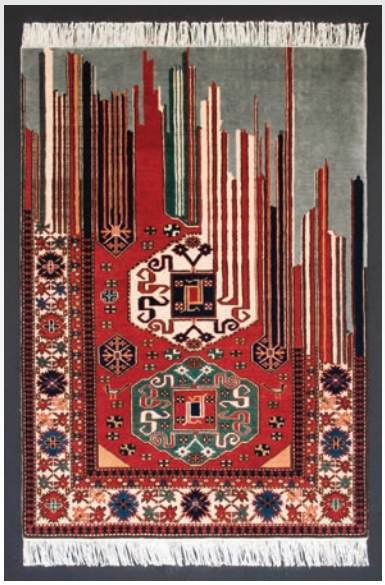
REVIEWS

TRADE ROOTS
LONDON

KRISTIN HJELLEGJERDE GALLERY
MARCH 21–APRIL 20, 2014



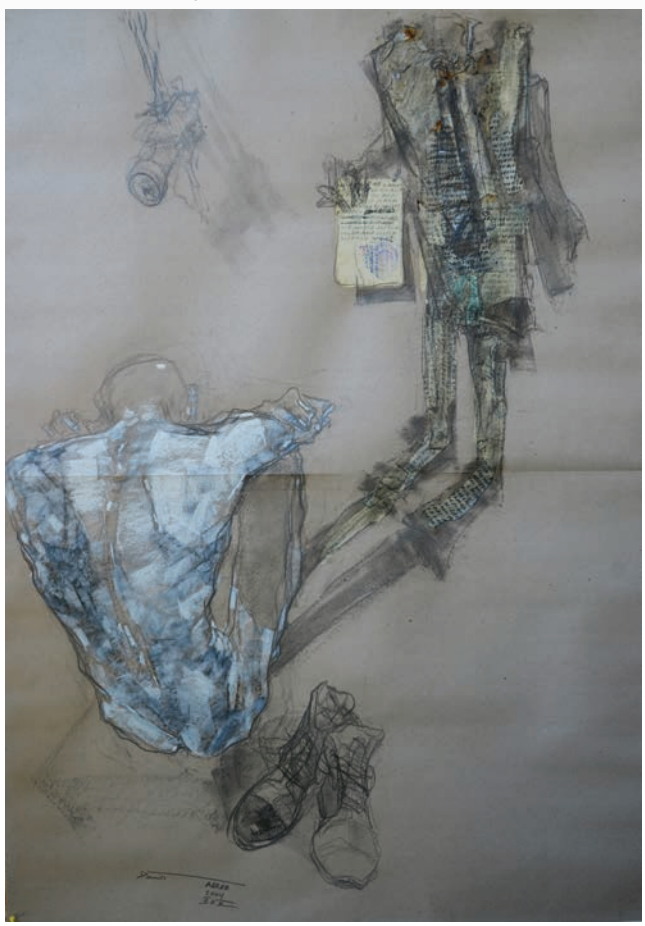
Faig Ahmed, *Restraint*, 2011, from *Carpet Collection*. Woolen handmade carpet, 150 x 100 cm. All images courtesy Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London

As a group show, *Trade Roots* brought together work by Kenyan-British Phoebe Boswell and Ethiopian Dawit Abebe and Azeri Faig Ahmed. While at first glance the practices of these diverse artists appeared to have little in common, all three presented works that explored the ways in which our world is constantly changing and, with it, how cultures adapt, meld, and fuse. They sought to examine the deconstruction and reconstruction of tradition, as well as the evolution of ritual and how, ultimately, these can all blend together to create new, unique, and vibrant cultural practices in our globalized world.

One could easily have assumed that the highlight of the show would have been Ahmed's now instantly recognizable textile carpets. Certainly, his star has been on an almost comet-like trajectory over the past few years, most notably with his nomination for the 2013 Jameel Prize. The Azerbaijan-born artist reconstructs traditional carpets by dissembling their traditional geometric patterns with sudden spatial interventions—colors appear to bleed off the carpet completely or get mixed up in a gloopy, painterly swirl, as if the pattern were liquid, the artist stirring the pot to manipulate strict geometry. This imbues the carpets with an almost sculptural quality, allowing the viewer to reappreciate the intricacies of patterns so familiar that we have long ceased to truly see them. "The carpet is an icon of Eastern tradition," Ahmed explains in his artist's statement for YAY! Gallery, February 2013. "It is canonical and has visual boundaries—my art is directed towards transforming these boundaries beyond any recognition. These carpets were more than simply visual patterns, they held a certain language and told stories. This tradition has fallen by the wayside, and in deconstructing and reconstructing them, in a way, I am creating new stories." In rebuilding this visual language—one that, for many, has ceased to carry any meaning beyond a purely aesthetic role—Ahmed examines how traditional stereotypes can be destroyed to create new contemporary languages. "I was in search of something really impregnable," he says. "These carpets reflect my internal conflicts and my will to be free, to shake tradition and transcend its boundaries."[1]

The real dialogue in *Trade Roots*, however, occurred in the synergy between the works of Abebe and Boswell. Abebe examines belief systems, the search for knowledge, privacy, alienation, and materiality. Above all, he is interested in the impact of technology on human behavior, as well as on the environment. In a sense, Abebe's

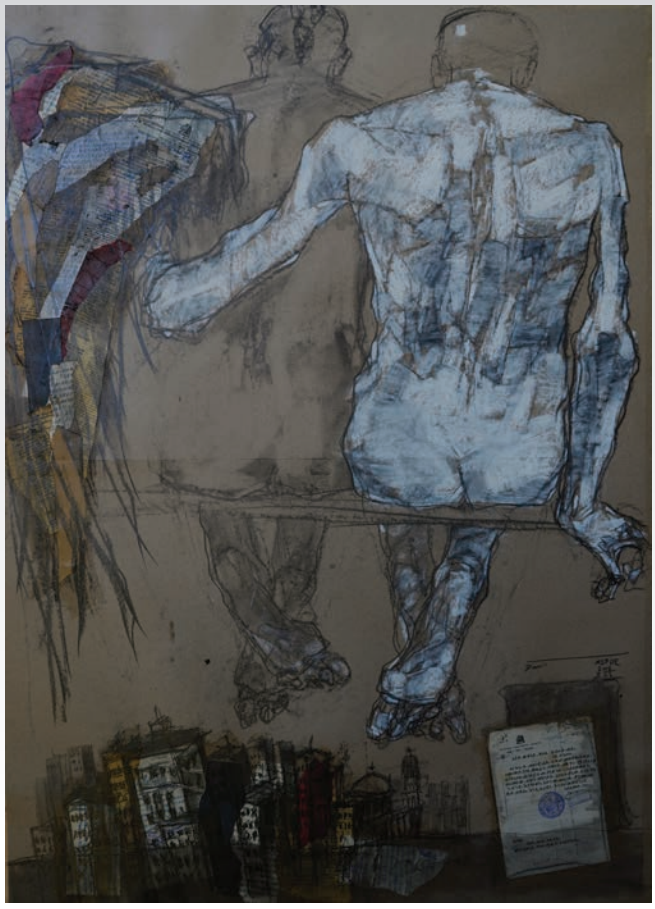
Dawit Abebe, *X Privacy (I)*, 2011. Mixed media, 140 x 100 cm.



DOI 10.1215/10757163-2914372

practice probes the realm of our shared cultural and belief systems, with technology taking on the role of an "other" culture. Paintings in muted grays and whites feature people, stark and angular muscles dealing with the burdens of televisions or security cameras. At times city vistas rise on the horizon, a mess of lines and sometimes text, as we humans are roped in by the pull of technology or the corporate lifestyle. Figures often seem lonely and separate, even in a crowd. In other works they appear weighed down—either by the technology itself, as in *X Privacy (II)* (2011), where we see a man hauling a large television on his back, his shadow merging into that of the messy city emerging on the horizon, or by the implications that an "advanced" lifestyle brings. This is most evident in *X Privacy (I)* (2011), where we see a man hunched over, despairing, on the ground, a figure in a disheveled suit and tie looming over him, a security camera, nearly translucent in its wispy strokes, pointed at him like a gun. "My interest in this subject has been a gradual process of examination of people's lives over the last ten years," he explains.[2] Abebe began to notice how, at least from what he has observed, social interaction has begun to move out of the public sphere and into the technological one, through computers and mobile phones. He explored this phenomenon in *Trade Roots* with a series of paintings. "I've seen the decrease of the 'face-to-face' social aspect," he says. "How do these technologies affect our social life? What happens when we meet less frequently with 'real' people, and more often online?"[3] Abebe (who also had a solo exhibition in early 2015 at Kristin Hjellegjerde) also examines the impact of technology on societies, and how its introduction causes them to evolve differently. He says,

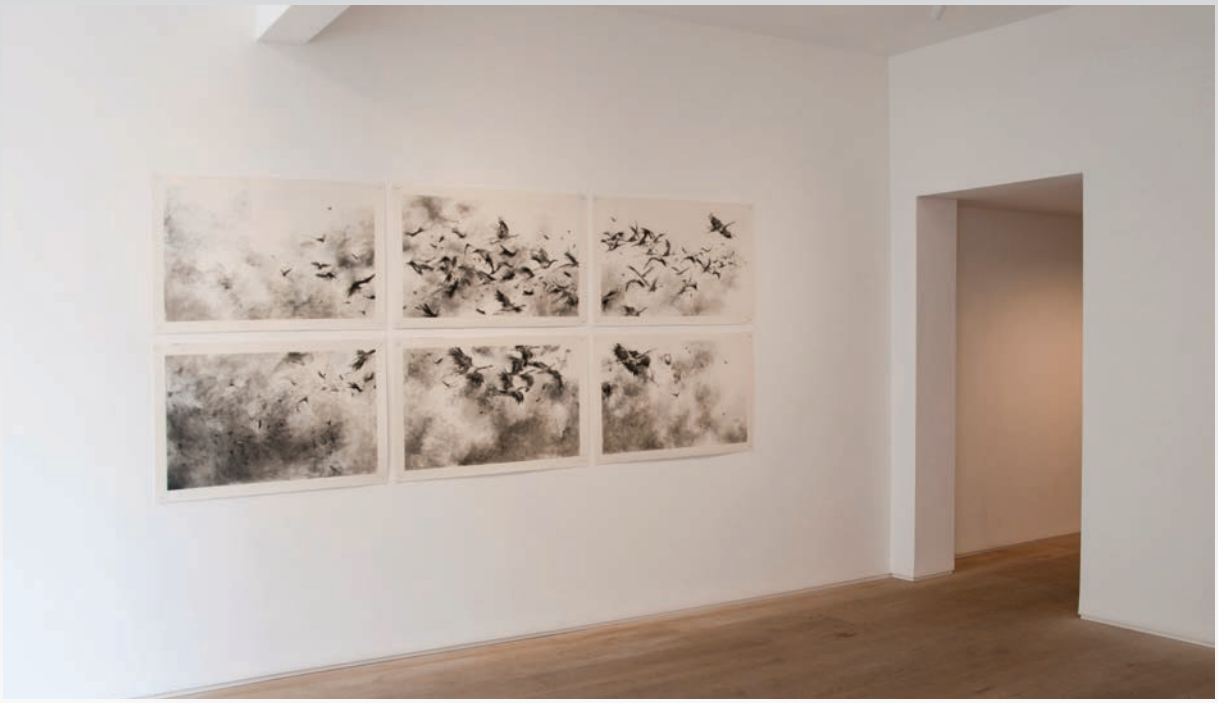
> In rural places, such as Ethiopia, Madagascar, or Kenya, people use technology as a sign of wealth, such as owning a television. They adapt fast to new technologies, and their behavior changes fast too. These technologies consume our time unnecessarily—I see so many people spending hours watching television, even though they may not speak or understand the language spoken in the programs! This means that they spend less time doing other things, such as talking to each other or socializing in a more meaningful way. It is so much better to have a face-to-face conversation with others than over a computer—otherwise something valuable is lost in the human experience. This is what I want my work to address.[4]



Dawit Abebe, *X Privacy (V)*, 2011. Mixed media, 140 x 100 cm.

However, the highlight of the show was a series of simple charcoal drawings by Boswell featuring the Maulidi ya Homu, a form of Sufi rhythmic chanting that traces its origins from East Africa back to the Middle East and is practiced in Zanzibar. It had been a busy year for Boswell, with an ambitious and immersive multimedia installation at Carroll/Fletcher, as well as participation in the unique Interchange Junctions at 5 Howick Place, where she displayed work alongside such luminaries as Yinka Shonibare, Romuald Hazoumé, and Zineb Sedira. Both installations were impressive, moving, and utterly immersive—the former taking place in the basement space of Carroll/Fletcher's Fitzrovia gallery and the latter taking up a large part of the expansive and airy floors afforded by the Victoria-based building (before it was due to become office space). And yet, the simplicity of the charcoal drawings—especially a stunning series of works comprising a bird migration, reflecting the idea of the migration of cultures and ideas—at Kristin Hjellegjerde brought a curatorial tightness back to her work, a sense of coming back to basics and examining some of the themes that lie at the very core of her oeuvre.

Boswell's interest in the Maulidi ya Homu stems, in part, from her own mixed heritage and Middle Eastern ties. Born in Kenya to a Kikuyu mother and a fourth-generation British-Kenyan



Phoebe Boswell, *Wild Men Who Caught and Sang the Sun in Flight*, 2014. Charcoal and granite on paper, 312 x 138 cm.

father, Boswell and her sister moved to the Gulf at the age of two. She says,

> [My parents] were both children when Kenya got its Independence from the British in 1963, but their partnership years later was still looked upon as quite controversial, and certainly ideological in post-colonial Kenya. It was a childhood that was rich in diversity, sharing a classroom with kids from all over the world, and where we developed a worldview—that nation-states are not important, that race is not important. But with the freedom of this upbringing came a rootlessness that was both liberating and alienating at the same time. I understood aspects of my cultural make-up, was able to "fit in" in various scenarios, or perhaps never fit in at all. I appreciate the multi-layered nature of post-global upbringings such as my own, and want to determine ways of exploring and conveying these multi-faceted narratives through my work, where a single drawing or a single-screen film is not enough.[5]

The form of Maulidi that Boswell has documented now only exists in the Zanzibar Archipelago. While its chants were originally prayers to the Prophet, it has since become a cultural, rather than a religious, practice, its rhythmic movements echoing the waves and sailboats of the East African coast. "I became interested in the fact that this tradition only exists in Zanzibar, and in the notion of how the sharing, appropriating, and colonizing of culture works," explains Boswell. "I'm also fascinated by the idea of shared systems of belief, and this to me represents a physical manifestation of that."[6] The artist's works are created in charcoal, carbon, and graphite, through Boswell's process of heavy layering and subsequent rubbing away of the medium—reflecting the rhythmic nature of the ritual itself. "Like memory of an experience, or culture itself, [it] is revelatory in waves—the image comes and goes until completion," she says. "It's about ritual, and the coming together to engage in a spiritually uplifting act."[7]

The work reminds us that Boswell is an excellent draftswoman. Her charcoal practices were evident in the Carroll/Fletcher show, most arrestingly in a nearly life-size figure of a capsized elephant, which greeted viewers as they came down the stairs. Similarly, Howick Place showcased a selection of hauntingly beautiful human figures, yet in *Trade Roots* the simplicity of pinned pieces of paper and the almost rough edges of the drawings of these Sufi practitioners captured their elegant movement and the raw power of spiritual experience. The light streaming down on faces oblivious to the world around them, eyes shut in rapture, and beautiful folds of cloth transported the viewer to the intimate surroundings of the Maulidi, a fly-on-the-wall experience so few are privy to. Boswell explains,

> I first was taken to see Maulidi ya Homu rehearsing in their practice room near Stone Town in Zanzibar about eight years ago. My sister was working as a BBC correspondent there and so we were granted access to this private space. I wasn't sure what to expect as we sat on the floor in this small room, but as they began to sway and the rhythm got louder, I was transfixed. I'm not religious but I'm interested in the power of belief on people, and what I saw was the intensity of deep prayer and meditation. I began to draw studies and take lots of photos, and every time I visited the island, I would revisit.

> I've wanted to make a large series of drawings based on my experience of the Maulidi since I first saw them.[8]

The result was immersive, the power of the work not diminished by its being part of a group exhibition. Yet such is the energy created in Boswell's practice that one can only imagine how amplified the experience of the Maulidi ya Homu would be had it been the sole showcase in the space (as, indeed, it was at Carroll/Fletcher). The artist says,

> This series is quite self-contained—I want to recreate an experience within the gallery—and so the playfulness exists within the charcoal lines and textures more than the content. In other projects, I tease out narratives over time, playing with different media, with time (through animation), and with various symbols and levels of ambiguity, to formulate layered narratives. This new Maulidi series (in comparison to the intricacies of an installation) is in some ways a reaction to that—it is a freeing of my hand, and also a meditation towards the spiritual.[9]

Overall, the exhibition presented a complementary exploration of both the foundations of our cultural and belief structures and how they operate in a world that is in a continual state of flux. While Ahmed's work was conceptually paired with the works of both East African artists, it perhaps had less of a visual synergy with them, although the sensory nature of the carpets worked nicely with the idea of movement created by Boswell. Between the latter and Abebe, however, there was a comfortable flow created by the presence of the human body and the exploration of fast-changing tradition. Tradition is, by its very nature, liquid—we see it as immovable and impenetrable, yet it moves with the times and shapes itself with us—sometimes a little more slowly, sometimes too fast, but ever melding, ever metamorphosing. Boswell nails it, her own multinational and multilingual heritage seeing her at the center of an ever-shifting cultural plane, yet one she captures with skill and adeptness—reinvigorating nostalgia for the past into beautiful, eloquent elegies for traditions that are dying, continuing, and being reborn.

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Notes

1 Faig Ahmed, correspondence with the author, February 15, 2014.
2 Dawit Abebe, correspondence with the author, February 11, 2014.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Phoebe Boswell, correspondence with the author, February 11, 2014.
6 Phoebe Boswell, correspondence with the author, February 3, 2014.
7 Phoebe Boswell, correspondence with the author, February 16, 2014.
8 Phoebe Boswell, correspondence with the author, February 11, 2014.
9 Ibid.

Phoebe Boswell, *Damani*, 2014. Charcoal and granite on paper, 153 x 122 cm.