

**MULUGETA TAFESSE**

Specially for UNSETTLED, Mulugeta Tafesse (b. 1960, Ethiopia) has created a new series of captivating paintings, called “The medicine man”, in homage to his mother, who passed away at the age of 91 in 2014. Investigating his personal history, the artist revisited treasured memories and transposed these moments onto canvas. Painting an intimate subject, these portraits pay tribute to the single mother who worked hard to support Tafesse in his dreams and ambitions to become an artist. Inspired by Milan Kundera’s novel *Immortality*, he continues to communicate with his mother with every brushstroke. By means of her portraits she stays in close connection with her son. Painting her portrait for the first time since she died was an intense experience. Every work forms part of a process of mourning, missing, and healing.

Tafesse shows his mother in her apartment in Addis Ababa where she spent the last years of her life. Vulnerable and practically immobile, her sequestered existence created a lasting and strong impression on the artist. In this new series of portraits, his mother’s isolation and psychological state are expressed through her posture and position within the interior. The reflective wooden floor increases the dramatic atmosphere and mirrors her fragile state. With these series Tafesse wishes to return the sacrifices she made for him; at the same time paying tribute to mothers in general. With this universal theme, the artist defies the typical categorizations, rejecting being framed as an African artist, as his work is the product of a synergy of cultures and idioms.

“Many people who see my work immediately try to make a connection with my roots, my Ethiopian origins. That sometimes bothers me. The last time I was in Amsterdam I went to the Rijksmuseum. There I studied Rembrandt, Van Eyck and other old masters; they are much more my frame of reference.”

The name of the series “The medicine man” refers to the secondary character in these paintings; the artist himself. He paints himself in the act of taking care of his mother. While he lived abroad as an internationally acclaimed artist, Tafesse hired caretakers who brought his mother medication and gave her the care he himself was not able to provide, only visiting her once every 1 or 2 years. Through his paintings Tafesse wants to recreate the memories of his beloved mother, but also to reshape the lost time with her, to express the wish he could have been nearby her in a time of need. By painting himself as the medicine man, he reconstructs the past into a desired state. Simultaneously, this motif skillfully plays with the colonial narrative of the black servant, copying the imagery of similar sculptures that used to welcome visitors at restaurants and other establishments. Tafesse has painted the apartment from his memories, including his mother’s furniture and decorations, thereby inscribing these works in a longstanding classical tradition of interior portraits.

Having stayed in Europe for a long time, Tafesse is inspired and motivated by the constant exposure to Western painters. He incorporates traces of Western cultural history in his own African roots. The experience of seeing virtuoso works from contemporary artists such as Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans pushed him to new heights. Classically trained, old masters such as Vermeer and Van Eyck instructed him about perspective and the geometric division of a space, resulting in an unsettled contemporary take on vanishing points. Whistler's and Rembrandt's portrait of their respective mothers preceded him in his subject choice. The expressionism of artists such as Monet and Caillebotte, impelled him to his own subjective take on the world, without compromise and in full freedom of self-expression. Starting from a strong inner self, the artist sees himself as "a realist with an expressionist heart". Tafesse's canvases are deliberate in their use of space and ephemeral light. His palette, whether he is working in oil, tempera or acrylic is typically muted and soft, drawing the viewer closer to an intimate dialogue with the works. In his portraits, the imagining of the figurative and realistic becomes a suggesting, creating unsettling yet beautiful evocations of lost moments.

Tafesse Mulugeta graduated at the Fine Arts School of Addis Ababa in 1980, where he shortly taught painting before obtaining his Master of Arts at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1989. He continued his postgraduate studies in painting, between 1992 and 1995, at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts (HISK) in Antwerp. Since then, he has been living in Belgium, with frequent stays in Addis Ababa. In 2012 he received his PhD cum laude from the University of La Laguna in Tenerife. He has written and lectured extensively on modern and contemporary Ethiopian and Eastern African art. Tafesse's paintings have been exhibited in Belgium, Mexico, USA, The Netherlands, Spain, Germany, France, Senegal, Tanzania, Switzerland, and Lithuania. In 2014, he was a R.A.T. artist in residence in Mexico City, and in 2020 artist in residence at the Frans Masereel Center, Kasterlee Belgium. He will have a solo museum show at the Modern Art Museum Gebre Kristos Desta in Addis Ababa later this year.

### **SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2018 Frivolous Marks, Lela Art Gallery, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- 2018 Polémica Personal, Agencia de Tránsitos Culturales Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain
- 2016 Wereldfeest Ondersteboven, Domelhoff Cultural Center, Neerpelt, Belgium
- 2016 Inside Track, Lela Art Gallery, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- 2016 BAD, Belgium Art and Design, Eskimo Fabriek, Gent, Belgium
- 2014 Start to Jazz, Kunstenplatform WARP, Sint Niklaas, Belgium
- 2014 Alliance Ethio-Française, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- 2012 Gallery 24 with Etiye Dimma Poulsen, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2012 Terra firma, Ruimte Morguen with Ermias Kifleyesus, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2012 When Words Fail, Bekris Gallery, San Francisco, USA



2011 Beyond Axum, Bekris Gallery, San Francisco, USA  
2010 X Factor, Laphto Centre, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
2008 Domelhoff Cultural Center, Neerpelt, Belgium  
2006 Leopoldburg Cultural Centre, Leopoldburg, Belgium  
2006 Gallery 23, assisted by Felix de Rooy, Frank Händler and Diana Elshout, Amsterdam  
2005 Anka Humma, Brussels, Belgium  
2003 Back Bencher, Alliance Ethio-Française, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
2002 Art and Advice, Gallery, Hasselt, Belgium  
2001 De Branderij, Antwerp, Belgium  
1999 Alliance Française, Addis, Ethiopia  
1996 Open Hands, St. Bernardus Cultural Center, Antwerpen, Belgium  
1994 VUB Gallery, Vrij Universiteit Brussels, Brussels, Belgium  
1989 Gallery Sredets, Ministry of Culture, Sofia, Bulgaria  
1982 City Hall Gallery, the Municipality of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
1980 Alliance Ethio-Française, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

#### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

2021 Bolero Art Group 10th anniversary, in different locations, France  
2019 FOMA, Genk, Belgium  
2018 Funny, How Art Makes You Wander, Morbee Gallery, Knokke, Belgium  
2017 BOLERO, EOS Gallery, Athens, Greece  
2017 BOLERO, KIOSK, Geneva  
2017 Open door day, NICC/Studio Start, Antwerpen, Belgium  
2016 Gallery Resonance, Plovdiv, Bulgaria  
2016 BAD Belgium Art and Design Fair, 1st edition, Gent, Belgium  
2016 Imagine Europe: In Search of New Narratives, BOZAR, Brussels, Belgium  
2013 Leaving for a living, A&A Gallery, Hasselt, Belgium  
2013 Celebrating Pan Africanism through Artistic Expression, Addis Ababa University  
2012 BOLERO, Bangalore, Indonesia; Galerie VOSS, Dortmund, Germany, Beijing, China  
2012 BOZAR initiated Africa touring exhibitions, Belgium  
2012 Lela Art Gallery, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
2011 Neo Escape, Atelier Gallery, Addis, Ethiopia  
2010 BOLERO, Addis Ababa, Laphto Centre, Ethiopia  
2010 Kunsten Route-Euro Park, Belgium  
2010 Impetus, Atelier Fine Arts Gallery, Addis, Ethiopia  
2009 East African Biennial, Tanzania  
2009 Sport: Fait(es) Divers, Mechelen, Belgium  
2008 Ecouter et Entendre, Gallery Kevin Conru, Brussels, Belgium  
2008 Art Reflecting The World, Netherlands Institute of International Relations



2006 Amandla, City Library, African and Belgian artists, Antwerp, Belgium  
2005 Ethiopian Cultural Event, France  
2004 Montigny-Dakart, Montigny Charlerois, Belgium  
2004 Eclipse, Bornem/Puurs/Willebroek CC, Belgium  
2003 23 sins – Artists book, Triennale, Vilnius, Italy  
2002 Dakar Biennale, Senegal  
2001 Dessins Choisir, Paris, France  
1999 Print as Fiction, Gallery Roger Van Daele, Antwerp, Belgium  
1997 African Wind, De Vierkante Zaal, Belgium  
1996 Ethiopia: People, Culture and Art, African Museum of Tervuren, Brussels, Belgium  
1995 De Sokkel Van David Teniers, Elzenfield Cultural Centre, Antwerp, Belgium  
1989 Small Format Paintings, the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Sliven, Bulgaria

#### **EDUCATION & RESIDENCIES**

2020 Residency at Frans Masereel Centrum, NICC and Ecole Mondiale, Kasterlee, Belgium  
2014 Residency by Intercambio y proyecto TRUEQUE, R.A.T., Mexico City  
2012 PhD. (Cum-Laude), La Laguna University, La Laguna, Tenerife  
2001 Lecturer, Hasselt Visual Arts Academy, Belgium  
1995 Lecturer, Fine Arts School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
1995 National Higher Institute for Fine Arts, post graduate degree, Antwerp, Belgium  
1989 Higher Institute of Fine Arts, (Nikolai Pavlovich Art Academy), M.A., Sofia, Bulgaria  
1980 Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design, Ethiopia