptors, many of whom studied under the Modernists. Some of the artists in this section remained in Ethiopia, such as Addis Gezehagn and Merikoberh Berhanu – who just recently left Addis for the US, whilst other artists graduated from the school of fine art and moved abroad after finding the art scene here too difficult to navigate.

The Diaspora is very much linked to the previous section, however, in that many of these artists are second-generation migrants. Their experiences of these diasporic artists were shaped by being born and raised in the United States and Europe, and they accordingly address issues related to this hybrid experience of simultaneously having to contend with the realities of racial caste systems and those of being a migrant in a new country.

The final section, The Emerging, is dominated by exciting, female trailblazers of Ethiopian and Sudanese descent, such as Selome Muleta, Tizta Berhanu, and Yasmeen Abdullah. Most of them are in their 20s, and are engaged in actively reshaping the art worlds of their respective homelands, whether they be working in Khartoum or Addis Ababa.

Selome Muleta, *Tabdal XXI*, 2021, Acrylic and oil pastel on canvas, 110 x 100 cm

It sounds like these 19 artists, despite being linked in many ways, have incredibly unique stories. What are some of the topics that the artists in this exhibition address in their art?
Rakeb: There are a myriad of topics under investigation in this exhibition. This diversity of subject matter is further complemented by the diversity of mediums on show, which range from painting, sculpture, video, and installation art to photography.

Artists like Helina Matefiera, Tariku Shiferaw and Tsedaye Makonnen, who are all Ethiopian-American, address every facet of the "Black experience in America". Helina, for instance, creates collages of BIPOC activists on the front lines of the struggle for racial justice in the US. Tariku's *One of These Black Boys* series is a personal look at what it is to be Black in the US; his abstract paintings are, in many ways, personifications of the Black body. Tsedaye's complex, research-based sculptures and textile pieces are physical and metaphysical memorials, commemorating people who lost their lives to state-sanctioned violence.

Mesai: Many of the Ethiopian artists who are based in-country deal with topics familiar to a domestic audience. Tadesse Mesfin's *Pillars of Life* series is an ode to the women who work as small-holder vendors in markets across the country. Addis Gezehagn's layered collage works explore the rapid pace of urbanisation in Addis Ababa, and the reshaping of the skyline as buildings are demolished and built.

We have two artists of Sudanese descent, Atong Atem and Yasmeen Abdullah, whose work we are very excited to be able to include. Atong, who is a Sudanese-Australian, uses portraiture as a means to explore migrant narratives, postcolonial practices in the diaspora, and identity. Yasmeen, who is based in Khartoum, creates dream-like figurative paintings, many of which are based on the writings of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

Rakeb: The beauty of this exhibition lies in the diversity we have on display. Artists of African descent are often shoehorned into broad or reductive categories like "African" or "Black" art. This exhibition counters the notion that these artists ought to create works that look some specific way, and shows that these terms are actually redundant, as artists of African descent work in all mediums and address all topics. Moreover, it is exciting for us to get to demonstrate just how unique the art that comes out of this part of the world is. We have a long history of abstract painters, so expect to see many abstract compositions that require some scrutiny before the meanings behind them can be unearthed. I'm thinking particularly of the works of Meriokeberh Berhanu, Addis Gezehagn, Ermias Kifelyesus and Tariku Shiferaw here.

What are your expectations for this collaboration with CFHILL?
Rakeb: I'm looking forward to seeing the local Ethiopian, Eritrean and Sudanese communities get engaged. One of the reasons why we founded this gallery was our desire to create a platform that would allow artists from our region to be seen by people of Ethiopian heritage. I'm eager to get feedback from people from the local community, who may not be aware of the beauty of art from the Horn of Africa and its diaspora.

I am, of course, equally excited to introduce all visitors to the amazing works we have on display here. Hopefully, they will leave with a newly discovered interest in the culture and stories on display. People may even see some connections between artists of Ethiopian descent, such as Merikokeb Berhanu, and renowned Swedish painters, such as Hilma af Klint. Their paintings are equally steeped in symbolism, and they both use imagery taken from the natural world.

— Rakeb Sile & Mesai Haileleul Addis Fine Art gallery in Addis Ababa and London. Interview. June 2, 2021.