

AIDA KIDANE

Casa M

August 17 – October 5 2025

Opening: Saturday, August 16, 5 p.m.

For the exhibition *Casa M* by Aida Kidane, the Kunsthalle Arbon has been bathed in turquoise light – an effect created by colored foils on the windows. For Aida Kidane, turquoise is a color rich in symbolism, inseparably tied to her birthplace Asmara. It evokes in her a subjective sense of memory of that city, accentuating her personal perspective and perception.

Eritrea was under Italian colonial rule from 1890 to 1941. Particularly in the 1930s, numerous modernist buildings emerged, ranging from Rationalism and Futurism to Art Déco, designed and realized by Italian architects. Inscribed within Asmara's architectural heritage are both the achievements of modernity and the violent suppression of local building traditions. The years of Italian rule brought Eritrea modern infrastructure but also social divisions that persist to this day.

Aida Kidane's exhibition is an immersive installation engaging with the complex relationship between colonial history, architecture, and personal memory. Several photographs depict architecturally symbolic sites in Asmara, captured by the artist herself. The works are composed so that multiple layers of meaning and narrative appear superimposed. They resemble X-rays, reflecting the artist's analytical yet subjective gaze on Asmara's architecture.

Among the buildings shown are Futurist structures such as the Fiat Tagliero gas station; Rationalist landmarks including the Farmacia Centrale or Harnet Avenue – the grand boulevard from the colonial era; and Art Déco architecture like the Bristol Hotel or the Maekel Regional Administration Building. The latter hosted presentations by architects, engineers, and UNESCO representatives that contributed to the successful recognition of *Asmara: A Modernist African City* as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017.

On the opposite wall, a video depicts two Italian construction workers in a barren landscape, excavating the earth with a digger according to a plan they repeatedly consult. Kidane provided them with the blueprint of a house in Asmara. *Casa M* grew out of an extended artistic and research-based engagement. At its core lies a critique of Mussolini's unlawful occupation of Eritrea and the colonial-architectural structures tied to it. This investigation is translated into a spatial, visual, and acoustic experience – a form that simultaneously raises historical questions and offers a critical perspective on construction itself.

In a reversal of power relations, Kidane commissions the excavation of *Casa M* on Italian soil. The men drive stakes into the ground and begin tearing up the earth. The digging itself carries a sense of violence. The destruction intensifies as the two workers, with concentrated, neutral expressions, continue their task. Working into the night, the video becomes increasingly abstract until only the light of a red laser remains visible. Finally, the excavated silhouette is marked with lime. *Casa M* emerges embedded in traces of devastation, surrounded by collateral damage scarring the surrounding landscape.

The video is accompanied by a soundscape in which construction noise merges with a piercing whistle. This tone matches the frequency of the tinnitus the artist lives with – an auditory condition that accompanies and permeates every perception.

The act of reversal permeates the entire installation: *Casa M* is not constructed but cut out of the ground – leaving behind an empty imprint. Absence dominates over presence. The images on the wall appear like negatives or X-rays. And the turquoise light itself alters the viewers' vision, causing parts of the film to appear in complementary colors.

Accompanying Program

European Heritage Days

Guided tour on the architecture and industrial history of Kunsthalle Arbon
with Inge Abegglen, President Kunsthalle Arbon
Saturday, September 13, 2025, 3 p.m.

Public Tours

Saturday, August 30, 4 p.m.
Saturday, September 20, 4 p.m.

Talk with Aida Kidane in the exhibition

as part of: *Architecture, Textile Production and Industrial History*
Open Doors in Arbon, in cooperation with TaDA, TDS Textildruckerei and Saurer Museum
Saturday, October 4, 2025, 3:30 p.m.

Opening Hours

Friday: 5 – 7 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday: 1 – 5 p.m.

With kind support from:

List of Works

Casa M, film, 2025, approx. 60'

Light installation, 2025, UV-stable PVC foil, variable dimensions

12 digitally processed photographs, printed on transparent foil, matte mounted on 2 mm aluminum Dibond, UV-protected.

- Fiat Tagliero, built 1938, Futurism, 270 × 96 cm
Photograph 2019, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Main staircase, Maekel Regional Administration Building, built 1930s, Art Déco, during a screening and presentation with UNESCO staff, architects, and engineers, 130 × 173 cm
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Office corridor, Maekel Regional Administration Building, built 1930s, Art Déco, during a screening and presentation with UNESCO staff, architects, and engineers, 130 × 173 cm
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Harnet Avenue, Asmara, 257 × 90 cm
Prestigious boulevard from the 1930s Italian colonial era, with palm trees and five-story administrative and residential buildings in Rationalist style – once the representative center of colonial urban planning.
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Foyer, Maekel Regional Administration Building, built 1930s, Art Déco, during a screening and presentation with UNESCO staff, architects, and engineers, 135 × 180 cm
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Marathon runners training in front of Asmara Airport, 160 × 76 cm
Photograph 2019, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Apartment building, Asmara, built 1930s, Italian Art Déco / Rationalism, 180 × 135 cm
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Farmacia Centrale, Asmara, built ca. 1920s, with the artist in the foreground. Constructed in Italian Rationalist style, 190 × 130 cm
Photograph 2019, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Post office in Edaga Arbi, Asmara, 170 × 115 cm, built 1930s as pragmatically designed infrastructure ("Poste per Indigeni") to serve the colonial city. Edaga Arbi is a historic, organically developed neighborhood on the margins of colonial Asmara, predominantly inhabited by the local population – characterized by modest small-scale buildings, narrow alleys, and vibrant public street life.
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Room in the Bristol Hotel, 160 × 120 cm, constructed in the 1940s under British administration. The Bristol Hotel continued the Art Déco style of the Italian colonial period.
Photograph 2019, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Staircase in the annex, Maekel Regional Administration Building, built 1930s, Art Déco / Rationalism, 135 × 180 cm
Photograph 2023, Asmara, Aida Kidane.
- Schoolgirls with backpacks and cellphones in Akria, Muslim district of Asmara, 250 × 107 cm. Postcolonial neighborhood shaped by informal and modest urban growth.
Photograph 2019, Asmara, Aida Kidane.