Elias Sime: Tightrope  
Curated by Tracy L. Adler  
Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art,  
Hamilton College, Clinton, NY  
September 7–December 8, 2019

Reviewed by Carol Ann Lorenz

Gracing the expansive Dietrich Exhibition Gallery at the Wellin Museum of Art (Figs. 1–2), the exhibition Elias Sime: Tightrope presented twenty-eight large-scale wall-mounted compositions, many of them between 10 and 21 feet wide, as well as two three-dimensional installation works. A film produced for the exhibition included commentary by the artist and footage about his work and process. The film also documented Elias Sime’s association with the Zoma Contemporary Art Center and its successor, the Zoma Museum (dedicated in 2019) in Addis Ababa, an art project in its own right. Sime co-founded the Zoma Museum with Meskerem Assegued, an anthropologist, contemporary art curator, and Sime’s frequent collaborator.

Elias Sime was born in 1968 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he continues to live and work. In 1990, he graduated with a degree in graphic art from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design, but began to make art according to his own vision soon thereafter. In the intervening years, Sime has become an internationally known multidisciplinary artist noted for his originality and independence, as well as his focus on contemporary themes.

Sime’s accomplishments were honored in October 2019 with the 4th annual African Art Award from the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art, which recognizes “the best in contemporary African art” (NMAA 2019). Sime has also been named one of six finalists for the 2020 Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation’s Hugo Boss Prize, which honors outstanding achievement in contemporary art.

Although Sime’s work has been included in nearly twenty solo exhibitions and many group shows, the Wellin Museum was the organizer of his first major touring exhibition. It traveled to the Akron Art Museum in Akron, Ohio, and will also be exhibited at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.

The exhibition included objects from 2003 through 2019. Sime’s earlier work was represented by six canvases with imagery stitched with multicolored thread. Three of these, dated 2009–2014, were from a series called Ants and Ceramicists, in which both linear elements and seemingly solid areas of color were created with hundreds of stitched ant forms suggesting tunnel networks and dense nesting colonies (Fig. 3). The idea behind this series is that ants, typically viewed as an annoyance, are nevertheless highly adaptable social animals that have survived for millennia. With the title Ants and Ceramicists, Sime compares ants with Ethiopian potters, who are often of low status and impoverished (Assegued 2013), in part because their livelihood has been threatened by readily available cooking and serving vessels in metal, enamelware, imported porcelain, and plastic. Sime admires the communal labor practices that have helped local ceramicists to survive as craftspeople who continue to provide for the household needs of the common people.
Sime feels a special bond with ceramicists in Addis Ababa, with whom he has worked closely. The exhibition included an installation titled *Bareness*, which was created in 2014 around the end of the *Ants and Ceramicists* series. It consisted of a large floor piece with numerous clay vessels that Sime commissioned from the ceramicist community in Addis Ababa. The pots are similar in form but have small variations in size, color, the dimensions of the openings, or the shape and location of the fire clouds that result from pit firing. Sime sees parallels between the similarity and differences in the pots, on the one hand, and the commonality and individuality in the human population, on the other. By using some 200 pots in this piece, Sime also draws attention to the significant contributions that potters have made to society.

The end of the *Ants and Ceramicists* series overlaps with the beginning of the *Tightrope* works, which are the focus of this exhibition. Of the twenty-two pieces included from this series, the first are dated from 2009–2014 and the most recent were made in 2019. Two compositions, *Tightrope: Silent 1* and *Tightrope: Silent 2*, were created specifically for this exhibition. Both of these art series are characteristic of Sime’s imaginative use of unusual materials.

The stitched thread canvasses of 2003 to 2014 incorporated occasional found objects such as buttons, fabric, and bottle caps—the latter often used as the artist’s signature. Work in the *Tightrope* series takes the use of repurposed materials to a new level as well as in a new direction. These works nearly defy definition. Sime has called them “collages,” while others refer to them as “assemblages” or “tableaus.” First, they consist entirely of reclaimed objects affixed to panels, and secondly, those objects are predominantly electronic elements such as circuit boards and their constituent components, keyboards, batteries, and insulated electrical wires in various colors. They are two-dimensional, wall-hung artworks with richly sculptural, tactile surfaces.

The generous gallery space and well-designed layout of the Wellin Museum exhibition permitted a visitor to access Sime’s works incrementally. From a distance, a viewer may have noted that some panels resembled bold paintings, as in *Tightrope: The Dominant* (Fig. 4), while others, such as *Tightrope: Silent 2* (Fig. 5), gave the impression of mosaics. Approaching the panels, one read references to textiles in the gridlike arrangements of some, and suggestions of beadwork in the brilliant pointillism of others. It is only at close range that one discerned that these large-scale artworks have been constructed of thousands of tiny elements from computers, cell phones, televisions, and other electronic devices.

Although the electronic materials are new to the *Tightrope* series, there is continuity in the concepts expressed between this and Sime’s older work. For example, communication and networks, suggested in the *Ants and Ceramicists* imagery, are ideas now embedded in the materiality of the *Tightrope* works. And while stitched rows of ants created lines and shapes in the earlier *Ants and Ceramicists* works, Sime often relies on electrical wires to delineate geometric or organic forms in the newer *Tightrope* series.

Sime acquires his materials primarily from the Addis Mercato, the largest open-air market in Africa, where obsolete electronic machinery may be found in great quantities. Sime states that he uses the disarticulated electronic wares in his *Tightrope* series as an “archive” or “time-line” of the development of technology, hoping to inspire recognition and emotional responses in his audience (Sime 2019). At times, he goes in search of materials that will enable him to express his ideas, and at other moments he discovers unexpected found objects that trigger his creative impulses. In either case, he is not only selective, but he also works the materials, cutting and sanding circuit boards, for example, or braiding anywhere from two to twenty-four wires of different colors together, using plaiting techniques his female assistants have taught him. Sime stated that when he looks at the colored wires he has collected, “I think about the possibility of great things emerging when different ideas come together. So, I combine different colors and braid them.”
Sime bristles at the notion that he is recycling waste products and states that the materials he collects for art-making are attractive to him because of their history, and especially because they have been touched by human hands (Sime 2019). Allowing, however, that Sime is an artist rather than an environmentalist, a case could be made that his work belongs to the current global interest in upcycling, reusing discarded objects or material in ways that create products of higher quality or value than the original.

Sime’s finished works display great variety. Some, like Tightrope: Silent 2, for example, are nearly monochromatic, using subtly variegated tones of computer keys, arranged on the diagonal within a vertical and horizontal grid. Not only is the color subdued, but the subtitle “Silent” refers to the ability of the nearly soundless keyboard to communicate words and ideas. Other works, such as Tightrope: Familiar Yet Complex 2 (Fig. 6) from the Wellin Museum collection, use a brilliantly colorful palette. A key feature of Sime’s work, evident for example in a detail of Tightrope: Surface and Shadow 2, is the use of multiples of the same sorts of materials, which allow him to create patterns with repetitive shapes but subtle variations (Fig. 7).

The title “Tightrope” refers to equilibrium. “Sime recognizes the uneasy balance between the advances made possible by technology and the impact they have had on our humanity and environment …” (Wellin Museum 2019). It is the genius of Sime to use electronic parts to create works that, from a distance, evoke landscapes and waterscapes, as well as the human figure that depends upon, exploits, and often pollutes these environments (Fig. 8).

Also on view on an outdoor terrace was a site-specific work called Flowers and Roots (Fig. 9). Sime created this sculpture in collaboration with a group of Hamilton College students during the summer of 2019. Sime was inspired by a local hybrid flower, the Saunders peony, that the late Hamilton College professor Arthur Percy Saunders developed.
in a great variety of colors and shapes during the mid-twentieth century. Discovering that the Saunders peony is seedless and depends on human manipulation to reproduce, Sime found himself thinking of computer engineering (Sime 2019). He used reclaimed computer parts and bundles of electrical wires along with sheet brass to fashion the twisted roots of the peony and a red-dyed composite of cement and recycled newspaper to create the flower. The large sculpture is interactive, allowing visitors to walk around the flower and through an arch representing its roots.

Programming around the exhibition took place all fall. Among the highlights was the return of Elias Sime to the Wellin Museum in September. He participated in a panel discussion of his work along with Meskerem Assegued and Tracy Adler, and led a gallery tour and discussion of the exhibition interpreted by Assegued. On October 2, a lecture by Dr. Karen E. Milbourne, senior curator of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC, focused on her essay in the catalog of the Tightrope: Elias Sime exhibition and discussed her continuing scholarship in contemporary African art.

The first monograph concerning Sime’s work, Elias Sime: Tightrope, is authored by Tracy Adler with contributions by Karen Milbourne; Meskerem Assegued, curator and co-director of the Zoma Museum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In September. He participated in a panel discussion of his work along with Meskerem Assegued and Tracy Adler, and led a gallery tour and discussion of the exhibition interpreted by Assegued. On October 2, a lecture by Dr. Karen E. Milbourne, senior curator of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC, focused on her essay in the catalog of the Tightrope: Elias Sime exhibition and discussed her continuing scholarship in contemporary African art.

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Reference


