

ERMIAS EKUBE

MEMORIES ARE WE ARE MEMORIES



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FOREWORD

Ermias Ekube's story is a testament to his resilience and resourcefulness. Born in Ethiopia to Eritrean parents, he has lived and worked in Addis Ababa, Asmara, Nairobi and Västervik, Sweden. Displaced multiple times, Ekube has found community and creative outlet every time, successfully reestablishing his art practice in each location through his journey. His works explore identity, memory, and the humanness that lies in revisiting and revising memories. Juxtaposing the immediate perceived truth in traditional figurative painting with texts, symbolic objects, and mirrors that inaccurately reflect the flotsam of life, Ekube has charged his works with increasing conceptual tension about time and reality throughout his career.

I would like to thank Ermias Ekube for taking part in this project with such openness and commitment. We are very excited to present a text by Hiwot Abebe exploring the themes that inhabit Ermias' works. This publication also includes a small selection of poetry by Ermias Ekube, selected by Hiwot Abebe. We thank Mike Jarmon for the filming and postproduction of the documentary that was produced in tandem with this publication.

This project gave us the opportunity to document one of the earliest and most renowned art institutions in East Africa, The Alle School of Fine Arts and Design. We are grateful to the directorship of the Alle School for granting us permission to photograph Ermias' graduation work as well as the school and its beautiful gardens. We were honoured that Tadesse Mesfin welcomed us to his studio and are thankful for his generosity in talking to us about Alle and Ermias Ekube's time there. We thank

our photography and filming partners in Ethiopia, Aziz Ahmed and Kemeriya Abduraheman.



We feel grateful to have worked with such incredible collaborators once again and I hope the readers enjoy this volume and the accompanying documentary on Ermias Ekube.

Farah Jirdeh Fonkenell
Founder and CEO, Almas Art Foundation



CONVERSATION WITH ERMIAS EKUBE

Can you please introduce yourself?

My name is Ermias Ekube. I was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during the 1970s when the socialist revolution started against the monarchy. It went on for some years and was a turbulent time, but as children, we didn't really notice the situation. It was kind of a normalised situation with the neighbourhood being of mixed classes and religions. We had a nice childhood.

My parents came from Eritrea. They were immigrants in a way because different revolutions were going on across the region. My parents lived in Addis, and all my siblings were born there; my mother was a housewife, and my father was a metal worker. His tools inspired me to start; maybe that is one of the main components of creative aspirations like fixing things around and making toys with his tools. The pre-school, started by the priests, was the traditional way to learn reading and writing before I was six. Then, I went to the modern public school. I was good in school and in the academies. The art part was coming through; in school, when I was copying diagrams from textbooks, everybody was impressed. I was encouraged by my elder brother and the family.

How would you introduce yourself as an artist?

Being an artist, I don't take it as a kind of identity in a way. It is an activity, that the rest of your identities roll into. It is as any kind of activity, which has possibilities to express oneself and a lot of freedom. I can draw, I can sculpt, I can print. Those skills are the ports to expressing oneself. Most of the expressions are mysterious; I don't rationally know about them. Things are happening. The most beautiful part of being in creative activity, in a way, is to have those tools instead of being an artist or having that as an identity. Maybe, this perception gives me a chance, wherever I go, to meet people and say I have these skills, and then it's easier for me to collaborate, to make conversations, or to create possibilities of conversations. You have the possibility to create conversations among different experiences in a way. That is how I feel about it. It is not you. It is just a tool. But you become through these conversations and sharing experiences; that is how you become. Otherwise, I don't consider myself an artist. Am I a painter? I don't know. Am I calling myself a painter or sculptor or a draftsman? It's difficult; these are tools that create possibilities for sharing experiences with others. It could be changed. I'm not worrying about changing from portraiture to abstraction, or other means of expression.

While you were growing up, was art considered a valid career?

In terms of considering art as a merit, it was not much recognised or known. In my family, no one was practising art. It's not known as 'art practice.' And in my neighbourhood and surroundings, it's not that known. The only thing is just copying these small things in school. I didn't know about artists as such in the art scene.

Maybe later, I remember seeing some posters from Afewerk Tekle, one of the big artists in that region, and he was like a king, and everybody was asking, “If you are doing drawings, do you want to be like Afewerk Tekle?” That was the only known name for me at that time. As a profession, it was not really supported. It was not even known as a profession. Otherwise, having it as a skill or practising it, I was supported by my family, friends and teachers. After realising this recognition, my mother started asking me to make designs for her quilt works instead of the carbon copies from her friends that she used to ask for. I remember, the priest who used to teach me reading and writing as a child, bought my colour drawing of Christ in my late childhood.

When you decided to enroll in the Alle School of Fine Arts, were they supportive? How did that come about?

The Alle School of Art happened by coincidence. I had never thought of being an artist because there is no such thing in the family or in my neighbourhood. I remember one time when I was doing this stuff—drawing, making sculptures, and toys with clay—an older boy asked me, “Do you want to be a professional artist or just an amateur artist?” And that was the first time I realised what it meant. Amateur means you just do your art practice as a hobby. Professional is to live on your art. Is there such a thing? And then he tried to explain, “Yes, you know Afewerk Tekle.” Then, yes, I want to be a professional artist because I consider myself the best in my neighbourhood.

When I think of being an artist at that time, there is Afewerk Tekle, and then, there is me. There is no one in between because I haven’t seen anyone around. But in between, I started to see some artists from other neighbourhoods. I saw their work, and I was intimidated; oh, there are others like me. I had a friend in high school who was supportive. We had been assigned to make a project—a diagram for a biology class or something like that. I was a bit shy, but I asked to be involved. This other guy was really extroverted. The teacher assigned us both, but the other student wanted to make it more himself. He did it, and I just tried my best to comment on it. He realised I was better than him, but he was not arrogant. So, we became close friends and the next time, he took me to the Alle School of Fine Arts. It was summertime and there was a course, which, at the same time, was an entrance exam. When we reached there, 800 people were there to register. I asked him what was going on. “Yeah, there is this course, and it’s a filtering process.”

In the first week, 400 were filtered. I stayed there, but my friend was kicked off. Okay, what’s going on? I can’t do it alone. He told me that I can do it. In the end, they took 24 people. Everybody was crying here and there. I wondered why they were crying; I didn’t realise what it was. In the end, they took me to the backyard to show me the school. It was like heaven, there were sculptures and monuments. That impression was like a dream.



I got back to my family and told them about it. They were shocked because they thought that I was good at school. My father always said, “My son will be an engineer or an architect.” I told him I wanted to continue in the art school.

There is another story in that high school. Every day during break time, I see a boy of my age doing a sketch, and everybody sits for him. I have never thought of drawing from life. I am copying pictures, posters, saints, and that stuff. But he’s doing sketches and is very good. I really envied him, but I never talked to him. When I joined school, I saw everybody was skilled at sketching. I had never done such things. But I met that guy, named Anteneh Seyoum, at the art school the same year; he was there. He was one of the top kids. After a while we became best friends. He was really my mentor at the time because he had this experience and background. He already had mentors who had graduated from the school, so he knew all the artistic procedures. He started teaching me how to see and how to think this way and that

way. The first semester was difficult because everybody was so good that I thought I couldn't continue and felt almost on the edge. And then, a teacher, Eshetu Tiruneh, asked me, "Do you practise at home? Everybody practices." For me, I thought that it had been a matter of talent. After the first semester, I coped with the others. In the second semester and forth, I became one of the top kids.

Were you always more drawn to painting?

In the Alle, during the first two years, you take every course: drawing, sculpture, printmaking, calligraphy, and all. But my interest was mainly in drawing and painting, as well as sculpture. But painting and drawing were my main interests. In the third year, you have to choose a department: painting, sculpture, printmaking or graphics. I chose painting in my third year. Then, I started studying under Tadesse Mesfin and Worku Goshu. Tadesse was the master of drawing. In my third year, I studied drawing under him. That was the basis for my understanding of how to see because drawing is the core component of any kind of art. That's what I learned from Tadesse Mesfin.



Tadesse Mesfin in his Addis Ababa studio, 2024. Tadesse Mesfin, *Emby Lagere*, 1991, oil on canvas, 210 x 312 cm in the background

Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like to study under Tadesse Mesfin and how being a student at Alle was at the time?

Alle was different from what it looks like right now. Now it is very much modernised with the new buildings. But at that time, most rooms were made of mud walls. The backyard was very bushy, but it was fascinating, especially with the monuments and the sculptures. I consider myself lucky because, in my first year, I studied under Eshetu Tiruneh, a friend of Tadesse Mesfin. They studied together in Russia. He taught us all the basic visual language, which is very important. In the second year, the drawing study was very intense. When I got Tadesse in the third year, he took us to the depths of the techniques and all these old masters, Michelangelo and Rembrandt etc. The second thing is, in the third year, luckily, I went under Worku Goshu, another master painter, for my last two graduation years. Worku Goshu is a liberal who allowed me to experiment with new ways in painting. So, Eshetu Tiruneh gave me the basic language. Tadesse Mesfin, strong drawing skills. Worku Goshu gave me freedom. So, these three masters gave me a good path or a way of thinking. That is what I remember as the most important thing from the Alle School of Fine Arts.

How did you start your career as an artist after Alle?

At that time, the school's character was shaped by the trend of Socialist Realism. For maybe a decade before, it had been merited to work on patriotic or socialist agendas. So, part of the trend was not that comfortable for me. For my graduation work, I used the beggars' life from my surroundings as a topic. In my childhood, our neighbourhood integrated different kinds of people, from the beggars to the vendors. That was my inspiration for my graduation work. Somehow, you are expected to do patriotic work, but I used the beggars from my nearby church and from Addis streets. I did that graduation work in a combined manner of impressionism and social realism. The literature of Gorky and Dostoyevsky was very popular at that time because it was widely translated.

The life around the church, and my graduation work have a connection in retrospective. The church embraced all people at that time, especially homeless people. Usually, when beggars start begging, they do so far away from their homes. Most beggars come from different areas to these churches. They are not begging in their own community. So, when I was searching for material for my graduation work, the lives of the beggars were very much connected to my own. Beggars, in my childhood, were coming to our neighbourhood. They would become part of your day-to-day life. For example, a beggar comes to your village. They know you. You know them. Then, when they come from far away, we even compete over whose house they come to. You run to your mom and ask, "Are there any leftovers? This beggar is coming." We don't see them as beggars; they are like relatives.



These people settled around the church or in their own segregated places. They had different problems; some were lepers. In this graduation work, I put every character that I knew and their day-to-day begging activities. The central figure in the composition was a woman who brought leftovers from the memorial ceremony of a deceased person from her family. This is a well-known ritual called *Teskar*. The beggars take their daily bread from this ritual too. So, the title itself is *The Sound of Dark Leftovers*. The beggars were part of our daily lives; that's what I wanted to make a painting about.

After I finished at Alle, I just jumped into experimenting with European Modernism. I was experimenting with abstract art, inspired by Gebre Kristos Desta and Ibrahim El-Salahi from Sudan. Their works influenced me at that time, and then, Cubism, Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. I wanted to experiment on that area of early modernism. But it was difficult because the commercially successful trend was Ethiopian traditional church paintings, and I was completely outside of that trend. I was experimenting with wall paints, acrylic and building materials. I started painting with those materials because oil was expensive and not even that available in the market. I started experimenting with installation with found objects and started writing poetry almost full-time. Painting full-time was difficult because of the materials, and poetry gave me a chance to engage with this expanding imagination or creative process. Because I knew Gebre Kristos was a poet and painter at the same time, I was inspired by him. Two of my friends were also painter-poets. I experimented with modernism and poetry at the same time.

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When the port town was trying her necklace
 in the night-mirror of the sea,
 and her earrings by consent of the moon,
 I missed you!
 Searching for small-breathing eyes
 that seem so far but so bright,
 shaded by thin, up-straight,
 hawk-winged eyelashes
 on a wall grey and tarnished,
 reminds me of my old age.
 I turned my face to the sea
 and saw the town's lit necklace
 praying you in my eyes
 “never are the images
 of the soul's pure memories
 inevitable when least wanted,
 or attractive when anticipated,
 AMEN!”
 Though the crystal memories
 were never acquainted with
 the pride of the town; nevertheless
 surrenders the town its grace of poise,
 laughing my ever new trials
 eternally for an instant
 in the timid low tides, it trembles
 in a whispering shyness.
 Farewell, farewell, adieu
 I lost my self amongst you.

Did you organise poetry performances and exhibitions?

In terms of poetry, we had readings among friends. It was kind of an underground circle. It was not in public venues because it was not that well supported. The other thing I was also involved in was theatre. Not directly, but I was assigned to paint backdrops. One of my best friends, Mesfin Habtemariam, worked in the making of theatre backdrops. This led me to read modern theatre, the likes of Beckett. The first time I read the translation of *Waiting for Godot*, it was like there was a limitless way of thinking. The absurd and existentialism resonated with the situation around us. Everything was confusing, from one political change to another, and that was happening in Europe in the 50s or 40s. Kafka made sense in our situation at the time. Beckett also. That was how we gathered, read, and shared these things; that was an interesting period. Mesfin Habtemariam died just after I left Addis. He was one of the special personalities in the Addis art scene. I want to commemorate his personality and his genius.

My first solo exhibition in Addis was in Alliance Française in 1997; it resulted from my six years of experimentation in art and poetry. Most of them were almost purely abstract paintings. Some of them were found-object installations. I was much more into mysticism, spiritual thinking and metaphysics. The title of that exhibition was “If There is a Soul Before Death.” So, it was a bit outside of the art scene and people were talking about the meaning. It was provocative and interesting. Many people remember that show at that time. Then, the *Revue Noire* magazine came by coincidence at that time. They put one of my works on the cover of that edition: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti were the topics of the issue.¹

Can you tell us about how the founding of the fine arts school in Asmara came about while you were in Addis?

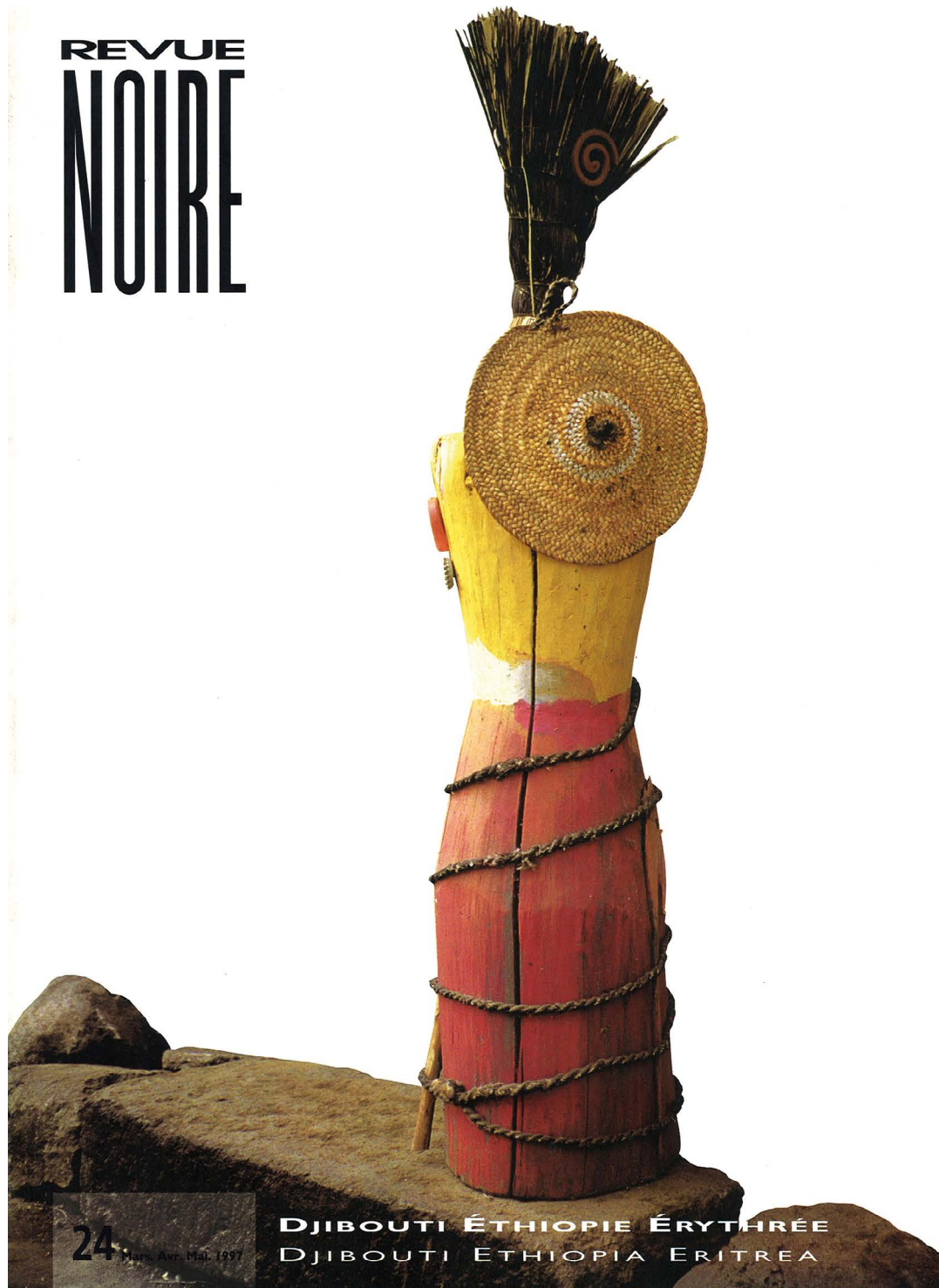
The year I graduated, Eritrean independence happened. My parents and siblings moved to Eritrea after independence. During a visit to my family in 1994/95, I met one of the directors of the Department of Culture. He asked me if we could start a new art school in Asmara. So, I stayed there for one year to establish the new art school with the other artists. I taught painting and drawing for the first year and then got back to Addis.

When I was stuck after the border conflict, I continued teaching in the art school. It took some years to establish my own studio again because I had to start everything from scratch. All my old works were stuck in Addis. I didn't know their whereabouts. They were thrown away somewhere. I found out later in 2015 that most of them were damaged, but I tried to keep some of them in some way.

¹ The volume mentioned is *Revue Noire* No.24.

Pivin, J. L. and others (ed.) (1997) *Revue Noire: African Contemporary Art. No 24. Djibouti Ethiopia Eritrea*, Paris: Edition Revue Noire

REVUE NOIRE



Cover image of Revue Noire: African Contemporary Art, No. 24: Djibouti Ethiopia Eritrea featuring Ermias Ekube, *The Green Jail*, (1996), found objects: wooden mortar, broom, robe, fan made of palm leaves, bottle top, plastic top, spiral incense, 120 x 30 x 30 cm

Can you tell us about your time in Eritrea?

I used to consider myself part of the Addis art scene, at that time. After Eritrean independence in 1991, I stayed in Addis, but in between, I went to Eritrea to establish the new art school. After my first show took place at Alliance Française in 1997 in Addis Ababa, I took that exhibition to Alliance Française Asmara, Eritrea. I was visiting Asmara for this exhibition and visiting my family. During this visit, the border conflict started between Eritrea and Ethiopia. I got stuck in Eritrea because the border was closed. The war went on for three years, and everything from my past was cut.

I stayed in Eritrea for 15 years. I started teaching at the art school I founded in 1994. The Eritrean situation was just the mirror image of the dark times when I was a child. I see my childhood again in my adulthood in Eritrea. The same things were happening: the censorship was there, and there was no freedom of speech. To do exhibitions, you have to submit every work to see if it is permitted. Luckily, my work was abstract and semi-abstract figurative. The motifs were mainly women from Eritrea with different props and costumes, so it was ignored by the authorities. They needed artists with socialist realism propaganda works. I was ignored. I was assigned to make arts education books for integrated arts. It's called integrated arts for dance, theatre, visual arts and music. After I finished that project in 2012, I escaped from Eritrea to Nairobi.

Can you talk about the *Prisoner* series?

The Prisoners series, I didn't continue much because whenever I was searching for footage and images, I suffered a lot myself. Because first, I had experienced them in different ways when I was in Eritrea, and I knew a lot of fellow people suffering through that, who lost their lives through that. I started it as "I have to do it" and then it was too explicit. Even I couldn't stand it myself. I didn't think I could go far more on that topic.

How was it going from Eritrea to Nairobi with your family? And how did you integrate into the art world in Nairobi?

My life had started in Eritrea from scratch. I started practising my art. I started a family and had three children. I moved with my family to Nairobi in 2012 and stayed there for one year, until the end of 2013. I joined the Kuona Arts Trust. It was a collective studio space, and they were amazing artists. That was the first time I felt welcomed. Because when I was in Eritrea, even among the artists, there was subtle discrimination. It was not like a conscious one, but most were ex-fighters. So, everything was political. It was frustrating. When I joined the Kuona Trust, everybody talked freely, and nobody cared about your background. You are an artist.





They saw your work. It's amazing. And then they want to share. I started giving drawing workshops. Because academic drawing is the Alle School of Art specialty. They were really fascinated by that. I felt really at home for one year. It was amazing.

Kuona has this history of being an incubator for artists. Did you attend anyone else's workshops? Did you learn from anyone else at the time?

I learned a lot because many of them were experimenting with different ways, especially with found objects. And recycling materials was very popular. It was really flourishing; most of the artists were recognised internationally afterwards. I learned a lot, but most of all, I learned the spirit of sharing and accommodating each other. That part was most fascinating in Kuona. That was the most important thing for me. I was really fascinated by every individual artist because of what they were doing at the same place at the same time. There is always a party on the weekends. I was fascinated by every individual artist. Slowly, I asked one day to one artist, "Can you sit for me?" And then I drew one of them. Then, slowly, I did draw most of the artists. When I was leaving the Trust, planning to come to Sweden, there was a party. They put all the portraits together, made a collage and displayed them. I made one sculptural portrait of a sculptor, and the rest were charcoal drawings on cardboard. It was warm and really a kind of family. I wanted to celebrate the family of Kuona.

Have you visited Ethiopia or Nairobi since you came to Sweden?

After I moved to Sweden, I wanted to only visit Addis. Because since 1997, I hadn't had any contact at all. Luckily, when I moved to Nairobi, the internet was working. Slowly, I retrieved all my friends through social media. I wanted to see Addis again, and I wanted to get closure because everything had gotten blurred since I moved to Eritrea. I went back in 2015 to Addis to see what was going on. I met old friends. I haven't gotten back to Nairobi yet, but I plan to.

How about your peers from Alle or Nairobi? Do you follow their careers?

There is my friend Tewodros Hagos, who is renowned right now. He's participating in different fairs, and he is represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde. I have contact with Tesfaye Urgessa. He's from the same school under Tadesse Mesfin. Elias Sime was my classmate. He's one of the successful artists internationally. He has exhibited at The Smithsonian, different museums in the US, and had some big exhibitions in Europe. From Nairobi, most of them are doing well in the international art scene. When I was there, some of them were young, like Kaloki Nyamai, who is now working with big galleries in New York and Germany. Or Cyrus Kabiru, who works with recycled materials. There are many of them that are really doing well internationally. When I see that, I really feel happy about it.

I still follow Alle's activities. It is completely different from the old times. They expanded it into the master classes and different departments, with filming also, I think. I have contact with the directors and the teachers there. It has a different direction. Maybe the old academic trend is not that strong, but in a different way, they are doing very well.

Are there any anecdotes or advice that stuck with you from that period?

I'm always grateful to have had these different teachers. The advice that stuck is from Eshetu Tiruneh because when I was frustrated about my capacity as an artist, if it weren't for him, I don't think I would have made it. That advice that it's all about practice, came from him. I always put this into my students when I was in Eritrea. Still with younger artists I have contact through social media. I give them this advice. It's just consistency. Be into it. Be honest. Always the spirit of sharing is going with me. That is maybe the most important advice or learning from this journey. I mentioned about Kuona's sharing spirit, it gives you energy wherever you go. That is the most important thing.

Can you tell us about how your journey brought you to Västervik, Sweden?

I see these patterns. When I joined the art school, it was by coincidence. When I moved to Nairobi, it was not really planned. I got a chance. Then a family, from Sweden, who collected my work when I was in Eritrea, reached out. We had been in touch while I was in Nairobi, and they asked me if I wanted to come to Sweden. But how? To go to Europe or America, it's impossible unless you take this risky journey through the Mediterranean. There are a lot of catastrophes; it never crossed my mind. But these people sponsored my visa. Just in a month's time, they made this arrangement, and we came to Sweden. I never thought of ending up in Sweden, but it happened. First, we went to the south of Sweden, where this family was. After some months, I sought asylum. The immigration department took us to Västervik. There was a camp here for immigrants, behind my current studio. I ended up here and then continued my life. This was in 2013.

How was getting used to life here in Sweden? How is it different?

When I moved to Sweden, that was, in two ways, very important. One was the identity issue; it really started in a new way. I'd never considered myself an immigrant through my journey to Nairobi. And then you become it. It's a kind of identity. Being an immigrant itself is an identity. Now, we are just immigrants, that's all. It was a new beginning, but slowly you get used to it. The system is wonderful. It's welcoming, accommodating. I see things a lot with retrospective revising. You see things in a different way. Combining your past experiences, you develop or formulate a new kind of identity, which is, when I think of it from this perspective,

wonderful. It's very important to see humanity completely from a different perspective. You see life, existence and all this stuff from a different perspective. It's just that you changed completely in a different direction, which is inevitable and good as well.

Not only as an artist but as a family man, moving was one of the challenges. The first thing is that we have a better life here, which is secure. That was important for my family and my children. That part was not a worry. I was more worried about how I could continue as an artist. After a few years, I started to explore the cultural system and how it works. Through the internet, I started exploring, and I communicated with other artists in different regions of Sweden. So, I communicate with this group that facilitates integration as a cultural actor. I joined that group, which is in Norrköping.

I joined the union of artists. These organisations facilitate exhibitions and projects. So, the first one I remember was *Konsten att delta* (The Art of Participation). They organised a museum show in Norrköping Museum with two other immigrant artists from Syria and Palestine: Sahar Burhan and Shireen Haj Mustafa. These things bring up lots of opportunities and give you a boost so that you can continue as an artist. Some people just tell you, "Oh, you can't continue your artistic endeavour at all." But you just work; you do your job, and then things roll up like that. This was kind of a mentorship programme between non-Swedish artists and established Swedish artists. So, I got a mentor. You fill out the preference form; a man, a woman, your age, and this or that. It was open for me, but by coincidence, I got an artist almost my age, Mattias Åkeson.

We have a lot of similarities, which he recognized. That was interesting. He's Swedish but we have a lot in common. And we started an artistic conversation based on those similarities. I don't know what he learned from me, but I learned a lot from that period of collaboration. After this museum show, we had a thematic show in Sahar Burhan's gallery. We started something, and then something came out of it. He came up with the push – pull idea of migration. For me, it was inhale and exhale. Like, we breathe ideas, concepts and we take in; we give out; we take in (*Inhale Exhale Push Pull*, Galerie Kameleont, 3-30 November 2018). He is more of a conceptual artist; I am maybe a more poetic or more skill-based artist. That collaboration was so wonderful. It was just a small project, but it was interesting. We had conversations in terms of his work and my work, in terms of ideas, poetry, conceptual art and all.

That opened another path with two other colleagues: a film teacher, Mike Jarmon and a political science lecturer, Karl Dahlquist. We started a children's book project, and maybe it will turn into an animation project. We made this book; we got a grant from Konstnärsnämnden (the Swedish Arts Grants Committee). Later, I applied

and got a work grant. These things are boosting. Okay, you can do it. Even if it is a solitary life, maybe the digital side of communication makes the challenge much easier than before. I exhibit whenever people ask, joining group shows, here in Västervik, Kalmar, Norrköping and Stockholm. You get invitations from here and there: group show, solo show, and different small venues. I roll up to these kinds of activities, not necessarily to make something big, but it's a vital process in a way. I enjoy that a lot.

It appears that you live a more solitary life in Sweden. How was that shift for you when you moved from the collaborative and communal artistic space in Nairobi to your life here, where you didn't have that built-in community?

My natural or developed personality is, even in retrospect, suited to this hermetic kind of life. It is, I think, something inborn. Wherever I am, solitary life is not a big deal. I enjoy it. I embrace it. It's challenging at the same time because you need people to collaborate with and discuss with. Luckily, social media is wonderful because I meet people, talk with my peers from all over the world, and share ideas. Since I moved to Sweden, the idea of memory has become stronger. My previous experiences were very direct experiences of society or the situation. The changes—you wouldn't notice. But coming to Sweden is a sudden change. You notice it immediately. The solitary situation is very clear, so I started dealing with memories. You know, I remember things, or I miss things, I miss people, I miss society. The idea of memory was becoming dominant, and then revising, recalling and retrospection; these ideas came to the foreground somehow.

Can you tell us about the ice sculpture project a little bit?

That was when I first came to the camp. After a month, the snow started. That was the first snow experience for my family, but I had experienced it in Norway in 2001. I had a residency program there. Ok, let's make something with my kids. We collected the snow. I asked the person assigned to clean up the snow to collect the snow around here in front of our camp cottage. He collected the snow for me, we compressed it a little bit, I made just a random portrait thing, and we took a picture. At the same time, some journalists who knew that an artist was in the camp came to interview me. People are learning that an artist is in Västervik—just a little bit of drama in a way at that time. And then this local artist who used to work for the snow sculpture competition in Kiruna, hearing that an artist makes a sculpture with the snow, came by and asked me if I wanted to join him for this project. Okay, why not? We made sketches and submitted them to the organisation in Kiruna, and we got accepted. People submitted from all over the world, from the US and Europe. The project was a three-day competition. We went up there; everything is white. You don't see anything. Every tree and house are loaded with snow. They showed us our blocks. We started carving. For three days straight, for almost 12 hours each day,



sometimes it was -35 degrees outside. Still, I have that feeling when I think about it: “Have I been there, really?” It was 2015. We won the jury and the people’s prizes. Everybody was happy. We took another chance in 2016 and did a similar project. It was wonderful. A lot has happened in the last ten years.

What about poetry? Is that something that you still practise?

The poetry thing is tricky because poetry involves language. Sometimes I think I should have started short stories because I love short stories too. But poetry is really about the society you are living in, the humour, the way you use language. Before I moved to Eritrea, I was writing in Amharic. I couldn’t write in Amharic when I was in Eritrea because it wouldn’t come. I tried a lot of times, but it didn’t work. So, I started writing in English instead of Tigrinya. I write here and now, but I used to write a lot when I was in Eritrea in English, connecting to my exhibitions for individual works. Sometimes I write the poems directly on the canvases. So, I still write, but it’s not as much as I used to because the language is very important.

The use of texts in the paintings and drawings was very common when I was in Eritrea because the works are mainly abstract. It’s very free, fluid, the figures are bending here and there, it’s all very free. The whole idea is poetic. I use texts sometimes in Tigrinya, sometimes in English. I use the text as an aesthetic pattern, and at same time, as some kind of absurd connection. If you read the text, you a pattern or decorative element in it. I use both the visual and the verbal meaning of the text in paintings.

You mentioned a residency in Norway. Can you talk about the experience of that residency?

That was my first art residency. It was in 2001, sometime after I moved to Eritrea. That was the time when I established my studio and started producing works again in different directions. A woman came to make an artistic project with the local artists in Asmara. Mostly, when people come to Eritrea, they expect some naive work; they have some expectations. They come and see my studio, the setup. I had different projects started; some of them were successful, some were not. This time, the proposal was a residence program in Trondheim, Norway. In Eritrea, to go out, you need an exit visa. That was the hardest part; otherwise, I have connections or contacts all over the world. I did my works in the school, and then I asked for permission. Luckily, I got that permission. I stayed for three months in the residence program. The deal was that I would give workshops to different schools with the municipality, and then I would do my projects in the residency space. I gave sculptural workshops in different schools, and at last, I exhibited my work in one of the galleries in Trondheim and got back.

Since then, people have come to Eritrea and invited me for residency programs. This was happening all the time. But I couldn't get the exit visas. It became frustrating. People recommend you for a residency program, not an application. Someone recommended me for Apexart in New York. I was registered, and the date was approaching. I asked for the exit visa; it was rejected. These kinds of things were happening many times; it was frustrating. That's why I escaped the country in a way. Was the work you produced in Norway similar to your work in Eritrea or did you use that experience to explore something else?

That is the thing. I didn't know what to do when I got there. For me, it's always like that. I go and then see what is possible. I explored a lot of things, and that changed my later work in Asmara, too, because I met artists in Trondheim. During the workshops, I used portraits sometimes. I did some free abstract paintings here and there. But when I got back, things had changed. I solidified some kind of concept afterwards, especially in terms of brush work and the free movements. That changed a lot in retrospect.

Can you tell us a little bit about how you kind of focused on portraiture?

Portraiture was part of the early school practice at the Alle. Portraiture was the most fascinating part. But for a long time after graduation, I almost stayed away from portraiture. Usually, I do my own portraits. I don't know the reason, but whenever I feel like warming up, I use my self-portrait from the mirror. But starting with the last years of my time in Asmara, I started to paint my friends regularly. I would ask for a sitting. I painted and gave the paintings to them mostly. After I moved to Nairobi, it became my focus. People really liked it. I got commissions. Slowly, I get into it as a means of expression. Since I moved to Sweden, the people around me, my family, I have focused on that. I started to paint them regularly. I see their evolution from one age to another, and that fascinates me a lot. That is how I do portraits a lot. I like to see people's faces in a way. It also became problematic. For example, trying to learn Swedish, I couldn't stand it, but whenever the teachers were talking, I was lost in their faces. That was one of the things that happened for a long time. But when in other activities or just hanging with friends, I am always immersed in their facial expressions, psychological things. So, that fascinates me. Sometimes I am lost from conversations when I am immersed in their portraiture, every light and form, twisting faces, hands and other stuff. Somehow, I think it may be the most mysterious subject in the art world. Maybe, the most fascinating thing is painting portraits.



You also experiment with painting with your left hand. What do you find interesting in that process?

I used to paint left-handed after my graduation for two reasons. The first one, I remember when we studied drawing, was in this famous book about drawing. It is one of the most important ways to practise because drawing is not really a matter of hand. The hand is kind of a physical device. The main part is the mind and the eye—how you see and perceive things rather than how they appear. It is between perception and conception. It is a bit complicated. This book was a popular practice book about the right mind and the left mind. One of the practices was to copy upside-down pictures. Any kind of creative way of thinking or way of seeing reality—is it perception or is it our experience? We learn it. This applies to everything, like a dogma or these kinds of things. After copying upside down, if it's accurate, your way of seeing is good in a way because you think in terms of negative and positive spaces, the proportion of lines. When you see a portrait of a person, it's mostly people who perceive it as a human being. The nose, the eye is there, in different shapes and sizes. There is no standard. If you use your left hand, it is a dexterity problem or a lack of practice problem. Otherwise, you do the same thing with the left hand. It was fascinating. At the same time, there is a very special feeling in your stomach. There are a lot of challenges. It's a very nice exercise for your stomach. That was what I experienced, especially in this portrait. The next day, okay, I know those problems. It becomes fluent slowly. It was a fascinating experience and an exercise at the same time.

In the recent pieces, the sitter is blocked out by the mirror and there's an obstruction of the face. Can you explain the idea behind that?

That is the *Memories are We are Memories* series. This series is the other side of portraiture—the absence of portraiture. Sometimes you get tired of portraiture as a full expression, except for the particular person. But I want to go beyond, and I want to see something beyond with the absence of portraiture, with *anonymity*. How can I say something in the absence of the portrait? When I was making my self-portrait, I used the hand or other things and blocked my face somehow. Somehow the mirror came into the idea. I started to explore the mirror. When I started the mirrors, I took different options, either reflecting some objects that are connected to the recent past or distant past. Then, I started making the reflections, though not the actual reflections, but elements absurd about them. If I put the onion, for example, I would show the full onion in the front, but the reflection would be half, and that half would show the layers of the onion. I started playing with these kinds of things. Slowly, I got away from the portraiture towards the hidden portrait behind. Obviously, when people see someone holding a mirror, they think about who is behind the mirror. It becomes just a question in a way. People start imagining someone is there. Even if it's obvious that the hand is mine, or my child's. That shows those things become stories connected with the objects on the canvas. So that is the idea.



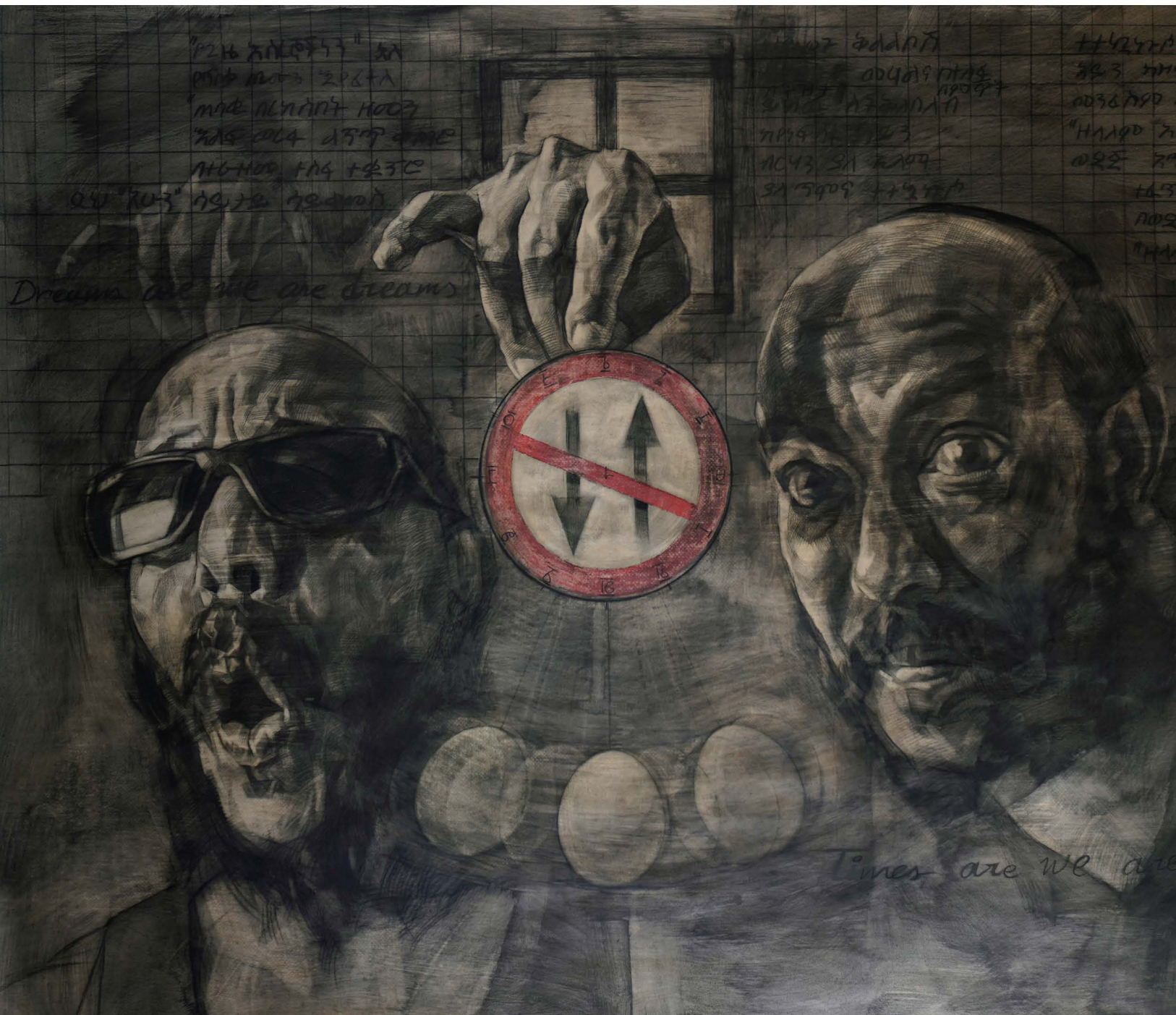
The portraiture is immediate reality. But my life right now is all about revising my life's journey. And then remembering things becomes tricky. For example, since I moved to Sweden, people have asked a lot of questions that I have never been asked before in my own family or society. Where do you come from? You start thinking because you don't name places. What do those places mean for the person who is asking? Or you start thinking and revising your answers to questions all the time, and then your memory also. It's not as if you used to think about your memories. It's just a new story, or sometimes is reshuffled. If you are asked about or if you start telling your stories, they change according to the context. So, these things make me explore the idea of memory. That's why objects are becoming crucial to the expression of every canvas. It's a visual game between fiction, imagination, and actual reality. These things are just intertwined into the canvas.

What is the significance of the title *Memories are We are Memories*?

It's a bit connected to this poetry again. I used the phrase in different ways, in different series when I was in Eritrea: "Times are We are times," and "Dreams are We are dreams." I used these two phrases for different works or series connected to consciousness somehow. When it comes to memory, everyone's being is really about their memory. You are how you commit to memory your experiences. Sometimes me and my children experience the same thing—the same journey coming from this place to this place—but how we remember all these things, when we are talking about them, is completely different. Their memories, their own perception of their reality, or these experiences are different from mine.

There are some recurring elements in your works, like the egg, or the paper boat. What do they signify?

The egg comes from *Whose Life Matters More?* series, especially the drawings. They are the symbol of one's life. Just one individual's life, which is connected to my journey or fellow immigrants' journeys through difficult roads, the sea, the desert. These stories are known. Egg is fragile. At the same time, it's full of life. We think that one person is strong, or another is weak. The difference may be only circumstances, privileges, or different situations. We realise when we are in real situations like being forced to evacuate from place to place. Then everyone realises that it's fragile. Egg shows to anyone that, for all of us, it is fragile and at the same time powerful. It depends on how we handle it, in a way. We have to know it is fragile all the time. The world clock also appears, especially in the *Memory* series. I was contemplating what time is. Because your journey is measured by time. At the same time, it's how we interpret reality. Is time a sequence, or is it an independent entity that sees us all the time? That's why I make it either half or a portion of the circle of the wall clock, which resonates like the eye thing. Or it's hanging on top of the canvas, as if it is watching and not participating.





That is how I feel about time. Time is not participating at all in life, it's only a watcher. They describe God as watching. Maybe for me, only time is watching. It's not participating at all. But we think that time is participating. We say, "it's a matter of time." Maybe. I don't know. That is the thing I want to explore. Time is always there. The rest is just making the drama go on. They are like characters.

I use these tiny objects like a stream of consciousness. I try one object and then change their meanings in the context of their interactions with each other. Let's say the egg—one individual egg, two eggs or three eggs in a box. Those reference lives within boats or packaging. These kinds of ideas come through the process. It's not fully pre-thought. Maybe ideas come through the process. I want to explore all the time. One object triggers another object. One object triggers another idea. So, rolling with different ideas, and then, it becomes infinite at the same time. I explore myself and get to know myself from different perspectives, in a different light, through each object. Some of them might trigger sensations, or feelings. For example, let's say I think of coffee, and then I relate my day-to-day coffee rituals to Eritrean coffee rituals. I want to relate things, to explore memories from different perspectives.

Can you explain a bit more about the series **Whose Lives Matters More?**

The idea was triggered by this immigrant's journey, but at the same time the Black Lives Matter movement was happening. For me, it was provocative just to think about it. This movement was happening; a lot of disasters were happening in migration at the same time. The whole issue was not balanced, this one was really magnified but the rest was just played down; millions of people are dying. This is how the question started and I started making this series focusing on this immigrant's journey. At the same time, I was really feeling guilty about fellow immigrants going through this. And then you see it as news—your brothers and relatives—and then it becomes normal. At first it was shocking, later, it became, "Oh, the story, many boats sinking." We are still counting the boats and the lives of people who were lost in that, we become desensitised. That was a question: whose lives really matter more in any situation or in any case? That was just a question in a way.

I used texts and road signs when I did not really know about road signs because I had never driven before. I saw them as an outsider when I would go driving with people or travelling on buses. I saw them as things instead of reading them as actual symbols. I saw them as extra symbols for restrictions, obligations, and commands. I tried to use those road symbols in my works. But I couldn't go much about it, and then I just dropped them afterwards. The texts in the drawings are more related to these journeys, sufferings, and the human condition. Sometimes I reference some literary sources, like Beckett's *Endgame*. Who is the oppressor, who is the oppressed between slaves and masters, prisoners and the one who

imprisons people? In this human condition and the big picture, as I see it, I think everybody is a victim in this process. Even through this whole journey, I don't want to feel like I am a victim, or pathetic. Still, maybe that is my basic existential question. Whatever happened, it happened for some universal process. What do I gain? Or what do I understand? Those texts are some references or my own texts. I try to articulate my thoughts in that way, even if it is absurd, even if I don't fully understand what it means myself.

We talked about politics coming into your work, but then when you move to Sweden, you did a series of landscapes, which was maybe different, what is the inspiration behind that?

I was not into landscape for a long time. Maybe as an assignment, I had done it in art school. Still now, I can visualise my first impression when we entered from Denmark to the south of Sweden. It was the end of summer. In that part of Sweden, the landscape is curved. It's not hills. Every part of it just curves up and down, and then it's moving. Oh, that's why those European painters I remember from books became good landscape painters. Since then, I have always wanted to paint landscapes. When I came to Västervik, I saw the four seasons. Every season is rich for landscape painting. It is good because you don't see many people. You don't need to think about people; landscape itself is a big resource. I was crazily doing all seasons; I was fascinated. It was so wonderful to paint the landscape of Sweden.

What are your plans for the future?

Getting grants here in Sweden and being represented by Ed Cross give you hope, you know. Because I used to live on my art, and then I came here, I passed those challenges, and then I want to be a full-time artist with good facilities. That is my dream.

This conversation was recorded between Ermias Ekube and Basak Tarman in Västervik, Sweden in January 2024.



“I am the son of my village. This village is in this country. This country is in this continent. This continent is in this world. Sometimes, maybe, this world seems flat, as the whole shares the stars, the sun and the moon equally, even if their effects would be different according to the nature of Life and Nature. Therefore, I, the son of the world, need not ideology. I need only an image of Man and Nature, Self and Soul, Form and Colour, in Life’s mysticism. For I am always awake to the new objective and subjective conceptions of this world and these all make me passionate and inspire me to draw my own statement about this mysticism of life. I think that the humanistic aspect of ART is to give, or to feed, a spiritual hunger. I used to journey from the known to the unknown, from the mind to the soul. This is the beginning for creation. I feel nothingness is the known and the divine is the unknown.”

Ermias Ekube’s statement in Revue Noire No.24 (1997)



MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND PLACE: THE WORKS OF ERMIAS EKUBE *HIWOT ABEBE*

Ermias Ekube's paintings are concerned with time, memory and identity. His relationship with time and its passage, especially in relation to the many places he has lived, has impacted his work in various and interesting ways. These places have changed him, his ideas have evolved, and his work serves as a window into this process as he continues to engage with his three-fold concern — the individual, the social and the universal. He uses all to capture a vision of the human condition. Ermias considers identity a tricky concept, depending on the person's approach. "As humans, we belong anywhere. This is not wishful thinking. Factually, I am here. I belong here. This is my place. I don't need anyone's blessing to live here," he tells me. This perspective gives insight into his sense of place and belonging.

Palestinian American academic and critic Edward Said wrote in his 1984 essay *Reflections on Exile*, "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles, cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience." This thought parallels Ermias's life. Having lived in four different countries throughout his life, his experiences are varied, and his perspective on nationhood and national identity has broadened. He has multiple homes and believes he belongs wherever he lands. This allows him, as Said would describe it, plurality of vision.

This is most evident in Ermias's 2019 series *Whose Life Matters More?* This series poses questions about the value of people's lives: whose lives matter, where and when does life matter more.

During the 2016 'migrant crisis,' reports of people lost at sea, bodies that wash up on the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, along the borders of Italy and Greece, were unforgettable. While photographs of these bodies appeared on our phones, we watched border patrols idly watching as people struggled to stay afloat on rocky boats or keep swimming to reach the shore.

In this series, recurrent imagery of paper boats and eggs symbolise the fragility of this trans-Mediterranean journey. For Ermias, moving to Sweden magnified the horrors of immigration of mostly people from Africa and Asia to Europe. Despite modern technology and the best global travel available in the world, lives were endangered as people were forced to take rickety boats on this dangerous journey. "It is all paradoxical for me that in this highly civilized time, the value of human life is measured by the status, place, religion, ethnicity, and so on," Ermias stated in an interview with PEN Eritrea in 2018.

Migration was also an issue for Ermias's contemporary and portrait artist Tewodros Hagos in his 2020 series *Desperate Journey*. Determined to show the humanity behind the statistics of the so-called migrant crisis, Tewodros's paintings depict survivors of this harrowing journey wearing orange life vests or reflective blankets, arriving on land despite the odds. Voyeurism is an aspect both artists were interested in exploring.

In *Déjà vu* (2016), Ermias comments on the surreal experience of watching these events unfold as if it were an action movie, a desensitized viewing that dehumanises suffering people. Media reports of the number of migrants who did not survive the journey reduced people to statistics. Ermias intentionally chose monochromatic charcoal drawings to create a dark and sombre atmosphere, giving power to the subjects. His painterly application, typically brushing wet ground charcoal on paper and, once dry, using an eraser and dry charcoal, gives the works depth and dynamism.

The title for this series is connected to the Black Lives Matter movement, inspired by the question of whose life matters more or most in our contemporary world of connection amid frictions of political, economic, social and racial identities. The imagery of the egg prevalent in these works emerges from a line in Wisława Szymborska's poem "On Death, Without Exaggeration" (1986), for which the author won The Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996.²

Hearts beat inside eggs.
Babies' skeletons grow.
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves
and sometimes even tall trees fall away.

Szymborska's poem is an incisive examination of death. In the quoted stanza, the triumph of death is mocked by the persistent instinct for life in nature. In the end, the poem implies the significance of death is to illustrate the value and meaning of life.

The egg is symbolic of life's vulnerability. Ermias has distinct childhood memories of his mother buying eggs from door-to-door sellers. She used to examine them by bringing each close to her eye, facing the sun or another light source. Bright orange ones without any blemishes would be chosen. "My first impression of her putting the egg close to her eyes was a magical moment, something very mysterious," he says. Alternatively, putting eggs in a bowl of water would reveal the freshest to be the ones that sink to the bottom. In *Memories from Home* (2016), a figure holds up an egg to his forehead as if divining what's within while his other hand holds a bird's nest.

² Wisława Szymborska, "On Death, Without Exaggeration," *The People on the Bridge*, 1986.
Wisława Szymborska – Poetry. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. Wed. 27 Mar 2024.
<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1996/szymborska/poetry/>>







Putting the egg in different circumstances and juxtapositions, Ermias examines its potential and value. In *Holding Egg #1*, an egg is delicately cradled in both hands. In *Examining Egg by Water* (2016), hands embrace a clear bowl halfway filled with water, a floating egg within. In *Eggs in a Bag #1*, a hand clutches 5 eggs in a clear plastic bag.

In these and other drawings, Ermias offers a subtle metaphor for the power dynamics that force the dispossession and death of hundreds while the hand of power puts these lives in precarity. The status of the refugee, the forcefully

displaced, the dispossession and the sense of alienation inherent to living in a foreign land among foreigners can be extrapolated in these works.

While Ermias does not consider his work to be directly political, politics seeps into his thought process. “Every expression of art is political in one way or another. It’s a protest. Sharing an idea is political,” he says. Having been alive during two revolutions in Ethiopia, a war and a lot of displacement, Ermias’s life has been mired



in strife and chaos. Inspired by his first-hand experience in compulsory military training, *The Prisoners #1* (2022) is a bifurcated view into the prison and its exterior, a narrative and aesthetic inspired by George Orwell's 1984. One of the two central figures is a guard, wearing green military camo attire, a rifle resting on his lap, its muzzle seemingly pointing at the second figure, a prisoner whose gaze penetrates out of the canvas as if aware of being under scrutiny.

"My focus is human condition. Indoctrination is one of the tools tyrants use. What loyal supporters memorise matters a great deal more than what is actually going on. We are just as blessed or cursed by our evaluation of our memories. Pain and suffering are shared by the rich and the poor, the white and black. The opposite of pain and suffering is love. If we focus on the universal perspective, we are deeply the same within diversities," says Ermias.

Politics is part and parcel of our lives, and lives are what concern him. This may be why his subjects are always close to home. His portraits feature family members and the landscape of his immediate surroundings. His interest in the present and the accessible ensures in-depth engagement with whatever topic he's decided to explore. This choice of subject is often dictated by the lack of available models to pose for work. But the continuous depiction of himself and his family through different series across many years offers deep intimacy. In *Altering Memories*, the domestic interiors depicted in the background, behind his children, are a window into Ermias's life and his memories. The familiar objects reconstituted in his paintings are not just practical realities; they are connections to the past and the present. Nostalgia seeps into any serious contemplation of time or memory. The memories are reconstituted in his mind, their significance studied. The bodies portrayed are in poses of his creation (there is as much fiction as there is reality in his paintings), but he has recreated the conditions to reconstitute a memory afresh. This reconstitution is at place in the series *Memories are We are Memories*. The slippery nature of memories is under investigation, primarily using mirrors as a means of focusing on individual micro memories. The veracity of these memories is questioned as objects placed in the still-life works are often not reflected in the mirror. As in *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll, 1871), the scenes on the other side are portals to a different realm, a re-formed memory of the past, or an amalgamation of memories. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges writes in his poem "Cambridge":³

"We are our memory,
we are that chimerical museum of shifting shapes,
that pile of broken mirrors."

Most of the figures in *Memories are We are Memories* series stand before a closed or ajar door. This hints at a beyond that is not available for view, door to the past or a future we are not privy to yet. The figures have their faces obscured, often by a full-length mirror. The chimerical reflections grant the viewer entry into the figure's home, drawing us into a life lived or imagined. In *Memories are We are Memories #4*, arms wrap around a mirror, desperately clutching onto the reflection. A handleless clock hangs behind the figure, a reminder of time's infinity. By engaging with the still-life elements that are often commonplace objects, the viewer can also remember personal connections forged in the past. In this sense, we can also picture ourselves in a version of this interior.

The domesticity of the setting is an act of generosity. By allowing the viewer this level of intimacy in this series and *Altering Memories*, Ermias gives us a glimpse of his life. Most of the figures in *Memories* are lounging in a familiar setting. Two wooden chairs, often placed in different configurations, are common in this series, alongside a variegated Coleus. The houseplant was a housewarming gift from a friend. Its velvety texture is one familiar to Ermias from his childhood. "I use this plant as an

³ Jorge Luis Borges, "Cambridge," *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, (New York: Viking, 1999) 43



organic being that possibly represents the organic nature of memories. They have all the colours of the four seasons.” he says. Once he began propagating and repotting the plant, he found the activity much like the act of remembering, each new Coleus is changed in size, colour or character.

Eggs are also present in this series. They are seamlessly and casually inserted into the paintings: rolling on the ground, nonchalantly held in hand, or resting in a bowl of water that’s, in turn, resting on a chair that’s reflected in a mirror, opposite which is a chair, place on which are a plant and a leaning paper boat.

Above: *Memories are We are Memories #4*, 2023, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm

Opposite Above left: *Memories are We are Memories #8*, 2023, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm

Opposite Above right: *Memories are We are Memories #5*, 2023, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm

There is a lot going on in one painting, and the more is revealed the closer you look. The composition of this series is his most subtle and striking. At first glance, the figure, or at least a portion of the figure, and the mirror are the most visible. Upon further investigation, more objects and reflections emerge. Trying to parse through each object, retrace its origin and relationship to similar one in a different painting in the series can be dizzying. Perhaps this experience mirrors the slipperiness of memories.



Below left: *Memories are We are Memories #6*, 2023, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm
 Below right: *Memories are We are Memories #1*, 2023, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm



Books are frequent in this series; objects Ermias explains serve as a time capsule of historic events or imagined instances. He is interested in the actual, practical, psychological, divine, and abstract aspects of time. “Time is a crucial component of memory, and without memory, time ceases to exist.” He proposes that memories are reinvented as a means of survival or a coping mechanism that intertwines sentiment and hope.

In his poetry from 1993 to 2000, Ermias is occupied with similar concepts. A stanza from Poem 24:

She remembers
She is remembering
She is a remember-being.

Following a long tradition of painter-poets such as famed modernist Gebre Kristos Desta, Ermias has a way with language. He creates a meeting point for both painting and poetry, both imaginative and creative, one showing, the other telling. The impulse to abstract and create imagery through symbols, metaphors and gestures are common to both practices. Poem 40’s final stanza:

After some walking distance
The night watchmen asking passers-by
What the time was
To kill time itself.
Simply, Time is dream is cruel too.



The 2019 series *Altering Memories* is an examination into the illusive nature of memory. *The Process of Altering Meaning That Matters or Not* (2019) are three sequential paintings of a boy putting on a navy turtleneck. They are perfect examples of the mutability of memory. The background changes with each iteration: a lidded saucepan opens, and in the third one, is replaced by a frying pan. The accuracy of this memory is put into question by the location alone: why is the boy putting on a sweater in the kitchen anyways?

Scientists propose that each memory is rewritten during the process of recalling its details. Ermias uses this concept of changing memories as emblematic of how self-perception is rewritten under different contexts.

This is most evident when considering Ermias's use of self-portraits in his work. While this choice was also derived from a lack of models, he has been able to embody different characters in his poses. "We can phenomenologically attend to the space in which the body becomes the site of an experience that is independent of and at odds with our abstract assessment of that same experience," writes Dylan Trigg in *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (2012)⁴. In this sense, the characters Ermias poses, especially in recent works, could be read as what Trigg describes as transitional memories, real but not exactly part of the subject's self-perception.

This multiplicity offers an entry into Ermias's imagination, constructing and reconstructing memory through his work. He describes this process of painting *Memories are We are Memories* as a stream of consciousness, beginning with his immediate surrounding, drawing still-lives of the things in his vicinity. He arranges and rearranges these objects, connecting them to memories and ruminating on the concept of time and its passage.

The familiarity he has with these domestic interiors is also in direct conversation with Ermias's perception of home. "When I come here, and I'm asked about my homeland things have a different essence. Things have changed. How I remember and what I think changes all the time. Memories are not solid things. Everything is changing. This connects to identity," he says. Taking the time to remember has also

⁴ Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 107

given him the opportunity to review moments of significance, his regrets, remorse, childhood, all coming together in a stream of consciousness as he begins to paint. "Identity is defined by relationships. You know how you see yourself and how others see you and you respond to that. How others see you, and you see yourself is not separated." In this manner, he constantly questions why place of birth dictates identity, practically and in abstract terms. "I found the idea of identity, practically a choice, biologically factual, emotionally tricky."

While Ermias has Swedish citizenship, he has accumulated multiple identities from the places he has lived in; a singular story does not define him. Having been born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during the 1974 revolution that brought an end to the Ethiopian monarchy, he grew up in the politically tumultuous period of the military dictatorship of the Derg and witnessed its fall in 1990. He graduated from the Addis Ababa University College of Fine Art and Design in 1990. The next seven years were defined by experimentation and collaboration with other artists, through which he immersed himself in poetry, theatre and literature.

Traveling to Eritrea in 1997, he was unable to leave the country during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998 and remained in Asmara for the next fifteen years. His paintings during this period are emotive, semi-abstract pieces that managed to escape the extreme censorship of art and expression of the time. Managing to remain underground, he developed a distinctive style.

Leaving Eritrea in 2012, he spent a year in Nairobi, Kenya where he shifted his focus to portraiture. He was fascinated by the culture in this new place, evident in the rich colors and shape that define his paintings of that period. He spent some time at the Kuona Art Trust, an artist residency in the heart of Nairobi, a drastic change from the artistic repression of Asmara. Following this reset, Ermias moved to Sweden, where he's lived for the last 12 years.

Ermias describes his life in these four countries as driven by some kind of force beyond his control. His assimilation and survival were necessary in each new place and his work is renewed alike. Considering the unfamiliar, thinking of the particularities of landscape, weather and people offers new perspectives. Living in a rural area Sweden has isolated him, as reflected in the portraits of his family and his landscape paintings.

Landscape paintings have a long and rich tradition of exploring relationships with nature, belonging, and identity. Areas outside the city that are often closer to nature remind one of what they used to be; nostalgia for a past you might not have been present for. Paintings of rolling hills or fields of flowers have been symbols of national identity, tangled with the history of the place and the ancestors of

the people who lived there in the past. Of course, history is a collective selective memory, an exclusion of past realities as much as a true recollection. And there is always a question of who else belongs in these places beyond the constrictive definitions of a nation.

These landscapes emerged from watching seasons change distinctly, a phenomenon that is less noticeable in Eastern Africa. This incited an emotional response, forging a connection to the place. “When I saw European landscape art, I was fascinated by the browns and oranges. When I came here, I saw the experiential qualities and began to experiment. I’m not depicting actual places, it’s an experience of landscapes.” These expressionistic, gestural pieces are defined by the big brush strokes that emote more than denote. Painting landscapes can be a way of familiarizing himself with the foreign, becoming intimate with it and growing to call this new place home.

Ermias uses nature-related imagery to explain his approach to identity. “The topic of identity is one of the crucial issues in my journey as a person and my artistic expressions. It is a kind of organic being, growing/expanding in oneself; planted in parental and racial nature, fertilised by national and religious choice, watered by geographical and cultural settings, knowledge and experiences.”

All these elements came together to shape him, and he has found a way to articulate this complex process. His work presents us with the tools to engage with him and question our own understanding of identity, belonging, and memory in the context of the current world.

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Hiwot Abebe writes about visual art, popular culture, and social movements. She’s co-founder of Weyra, an online literary magazine publishing East African writers.



SELECTED POETRY BY ERMIAS EKUBE
TRANSLATED BY SAMUEL OGBE

1 የሰላሊው መቅደም

The Painter's Prologue

ሀ

ግራጫው ቀን

ጳጳሱ ግድግዳ ሰዓት
ሰማያዊው ግድግዳ ላይ
ባለፈጅም ጥለቱን የማታ ጥላውን ለብሶ
ጥልጥል ቁላውን በመስታወቱ ሽርጥ ሸፍኖ
ግራ ቀኝ እያወዛወዘ
ቃቃ-ቃቃ-ቃቃ
የፊቱን ቁጥሮች ንቅሳት
በእንብርቶቹ ጣቶች እየዘረ
በየተራ ይጠቋቁማል
ቃ-ቃ-ቃ-ቃ-ቃ-ቃ
የሞኝ ድመት ፈገግታውም
ሳይታውቀው ያመልጥዋል።

It is time to have pity!
Colourless acting of the filthy actors
Conquers the playwright's mind.

A

The Grey Day

The grand, wooden, pope-clock
was hanging on the blue wall,
wearing its night shadow
framed with embroidery so long
and swung its suspended cock
left and right,
behind its glass apron
tic tac — tic tac
Pointing its tattooed numbers
with fingers of its navel,
it went on rotating
tic- tac tic- tac tic- tac.
its foolish-cat's grin
slips its old papal mask.

It is time to have pity!
Colourless acting of the filthy actors
Conquers the playwright's mind.

በብላክበርድ ህልሜ ጥግ ላይ
 ጥልቅ ጨልማ ክፍል ውስጥ
 አየር ግድግዳ ጥግ ላይ
 ቆሜ ይሁን ተጋድሜ
 በማደገባ ሁኔታ ነበርኩ
 አይኔን ልግለጥ ልጨፍን
 በማያስታውቅ ሁኔታ ነበርኩ
 በተቃራኒው ጫፍ
 መጨርሻ ከሌለው ጥግ ላይ
 ይተናል
 የሙዚቃው እባብ ይፈልቃል
 በከሰለው ድቅድቅ ጨለማው አናት ላይ
 እንደ ጥላሽት ሽረሪት ጉም ወደኔ ጥግ ይጎተታል
 ተነስ! ቆሜ አለሁ
 ተኛ! ተጋድሜ አለሁ
 ግለጥ! አፍጥጬ አለሁ
 ጨፍን! ራሴን ስቼ አለሁ
 ሽፋል አልባ አሳ አይኖቼን
 መራር ሙዚቃው ነደፋቸው
 ሰማይ-ሳጥን ጭንቅላቴ ውስጥ
 የተቋጠሩት ጌጣጌጦች
 እማያባራው ጨለማ ውስጥ
 እንደ ከዋክብት ተበተኑ
 አይ መቆም አይ መጋደሜን
 አይ መጨፈን አይ መግለጤን
 ለማየት የተጠየቁ
 የቀፈፋቸው ይመስላሉ
 ሽረሪት ሙዚቃው ከመፈልቅበት ማዶ፣ ማዶ ላይ
 የማትታይ የማትታሰብ
 ደፋር ፀሃይ ሳትኖር አትቀርም?
 ተኛ! ተነስቼ አለሁ
 ተነስ! ተጋድሜ አለሁ
 እባብ ደመናው ሙዚቃ
 ጨፍን! አፍጥጬ አለሁ
 እይ! ራሴን ስቼ አለሁ
 ጨለማው እባብ ዘፈነ
 እጅህን ግን እንዳታነሳ
 ቅዥቃዣ መዳፍህ
 ቀዝቃዛ ጣቶችህ
 አድማስ ማዶውን ተሻግረው
 ብርሃን እንዳይዳስሱ
 እሾህ ቀለማት እንዳይውጉዋቸው

At the corner of a smoke wall
 In a deep dark room
 Of my blackboard dream
 I was confused
 If I was erected or laid down
 If my eyes were closed or not
 I was disoriented.

From the other opposite side
 From the infinite corner,
 on the top of coal-dense-darkness
 The mysterious serpental music,
 Like spiderish tar cloud,
 streamed towards my corner
 Stand up! I am standing
 Lay down! I am laying down
 Open your eyes! I am gawking
 Close your eyes! I am collapsed
 The bitter music has bitten
 My cup-less fish eyes.
 The treasures, kept in my sky box mind,
 Scattered like stars into the interminable darkness
 And they look ashamed to see
 My confusion.
 From the horizon
 Where the music spider stretched
 An invisible brave sun might be laughing?
 Lay down! I am erected
 Stand up! I am lying down
 The serpental-music-cloud
 Close your eyes! I am staring still
 The serpent darkness is singing
 But don't let your arms up
 Don't let your restless hands
 And your chilly fingers
 Cross the horizon
 If no , Don't let them touch the light

The thorny colours will wound their night
 Oh please! Let my restless hands
 And my innocent fingers
 Go into the tunnel of darkness

ቅዥቃዣ መዳፊ
 እፃናት ጣቶቼ
 ጨለማው ጉዳጓድ ውስጥ
 አይናፋር ከዋክብቶቼን
 ለመልቀም ይንበጫረቁ
 ምራቃቸው ሳይደርቅ
 ቆዳቸው ሳይሽማቅቅ።

‘ ልሀ

To collect my shy stars
 Before their saliva desiccated
 And before their skin contract.

11

ወረርኳት- ደሴቴን
 የብቻ ግዛቴን
 ተቃኮሰኩ ከኔ ጋር
 ጣልኩት እኔ ወንዱ
 ወንዱ! የራሴ ልጅ
 አበበች ፈኑዳ
 አጤዙ ቅጠሎች
 ችግኞች ሰገዱ።
 እናም ሰገድኩለት
 በገዛ ደሴቴ
 በብቻ ግዛቴ
 ረገፋ አበበች
 ጤዛቸው ተነነ
 ጮኹ ተላቀሱ
 ዓሶች ሙሽ ቆሙ
 ወፎች ደረት ደቁ
 በተኛው ደረቴ
 በፍኝ ግዛቴ
 በዛው በጥቁሩ በብቻው ተረቴ።
 ተምሳሌት አደለም
 ምስል ነው የነፍስ
 ጠጠር ትርጉም ያጣ
 የሚጋጭ ከራስ
 የጣፈጠ ከማር
 የመረረ ከፊት
 የበራ ከጸሀይ
 የጨለመ ከሌት
 ከመኖር የከፋ
 የቀረበ ከሞት።

አዲስ አበባ

I invaded my island,
 My own territory;
 I dwelled with myself,
 I hailed in triumph.
 The flowers bloomed
 The leaves got drizzled
 The saplings all bowed.
 And I surrendered to myself
 Within my own island,
 In territory of my own.
 Flowers fell down,
 Their drizzle vanished,
 They cried in anguish.
 The fish mourned
 Birds drummed their chest,
 My own chest that is sleeping
 In my micro territory,
 In that dark, lonely tale.
 It is not a metaphor
 It's an image of the soul,
 That lost concrete meaning,
 a contradicting self,
 sweeter than honey,
 Bitter than Life
 Brighter than the sun,
 Darker than the night,
 Worse than living,
 And closer than death.

Addis Ababa
 1994

አንዳንዶች፤

ፍቅርን-
 ፊኒክስ እርግብ ነው
 ትንፋሹን ከሰበረበት ትቢያ
 ሀውልት ትንፋሹን የሚጠግን
 ከተበተነ የህንድ አመድ ውስጥ
 ህይወቱን የሚሰበስብ
 አንዳንዴም ድካም እረፍቱን
 መቃብር ቤት የሚያሳልፍ
 የክርስቶስ የጭን ገረድ ነው
 ይሉታል፤
 ክርስቶስ ፍቅር እንደሆነ
 ፍቅርም እርግብ እንዲሆን
 ከዋክብት የቀረፁትን ነገር
 ንፋሱ አልላከልንም
 ልቡ-ኮሪደር ሰፊ-ረጅም ለሆነ
 ሃንቶባክ የቢዛንቲም ጠቢብ
 ክርስቶስ ረጅም-ረጅም ዋርካ ነው
 የሰማይን ጆሮ መንከስ የሚችል፤
 ልቧ እንደ ብርጭቆ ውሃ ለሚስለመለም ልጃገረድ
 ፍቅር የክረምት ሰማይ ነው
 እባብ መብረቁን የሚወነጭፍ
 የነፍሷን ብርጭቆ ውሃ
 ደራሽ ጎርፍ ውስጥ የሚሰባበር
 የቡድንና የቡድን ጓደኞች
 የካርታ ጭዋታ መሀል
 ሽረሪት ፋጨት ደፋጫል
 ደፋጫል ባይሰማቸውም
 በአውርናቸው ያዩታል
 የሰውነት ቀልብ ጦርነት
 ከፍቅር ጓዳ ይነሳል
 ክርስቶስ ከተራራው ከለላ ስር
 አራት ወይ አስራ ሁለት ወይ ሃያአምስት ...
 ፍቅሮችን ሞተ

I hear people saying

I hear people saying;
 Love is a phoenix pigeon
 That builds the statue of its breath
 From the dust of its demise.
 That collects its resurrection
 From a dispersed burned ash.
 They say:
 It is Christ's mistress
 That takes its siesta
 In a forsaken graveyard.
 Since Christ is love
 And love being a pigeon,
 The wind hasn't sent us yet
 The carving of the stars about.
 For a long-wide-corridor-hearted
 Hunchback Byzantium artist,
 Christ is a tall, unreachable oak tree
 Who can bite the ear of the sky.
 For a girl, whose heart sparkles
 Like a trembled glass of water,
 Love is like a winter sky
 With its lightening-serpent
 That smashes her soul's glass of water
 In a sudden flood so merciless.
 During a card game of friends
 A spiderish buzz was heard.
 Though they do not hear it up,
 They see it with their blindness.
 The conflict of human consciousness
 Rises from love's chamber.
 Christ died under the mountain
 Four or twelve or twenty five loves.
 He raised numberless deaths,

እልፍ ሞቶችን ተነሳ
እልፍ ‘ርግቦችን’ ተቃጠለ
ጭብጥ አመዳን ሰበሰበ
እየከሰ ነው!
አንዳንዶች፣ መከላከል-መርዘም ነው
ከሰማይ ጆሮ ማለፍ
መብረቅን እግር ስር ማዋል፣ ይላሉ
ፍቅር-
ጨለማ ጫካ ህልም መሀል
‘ጥበብ ሰማያዊ ቅንጦት ነው’
ብሎ ጠቢቡን ሲገስፀው
ጣቶችን በረሀ መሐል ተክያቸው ነበር
ጢሜ መለምለም ጀምሯል
ጥላዩን በቃሬዛ ወሰዱት
ጭንቅላቴ ሲግል ተሰማኝ
የሞት ፈረስ ቃል ገባልኝ
የእርግቤት መቃብራን
በጥላዬ ይሰውጠኛል።
ስኔ ህ , “፳ህ

Was burned up numberless pigeons,
And collected palm-full of ashes.
He is getting emaciated!
Some people say again:
That to get thinner is
To get taller beyond the sky,
To have the lightening under your feet.
In a dark jungle in a dream
When love said to the artist,
“Art is a divine luxury”,
I had planted my fingers
In the middle of a desert.
My beard is getting thicker,
They took my shadow on a stretcher,
And I felt my head scorching.
The horse of death promised me
To exchange my shadow
With the bird-cage-tomb of mine.

June 12, 1995

ልቧን ያልተወለደችው ልጅ
ከከዋክብት በተፋታችበት ማግስት
ከሚሊዮን ሰዓታት በውሃላ መወለደን?

ዝናብ ለሊት እንደነበረ- ሁሉ
ታስታውሳለች
ጨረቃ ፊኛ ከኮርኒሱ ደመና በላይ
በማይታየው ክር መንጠልጠሷን ጭምር--

ይህንንና እነዚህን
አላፍ ምስሎችን ጭምር
ታስታውሳለች

እኔ ጨረቃዋን አክል ነበርኩ

ፊኛ ነፊው መለክክም
ባስቸኳይ ጥሪ
ወደሌላ ጫካ ይሁን ዋሻ

መላኩን ታስታውሳለች

እማስታውሰው ነገር ስላልነበረ
እማውቀውም ነገር አልነበረኝም

ምናልባት ከዋክብትን
አቆጥር ነበርኩ- ይሆናል-

ወደንም የክርስቶስን ቀሚስ እጥፋቶች
አለያ የፈላስፎችን አዕላፍ ሽቦቶች

ብቻ አስታውሰው ስላልነበረኝ
አውቀውም አላገኘሁም
ግን --

ቡና-ሽካራ መደብ ላይ
ነጠላ ፀጉር መስመሮች
ሰከንድዮሽ ሲንቀሳቀሱ
ጥላቸው የነፍሴን ሽፋሎች
አፋየገላ ሲኮረኩሩኝ
(አስታውስኩ ልበል!)

መሰለኝ

በዚህ ሰዓትና ከዛም በውሃላንኳ
ልጅቷ መወለደን አለመወለደን
አላውቅም -- አላስታውስምም

She remembers
On the morrow she divorced the stars,
That I was born after million hours,
That girl who was not born her heart;
She remembers it was a rainy night.

She remembers:
Moon balloon was hanged above
a ceiling of clouds a thread invisible
And I was as big as the moon.

She remembered
This and that plentiful
Images so myriad?

She remembers:
That the balloon-blowing angel
Was called on a mission far
To another cave or remote jungle.

There was nothing I remember
'cause nothing I knew was there,

Perhaps I was counting the stars
Or the drape of Jesus shawl
Otherwise ample grey hairs
Of the great philosophers

Then I found nothing I knew
'cause I had nothing to remember

But:
On a rough brown block
When hairy lines move

Like the second-pointer in a clock;
And they tickle the shadow
Of my soul with a feather,
(can I say I remember)

Either then or even later,
If she was born or not
I knew not, nor I do remember.

ብቻ የብብቴ ፀጉር
 እንደ- መነኩሴ ሸረሪት የ'ጅስራ
 በረሃ መሃል ኑሮ መምረጡን
 ታስታውሳለች
 ብዬ አስባለሁ
 (ምንድነው!... የጥላዬን ውስጥ እግር አሳከኸኝ!)

በደስታም በሃዘንም ፅዋዎቼ መካከል
 ልቤ ጨው እንባዋን
 እንደምታጣጥም--

ከሁለት ተቃራኒ ጫፎች
 በ'ተቀር
 ሌላ ወንዝ መዋኘት አለመቻሌን ሁሉ

አስታወሰች

ደጅ አፍህን ስትዘጋ እንኳ
 እደጅ ቆሞ እንደማይቀር ጥላ
 “ሁሌዬን” ታስታውሳለች

ክርስቶስን ለመክሰስ
 ነፍስና ጊዜዬ ከጨረቃ በላይ ተንሳፋዋል
 (አሮማይ!)
 ሞላላዋን ፀሃይ ጭንቅላትህ ውስጥ
 እንደከረሜላ መምጣጥ ብቻ!
 መምጣጥ ነው
 እስክትጎመዝዝህ ድረስ!

የውሃ'ናቶች (የንቁራሪት ልጆች)
 በቀጭኑ በተጋገረ ኩል ውሃ ውስጥ
 ሰርከስ ሲጫወቱ
 ከተወሰኑ ፀሃይ ቀናት በውሃላ
 የእንቅስቃሴያቸው ድርቆሽ ብቻ
 ብሌን ሲያጋጥም- ዓይነት ጨዋታዬን ሁሉ

አስታወሰች
 ታስታውሳለች.....አለች!

‘äü

Anyhow, she remembers
 That the hair of my armpit
 Like a monk-spider handcraft
 Chose to live in the desert,
 I think she remembers that.
 (what is itching
 My shadow's under feet?)

She remembered:
 Through out my happy and sad fates
 My heart could savour its salty tears;
 That I am able to swim in no river
 But only between two extreme tips.

As a shadow never stays out
 When you move into your hut,
 She remembers my 'eternity'

My soul and time are floating
 High above the balloon moon,
 It is Jesus they are accusing.
 (Alas!)

Sucking on, in your head, the oval sun
 Like a candy or a sweet bonbon;
 Just sucking! Till it sours you down.

She remembered:
 That my soul lost its gaiety
 Like tadpoles in a pool so clear
 Making circus in swimming play
 Then left with only the spectre
 Of their movement quite dry
 After few sunny days so waterless.

She remembers
 She is remembering
 She is a remember-being.

1995

Hello! I say
 Hello my dear
 We both were hallucinated
 In each of our hearts.
 What does it mean?
 Was that the blowing of love's Milky Way?
 Or hesitated grim of love's fire?

Remember the lines
 At corners of my lips
 For I remember
 The lines of water in your blazing eyes
 My own to-and-for shadow
 On your statuette cheeks.

1995

As If

Last night I had a thought
 of having a deadly solar rest
 as if my secret duty is accomplished,
 and as if Love, too, needs a lunar break.

As frenzy street boys
 are a terror to a street dog,
 every morning, the Devil preaches
 the secret alchemy of a stone,
 as if lives destined in motion are in vain,
 as if the goal of one's life is
 to breed stinky memories
 in flamed saliva of soul's wrath
 to spit on other festive faces,
 and to justify heart's hypocrisy
 by reflex claps of self argument
 to every challenge of Beauty.
 This afternoon I had a thought
 of persisting the day as I can
 as if I have invented the concept
 of The oak sleeps in the acorn.

2008

The realms are given and taken
 And named by tongue and limbs of time
 And grew through the forest
 Where womb and tomb become one.

I took a realm baptized many times
 By colour and melody of different seasons,
 And like a morning kettle on a fire
 I'm boiling, inside, blood and acid
 To greet the infinite, nameless black river.

But a learned madness named power
 Trying to pump a toxic broken ray
 Underneath our pretentious skin
 Plotting an infirm grayish play.

But in a cave, in a forgotten landscape,
 A natural born energy named innocence
 Waiting for the second coming
 Of timeless freedom to send its fragrance
 From an ancient pot made of bones.

2009

I used to be certain
 That we are not blind
 But often choose to turn faces
 From the light to darkness;

While after crossed the wild grass
 The birds' hidden melodies
 Stand interminably on foreground.
 Suddenly, Beauty is tricky.

Walking down the street
 By night, a black cat,
 Stitched to the purple asphalt,
 Whispered the Actual to the child
 Hanged on the mother's back.
 Obviously, Truth is cruel.

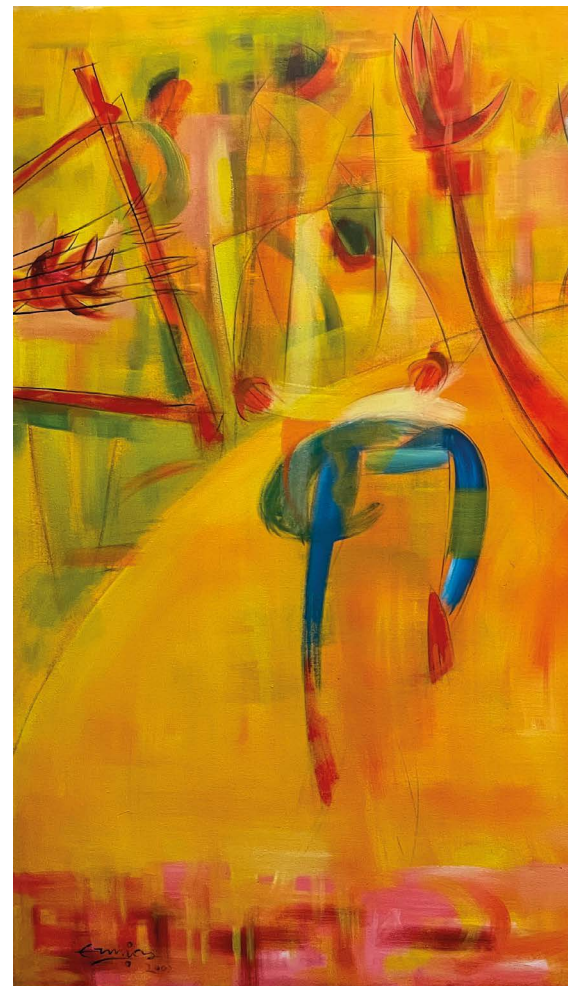
After some walking distance
 The night watchmen asking passers-by
 What the time was
 To kill time itself.
 Simply, Time is dream is cruel too.

2009



WORKS



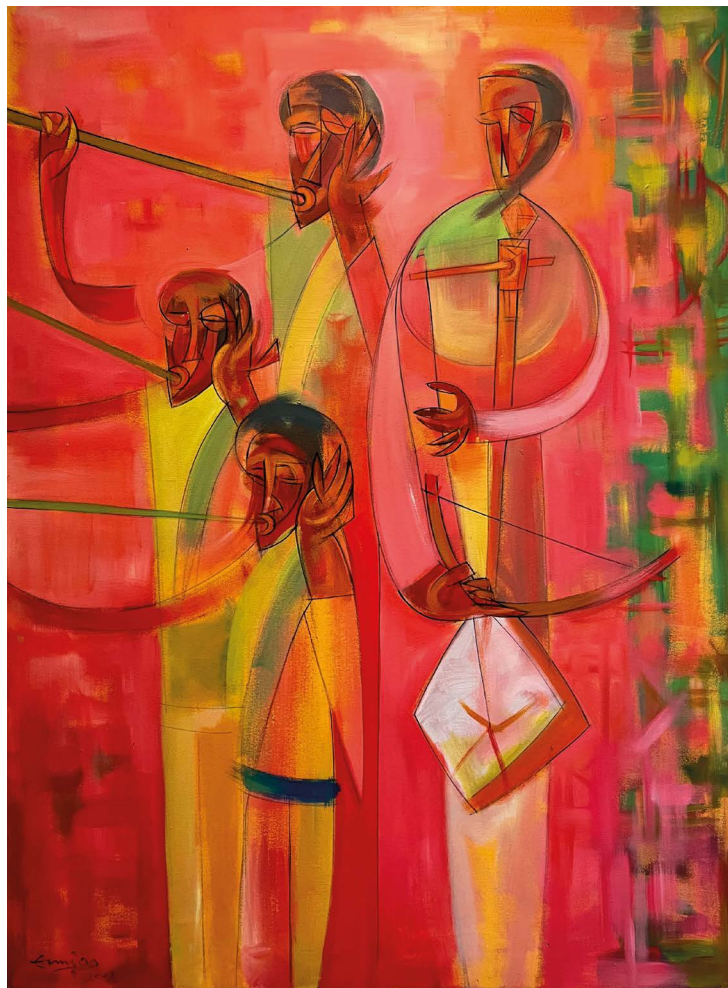


Guayala (triptych), 2002

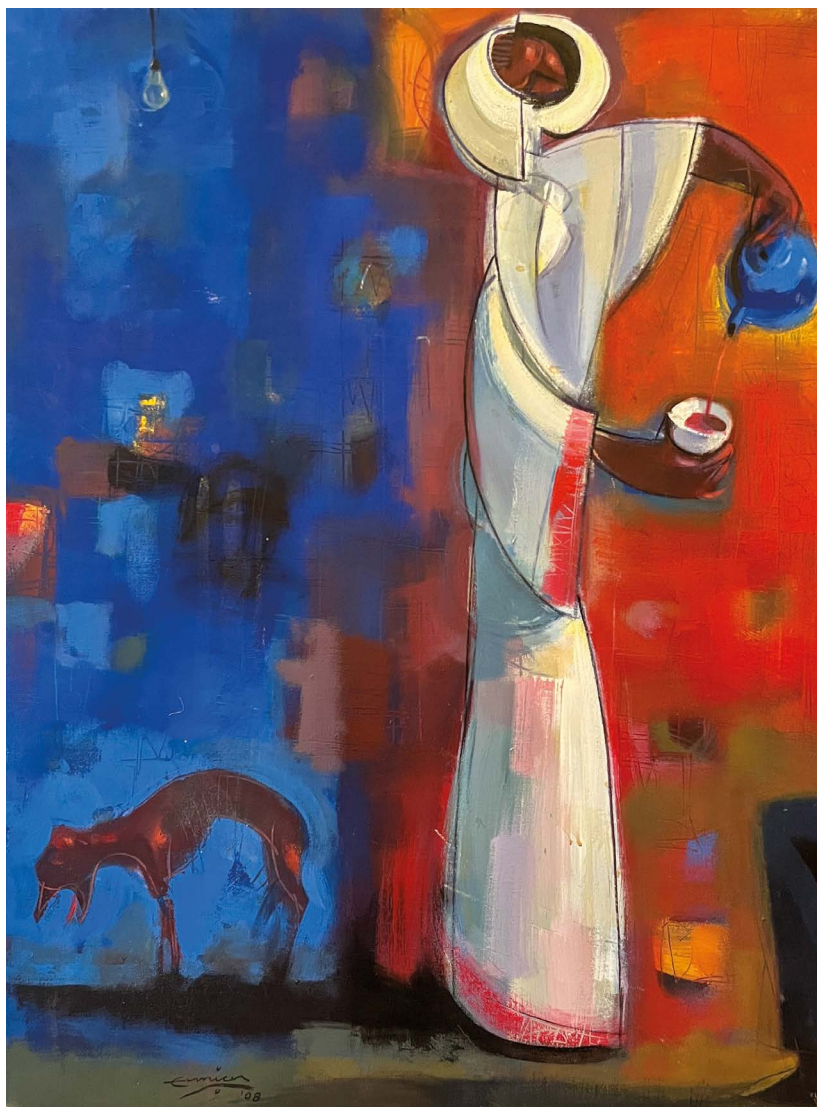
Left panel: *Horn, Krar and Clap*, acrylic on canvas, 135 x 101 cm

Central panel: *Kuda, Drum and Orchestra*, acrylic on canvas, 135 x 180 cm

Right panel: *Embilta and Watta*, acrylic on canvas, 135 x 101 cm



















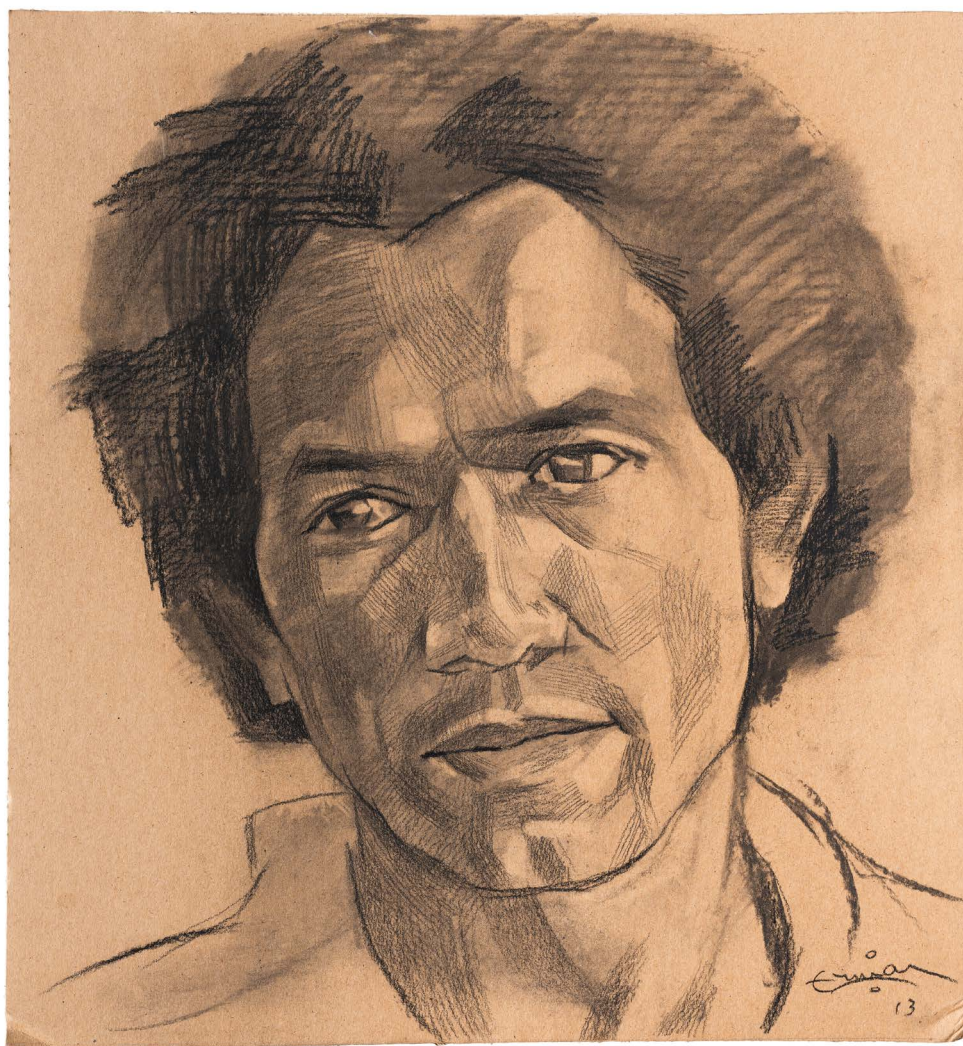




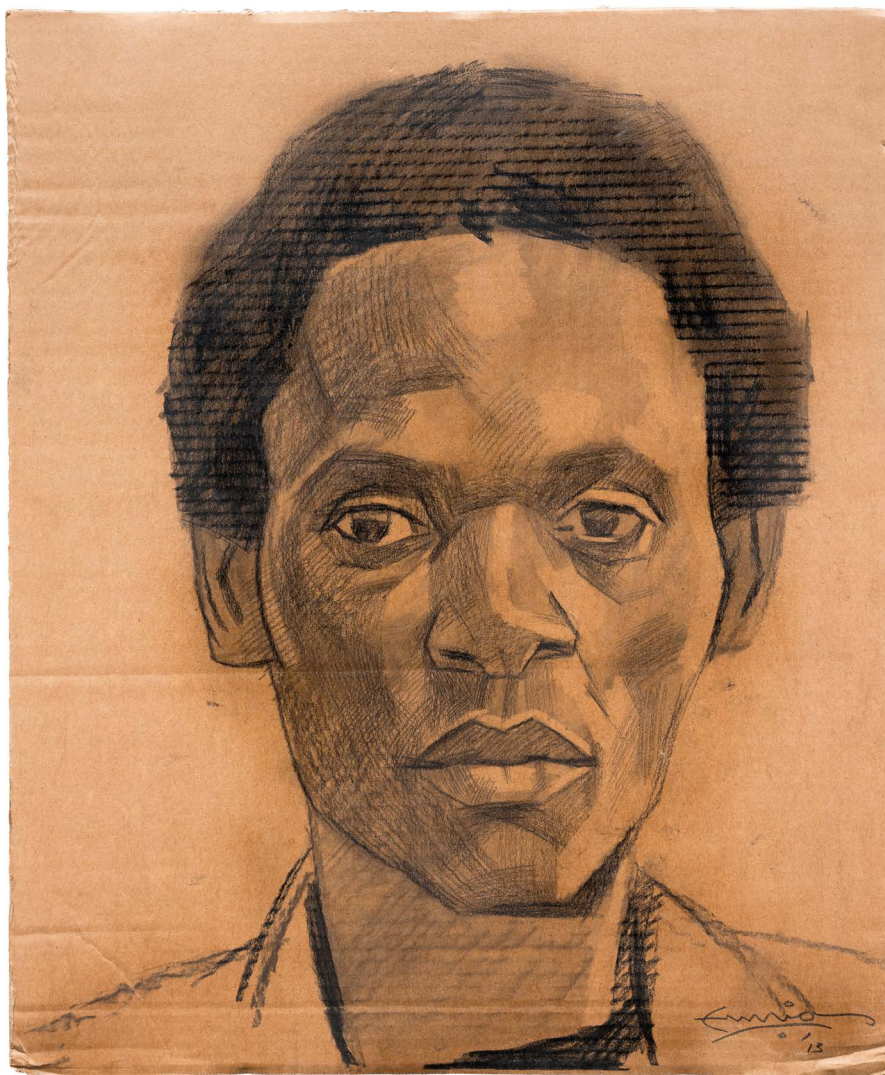


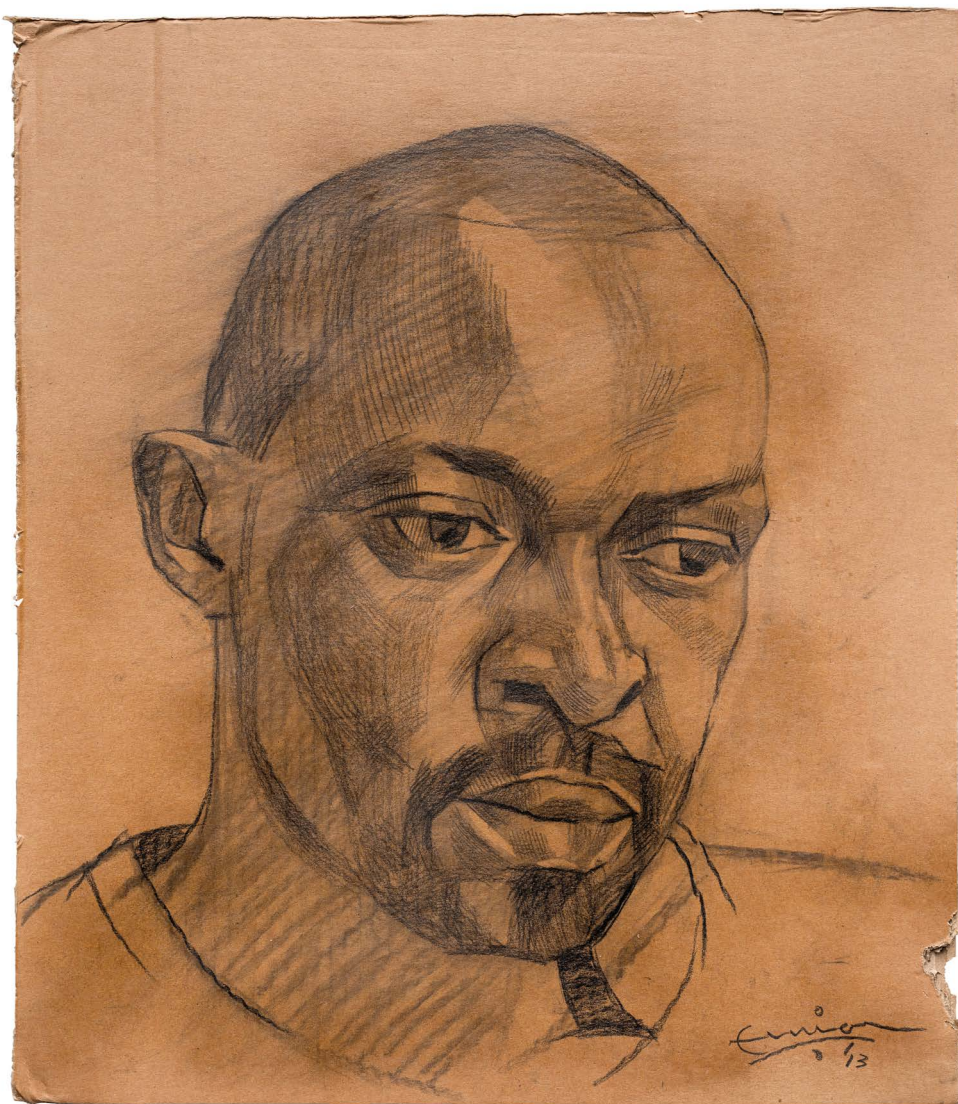






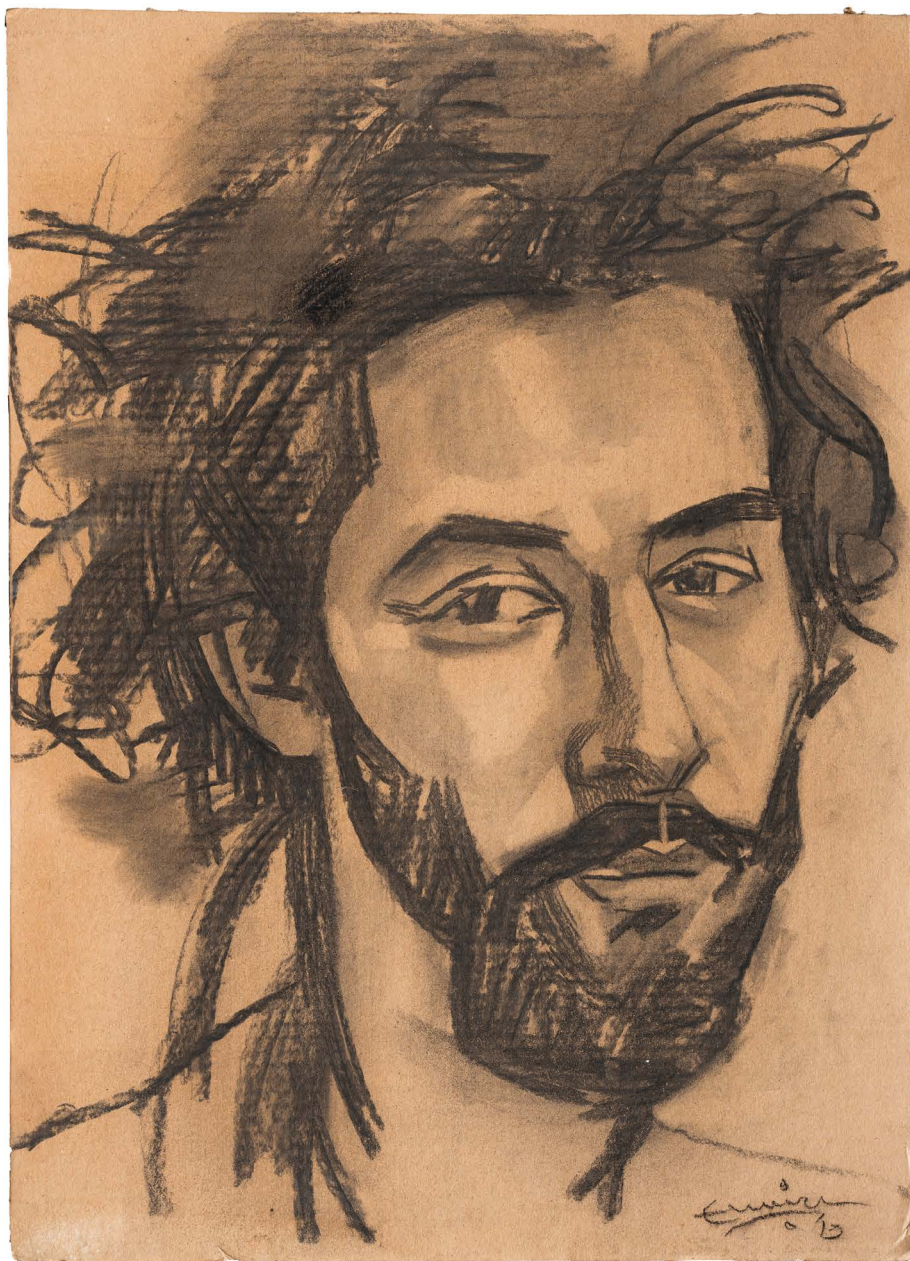






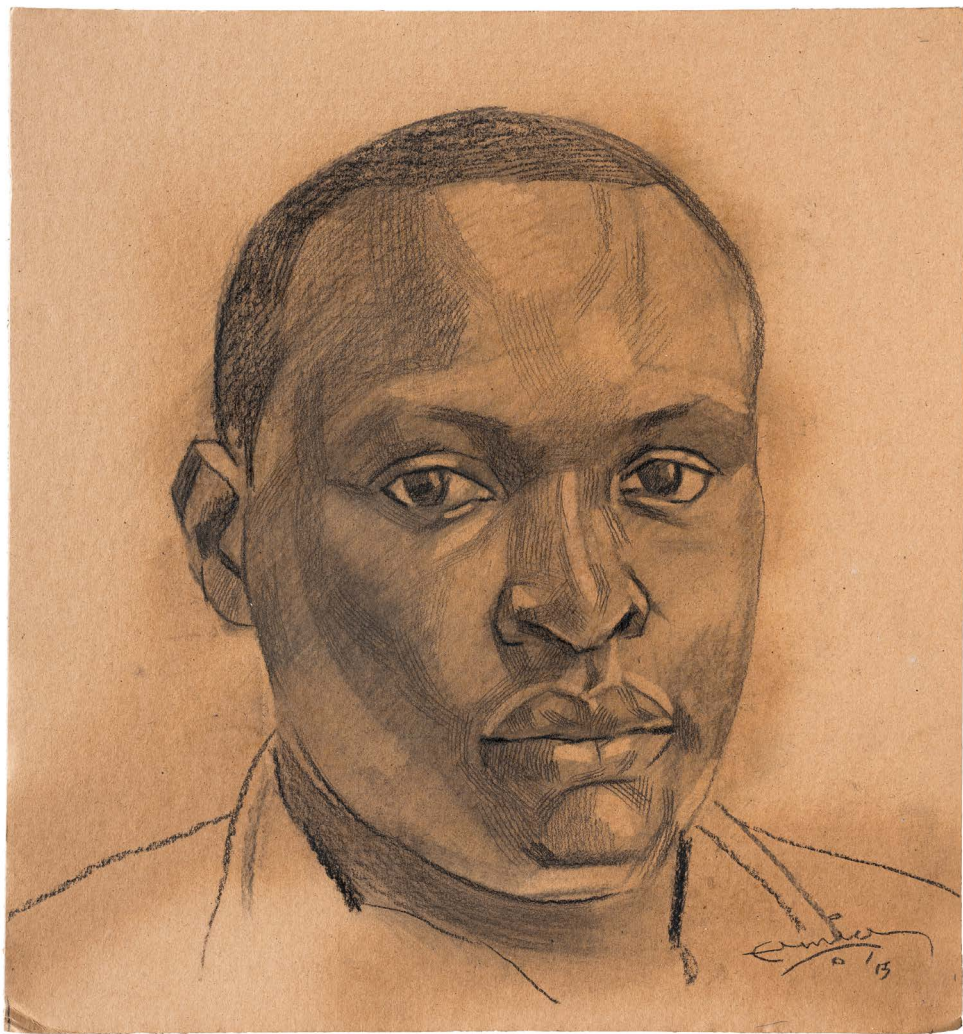




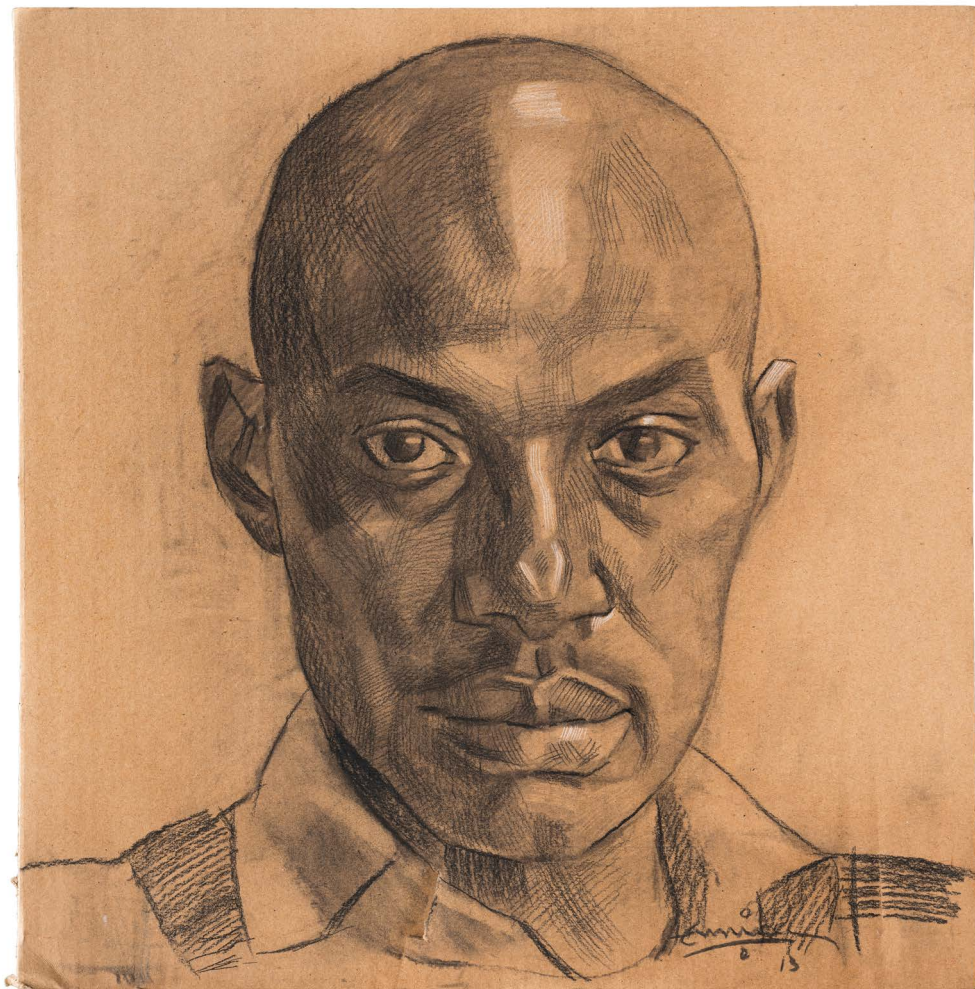


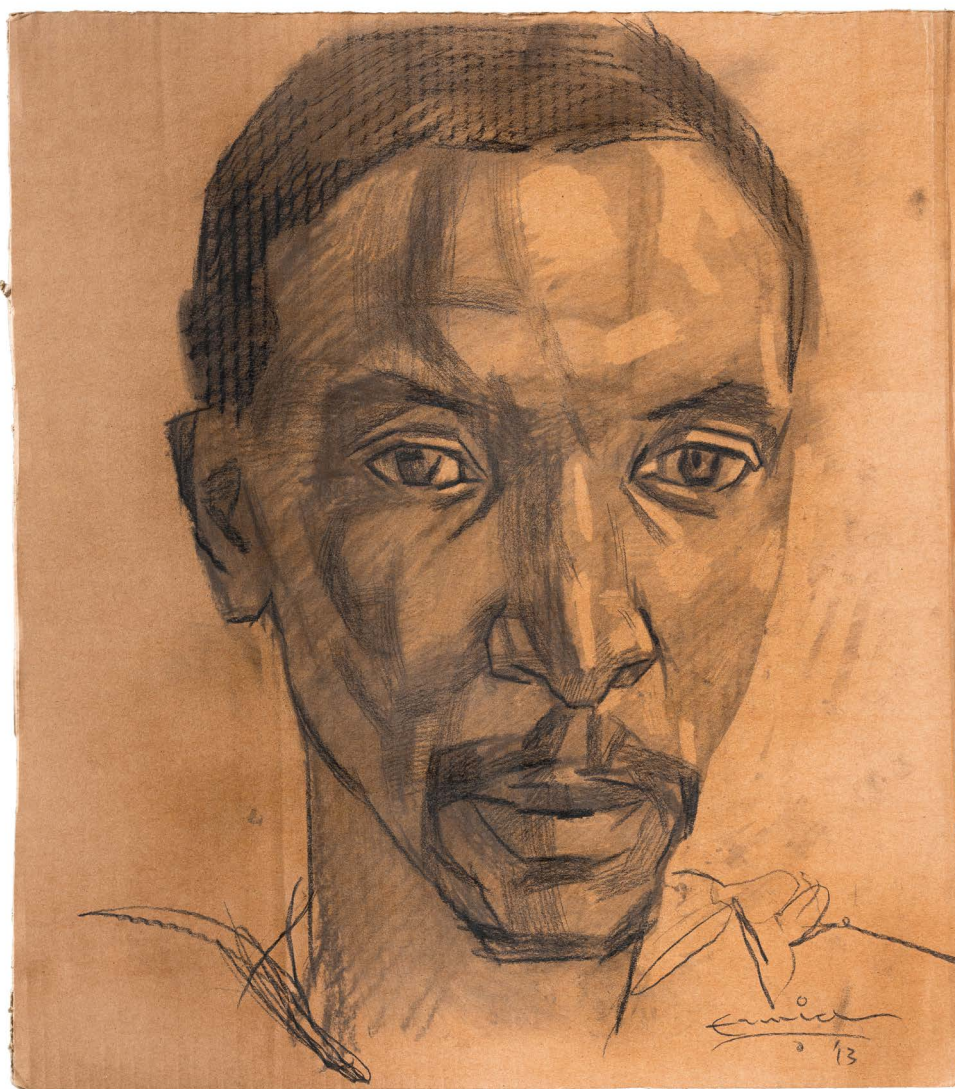


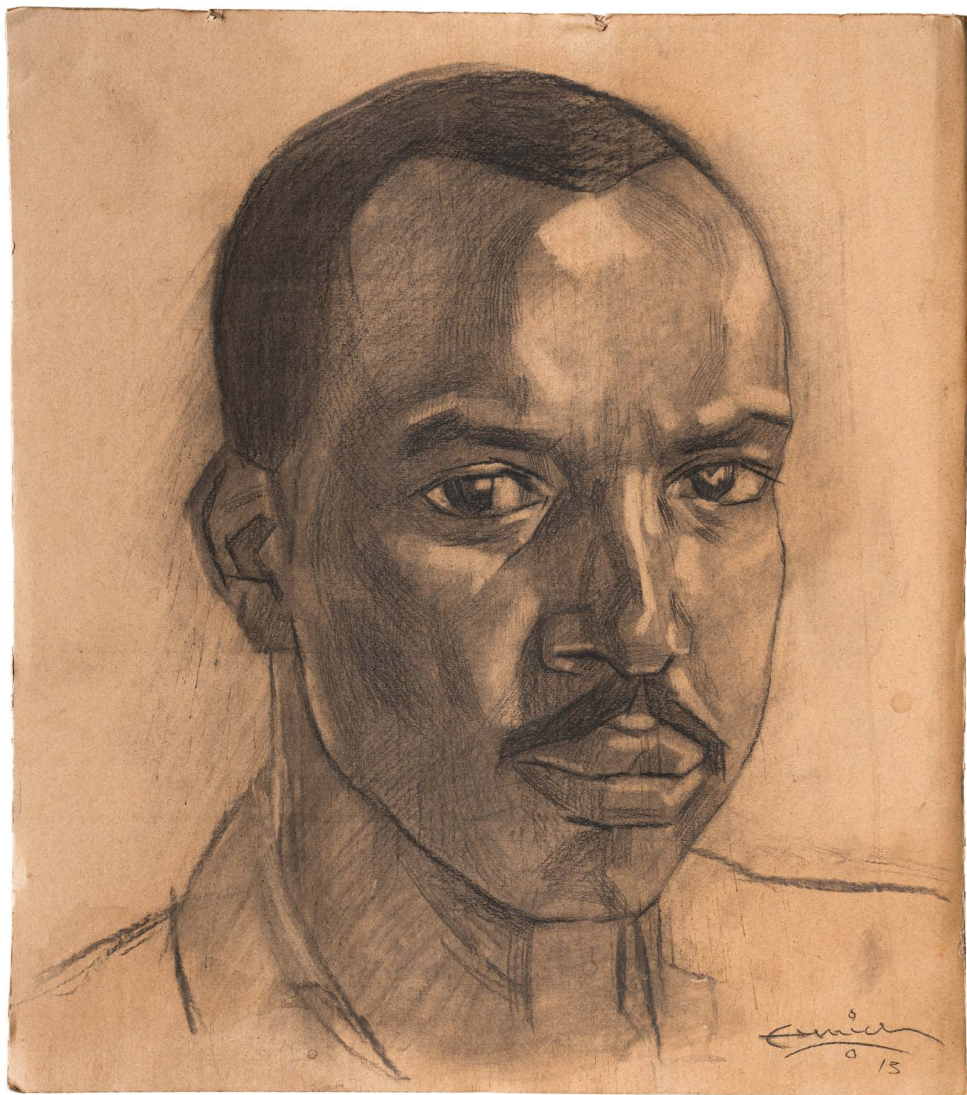


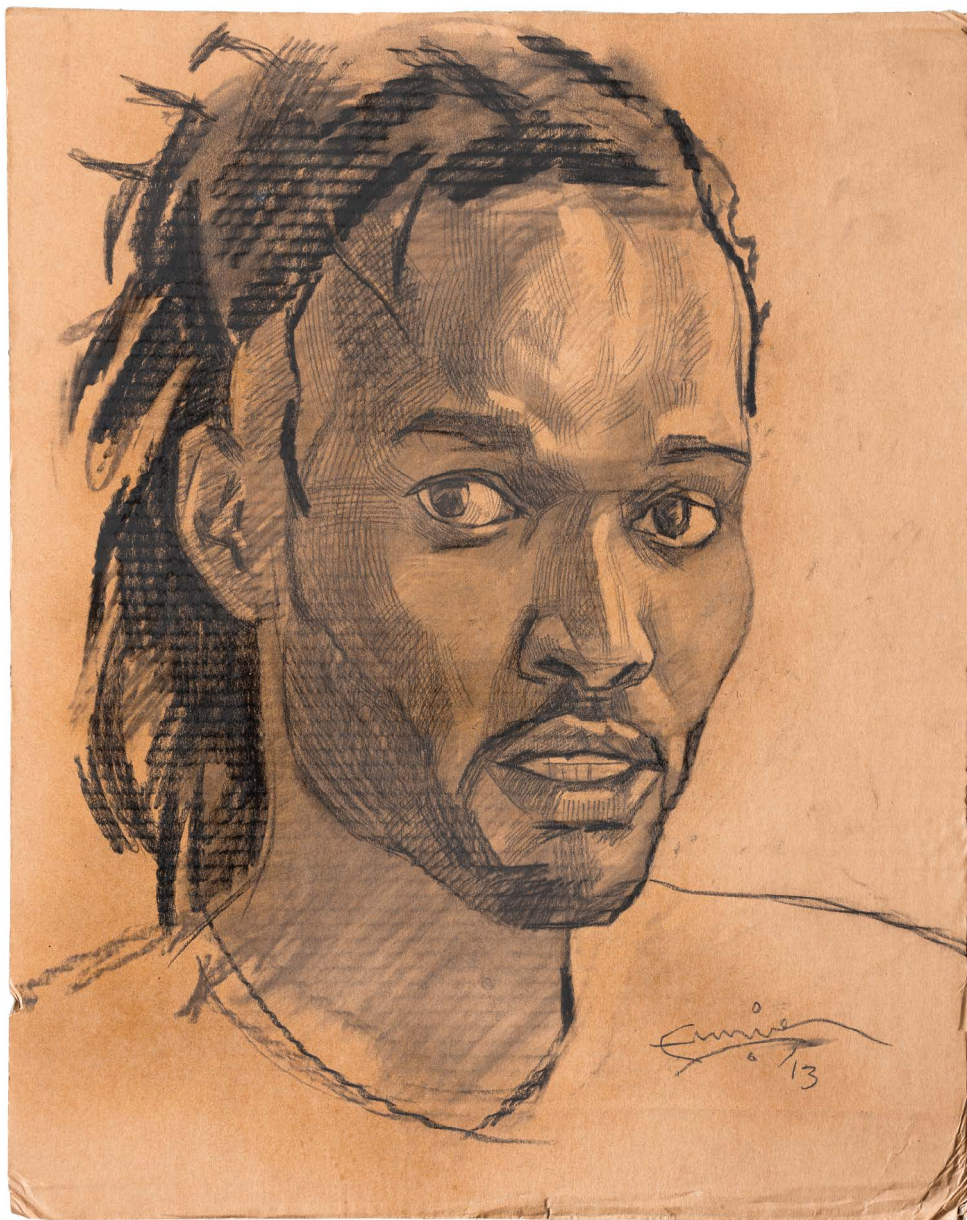


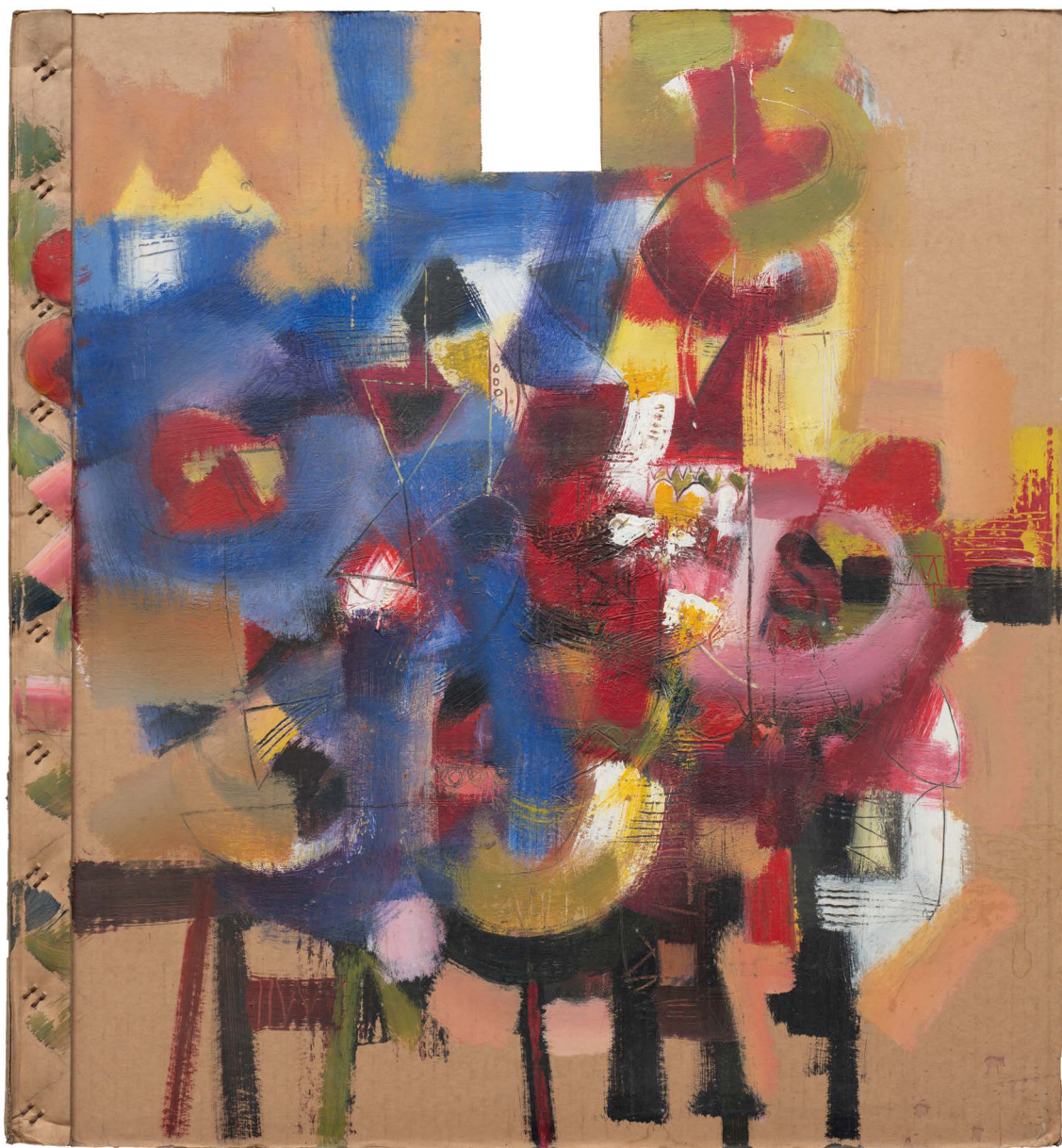




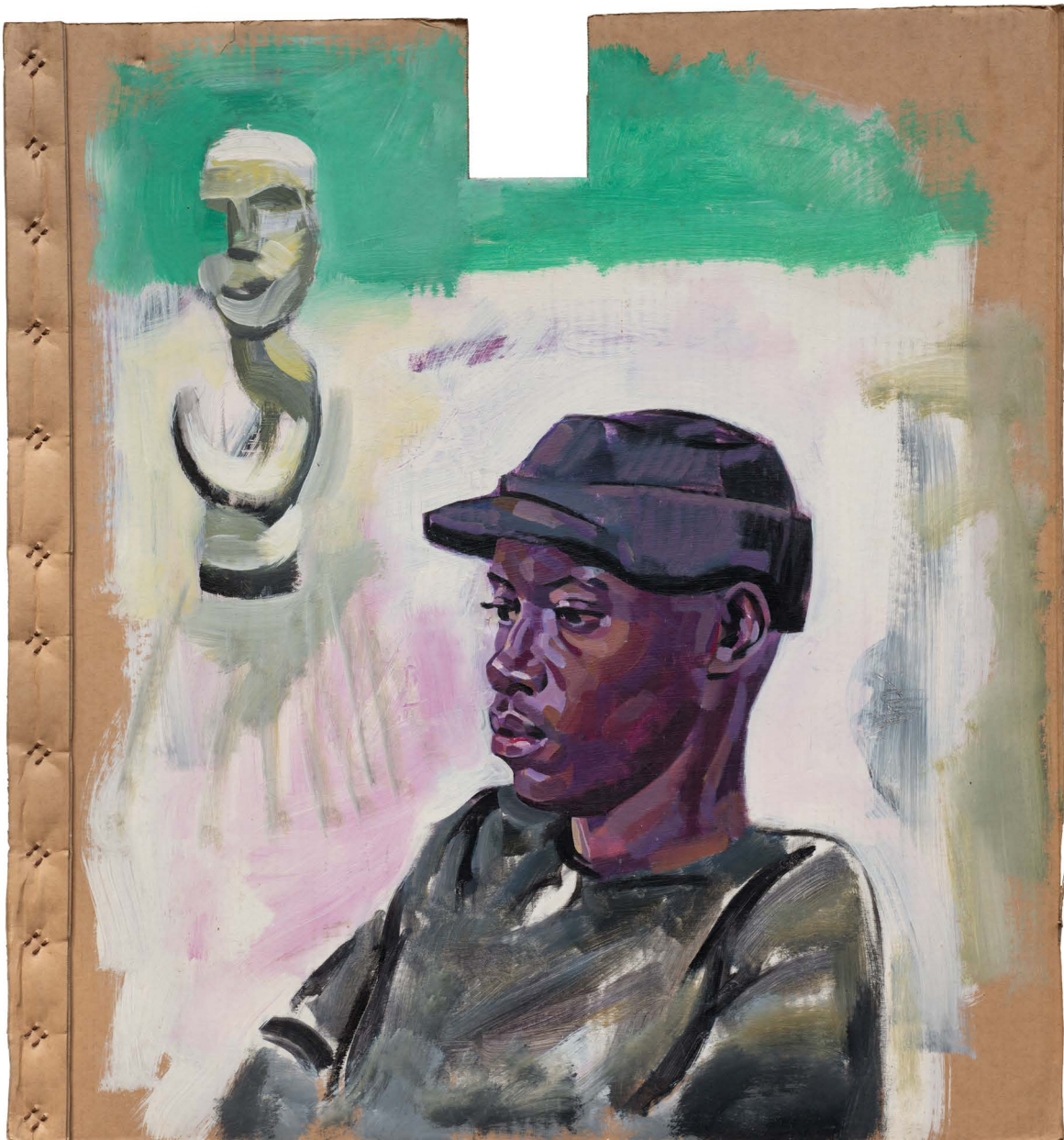
























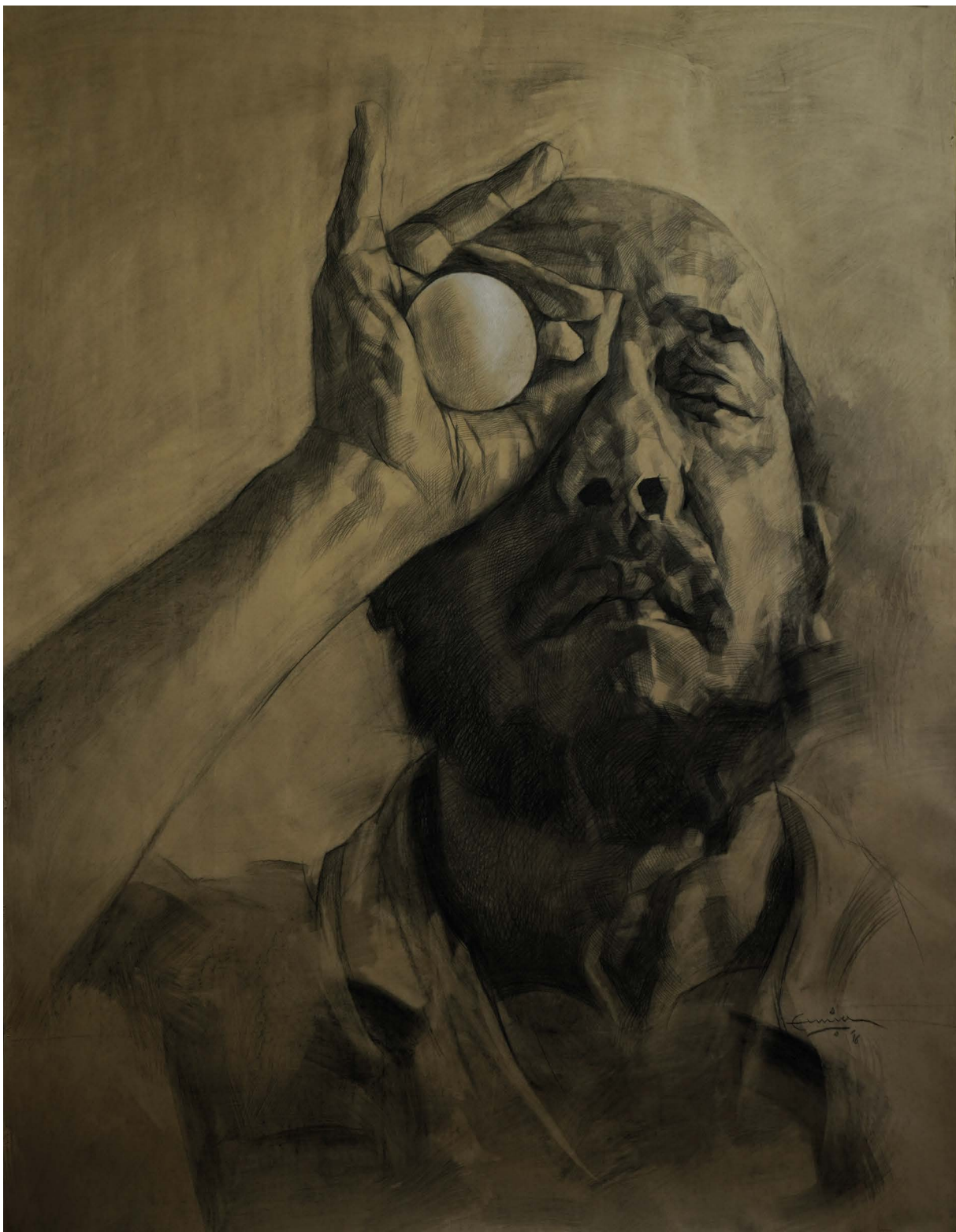


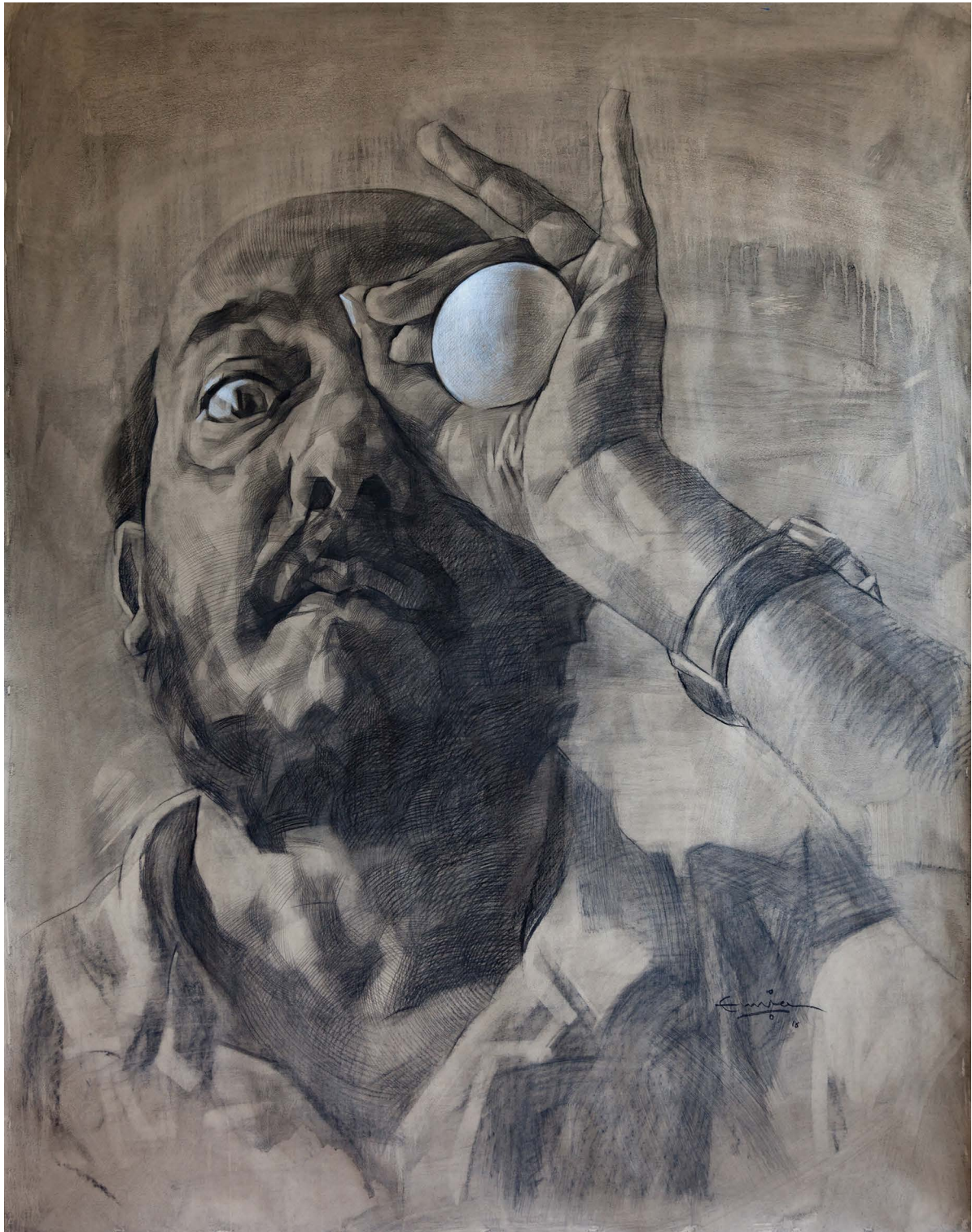




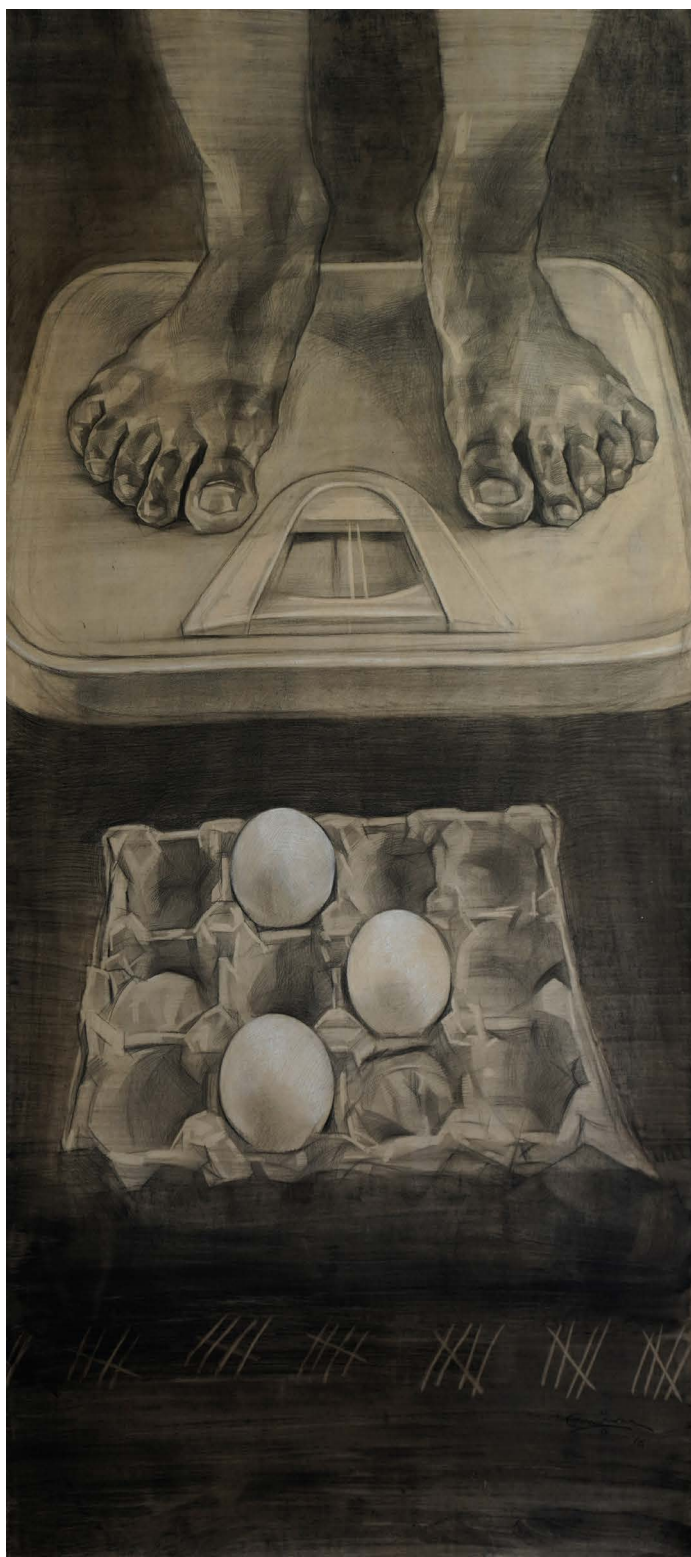










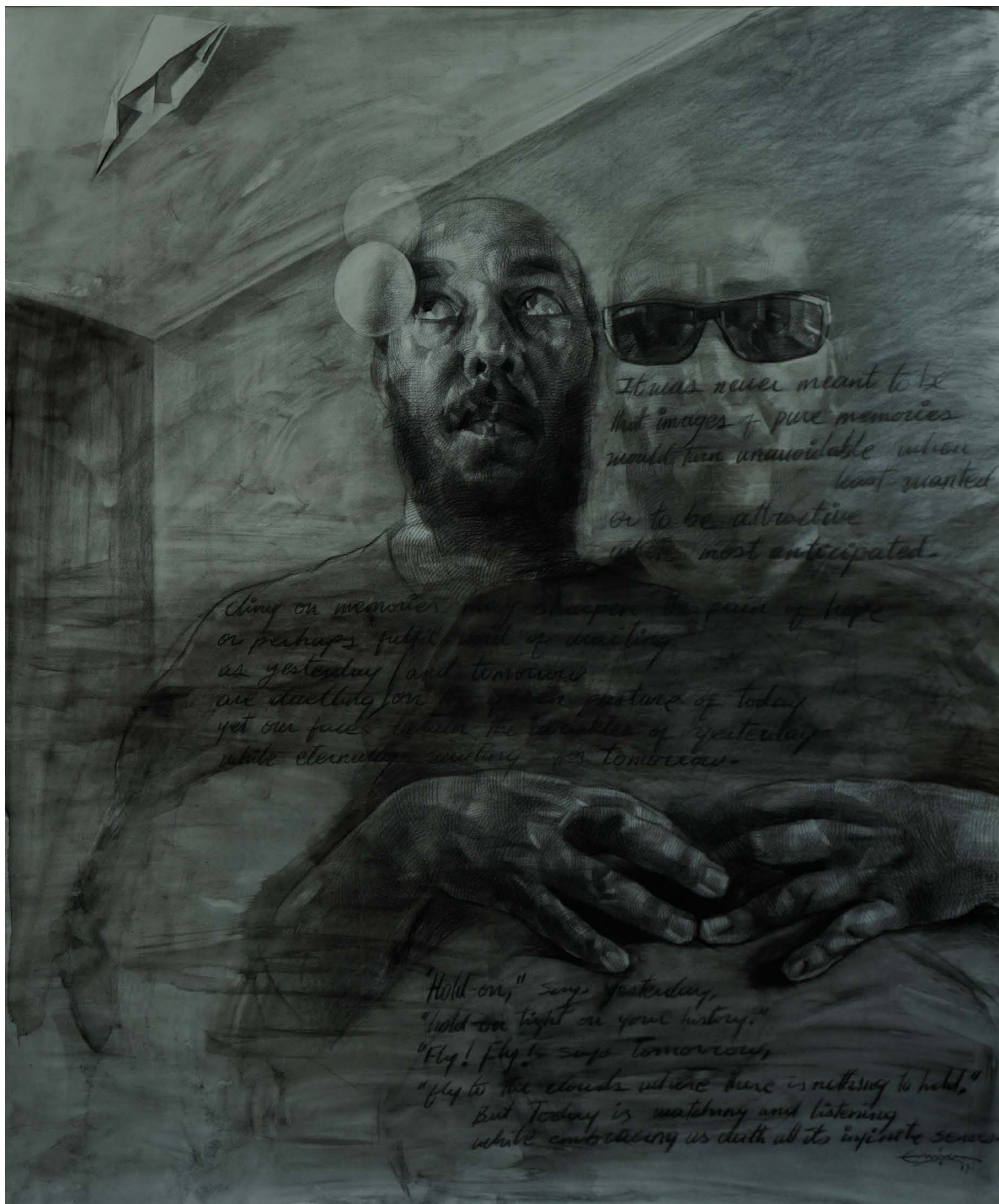


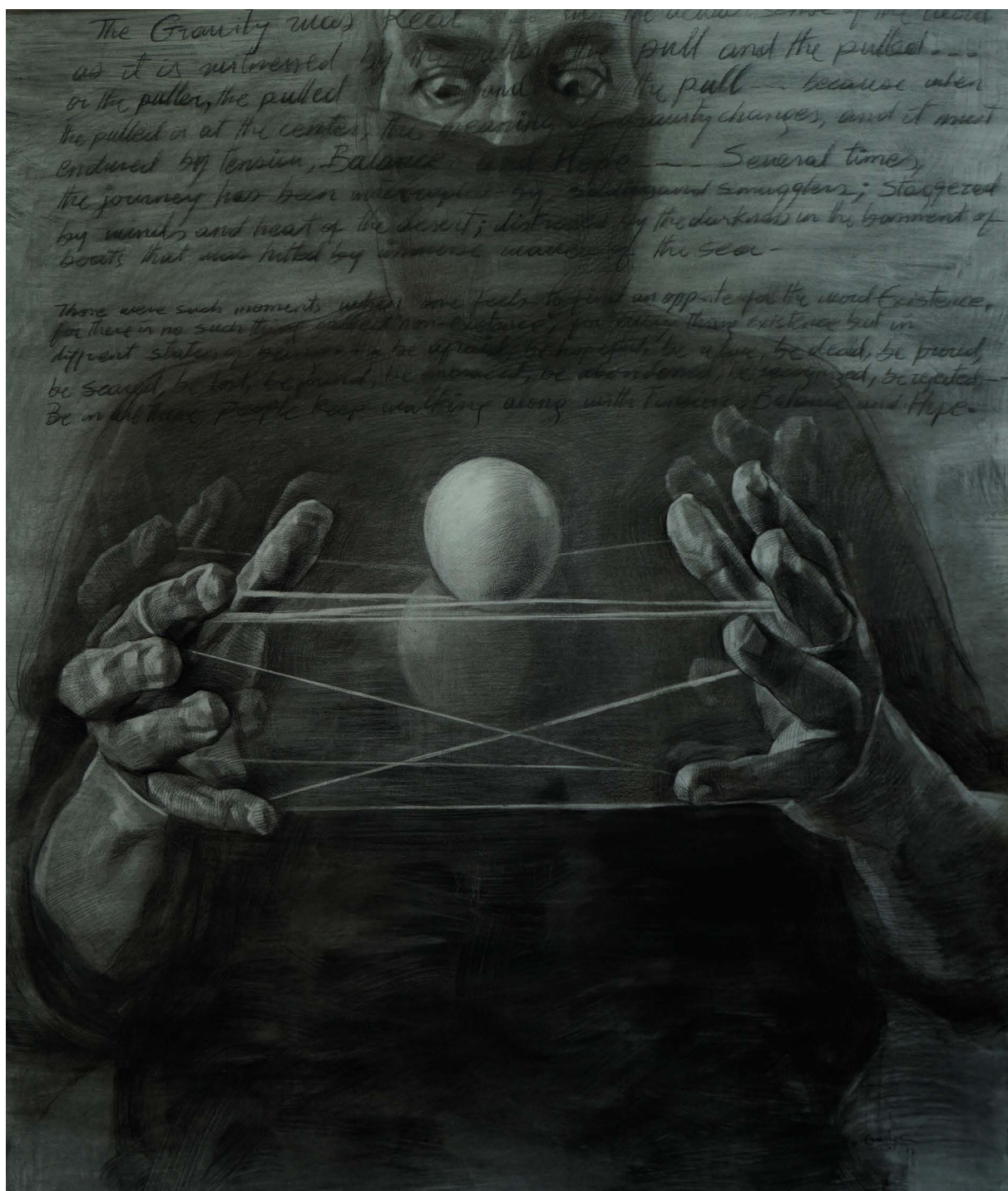


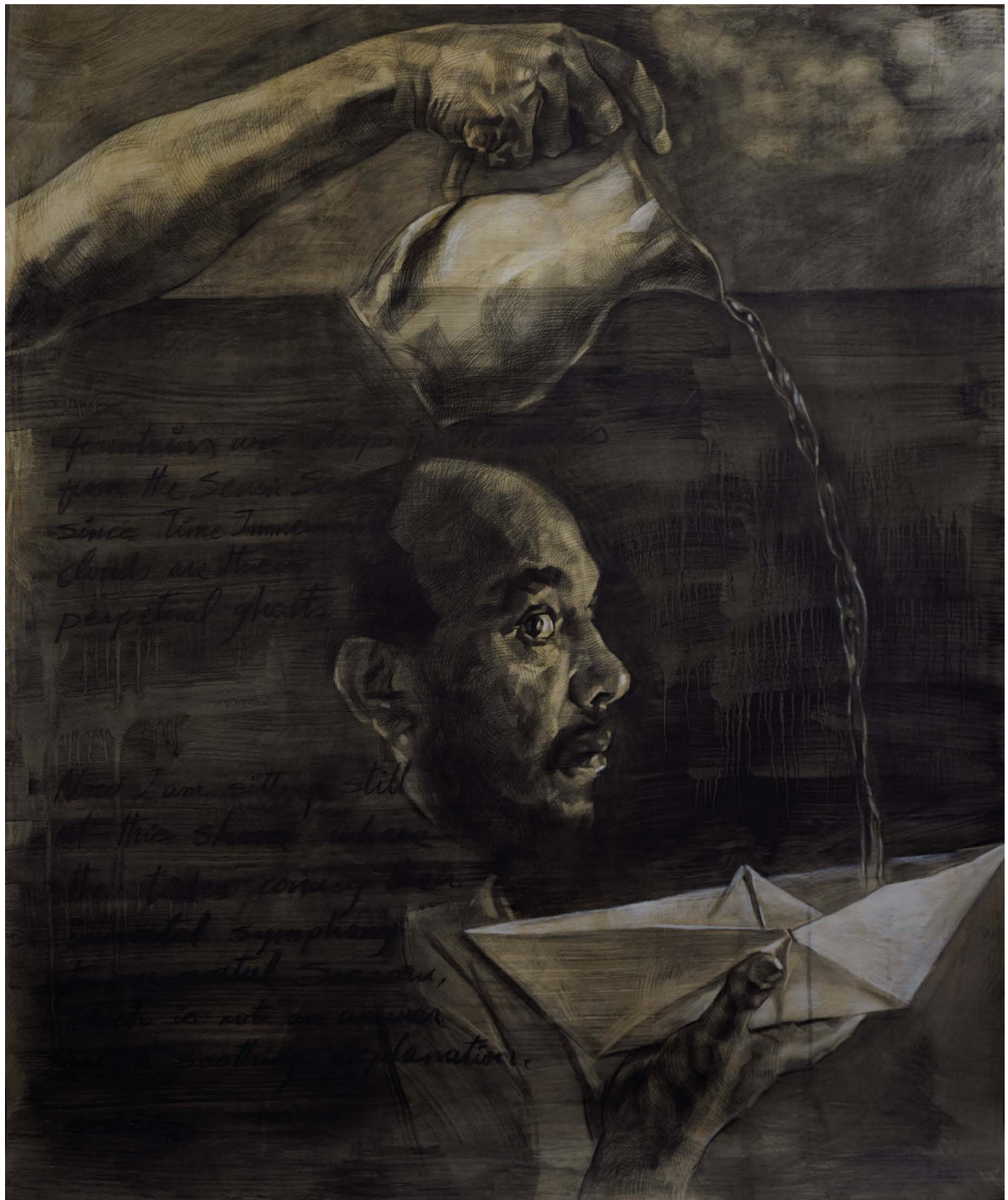






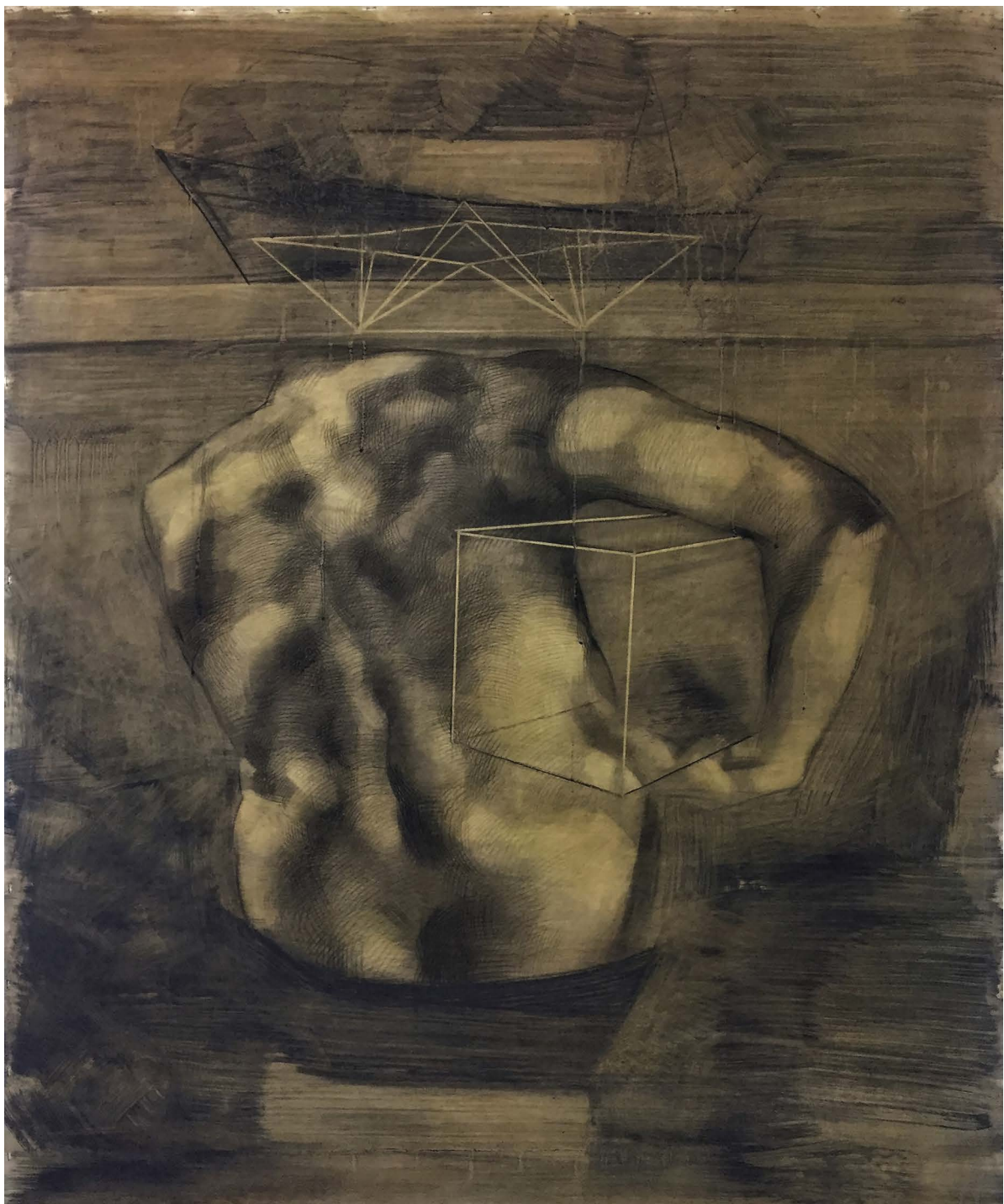


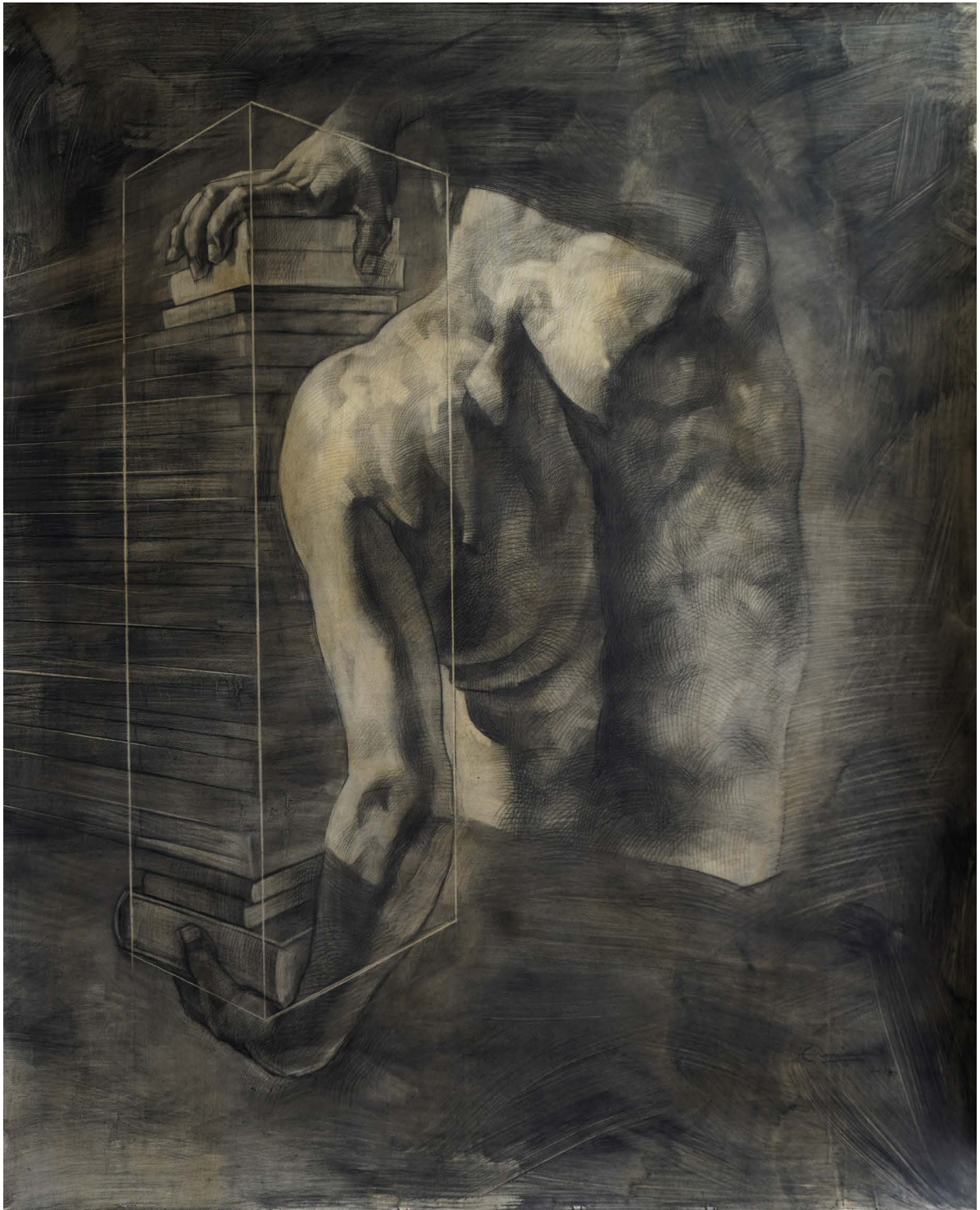




fountains are drops of memories
from the Seven Seas
Since Time Immemorial
clouds are their
perpetual ghosts.

Now I am sitting still
at this shore where
the tides coming from
distant symphony
to my mental horizon,
which is not an answer
but a soothing explanation.















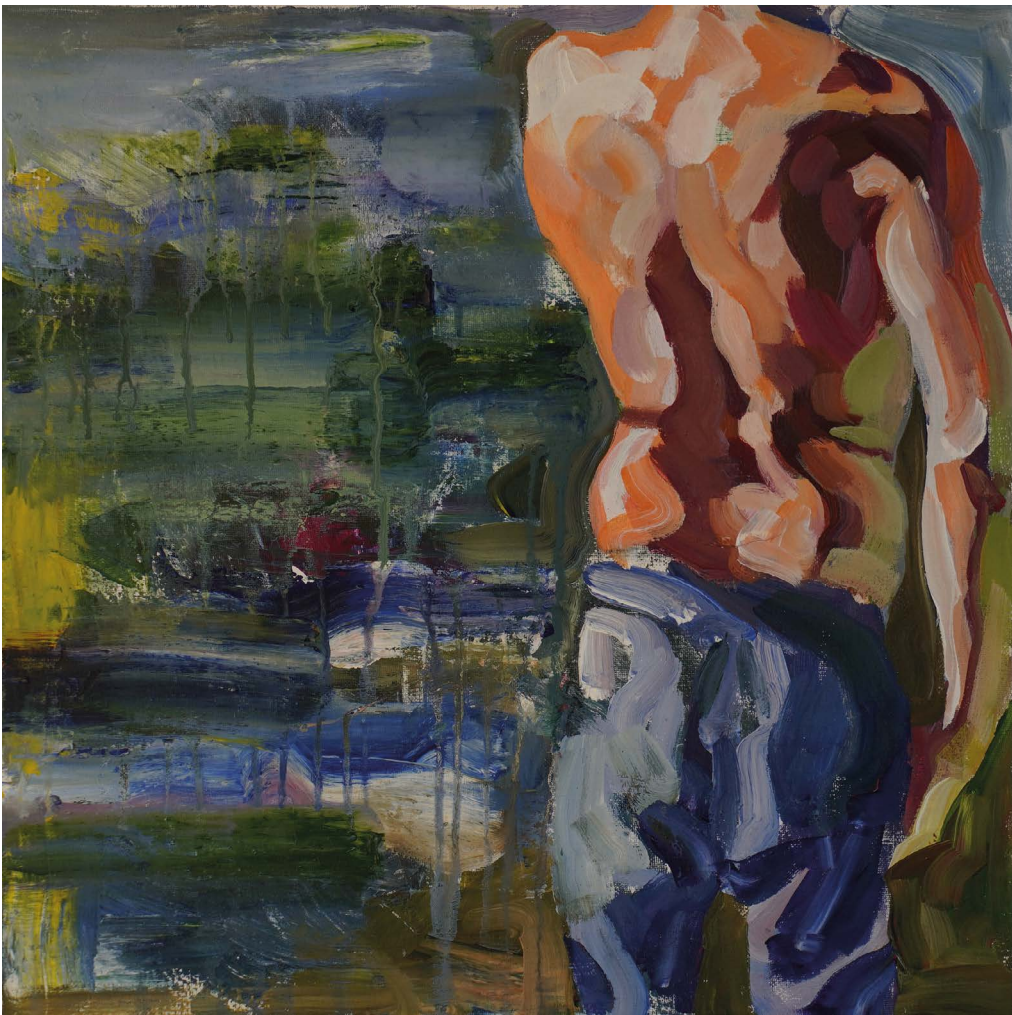






















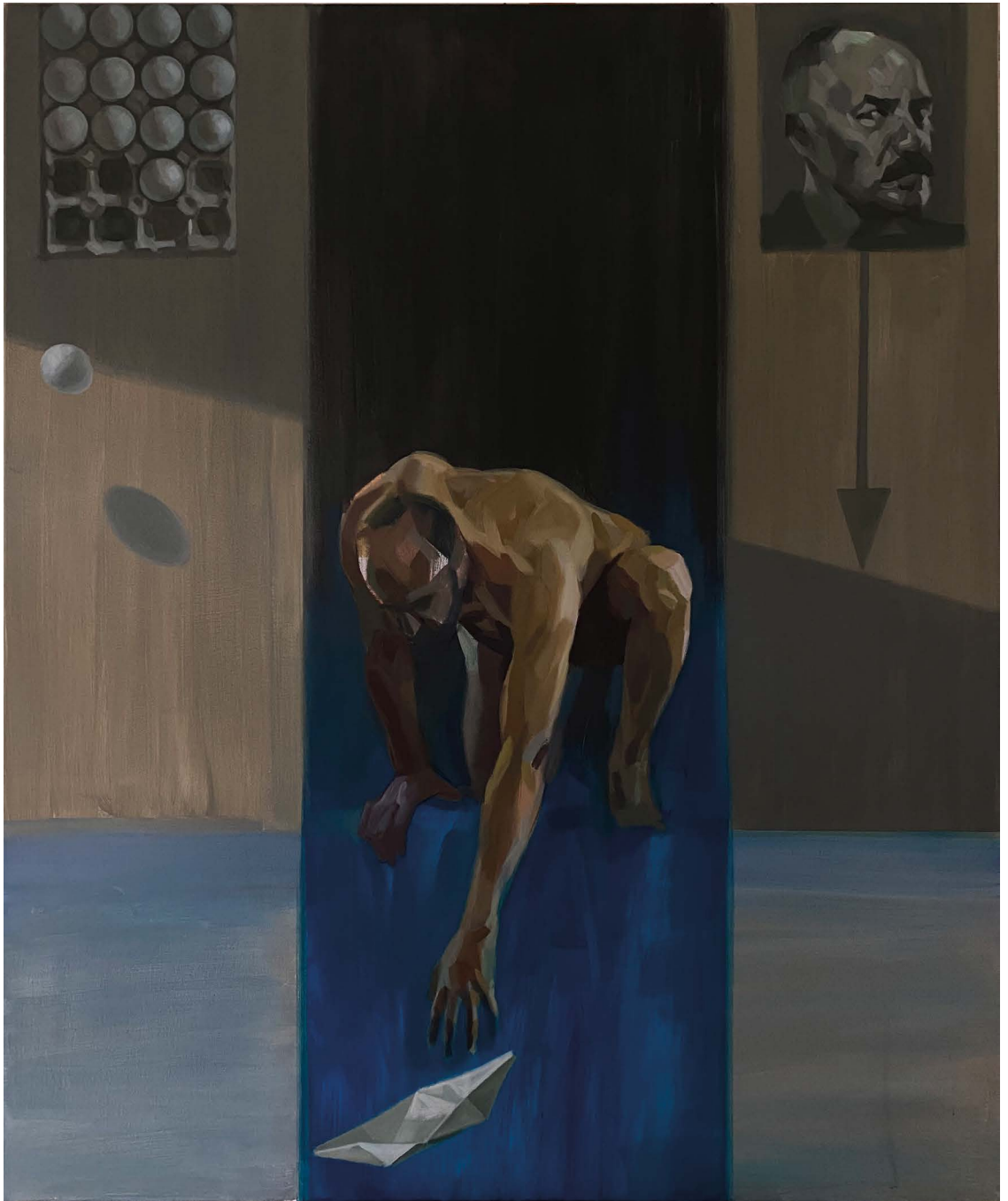












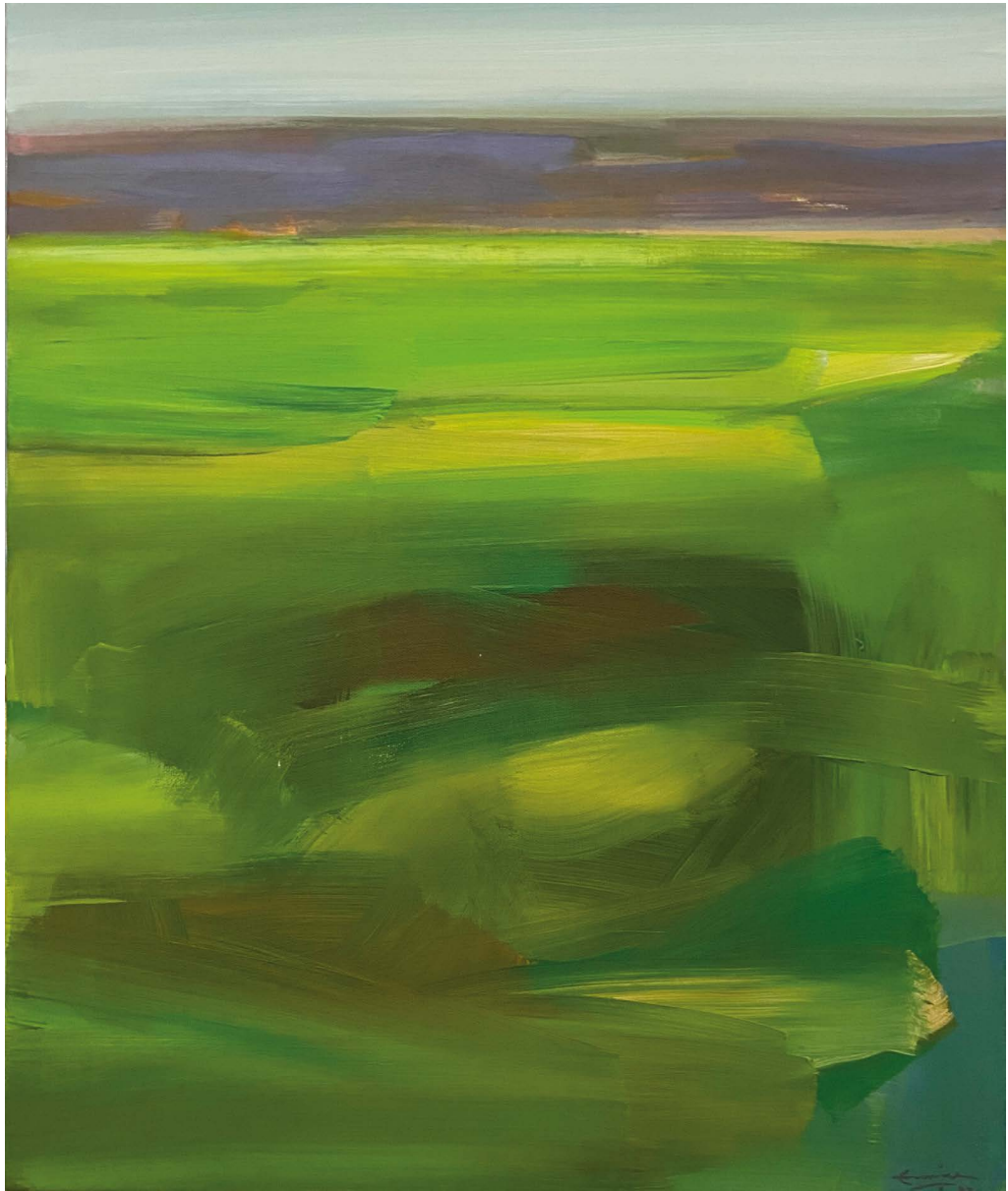
























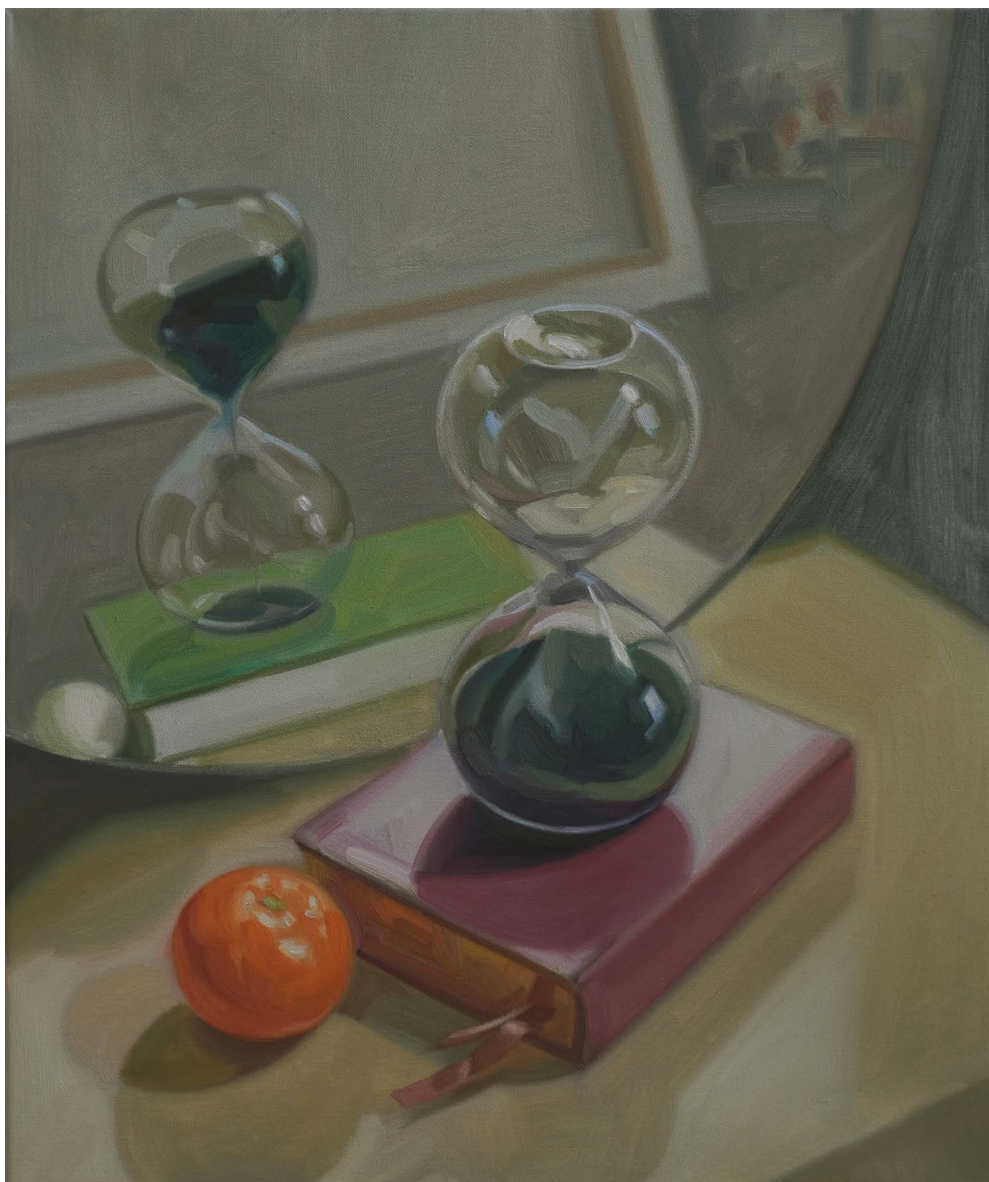
























BIOGRAPHY / CV

ERMIAS EKUBE

Born 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

EDUCATION

1986-90 Addis Ababa University Alle School of Fine Arts and Design

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 Persona Galleri, Kalmar, Sweden
- 2023 Lofta Caffè, Västervik, Sweden
- 2020 Lofta Caffè, Västervik, Sweden
Bergagalleriet, Solna, Stockholm, Sweden
- 2019 Centrum Galeriet, Gamleby, Sweden
Oskarshamns Konsthuset, Sweden
Konstviken Västervik, Sweden
Östra Gymnasiet, Skogos, Stockholm, Sweden
- 2018 Huddinge Artists Club, Stockholm, Sweden
- 2017 Lofta Caffè, Västervik, Sweden
- 2016 Mela Kulturhus, Oslo
Lofta Caffè, Västervik, Sweden
- 2015 Lela Gallery, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Konsthall, Västervik, Sweden
- 2014 Konsthall, Västervik, Sweden
- 2013 Alliance Francaise, Nairobi, Kenya
Talisman Restaurant, Nairobi Kenya
- 2005-12 The Gallery, Asmara, Eritrea
- 2006 Print exhibition, Swaziland
- 2004 Alliance Francaise, Print Exhibition, Djibouti and Tanzania,
- 2003 *Dreams of Consciousness*, Intercontinental Hotel, Asmara
- 2002 *Allegory of the Self*, Alliance Francaise, Asmara, Eritrea
- 2001 *Fates of Images*, Alliance Francaise, Asmara, Eritrea
Kunstforeining, Gallery, Trondheim, Norway
- 2000 The British Council, Asmara, Eritrea
- 1999 European Union, Asmara, Eritrea
- 1997 *If there is a Soul Before Death*, Alliance Francaise, Asmara and Addis Ababa

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Chart Art Fair, Copenhagen, Denmark
Ed Cross Fine arts Gallery, London
Addis Fine Arts Gallery, London
- 2022 Ed Cross Fine Arts Gallery, London
Galleri 28, Kalmar
- 2021 Galleri 28, Kalmar

- 2020 *Hononga*, Marlborough Art Society, Nya Zeeland
- 2018 Duo exhibition, *push pull, inhale exhale*, Kameleont Gallery, Norrköping
Trio exhibition *Borderless insight*, Norrköping Art Museum
Kalmar Art Museum
- 2015 African Artists for Development, Théâtre National de Chaillot, Paris
African Artists for Development, Ministry of Finance, Paris
- 2013 Manjano Prize Exhibition, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2012 Duo Exhibition, *Far & Near*, Pontasieve and Bergamo, Italy
- 2004 *Engraving from Eritrea*, Paris and Milano
Tour Exhibition, England
- 1990 Addis Ababa Art Museum, Ethiopia

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 2023 Culture Grant, Region Kalmar, Sweden
- 2023 Work Grant, Swedish Arts Grants Committee
- 2020 Culture Grant, Region Kalmar, Sweden
- 2020 Project Grant, Swedish Arts Grants Committee
- 2018 Culture Grant, Västervik Kommun, Sweden
- 2015 Kiruna Snow Sculpture Competition, 1st prizes, Jury and Spectators prizes, Sweden
- 2013 Manjano Art Competition Award, 2nd prize, Nairobi, Kenya
- 2001 Artist in Residence program, Trondheim, Norway

PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

- 2023 Ground art project, Lofta Caffé, Kubik Project, Västervik Municipality, Sweden
- 2021 Ground art project Three schools, Västervik Municipality, Sweden
- 2020 Outdoor Mural, (street art) Oskarshamn Municipality, Sweden
- 2019 Outdoor Mural, (street art) Västervik. Part of BANK Street art festival, Sweden
- 2015-16 Kiruna Snow Sculpture Competition, Sweden
- 2012 Outdoor mural, Eritrea
- 2012 Public Sculpture project, Eritrea
- 2001 Public Sculpture project, Eritrea

OTHER PROJECTS

- 2020 Co-authored and illustrated “Shashu,” a children’s book
- 2020 Illustrations for two children’s books, one bilingual and one in Tigrinya, Emkulu Publisher
- 2010-12 Co-produced books for Integrated-Arts Education in schools in Eritrea
- 2014 Character and background design ‘Solomon’s Hut’, short animation film

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ALMAS ART FOUNDATION

Almas Art Foundation is a London based non-profit organisation that is committed to celebrating the invaluable contributions made by African and African diaspora artists to modern and contemporary visual arts.

Almas aims to present and create an awareness for the practices of established and mid-career African and African diaspora artists through a programme of publications, exhibitions and films, documenting these artists' practices for a new generation of African artists, scholars and the wider international art community.

Almas aims to foster collaborations with emerging artists, curators and writers to support the arts ecosystem in Africa and facilitate residencies through partnerships with universities, institutions and independent initiatives.



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