Artist Aïda Muluneh: 'We were at the mercy of foreign photographers'

Her bright, surreal works and her new photo-festival reclaim African agency over depictions of the continent

Aida Muluneh's 'The Blind Gaze' (2021) © Aida Muluneh's 'The Blind Gaze' (2021)

On the streets of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Aïda Muluneh's photographs are popular with local businesses: printed from the internet and placed in windows as makeshift adverts for everything from hair salons to tour operators. "I think it's hilarious — they could have chosen a photo of Beyoncé, but they chose to take my strange work because they saw something in it," says the Ethiopian-born artist and entrepreneur, speaking on Zoom from Abidjan, Ivory Coast. "I usually call them up and tell them not to do it again — but that's when you know you've reached people, when you've made an impact as an artist — when the work goes to every corner."

It's easy to see the street appeal of Muluneh's art. The crisp geometries of her choreographed scenes of female figures who have their skin painted with block colours are indebted to the bold graphic style of 20th-century west African studio photography, but with a surrealist twist. They also incorporate Ethiopian symbols, ancient African traditions such as body painting, landscapes and personal stories from her own family.

In her latest solo exhibition at Efie Gallery in Dubai, *The Art of Advocacy*, there are striking images from her 2018 commission for NGO WaterAid, shot on the salt flats of Dallol in Ethiopia, famous for its hydrothermal springs; the

barren backdrop contrasts with majestic female figures inspired by women Muluneh saw carrying water.

'The Road of Glory Yemen' (2020) © Aïda Muluneh

'The Rain of Fire Vietnam' (2020) © Aïda Muluneh

Other works in Muluneh's signature shades of canary yellow, pillar-box red and electric blue reflect concerns about conflict, disease and famine, but in a vastly different language from the images of Africa — depictions of starving bodies and land decimated by violence and nature — she was exposed to growing up abroad. "We were at the mercy of foreign photographers," she says.

Muluneh and her mother left Ethiopia in 1979 for Yemen, then Cyprus and eventually Canada in search of "a better place to live. I understood very well the power of the image — but the image the system was pushing out there didn't match with the version of Ethiopia I knew. Many of us [Africans] felt a sense of urgency — not just to show the peachy side of Africa, but to create balance."

The Art of Advocacy surveys how Muluneh, 48, uses photography to raise awareness about issues affecting many African people today — from drought to tropical disease — but with dignity and imagination. "Photography, regardless of where you come from or your economic status, is an integral part of our society," she says. "The image is the strongest thing, it's not politicians talking to people."

Photographer Aïda Muluneh: 'What's the point of art if you're not able to go beyond the comfort zone of your own community' © Mario Epanya/Efie Gallery, Dubai

Her early forays into photography were first encouraged by her grandfather, who was in Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie's air force, as well as being a painter and poet. After graduating from Howard University in Washington, DC, in 2000, Muluneh worked as a photojournalist at the Washington Post, but eventually felt restricted. "I believe in photojournalism, and I still teach it — but it came to a point where it wasn't enough for what I wanted to say." She quit her job, and in 2007 returned to Addis Ababa. "I felt passionately about readjusting how the world saw us, and more importantly, how we saw ourselves. We're not just sitting here waiting for people to save us."

Creating her own work is only a part of Muluneh's project. She has played a significant role in the local photo-festival and biennale scene, which includes Bamako Encounters in Mali and Lagos Photo in Nigeria; these have stimulated the continent's art scene, in the absence of institutions and government support. Muluneh was the founder of east Africa's first international photography event, Addis Foto Fest (AFF), which launched in 2010. She says she has witnessed a rise in the number of African photographers since the first edition of AFF, which had only five from the continent out of 34 participants; in the 2018 edition, there were 36 out of 152. The festival will return in 2024.

‘Knowing the Way to Tomorrow’ (2018) © Aïda Muluneh

‘Burden of the Day’ (2018) © Aïda Muluneh

Muluneh attributes the surge in interest in photography she has witnessed on the continent to social media, which has given a new generation "access to an international community to be able to discover things without the gatekeepers keeping it locked up". Her response has been to create an AFF spin-off, Africa Foto Fair, which launched in December 2022 in Abidjan, where she moved in 2019. It is the first international event devoted to photography in the Ivory Coast, she says, and the first fair to expand into a second African country.

The international photographers participating showcase various approaches to photography, but with a focus on those visualising social justice, from the award-winning Ethiopian documentary photographer Mulugeta Ayene to

conceptual photographic artist Meseret Argaw to Pablo Albarenga, known for his work on indigenous land rights across Latin America.

As part of the business model of the fair, Muluneh has also opened a high-quality printing facility — the first of its kind in the Ivory Coast. All editions sold at the fair will be printed at the Africa Print House, Abidjan, and her ambition is that one day all the printing for African photographers will be done on the continent.

In July 2023, Tate Modern will mount its largest-ever exhibition surveying photography from the African continent, *A World in Common*. Muluneh is among the artists included. "These collective shows at international institutions are important, but it's even more interesting to be included in shows that have nothing to do with race, nationality or ethnicity — when we don't only have to showcase where we come from."

‘The More Loving One Part 2’ (2016) © Aïda Muluneh

‘The Sorrows We Bear’ (2018) © Aïda Muluneh

Capturing the rallying spirit of her work, in March Muluneh will unveil an installation with Public Art Fund, taking over 330 bus shelters in New York, Boston and Abidjan simultaneously with a series of 12 new images, inspired by the Ethiopian writer Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin's poem "This is where I am", which portrays a bloody yet hopeful image of Ethiopia in the first months of the civil war that began in 1974 — the year Muluneh was born.

"You have to confront people with the work — what's the point of art if you're not able to go beyond the comfort zone of your own community or surroundings? I think that's the power of photography."

'The Art of Advocacy', to February 23, efiegallery.com