

June 2020

Word Power

Wosene Worke Kosrof Merges the Ancient Beauty of Ethiopian Writing with Modernist Abstraction

BY JOHN DORFMAN



America: The New Alphabet, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 79 x 140 in

IN DISCUSSING the work of the Ethiopian-born artist Wosene Worke Kosrof, the phrase “visual language” can be taken literally. Kosrof’s most important body of work consists of paintings in which the characters used to write Ethiopia’s Amharic language are the central graphic element. Cohabiting on the canvas with simple geometric forms and fields of color, the Amharic characters create a dynamic, logic-challenging, visually fascinating abstraction.

The abstraction is deepened by the fact that the characters—technically not letters but syllabic signs—are indeterminate and generally don’t spell out actual words. Kosrof, who has lived in the U.S. for over 40 years—first in Washington, D.C., and then in Berkeley, Calif.—has observed that non-Ethiopian viewers may have an advantage over native speakers when it comes to experiencing his work. Those who know

Amharic may believe, incorrectly, that they can reduce the meaning of the painting to the meaning of the words, or else may be flummoxed trying to relate the one to the other. On the other hand, those to whom the script is unknown can appreciate its graphic possibilities and relish the mystery.



Love IV, 2005, acrylic on linen, 19.75 x 20.5 in.

The element of mystery in Kosrof's letter paintings, it has been observed, is akin to that of Dadaist poetry, in which the layout of the words on the page is as important as their meaning, if not more so. It also has something in common with modernist forms of Asian calligraphy, in which the Chinese characters are abstracted to the point where they leave literal meaning behind. And of course, the use of letters in an abstract, non-literal way is very much a part of modernist art practice in general, from Stuart Davis to Robert Indiana to the late Japanese-American artist Kikuo Saito. Saito's use of Western letters in his abstract paintings is, in a sense, the reverse of Kosrof's practice—their abstracted, un-meaning quality reflects Saito's state of incomprehension when he arrived in the U.S. not yet able to read English.

Kosrof was born in Addis Ababa in 1950 and was raised in a neighborhood of the city that was home to traditional musicians, poets, artisans, and tailors. His brother, Mulatu, perceived his inborn talent and encouraged him to attend the prestigious School of Fine Arts (SFA) in Addis Ababa. There Wosene came into contact with a key figure in his development, Alexander "Skunder" Boghossian, an Armenian-Ethiopian artist and art teacher who happened to be his half-brother. It was an exciting time to be finding one's vocation as an artist; the 1960s and early '70s saw a burst of creativity in arts and culture in Ethiopia, just before the decline and fall of the Ethiopian monarchy. Kosrof learned about European art and

modernism from faculty members who had studied abroad, and at the same time absorbed traditional Ethiopian aesthetics, calligraphy, and Coptic Christian icon painting. Upon graduating with honors from SFA in 1972, he received an award directly from Emperor Haile Selassie and soon was exhibiting his work in Addis Ababa galleries. He also had paintings included in an exhibition in New York, "Africa Creates '72."



Coltrane, 2019, acrylic on linen, 38 x 36 in.

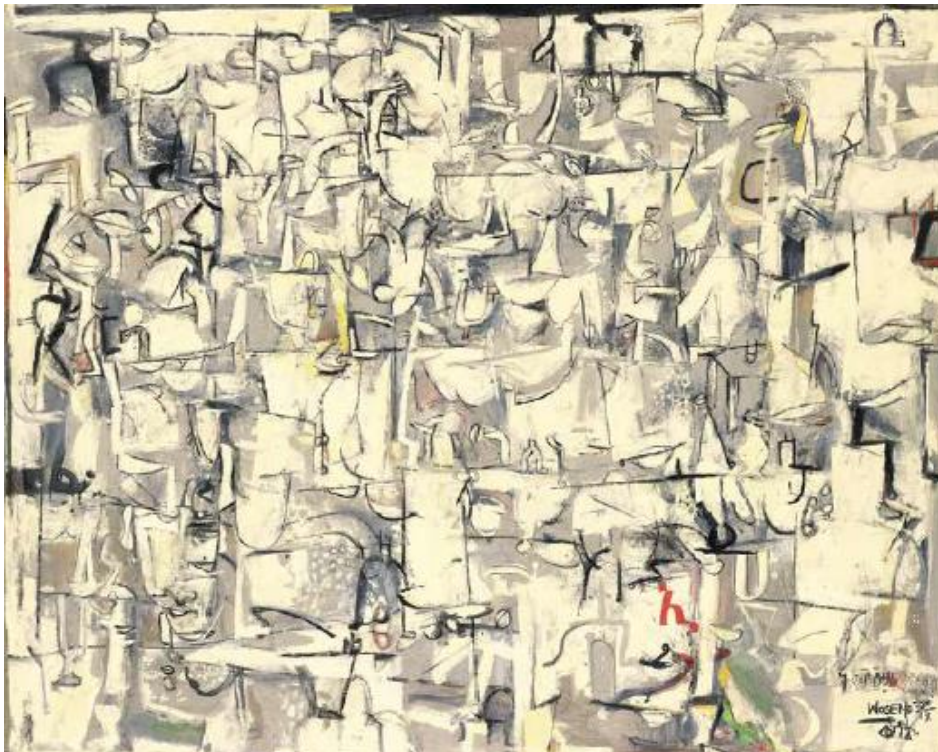
In 1974, the emperor was deposed and in 1977 the Communist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam took power, launching the "Red Terror." Kosrof chose to leave Ethiopia, first for Nairobi, Kenya, and then West Africa and London. Following an invitation to exhibit at a gallery in Bethesda, Md., he emigrated to the United States in 1978. He settled in Washington, D.C., and enrolled as an art student at Howard University, a historically black college, supported by a Ford Foundation grant. Boghossian was teaching at Howard, so their relationship continued. Like Boghossian, Kosrof had become interested in the greater African diaspora and made it a priority to integrate symbols and styles from other kinds of African art, not just Ethiopian.

Boghossian and Kosrof also shared a passion for jazz, which as a combination of African and Euro-American musical influences, has proved particularly meaningful for African American visual artists as well

as modernists of all stripes. Kosrof first became a jazz fan in Addis Ababa and was working jazz elements into his art almost from the beginning. Now, in Washington, he had more opportunity than ever to immerse himself in the music. Some of Kosrof's paintings, such as the aptly titled *Coltrane*, convey the polyrhythmic syncopation and improvisation of jazz in a graphic manner that is somewhat akin to Mondrian's "Boogie-Woogie series" of the early 1940s. Sometimes he places his letters into little boxes or grids that refer to the boxes that he used to learn to write Amharic as a child; they also, in a certain way, recall the letter-and-number-based paintings of the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García, another artist who sought to infuse modernism with non-Western content from the land of his birth. While Torres-García may not have been an influence on Kosrof, his fellow Latin American modernist Wifredo Lam certainly was, as Kosrof first became aware of his work during his student days in Addis Ababa. Other salient influences that Kosrof has acknowledged are Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso.

In his earlier work in Ethiopia, Kosrof riffed on traditional Ethiopian representational art, in which text is combined with images to communicate religious ideas, as in other Eastern Orthodox schools of icon painting. Many of Kosrof's early works were on goatskin, a deeply significant and time-honored material in Ethiopian culture, and some were three-dimensional, such as his "Lucy" series of sculptures, named for a proto-human fossilized skeleton found in Ethiopia in 1974 and reconceived by the artist as a sort of everywoman figure. The notion of isolating Ethiopian script from figural painting was a new one, and in creating his first letter works in the early 1980s, Kosrof was taking a bold step in a direction all his own.

Perhaps the closest analogy to this work is to be found in a school of 20th-century painting in the Arab world called *hurufiyya*. In Islam, the Arabic script is believed to have a sacred power and to be visually superior to representational art. Mystical trends such as Sufism saw letters as having an inner, secret meaning in addition to their literal meanings and phonetic sounds. Artists in the modern Middle East were inspired by these ideas to use Arabic letters as elements for abstract painting, and in so doing found a



Beauty of Your Own VIII, 2017, acrylic on linen, 50 x 62 in.

traditional native source for modernist innovation. In describing his intentions, Kosrof cites a similar idea from an Ethiopian literary tradition that speaks of “wax and gold” – the wax being the literal meaning of the verse and the gold being the hidden, non-literal or spiritual meaning. For the artists, the “gold” is also a personal phenomenon. In 2003, he told the American curator, Christa Clarke, “Perhaps it’s really a moment of reconciling myself with the fact that I live in the United State, that I don’t live in Ethiopia, but Ethiopia remains a source of strength for me. And I see that in my paintings, in that I am taking the characters to the edge, to find out what’s inside them, who they are beyond their accustomed conventions.”