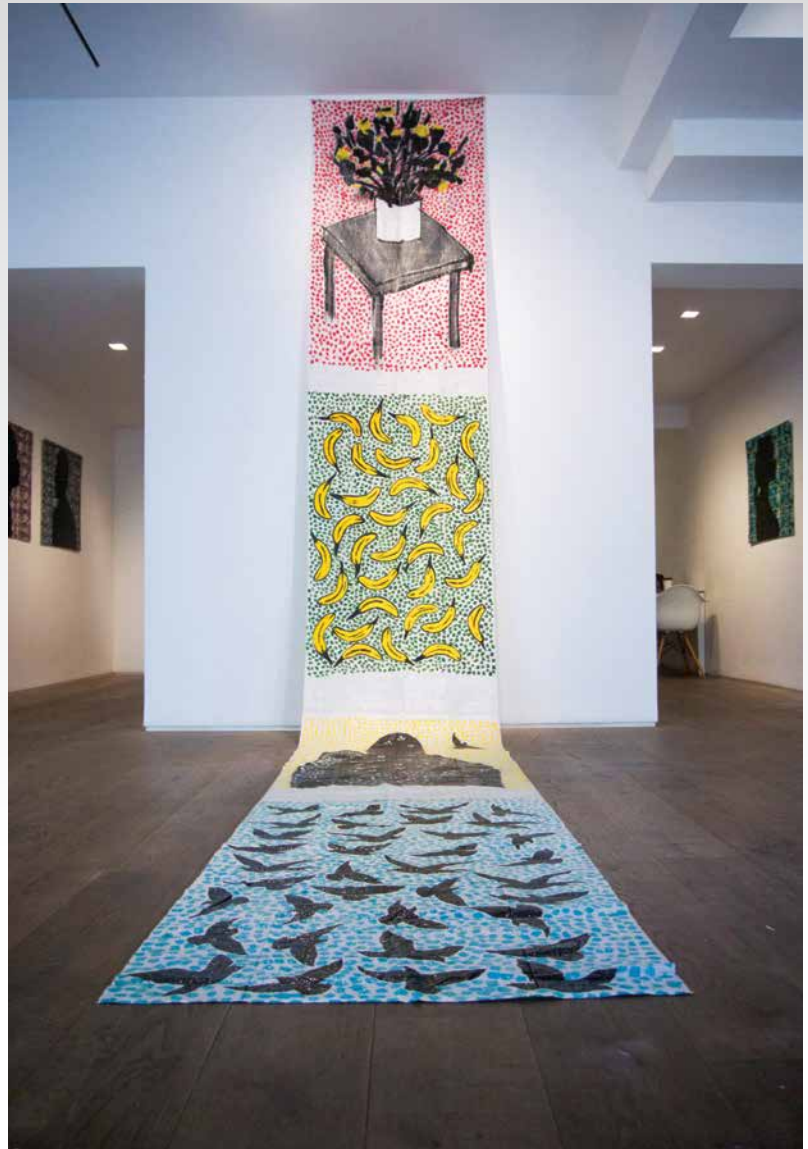


SILENCE: EPHREM SOLOMON

KRISTIN HJELLEGJERDE,
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The wide, almond-shaped eyes in ancient Ethiopian iconography symbolized what art historians call the “reversal gaze” philosophy, which suggests that it is not only the viewers who observe paintings, but also the paintings that observe the viewers. This reversal of the gaze, where the painting looks back and perhaps even hypnotizes the viewer, is very much operational and at the center of the striking two-dimensional woodcut paintings by Ephrem Solomon showcased in *Silence*, his 2018 solo exhibition at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London. Ethiopian artists historically used narrative paintings for illuminating subtle meanings of religious texts and to convey often complex theological ideas. Traditionally, the subject matter of early paintings was almost exclusively biblical, and it was not until the eighteenth century that more secular themes began to emerge. Painting is by far the predominant medium for Ethiopian artists, followed closely by sculpture.¹

Born in Addis Ababa in 1983, Solomon works in the recognizable vernacular of Ethiopian narrative painting, a tradition passed down for generations, beginning with church paintings in the fourth century and continuing to the present, as secular art became more widespread at the turn of the twentieth century and notably furthered by the establishment of the Addis Ababa University Alle School of Fine Arts and Design in 1958. He is part of a young generation of painters (Dawit Abebe, Tamrat Gezahegn, and Surafel Amare are some examples) who describe the world around them, with the city of Addis Ababa serving as actual and metaphorical inspiration. Having trained in traditional printmaking, Solomon uses carved marks to create constructed

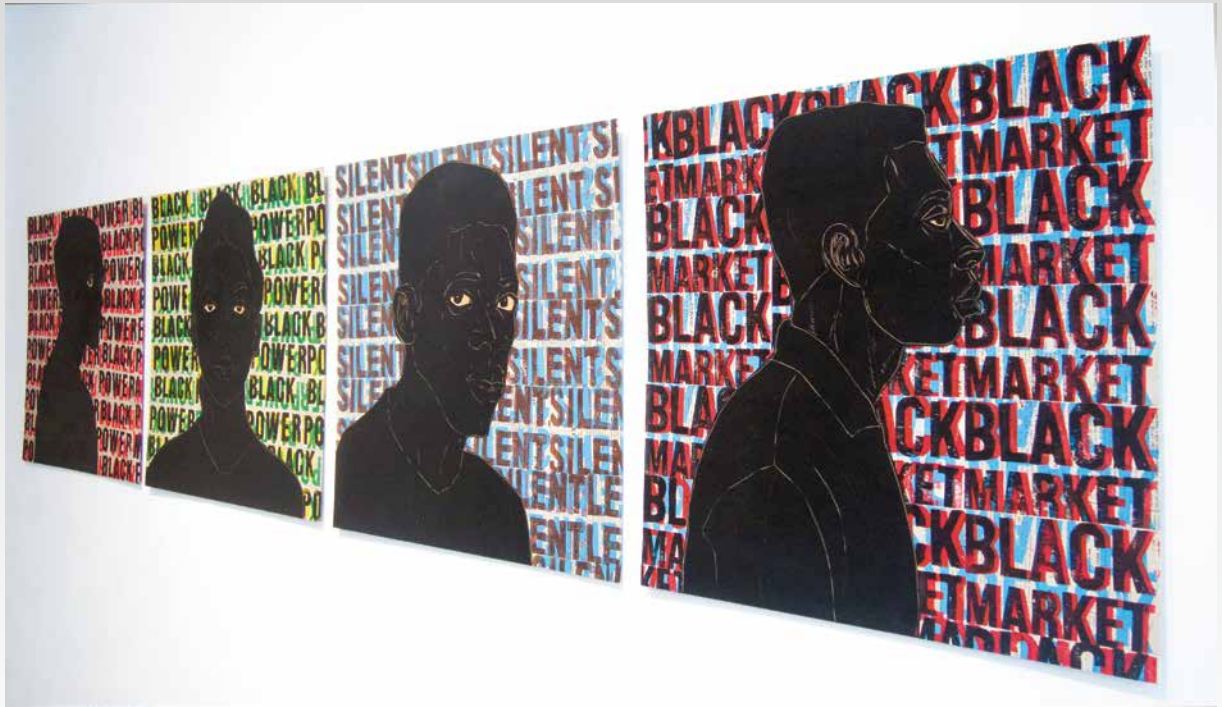


Ephrem Solomon, installation view of *Silence*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

portraits informed by the people who inhabit the spaces around him, creating figures that can be recognized but are also invisible in society.

Solomon’s new body of work for *Silence* draws on growing concerns with his home city. Additionally, he mediates the universal plight of a black artist working internationally but constantly reminded of the lack of mobility and access, issues that still continue to limit the movement of artists on the continent. While Solomon’s palette in this series has moved from a limited color scale to a more vivid one,

his signatory method of juxtaposing woodcuts with collage and graphic design persists. The figures in his paintings are still somber, with an emphasis on the gaze—eyes as the key to the soul, a variety of gazes that can be confrontational, doleful, hopeful, despairing, and questioning. All of these perspectives captured by Solomon’s figures represent a multiplicity of black experiences in a body of work that is his most political and focused on the present and which he describes as being “highly personal and a reflection of the last few years as a world citizen,



Left to right: *Silence Series 41*, *Silence Series 42*, *Silence Series 5*, *Silence Series 10*, all 2017. Woodcut, collage, and mixed media, 80 x 80 cm. Installation view of *Silence*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

as a black man, as an Ethiopian, and as an artist.”²

Bearing this in mind, it is not unsurprising that Amharic and English resistance texts, with words such as “Black Power,” “Silent,” and “Black Market,” serve as backdrops to these portraits, all of which return the viewer’s gaze ever so intently, clearly as an act of resistance and staking a claim to be seen. Many of Solomon’s works remain untitled, allowing viewers to identify themselves in the works, as well as those around them.

A slight departure from the figurative work Solomon is now known for is a wall-to-floor scroll piece consisting of four adjoined works on paper (flowers in a vase, bananas, a mother and child, multiple blackbirds). The artist explains that this work is autobiographical and deals with personal loss and struggles he experienced in recent years.³ The bananas refer to an incident at an airport where a guard handed him a banana on first encounter; the mother and child reference his mother, who recently lost her daughter; the flowers represent sympathy in times of loss; and the birds are a metaphor for the freedom from suffering death brings,

particularly after a sustained period of illness. Finally, Solomon’s use of the familiar chair motif, signaling past, present, and future authority, makes an appearance in this exhibition.

Solomon approaches this intrinsically Ethiopian aesthetic with a contemporary touch that entwines old and new, and for his new work, a particular mediation on blackness. He uses dense black lines to create portraits that are rich in meaning and deliver haunting emotional gazes. In his work, he transforms familiar painting traditions—paintings on wood (icons), manuscripts, and murals deeply embedded in Ethiopian history—into something relevant to the present. He continues to navigate changing times while reflecting on Ethiopian life and its relationship to the global. In his works, Solomon invites the viewer to enter into an intimate encounter with his figures—to stop, to listen, and to observe.

Jareh Das is a writer, researcher, and curator based between Lagos, Nigeria, and London.

Notes

- 1 See Girma Kidane, “Four Traditional Painters and Their Life Histories,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art*, ed. Richard Pankhurst (London: Pindar, 1989), 72–77.
- 2 Ephrem Solomon, interview by author, February 3, 2018.
- 3 Solomon, interview by author, February 3, 2018.