

ArtMarket-BlogMag

by *Riccarda Mandrini*

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Art Gallery. Addis Fine Art. Addis Ababa. Ethiopia

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Dawit Abebe, 'Rank & Providence IV', detail, 2015. Courtesy of Addis Fine Art.

Art galleries are a hotbed for talent in modern and contemporary art because of their pursuit and support of new artists. This is no less true of Addis Fine Art in Addis Ababa, founded by collector and project manager Rakeb Sile; and by curator and dealer Mesai Haileleul, a leading figure in the Addis Ababa cultural scene. Their work has given Ethiopian artists the opportunity to be recognized globally. We met with Rakeb Sile.

When and why did you decide it was the right moment to open an art gallery in Addis Ababa?

Addis Fine Art started in 2013. It was a response to requests for advice related to Ethiopian artists directed to both Mesai Haileleul (AFA co-founder) and I from institutions, galleries and individual collectors from all over. We realised that, whilst independent art institutions were increasing in number across Africa, there was a distinct shortage of Ethiopian art spaces, especially ones which actively engage with the wider international contemporary art world.

After three years of art consulting, we decided that we had to open a gallery emerging from a local space in the heart of Ethiopia's capital. We wanted to champion modern and contemporary art from Ethiopia and its diaspora and simultaneously engage with global art market; to become a local space and international platform for artistic expression from this region.



Dawit Abebe, 'Rank & Providence IV', 2015. Courtesy of Addis Fine Art.

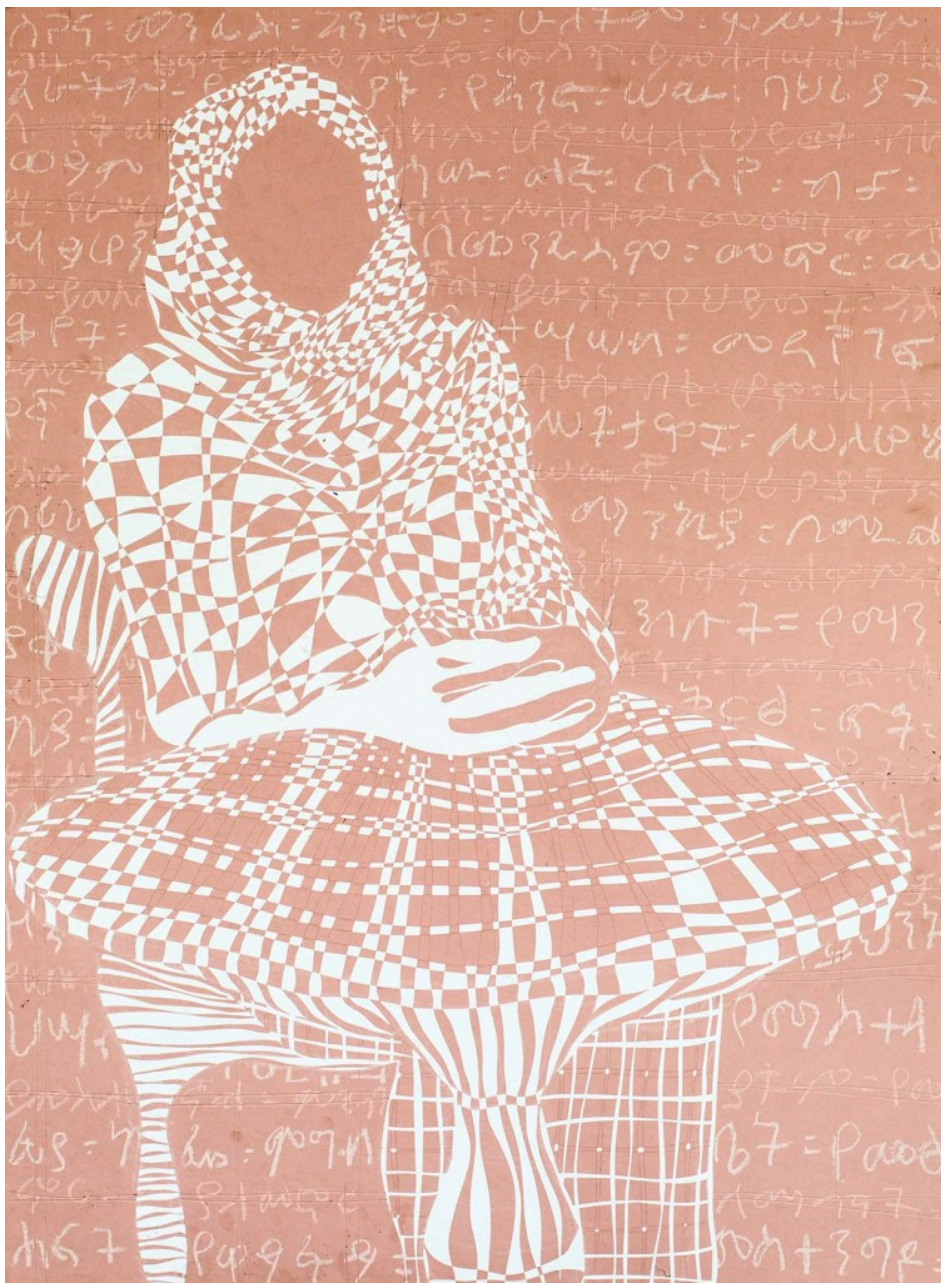
Would you describe the contemporary art scene in Addis Ababa?

The number of local artists invited to participate in art fairs and to show their work in prominent galleries and museums around the world is unprecedented.

International collectors are noticing and buying, whilst local collectors are also spending significant amounts on artwork, which was unthinkable just a decade ago. The growing public participation in art related events is also very encouraging. The youth of the city, in particular, are the most visible participants, and the most receptive to new forms of expression that challenge traditional norms. We are particularly excited by a new generation of artists from this region such as Dawit Abebe, Ephreme Solomon, Micheal Tsegaye, Leikun Nahusenay, Tamrat Gezahegne, Robel Temesgen, Aida Muluneh and many others who are influenced not only by their local contexts, but also use the exchange of international information and ideas as part of the creative process.

Can we talk about the work of the artists and the content of their works?

Our current show (on until 11 June), *Process and Progression* is by a very exciting young artist, Leikun Nahusenay (b.1982 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia). Though wide-ranging in his choice of medium, Nahusenay's exploration of the world's opposing forces (light, dark; flesh, spirit; good, evil) and the futility of their reconciliation, grounds the collection of works. Using the checkerboard motif, Nahusenay probes the Biblical passage which illustrates the drunken gambling and revelry that took place underneath the cross during the Crucifixion. Using rows upon rows of black and white squares and etchings, he takes this meditation to a more secular context, as the alternating squares sinuously trace the calm repose of a woman seated behind a café table, clasping her mobile phone. In his photography, the use of double exposure, collage, and scratch-and-peel methods allows Nahusenay to create irreproducible, dreamlike worlds in which the spiritual ostensibly strains against, and spills into, the physical. The ghostlike rendering of a busy street scene hollows out the solid but battered exterior of a green and yellow public bus, in turn allowing us a glimpse into its inner function. A colorful market scene curdles and coagulates—its participants juxtaposed against the raw grains they will soon consume. Nahusenay's fascination with life's cyclical nature, and its expression in physical spaces, is evident throughout the collection. Informed by the simple yet layered, circular structure of a traditional hut, his earliest works feature interposed cardboard shapes, each of various textures, sizes, and shades of taupe, suggesting movement, and a certain playfulness of perspective. This playfulness seeps into other pieces where Nahusenay quite literally offers us a window into a dark, tenuous landscape, albeit through the protective shield of a woman's shawl.



Leikun Nahusenay, 'Body vs Soul', 2016. Courtesy of Addis Fine Art.

Our first show was the group show, *Addis Calling*, which ran from 9 January to 26 March. We aimed to celebrate the diversity of artistic practice here in Ethiopia through the presentation of works by seven contemporary artists who live and work in the capital city Addis Ababa. The exhibition was a vibrant mix of painting, photography and mixed media. Dawit Abebe's (b. 1978, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) new series Rank and Providence, explores the relationship between society and those in positions of authority. His work is concerned with the visible imbalances of power in modern life. Yosef Lule (b. 1977, Assela, Ethiopia) explores the impact of urbanization on the traditions, religions, and lifestyles in his home city of Addis Ababa. Tamrat Gezahegne (b. 1977, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) studied under the esteemed Ethiopian artist Mezgebu Tesema and is known for the bold use of colour and the repetition of motifs that define his compositions. Gezahegne's inspiration comes from the customs and traditions of indigenous tribes of the Omo Valley in

Southern Ethiopia. Emanuel Tegene's (b. 1985, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) pieces explore changing cultural dynamics in society and are deeply rooted in his own personal encounters. Mixed media artist Workneh Bezu (b. 1978, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) draws inspiration for many of his compositions from his own dreams. Figures in Bezu's paintings are often immersed in a supernatural world. Michael Tsegaye (b. 1975, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) has an attentive voice in recording and documenting his rapidly changing surroundings. Series such as 'Future Memories' display his grasp of change and the shifting topography of the city over the last decade.

Can you give us an idea of the range of prices for the artists you represent as a gallerist?

Currently, our prices generally range from USD \$500 – USD \$10,000.



Leikun Nahusenay, 'Colour of Ethiopia', Somali, 2014. Courtesy of Addis Fine Art

How did you choose the artists you represent? And what about the work of women artists?

The artists we work with tend to be contemporary artists, first and foremost. The fact that they are of Ethiopian origin is a point of departure, not the whole story.

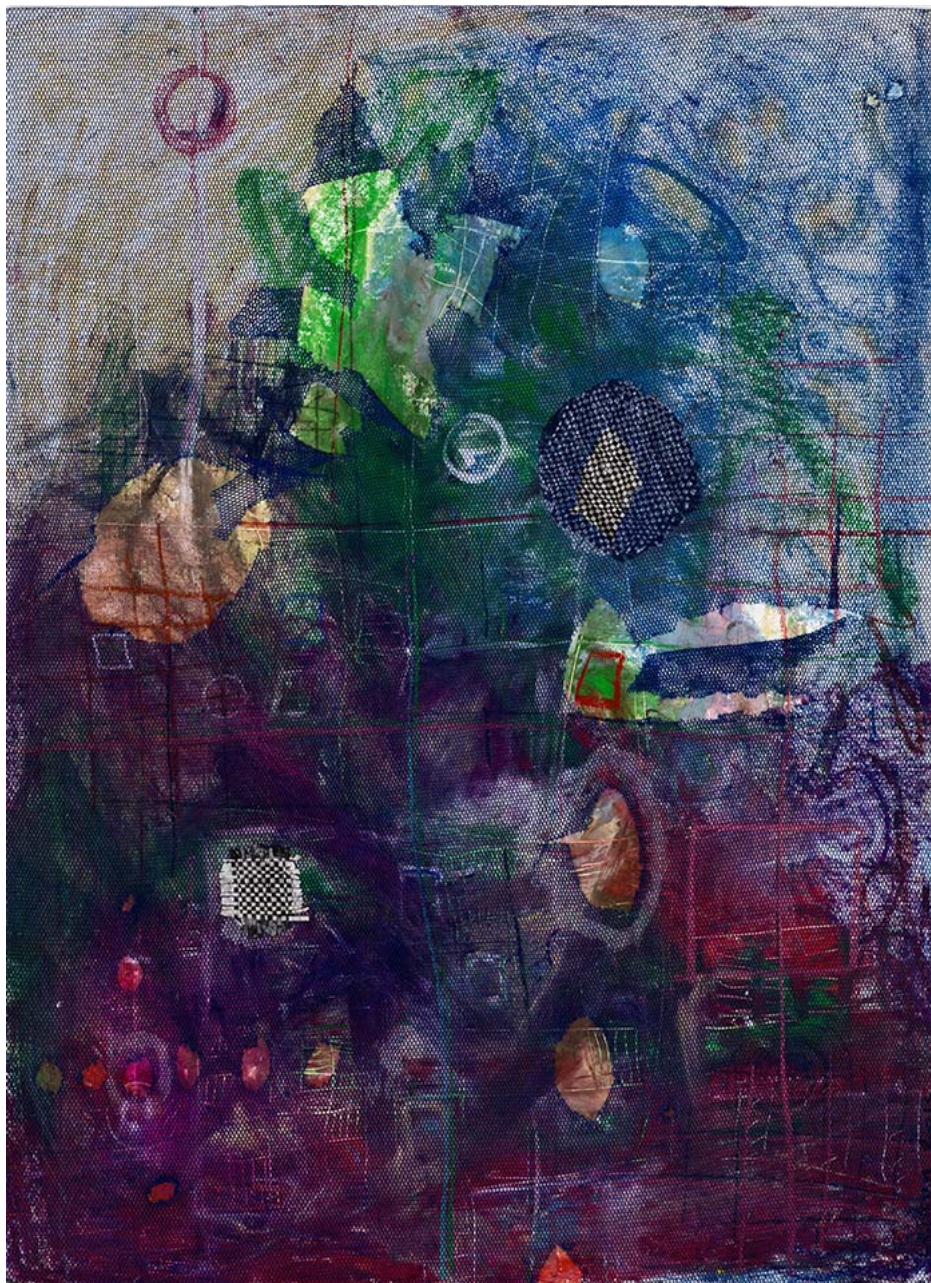
Some artists challenge the assumed “African” aesthetic and some use the rich tapestry of their cultural heritage as an integral part of their work. Regardless of how their art is expressed, the artists we work with are determined to convey their personal narratives and develop their creative practices in an increasingly interconnected world. We have yet to feature a female artist in our short history, but we have plans to do so in the near future.

As a gallerist do you only work with Ethiopian artists?

At the moment, our aim is to champion contemporary art from Ethiopia and the diaspora. However, we intend to enrich our programme by initiating collaborations and dialogues with artists, curators and practitioners from the continent and internationally.

Who is your audience, the visitors to the galleries?

Addis Ababa is second only to Geneva in its number of international offices and NGOs, which makes the city very diverse and transient. The presence of this large expatriate community lends support to the local art scene. We also have a long history of locals collecting art so there are number of collectors who we attract. We also attract the increasing number of visitors to the country, be it for business or leisure.



Leikun Nahusenay, 'Beyond', 2015, Courtesy of Addis Fine Art

The last question is about Modern East African and Ethiopian art, a segment that is gaining more and more attention on the international art market, especially in auctions. Can you please talk about the Modern artists you represent?

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church played a major role in shaping the style of early Ethiopian modernists. The first group of artist who led the movement were Ale Felege Selam, Afeework Tekle, Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta. However from the mid 1970s, Ethiopia was in the grip of communist rule for over two decades, which greatly inhibited artists from practicing freely like their counterparts across the continent and beyond. Fortunately, with the persistent work of the only Art School in the country, Alle Felege Selam School of Fine Art and Design, and with the recent addition of new private art schools; Ethiopia is experiencing a resurgence in artistic expression and appreciation.

This year, we have a group show planned dedicated to living modernists who have elevated modern Ethiopian art to new heights, which should get them the international recognition they deserve. In addition, we continue to work with Wosene Worke Kosrof (b.1950), who has had a very successful international career spanning forty years.

www.addisfineart.com



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Daniel Buren, 2007
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Dak'Art 2016
12° Biennale de Dakar

“Dak'Art – Biennale de Dakar”

03 May – 10 May 2016

19, Avenue Hassane II Dakar,
Dakar, Sénégal 65654sn

Exhibition of the Week



Cappadox Festival 2016 – “Let us cultivate our garden” courtesy of Maider Lopez, 25
PEOPLE ON 25 HILLS

“Cappadox Festival 2016 – Let us cultivate our garden”

19 – 22 May 2016, art programme until 12 June 2016

Artwork of the Week



PEFURA

“Next stop Dak’Art”

2016

Courtesy of the artist

Artwork of the Week



Santu Mofokeng

“Eyes Wide Shut”

Motouleng Cave Clarens (2004)

dalla serie ‘Ishmael’

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Images courtesy Lunetta Bartz,

MAKER, Johannesburg

Santu Mofokeng è il vincitore del Premio Internazionale per la Fotografia 2016, promosso da Fondazione Fotografia Modena e Sky Arte HD e Unicredit.

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