

One of the Historical and Current Aspects of Contemporary Art in Ethiopia

By Meskerem Assegued

Contemporary art is a reflection of the artists perception of the here and now, the present day or the moment that the artist is living in. It could be a depiction of what the artist observes in his or her society or it could be ideas, emotions, a need to break out or a need for atonement with the present situation. This is what makes contemporary art unique. For historians, anthropologists and archeologists, contemporary art plays a major role in their research since it is a visual documentation of the society that the artist is a part of.

If contemporary artistic expression is about the here and now, the intended audience is then faced with seeing the reality that he or she is living in. When the artist creates visual images, he or she draws emotions, reactions thus initiating a dialogue with the public. I can't think of any other reason why an artist will create a visual image if reaction is not expected. Contemporary is then a quest for public dialogue. It is in this context that I want to begin my presentation of one of the historical and current aspects of Ethiopian contemporary art.

In an attempt to understand my past and the ancient pre-Christian rituals that my grandparents and great-grandparents worshiped, I studied anthropology and did all my fieldwork in rural Ethiopia. I spent a great deal of my time in the last six years, traveling throughout the country learning about the ancient pre-Christian belief systems. During these field studies, I met potters, masons, carvers and weavers living in the poorest conditions that one could ever imagine. I met the Gustus people locally know as the Fugas, in south-central Ethiopia. The clay pots, baskets, mortars and pestles and many other household goods are made with special attention to their aesthetic beauty by the Gustus. These artists are the outcasts of their society. They are perceived as having evil eyes so the people around them, who sell, buy and use their products, shun them and keep distance from them. In the north, the Negedes, locally known as the Woitos, are also the mesons, weavers, silversmiths and potters. Once again, they are perceived as having evil eyes and are the outcasts of the society that uses their products. Both the Gustus and the Negedes live in areas, where marvelous pre-Christian archeological ruins such as monolithic stales and other structures, reliefs and statues are found. These ruins were made by skilful craftsmen and artists. They paid special attention to the artistic representation of the contemporary aspects of their society. The artists of these ruins are still not known with certainty but we know that the Gustus, the Negedes and many others who are in the same line of work living throughout Ethiopia are outcastes because of their professions.

Today, two of the major religions in Ethiopia are Christianity and Islam. Both these religions play a very significant role in the lives of the people. The Orthodox Church of Christianity came to Ethiopia from Egypt around one thousand seven hundred years ago and Islam followed six hundred years later. Although, there are relatively equal numbers

of Christians and Moslems, modern and contemporary art is highly dominated by Christians and particularly by those from central and northern Ethiopia. When Christianity came to Northern Ethiopia, a new style of art was introduced. The bright and colorful art of round faces with large oval eyes depicting biblical stories were done purely to make social changes and expand the new religion. It was very effective in creating new societal norms. Although the pre-Christian art may have been done for the same reason, we know for sure that the Christian art was done for spiritual and social changes. In the ~~of the~~ Orthodox Church, we find reflections of contemporary lives of the people when the art was made. This style of art survives to the present day, not in its previous contemporary nature but in its repetitive style. These art pieces are what we now call icons, a piece of art to be worshiped.

In the Ethiopian Orthodox religion, there are men known as Debteras who possess magical and healing powers. These men create art work called the magic scroll to heal people who are mentally or physically sick. Starting in the late 1960s, the most famous Ethiopian artist in the West, the late Skunder Bogossian, used these magic scrolls and stylized them. He added his newly acquired knowledge of art from the west, making them contemporary. In other words, he brought them from the past to the present. Skunder influenced many artists in Ethiopia who played with this concept of stylizing or modernizing the church art.

Since the days of Skunder, Ethiopia went through major political and social changes. After the five years of Italian invasion in the early 1940s, Emperor Haile Selassie, the ruler of Ethiopia made a major commitment to modernize or westernize Ethiopia. In this endeavor, the emperor sent several students to the West providing scholarships and anything else they needed. Among these scholarship recipients was Skunder.

In 1974, Haile Selassie was overthrown and a military socialist/communist government known as the Durg assumed power. During the time of the Durg, many of the changes that the imperial government brought were dismantled. Among these, was support of the arts. The art school that opened in 1959 by and with western and eastern block educated artists, who were teaching Eurocentric art was transformed to serve the government as a tool for creating their social realistic propaganda. Other than the few artists who maintained their creative integrity against the will of the government, the majority of artists simply did what they were told to do. A good number of artists were also persecuted for their refusal or their perceived refusal to follow government's rules and orders. This social realistic art ended in 1990, when the current government took power. In the last thirteen years, contemporary art in Ethiopia has taken on a new dimension. Today, we are witnessing a new renaissance of artistic activity.

Thirteen years ago, towards the end of the Durg era, I visited Ethiopia after living in the US for nine years. During that time, the artistic activity was more or less dormant. People on the streets walked with their heads down, giving the impression that the whole country was depressed. All the major sections of the streets were adorned with images of Mengestu Haile Mariam, the ruler of the country at the time. There were large paintings of the poor, the working class, the farmers, animated flowers with large green leaves,

statues of Lenin, Marks and Ingles and large metal arches with graphic slogans. I came back in 1995 and every year thereafter until I finally settled six years ago. I watched most of the social realist art fade from the few remaining metal arches. What is even more significant is the continual change of art activities throughout the city. The absence of Skunder Bogossian and his contemporaries during the seventeen years of the Durg gave birth to a different style of art. In the last five years, I have witnessed artists experimenting with new ideas. Today, we have artists like Elias Sime, who makes collages using plastics, clothes, buttons, bottle tops, and creates three-dimensional art with wood and metal. Elias consciously refuses to use paint in his artwork. Using the technique that he is perfecting, he is making a contemporary documentation of the city he lives in. There is also Assefa Gebrekidan, who is experimenting with forms, light, sound and smell. His forms are made from clay that he collects from various parts of the country. Depending on the type of clay, he uses traditional methods to fire that particular clay or merely air dries it. Assefa's art will be exhibited in November 2003, in dark rooms, where only the art pieces will be illuminated. In addition to the light, each art piece will produce its own sound and odour giving us an opportunity to use all our senses to experience his creation. Last year, I organized Giziawi #1, an art activity that took place on Meskel Square, one of the major open-air public venues in Ethiopia. Giziawi, which means temporary in Amharic involved music, dance and visual art in a single composition.

This new renaissance of art in Ethiopia is challenging and stimulating artists not only to be creative but to find the creative energy within themselves. In December, I am curating an anthropological art exhibition with Elias Sime. At the end of Last year and the beginning of this year, Elias came with me to Inengera, in central southern Ethiopia, one of my anthropological fieldwork sites. There, I was documenting traditional rituals while Elias was observing. In the end, he created art pieces from his own feelings, understandings and perceptions of his experience in this ancient ritual that is still practiced today. This is a very significant exhibition. It not only documents the ancient ritual in its present contemporary existence but it shows the artists expression of a culture that is remote from the modern city life that he lives in. Along with Elias's art pieces, the exhibition will include photographs and written documentations of the rituals where some of the symbolic items will be explained. The exhibition will first open in the village of Inengera

If contemporary art is a reflection of the artist's perception of the here and now, the present day or the moment that the artist is living in, then the anthropological exhibition with Elias Sime is African contemporary art. One of the things that we witnessed during these rituals is the contemporary nature of the participants all the way from the ritual leaders to the followers. They were dressed in modern clothes worn in a style unique to the area. The handful that had the ancient leather outfits wore them on top of their pants and coats. This exhibition is a perception and a depiction of what the artist observes and feels in his society.

Assefa uses electricity to produce light and sound from forms made out of local clay using traditional firing method. This could be seen as an idea, an emotional reaction, a

need to break out or perhaps a need to synchronize the ancient with the modern. This uniqueness of contemporary art allows us to visually experience the past using our present knowledge. The ancient artists who left the story of their society carved on stones gave us a window into the past. The contemporary artists today are also leaving their history for future generations wither they are bringing the past to the present, the present as it is or predicting the future. It appears like the current Ethiopian contemporary artists are beginning to experiment with these concepts of art.