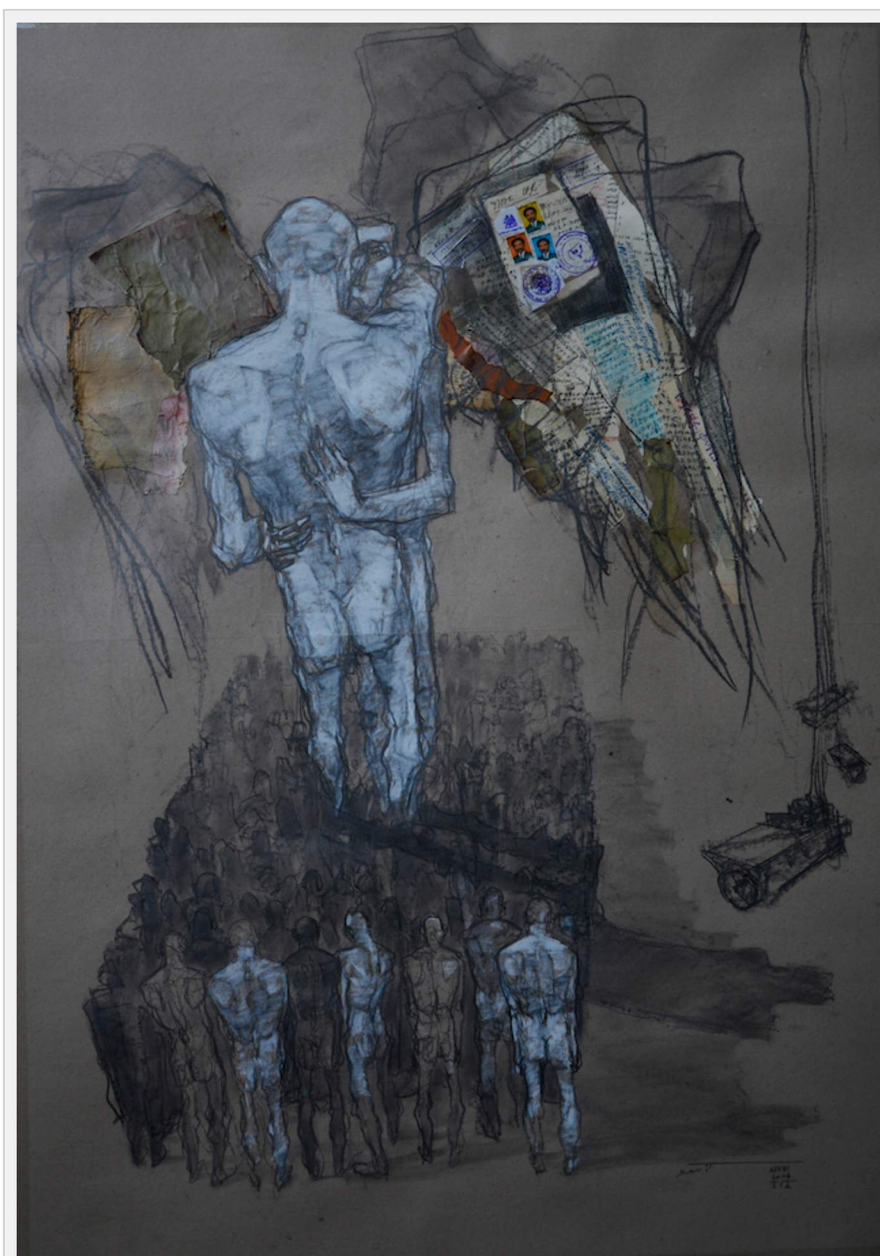


Ethiopian painter Dawit Abebe on modern life – interview

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***Art Radar* speaks to the rising star from Ethiopia as his works appear in summer shows from London to Nairobi.**

Dawit Abebe is one of the most intriguing painters to emerge from Ethiopia in recent years. His figurative paintings reflect technology's searing impact on humanity and are simultaneously showing at Saatchi Gallery's "Pangaea II: New Art from Africa and Latin America" in London until 6 September 2015 as well as "Addis Contemporary" at Circle Art Gallery in Nairobi, Kenya, through 12 July 2015.



Dawit Abebe, 'X Privacy X', 2011, mixed media on paper, 100 x 140 cm. Image courtesy the artist and the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Dawit Abebe was born in 1978 in Ethiopia's capital city of Addis Ababa. He graduated with a Diploma in Painting from the Addis Ababa University of Fine Art and Design in 2001. According to **Kristin Hjellegjerde**, whose London gallery represents the artist, one of Abebe's greatest strengths is how he captures the subtle shifts that technology is weaving upon contemporary culture. Hjellegjerde told *Art Radar*:

As technologies advance and develop to bigger and better levels of sophistication, Abebe's interest has lain in the impact these technologies have, not only on the environment but also on human behaviour. The most apparent evidence of this, to his eyes, has been the way in which social interaction has begun to move out of the public sphere and into the technological one, through computers and mobile phones.



Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde.

Can you begin by telling us about your early experiences with art and why you decided to become an artist?

I believe that I have had this talent since I was a child. I had a neighbour who was an artist and I used to spend time with him in his studio. I regularly participated in different art competitions during my school years. When I finished high school, I decided to be an artist and enrolled at the Addis Ababa School of Fine Art.

In your recent series "Background", the figurative works show men standing with their backs to us, exuding a feeling of absolute isolation. What is the driving force behind the series, and why do you feature men and not women?

I paint women as well, but most of them are men. I like the male form because of its defined shape and muscles. I realised that one of the inspirations for this series is that more lay behind me than [what is] immediately in front of me, and that appearances almost never present or represent what the backstories have to reveal.



Dawit Abebe, 'No. 2 Background 16', 2015, acrylic and collage on canvas, 140 x 200 cm. Image courtesy the artist and the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

In many of your works, such as the series "Pin Code" as well as "Background", you include numbers on objects. What is the significance of numbers to you?

I see them as symbols. These days we are represented by numbers – phone numbers, house numbers and license plates, to name a few. They have become a part of our identity. Unlike before, it is now impossible to live without these codes and numbers in modern societies.

In other paintings, you also include materials from old school books and newspapers.

I used newspapers in the "Pin Code" series because they provide information about what is happening in our daily life, which relates to my artistic ideas and the focus on social commentary in my paintings. As an art form, I also like the texture of newspapers and the Amharic alphabet.

When it comes to the "Background" series, I decided to use these old documents to represent history, as I believe that every human being has a history and that this, as well as the history of our country, can be viewed as the basis for our identity.



Dawit Abebe, 'Pin Code 2', 2007, mixed media on paper, 1 x 1 m. Image courtesy the artist and the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

For many in post-9/11 society, the modern surveillance state has cast an unsettling pallor over everyday life. How does this translate to your work?

It's not comforting! A few decades ago, people were thinking that God was the only one who could see what we do, but society has changed. Now it's humans who are doing the surveillance and invading each other's privacy from every corner, even from space.



Dawit Abebe, 'No. 2 Background 18', 2015, acrylic and collage on canvas, 130 x 160cm. Image courtesy the artist and the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

What is it like to be an artist in Ethiopia these days?

I am happy to be in my own city and country. I feel more inspired here and find it easier to be more productive despite several challenges, like not having proper galleries around to show my work or finding art supplies. There are also very few art collectors here and the galleries are not participating in any art fairs.

Can you tell us about your involvement with the Habesha Art Studio. When and why was it established?

I am one of the founding members of **the group**. It was established in 2003 because it was difficult for us to have individual studios. Therefore, we decided to create a common space in the studio where we can work and show our works, as there is a shortage of galleries where we can exhibit.



Dawit Abebe, installation view from "Pangaea II", Saatchi Gallery, London, 11 March to 6 September, 2015. Image courtesy Justin Piperger and Saatchi Gallery.

Finally, how would you explain the Ethiopian contemporary art scene to someone who is new to the country and its creative traditions?

The art scene has definitely changed during the last ten to 15 years. There are now more artists who are exploring new ideas and using different media. Artists are also getting more opportunities to exhibit their work outside of Ethiopia.

Lisa Pollman