

WOSENE WORKE KOSROF

From a very young age Wosene Worke Kosrof would spend every minute of his spare time drawing whatever caught his eye. Encouraged by his older brother to pursue his gift he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, where he received his bachelor degree in 1972. He studied at a time when Ethiopian modernists Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian were teaching a new visual vocabulary of iconography, symbolism and technique. Having both studied in Europe they were regarded as pioneers and fathers of the Ethiopian modernist movement. They did not engage in art as a mere academic exercise, nor did they uncritically accept what they had learned of the western tradition. They would go on to have a profound impact on a new generation of Ethiopian artists.

During his studies Wosene gravitated more and more towards abstraction and began to consider his practice within the classical and modern Ethiopian art and within the broader art histories of Africa and the global contemporary world. Ethiopia being one of the oldest Christian countries in the world has a very old artistic tradition which has been dominated for centuries by religious iconography. Wosene's first abstract works were deconstructing traditional religious imagery. These were exhibited in 1973 at the Belvedere Gallery in Addis Ababa where they were viewed as challenging the integrity of Ethiopian Ecclesiastical arts. At this time he also started experimenting with the Amharic script as a visual tool.

Wosene left Ethiopia in 1977 and in 1978, under sponsorship of the Ford Foundation, he enrolled in the College of Fine Arts at Howard University where he studied under Skunder Boghossian. The African American artist Jeff Donaldson was the chairman of the University at that time and he encouraged Wosene to explore further the use of Amharic script in his art. In 1980 he took his MFA in painting and drawing. His first major solo exhibition in the US in 1987 situated his work within African and global contexts and signalled his confidence engagement with Amharic script. The exhibition contained paintings, mixed media and sculptural works. It addressed global and local themes like famine, social solidarity, Martin Luther King jr and Jazz as well as the vocabulary of Ethiopian art and African art in general. He would explore these themes throughout his career using different methods as his expression.

Like El Anatsui he was an early adapter of reusing and repurposing metals and other materials in his sculptures and mixed media works. Wosene notes that his interest in recycled materials celebrates African ingenuity in creating something new out of something discarded, but it also serves as the artist's gentle commentary on consumerism and cultural imperialism. In the 90's he started solely focussing on painting continuing his exploration of motifs and colours connected to his native Ethiopia and his adopted home in the United States. His admiration for artists such as Paul Klee, Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning furthered his exploration of abstraction and abstract expressionism.

Wosene is the first painter to transform Ethiopian Amharic script forms into what can be described as contemporary abstraction. Amharic is derived from the ancient language Ge'ez, one of the few written systems indigenous to Africa, and while script has been in use in Ethiopian art for centuries, in conjunction with Coptic icon paintings, Wosene has been the first contemporary artist to develop the forms into a suitably current painterly language. His visual vernacular thus combines both language forms and visual ones, in ways that summon up the history of recent non-objective painting in America, as well as the archaic script used in Ethiopia.

Because Wosene has spent considerable time in America, his influences include evidence of abstract expressionism. One of his most ambitious recent works, is *America: The New Alphabet*. Painted in 2017, and attaining the considerable dimensions of 200 by 355 centimeters, this remarkable painting belongs very much to the New York School, its mixture of freedom and disciplined measure makes it an artwork of distinction. Wosene's art makes use of the visual forms of language, even

as those forms refuse to cohere into linguistic meaning. But, at the same time, the denotative implications inherent in the fractured script the artist uses enlarge and intensify the visual interest of his work.

Another important source of inspiration for Wosene since his early days as an art student in the 60's has been American jazz. He sees his own paintings as informed by exploratory, improvisation processes that mimic the immediacies of jazz. In the artist's paintings, his audience recognizes the tension between autonomous assertion and the inherent discipline of historical language. In regard to the script images, the artist states: "I elongate, distort, invert, dissect, and recombine their shapes and volumes, and turn them inside out to discover their moods, tempers, and personalities."

So the script used by Wosene is being treated, at least in the course of the painting activity, as a visual language, rather than a literary one. But the two kinds of expression coexist in the final version of the work, demonstrating Wosene's highly successful method, in which he combines form and meaning to create an airy, impromptu structure. Working with acrylics, which dry quickly and enable the artist to revise his compositions, Wosene employs a broad palette, ranging from bright hues to slight shadings of monochromatic color to single-color paintings enlivened by touches of color. Wosene belongs to a diaspora of African-born artists who, like most painters today, borrow and grab hold of influences in a liberated manner, without worrying greatly if the force of their effects belong to him biographically or geographically.

Although Wosene's art isn't explicitly political, his work engages with ideas of power and politics in a number of ways. In series like *Witness* (1986), *Words of Justice* (2002) and *Migrations* (2005-2009) Wosene addresses the struggles of the ordinary people, from the poverty, famine and political strife in Ethiopia to civil right struggles and the plight of the homeless in the United States. While Wosene's Ethiopian descent informs his practice in significant ways, it does not define him or his art as essentially "African" or "Ethiopian". His works cannot be reduced to any one place, impulse or time. Having lived outside Ethiopia since the late 1970's the artist draws on all the places he has called home and, by doing so, resists fixed and facile labels of identity. His art comprises a reflection, representation, and creation of transnational flows, national identities, and personal memories. He was at the beginning of the global contemporary art movement at a time where with the increase of migration and travel, boundaries of culture, gender, language and class were broken.

Contemporary painterly abstraction is now a global phenomenon. Wosene's stay in America has informed him of the extraordinary possibilities of non-objective art, especially in a style that suggests more than mere visual abstraction. The painter's career, which spans four decades, has encompassed five major painting series: "Graffiti Magic" (1980-87); "Africa: The New Alphabet" (1988-94); "Color of Words" (1995-2003); "Words: From Spoken to Seen" (2004-08); and the current sequence, entitled "WordPlay" (2009-present). All these sequences describe a conversation between the artist and his output, in which the script is dissected, rearranged, and built up again in the service of an esthetic neither language- oriented nor entirely visual, but somewhere in between. Interestingly, Wosene's creativity adjoins American painting without fully belonging to it. The Amharic script he orchestrates in his art is original enough visually for Wosene to establish a style that clearly originates outside of recent American painting culture, even as it exists in dialogue with its history.

Wosene's work has been collected extensively throughout the world. Museums with his works in their permanent collections include the National Museum of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (DC); The Newark Museum (NJ); Neuberger Museum (NY); Indianapolis Museum of Art (IN); Birmingham Museum of Art (AL); Fowler Museum of UCLA (CA); Samuel Harn Museum (FL);

Krannert Art Museum, (IL): Fleming Museum (VT), the Völkerkunde Museum, Switzerland. *My Liberty*, 2016 was acquired last year by the Virginia Museum of Fine Art. He exhibits recent works in select galleries, and his paintings are included in many international private and corporate collections.

Wosene has been an artist-in-residence three times-- at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Sweet Briar in 1984; at the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy, in 1996; and again at the Virginia Center for Creative arts in 2000-01. In 2016, Kosrof put up a solo show at Skoto Gallery in New York City, and the year before that, he had a single-person show at the Gallery of Fine Art (GAFRA) in London. Also in 2015, Wosene had a solo show in Japan, in Kochi. He currently has a solo exhibition at the Keith Haring Museum in Yamanashi, Japan. Other solo shows have occurred in Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, and the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa. His work has been reviewed by the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Financial Times, as well as the San Francisco Chronicle, Winston-Salem Journal, and the Philadelphia Tribune.

Additionally, Wosene has lectured extensively at such institutions as the George College and University in Milledgeville, Georgia (2017); the Kennedy Museum of Art at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio (2016); and UCLA in Los Angeles (2011). Earlier presentations include talks at the Detroit Institute of the Arts (2009); San Francisco State University (2006); the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey (2004); and the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York (2003).

Literature:

Christine Mullen Kraemer, Allyson Purpura, *Visual Poetry/Performing Script: The Art of Wosene Worke Kosrof*, Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art, Vol 2012, Issue 31, 2012

Andrea E. Frohne, *Language, Memory, and the Transnational: Art of Wosene Worke Kosrof*. In *The New African Diaspora: Assessing the Pains and Gains of Exile*, eds. Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Christine Mullen Kreamer/ Mary Nooter Roberts/ Elizabeth Harney/ Allyson Purpura, *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, Fowler Museum exhibition catalogue, 2008

Salah M. Hassan, *The Khartoum and Addis Connections, Two Stories from Sudan and Ethiopia*. Exhibition catalogue: Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, Catherine Lampert, Clementine Deliss, Whitechapel Gallery, Exhibition Catalogue, 1995.