

## Art and Struggle: Ethiopian Women Artists in Israel

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*Abstract: The study analyzes the work of 16 young women artists from the Ethiopian community in Israel who studied at leading art schools in the country. It focuses on the visual expressions through which these women battle the stigmatization and exclusion of the Ethiopian community and of them as artists - perceived as "others" in terms of race, profession and gender. Their art therefore serves as a dynamic interpretive arena in which urgent social issues are brought to bear. The study asks what representational methods do the artists employ to mollify the link between the color of their skin and the stigmatization of the Ethiopian community by Israeli society and what ideological discourse and artistic means do they employ to give visual expression to their objection to the stigmas attached to the Ethiopian community. The results indicate that the work of the majority of artists centers on the life of the Ethiopian community in the new country they arrived at, and that they are especially preoccupied with images of women. This self-exploration represents a rare form of reflection in which black people, perceived as the "object" of the hegemonic "gaze", cast a probing look at their own culture. In this reality, artistic creation serves as a performative-visual journey that gives symbolic expression both to the ethno-gender identity of the artists as well as to the social system which shapes that identity.*

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**I**N THE LAST forty years, we have witnessed a veritable revolution around the world in the relations between states and ethno-cultural minorities. Older models of assimilationist and homogenizing nation-states are increasingly being contested, and often displaced, by newer "multicultural" models of the state and of citizenship. This is reflected, for example, in the widespread adoption of cultural and religious accommodations and the acceptance of territorial autonomy and language rights for national minorities; the recognition of land claims and self-government rights for indigenous peoples and of the rights of immigrant groups.

This paper will take a closer look on one such group – a group of immigrants from Ethiopia that came to the state of Israel in recent years. It will focus on a specific sub-group of young women artists, who chose to take up a career in art, and will examine their double struggle – to form and articulate their gender identity and their ethnic identity as immigrants in the new state they arrived at.

There are currently sixteen young women from the Ethiopian community in Israel who have completed their studies in the visual arts at leading local art academies. This group represents the entire number of female students from this section of the population who are at work in contemporary art and this study discusses and analyses the artistic activities of these young artists. It centers on the assembled visual output they created in the past five years. My intention was to find out how Ethiopian identity is expressed by women artists from the community, with the art work providing a dynamic interpretive

field from which their responses to some burning social issues emerge. When I have put together the interviewees' life stories and their artistic output, a number of key issues and questions arise, and those will be discussed in the article: the various modes of representation that the women artists use in order to disengage the obvious association between their skin color and the stereotyped status of the Ethiopian community in Israel; the ideological discourses and artistic modes of expression that the artists use in order to render their opposition to the stigmatization of the Ethiopian community in Israel and the ways in which they visually express it; and finally, the significance of the critique embodied in their work.

From the 1980s, thousands of immigrants from Ethiopia have taken up residence in Israel. There, though officially recognized as one of the Jewish people's lost communities, they met with an ambivalent reception due to the color of their skin. The Ethiopian community, it should be noted, is extremely small compared to other immigrant populations in Israel, for instance, the ex-Soviet citizens who entered the country from the 1990s (Rapoport 1986). Nevertheless, the Ethiopian community has considerable visibility in Israeli society, as black skinned people are a relatively rare phenomenon (the Ethiopian community in the state of Israel composes of proximately 85,000 people, less than 2% of the overall population). People from Ethiopia, for instance, feature in the press as socially "problematic" (Wersberg 2003; Shwitzer and Hekin 1991); health workers single them out as carrying specific health risks for the large community, while in the education-

