

The Artsy Vanguard 2021: Wendimagegn Belete

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December 1, 2021



Wendimagegn Belete

is a passionate excavator of the past. For his latest work, a multimedia mural titled *Your Gaze Makes Me* (2021), the Ethiopian artist placed ethnographic portraits collected from online archives into an immense, grid-like composition that exalts anonymous Ethiopian people. He then layered salvaged African mementos—pieces of jewelry, tools, masks, and bells—onto each image, breathing new life into ancestral histories that would otherwise have been forgotten.

“I’m fascinated by ethnographic photographs and digital archives that can say something about the past,” Belete said. “These people have a story to tell. I put objects on top of photographs because the combinations bring memories and narratives, but at the end, the presence of the viewer, or their confrontation with the work, gives it meaning and completes it,” he explained. Hence the title *Your Gaze Makes Me*, the name of his most ambitious artwork to date, which is currently on show at the Future Generation Art Prize exhibition at the PinchukArtCentre in Kyiv, Ukraine, through February 2022.

Born in Ethiopia in 1986, Belete knew from an early age that he would devote his life to art. He completed his BFA in 2012 at the Allé School of Fine Arts and Design at Addis Ababa University, the only formal art academy in Ethiopia—which graduates just 25 artists every year, in a country of more than 100 million citizens. Four years later, he left his home country to pursue an MFA at the Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art and Creative Writing in Norway. It was during this time that the young Ethiopian artist experienced a significant personal and professional shift.

“For the first time, I found myself alone,” Belete remembered. “I started to ask questions about myself and my practice. I saw my country’s history and identity from afar.”

That outsider perspective on his own culture has offered fertile ground for his creative output. Belete remained in Norway after completing his MFA, and has since expanded his practice. Last year, his work appeared in three solo exhibitions and one group show in the Nordic country, and this year alone his work has been shown (or is set to be shown) in eight group shows from Oaxaca to Casablanca, and at least four solo shows in various European countries, including one at the [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#) in Berlin and another at Iodeposito in Treviso, Italy.

In 2022, this fast-rising artist—who now lives between Ethiopia and Norway—will also receive a major solo exhibition at the National Museum in Addis Ababa, and a spot at the Venice Biennale as part of the Future Generation Art Prize group show.

Belete, however, does not see these accomplishments as entirely his own. “Whatever we do in our artistic practice is something that comes down from our ancestors,” he said of the inspiration for his artworks. He concedes that there are both conscious and unconscious elements at play, but he’s particularly careful to pay homage to the latter. “It’s hard to say that when I paint, somebody or something tells me to choose this color or that one, but I know it’s happening.” His work refers to his memory and to “what I know from where I grew up, the kind of language I speak, the foods and spices I eat,” he explained. “Everything contributes and shapes the visuals.”

Atmospheric and cultural aspects of Belete’s upbringing show up in the work through richly colored textiles, ceremonial objects, or the use of the Amharic alphabet—one of the main languages of Ethiopia, which appears as phrases and paragraphs written directly onto many of his paintings. Using these material elements, Belete creates artworks that allow viewers to connect to Ethiopian narratives through powerful visual landscapes infused with the artist’s personal experience.

Belete’s emphasis on his own ancestral heritage and identity has been present in his work for at least the last few years. He is fascinated with the concept of epigenetic inheritance, which he describes as “a kind of memory that transfers over generations whether we know it or not.”

“My artistic practice is a way to unveil or unfold the memories I inherited,” he continues. “So indirectly, I am also interested in knowing myself.”

Belete’s layered method of visual storytelling has also taken the form of painted collages. Paintings such as *Moment (32)* (2020) and *Moment (27)* (2020) are vibrant and complex works that include a wide array of archival materials such as maps, texts, photos, and pieces of fabric, as well as half-formed shapes that he occasionally cuts from one canvas and adds to another. The artist is known to work on several paintings at the same time, letting each one influence the direction of the others.



Wendimagegn Belete

Moment (32), 2020

Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Indeed many pieces from Belete's "Moments" series (2020) appear to be fragments of a broader narrative. Taken as a whole, the collection feels like an otherworldly journey into the artist's remembrances. "It is less about creating a series, and more about forming a visual 'memory map' that transcends the boundaries of a single canvas," he has said of this body of work.

The artist's visual language has morphed over the years, but his oeuvre maintains much of the same DNA. Belete's charged use of black- and-white imagery, for example, shows the kinship between his works. Take Unveil (2017), a mesmerizing, large-scale video installation inspired by the anti-colonial Italo-Ethiopian war that took place between 1935

and 1941. It features rare, 16mm cropped black-and-white video portraits of 3,000 anonymous Ethiopian citizens, presented as one continuous loop. Or "Revenant" (2019), a series that incorporates photographs taken during the aforementioned war, which the artist enlarged, partially colorized, manipulated with acrylic paint, and overlaid with pieces of texts or maps. Most of the faces are tinted with black paint, a crucial detail the Ethiopian artist has described as an act of respect.

"In many traditional Ethiopian visual cultures, hiding the face with a kind of fabric is seen as a sign of holiness or as something to be respected," the artist has explained.





Belete believes his latest project, the mural *Your Gaze Makes Me* (2021), has offered something of a pathway to the next evolution of his work, taking his use of archival materials to another level.

“Previously, most of my works would focus on digital archives, mainly uncolored digital photos,” he explained, “but for this last piece, I combined my own reflection, the digital archive, and the material archive, so there’s me as a storyteller, found objects as storytellers, and the digital archive as a storyteller.”

It’s a rich palimpsest of storytelling that the artist has found particularly fulfilling—and one that he sees as pointing ahead to future artworks, even as he continues to summon voices from his ancestral past.

The Artsy Vanguard 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature recognizing the most promising artists working today. This fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard is a triumphant new chapter, as we present an in-person exhibition in Miami featuring the 20 artists’ works, including many available to collect on Artsy. Curated by Erin Jenoa Gilbert, sponsored by MNTN, and generously supported by Mana Public Arts, the show is located at 555 NW 24th Street, Miami, and is open to the public from December 2nd through 5th, 12–6 p.m.

Salomé Gómez-Upegui

Header and thumbnail image: Portrait of Wendimagegn Belete. Courtesy of Wendimagegn Belete.