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Elizabeth H. Wold



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Elizabeth H. Wold  
April 2017

## “Erasen Be Ras”

### An Exhibition by Elizabeth Habte Wold

In *Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site*,<sup>i</sup> curator and contemporary African art scholar Okwui Enwezor states that the intellectual production of exhibitions “may not necessarily begin with issues of disciplinary identification, but instead with what at first might be understood as limiting forms of identification that concern the intellectual biography of the curator working in the enlarged geopolitical and global framework of today’s contemporary art disciplines.”<sup>ii</sup> Enwezor argues that curatorial practice should encompass “better knowledge and a more complex understanding of the work of African artists”<sup>iii</sup> with exhibitions representing “both frames of analysis and topographies of critical practice.”<sup>iv</sup> To this regard, Enwezor states that exhibitions should be sites of encounter where “critical production, historical analysis and theoretical reflection”<sup>v</sup> resonate. The meaning and significance of images, ideas and objects, therefore, become sites of competing and clashing intellectual genealogies.

In the case of contemporary Ethiopian art, these deliberations become particularly salient since exhibition encounters and curatorial practices neither bare “frames of analysis” nor “topographies of critical practice.” On the contrary, the critical geopolitical and global framework of curatorial authorship that Enwezor indicates are often routinely compromised in the production of the exhibition site. And by extension, the art historical research on contemporary Ethiopian art frequently lacks core areas of inquiry that pertain to the multiple analytic frames that have in the last few decades enabled and facilitated the study of contemporary African art.

This is not to say there are no artists who have examined the relationship of their art to the decolonization postmortems that scholars of contemporary African art have reimagined and rewritten as a practice and category of thought. Though few, artists like Elizabeth Habte Wold continue to challenge the authority of Western art history by negotiating the shifting topographies of modernism’s ambivalence and plurality. Rather, it is to say that the very concept of the exhibition space and the curatorial practice that produces it, is exclusively preoccupied with the aesthetic dimension of the art object. De-historicized and decontextualized, the complexity of the art object

is, therefore, routinely positioned in superficial ways and in manners that are divergent from critical encounters; extracted from the uncertainties, instabilities and ruptures that are generated by geopolitical changes that ultimately influence artistic subjectivities.

Perhaps this is because of Ethiopia’s singular colonial history. Ethiopia had never been colonized. Certainly, this predicament has not helped much in understanding the complex relationship between colonialism, post-colonialism and the network of African artists that had in the past decades shaped the discourses and critical practices of the scholarship of contemporary African art. Consequently, this critical inquiry had also broadly been absent in the making and shaping of the exhibition space and the curatorial practice that attends it. Indeed, an exceptionalist intellectual genesis and evolution has dismissed the histories of colonialism and imperialism, frequently positioning Ethiopia as unique and freestanding from the historical time of colonial projects. For instance, disciplines in the arts and the humanities at the major institution in Addis Ababa University, from where artists graduate every year, rarely provide movements of non-Western thought. It is indeed impossible to conceptualize the history of modern Ethiopia without addressing European colonialism and imperialism. The violent realities of indirect colonial rule that have played a major role in producing current Ethiopian spaces of knowledge production, and its multiple materialization—curatorial practice being a major part of this constitution—have, therefore, largely been ignored in the empirical data of the social sciences and the humanities.

In line with this, there are also scholars who argue that Ethiopia’s singular colonial condition had contributed to Ethiopia’s modern education strategy which had exclusively been found on Eurocentric values and key to the epistemic excision of local and traditional scholars. For these scholars, crucial to this exclusion is modern education’s troubling contemporary consequence where cultural practices and traditional knowledge are on the verge of disappearance.

Perhaps it is this unsettling quandary of contemporary spaces of knowledge production and dissemination that enticed me to the works of Elizabeth Habte Wold. As Enwezor argues, “the intellectual production of exhibition and the cultural and epistemological assumptions that underpin it” is important in the framing of the exhibition space. This is particularly significant in Habte

Wold's work since she deals with age old practices that have been erased from contemporary production and circulation of knowledge. Her engagement with everyday objects and everyday practices in productive ways is aesthetically absorbing as it is intriguing. Since she calls into question conventional trajectories and homogenous prototypes, her work undoubtedly calls for a curatorial inventiveness that locates not only the aesthetic element of images and forms, but also their relation to the subjects of intervention.

Habte Wold uses computer generated animation to articulate her work. Computer generated animation is one of the central elements of a multimedia presentation. The artist employs one of many software applications that can enable the creation of animation. In some of the presentations, Habte Wold also supplements the animation work with video clips. Magnificent movements, therefore, loom out of the screen with a life and a style of her own. Both static and dynamic images populate the screen and the pictorial simplicity gives the images a natural grace and magnanimity.

The inherent tension that composes Habte Wold's tools of analysis such as the "enset or koba"/false banana—an indigenous and a multi-purpose plant whose trunk not only functions as a major form of staple but also used as an everyday purposeful tool—metaphorically indicates the multiple experiences of ideas and concepts in the setting of modernity. The *enset* plant has been cultivated in Ethiopia for thousands of years. Resembling a banana tree, *enset* is fatter and taller without the banana. The trunk or "pseudo stem" is thick and stretches into crescent shaped leaves. Its primary product is its starchy "pseudo stem" which is pulped, fermented and buried underground for three to six months. This process produces the *kocho* which is a staple that is eaten with meat, collard green and cheese. Locating tools of analysis such as the *enset* in the present, Habte-Wold conceptually transforms objects and practices to modernist idioms, creating a new artistic language in the reading of contemporary Ethiopian art.

And staging the intrinsic values of objects, Habte Wold explores the ambivalent relationship of epistemes; the point of view of a dominant Western culture and the complex politics of subaltern identity where identity is systematically de-centered by an epistemic framework that shelves the perspectives and insights of vernacular

thought. Even as the use of the *enset* is limited to the local and regional, it is essentially shaped by the propensities of its varied networks in the politics of modernity.

With a plant at the center of the artists' query, Habte Wold subsequently negotiates not only new forms of texture and balance, but also converges towards an aesthetic that takes its source in the simplification of effects. As she tears the trunk of the *enset*, the details of the image are spectacular and striking. A deep and hollow scene appears as it simultaneously dissolves. Looking like a mother's womb or even an abysmal hole, the image's troubling posture is constantly at odds with the beauty it informs. At first, it looks like she is exploring the plant, its makeup and its beauty together with its vulnerability. The trunk of the plant appears to symbolize the native's brain. It is later that the viewer is confronted with the gouging of the trunk's form and content. As if to elucidate the susceptible side of the native's brain, the harsh sound that emerges seems to allude that the artist is incorporating violence into the basic vocabulary of the plant. The composition's visual pleasure is complicated with the violent upheavals of images that are inextricably woven with exquisite doubles. Furthermore, the sound that arises is particularly pronounced. Screeching and whispering sounds are instantaneously transpired into the picture. These contrasts are nonetheless delicately gathered towards the end when the artist attempts to link all the disjointed forms. A critique on repressed epistemologies as well as the encounters between coloniality and de-coloniality, the artist's work reflects on the truth of the archive and its ambiguous present.

**Habte Wold says:**

"My work involved the gathering, touching, stirring, un-tangling, tangling, peeling tearing and organizing the dry trunk of the *enset*. As I did this, I heard strange sounds emerging from the shredding and joining of the plant. Sounds like hay and ho that abruptly appeared and dissolved from the plant mesmerized me. I came to see and hear what I have never heard and seen. I felt its physicality and its coarseness, simultaneously with its suaveness. It stunned me as it bemused me. There is nothing that you throw out from *enset*. Everything is used and reused; the sound ho can mean food and hay can mean presence and survival, ho can again be a house machine and a bed."<sup>v</sup>

Her primary objects are the *enset*, the *matot* which is a seat for containers and pots that is made from the trunk, works of crochet, and leaves that are found in her garden. Believing that nature is wise that resolves her own mysteries, Habte Wold says that she was first inspired by the lotus leaf particularly because water droplets on the lotus leaf pick dirt particles. Of course this is due to the micro and nanoscopic structure of the surface which diminishes the water droplet's bond to the surface. It is also the tension on the surface that situates the drops. Of her fascination with the lotus leaf,

**Habte Wold says:**

"This leaf has the ability to naturally cleanse herself. Through this leaf, I saw the rain droplets fall on the surface of the leaf. Instead of droplets dropping onto the leaf, I saw the ball like structure of the droplet roll on the leaf. Back and forth, left and right, the wind and gravitational forces often changing its form of movement. And through this motion, all the dirt in the leaf cascades onto the ground. I got excited from watching this passage of motion. For a brief moment, I wanted to be that leaf, to share her destiny. I saw the leaf with all the other garbage and refuse that we daily pull out to dump. It is exasperating to see this since each dump is always and continuously filled up with other dumps. The garbage is always ahead, endlessly stuffing the dump. I saw the green and dry leaves of the koba, simultaneously and gracefully seated on the trunk from my studio window. I saw it in the present. I thought of the wisdom of the lotus leaf. And I began to work."<sup>vii</sup>

Certainly Habte Wold also says the works in this exhibition emphasize the character of women's collective experiences. Objects such as the crochet and the *matot* are represented as critical sites of female identity—in the household domain in which feminine identity is intimately linked. Habte Wold confronts conventional female representations in many of her works. Here too, one of the central themes of her work is the enigma of the female body. For instance, the tearing and rupture that she depicts captures the feminine as an object of fascination and ambiguity. Views of the feminine is disrupted with the anxieties that accompany the shreds and tears. The experience is not so much one of looking at the image, but also the obscene and profane invested within the irony of fertility, godliness, and purity without sex; the first curse of woman as symbolized in Eve. This very depiction places the female body as enigma erecting a barrier between the body of the Ethiopian woman and the institutional context in which her body is situated.

The attempt to deconstruct stereotyped images of the 'female' is at the crux of many contemporary African women artists' enterprises. The female body as imagined, manipulated and defined and the social and political situation that continues to repress women appear in many of their works. Unfortunately, in Ethiopia, the historical and mythological convention is so strong that a private experience of femininity is not articulated. Perhaps the lotus that is also used in contexts of beauty, divinity and fertility, while the unfolding of its leaves represent the expanding of the soul and spiritual awakening, also serves in representing feminine agency. Indeed, women artists had been few in Ethiopia and the understanding and legitimizing of women's art had been a continuous narrative of a hegemonic gaze. And male ideology had denied the validity of women's individual experiences.

Icons of domesticity, fertility and purity have circumscribed the artistic practices of early Ethiopian women modernists of the 1950s and 1960s. Although there are few contemporary female artists who engage in women's agency, not too much has changed since the 1950s and 60s. One of the few visible women artists, Habte Wold's works are as much about gender politics as they are about memory and coloniality. Her works broadly engage the politics of visibility and the hegemony of vision. She invokes images that envision the domestic sphere in multiple ways, often depicting stories and mythologies surrounding women. Examining the construction of the 'female' and her feminized space, the artist consequently evokes women's history and identity that had historically been relegated as insignificant.

As indicated elsewhere, the *matot* that is made from the dry part of the *enset* trunk serves as seat to pots or water containers (*enseras*) that are made of clay. A functional object for thousands of years and an exquisite work of art, the *matot* has unfortunately been replaced by cheap and hazardous materials that are massively imported/dumped from China. However, the artist still uses the *matot* in her own household in its functionality as well as in her art. She says that the *matot* serves both as a metaphorical seat and stand. She states it is symbolic of "a place for rest, a place for comfort and a mechanism for support." It is made through a repetitive braid that gives it its distinct sturdiness. The repetition of identical casts also gives the *matot* a spatial structure giving it a unique vision of a dynamic abstract form. What does this form mean?

Does it tell us something apart from what it represents? Indeed, the meaning of modernism is beyond content of any kind. But our modernism is different than the European one. Our modernism bears our own face and story. It is the story of the colonized. It is the hopeful search for the archive that is on the verge of disappearance. It is the location of the dislocated subject. And it is a fight to reclaim what was once ours.

And the artist has pointed the *matot's* metaphorical position; from being a seat to a stand, and from being support to a place of comfort. To this regard, the *matot* serves as both metaphor and reflexive art. Its repetitive structure articulates a language that is connected to a social context. Blurring the line between art and artefact, as she has done through all the fragmented objects in this exhibition, Habte Wold narrates the complex history of the postcolonial subject. What fascinated the artist even more was when her nine year old twins---boy and girl---began to play with the *matot*. They quickly replaced their imported Chinese toys that have been unfairly dumped on them; toys that break so easily, so fragile and precarious that they violently mock a child's innocence. What came out from dried *enset* trunks that pervaded her garden suddenly became intricate patterns and textures. And her twins played numbers on them, and without a toy's blueprint, the *matots* suddenly became toys. Therefore, she tells us that the meanings of these objects should be less of the function they provide, and more about the ways in which they present the history of the extinct or the soon to be from collective memory.

**She states:**

"I took this image of a repetitive braid and began to repetitively work on it. They multiplied. They were on top of one another. They stood in unison and created a form and a style that I did not anticipate. Their circular shape expanded as they multiplied and stretched. They became malleable and repeated themselves more and more."<sup>viii</sup>

The artist also plays with crocheted balls that loom out from a box and yet jump into it. The crochets are made by women. An additional extinct craft, crochet works once served in embellishing homes. Their intricate structure can be read as the body languages of the women who made them, those ephemeral clues that give meaning to womanhood. The pattern and its underlying ideology are one and the same. The feminine is always in search for binding organizations in the private domain. However complex and complicated, she methodically organizes structures and

forms from the everyday and the mundane. Between the strokes of her crochet lies her wisdom, and between its obscurity rests the simplicity of her astuteness. Furthermore, the box that the crocheted balls jump in and out represent memory where memory is at once extinguished and preserved. Amid the disorder and rupture of postcolonial lives, recovering memory becomes important to imagine lost sensibilities, even as they are fleeting and temporary.

Habte Wold uses animation and video, in addition to installed materials in the museum space to question and reimagine established narratives and hierarchies with an epistemological lens that is non-conventional and out of the ordinary. Her primary materials are everyday objects and her unsettling queries become particularly poignant in the medium of animation. Enwezor's assertion that an exhibition is positioned "through the process of reframing"<sup>ix</sup> is acutely resonant in this exhibition. Framing the relationship between form and content in the exhibition space becomes significantly critical for its questions and lack, as well as for its answers and excess. We may be confronted with the ambivalence of our own gaze, or our own desire to 'see' through the image, and explore the very physical object in our hands; and yet we also give justice to the work with the appropriate curatorial approach. It is from this perspective that I have found it important to write about Habte Wold's work. Moreover, I believe that her work not only reveals Ethiopian feminist politics, but is also the subject of a vital work of contemporary art that foregrounds a new formal variation in the larger context of postcolonial subjectivity.

**Elizabeth W Giorgis (PhD)**

Curator

Modern Art Museum: Gebre Kristos Desta Center

College of Performing and Visual Art

Addis Ababa University

<sup>i</sup>Okwui Enwezor, "Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site," in *The Exhibitionist*, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/85081/697c1b2479b30f78e3d86eed5f764ebf.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Conversation with the artist, March 2017.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Enwezor, *Topographies of Critical Practice*.





**እራስን በራስ**

የስዕል ሥራዬን ከምሰራበት ክፍል ሆኜ በጎን መስኮት ሁሌ የማየው ግርማ ሞገስ ካለው የእንሰት ተክል ላይ የሚወድቀው ደረቀ ኮባ ቅጠል ተከምሯል። አሁን አየሁት።

ከፊት ለፊቴ ካለው መስኮት በርቀት የምትታየኝ እንዲት ተክል ከላዩ ላይ ያለው ቅጠል የዝናብ ጠብታ ጠብ ሲል እና ሲወድቅ ውሃው እላዩ ላይ መረጨቱን፣ ትቶ እንደ ኪስ ይንከባለላል። እንደ ንፋሱ ሁኔታ ደግሞ ወደ ጎላ እና ወደፊት፤ ወደ ግራ እና ወደ ቀኝ ተንከባሎም ወደ መሬት ይወድቃል። በቅጠሉ ላይ በሚንከባለበት ጊዜም እላዩ ላይ ያለውን አባራ እና ቆሻሻ ይዞ አብር ተስፈንጥሮ ይወድቃል። የተፈጥሮ ቅርጽ እና ያላት አካላዊ ይዘት ቆሻሻ በላዩ ላይ እንዳይቆይ አድርጓታል። ይህች የተለየች ቅጠል እራሱን በራሱ የማዕዳት ተፈጥሮአዊ የሆነ ተሰጥፆ አላት።

እራሱን በራሱ የምታፀዳ የቅጠሉን ጠቢባዊ ሥራም እያሰብኩ ሥራዬ መሬት የወደቀ የደረቀ ኮባ መሰብሰብ፤ መጎተት፤ መንካት፤ መፈተሽ፤ መፍታት፤ መላጥ፤ መተርክክ፤ እና መሸርደድ ሆነ። የአላጠ መጠን ዝግ ባለ ጊዜ እና በቸኮለ ጊዜ የሚያወጣው ድምጽ የተለያየ ነው። በችኮላ ሲላጥ ያለው ድምጽ ሃይለኛነት አለው። አይቼ እና አስተውዬውም የማላውቀውን የውስጡን ቁመና እና መልኩንም አሳየኝ። አስደንገጠኝ። አስደመመኝ።

የደረቀውን የኮባ ቅጠል ክፍል በውስጥ በማድረግ ለስለስ ያለውን የግንዱን አካል ከላይ በመጠምጠም በዝግታ የእሽክርክሪት ጨዋታ ጀመርኩ። የህይወትን እሽክርክሪትም አስታወሰኝ።

መዘር፤ ማዘር፤ ማሳለፍ፤ ማስገባት፤ መሻገር፤ ማሻገር፤ መሳብ፤ ማጥበቅ፤ በላይ ማስኬድ፤ በውስጥ ማምጣት፤ መሄድ፤ መምጣት፤ በእነዚህ ድግምግሞሽ ውስጥ ሥራው እና ሂደቱ ቀጠለ።

የተሰራው የዕቃው ቅርጽ፤ በሥራው ተምሳሌትነት ያለው። እንደ ቆሻሻ ክምር እራሱም ማለቂያ እና ማብቂያ የሌለው፤ የክብ ቅርጽ ያለው ማቶት ሆነ።

የደረቀ የኮባ ቅጠል ከማዳበሪያነት ወደ ቤት መገልገያ ዕቃነት ተለወጠ። እራሱን አደሰ። የህይወትን ቀጣይነትንም አስታወሰኝ።

ይህንን በድግምግሞሽ ጥምጠማ የሚሠራን ቅርጽ እየደጋገምኩ መሥራት ጀመርኩ። የሥነ ጥበብ ትምህርት ቤት ተማሪ እያለሁ የታሪክ መምህራ

ስዩም ወልዴ “ድግምግሞሽ የዕውቀት መጀመሪያ ነው” የሚለውን አስታወሰኝ።

የኔም ማቶቶች ተደጋገሙ። በዘ። ተከመሩ።

አብረው ሆነው በአንድነት ሲደረደሩ እና ሲቀመጡ ሌላ የሆነ ቅርጽ ማውጣት ጀመሩ።

ከተከመረው የደረቀ ኮባ የወጣውን ማቶት ሌላ ጎን አየሁበት። የዘጠኝ ዓመት መንታ ወንድ እና ሴት ልጆቹ ብድግ አድርገውት እንደመጫወቻ እያሽከረከሩ ተጠቀሙበት። እያንዳንዱን እያነሱ አንድ፤ ሁለት፤ ሦስት፤ እያሉ ቆጠሩ። በጊዜው የልጆች መደሰቻ፤ የመጫወቻ ዕቃ ሆነ።

በአንድ ወቅት የባለቤቱን አክስት ወ/ሮ አሰከደች ከበደን ለመጠየቅ ከልጆቹ ጋር ስንሄድ በቤቷ ውስጥ በጣም የሚያምር እና የሚገርም አይነት የዳንቴል እና የስፌት የእጅ ሥራ አየሁ።

እነዚህ የእጅ ሥራዎች ጥበባዊ ይዘታቸው ሕብረትን፤ ጥንካሬን፤ ትዕግሥትን፤ ዘይኛነትን፤ የሚያሳዩ እና እንዲሁም መላን እና ዕውቀትን የሚጠይቁ ናቸው። የሰራቸውን ሰው ባህሪያ ተላብሰዋል ብዬ አምናለሁ።

ይቀጥላል....

ኤልሣቤጥ ሀ/ወልድ  
ሚያዝያ 2009 ዓ.ም.



## Fanaye Gebreheywot and Semeneh Ayalew in Conversation with the Artist

Elizabeth Habtewold's work invites us to note that being creative is an extension of nature or an admiration of something that is not yet revealed but nonetheless exists. Besides things of "nature", Elizabeth uses materials that we find in our everyday lives and in our environments. One such item is the treasure box which can be seen as a metaphor of our collective experiences and our shared pasts. The box contains valuable assets and inscribed in it are the things we keep; our secrets, memories and experiences.

The notion of "going back" is a recurrent theme in the artist's work. By prompting us to gape into these artifacts, her works encourage us to revisit our past. This is particularly evident in the artist's choice of material and practice such as the making of *matots* and *dantels*. The *matot* and *dantel* are household materials traditionally perceived as used and made exclusively by women, making up an integral part of their daily practices. Through the examination of these artistries, she implores us to look into practices of women regarded as mundane and that are simply confined to their function in the domestic sphere. By going back, we are not so much encouraged to re-enact the practices of the past, but rather we are persuaded to foreground the shared past and its varied practices. Consequently, the artist orients our attention to these objects by instigating us to consider enchanting our present with the vitality of practices that are otherwise dismissed as ordinary and mundane.

Furthermore, the artist looks at the beauty of these intimate spheres of household objects, giving prominence to everyday things and crafts that are not seen as art. She ultimately takes us to a place we have not been to looking for art; a place that is deemed as "the female space." Indeed, the divide between the 'domestic' and the 'public' has been used to frame women in the home and assign their crafts as functional everyday objects or mere 'artifacts' with little or no artistic value. Therefore, her work rejects the idea that for something to be art, it should not have any other functional use

than being a spectacle, a point of artistic admiration.

While art in the 'public' arena, such as in the museum and in the gallery is limited to the appreciation of the few, Elizabeth's work is saying that art is also to be found in the quotidian; in the kitchen, in the household and in the practices of everyday people. Her work incites us to cultivate our sensibilities and see how women in the past and in the present are makers and admirers of art that they produced and lived with. By doing this, she provokes us into appreciating the art found in the more democratic popular domain.

The other theme that is given centrality in Elizabeth's work is the idea of going back to "nature". She shows us that nature---represented by the banana and lotus leaves---inspires us not only by its shape and form but also by its function. The 'transaction' that she presents between "us" and "nature" invites us to complicate our understanding of the dichotomies between "us" and "nature." She shows us that there is no unadulterated nature that exists objectively of us, separate from human existence. She is zooming in on nature that lives in and with us, and that which is part of our intimate existence. What we are presented with is, therefore, a lived-in and intimate nature that is an integral part of human social life, rather than one that is extrinsic to it. The intricate design and shape of the crochet that Elizabeth presents, for instance, is one example in her work which shows that everyday objects and motifs are always in linkage and transaction with the natural environment, and that our social life is inextricably linked with the rest of the natural environment that surrounds us and that overflow and interpenetrate each other.

On the one hand, her work allows us to pause and appreciate banana leaves in their very existence as an art form, by noting, for instance, the intricacy of the pattern of its stem. On the other hand, her work is highly experimental. She plays with various forms giving the banana leaves a more fully-fledged and serial life. Through these experiments we are prompted to admire the *matot* (made from banana leaves), as an art form, while simultaneously realizing that this particular form can go beyond its conventional function, and can be

used to make toys, circles, trash cans etc.

Elizabeth mixes and combines the matot with different materials to re-form it and to come up with new forms and functions. In her experiments with form, we note that there is a profound acknowledgment and reclamation of craft practices common to our communities, both in the past and the present. We also see that banana leaves have many different lives, from the way they grow to their decomposition that gives life to people and other things of nature. The many lives of the banana leaf, both as an art form in its very existence as well as its many different altered forms and functions, can be read as a metaphor for a potential life of self-sufficiency. It can be seen as a statement about the cycle of life: *What is in nature is used and reused in different forms and shapes. And if nature is allowed, it can recreate and replenish itself.*

This perceptiveness to nature provides self-understanding since it grasps the essence and value of things in our environment. But the oblivion from seeing and appreciating what is in nature often compels us to resort to the 'unnatural', which breaks nature's life cycle and its self-regenerative capacity. As we see in Elizabeth's experiment with banana leaves, she does not tie the leaves just to one function: she allows them to have different lives. In this way, we are urged to connect and reconnect ourselves to what is inherently part of us and to what we are simultaneously part of, the natural world. By allowing our senses to appreciate nature's elements, we locate ourselves in the natural world, as opposed to seeing ourselves as external to it. This way, we see ourselves and the rest of the natural world as constantly constituting each other, rather than as existing in separation of one another. Connecting with the natural environment and practices of the past not only bridges the gap between "the human" and "nature," but also casts us in a new light. Rather than falling prey to the allures of the world of commodities that more often than not separate us from our own environment, this interconnectedness compels us to explore the structure, function and rhythm of nature.

Elizabeth Habte Wold also explicates the cleansing power of nature through the lotus leaf. She insists, while nature in its own cycle has ways of cleansing itself, the world of commodities is invasive and alien

to the natural environment. When we are bombarded by the pervasiveness and indestructible waste of the world of commodities, we stop seeing the meanings in nature. But when we allow nature to be, it cleanses itself like the lotus leaf.

In short, the artist is compelling us to find our element in our natural environment. And she relays this message through a perceptive artistic engagement.

### **Fanaye Gebreheywot**

Setaweet

And

### **Semeneh Ayalew**

Doctoral Candidate at Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR)  
Kampala Uganda







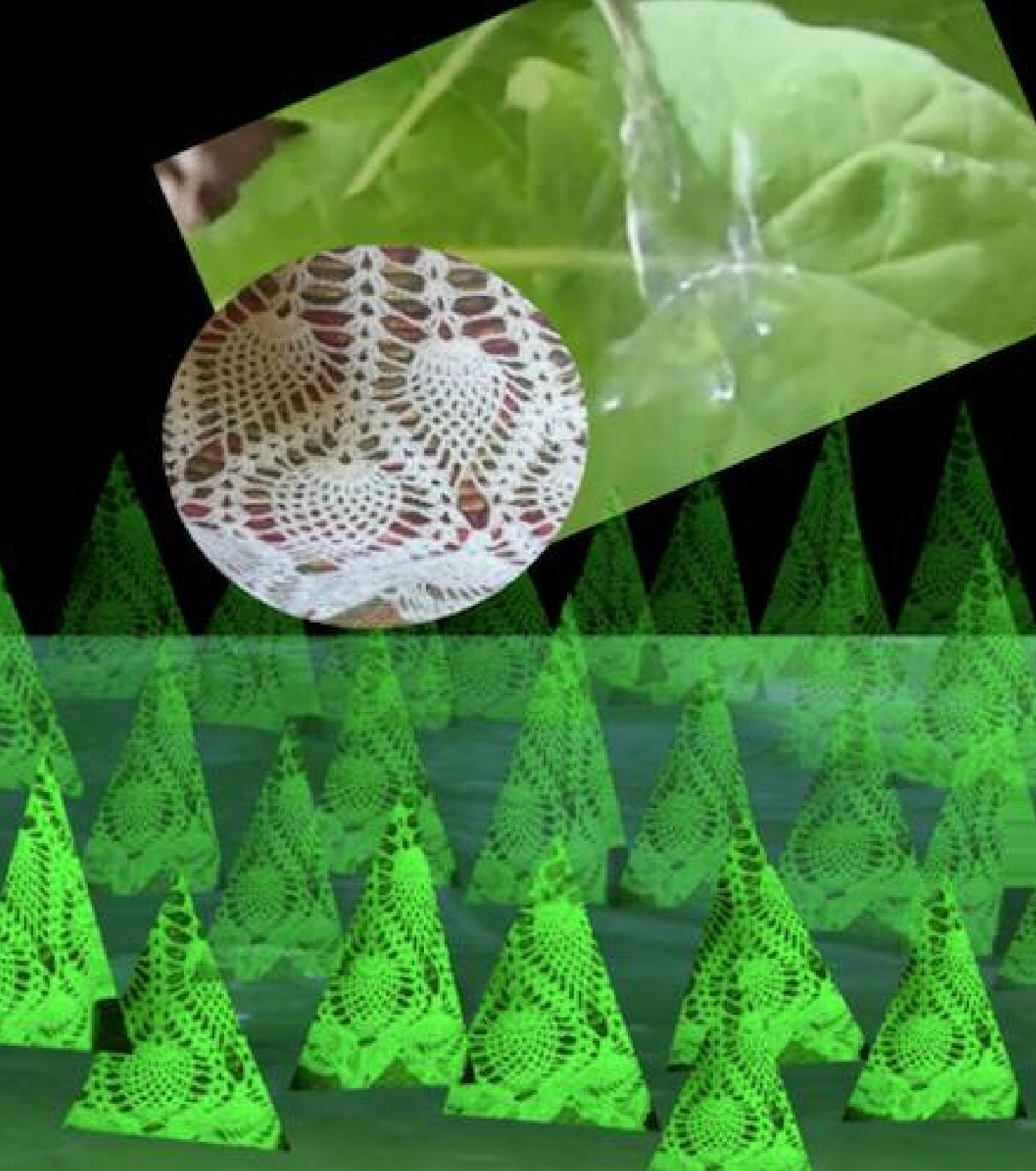














Born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Elizabeth Habte Wold studied painting at the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design and graduated in 1985. She moved to the USA in 1987 and studied graphic arts in Baltimore City Community Collage. She joined Howard University in Washington, DC, and received MFA in painting in 1993. In 2000, she studied Interactive Multimedia for a year at George Washington University, while she was working as in house designer at the Washington Gas and Light, Washington, DC.

Since 2001, Elizabeth has been living in Addis Ababa and she has been engaged in various artistic interventions. Her works have been exhibited locally and internationally. Her recent works include Africa Rising, the mirror mosaic installation currently displayed at the African Union, and a video documentation of Ethiopian Women Artists.

Her solo exhibitions include Parish Gallery, Washington DC, in 2004, and in 2007, 2010 and 2013 at Asni Gallery, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

List of selected group exhibitions include, National Museum of Ethiopia, 2016, the Lafto Gallery, Inspired Women II, 2014, the Samuel P. Harn Museum, Continuity and Change, Three Generations of Ethiopia, 2007, the Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, Ethiopian Passages in the Diaspora, 2003.

[elizabethwoldstudio.com](http://elizabethwoldstudio.com)



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