

*Tête-Bêche: Abbas Akhavan & Merikokeb Berhanu*

16 Feb–23 Mar 2024

55 Walker

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Bortolami is pleased to announce a two-artist exhibition by Merikokeb Berhanu and Abbas Akhavan, opening February 16th at 55 Walker. The exhibition presents new artwork by both artists, alongside a selection of sculptures and paintings produced over the past decade.

Merikokeb Berhanu's abstract paintings are matrices of embryos, microchips, and cells—biospheres containing worlds nested within worlds. In rich cobalt blues and burnt siennas, her forms fall, drip, and pulse within a shared bed, the viewer's vantage resting impossibly at the cross-section of this environment's crust. The paintings on view hail from two periods in the artist's production: from the time in which she was still living in Ethiopia, and after her move to the United States in Maryland. Hieroglyphic impressions appear in the latter work, like embedded computer processors in clotted surfaces, indicating an ecosystem in which nature and human invention are enmeshed.

In a series of recent sculptures, Abbas Akhavan uses materials such as tropical flora, tempered glass, water, plaster, and snail mucin to produce scenes for events which have already elapsed or are in the process of transformation, sometimes to seemingly great consequence. Viewers take on speculative positions, asked to reconstruct histories through indexical clues – a found stick, cast bronze along with other found objects, loosely indicating what has transpired. In *spill* (2020), we are presented with a mound of shattered tempered glass interlaced with tropical plants. The viridescent green blankets recall green-screen technology, compelling us to project possible settings for the wreckage. Injury, conservation, wreckage, and recovery are some of the ideas that take form through carefully chosen materials.

*Tête-bêche*, the title of the exhibition, is a 19th-century printing style in which two books or images are connected "head to tail," either intentionally or through error. Books bound in this manner combine two texts, often by different authors, back-to-back and flipped upside down so that one must turn the object 180 degrees to read in full. Mirroring this format, the exhibition proposes two artists' works as an interconnected set of objects and their respective modes of making and viewing the world as a parallel series of inversions.

Abbas Akhavan's work ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video, sculpture and performance. The direction of his research has been deeply influenced by the specificity of the sites where he works: the architectures that house them, the economies that surround them, and the people that frequent them. The domestic sphere, which he explores as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, has been an ongoing area of study in his practice. More recent works have wandered into spaces and species just outside the home: the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes.

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Recent solo exhibitions include Copenhagen Contemporary & Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (2023); Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2022); Chisenhale Gallery, London (2021); the CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco (2019). Recent group exhibitions include Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2024); 14th Gwangju Biennale (2023); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2022); Liverpool Biennial (2018); SALT Galata, Istanbul (2017); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2016). Akhavan received his MFA from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (2006), and his BFA from Concordia University, Montreal (2004). Residencies include Fogo Island Arts, Canada (2019, 2016, 2013); Atelier Calder, France (2017); and Flora ars+natura, Colombia (2015). He is the recipient of the Fellbach Triennial Award (2017); Sobey Art Award (2015); Abraaj Group Art Prize (2014); and the Berliner Kunstpreis (2012).

Merikokeb Berhanu (b. 1977, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) received her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Addis Ababa University, Alle School Fine Arts and Design in 2002, where she studied painting under the tutelage of a generation of Ethiopian modernist painters, including Tadesse Mesfin. Following her graduation, Merikokeb and her contemporaries founded an artist-run studio and exhibition space called the Nubia Studio (2004) with the goal of increasing their visibility and long-term career opportunities in a region where the arts have historically been under-supported. The next fifteen years were spent quietly developing her work, crafting her idiosyncratic visual language that toes the line between pure abstraction and recognisable form. Merikokeb's immigration to Maryland, USA in 2017 marked a time of sudden and intense change in all aspects of her life, a shift that is nowhere more evident than in her paintings. This is evidenced by the inclusion of more vibrant hues and new symbols – a circuit board structure, the skeletal remains of fish – began to emerge throughout Merikokeb's work as she grappled with the implications of a society estranged from nature.

Merikokeb has featured in several European group shows and presentations, including *A World Grows Within*, Addis Fine Art, London (2023), *Where Cloudy Waters Collide*, Pippy Houldsworth, London, UK (2022), and *From Modern to Contemporary: Artists from the Horn of Africa and Diaspora*, CFHILL, Stockholm (2021). Merikokeb was included in the *Milk of Dreams*, The 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy (2022). Her work is featured in *Making Their Mark*, curated by Cecilia Alemani, Shah Garg Foundation, New York (2023), and *Ethiopia at the Crossroads*, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (2023).