

# THE NEXT CANVAS (/)

Sensing The Word - The Inspirations Behind Wosene Worke Kosrof's Artworks (/Ethiopian-Art-Blog/2015/5/22/Sensing-The-Word-The-Inspirations-Behind-Wosene-Worke-Kosrofs-Artworks)

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Photo. Wosene.com (<https://wosene.com>)

By the time his mother died in 1998, Wosene Worke Kosrof was already an internationally established artist known for his inventive use of the Amharic (<http://www.ethnologue.com/language/amh>) script. However, the intimacy of the written word was brought home to him when his mother learned, in the late years of her life, to write her name. Watching her discovery, her play with the letters and delight in their beauty, renewed his own attachment to script, not just for his art, but as a deeply resonate form of cultural memory.

*"My mother learned to read a little at the end of her life. She had always known the beauty of the letter, but when she learned to sign her name, they really came alive. That assured me, to see my mother so close to writing, and it made me think how script had always been - familiar. She told me the characters were dressed up, some in nice clothes, they reminded her of eucalyptus or oak trees; or maybe she saw animals in them. This affected me deeply. When I gave my mother a canvas and asked her to write, she replied, "But I don't know how to". No, you do, I said. Take a few colors. But she took black. She drew the letters she knew and liked and kept repeating and repeating them. Then she started to distort them, to break them up. I asked her what she was thinking, "its like a dream", she said... Abstraction is a dream world - broken pieces coming together, creating new layers of reality. Because of my mother I've become even more fascinated in the deep play of the words; and as my life changes they tell my experience... they go back in time and they move forward. They travel with me".\** And so does his mother. Breaking with Ethiopian tradition, Wosene has taken a middle name - Worke; it is his mother's name. (Allyson Purpura, Ph.D. Independent Curator, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2006)

In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, ecologist and philosopher David Abram has suggested that all language and alphabets arise out of specific physical landscape, but they can also become an unconscious replacement for that landscape. Language and writing can become a veil between us and the sensual or natural world, replacing our direct contact with that world with a text. We then live vicariously through our written language and have lost contact with a great living mystery, or in Abram's words, the "*spell of the sensuous*." Using the Amharic alphabet and written language as his foundation, Wosene takes us on the return journey of making the script/word/letter become landscape again, not its replacement.

Exploring the temporal and spatial dimensions of script has led Wosene to experiment with its deployment in constructions of place and identity. In his art, Amharic (official Ethiopian script) becomes an elastic means for communicating across the limits of time, place, and culture.

In his hands, letters become distorted, impressionistic shadows of their former selves, animating his canvases with pseudo-script that, as he puts it, "is divested of literal meaning, and transformed into a visual language that can be understood internationally".

*"I'm working to when these writings become a condition in which everyone of us tends to speak to it in all kinds of ways. Either we smell something in memory where we travel into space, or in a way we hear sound out of it. And, its a continuous agitation. Or is it a trumpet, a drum or a classical African instrument? Or could that be a Chinese instrument, or anything? I'm concerned with how these writings are really informing by mimicking how our position and place in memory is telling us something. How it is trying to tell us where we should go. All of that is, literally, imbedded in these writings. I try to tell my Ethiopian friends that I'm not writing this for you to read. That this is an old concept of illusion, a concept of exaggeration and distortion. Anyone could stand in front of this painting and absorb its message in the sense of being into it, or being able to read it and going into time and space wit it", says Wosene.*

Wosene's concern with the process inside his paintings has helped him develop personal language of visual relationships. Not only are his paintings composed of specific types of symbols, letters, or words, but these elements have a relationship with each other. Working like a choreographer in dance, Wosene is playing with the language of their relationship. For Wosene, the suggestion of a dance relationship is an illusion he has created by taking the alphabet out of its "box in which it can't breath", out of its prison, and returned it to a spatial freedom in which it can move, interact and improvise. (C. Daniel Dawson Independent Curator New York City, 2006)



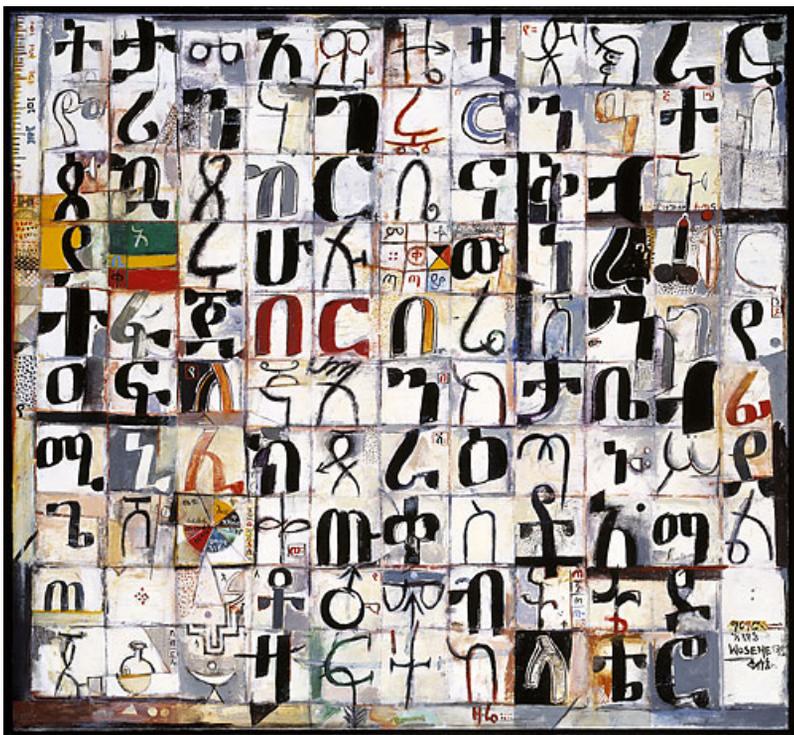


Masks of the Dancers, 1999.



In the Garden, 2001.

*In addition to the fragments of Ge'ez script, Wosene's paintings reveal patchworks of geometric ornament and bands of interlace (harag) used to frame illuminated manuscripts (see artworks above)*



*The artist's play with the grid also recurs in much of his work - the grid of his childhood, which he used for printing his first Amharic characters (see above)*

While Wosene's Ethiopian descent informs his practice in significant ways, it does not define him or his art as essentially 'African' or 'Ethiopian'. The tendency to see the work of non-Western contemporary artists as representative of the artist's culture of origin not only limits the narrative possibilities of the work; it also locks the artist out of time and place, reducing him, his agency, his very

history, to a stereotype that privileges tradition over modernity, the local over the global, and permanence over transience. If anything, it is precisely because Wosene's work is loosely biographical that it cannot be reduced to any one place, impulse, or time. Having lived outside Ethiopia since the late 1970s, the artist draws from all the places he has called home, and as such, he resists fixed and facile labels of identity. (*Allyson Purpura, Ph.D. Independent Curator University of Michigan Museum of Art Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2006*)



Lady Liberty. 1986.





Words of Justice, 2002.

\*All quotes are taken from *Words from Spoken to Seen - The Art of Wosene Worke Kosrof* - Curated by Allyson Purpura and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz.

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