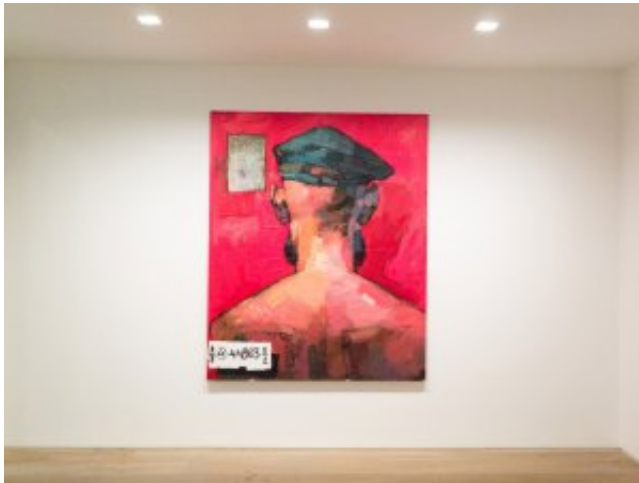


London Art Reviews

Magazine of art press and reviews from London

Dawit Abebe exhibition at the KH – Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.

David Franchi – Monday, 4th May 2015.



Background #20 by Dawit Abebe, 2015 © Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.

“Background 2” exhibition by Dawit Abebe was a sold out, at **KH – Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.**

The **KH – Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London,** proposed **“Background 2”,** an amazing **exhibition by Dawit Abebe.** It had different but involving ideas. **Abebe** is an Ethiopian artist who works and lives in Addis Ababa. He did not move to another country. Therefore

his work maintains a sort of genuineness, and returns a fresh and uncorrupted point of view on changes happening in the area.

Dawit Abebe, in fact, is exhibiting also at Pangaea II, the latest show of the Saatchi Gallery, **London.** The focus of Pangaea II is the new developments on the African and South American continents.

In a sort of witty ‘spin off’, **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London,** presents this artist of stunning abilities – both for the ideas expressed but also in the technique using the media. The subject of his work is the contemporary complicated relationship between history and technology, and the ways in which these two elements live together today.

The exhibition **“Background 2”** was made of backward portraits. Abebe has also chosen different age groups for his subjects, putting the accent on the older generation. There were eighteen canvases on display, in which the depicted subjects were man only and taken from the back.

Dawit Abebe said: “From the back, because in our culture it means they are looking at the past. In recent years Africa has seen big developments. I feel that the coming of technology has seen a rapid transformation in Ethiopia. The younger people know less of our own history and are more involved with pop culture and social media.”

The Ethiopian artist explored the ways in which rural communities of African countries, including Ethiopia, Madagascar or Kenya, have been affected by technology progresses – predominantly as a symbol of wealth – and, in turn, the way it has impacted on the people behaviour. Ethiopia has 3,000 years of history, passed down both through written and oral tradition, and the older generation knows more than the younger.

As in many other areas, technology has disrupted the process of transmission of oral histories. Abebe feels that the older generation could play a significant role in healing this course. The artist highlights the problem of the lost of the tradition ongoing in Africa. It is an issue that Western Countries have faced already during the Industrial Revolution (a transition from rural to industrial society), and to which they tried to remedy the problem by using heritage centres, folk and tradition hubs, founded all over especially in Europe, for example the Cecil Sharpe House in London.

Consequently, “Background 2” exhibition is mainly focused on the loss of the past. The backward paintings all of them

have in a corner a page of a real school book. When visiting the local market, Abebe found used school books and newspapers. He then returned to his past life, what had been taught to him in school and comparing it to the present and how it evolved. As in the *Panta Rei* concept of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Abebe realised that there is a constant changing of life, but posed the question on how it affect us today: throwing away those books it means to put aside the history.



Background #16 by Dawit Abebe, 2015 © Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London

Furthermore, in each work there is a car license plate, visible only to the audience, showing the interest of Abebe in how numbers have come to define us. Today we have numbers and codes for everything in our lives, including car license plates. In Ethiopia, in particular private cars are seen as a status symbol and most of them belong to government officials, merchants and so forth. Therefore, here car plates are used as personal codes for each person, a marker of who they are.

The style of Abebe is very interesting. With his strokes and background paintings, made of vivid colours, he renders the African shades: the sky, the street markets, the desert, etc. The way he uses the brush for the lines or to spread the colours reminds the Egon Schiele paintings; but also one of the most famous Italian illustrator Angelo Stano, author of the best seller comic *Dylan Dog*.

Dawit Abebe graduated from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Art and Design with a diploma in painting, sculpture, graphics, photography and industrial design. Since 2001, he has been a full-time artist in residence at the Habesha Art Studio in his native Ethiopia, and has also worked with UNICEF to hold workshops for street children in Arba Minch, Jinka and Addis Ababa. "Background 2" is Abebe's first solo show and second exhibition at KH – Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.

"Background 2" **exhibition** by **Dawit Abebe** was at **KH – Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery**, Wandsworth, **London**, from 26th March until 2nd May 2015.

