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The Dreamers Issue

An image of change

Aïda Muluneh's solo exhibition at Dubai's Efie Gallery tackles topics of advocacy through surrealist photography



WORDS BY AIDAN IMANOVA
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EFIE GALLERY DUBAI

There is no mistaking the striking images of Ethiopian photographer Aïda Muluneh, which typically depict female figures with faces bearing masks, paint and intricate patterns, dressed in chromatic garments. While one may assume that Muluneh's female protagonists are a representation of a surrealist world of fantasy, that would only be half true. Her visual expression is often a reflection of her own personal experiences and explores both the realities and fictions of post-colonial Africa, while drawing the viewer towards topics surrounding human rights, the environment, conflict and health.

Muluneh also explores the African female identity within the colonial experience while interrogating the foreign gaze on African women and advocating for the development of photography in the continent and its impact in shaping cultural perceptions.

"Aesthetically [my photographs represent] a different approach on representing social issues in Africa without the western cliché that continues to promote the one-sided story," she explains. "I am utilising my creativity to express topics of interest through a different visual language. The basis of my work is rooted in realities that are expressed through an abstract visual form."

Having creatively directed Efie Gallery's solo exhibition titled 'Shard Song', showcasing the work of pioneering Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, Muluneh's own solo show at the gallery, titled 'The Art of Advocacy', is the continuation of an impactful collaboration, part of the gallery's aim in representing and advancing both

established and emerging artists from the African continent and its diaspora. "We as a family have long admired Aïda, both as an artist and an advocate, and her ethos aligns with the gallery's vision – she is innovative and challenges norms while respecting traditions, [as] evidenced through the number of initiatives that she has found, including Addis Foto Fest," say the founders of Efie Gallery, run by



Aïda Muluneh

Photography by Mario Epanya



The Blind Gaze, 2021



*The More Loving One
Part 2, 2016*

Valentina, Kobi and Kwame Mintah. Much like its name suggests, the collection at Efie Gallery – on show until 24 February 2023 – showcases commissioned works on the topics of advocacy relating to water scarcity, health and the plight of war. It is also the first time the artist is displaying a new piece of work in which she explores a new process of hand-painting acrylic on photographs.

Also on display are works from her 'Water Life' (2018) series – commissioned by Water Aid – through which she addresses the plight of water access in rural regions and its impact on liberation, health, sanitation and education. Set in the arid salt flats of Dallol in northern Ethiopia, Muluneh draws from her own experience of regions where the transportation of water to various households falls

on the women who do so by travelling on foot. The works advocate the urgent supporting of clean water in the rural regions of Africa.

Another series, 'The Crimson Echo' (2021) – commissioned by The END Fund – highlights the impact of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) on gender equity, mental health, mobility and access to resources. Featuring insects and abstracted body parts, as well as elements of Ethiopian body ornamentation used to honour traditional knowledge and beliefs across Africa, the works look to dismantle bleak representations of the continent while provoking the viewer to question whom these diseases affect and why.

"My approach is to shed light on social issues that evoke questions in the viewer on [their] causes," Muluneh concludes. ■