“Words Unbound: Reflections on the Art of Wosene Worke Kosrof”

Born in Ethiopia in 1950, Wosene Worke Kosrof is a contemporary artist of international acclaim. Best known for his inventive renderings of the Amharic script—one of the oldest scripts indigenous to Africa—Wosene is a master translator of human experience. His richly textured, lyrical paintings allow us to “see” the sounds, smells, rhythms and spaces that surround and inspire him. Be it the improvisational impulse of American jazz, the purgant swell of roasting coffee beans, the lifting sound of an Amharic prayer, or the psychic violence of political oppression, Wosene’s art takes us beyond the canvas into a deeply personal exploration of, in his words, the “drama of human life.”

Academically trained as a fine artist in both Ethiopia and the United States, Wosene was among the first African contemporary artists to gain critical attention on the international art scene. However, having lived outside of Ethiopia since the late 1970s, the artist draws from all of the places he has called home, and as such, resists fixed and facile labels that characterize him or his art as essentially “African.” Instead, it is his ability to shuttle category, and to challenge conventional distinctions between the familiar and the foreign, tradition and modernity, that has made Wosene’s work compelling to such wide-ranging audiences.

The plasticity of the written word—particularly of his native Amharic—has fascinated Wosene for over 30 years. As a young art student in Addis in the early 70s, his first experiments with abstraction were inspired by the rich iconographic and written traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, where word and image are deployed to create aesthetically compelling objects of devotion and healing. In Wosene’s hands, however, words became images, as he stretched and inverted their letters, and scattered them across the canvas. Discovering this slip-page between the visual and literal dimensions of script amounted to a kind of epiphany that revealed to him the aesthetic, sensory, even kinetic potential of the written word unbound.

At the canvas, Wosene interacts with his letters, coaxing them forth, his process is iterative, continuously building, wiping, spraying water, dabbing and smudging the layers of paint until the characters “find themselves” in the emerging composition. In this way, his paintings visualize depth in both line and space—dimensions that are key to his aesthetic. Exploring the temporal and spatial dimensions of script has led Wosene to experiment with their deployment in constructions of place and identity. Indeed, as a transnational artist, his sense of place is necessarily fluid, shaped at once by attachment and the resilience of moving on. Thus the themes of movement, memory and place-making are prominent in the selected artworks.

The very nature of Wosene’s work—his visual vocabulary, his cartographic moves across time and place, his “cross-circuiting” the senses—is ties to the visual power and versatility of language. At once abstract and narrative, Wosene’s paintings, in his words, “create a visible, interacting surface—like an icon available to everyone; it allows them to have dialog, to take them into memory.” But like all “word play,” not everything is knowable, nor should it be. This is in part the joy of Wosene’s paintings; they present us with a challenge to look into the art, feel its effect, and to watch what happens.

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You are cordially invited to join us for a dialogue among the artist, professor of art Roy Nydorf, and poet Douglas Smith, Tuesday, March 20, 7:30 p.m., in the Art Gallery, Hege Library.