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[Ethiopian American Artist Helina Metaferia Refigures the Canon at Hamiltonian Gallery \(https://bmoreart.com/2018/09/ethiopian-american-artist-helina-metaferia-refigures-the-canon-at-hamiltonian-gallery.html\)](https://bmoreart.com/2018/09/ethiopian-american-artist-helina-metaferia-refigures-the-canon-at-hamiltonian-gallery.html)

September 5, 2018

Words: [Angela N. Carroll \(Https://Bmoreart.Com/Contributor/Angela-N-Carroll\)](https://bmoreart.com/contributor/angela-n-carroll)



Helina Metaferia: Refiguring the Canon at Hamiltonian Gallery by

Angela N. Carroll

“Like the societies themselves, contemporary art objects produced in Africa are considered inauthentic approximations of traditional forms, sullied, as it were, by the degenerative impact of Western influence.” – Christopher Steiner from *African Art in Transit*

Helina Metaferia lies on her back in the middle of the floor of the National Gallery of Art. Robert Motherwell’s monumental abstraction “Reconciliation Elegy” (1978) hangs ominously above her. Many patrons, most older white couples, quickly pass by. Others sit or stand at a distance to watch for signs of life. Few stay long enough to ensure that she is, in fact, alive and well. In the rare moments when Metaferia does move, the shifts are deliberate; she turns heavily from a position on her back to her stomach, then resumes her paralysis on the museum floor.

How ironic I thought, to be a black mass on the floor of a largely white institution—the proverbial fly on the wall, where the mass is reduced to a speck no one deems worthy enough to consider. In Metaferia’s latest solo exhibition, *Refiguring the Canon* at Hamiltonian Gallery in Washington, D.C., documentation from this performance, “The Mother,” and others accompany elaborate collage installations that incorporate imagery and text from contemporary Western artworks, art archives, and classical antiquities.



“The Mother” 2018 Runtime: 9:34 Performance by Helina Metaferia

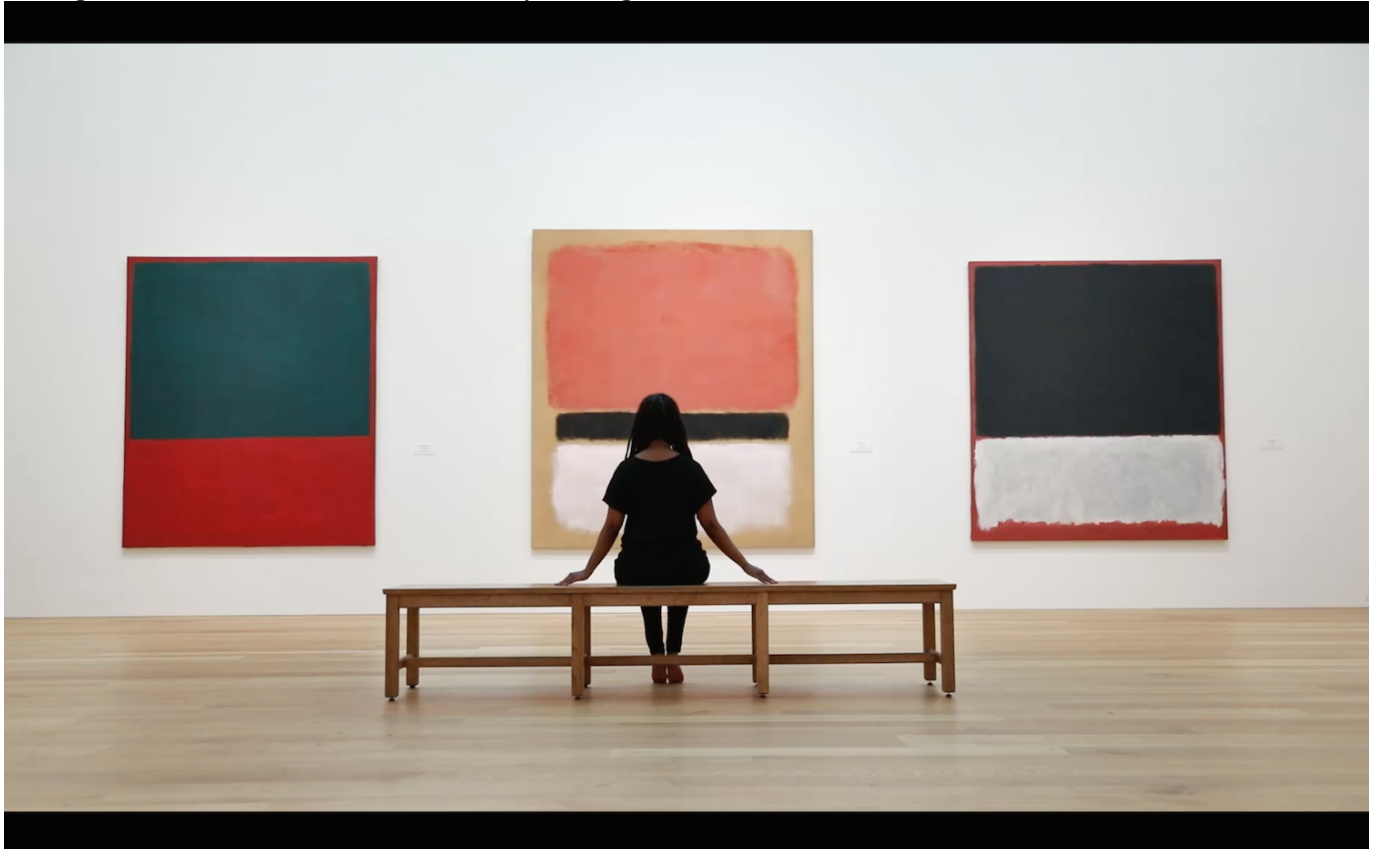
Video documentation by Jeremy Mines

Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC NFS

At its core, *Refiguring the Canon* captures the tension between Black bodies and art institutions, and more explicitly, African artists and art museums. One need only observe the architectural layout of any art museum to notice a clear delineation between Western and Indigenous artists. Whole wings are dedicated to pre-colonial works, decontextualized artifacts that are considered authentic representations of the spiritual traditions of non-white societies. The items on display narrate a particular and singular narrative about the creative histories of non-white nations that limits their making and display to bygone eras thought to be uncorrupted by Western influence. The arrogance and ignorance of these presumptions inform segregationist approaches to art archival that reify hierarchies of appreciation, and only narrowly considers the artistic contributions of non-white subjects.

How has the work of African artists been archived and displayed by Western art institutions? How do you investigate inequitable art archival practices? What impacts have colonial art archival practices had on contemporary art archives? These queries recur throughout Metaferia's career and offer sharp critique of the archival practices of art institutions and the display of pre-colonial and contemporary African artists. The artist is especially drawn to art magazines from the 1980s, the era of her birth. In this time, publications like ARTNews, Art in America, and Artforum celebrated the resurgence of "primitivism" by white male artists, whose cultural appropriations further supplanted the contributions of Indigenous artists to Western art canons. Metaferia culls these archives, interrogates these artists and art publications and compounds the narratives in clever and revelatory ways.

I sat with Metaferia at the Hamiltonian Gallery to discuss *Refiguring the Canon* and her thoughts about how art archival may change in the future.



"Responding to Marks" 2018, Live Performance by Helina Metaferia, Video Documentation by Jeremy Mines, Courtesy of Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko, Artist Rights Society NY and National Gallery of Art

I am most familiar with your work as a performance artist, and less so with your paper works and collage installations. Can you share a bit about how your performance work informs your process in collaging or vice versa?

I look at this show as kind of the marriage between performance, performance documentation and collage; performance, video and photo and how that lends itself to collage. Each work in here is a remnant of a performance that I have done live, it's a live experience, but then it's been altered and translated by the hand that's editing the video footage in a collaging sort of way, or the hand is involved with paper cut outs of the photo documentation. There are two parts to the project, documentation of performances in museum spaces and collaging from archives. I'm really interested in embodiment, embodying a persona, an avatar, the retelling of history as mythology, and rethinking the status quo. I question the cultural appropriation of Africans and Native folks, the colonial quest to acquire lands and goods [is] also a part of art and culture.

“As an artist who has been trained in the western canon I had my own experiences with being told that this is my history and something that I need to integrate. But being an Ethiopian American person I have always had the side eye, the question mark.”

Being of recent African descent and knowing that the story is obviously very complicated and very complex and wanting to tell that narrative in a way that wasn't finger waving, or didactic. I wanted to do this in a fresh way that spoke to me, to just focus on the body as medium, body as conduit. And that comes through with performance.

Refiguring the Canon

Helina Metaferia



“Tribal Side Eye” 2-4, 2018

I think this is interesting, especially how you enact these questions in real time and space.

The other question is access, like how do we access these spaces. A lot of the archives that I was digging through, including ARTNews, ArtForum, Art in America, are in the collages and from the 1980s, and acquired through a residency that I did. I chose the eighties because that’s my birth era, and I was thinking about “what are the chances of me being an artist in this time?”

To be a Black woman making, which at the time when I was born and even now, that is still rare. There are huge obstacles. More hoops. Not just for recognition, but also in making this a viable profession. Those things occurring in the 1980’s and prior are recurring today in 2018. The system hasn’t changed too much. Yes, we have made advancements.

The summer issue of ARTNews right now is dedicated to contemporary African artists. There are appointments of Black curators, and yet simultaneously we are still having to deal with issues that we dealt with 100 years ago. A lot of that has to deal with [the realization] that African art, African artists are not fully incorporated or recognized as equal cultural makers. There is still a hierarchy. For example, in academia, global perspectives of art history are often offered as electives and not standard education.



“Mythological Quest 2” 2018, Collage

Do you consider your performances to be interventions? I'm curious about the sorts of reactions you experience and if you have expectations about those responses. Is the work meant to challenge the institutions you perform in?

Absolutely. All of those things. The performances I do in museum spaces, a lot of them are more announced and I am invited to perform as part of museum programming. [The Mother] was more guerrilla, it's a mixture between guerrilla and getting access to the space.

There's an amazing education/curatorial programmer named Terence Washington, who I met through Hamiltonian Director Amanda Jiron-Murphy, and he helped me get access to the National Gallery of Art space to create a performance. Very few people knew a performance was going to take place, it was kind of on a need to know basis. There were a lot of hurdles to begin with because it's a very top down institution. There were recent articles in Hyperallergic and Washington Post about the security staff and power dynamics within the museum, and I felt all of that.

It was a very vulnerable performance, not just because I was on the ground and anybody could do just about anything to me, but also because I didn't feel supported in a way to do this project in the same way as if they had invited me to do this project. It was a little bit grassroots to enter a museum space to make art without a formal invitation. It's all politics. You kind of have to walk this fine line. In my performances, there's my body who is the protagonist, and then there's everyone else, including the museum professionals and board members and public, who are also characters in this story. The narrative also reflects some of the institutional hierarchical structures.



"New(o)man" 2018, Performance by Helina Metaferia, Documentation by Jeremy Mines, Courtesy of Barnett Newman Foundation, ARS, and National Gallery of Art

Can you talk more about "Reconciliation Elegy"?

I wanted my body to be next to the painting ["Reconciliation Elegy"] because it is so omnipresent in the East Wing of the National Portrait Gallery. Abstraction art lives at the top in this sort of hierarchy of art history and the makers highlighted have been mostly white and male. There are few women and artists of color in this period of time who are mentioned as emerging from modernism, and they do exist, but mostly these artists were thinking about the highest form of expression as the removal of the figure from art.

My refiguring of the canon is putting the body back into conversation with abstraction and is shifting away from the idea that the white male embodied artist is the default. I am looking towards a canon that is more universal, reflects more than one narrative, and deemphasizes the western philosophy as the basis for all high thought. I want to remind folks with my body, which in turn highlights the abstract expressionists bodies. I am interested in art of all forms. There is a question about how much am I giving homage to their work and how much am I changing the narrative. It's not very clear, it's complicated, it's gray. I want that tension.





(<https://bmoreart.com/2018/09/ethiopian-american-artist-helina-metaferia-refigures-the-canon-at-hamiltonian-gallery.html/helina-metaferia-4>)





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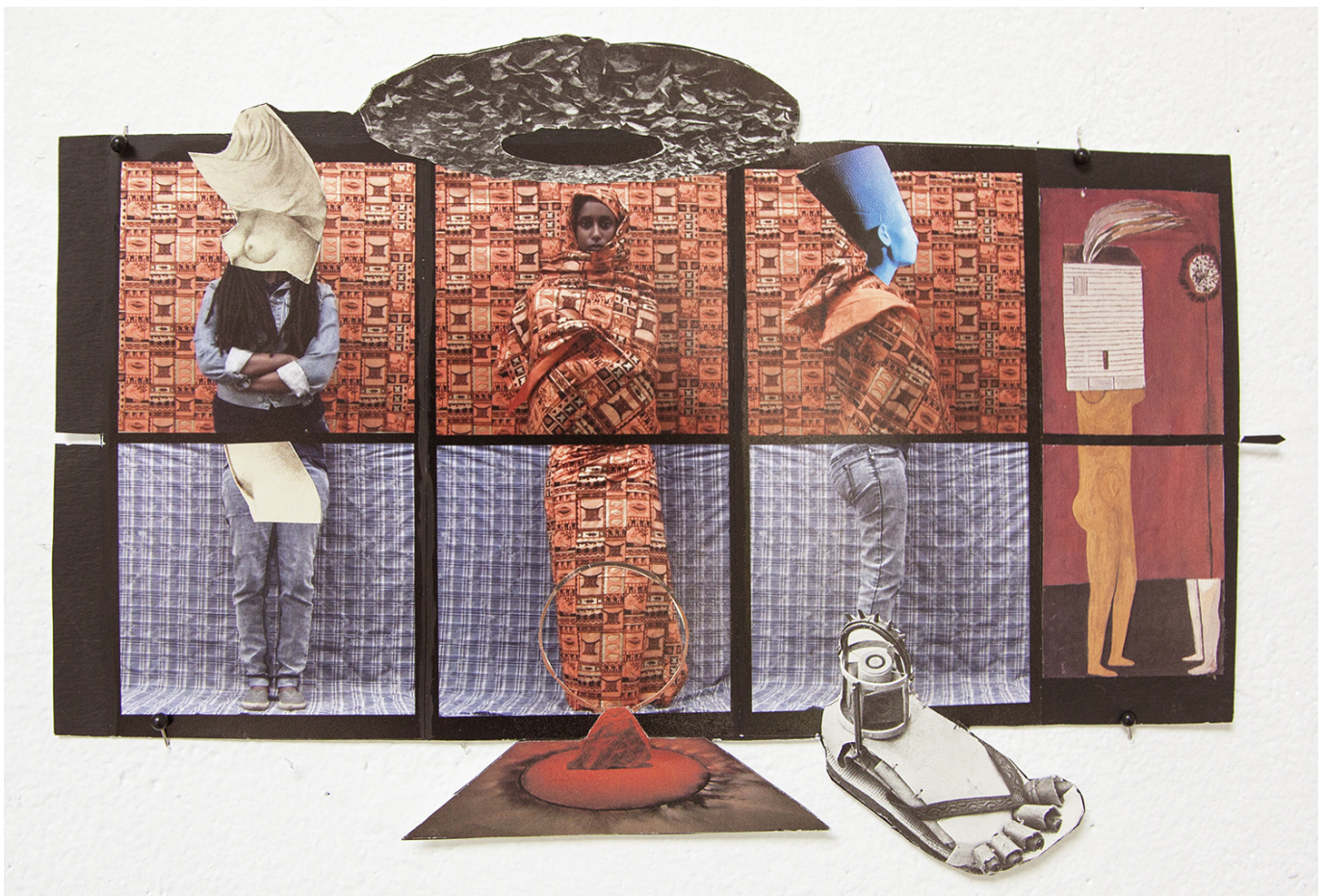


(<https://bmoreart.com/2018/09/ethiopian-american-artist-helina-metaferia-refigures-the-canon-at-hamiltonian-gallery.html/helina-metaferia-3>)

This feels like an indictment of art institutions about their colonial archival practices, as well as the marginalization and omission of African artists. Your work directly confronts the gaze of the viewer and art institutions with regard to how African art is archived. A strength of the exhibition is the juxtaposition of collages with quotes culled from myriad art publications about Indigenous and African artworks.

I was looking for something I could see myself in. Something I could identify with. I didn't see many women in art periodicals from the eighties, period. Very few. The only artist of color that I saw on the cover was Romare Bearden. In the 1980s there was a renewed interest, prompted by MOMA, of fetishizing the African form in the show *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.

The conversation was white people talking about indigeneity among other white people. Others were not invited into the conversation. I was also reading articles by the curators of these exhibitions. I knew I wanted to work big with these. This was me trying to speak and have voice for those artists of color who are just beginning to be recognized now and who were on the margins then, but also, for the so called primitive artists, the unknown artists who we will never see or know.



"Oracle" 2018, Collage

How did your critique of museums and institutions come about?

When I was twenty years old, I had a curatorial internship in the Ethiopian Arts Collection at the Walters Art Museum. I was amazed by the opportunity to study my own peoples work, while I was still an undergraduate student at Morgan State University.

This work was all ritualistic work from the Coptic church, and all the scholars were white. I was the only Ethiopian person who had ever worked with that collection that I knew of. I don't know if that has changed in the last several years. During that internship I knew I wasn't a curator, I was a maker. I try to bring in my own cultural references.

A big Ethiopian motif is an emphasis on the eyes in paintings. I wanted to have my eyes throw shade, give a bit of side eye in my performances and collages, and also represent my own cultural lineage. Even when I go to Ethiopia I'm a little disappointed because those art schools are studying an emphasis on western art.

“When am I really going to get to understand painting and art from a global perspective? The fact that I have to dig so hard to find that history is problematic.”

The collages are all evolving. This is one installation, but I consider them individual pieces, composed of 30 or so small pieces. I like to post quotes there so viewers can make their own conclusions. If you want to be angry, be angry. You want to laugh, I have seen people laugh, then laugh. If you think it's funny that I am juxtaposing these things. Or if you notice a reference to Picasso and you say, Oh I can relate to that, then go there. I don't want to scream and shout for everything. I just want it to be out there and allow viewers to come up with their own conclusions.



“Actions for Jackson” 2018, Collage



“Primitive Puh-leeze” 2018, Collage



“Baptism” 2018, Collage



"Avatar" 2018, Collage



"Mythological Quest 1" 2018, Collage



"Out of My Mouth" 2018, Collage

Helina Metaferia: Reconfiguring the Canon

(<https://www.hamiltoniangallery.com/exhibitions/2018/7/25/august-2018>) at Hamiltonian Gallery in DC will be up through September 15, 2018.

Top Image: "X" 2018, Performance by Helina Metaferia, Courtesy of the estate of Sol LeWitt, Mass MoCA

Words: *Angela N. Carroll* (<https://Bmoreart.Com/Contributor/Angela-N-Carroll>)



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His murals dot Baltimore City and are immediately recognizable for their realism, sense of color, and strong, often political narratives

Adapting and problem solving excite Maghazehe and motivate her materially centered sculpture practice.

SUZY KOPF

([HTTPS://BMOREART.COM/CONTRIBUTOR/SUZY-KOPF](https://bmoreart.com/contributor/suzy-kopf)). — MAY 24, 2021

breath-of- loving- katherine- bradford's- mother- paintings-at- canada.html

Bradford's Mother Paintings feel like deep breaths exhaled into a changed world

The figures populating the Mother Paintings live among slabs of heavy, humid air, hypersensitized in their responses to claustrophobic and caustic atmospheres.

RYAN SYRELL

([HTTPS://BMOREART.COM/CONTRIBUTOR/Ryan-SYRELL](https://bmoreart.com/contributor/ryan-syrell)). — MAY 17, 2021

"Our abilities are not proprietary and should not be hoarded. If someone needs assistance producing a mural I try to make myself available."

SUZY KOPF

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