

A Look Beyond Content: The Collection of Alitash Kebede

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Living With Art features works from the collection of Ethiopian-born, Los Angeles-based collector Alitash Kebede. Her collection points to the multiple influences and identities that contribute to the spectrum of works by African American artists while illustrating types of works, such as portraiture and genre scenes, that have been so endearing to many Black viewers and collectors. While embracing those forms, the collection also offers a respite from them by highlighting other challenging forms that offer experimentation with non-objective styles that are appreciated for the manipulation of materials, spatial arrangements, deconstructed images, irony, and critical juxtapositions.

Works of art by African Americans, like the artists themselves, have often been classified under one sweeping view. Some contend that it must somehow “look Black” and be created from the specific experience of being Black in America. Yet the critical thinker realizes that works of art by African Americans, like the people themselves, does not fit within a monolithic definition, character, or identity. And like African American people, it is very diverse within the ethnically Black population.

The success of this personal survey of modern and postmodern art supports the idea of art appreciation through early exposure to art. Kebede was exposed to art in her home as a child. A watershed moment came for Kebede when as a teenager she attended the exhibition of Ethiopian-born modern painter, Skunder Boghossian at the Creative Arts Center at Addis Ababa University. Bhogohssian, who was trained in Paris, is known for his abstractions based on the symbols and material culture from his native Ethiopia as well as the Black Diaspora.

In 1970's Kebede came to the United States to study. Kebede's intrigue with contemporary art led her to minor in studio art at Lindfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. She then moved to Los Angeles, to attend graduate school at UCLA. In the early 1980's she took frequent trips to New York to pursue her interest in art. During this period she met many artists including Vincent Smith, Ed Clark, Herbert Gentry and the Ethiopian-born artist Elisabeth Atnafu. In 1982 Kebede had an opportunity to meet Skunder Boghossian in Washington. D.C. She purchased one of his paintings and thus started her collection.

Painter, Herbert Gentry, later introduced Kebede to Bearden at a party in his honor at The Armory in New York. Bearden was very approachable and invited Kebede and Gentry to his studio in Long Island. Gentry also introduced her to Richard Mayhew, and when Kebede saw his painting *Autumn Sonata*, (date) her interest was peaked as she was reminded of the landscape painting in her (childhood home) Mayhew's watercolors and drawings, such as his *Spiritual Space Series* (1994) are sensitive to the layering qualities of clear bodies of water in natural settings where one can peer into the water and realize the layers of life below. Mayhew scoffs at strictly calling his paintings landscapes, preferring to refer to them as spiritual spaces where

one enters and wonders among the layers of color and textures. He often provides a passageway or a path into these spaces that meanders into the unknown. In one painting *Meadow* (1983) she became absorbed in the spiritual space of the composition, finding it much like the space of the landscape in which she had lost herself as a teenager. Kebede purchased *Meadow*; it now hangs in her

Kebede had an early sensibility toward abstraction and deconstructed imagery and this led her to collect Ed Clark's signature broad-brush stroke paintings, such as his *Paris Series* (1991), and Alma Thomas's *Untitled (Red)* (c. 1978) and *Garden* (c. 1978). Both of Thomas's paintings are characterized by brief daubs of paint on painted undersurfaces, sometimes executed in broad bands of color with linear elements. Works by other artists exhibit this same type of experimentation with materials while also focusing on visual illusion and perception, such as in Sam Gilliam's *For Xavier* (1990) and Mel Edwards' *C & M Carodolet* (1981), both of which appear to slice into the spaces around them. Phyllis Thompson's *Ritual Series* (c. 1973-4) and Norman Lewis's ethereal *Pine Top* (1956) are characterized by riff-like textures, while Mary Lovelace O'Neal's *The Mother of Twins Carries a Gun* (1994) emphasizes the liquidity of monotype. Betye Saar is often a storyteller, but her *Slipping Into Darkness* (1981, which shares the same indigo background with bright red accents as *L.A. Sky With Spinning Hearts* (1989), illustrates her capacity to break away from the narrative and provide her viewers an opportunity to appreciate the spatial arrangements that are so integral to her compositions.

Portraiture is a staple in art production by African American Artists and a genre appreciated by many people because it allows one to gaze unnoticed into the lives of strangers and create narratives based on the fragments of information revealed by the artist. As we fantasize, we interact with the subject, incorporating our own baggage and longings into their stories. Some of the earliest drawings, all created in 1947, are an academic self-portrait by Samella Lewis, a sensitive portrayal entitled *Lovers* by Charles Alston, and Charles White's poignant *Woman in Pain (Dolorosa)*. Later works share the same romanticism: Elizabeth Catlett's thoughtful *Glory* (1986), Richmond Barthe's *Spanish Mother* (1939), the ultra realism of Richard Wyatt's nineteen ninety-nine portrait of Kebede's nephew entitled *Young Zelek*, and *Untitled* (2001) by Kehinde Wiley, the youngest artist in the collection.

The most engaging portraits are those that also employ a sense of irony, such as Emilo Cruz's *Portrait of Alitash* (1991)—a beautiful rendering of the collector that accentuates an attitude of feminine charm, determination, and resolve—as well as his anthropomorphic *Origins* (1985) and *Umbrella* (1998). Also engaging are the offerings from the trio of Betye Saar and her daughters Allison Saar and Lazley Saar. Allison's *Fiona* (1987) continues to blur the lines of interior / exterior space, opening the dress bodice painted form to expose the complex inside of the woman's bosom with a similar briolette design as picture frame. Her *Skillet Black* (2001) are portraits painted on cast-iron skillets, a staple of many Black kitchens and an element and symbol of Black folklore, often used as a signifier for blackness in works by such other African American artists as David Hammons, Mildred Howard, and Murray DePillars. Allison Saar's skillets are strung together like black opal stones, highlighted with portraits of black faces, and are conceptually similar to Lezley Saar's *Things Fall Apart Series* of portraits (1994-2000) of 19th century ethnographic photographs encased in ornate gilded frames with lace backgrounds. Both works resemble precious jeweled lockets. Betye Saar's *The*

Sisters (1977) is a series of works based on family memories and personal stories much like Eve Sandler's unfolding mysteries in the mixed media work *Castaway Fear, Territories Series* (1989). But Betye Saar's *Mr. Lucky* (1977) stands out as the most evocative of the group. A mysterious background frames *Mr. Lucky*, detaching him from his environment and causing a curious interaction among the frequently used motifs of leaves, a playing card and hand in this work. Throughout his brief artistic career Bob Thompson narratives often juxtaposed good and evil as in *Study for Ascension to the Heavens* (1963) a battle fought as the heavens open onto earth. But most striking paintings in this collection are his five small *Tarot* cards (c. 1960) for their evocative narratives and sensuous painterly images.

More straightforward are the two Charles White lithographs from his *Poster Series* (1978), which confirm his skill in discerning the structure of planes. They resemble that White applied the academic exercise of folding paper in different angular shapes and then unfolding it to realize the many planes that are made light sensitive in lithographic processes. By manipulating the light exposure, the tonal areas have the effect of shattered or exploding glass, providing a sharp-edged environment for the immersion of his ethereal and questioning portraits.

Other compelling figurative works dance and float within the confines of their frames, highlighting the compositional structures as much as the narratives within. Kebede has chosen to collect artists' figurative works that are fluid and whose content does not compromise the design elements. Romare Bearden's *Evening* (1985) allows the viewer to know more about the life of the subject through his interior scenes, as does William Smith's exotic and romantic bare-breasted, brown *Polynesian Woman* (c. 1953) at her bath alone with her thoughts as she prepares to cleanse herself.

The figurative content is more vague and design more evident in Bill Hutson's *Family Portrait* (1988) and Herbert Gentry's *Awaiting Together* (1991-92). Nanette Carter's *Window View #6* (1995) is an opaque interior scene encased in thick two-tone border, and Richard Yarde's *Red Dress* (1986) suggests the movement of dancers, yet their movements appear frozen in mid-step and time. As viewers of these paintings we can only peer through an opening that reveals the actions of those that remain unconscious of our gaze as we fantasize about their stories.

There are several genre scenes that point to the artists' need to document the world around them. Some paintings, such as Lois Mailou Jones' *Le Camp De Gitanes* (Burgens, France) (1940) and Palmer Hayden's *Steps of Baltimore* (c. 1940), attest to the early realistic narratives in paintings that took precedence over design or experimentation. For Jacob Lawrence, painting was always design as exemplified by the colored shapes in *Flight #1 (Walking in the Rain)* (1967) and *Builders Color Drawings 12* (1985). He often reworked themes in different media making works like *Confrontation at the Bridge, Harlem Street Scene* and *The Library* all silk screens from the 1970s, available to wider audiences. The concentration on design over content is also evident in Gwendolyn Knight's *Lullaby* (1992), while Romare Bearden's *After Rain* (c. 1984) (which has a mysterious acquiescent watery sensibility) and *Evening* (1979) (a moonlit night) are watercolor exercises on light and shadow in nature.

Kebede has amassed a diverse collection of sculpture, from realistic renderings to abstractions that mimic the movements and textures of nature. David Butlers' whimsical *Garden Figures* (c. 1960) share the same punctuated shapes as Richard Hunts' *Orbit*, Al Loving's *Wyatt Avenue #8* (1992), and Charles Searles' *Warrior's Dance* (1998). In Maren Hassinger's *When The Time Came There Were No Leaves* (1988), which resembles an earthscape, wiry bristles billow like grasses propelled by nature's design. As in nature, Tyrone Mitchell's carved wood and aluminum *Buzzards Vine* (1963) is reminiscent of a twirling vine as it spins around a twig or branch.

It is clear that these artists are sensitive to motion and the spectacles of nature. The artists' sensitivity to small things that may go unnoticed by the larger populace is what nourishes Kebede's continued collecting. She feels that the artists that she has known and the richness of their lives have enriched her quality of life.

So far Kebede has collected mainly works by African American artists, even though the inspiration to become an art collector was Ethiopian artist Skunder Boghossian. She remembers coming from college in Oregon to Los Angeles to see art scholar and curator David Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, a 1972 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum, and wondering how all of this work existed with so few people knowing about it. Consequently, her initial focus was on works by tried and tested modern and postmodern artists. She then began to offer collect works by artists a little older than her generation, and most recently her attention has turned to younger artists. Although Kebede has collected mainly African American Artists she is also excited about introducing other artists from the African Diaspora into her collection or starting another one solely composed of Black diasporian artists. This is a very exciting move for Kebede, one to which few collectors in the US are committed.

While Kebede's collection is culturally specific, her collecting outlook is international. *Living with Art* is an ever-evolving experience that grows and is shaped by the collector's experiences and personal relationship with what is collected. This exhibition is therefore an introduction to modern and postmodern works by African American artists, save for Boghossian, the inspiration for the collection. The second phase of her collecting will be equally as compelling, as Kebede uses her skills to shape a collection with far-reaching implications on the modern/postmodern cultural interface of Blacks dispersed across all seven continents. An exciting thought, indeed.