

Voice MAGAZINE

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Lecture

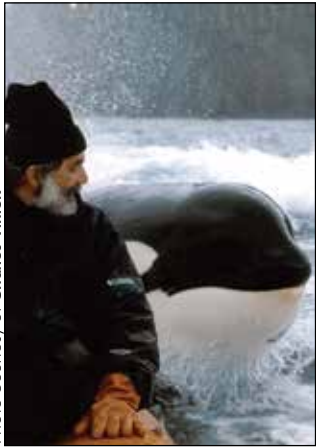


Photo courtesy of Charles Vinick

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Photo by Virginia Barlow

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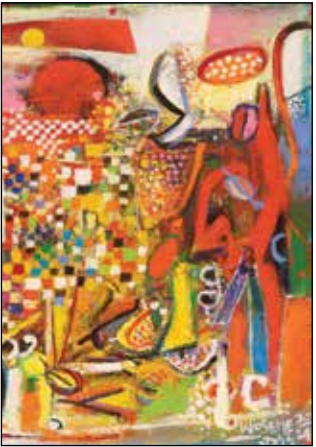
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Photo by Curtis Jermamy

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Interview

Wosene Worke Kosrof riffs on life in *Beyond Words*

By Kerry Methner / VOICE

NUANCED, tantalizing, messy... reflecting the accretion and assimilation of a lifetime of rich experience, the 16 canvases that make up *Beyond Words* at Sullivan Goss speak volumes about the fullness of the years Wosene Worke Kosrof has lived. From his birth in 1950 and early years in Ethiopia, to his immigration to the United States in 1978, to his relocation to California in 1991, Kosrof has traveled, savoring experiences, and exploring new worlds as they opened to him. When he returns to his studio, each of those flavors become iconic notes in a riff bubbling with ideas, feelings, and observations.



American Dream, 2022, 62 x 78 inches | Acrylic on linen, by **Wosene Worke Kosrof**

walk and dance – and in their foods. And I carry all that back to the studio with me and use it to inspire and inform my work.”

Kosrof has also traveled in the world of music - especially jazz.

“My experience of the world is reflected in all my paintings,” Kosrof explained in an email interview with VOICE. “For example, I consider myself, after 44 years in the U.S., an American painter, though I am Ethiopian born. So, basically, there are two strong currents of history and culture in my veins that are part of everything I breathe, do, or paint. Secondly, I have traveled in many parts of the world, both for work and pleasure, and I immerse myself in living images – in architecture, in vegetation, cityscapes, in people’s faces, movements – the way they



The Spirit of Coltrane, 2021, 36 x 78 inches | Acrylic on linen, by **Wosene Worke Kosrof**



The Inventor V, 2022, 34 x 38 inches | Acrylic on linen, by **Wosene Worke Kosrof**

“From the time I was in art school in Addis Ababa, when I first heard jazz, the music, improvisations, rhythms of that great art form have all become parts of the whole,” he explained. “You can see them, and – if you listen closely – hear them in my works.”

[Sullivan Goss programmed two jazz performances in the gallery in conjunction with this exhibition.]

Kosrof achieves the complexity of his work and process on an intuitive and in dialogue with the creative stream where he has made his home. He noted, “I was taught by a major Modernist painter in Ethiopia, Gebre Kristos Desta, so in my works, you’ll find traces of Modernism as well as the contemporary, the pan-African parts, as well as Western imagery. I am really an international artist working with visual elements that have global reach.”

Before leaving Ethiopia, Kosrof trained at the School of Fine Arts, Arat Kilo/Addis Ababa. Once in the U.S. he earned a Masters of Fine Arts degree at Howard University in Washington D.C. According to Sullivan Goss, he was mentored there by Jeff Donaldson, a major African American artist, who advised him to use his proficiency and fascination with Amharic script [*Amharic is an Ethiopian Semitic language spoken as a first language by 32,000,000 people in Ethiopia*] to develop his own abstract language.

“The Sullivan Goss exhibition ‘*Beyond Words*’ has, for me, some of my strongest works yet. I had such joy painting them in the studio, enjoyed the various compositions, enjoyed the diverse colors in them,” Kosrof shared. “*Beyond Words* – the title of the show – is also the title of my newest series which I started in 2021. This is the first exhibition of works in that series, and I’m pleased it’s at this gallery.”

“Because I use Amharic script as the foundation of my painting, people often think I’m writing legible text. But I’m not. My paintings are rather visual narratives, visual poems – and the title of my new series, ‘*Beyond Words*’, emphasizes that point,” he added. “I’ve moved beyond the words that are specific cultural/literal signs to a place where they are pure contemporary art.”

Richard B Woodward, who writes an essay in the new monotype being published by Sullivan Goss to accompany their second exhibition of Kosrof’s work, notes, “For Wosene, the world is filled with languages of signs, natural and manmade, which he avidly collects in the visual library of his mind’s eye.” He adds, “Ethiopia resonates through the elements of Amharic letters that he weaves into the compositional architecture of his paintings...”

Nathan Vonk echoes this sentiment in the essay he wrote for the monograph, “Most of Wosene’s audience will not be literate in the Amharic script from his homeland, but as symbols of language and heritage they are, in turn, symbols of migration

and identity that are part of the artist's own personal story....That said, Wosene's letters are not simply form and color either. Even without the ability to read Amharic writing, Wosene's text is recognizable as a language that evokes a rich cultural heritage."

Those characters, especially the ones whose shape captures Kosrof's imagination form a kind of subtext in the paintings, along with other iconic images. He explains, "Your question [on multiple focal points] makes me think about the 'parts' and the 'whole' of a painting. For me, the 'whole' refers to the final composition in which I have made both conscious and unconscious decisions about color, line, balance, composition. Then, there are the various 'parts' or 'locations' in the painting that can be considered 'sub-texts' to the main statement, but that also contribute to the whole work."

Those parts offer volumes.

Kosrof elaborates, "Many Amharic script forms appear in my paintings and move from one work to another. The accidental and intentional process of my studio work, determining the right form or shape that goes into a certain space, leads me to use, re-use/ repeat the characters. They have distinct personalities and they give life to my paintings. It's always a question of how a particular character can become part of the composition – whether they'll be flying on the periphery, hiding out in the center, or falling apart on the edge or middle. They inform me where they best belong."

These script forms are one of the ways art critics and curators talk about the work. Kosrof continued, "There are several characters that I especially like because of their beautiful shape, their expressiveness, or the way they speak to me or look at me. They look like people to me, like animals, trees, plants, food. They have aromas – I can smell and taste them. I also hear them, like the wind, birdsong, or jazz music. So, yes, there are certain script characters that find their place across paintings."

Focusing on the present moment with hot temperatures and hot politics, and the potential impact on an artist's work, Kosrof shared, "In the 27 years I've lived and worked in Berkeley, I've seen how the timing of the start and end of seasons is subtly shifting. I see it in the plants, in the rising heat in summer. I feel it too, for example, in the increase in warm days in my studio. I'm aware of and concerned about these shifts that I'm seeing and I often express that in my paintings. My art work stems from that consciousness."

Politics also seems to be implied in his work. "With regard to politics and the rising heat on that front," Kosrof related, "I have to say I am not an overtly political painter. However, art is always political, because life – the basis of art – is political. But I don't deal with specific single issue politics in my art."



The Picnic, 2021, 12 x 12 inches | Acrylic on canvas, by **Wosene Worke Kosrof**

Instead I create visual tension about civil unrest, about women's lives and repressive laws, about the sadness of social divisiveness, but also about joy in our humanity, about the resilience that grows within us when we appreciate beauty. In my paintings, colors, lines, composition all speak loudly to viewers who take time to engage in and interact with my work."

Like the jazz musicians he admires, Kosrof enjoys the process... the improvisation that is part of any creative process. His work reflects this through, interestingly enough, recurring grids that have origins in how he learned Amharic script and how he plays with them.

"At times, a grid gives me a starting point for a painting. I first learned Amharic script by chanting it and writing it on lines and in boxes I drew in the dirt as a small child in the church pre-school," Kosrof recalled. "The lines, the grid are deep-rooted in me, and they've also become part of the signature of my work. I like to observe how the script forms step in and out of the grid space, what they do inside, how they mix with colors, how they move outside the grid. What colors go best inside, which are better outside? It's play, it's 'wordplay.' I enjoy moving with them, integrating them with colors, keeping them within the grid and then breaking through the boundaries of the grid elements. The grid becomes an intriguing labyrinth or maze for me – I enjoy working toward its center and breaking out again beyond its lines."

This joy in the play with paint and content keeps him coming back to his work. "Painting intrigues me, even when it's hard. I confront it, talk with the script characters, with the colors. And, always, I'm surprised what develops. I keep gazing at the canvas, wondering what is going on, pushing its edges and mine," Kosrof shared. "Standing in front of an empty canvas takes tremendous energy, love, and commitment. That makes my heart beat faster, a bit from anxiety, but also from curiosity – what will happen as I work there. That unknown – because I don't pre-sketch my paintings, they develop as I paint – always brings some surprises. For example, I see how two colors, strange colors you wouldn't typically think could fit next to each other, can work very well together on the canvas. That thrills me. Colors excite me, working with them, mixing them, trying them out next to each other – very exciting stuff!"

Vonk summed up Kosrof's expression and body of work this way, "Paintings are very personal expressions, but his oeuvre as a whole is about more than just one artist's life story; they are his documentation of many of the major themes of the human condition. They are simultaneously an intimate expression of his inner life, a relatable visual opus that invites us to look deeply, and an intricate puzzle that promises no solutions, only an endlessly rewarding search."

Sullivan Goss: 11 E Anapamu St, Santa Barbara • Open 10-5:30 Daily • www.sullivangoss.com



Migrations X, 2021 40 x 50 inches | Acrylic on canvas, by **Wosene Worke Kosrof**