

KQED

Ficre Ghebreyesus Painted Blackness as a Rich and Complex Landscape

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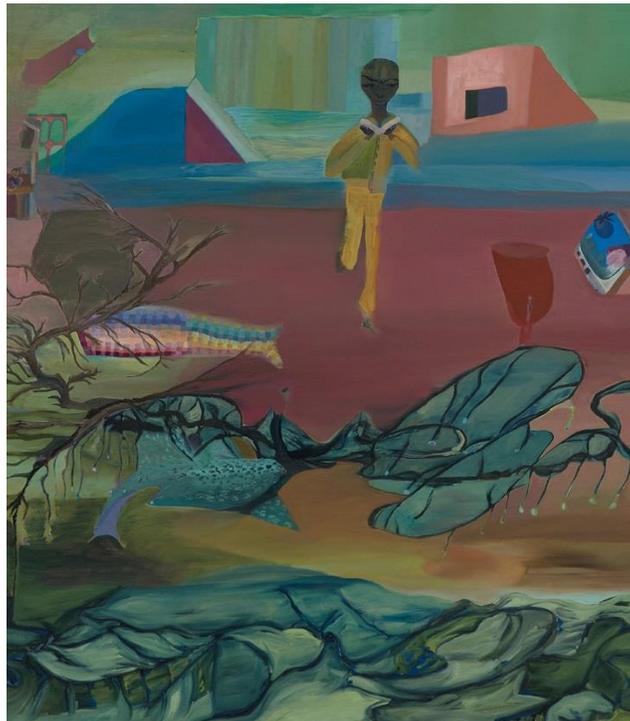
by Harry Tafoya

In her memoir, *The Light of the World*, the poet Elizabeth Alexander chronicles the ways that she and her husband, the late painter **Ficre Ghebreyesus**, filled each other's space to build a life and family together. Alexander's book suggests that love is not blind, but actually a deeply visionary experience, a broadening of perspective that makes one alive to nuance in the world and in one's self.

Their story is of an American woman and an Eritrean man who lived and worked in New Haven, Connecticut, and who reflected and refracted each other, finding new dimensions to not only sustain their marriage, but enrich their creative practices.

Ghebreyesus' generosity is on full display in *City With a River Running Through*, a remarkable show of his work at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD).

Working across styles, subjects and media, Ghebreyesus created from the currents of his own multifaceted identity, bringing the sum of his life as an artist, activist, refugee, chef, father, filmmaker and husband to each piece. He also brought with him his Blackness, which he understood in equally rich terms as a cultural inheritance and responsibility to kin, a bedrock of tradition that did not constrict, but celebrated what it meant to be free.



Ficre Ghebreyesus, 'Mangia Libro,' 2006. (Courtesy of the Estate of Ficre Ghebreyesus)

The freedom in a Ficare Ghebreyesus painting has something to do with movement and something to do with imagination. *Mangia Libro* depicts the archetypal Ghebreyesus-ian hero, a boy reading a book as he walks away from his village and into a dreamscape. Translating to "book eater" in Italian, "mangia libro" was Ghebreyesus' childhood nickname, a reference to his insatiable appetite for learning. The exhibition is full of similarly intimate journeys, even if most of the pieces are more abstract than the questing of that painting's iconic young boy.

The bulk of *City With a River* is made up of landscapes, but landscapes untethered from real geographic place. Instead, Ghebreyesus' paintings form at the nexus of culture, history and memory, sprawling across the canvas, and flowing out into this and other worlds.



Ficare Ghebreyesus, 'Zememesh Berhe's Magic Garden,' 2009. (Courtesy of the Estate of Ficare Ghebreyesus)

The show's titular piece and *Zememesh Berhe's Magic Garden* invoke specific locations that Ghebreyesus renders abstract with precisely mapped shapes and colors. The house and yard in *Magic Garden* are carved out of shimmering, Klimt-esque blocks of gold, purple and brown by a door and cascading willow tree. As your eye moves across the painting, from the garden to home and back, you're left contemplating the continuity and warmth of gorgeous interlocking squares. Zememesh Berhe was Ghebreyesus' mother; his painting suggests that her garden grew both indoors and out.

For the warmth and dynamism of these works, Ghebreyesus packs a punch with stillness too. The surreal calm of *Gate to the Compound* is made ominous by the presence of soldiers lurking in its upper corners, while the kaleidoscopic *Solitary Boat (Reflected)* is as evocative of coral seas as it is of a sunken ghost ship.



Ficare Ghebreyesus, 'Solitary Boat, Reflected,' 2008.

But to my eye, it's *Solitary Boat (Adrift)* that is most disquieting. With its minimal fields of color, the painting conjures a bright horizon fading into the distance against punishing expanses of purple and blue. It is a sober work that remains devastatingly topical. Fleeing a government often compared to North Korea in its authoritarian rule, thousands of Eritreans have drowned in recent years in their pursuit of safety abroad.

Water is the motif common to almost all of Ghebreyesus' paintings. It is treacherous in some, life-sustaining in others and downright mystical in one. In Ghebreyesus' hands, water is the vehicle that connects and carries Black life, its traditions, traumas and riches.



Ficare Ghebreyesus, 'City with a River Running Through,' 2011. (Courtesy of the Estate of Ficare Ghebreyesus)

Which brings us to the show's title piece. The waterway of Ghebreyesus' masterpiece is confined only to the painting's first panel, but it is the point of entry to a dazzling metropolis. Mapping his elements with incredible precision, Ghebreyesus balances shapes and colors, patterns and prints in a breathtaking feat of composition. Warm reds, greens and blues seem to allude to [African flags](#) and textiles, while dashes of black and yellow remind of Arabic and Ge'ez script.

Like the rest of his work, Ghebreyesus' city is dynamic, complicated and textually rich. It draws its power from its ability to be understood as multi-faceted and alive with difference, an accomplishment that inspires its own kind of love.



'City With a River Running Through' is on view at the Museum of African Diaspora in San Francisco through Dec. 16, 2018. [Details here.](#)