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MAGAZINE

## Heads you win, even from the back

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Portrait Head, by Dawit Abebe. PHOTO | FRANK WHALLEY

By FRANK WHALLEY

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### IN SUMMARY

- Painter Dawit Abebe completed a series of six portraits all painted from the back — and very fine examples they are of the sort of descriptive realism that promotes accurate drawing and formal tonal qualities.

You may have seen that photograph of Barack Obama staring out of a window in the Oval Office. Taken from behind, it is nonetheless unmistakably The Pres... the shape of the head and those jutting out ears give the game away.

And it is true you can often recognise a friend from the back almost as easily as by their face. It is to do with the familiar outline of the head, the angle at which it is set on the shoulders, the mass of the skull against the neck, perhaps the way it moves when the person is walking.

The painter Dawit Abebe seems to think so too. He completed a series of six portraits all painted from the back — and very fine examples they are of the sort of descriptive realism that promotes accurate drawing and formal tonal qualities.

You can tell that one of his subjects, with his bull neck and thickset, balding head is a man of some substance. Another, pictured here, looks like he could be a professor; a teacher at least.

Abebe, an Ethiopian who lives in Addis Ababa, sold one of these portraits through Circle Arts Agency at the recent Cape Town Art Fair. Clearly a painter going places, he has been included in a group show, Pangaea 2, at the Saatchi Gallery in London.

Now some five of his portraits are at Circle's headquarters on James Gichuru Road, Nairobi, to be included in their next auction, in November.

Also waiting to go on the block is a selection of 12 first class Tingatinga paintings of impeccable provenance from Dar es Salaam. They are from a group of 20 being held by Circle for eventual sale to benefit a Tingatinga trust based in the Tanzanian capital, and include blue chip works by the founder of the movement, Eduardo Saidi Tingatinga himself, his brother Simon George Mpata and their cousin Kaspar Henrick Tedo.

Before then they can be seen in Circle's latest venture, an expansion of their agency to include a permanent gallery. They have revamped a private house that adjoined their offices and turned it in a place for showing Modern and Contemporary East African art: Modern being that created from the 1950s to 2000, and Contemporary thereafter — the year 2000 to date.

The gallery is of about 80 square metres, formed from three sides of a rectangle, like an E without the middle leg, with clean white walls and recessed lighting giving a spotless, almost antiseptic appearance. It is a neutral space, and will neither add to nor take from the vocabulary of the works on show.

Outside, art will be shown beneath a waterproof canopy; the sort of suspended sail you see at many restaurants nowadays.

In charge of the venture is Circle director Danda Jaroljmek, who took Abebe's portraits to Cape Town and who will be dashing back from the Dubai arts fair to supervise the private view on Wednesday this week, followed by a public opening the following day.

The gallery is well positioned, she believes, to attract Circle clients from their home turfs of Westlands and the many new developments in Riverside, and it forms another part of the growing South Nairobi arts scene that includes the Kuona Trust (of which Jaroljmek is a previous director) off Likoni Road near State House, and the increasingly attractive exhibitions of the Shift Eye Gallery on Argwings Kodhek Road.

Since 2013, Circle has held two Modern and Contemporary art auctions, grossing \$415,000, and three pop-up exhibitions showing over 120 artists and selling an average of 80 per cent on each opening night.

With increasingly regular appearances at international art fairs (Cape Town, London, Nairobi and now Dubai) Circle is at the forefront of showing the region's art to the world and promoting some of its finest painters, sculptors and printmakers. Its own gallery is a logical development.

Eighteen artists from Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania are represented in its inaugural show, called Concerning the Internal, which runs up to April 19. All works are marked by an introspective investigation of the artists' innermost thoughts and personal concerns.

That chimes with me, for I believe all good art to be to a form of self-portraiture and, as though by self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, I believe, a definition of what separates good art from the rest.

### Opening show

Attractions flagged up for this opening show at Circle, which plans to hold six exhibitions a year at its expanded base, include a suite of paintings by Beatrice Wanjiku from her Lifts Beyond Conception series, meticulous abstracts by Sibylla Martin, a large Paul Onditi painting layered with meanings called The Unseen Bridge, and several oblique quasi-Surrealist works by Xavier Verhoest.

These include delicate watercolours in which the small splashes of red, like spurts of blood, beckon you to stop, and a quietly sinister head slightly smaller than life size called, obliquely, Caput Mortuum. That literally means Dead Head and is also, you may like to know (or possibly wish you did not know), the name of a soft violet-brown painter's pigment called Mummy Brown. It was made by grinding up the mummified body parts of ancient Egyptians and was said to be the precise colour of dried blood.

Verhoest's sculpture looks out from its plinth with dignified reproach. Or rather, would do if it could see at all, which it cannot because its eyes, appropriately enough, remain bandaged and blind.

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