

# Art as depository of collective history

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## Art

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**By Hiwot Abebe**

He has specialized in the fields of fine arts and scripture. Distinguished for his historical narratives, Wendimagegn Belete has been announced as one of the shortlisted artists for the Future Generation Art Prize 2020, a biannual art prize organized by the Victor Pinchuk Foundation for global young artists that comes with the cash prize of USD 100,000 and with commitments to commission new works.

The Foundation was established in 2006 by Victor Pinchuk, a businessman and philanthropist that serves as an international, private and non-partisan philanthropic base in Ukraine. Selected by an international committee of juries along with 21 artists under the age of 35, Wondimagegn is expected to participate in the Venice Biennale, one of the largest art fairs in the world. He will commission his works for the upcoming exhibition at the Pinchuk Centre in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Wendimagegn's works seem to be gaining international recognition, quickly; and yet, regrettably, he is not that well known in his home country. Having left Ethiopia in 2016 to pursue his studies in masters of contemporary art (MFA) in Norway at the Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art and Creative Writing, the grooming artist stayed there for a while after finishing subsequent residency programs and commissioning his artworks at the exhibition there. Wendimagegn often travels between Addis Ababa and

Oslo.

*Moment II* (Andafta), his latest exhibition at Kristin Hjellegjerde, a new gallery space in Bermondsey, is a series of collage works that intertwined archival photographs and textiles in an effort to explore identity and cultural heritages.

Looking back at his last exhibition in Addis Ababa held in 2015, one could clearly identify a shift in Wendimagegn's work following his move to Norway. There are noticeable changes in his materiel use, in his approaches as well as in his concept and storytelling techniques. His works predominantly concentrate on utilizing archival materials in almost any form. He has employed archival videography taken from the time of Italian war, and the Italian occupation, costumes used in the National Theater, and textiles that have historical or symbolic significances.

“After I left Ethiopia, I found myself in a box. A black man in a white's place. My role in society has changed and I began to question things,” he explains the cultural differences he has encountered. That compelled him to work on processing new thinking. He says he needed to re-evaluate not just himself, with regard to his new space, but also the significance of his work within a new context.

Wendimagegn's work is often an exploration of the role of history in the present time, to closely look at the things we remember and those that we might be forgetting? Putting identity and race at the forefront of this question, Wendimagegn looks at the Ethio-Italian war fought in the 1890s that brought victorious Ethiopians to celebrate the Victory of Adwa to these days. He reconnects the second colonization attempt by Italy. This time Italian forces had achieved to occupy Ethiopia for five years. The Ethiopian patriots were struggling during the occupation period that lasted from 1935 to 1941. He relates the resistance movements that took place across Ethiopia. He says, “Ethiopia became an emblem of pan Africanism but the Italian way and occupation are rarely a part of the mainstream narrative of the country in the west”.

*This is the crux of unveil*, is a video installation that shows the portraits of 3,000 anonymous Ethiopians standing, holding weapons, or taking part in a parade. Original footage had a narrative that likened the patriots to brutes. Wendimagegn needed to cut out the audio and instead focused on individual dual faces, memorializing their roles in the fight for freedom. “I feel like I spoke to all the 3,000 people during the editing process. I was trying to capture their essence in this composition. This has significance in the African colonial story. A lot is absent, silenced or ignored and we are fed with a victim mentality but these patriots connect to anti-colonial resistance movements across Africa”.

*Revenants*, another series of collage works, draws on archival photographs from the colonial period. Wendimagegn alters large print photos by adding color to the outfits of the human figures present but blacks out the subjects' faces. The photo manipulations are done by hand with transparent ink.

The intention of doing that as he says goes with the thinking “[it is] black to make holy

or to make it mysterious. The collective story of these people are more interesting than individual tales. These people are members of the black race. They are representatives of a larger narrative.” he describes. “I am not actively trying to change history or material. But, I am creating my own imaginative productions of representational narrative.”

The video work, he named *Zemen* tries to explore the history of politics and Ethiopian performance art borrowed from the practices of the National Theater. Actors dressed in real costumes are represented in the theater since its establishment in the 1950s, perform different scenes against the backdrop of the colorful entrance of the theater and various significant monuments found in the city. Wendimagegn has created this 15 minutes video from selected scenes of three iconic plays performed in the theater that he found highly reflective of the political regime of the era. Posters, signs, and political slogans indicate the era and the *azmari* music audio that reminds one of the social and political role the arts played and still continues to be played.

The video, and certainly his other works, often blend time, folding the past and the present together and offering an interesting view at how one affects the other. “History is at risk of distortion. Especially our history of the last hundred years. It seems like we are reaching irreconcilable differences at this stage. The lack of institutions that document and archive history is a problem.”

*Zemen* offers a unique view of how art can be used as a narrative weapon much in the same way history is often manipulated to tell self-serving stories. Wendimagegn is attempting to observe how the regime of Emperor Haile Sellasie, the military Derg regime and the EPRDF era utilized the national theater to their specific narratives. “Each regime installs its own narratives and theater and state media served as propaganda machines.”

“Most of my work is looking at epigenetic inheritances. We are storage devices for our ancestors’ memories. I have inherited these things and they come across in my paintings,” he explains. A look at the past from as many perspectives as possible seems more urgent than ever today. Wendimagegn’s practice may be focused on the Italian war and occupational period but it serves as a jumping off point to explore many eras in Ethiopian history.

“Historically speaking, we have a lot of baggage. We have troubles interpreting all of this. The past is still part of our present. It’s evident in our lives. So it is important to be conscious of how we approach it.”

Wendimagegn hopes to exhibit his works in Ethiopia at the National Museum of Modern Art next year. If he could make through to win the prize, he will be receiving the recognitions and the award money at a ceremony to be held in Venice, Italy between May and August 2022.

*Ed.'s Note: Hiwote Abebe is a writer with the English Magazine—The Reporter, and currently contributing specially to this publication.*