

The Guardian



Interview

Ethiopia seen outside the box

By Caitlin Chandler for Africa is a Country, part of the Guardian Africa Network

Michael Tsegaye turned to photography because of an allergy to oil paint. Caitlin Chandler talks to him about 'African art', Renoir and his upcoming exhibition in Oslo

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It's hard to catch photographer Michael Tsegaye; photography jobs frequently take him to remote parts of Ethiopia, while his personal work graces urban art meccas such as Paris, New York and Bamako. He's soon Scandinavia-bound; Oslo will host his next exhibition later in September.

Luckily Tsegaye recently had time to meet for a macchiato at the Lime Tree café in the Bole neighborhood of Addis Ababa. He grew up in Bole, before the area became home to the never-ending construction of shiny new office buildings and restaurants. Originally a painter, Tsegaye turned out to be allergic to oil paint, and switched to photography in 2003. Photography brought him out of the studio and into constant negotiation with places and people; he says he's never looked back.

Tsegaye's photographic series range from tackling social issues such as climate change to pondering space and time across Ethiopia. He has worked in a variety of mediums and formats, and is increasingly in demand from commercial and non-profit clients. Despite exhibiting

around the world, Tsegaye regularly debuts work in his hometown. We chatted over coffee about how the media portrays African artists, which subjects catch his attention, and what reaction to his photos has surprised him the most.

In the bio on your website, you say that you try to escape being pigeonholed. Why is defying expectations important to you? And who usually does the pigeonholing?

There is a certain expectation when you are called an African artist or an African photographer; it puts you in a kind of box. So for me I'm here, I'm in Ethiopia, I'm in Africa - but that doesn't mean I do a certain kind of photography style. I can work anywhere, and my work should first reflect me as an artist - not as an African or Ethiopian.



Ankober (2007). Photograph: Michael Tsegaye

Your website offers a glimpse into your portfolio. For each series there is a short introduction but besides that, the viewer is left to interpret what he or she is looking at. Are you saying: this is art, and you, the viewer are free to interpret it as you want?

Some works on the website I put just for the viewer to see and imagine, but mainly the work is not meant to be presented online. I do exhibitions, where the photographs are the right size and accompanied by lighting. For exhibitions I also provide more explanation, and the picture becomes stronger, you can communicate more, interact with it. The website is just a glimpse.

Do you work with digital, film or both? How do you decide which medium fits the topic? When to use color or b&w?

For jobs I do digital but otherwise it depends on the subject. For Future Memories, the Addis series, I think the title and the concept led me to shoot in black and white film. If it's a long-term project I can process film whenever I want.

In a previous interview, you mentioned you prefer not to focus on poverty, yet poverty is also present in many of your photographs. How do you navigate this balance?

Ethiopia is viewed in many mediums as a poor country, with hungry people. I don't want to show that. It's not only that we have poverty; there is life, there is everything here like any other country. I know that maybe it sells if I do poverty, but that shouldn't make it the focus. At least that's not my focus.

How do you decide to work on a particular topic?

It depends. Sometimes when I travel I see things and it builds up to a story. Or I decide to take on something that's a big issue here - like for example when I did the Working Girls series which is about prostitution. Prostitution and HIV are big issues here, but I wanted to explore

what it is like on the inside, what their daily life is like. Mostly we see how they are dressed, that they are out in bars, but there are other layers to every person.

So sometimes it's a social issue I explore and sometimes it's more personal - if I'm happy or depressed, certain things come out. It's like solving a problem; you have an issue and you try to work with it and see where it goes.

In Working Girls, you document the lives of young women sex workers in Addis. How did the project originate, and for how long did you take photos? How did you gain the trust of the young women? Did you show the women the photos; if so, what were their reactions?



Working Girls II (2008), which focuses on solidarity and humour among sex workers. Photograph: Michael Tsegaye

I was introduced to the women by a local NGO and I stayed with them for two weeks. I went in the morning to their place and I left when they started work at the bar. Most of my day, every day, was with them. It was a bit difficult in the beginning - they didn't know what I was like, they didn't trust me. I didn't even take pictures the first two days, I just sat with them, and then when they started trusting me I started taking pics.

They came to the opening of the exhibition at the Harmony Hotel in Addis. They liked the photos, and they explained them to the audience.

I showed it also in Paris, and then the photos went online. There was only one guy who didn't like the idea and the subject; he said Ethiopia is not like this, Ethiopia has many beautiful things. I think that was the only negative reaction - many people liked that it showed a social issue that should be discussed.

What is the public reaction to sex work as a practice in Addis, and Ethiopia more broadly?

I think partly sex work is accepted here, because it's growing, the number of people involved in it. But it's a mixed reaction; it's accepted but it's not accepted. For the girls, most of them change places - if the girl is from Addis she has to work in Awasa, because she doesn't want her friends or neighbours to know.

If the girls are working in a bar, they say it's usually safe. But some of them are working in the streets, so sometimes a guy will come with a gun who doesn't want them to use a condom and force them [to have sex].

In several series you show the affects of development in Ethiopia through aerial shots which convey the magnitude of the changes, including the way the urban

landscape in Addis is changing - Bole road was recently constructed and debuted for the African Union's 50th Anniversary (although now appears under construction again), new apartment complexes are going up and older houses torn down. What do you hope your photos reveal about these changes?

I think in those photos I wish to show "know what you have when you lose it." Addis is 120 or 150 years old, so there is a culture that developed in those village areas that were first settled [where there are now new condominiums going up] like Arat Kilo, so when they demolish them and move people to the new apartment buildings, there are certain things that go with them, some of which fit or don't fit with this new kind of living structure.

For example in Sengatera, there is this main street, and along with it there used to be shops and garages. People used to collect discarded carton boxes from the shops to use as kindle for making injera. Older people lived off washing clothes and selling injera. The neighbourhood had its own system and social fabric; the residents helped each other out, they shared shiro, they called each other for a coffee. Everybody knew everybody. So when people are taken out of that system and put in different places, it destroys the system that existed. For me it's interesting to follow the people and see how they develop into the new system. And what they take with them.



Working Girls II. Photograph: Michael Tsegaye

Ethiopia, like most countries, has a complex religious history and many people identify as religious. In the series Chasms of the Soul you explore customs around commemorating life via photographs that are overlaid on gravestones. In North Road, you show gatherings of Christian monks; many of the photos in Ankober are grainy and partially obscured, lending them a mystical air. How do you approach religion in your work?

When I do personal work for me it's all my experience. I went to a Catholic school and my family is Orthodox Christian. I'm also influenced by the Amharic literature, and poetry I grew up reading. The sense of spirituality in my work comes not only from religion, but from my sense of Ethiopia and how I perceive it.

What is the photographer community like in Ethiopia? Where have you found supporters and colleagues? What are the challenges?

I don't hang out with photographers, I hang out with artists, painters. I come from an art background, and my friends are artists. Taking pictures is easy but producing an exhibition, producing a book, printing - those things can be difficult here. It can be hard to find a good space to exhibit.

What influenced you to become an artist?

I don't know. I used to draw when I was a child. We used to have in our house books of Lenin and Marx, and on the covers they had portraits, and I would copy them. We also used to get a calendar from this guy who worked for a pharmaceutical company, and the calendar had pictures of Picasso and Dali. In school I illustrated bible stories.

But beyond that I had no exposure to art. After high school I joined Addis Ababa University in Sidist Kilo to study economics. And then I quit - it didn't make sense to me. I told my mom I wanted to be an artist, and in our family I had a relative, Eshetu Tiruneh, who was an artist, so she took me to him and he was the one who trained me. I used to go to his office and he would show me slides, show me how light and shadow work. After that I joined an art school, but he was the one who first opened my eyes.

Which photographers do you admire, and any particular series of theirs?

I don't follow photographers; I tend to see painting more than photography. I like Vermeer, Rembrandt, the abstract expressionists. Also Egon Schiele and the Russian painters.

You've had exhibitions around the world. Has anyone's reaction to your photos ever surprised you? If so, how so?

If I sell, sometimes I get surprised.

What are you currently working on, and what is your next project?

My next exhibition is in Oslo, of the graveyard pictures series Chasms. Also my Addis Ababa project is ongoing. There's also a long-term project I'm starting to work on more - portraits of older people across Ethiopia, all in close-ups. I like portraits and I think with older people you can see more - all the wrinkles.

With portraits, it's a strange experience - you kind of invade someone's privacy and they're uncomfortable, but after a while they become comfortable. Maybe they don't have a choice - the mask is open and you really see them, you see what's there.

To see more of Michael Tsegaye's photographs, visit www.michaeltsegaye.com

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