

An abstract painting featuring a central circular motif with a dense, textured pattern of small blue and green dots. This central circle is surrounded by a wide, textured ring of yellow and brown dots. The background is composed of bold, expressive brushstrokes in various colors, including bright blue, orange, black, and green. Several stylized, abstract figures are visible, some with large, circular, orange-colored heads or faces. The overall style is modern and expressive, with a focus on color and texture.

AFA ADDIS FINE ART

MERIKOKEB BERHANU

MERIKOKEB BERHANU
FRIEZE LONDON



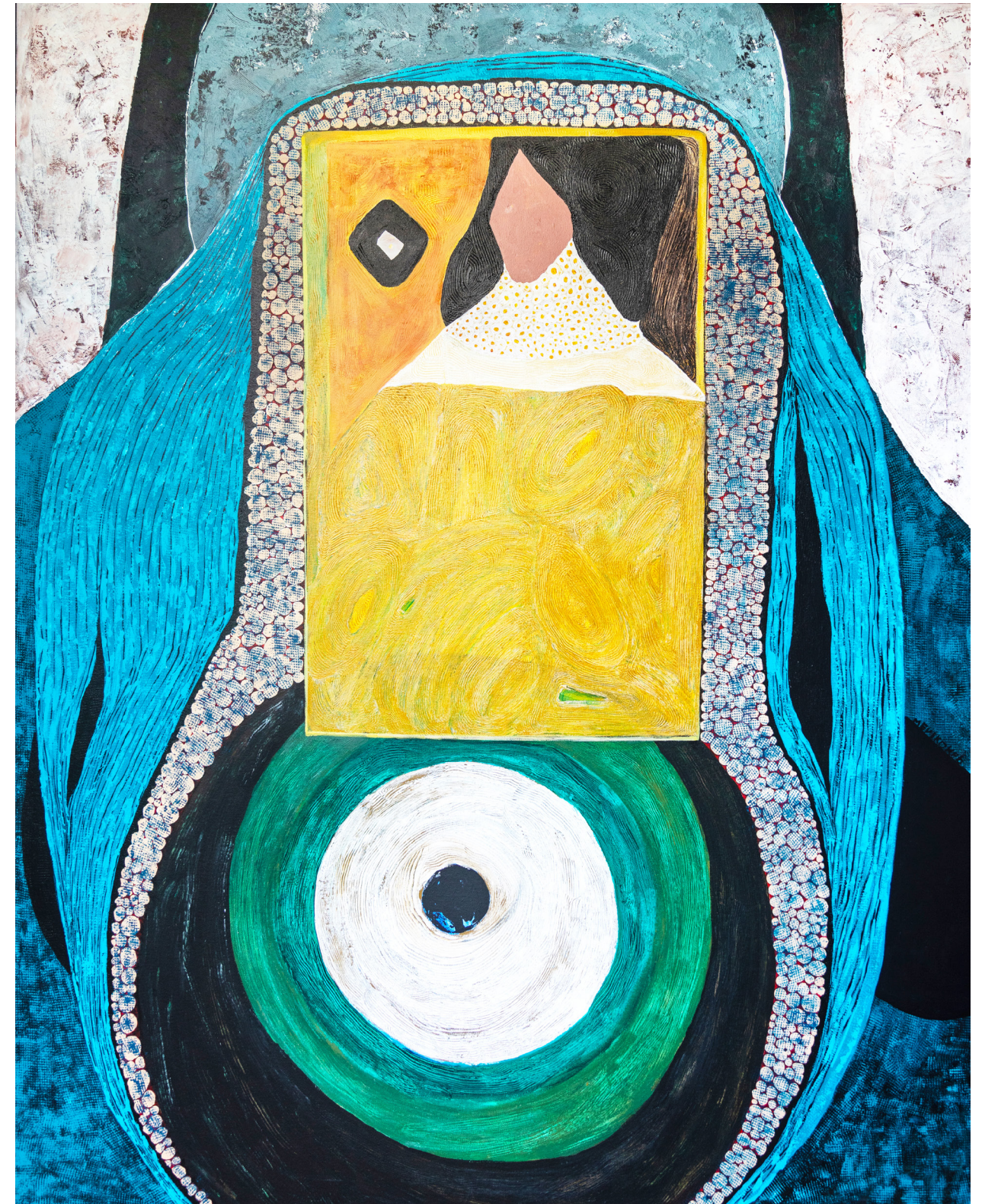
Merikokeb in her studio in Maryland, USA

BIOGRAPHY

For 15 years Merikokeb Berhanu (B. 1977) painted in relative obscurity in her studio in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Working diligently throughout this period, she created a unique transcendental visual language, a symbiosis of abstraction with elements of figuration, steeped in symbolism derived from the natural world.

Following her graduation in the early 2000s from Alle School of Fine Art in Addis Ababa, Merikokeb and her peers founded the Nubia Studio, an artist's studio collective and exhibition space. Here they found strength in numbers, increasing their visibility and chances of being able one day to forge their own individual careers. During this period, she honed her craft, finding some commercial success at home, but remaining largely unknown to the international art market until around 2016 when she began working with Addis Fine Art. She had her first solo show with the gallery as well as exhibited at a international art fair for the first time in 2016. Merikokeb has since garnered international attention, exhibiting in New York, London, Addis Ababa, and Stockholm.

In 2017, Merikokeb moved to the USA, and her experience of living in a Western consumerist society shifted her worldview. Alongside her natural imagery there are now depictions of the encroaching synthetic world. The ravages of mass consumption are poignantly represented in her paintings in the form of depleted rivers, their skeletal amphibious occupants a testament to human activity. Her work speaks to her experience as a migrant assimilating into a culture unlike her own, which views resources as limitless, in contrast to the way they are viewed on the continent of her birth.



Untitled LXI, 2021
Acrylic on Canvas
152 x 122 cm



Untitled LXII, 2021 Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 152.5 cm

A TRANSCENDENTAL VISUAL LANGUAGE

Organic forms abound in Merikokeb Berhanu's biomorphic compositions. Honing her craft over the course of two decades, the artist has developed her own transcendental visual language, where symbols derived from the natural world is intertwined with abstract forms are brought to life in vibrant, earthy hues.

Imagery of organisms proliferates throughout the artist's idiosyncratic paintings, from foliage to human and animal forms. Iconography signifying growth is also central to Merikokeb's visual lexicon. Blossoming flowers with elongated stems traverse the surface of the canvas, making their way through a medley of organic and manmade materials in search of a source of water. Concentric circles, which represent the infinitesimal cellular structures which exist within all of us, amass in clusters. Life-generating forms are also repeated motifs in the artist's ambiguous Untitled works. A cow's udder, the source of sustenance for her offspring, is juxtaposed with a human mother's bulging pregnant belly. By intentionally placing them together, Merikokeb blurs the line between human and animal, inviting them to cohabitate the liminal worlds that are her paintings.

Merikokeb moved to the United States in 2017, and since her migration to the behemoth consumerist society, has begun to incorporate new anthropocentric imagery into her work. Her paintings, which were once solely reserved for the natural world, have been invaded by artificial intruders. Circuit boards, which serve as the cell-like infrastructure the technology we use every day, cluster in her paintings, interfering with the once-harmonious ecosystem. Merikokeb is critiquing the environmental degradation she has witnessed in her new homeland. In one of her paintings, a cow's interior has been supplanted by one of these circuit board structures, leaving only the animal's manufactured outline- notably udderless- denying it the ability to reproduce. Likewise, the stems of flowers can be found rooted in the same unnatural material, ultimately stifling their growth.

Merikokeb's otherworldly scenes are multitudinous in meaning. On the one hand, they are to be understood as a foreboding interpretation of the hubristic relationship between humanity and the world we occupy. At the same time, her vibrant representations of the natural world sing with an understanding of and appreciation for the miracle of life at every magnitude, from the universal to the cellular.



Untitled LVII, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 122 cm



Untitled LVIII, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 122 cm



Untitled LX, 2021 Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 152.4 cm

Addis Fine Art

In 2016, Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul co-founded Addis Fine Art, creating the first white-cube gallery space for modern and contemporary art in Ethiopia. Described as one of the “Most Important Young Galleries in the World” (Artsy 2019), the gallery has since then grown to become one of the leading galleries in Africa, establishing a prominent international platform for artists from the Horn of Africa.

In October 2021, Addis Fine Art London moved into expanded premises in Eastcastle Street, opening a two-storey gallery space in the heart of Fitzrovia. The London gallery programme will encapsulate Addis Fine Art’s commitment to heightened international exposure for, and critical reappraisal of, African art on the world stage. The gallery’s Addis Ababa space will continue to be an incubator for emerging talent, facilitating critical engagement within the local market and encouraging the growth and development of the artworld ecosystem on the continent. The gallery will also serve as a space for artists from the diaspora to return to the continent and share and develop their practice.

Credits

Ikenna Malbert

Published on 1 October 2021

Published by
Addis Fine Art London
21 Eastcastle Street
W1W 8DD
London, UK

www.addisfineart.com
hello@addisfineart.com

