

## FICRE GHEBREYESUS

### *I Believe We Are Lost*

March 30 – May 6, 2023

Opening Thursday, March 30, 2023, 6:00pm – 8:00pm



Ficare Ghebreyesus, *I Believe We Are Lost*, c. 2002.

Galerie Lelong & Co., New York is pleased to announce our second solo exhibition by the late artist Ficare Ghebreyesus (b. 1962 – d. 2012). Tracing the impact of Ghebreyesus's experiences as a refugee and immigrant on his practice, *I Believe We Are Lost* will present paintings and pastels in rich and bold palettes that demonstrate Ghebreyesus's evolving definition of home, the majority of which will be shown publicly for the first time. Early works will be complemented by a selection of later works, demonstrating the development over time of the artist's distinct visual language, with a recurring focus on themes of displacement and representations of Eritrea throughout his oeuvre.

Born in Eritrea during its War of Independence, Ghebreyesus left as a teenaged refugee and ultimately settled in New Haven, Connecticut after living for a time in New York City. Ghebreyesus populates the works on view with scenes stemming from across these memories that speak to the natural beauty of his native country, the upheaval of violence, and the importance of community in creating a sense of home. Pastel drawings are vignettes capturing moments in time—be it of journeying and the experience of migration, as in *Road* (c.1990s), or of the beauty of nature at odds with the violence of war, as in *Tree* (c. 1990s)—while larger compositions amalgamate the places he lived, people he met, and cultures he encountered in his distinct blend of figuration and abstraction. Many of these works demonstrate the early emergence in Ghebreyesus's practice of the vibrant jewel-tones for which he has become known, while a selection of darker-toned works feature expansive backgrounds of deep blues that create an ominous sense of the unknown, a reminder of the figurative darkness of war that surrounded the artist's native community.

The titular work in the exhibition, *I Believe We Are Lost* (c. 2002), depicts a surrealist menagerie set against a dark blue background marked by mountains, calling to mind the Eritrean Highlands, where Ghebreyesus's birthplace of Asmara is located. The painting visually references Pablo Picasso's famed anti-war painting *Guernica* (1937) in its scale and method of representation. Vibrant animal-like beings twist into unrecognizable forms, while humanoid eyes and text from Erich Maria Remarque's 1928 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* peek through the blue background. Underscoring the composition is a thick white band, on which Ghebreyesus has written the title of the painting—also a quote from the same book, which examines the psychological toll of war. Ghebreyesus—who throughout his oeuvre drew upon a broad range of interests including music, language, and literature for inspiration—incorporates references to anti-war cultural hallmarks to communicate his own experience with the enduring trauma of war.

In an untitled painting from 1995, painted after his return to the United States following a visit to Eritrea, Ghebreyesus incorporates scenes of Eritrea and of New York, using a tree trunk and a river to divide the dreamlike composition between the two environs. Figures wearing traditional Eritrean clothing convene in conversation amongst the mountains, while the opposite side of the canvas depicts streetlights, cars, and an apartment building in which solitary figures are seen through windows, evoking the loneliness of displacement. Ghebreyesus continues his explorations of the two places he called “home” in *Five Figures with Horse Head* (1999). Figures, animals, and objects common in everyday life fill the burlap canvas, facing away from each other and lacking connection despite their physical proximity. Interspersed throughout are pockets of intricate patterns—common in Ghebreyesus’s work and evocative of Eritrean textiles—as well as trains, cars, birds, and airplanes that create a persistent sense of movement. Painted shortly before Ghebreyesus began the MFA program at the Yale School of the Arts, this painting signals the emergence of many motifs that would become recurrent in his practice.

Of the enduring impact on his life and practice of spending his childhood in a war zone, Ghebreyesus wrote, “I suspect I have carried this angst and fear of imminent explosion within me to this day, for when I paint I am accompanied by dissonances, syncopations, and the ultimate will for life and moral order of goodness.” A selection of later works on view in the smaller gallery highlight Ghebreyesus’s continued grappling with his experience in, and emigration from, Eritrea in his artistic practice. Paintings in muted palettes of solitary boats and trains travelling through empty space evoke feelings of transience, while Ghebreyesus’s signature use of bold color and geometric patterns are evident in landscapes of the Eritrean mountains and portraits of soldiers.

## About the Artist

Ficre Ghebreyesus populated his works with intricate, highly personal experiences as a citizen of the world. Born in Eritrea during its War of Independence (1961-1991), he left as a teenaged refugee to Sudan, Italy, and Germany, before finally settling in the United States where he received an MFA from the Yale School of Art, and was awarded the Carol Schlossberg Prize for Excellence in Painting at graduation. Ghebreyesus continued his lifelong activism for Eritrean independence alongside studying painting, printmaking, several languages, and working as the executive chef and co-owner of New Haven’s Caffé Adulis. Operating fluidly between abstraction and figuration, Ghebreyesus’s matte acrylic and oil paintings suggest the non-linear form of dreams, memories, and storytelling. Landscapes flow seamlessly into sea and skies, teeming with biodiversity, while boat hulls and angels’s wings are fashioned from colorful geometric shapes echoing Eritrean textiles. In a style distinguishably his own, Ghebreyesus embraces the complexity of his personal history built upon an evolving understanding of identity and home.

While Ghebreyesus turned down most opportunities to show during his short lifetime, posthumous solo institutional exhibitions of his work include *Ficre Ghebreyesus: City with a River Running Through* at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, California and *POLYCHROMASIA: Selected Paintings by Ficre Ghebreyesus* at Artspace, New Haven, Connecticut. Galerie Lelong began representing the Estate in 2019 and held the solo exhibition *Ficre Ghebreyesus: Gate to the Blue* in 2020. In 2022, Ghebreyesus’s work was showcased in the 59th Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams*. Ghebreyesus’s work is currently on view in museum collection exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland and the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. His work has also been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Illinois and California African American Museum, Los Angeles, California. Works by Ghebreyesus can also be found in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California; Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland; The Studio

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Museum in Harlem, New York, New York; New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana; Rollins Museum of Art, Winter Park, Florida and the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Writer and poet Elizabeth Alexander's memoir, *The Light of the World*(2015), chronicles her husband Ghebreyesus's life and work.

Ficre Ghebreyesus was born in Asmara, Eritrea, in 1962, and died in New Haven, Connecticut, in 2012.

## HIGHLIGHTS



**Ficre Ghebreyesus**

*Untitled, c. 1990s*

Signed recto

Pastel on paper

25 ½ x 19 ½ in (64.8 x 49.5 cm)

Framed: 31 ¼ x 25 ¼ x 2 in (79.4 x 64.1 x 5.1 cm)

(GL14453)



**Ficre Ghebreyesus**

*Untitled, c. 1990s*

Signed recto

Pastel on paper

19 ¾ x 25 ½ in (50.2 x 64.8 cm)

(GL14724)



**Ficre Ghebreyesus**

*Untitled, c. 1995*

Oil on canvas

90 x 54 in (228.6 x 137.2 cm)

(GL13850)



**Ficare Ghebreyesus**

*Five Figures with Horse Head*, 1999

Acrylic on burlap

66 ¼ x 93 ½ in (168.3 x 237.5 cm)

Framed: 68 ¾ x 96 x 2 ¾ in (174.6 x 243.8 x 7 cm)

(GL13870)



**Ficare Ghebreyesus**

*I Believe We Are Lost*, c. 2002

Acrylic on unstretched canvas

113 ½ x 118 ½ in (288.3 x 301 cm)

(GL13879)



**Ficare Ghebreyesus**

*Untitled*, c. 2002-07

Acrylic on canvas

8 x 10 in (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

(GL13795)