CURATORIAL STATEMENT

The history of Ethiopian visual art can be understood as operating across two intertwined trajectories: the history of art as discourse and the practice of art as making. These two modes continually shape one another, yet they are not equally valued. The history and theory of art, mainly textual, often assumes the role of framing authority, interpreting, categorizing, and representing, while artistic practice is visual and multimodal, rendered secondary, frequently treated as silent and in need of explanation. Written language has long occupied a privileged interpretive position over the image.

This hierarchy also extends beyond artistic discourse to broader social structures, where forms of manual labor have historically been devalued. In Ethiopia, Artisans have often occupied a marginal position within the social hierarchy, particularly regarding property ownership and access to land. Artisanal and material practices have been positioned below intellectual and discursive forms of work. A notable exception, however, is found in the tradition of painting.

Until the early twentieth century, painting in Ethiopia was primarily oriented toward religious subjects. Painters were not merely craftsmen but were often trained within ecclesiastical institutions, working closely with sacred texts such as biblical narratives, hagiographies, and homilies. In this context, the painter occupied an ambiguous position, both maker and interpreter, working at the intersection of word and image. In this sense, they functioned as mediators, giving image to the word. This dual role afforded them a distinct status, aligned with the clergy, and granted privileges not typically extended to other forms of artisanal labor.

Historically, Ethiopian painting does not foreground itself as image or call attention to its own form. Rather than representing material reality, it seeks to manifest spiritual presence, inviting the viewer to look beyond the image toward the phenomena it reveals. Time and space are suspended through the absence of perspective, background, and illusionistic depth, privileging instead a flattened pictorial surface. This emphasis on the plane has shaped local understandings of abstraction, where abstraction is seen not as a departure from representation, but as an extension of an already existing visual logic.

Tegene began his painting practice within the tradition of church iconography, establishing a parallel between his individual work and the broader history of Ethiopian painting. His later engagement with abstraction, through flatness and all-over composition, continues a longstanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopian pictorial tradition.

Shapes of Silence takes this condition as its point of departure. Drawing on the long history of Ethiopian painting, particularly its negotiation between word and image, the exhibition approaches Tegene Kunbi's work as a platform where these relations are unsettled and reconfigured. His paintings refuse the conception of the image as passive or subordinate. Instead, through layered, materially dense surfaces that draw on diverse visual and textile traditions, his work operates as an archive of labor, memory, and embodied knowledge. Materials and practices historically marginalized or silenced are brought into visibility and proximity.

In the spirit of a minor key, where meaning emerges through modulation, restraint, and resonance rather than declaration, Kunbi's paintings activate silence as a site of presence. Rather than yielding to language, they resist immediate translation, inviting a sustained, sensory encounter in which meaning remains open, relational, and materially grounded.

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