

Sotheby's

An Interview with Ethiopian-Born Contemporary Artist Wosene Worke Kosrof

By Kami Gahiga

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The upcoming Modern and Contemporary African Art auction on 15 October in London includes three works by Ethiopian-born U.S.-based artist Wosene Worke Kosrof. Ahead of the sale Sotheby's Kami Gahiga spoke to the artist about his life and where he finds inspiration for his art.

Kami Gahiga: Could you tell us about your education and the beginnings of your career? You studied at the Alle School of Fine Arts in the 1970s then at Howard University, how did these different curricula influence your practice?

Wosene Worke Kosrof: I studied at the School of Fine Arts (SFA), Addis Ababa, from 1967-1972. I did my MFA studies at Howard University, Washington, D.C. from 1978-1980, where I was a Ford Foundation Talent Scholar. The major difference between these two art programs was that, at SFA, I was a beginner. One of my professors, who often called all of us rank amateurs 'grasshoppers', shocked me by shredding my first drawings. I hadn't yet learned to 'see', he complained. But over the entire five years at SFA, I was either first or second in my class. I developed my passion for art through two of my teachers, the master painter Gebre Christos Desta, who taught me the fundamentals of color and composition; and Tadesse Gizaw, who guided me through hundreds of drawings, both figurative and abstract.

Then, by the time I started at Howard University, I was surprised that the art history professor was lecturing about my paintings as examples of the new contemporary art coming out of Africa. While a student at SFA, I had begun showing my paintings in Ethiopia, as well as in the USA, and I was pleased that I was already becoming recognized as an artist early on in my career.

Those five years at SFA were the most intense of my early life. I started with a bit of native talent and emerged with a strong foundation that led me to my work with Jeff Donaldson at Howard University, who was a wonderful mentor. Though I had worked with Amharic script as an undergraduate, it was with Jeff's guidance that I began to explore the script forms in depth, that then ultimately became the core of my work.

KG: You were following your art education at the SFA a few years before the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Had the change of regime and political turmoil in Ethiopia influenced the themes and subject matter explored in your subsequent works?

WWK: After the DERG (military regime) came into power in 1974, I naively continued doing my abstract work, and this was not viewed favorably by the government. Though I wasn't politically engaged, I was strongly opposed to the kind of 'socialist realism' favored by the Marxist/Leninists. There were times I had to hide out, and I'm fortunate I wasn't captured and killed for no reason, as some of my artist friends, colleagues, and other countrymen were. Despite the DERG, I continued my experimentation with Amharic until I left the country in 1977, when I went to Washington, D.C., and continued my work with the script forms.



WOSENE WORKE KOSROF, *MOON AND THE BLUE GODDESS*, 2001.



KG: How does this fit with the importance of memory in your paintings and the continuous incorporation of the Amharic script?

WWK: When I first came to the US, I continued working with Ethiopian motifs from icon paintings and sacred manuscripts. I was homesick, and this helped me to gradually settle into my new life in Washington. Once I started Howard University and met Jeff Donaldson, my path shifted: I moved beyond the religious iconography and focused on how I could work with the script itself. And that's been my focus ever since. I became the first Ethiopian artist to use Amharic script as a core element in contemporary art.

KG: Could you speak about the inspiration you have found from the Ethiopian orthodox church precepts? How does it connect with the colours, style and forms in your work?

WWK: I was never part of the Ethiopian orthodox church, and early on in my graduate studies I left behind the religious symbolism of that belief system. Much more important for me, then and now, are the symbols of daily life, both in Ethiopia and the US. When painting, I conjure up visions of street scenes, incorporate business signs, architecture, clothing, dance, and, very important to me – the sounds, rhythms, and compositions of American jazz. These influence me each day in the studio.

KG: Could you elaborate on the connection between your work and the Ethiopian literary tradition of 'wax and gold' as well as its relation to the painted language symbols in your oeuvre?

WOSENE WORKE KOSROF
MEMOIR, 1999.

WWK: In my works from the early to mid-1980s, I often used 'wax and gold' to inspire me. In the Ethiopian literary tradition, poets, for example, could say something seemingly harmless in a verse, while the deeper meaning was a strong criticism of the government. That tradition is long and enduring – from imperial times to the present. But in the late 1980s, living in the USA, I became more direct in my paintings when working on themes that drew on my terrible memories of the DERG period: works, such as *Ethiopian Memoir*, *Witness*, *Night of the Red Sky*, *The Train*, and others that are now in museums and private collections. I also used more literal texts at that time, while now I let the script form themselves convey my feelings and thoughts. The script images have become 'my language' – my 'WordPlay' – that also now speak to viewers globally.

"...As an immigrant, I've always held travel as central to my art. I'm 'imprinted' by the new, the different, the strange, the elegant...Once back in my studio, I conjure these imprinted images and shape them into distorted and exaggerated script forms, unrecognizable even to readers of Amharic. The trove of new experiences elaborates my inner repertoire and changes the script forms, almost in representation of my expanded understanding of politics, migrations, space and place, and humanity itself. Life becomes art. Through my works, Amharic script has moved beyond its Ethiopian boundaries to become a global visual language, an international narrative, our story."

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KG: From 1980 to 1987 you developed your first series of work entitled *Graffiti Magic*, then *Africa: The New Alphabet* (88-94) and the *Color of Words* that you continue to work on up this day. How are these creations related to your extensive travels on the continent, in America and Europe?

WWK: You mention three of my earlier series of works. Since 2008, I have been working on the current series I call 'WordPlay'. Reflecting on the focus on my earlier series, I see that 'Graffiti Magic' was a series of bold works in which I was figuring out how to work with Amharic script forms. In 'Africa: The New Alphabet', I started expanding out from my Ethiopian roots into other African cultures by incorporating many pan-African motifs. My works had a distinct African focus, though I was living and working full time in the US. With 'Color of Words', I started focusing on innovative compositions of the script forms, and expanded my accustomed palette to use colors I once thought repellent. This series was very important, too, in that I began eliminating literal words in my works, and instead used the script images to create a strong visual narrative.

Now, with 'WordPlay', my focus is on mining the script images themselves, creating large works in black and white, with dashes of color, or in colors I haven't used together before, such as brown/burgundy and grey tones, or ochres and frozen moss greens. The script forms themselves have become my inspiration – they've become 'emboldened' on my canvases, expressing themselves in surprising ways and unusual color schemes.

KG: You have previously mentioned the mark your mother has had on your journey as an artist. How has your relationship with her influenced and shaped your poetic approaches to text and image regarding *Roots of Words III*?

WWK: My mother, who raised my brother and me as a single mom, was a singular force in my life. Although she always worked very hard, I grew up poor in the heart of a major African city. The irony too about my mother is, while I've worked with words almost my entire artistic career, my mother was illiterate. But she made sure early on that I went to church school to learn the sounds and script of Amharic. That was monumental!

Because my mother was illiterate, she could never read to me when I was a child; our interactions were verbal. She would chide me, guide me, sing to me, threaten me – so between us, language was the spoken word.



WOSENE WORKE KOSROF, *ROOTS OF WORDS III*, 2012.

Roots of Words III is an intense play of the forms of the language. In the middle section of the painting, the forms - moving dynamically against the white background - are almost a discernible conversation, recalling those years of conversations with my mother. You can hear the music of the forms, feel the air moving around them, see them almost giving birth to new forms, taste and savor their colors and spiciness. That's what occupies me when I work in the studio: how these script forms come alive.

KG: What other themes are you exploring in this work, in contrast or as a complement, to your other paintings from the *Color of Words* series, *Graffiti Magic* and/or *Africa: The New Alphabet* (88-99)?

WWK: I don't plan or sketch my paintings; I go where they take me. The canvas, colors and I are in a never-ending dialogue, with agreements and many disagreements. I listen carefully to them, I watch them coming forward on the canvas, and I follow them. At times, they follow me. I'm much more interested in the 'word/play' – how the script forms come to life on my canvas, and in the stories of the human drama they present.