



ADDIS ABABA

# DAWIT ABEBE

MARCH 29, 2015

## Dawit Abebe – A look at the other side

### People's backs

When you walk into Dawit Abebe's art studio, you'll immediately be confronted by large images of human figures on canvas. These figures are very present due to their size but simultaneously absent as they are all painted from the back.



*Dawit Abebe's studio*

Dawit: "I show their backs because people have no idea about their own backs and thus their own history.... They mostly consider it as something unimportant. People tend to get brainwashed by politics. All over the world politicians tend to accuse the past for things that didn't go well, in their aim to gain popularity. Then they can say that the past has damaged their country and they will change it all and make

*things better. If you look at Ethiopia for example, for more than 3000 years our ancestors have fought for our freedom; we have never been colonized. We have our own language, alphabet, calendar and culture in Ethiopia. I want people to remember this. I am just observing problems that are created by a lack of awareness in society and I try to say something about that in my work."*

## Knowing\_yourself

Dawit has a mission to make people more aware of their history and society as well as the contemporary art scene in Addis Ababa. He considers it important for a country and its people to know and understand how contemporary life is formed by the past, because only then can society evolve. He explains: *"If you know society very well, you understand yourself, because you are part of that society."* Knowing one's history is for Dawit the only way to deal with one's future. Dawit: *"But people don't see it and only talk about football and Facebook... So I am trying to show that we do have important things in our history. Just try to see your own back and then you know yourself and that's the condition to see the future. I just hope that people start to analyse their history."* That's why he paints people from the back.



Dawit Abebe

Dawit deplores the fact that younger generations are only interested in online contact and he thinks that as a consequence society is becoming individualistic. He explains: *“Not that the internet or social media are bad, but we have to learn how to use them. The younger generation are forgetting their culture, history and social life and that is very bad... Losing face-to-face contact already happened in Europe but now also in Africa... it's sad because we have a rich culture of communal solidarity, of people sitting together while discussing and laughing. Besides... how can you fall in love with someone that you have never met before in real life? And why are people so obsessed with cameras?”* Dawit is concerned and intrigued by the impact of technology on human behavior and how it changes social interaction.

Historic layers



In order to intensify his message, he hides a historic layer below each of his painted figures in the form of pages torn from old primary school exercise books, covering subjects such as science, history and geography. "Later I cover it all and paint on top of the history. So the people's backs are literally covered with history." He also uses old governmental documents that he picks up at the market which illustrate different phases of history. Dawit finds it fascinating to see how history changes depending on who is telling the story.



Dawit Abebe





Dawit Abebe - detail

## No labels

When it comes to using the term African Art, Dawit has a very strong opinion: *"I hate the categories and I prefer to see artworks as artworks. Yes, I am African but my works are art works. Unfortunately people like to think in boxes and when it's not wooden sculptures and masks they don't consider it authentic African art. But Europe and Africa did the same in the old times, think about the Byzantine church paintings with the big eyes and its flatness. In Dawit's eyes, there are more similarities than differences between African & European art. Both traditions move along the same lines and should not be reduced to restrictive categories."*

Travelling to other African countries and to Europe made Dawit very conscious about his own living environment and he loves to be inspired by other artists he meets and work he sees in museums abroad. *"It expands my own artistic expression because it broadens my mind. And I get inspired by Europeans, Africans, and Chinese. I mean its all art to me."*

## Promoting contemporary art

Dawit is one of the driving forces behind 'Habesha Art Studio', an art community that he initiated after graduating from Addis Ababa University, School of Fine Art and Design in 2001. Their first group exhibition was a big success. Dawit: *"The first sales were an enormous encouragement for us!"* He thinks that as a result, the contemporary art scene in Addis Ababa and the understanding amongst Ethiopians about contemporary art is slowly developing. Dawit: *"First people didn't know anything else than traditional Ethiopian church art and about the older generation of artist. They were educated with a strong focus on technical skills and figurative art."* But when Dawit and his contempo-

aries started to exhibit their work in their own studios the awareness of contemporary Ethiopian art began to grow. *“It’s all about meeting the right people at the right time.”*



*Dawit Abebe*