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GIRMA BERTA

Words Metasebia Yoseph

The in-demand Ethiopian artist presents Moving Shadows, his unique perspective on street life in Addis Ababa, at AKAA

Amidst the bustle and noise of Addis Ababa, a mild-mannered artist is quietly capturing people as they go about their daily lives. Equipped only with his iPhone, he and his lens bear witness to the invisible within Ethiopia's capital city. Girma Berta, a 26 year-old graphic designer and photographer, is gaining critical acclaim for his portraits of the seemingly ordinary and working class in Africa's second most populous country. His self-taught technique involves extracting cutouts from his street photography, manipulating them to isolate the central figures and then setting them against digitally created backdrops. His entire creative process from capture to edit is produced using his mobile phone, and then posted to his strong fan base on Instagram (which is 22.3k and rising).

Like most African millennials, social media has provided the ideal platform for documenting his visual

testimonies along with a built-in audience for his creative imaginings. Instagram was the first place the artist felt comfortable enough to publicly share his photographic experiments and is also where he has received his big break. This year Berta was awarded a Getty Images grant in support of photographers who use Instagram to share stories about underrepresented communities around the globe. Getty and Instagram will present his project Moving Shadows at AKAA, a new contemporary African art and design fair in Paris in November. "Through my work on Instagram, I wish the world stares into the eyes of a face of Addis Ababa, the city where I was born and where I grew up," says Berta. "The beautiful, the ugly and all that is in between."



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picture
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The gallery’s emergence has signalled a changing

tide in Ethiopia's cultural landscape. No longer are the literati and creative classes looking externally for validation – instead they're developing significant works and reaffirming them within their own contexts first. The results are provocative and curatorially sound, and collectors have begun to take notice. Berta's first solo exhibition is yet to be scheduled and yet his work is already in high demand.



What makes his imagery so captivating is that they are frozen spotlights; technicolour vignettes of the marginalised and elderly crafted in a style all his own. He says “the best camera is the one that’s always with you” and he’s been able to explore this hidden talent due to the discreet and innocuous nature of his phone. Berta is acutely aware of the cultural aversion Ethiopians have to photography. Photography is often perceived as being exploitive and only recently began re-emerging as a popular fine art and advertising medium. But for Berta, “a picture not viewed isn’t a picture but a lifeless thing.”

If this is true, what are the implications for the unseen and the hidden; the millions of voiceless faces that dredge onward for survival, and are often reduced to statistical obscurity in the name of development politics. Who gives them new life? Who collects their stories? Berta is part documentary photographer, part fine art storyteller. He is able to capture the mundane and reframe our gaze, revealing details we would have overlooked if not for his unique perspective. He is also working on a book that delves deeper into this definitive style of work while exploring other lesser-known parts of Ethiopia.

***AKAA** runs from 11 to 13 November at Carreau du Temple, Paris*

Metasebia Yoseph** is a culture and design enthusiast living and working in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She is creative director at Gallery 26, founder of **Design Week Addis Ababa**, and author of **A Culture of Coffee

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