

GIRMA BERTA

Girma Berta is an Ethiopian photographer who has received much attention and wide acclaim since 2016 when he began showing his work. In 2016, Berta won the Getty Images Instagram Award, and then in 2017 he was given the CAP Prize-- both awards are evidence of the growing interest in and admiration for Berta's photos, which merge street art with a fine art conceptualism.

He is indicative of the creativity of the millennial African. Berta's esthetic, as he has expressed it, is disarmingly direct: he wishes to capture what he calls "the beautiful, the ugly, and all that is in between." As an artist living and working in Addis Ababa, Berta confirms the immediacy and depth of experience in his hometown. But the artist is hardly isolated, either geographically or culturally. The images may portray people given to manual work or clothed in traditional dress, but the isolation of the figures, which is intensified by the single-color background against which they are seen, can be read as a metaphysical statement. Without pushing meaningfulness too far, it is fair to say that Berta is suggesting not only the solitude that accompanies most work done for pay; he is also presenting an image of people whose physical separateness can be read as a comment on the reclusive desolation of everyone's experience of time.

For instance, his recent series "Moving Shadows I and II" features isolated persons, often carrying bundles, set against a large field of a single color. Berta works digitally in both the production and the presentation of his photos so that his images themselves both comment on and participate in the digital art now being made by a younger generation of photographers in Africa.

At the same time it cannot be emphasized too much that fine art is a joyous endeavor, one particularly evident in the kinds of colors and compositions seen in Berta's photographs. Today, photography leans to the conceptual, but this is not Berta's area of interest. Instead, he takes interest in compositional harmonies that, strikingly enough, are brought about by the skewed placement of figures, usually but not always single persons, in regard to the overall field of the photograph. The visual bias, or imbalanced placement, of the figures not only isolates their presence but accentuates their existence against a backdrop of a single color. This use of a physically crooked esthetic makes the photos extraordinarily modern, just as the minimalism of the imagery-- the placement of individuals compelling in their remoteness -- contemporizes Berta's art on both a thematic and a technical level. Because we know the image is digitized, there is also the recognition that Berta is taking part in a technological pursuit that some have said distances the audience from the art. But Berta's art is neither distant nor cold; instead, it belongs to a burgeoning interest in a point of view that is partly notional, partly advanced technically, and partly global in its esthetics.

Berta's images regularly show persons carrying bundles and often intimate poverty, but, to his credit, we never see these people as victims. Part of the strength of Berta's esthetic is that he

refuses to romanticize his subjects-- either positively or negatively. This gives his work its aspect of authenticity, based as it is on life as it is. And the thematic depth of the pictures acts as an active contrast to and tacit corrective for the arbitrary decisions that play so large a role in the digital process.

Contemporary art is now an entirely international phenomenon, and this internationalism informs Berta's art. Indeed, the two awards he has received are global; the CAP Prize is based on the judgment of photographer from all over the world, while the Getty award pays attention to photographers and artists using Instagram pictures to document marginalized and distressed communities wherever they exist. Berta's photographs have been widely exhibited, in La Gacilly Photo Festival (2017); in Nataal/Red Hook Labs New York (2017); and in the Cape Town Art Fair (2017). Other shows in which the artist has participated include PhotoVille New York (2016, 2015); the Look Festival (2016); the 1:54 Contemporary Art Fair London (2016); the Also Known as Contemporary Art Fair Paris (2016); and the Bamako Photo Fest (2015). In addition to winning the Getty Images Instagram Award and the CAP Prize, Bert was asked to participate in the New York Times Portfolio Review in 2017. His work will be featured in Art Dubai in Spring 2018 presented by Addis Fine Art.