

The past, present and future of Ethiopia by artist Aïda Muluneh

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Photographer Aïda Muluneh's "The past, the present and the future" [Courtesy of Aïda Muluneh Studio]

By Aïda Muluneh

Naima Morelli

March 4, 2020 at 1:30 pm

Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh's striking photograph titled "The past, the present and the future" depicts three women with blue skin; it is extremely evocative, and reminiscent of the painting "The three ages of Woman" by Gustav Klimt. The photo contains pop-culture elements, calling to mind the comic book character Mystique from *X-Men*, or Neytiri from the movie *Avatar*.



Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh [Courtesy of Aïda Muluneh]

Whether these references are intentional or not, Muluneh is no stranger to pop culture. The artist references another Marvel comic book-turned-movie — *Black Panther* — as a visionary work representing so-called "Afrofuturism". To her, the movie borrowed a great deal not only from Africa but also from her native Ethiopia, a country that is still viewed through a stereotypical lens.

She is aware that many people in the West, as well as in the Middle East, have only a partial image of Africa. "They see only part of the present," she points out, "and they are not able to imagine the future of the continent."

Since her earliest days Aïda Muluneh has been committed to showing global audiences some past, present and future aspects of Ethiopia and Africa. This is why she was chosen by the Africa Institute in Sharjah to speak to Middle Eastern audiences about her country, through a two-part show.



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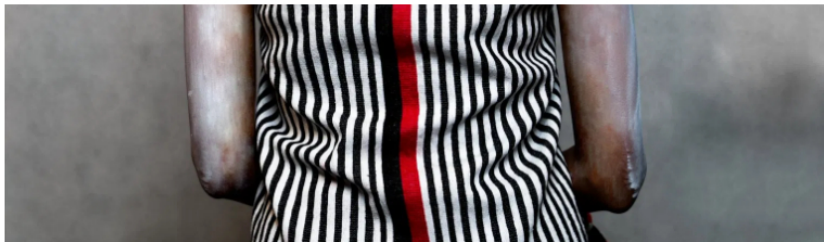
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A work of art by Aida Muluneh at the Addis Foto Fest 2018 festival
[Aida Muluneh Studio]

The first part is “Aida Muluneh’s Homebound: A Journey in Photography”. It will chronicle her journey as an artist and photojournalist. The second part, curated by the artist herself, will reflect on her journey as a founder and director Addis Foto Fest, which she established in 2010 in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

This exhibition will be the centrepiece of the 2020 focus of the Africa Institute, themed “Ethiopia:



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A work of art by Aida Muluneh at the Addis Foto Fest 2018 festival
[Aida Muluneh Studio]

Returning to her birthplace in 2007 — after living in Yemen, Cyprus, England, Canada and the US — was a turning point for her artistic inspiration. She was finally able to give shape to an Ethiopia

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was a turning point for her artistic inspiration. She was finally able to give shape to an Ethiopia which up to that point was just imagined and dreamed. Today she is considered as a photographer with one foot in the West and one foot in the African continent.

Muluneh started in photojournalism, but she leaned more and more towards the arts when her editors encouraged her to make the switch. It's a bit like Isabelle Allende — who started writing for magazines but was advised by Neruda to devote herself to fiction, as her imagination was best fitting the fictional realm. For Aida, it was quite an intuitive decision: "My main thing wasn't about making the decision, it was about what I felt comfortable in," she reflects.

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And the art dimension suited her well. While photojournalism tends to present images that shock the viewer, the kind of visual art that Muluneh is doing lures the viewer with a catchy look. There is a shocking layer, but this is revealed only upon closer inspection.

Inequality, immigration, prejudice, orthodoxy, ethics, colonialism and slavery are themes tackled through bright, bold colours and fascinating figures, with a reference to the artefacts, clothing and wall paintings in Ethiopian Orthodox churches. This is on top of embracing pop culture.

Ethiopian photographers

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Ethiopian photographers



*A work of art by Aida Muluneh at the Addis Foto Fest 2018 festival
[Aida Muluneh Studio]*

On an international level, she notes, the photo market is still male-dominated, and the Western gaze is still the prevalent voice for stories. That's why Muluneh's experience as a frequent jury member, as well as curator and educator, showed her that there is a need for more diversity, allowing different voices to step into the limelight.

Helping Africa's artistic community to grow, as well as shedding light on the complex histories within Africa, Aida Muluneh's work shows us that the future of Ethiopia, and its relationship with the Middle East, is still unwritten. And, perhaps, still un-photographed.

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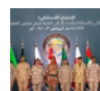
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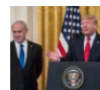
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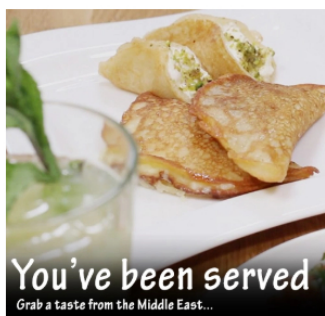
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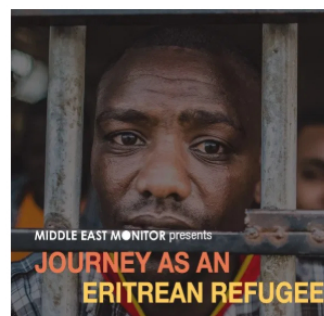


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