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Helina Metaferia, Home | Free, 2017, Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA, Installation View, Courtesy of the Artist and Museum of African Diaspora

July 19th, 2017

## Helina Metaferia in conversation

**Performa's Lydia Brawner talks with artist Helina Metaferia**

*The sculptural pieces in Helina Metaferia's recent "Home | Free" at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, utilized common home building materials : a huge burst of wooden slats filled one of the walls, neat stacks of bricks and paving stones on the floor, and, my favorite, small, neat shelves full of door knobs, hinges, sand, soil, wine, locks, and keys. The show was dominated by a large projection of Metaferia performing in Washington D.C., Addis Ababa, Oakland, and New York*

*City while thick, curving charcoal lines filled the remaining wall space. The effect was simultaneously riotous and, with its muted color palette and familiar components, austere. Like the bulk of Metaferia's current work, the show explores notions of home in our current border-obsessed, geopolitical moment... building it, losing it, and longing for it. Earlier this summer, Metaferia and I spoke over email. -L.B.*

Lydia Brawner: *As I understand it, your recent show "Home | Free" was one of the first performance-based shows ever at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD); I'm curious if you thought about that as you were constructing it. Perhaps just knowing from our conversations that you are very interested in institutional performance and institutional audiences...*

Helina Metaferia: I only scheduled one live performance during the exhibition. The rest was composed of ephemera in the form of video performances, installation, photography, drawing, and assemblage. I wanted to develop an interdisciplinary exhibition that was rooted in my performance without relying on my body being physically present during every moment that the museum was open. Knowing that this was the first performance driven exhibition at MoAD, I wanted to make sure that the work was accessible to a wide range of museum-goers. My goal was to bridge the gap between those who were contemporary art savvy and those who were new to it. I didn't want to undermine the audience's ability to work to find meaning, but I was concerned about making the work accessible to multiple audiences.

*Do you usually think of your audiences as you make work?*

Of course. I am aware of the differences between presenting performances in public spaces, institutional spaces, alternative performance venues, etc. Either way, people are generally giving up one of the most valuable resources they have, their time, and investing that in experiencing my work. I am conscious of that investment because without it I don't know how my work could exist. They become a part of the work.

*Can you elaborate on the title a little bit? It seems to me like a very elegant encapsulation of some of the themes in your current body of work.*

What's a home—be it the land of origin or a newly constructed home—without freedom? At the root of my work is the desire to see marginalized and oppressed people find empowerment and liberation. The combination of the two words was a nod toward rooting oneself in a place while demanding equality, even in a homeland that has politicized blackness and brownness and has equated this with oppression, historically and presently. “Home | Free” feels like a hope, a possibility, a journey, a small seed.

*How did you come to performance? I feel like this is a cliché to say to performers, but often your work strikes me as painterly. Or with something like your An Irrevocable Condition in 2015, where you are drawing on the walls in the performance...*

I was a painter for many years, painting and drawing solo female bodies in motion. At some point, I decided that my own body could suffice, and the actions in the paintings could be produced in real time and space. Eventually my art developed from illustrating experiences two dimensionally to creating experiences through process-based performances.

*What is that process?*

Most of the work is improvisational. Sometimes I write or sketch a few ideas, but they always change in the studio or in a site developing work. Often there is extensive research that I am doing that is parallel to my practice. The research provides written language or deepens the content, but it isn't until I begin moving that the art begins. Then it becomes about playing, having fun, and getting out of my head. The research, writing, and sketching informs the art practice, but it does not substitute studio or site-based experimentation.

*I know that you also teach. Does this work its way into your practice?*

The exchanges between teacher/student or performer/audience provide a sort of vitality that feels necessary for my practice. I consider teaching a sort of performance. As a teacher, I build a structure in the form of a syllabus and allow several unknown variables to enter, including the energy of the students and the complexities of group dynamics. I don't believe the teacher has all the answers, but hopefully some of the questions that help students find their own answers. Similarly, as an artist, I develop a structure in the form of a performance and the energy of the audience helps determine the flow.

*You mentioned the word belief...from what I know of your work, there seems to be a strong spiritual component.*

A lot of my work is ritualistic and holds pseudo-spiritual contexts.

*Pseudo-spiritual? What do you mean?*

For example, in my recent exhibition at MoAD, all of the work had titles that allude to spirituality. For this particular body of work, I was considering how people deal with times of intense political and social strife. In November 2016, when our current president became elected, like many others I was feeling literally and figuratively sick to my stomach and semi-depressed. At this point, I was in the studio, working on "Home | Free." It occurred to me that historically people have found refuge and led revolutionary movements during even more treacherous political conditions through two things: social solidarity and faith. Although they aren't enough to create sustainable action, they can ground one in a belief system that can fuel resistance. I am aware that both social solidarity and faith can also be used to form oppression as much as it can be used to promote liberation. However, in Home | Free, I wanted to consider how spirituality and unity could ignite and mobilize a revolutionary shift in forced migration and gentrification.

*So much of what I've seen of your work deals with our contemporary moment of forced migration...*

Yes, and sadly, I feel like this will always be a timely issue. I am interested in the many forms of migration that have occurred globally, but also in the United States, be it the traumas of the transatlantic slave

trade, recent immigration waves, bans on immigration, the notion of the “New American,” and gentrification. I suppose a lot of these interests began when I started investigating my own ancestral lineage, my parents' immigration from Ethiopia to the United States, and its impact on my identity. Growing up, I developed an inherited nostalgia for a country that I had never lived in, Ethiopia, and thought that this romanticized desire for a homeland that I never knew was complicated and interesting enough to make work about. Through casual conversation and formal research, I realized how common this “diasporic hybridity” is in many first-generation Americans. From there I began to explore all the ways that migration impacts one’s psyche and sense of home and belonging, and the projects are continuing to expand.

My mother, Maignet Shifferraw, and my father, Getachew Metaferia, were both academics and very involved in Ethiopian politics as expats. They had written books on the migratory history of Ethiopians living in America. As disinterested as I was in their research as a kid (as most children of academics can be), that stuff started to creep up in my artistic practice without me being conscious of it. My mother passed away last year, and now I am even happier to continue some of her research interests in the form of art, as I see it as a way for me to continue my bond with her.

*It seems like with performances like Weaving Capitals you are physically bringing places, DC and Addis Ababa, together, or maybe, showing the ways that they aren't a seamless fit with each other.*

Washington, DC has the largest populations of Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia. It was where I was born, and I am among the first generation of Ethiopian-Americans. Being the nation’s capital, the DC area symbolically and literally had a significant effect on my upbringing, as well as my social-political and artistic interests.

In *Weaving Capitals* I traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Washington, DC and gathered maps from both locations. I then began to weave those maps in a weaving compound on the side of a public

road in Addis Ababa, creating a wearable sculpture from the maps while studying the craft of weaving from local weavers. It was a way for me to weave a sense of identity for myself while also critiquing what gets separated as “highbrow art” and craft.

I then used the wearable sculpture created in *Weaving Capitals* in a separate performance that I did called *Everything But The Spice*, where I became this diasporic avatar that recited different stories of Ethiopian-Americans living in Ethiopia and abroad. Each story contradicted each other and began to feel more complicated in its sentiments on home and cultural hybridity. I like how one performance often leads to another performance. There is a lot of overlapping and foreshadowing in my work that I don't always predict.

*I know you've worked with performance artist Maria Magdalena Campos Pons. I'm curious if aspects of her work have influenced you at all?*

Spirituality and themes of ancestry and lineage had been my interest for some time, yet I was struggling to find a way to bridge these notions with academia and contemporary art. During my MFA, I worked with Magda as her student, thesis advisee, and teaching assistant. She also invited me to perform with her, in fact, my first public performance was performing alongside her at the Carrie Mae Weems retrospective in the Guggenheim. I later performed with her at the 12th Havana Biennial and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

As a former student of color, and now a current faculty member of color, I realize the importance of modeling what is possible for students. I am now very clear on my artistic path, but being a student of color in a predominantly white art school can feel vulnerable and challenging on many levels. What kept me focused and grounded was finding an artistic lineage and mentorship from Magda and other faculty at Tufts. That form of mentorship and professional experiences are what I hope to pass on to my students when possible.



I once had a professor who crossed out the terms “spirituality,” “healing,” and “metaphysics” in an artist statement that I wrote for a semester review. The work I had been making at the time looked to Ethiopian “healing scrolls,” which is a practice that stems from medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Christian traditions. The professor told me that I should know better, that I was educated in the west and there was no room for irrational, unquantifiable language such as this in academia or art. That felt a bit harsh, not to mention racist, as most rationalism promoted in academia seeks to separate itself from what is considered “low brow” and “primitive” or “third world” practices. Like many students of color, I needed to work with a faculty member who could help me articulate my interests and who could understand the contexts I work in. Seeing Magda’s work modeled for me empowered me to make the work I wanted to make in the world.

*I’ve told you before about my fascination with the kinds of reactions that work that deals with, what we call, spirituality often gets. I’m thinking especially of reviews of the Ana Mendieta show at the Hirshhorn in 2004 that said, I’m paraphrasing but, basically, the work was incredible, as long as you ignored her and any of her religious or spiritual references, that she should, as your professor said, have “known better.”*

Yeah. As I said, racist and sexist. Here we go. Same story, different characters. There is a history of colonialism and patriarchy that has been the framework for suppressing spiritually-inspired art and practices, and then chastising people for those practices. Some white men in the history of modern and contemporary art have gotten away with contextualizing their work in a way that alludes to the spiritual (Wassily Kandinsky and Joseph Beuys come to mind), but rarely women and especially women of color. There usually is a presumption of naïveté.

You can’t analyze your way through art. The soul that’s in “soul music,” for example, isn’t brought about theoretically, it’s felt and intuited. I get that people don’t want to have the religion/spirituality conversation in art and academia because it isn’t quantifiable. Or they feel like your beliefs should be kept private. But we can do and talk about anything else in art--especially performance--no leaf unturned.

Ana Mendieta is, of course, a strong influence for my work. As well as Betye Saar and Alison Saar. I listened to Betye's audio recordings of lectures when I was at Skowhegan last summer and her exhibition, "Red Time," really influenced the making of "Home | Free." That and Mark Rothko's Seagram murals. And, all of those artists speak openly about the spiritual references in their work; I am no longer waiting for my pass to speak freely about it being in mine.

*Lydia Brawner is the Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at Performa and assistant editor of Performa Magazine. She holds a Ph.D. from NYU's department of Performance Studies.*

*Helina Metaferia completed her MFA at Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She has exhibited in solo and group shows at venues such as the Museum of African Diaspora (San Francisco, CA), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), and Galeria Labirynt (Lublin, Poland). Her artist residencies include Ox-Bow, Yaddo, a full fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center, and an upcoming residency at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in the fall of 2017. Helina was a 2015-2017 AICAD Teaching Fellow at San Francisco Art Institute, and is currently a 2017-2019 Hamiltonian Artists Fellow at Hamiltonian Gallery in Washington, DC.*



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