

# Ethiopian Passages

Contemporary Art from the Diaspora

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*with contributions by*

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demarcating the familiar in our lives. In an era where attachments to a single homeland are becoming more rare, mapping becomes a key tool in relocating one's position in the world and understanding one's place in a community (plate 3, fig. 7). Mehretu explains: "I am interested in the multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity."<sup>24</sup>

In *Thirdspace*, urban geographer Edward Soja introduces a new discourse on geography in which he sees space as an integral part of understanding the interconnectedness of our global society. He writes:

*. . . the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance than it is today. Whether we are attempting to deal with the increasing intervention of electronic media in our daily routines; seeking ways to act politically to deal with the growing problems of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation; or trying to understand the multiplying geopolitical conflicts around the globe, we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities.*<sup>25</sup>

Mehretu's canvases and wall paintings provide us with insight to our own uses of space in this global age.

Of course, the ease with which Mehretu articulates her understandings of diasporas and transnationalism is rooted in her own experiences. Born in Addis Ababa in 1970 to an Ethiopian father, who was a professor of geography, and an American mother, Mehretu lived in Senegal and later received her BFA from Kalamazoo College when her father's career relocated the family to East Lansing, Michigan. She then moved to the East Coast to study for an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. After several years in the Houston area, where she took part in the Core Artists-in-Residence Program, she finally set up a studio in New York, itself a city of immigrants.

Mehretu's history and practice illustrate the fluid, shifting and highly personal means through which individuals negotiate definitions of diaspora. While she clearly feels an affinity and connection to things Ethiopian, her works move beyond any narrow definition and speak to global concerns.

Also, while her choice of medium is traditional and she admits a desire to engage with the rich history of painting practice, her iconography and her technique (which includes computer assistance) are purely her own, born of the freedoms that the global age has afforded her. One of Mehretu's future projects will be a series of epic paintings that address the spaces of Africa's postcolonial cities, themselves rich mixes of cultures, traditions and histories.

While Julie Mehretu's works offer us a kind of bird's-eye view of the structures of a transnational world, the art of Kebedech Tekleab provides us with a window into the souls of the displaced. In her large, haunting, painterly canvases, Kebedech addresses the agony of human oppression and the dignified resilience of its victims (plate 4). Many of the human

tragedies of the 20th century occurred as a result of brutal warfare or economic or ecological strife. Like many contemporary artists in exile, Kebedech has struggled to find peace in the face of life's vicissitudes and, through visual art and poetry, has been able to come to terms with its bittersweet realities, using autobiography to address shared histories. As she states in "A Long Walk in the Light of Art" (artist's statement, 2002):

*I am fascinated by the duality of life—the benevolence and the cruelty, the good and the bad, the darkness and the light—My art is a reflection of life that draws from this reality. It is done rationally and emotionally, embracing the bitter taste of life while yielding an aesthetic beauty of its own.*

Born and raised in Addis Ababa, Kebedech began her artistic studies in the early 1970s, but they were cut short by the rise of the Derg. At 17, she left school to join a student movement that rose in opposition to the military regime.<sup>26</sup>

As the government began to systematically wipe out its opposition, she, like many of her generation, was forced to flee the capital and the country. En route to Djibouti she was caught by the Somalian Liberation Movement and placed in a labor camp where she remained for over a decade until her repatriation in 1988. Although she escaped most of the physical abuse of the camps, working as a nurse and creating portraits of her captors, she experienced the psychological terror. After repatriation, Kebedech joined her family in Washington, D.C. in 1989 and resumed her art studies in 1990. She received her bachelors in 1992 and a masters in 1995 from Howard University.

At a certain point during her time at Howard, her paintings became more abstract; the figures began to lose their faces. The pain that she transferred to them was such that it became more effective to think about the soul within the figures than the identity of the figures themselves. For Kebedech, the dehumanizing and degrading experiences of war and refugeeism were better articulated through abstracted figuration. Her *Human Condition* series, of which *Shackled* and *The River in Rwanda* (plate 5) are parts, arose from her reflections at Howard.

*I tried to find parallels between poems I had written and my paintings. Internally, instead of visualizing the physical body, I began to sense the feelings, as if the numbness that I had was becoming less as the pressure that pinched its sensitivity was overcome. The use of human figures became a secondary means of expressing emotion. Since I started reliving the life that I earlier had lived emotionally, my mental picture of people whom I had once known only superficially became transformed to a sense of their souls. From the cause to the effects.<sup>27</sup>*

Kebedech produced the *Powwow* series in the early 1990s; a set of paintings that eventually served as part of her masters requirements. After a friend invited her for a visit in North Dakota, Kebedech met with a series of Native American elders, observing their community and their celebrations. Learning about their powwows, the artist was taken by the sophistication



FIG. 8  
Kebedech Tekleab  
**The Power**  
1993  
Mixed media  
on canvas  
173 x 105.5 cm  
(68 x 41 in.)  
Collection of  
the artist

of these cultures and, in her series of paintings, returned to a previous theme of “civilization versus savagery” (fig. 8).

Kebedech’s paintings are highly textured compositions within which forms are delineated through a strong sense of line and often bled to the edges of the canvas, as if threatening to join the surrounding world. Her painterly style, which is complemented by subtle and thoughtful uses of color, gives her forms a visceral quality. She says of her painting:

*In my effort to address human suffering as it might present itself to others in the world, I chose the art of painting as a medium of expression. This I did in two ways: first, by focusing on the similarities between my experience and the histories of human suffering in other parts of the world; and second, by examining the deleterious consequences of the notion of “Civilization versus savagery” which has been widely used to justify genocide on the part of the “civilized.”*<sup>23</sup>

It is of little surprise that in her reflections and her poetry Kebedech Tekleab has been drawn to the grandiose, dark and bloody canvases of Francisco Goya and Diego Velasquez whose works address war, human tragedy and frailty (plate 6). In her poem, "To Francisco Goya's painting 'The Third of May,' 1808,"<sup>25</sup> she writes:

*How true it is,  
Goya  
How True!  
'Tis the way to face death,  
For the enemy's missile  
Impotent in the realm of ideas,  
Can but strike at its target of tangible flesh  
And leave unscathed the abstract tenet.  
'Tis when the flesh alone is mortal  
That courage can stare death in the eye  
And bare its chest to the terrible messenger  
Dispatched by the horrible bark and blinding flash  
From the muzzle of the gun  
How true it is,  
Goya,  
How true!  
It is darkness,  
As for war,  
It is but darkness,  
Where the butcher and the butchered  
Discern one another in the twilight of hatred.  
How true!  
(Translation by Abiyi Ford)*

The synergy between Kebedech's poetry and visual works is obvious. They nourish and often parallel one another and serve as means through which the artist is able to transform trauma into a terrifying but beautiful vision, to make sense, somehow, of the madness in which humans have engaged.

In *Shackled*, Kebedech alludes to the cruelties and inhumanity of confinement. The dismembered, twisted, voluminous body parts, and the chaos they have endured threaten to spill beyond the confines of this highly textured and subtly hued canvas. Kebedech writes of her works: "The challenge for me as a painter has been how to reconcile the differing dynamics of tragedy and the sublime on one picture plane." She poses the question: "Is it possible to express tragic situations beautifully? Can I do justice to the tragic situation if my paintings are not shocking enough to reflect the inhumanity of the act they would comment upon?"<sup>26</sup>

*The River in Rwanda* is a disturbing account of genocide that occurred in 1994 in the small central African nation. A tragedy born of economic failure and ethnic conflict, this



Fig. 9  
Kebedech Tekleab  
**Insulated**  
1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
168.5 x 153 cm  
(66 x 60 in.)  
Collection of the artist

genocide had its roots in colonial politics in which the Belgians favored the minority Tutsis over the Hutus and fomented interethnic tension by propagating a racist myth of Hamitic superiority. Kebedech found within the story of Rwanda parallels to her own experiences of flight and internment in a Somalian labor camp and memories of the Red Terror under the Derg. She depicts this carnage through the assemblage of bodies, bones and blood that filled the rivers in Rwanda. The texture and palette of the work enhance its visceral impact.

When faced with experiences of displacement, exile and loss, émigrés seek a means to restore a sense of sanity, safety and belonging.<sup>21</sup> Through the rounded, contemplative figures and soft palette of *Insulated* (fig. 9), Kebedech extends an olive branch to the world, acknowledging the need for self-preservation within the whole, for individualism within the community and for benevolence and aesthetic beauty amidst the bittersweet realities of the 20th century. She writes of *Insulated*: