

Ficre Ghebreyesus

Bury Street, SW1

14 March – 10 May 2025

Modern Art is delighted to announce an exhibition of work by the late Eritrean-born American artist Ficre Ghebreyesus. This is Ghebreyesus's first solo exhibition in the UK.

Like a reoccurring dream that sears the mind of its dreamer, motifs and compositions are repeated throughout Ghebreyesus's painting oeuvre. Often, bright landscapes or seascapes emerge from an otherwise abstract set of forms on the canvas. On occasion we encounter views of travellers confronting the natural world. In one work, a little girl walks towards a brightly coloured apple tree in an otherwise abstracted landscape. In another, a mountain range dimly lit by moonlight looms above what is perhaps an ethereal couple taking rest for the night. Abstraction prevails in other paintings that are similar in theme, and the greens, browns and blues of the oceans and deserts summoned by the mind are stacked impenetrably like sheets or panels. A different reoccurring motif is that of a musician playing a string instrument, sitting, full of energy and vitality, housed in a warm interior; a loving portrayal of the feeling of home, or perhaps a yearning for one. In the largest painting, 'Map/Quilt' from 1999, what could be a kaleidoscopic topography simultaneously evokes the patterns and colours of Eritrean textiles. Indeed many of Ghebreyesus's paintings are deeply multifarious and unruly. Often in these works, fragments of figures – human and nonhuman – crowd and jostle around the canvas, as though flashes of memories of people, creatures, textures, sounds and smells. These paintings are crammed with life. And while Ghebreyesus's paintings depict an array of feeling - from longing and yearning, to dynamism, spirituality, connection and very frequently, joy - they are never simply representational. His curiosity about process, his experimentation with colour, and his unique formal vocabulary convey the depth of his investment in his medium and in the historical tensions between abstraction and representation as they have evolved over the 20th century.

Eritrea remained central to Ghebreyesus' life following his migration to the US. He described how, as a young adult settling in New York City, his "tiny kitchen table instantly became the studio table". Food and painting would go on to serve as his two constants – his means of survival and of self-articulation - becoming both his way back to himself and to his internal home. He wrote: "Painting was the miracle, the final act of defiance through which I exorcised the pain and reclaimed my sense of place, my moral compass, and my love for life." In parallel, his work as executive chef and co-owner of New Haven's Caffè Adulis ultimately became a means of sharing these deep and indelible parts of himself with others. But although Ghebreyesus's output invites narrativized biographical readings, he himself was quick to challenge any simplistic idea of the self. Instead, he was drawn to thinking of what he was doing as "syncretizing", that is recontextualizing and integrating memories of his early experiences in Eritrea with new cultural encounters and identities. Indeed, his experiments with paint do not lend themselves to locating fixed meanings or memories, but are formed with flickers of potential experience; both real and imagined, both fact and fiction.

Ficre Ghebreyesus was born in 1962 in Asmara, Eritrea. He died in 2012 in New Haven, CT. Ghebreyesus fled Eritrea as a teenager, crossing over to Sudan on foot. As a political refugee, he lived in Sudan, Italy and Germany, before finally settling in the United States. After initially joining his sister in New York, Ghebreyesus completed his undergraduate degree in New Haven, in 1987, while working as a humanitarian activist for his country. Back in New York City, he studied painting at The Art Students' League, as well as joining the notable Bob Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. He later earned his MFA at Yale University in 2002, where he was awarded the Carol Schlossberg Prize for Excellence in Painting. Ghebreyesus made a home in New Haven, where he lived with his two sons and wife, the poet Elizabeth Alexander, until he died unexpectedly at age 50. Alongside his painting, he worked as executive chef at Caffé Adulis, which he co-founded with his two brothers, and through which he worked creatively to offer an experience of the cuisine from his home to those in the United States. In the final few years of his life, he dedicated his time fully to his painting practice, despite being reluctant to exhibit his work publicly during his lifetime. He left behind close to a thousand paintings, countless photographs and works on paper.

Institutional posthumous solo exhibitions of Ghebreyesus's work include: *Ficre Ghebreyesus: City with a River Running Through* at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA (2018) and *POLYCHROMASIA: Selected Paintings by Ficre Ghebreyesus* at Artspace, New Haven, CT (2013). Ghebreyesus's work has been included in group exhibitions at such institutions as the 59th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2022); Baltimore Museum of Art, MD (2022) and the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT (2022); the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL (2020); California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2019). Works by Ghebreyesus can also be found in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; New Orleans Museum of Art, LA; Rollins Museum of Art, Winter Park, FL; Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Stanford, CA; and the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

For more information, please contact Sam Talbot (sam@sam-talbot.com) or Pascale de Graaf (pascale@modernart.net).