

FICRE GHEBREYESUS

The Art Show

February 27 – March 1, 2020

Booth A8



Ficre Ghebreyesus, *Red Room*, c. 2002-07.

Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, is pleased to newly represent the Estate of Ficre Ghebreyesus and will debut his work with a solo booth at The Art Show 2020. This will be the first time that Ghebreyesus's work is publicly exhibited as a solo presentation in New York City.

Occupying a dream-like space between abstraction and representation, Ghebreyesus' alluring acrylic paintings demonstrate the range of cultural influences he encountered throughout his life. His works hold a myriad of diverse references: Coptic Christian iconography, Italian colonial and Islamic architecture, the alphabets of the seven languages he spoke well, jazz and the polyrhythms of the Black diaspora. Ghebreyesus was, in his own words, a "conscious syncretist" of culture.

Works on view include Ghebreyesus's seminal painting *Red Room* (c. 2002-07), a vibrant still life that places him at the Yale University Art Gallery. The work directly references sculpture in the University's collection, collapsing background into foreground, interior and exterior, to imbue it with as much life as the people it represents. While clearly inspired by his own life, the work also draws from art history, such as evoking the sensuous red color and patterned plant life that dominates Henri Matisse's *The Dessert: Harmony in Red* (1908).

Ficre Ghebreyesus was born in Asmara, Eritrea, in 1962 during the Eritrean War of Independence. After leaving his homeland at the age of sixteen as a refugee from this decades-long political conflict, he traveled through Sudan, Italy, and Germany, before arriving in the U.S. While working as an activist for Eritrean independence, he studied painting at the Art Students League and printmaking at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop in New York. He eventually settled in New Haven, CT, with his wife and two sons and was executive chef and co-owner with his brothers of the popular Caffé Adulis. In 2002, he received his MFA from Yale University and was awarded the Carol Schlosberg Memorial Prize for Excellence in Painting at graduation. He died unexpectedly in 2012 at the age of fifty. While Ghebreyesus turned down most opportunities to show during his short lifetime, recent posthumous exhibitions of his work include *Ficre Ghebreyesus: City with a River Running Through* at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), San Francisco, California, 2018 and *Ficre Ghebreyesus: Polychromasia* at Artspace, New Haven, Connecticut, 2013. Lowery Stokes Sims, Co-Curator of his exhibition at MoAD and Curator Emerita for the Museum of Arts and Design, states, "Ghebreyesus's paintings are infused with the urgency of cultural memory, national storytelling, and personal evocation." Writer and poet Elizabeth Alexander's widely lauded memoir, *The Light of the World* (2015), chronicles her husband Ghebreyesus' life and work.

For press enquiries, please contact Grace Hong, 212.315.0470 or grace@galerielelong.com.

FICRE GHEBREYESUS

Selected Original Writings

I started painting ten years ago, but I suspect I have been metaphorically doing so all my life. When I started painting, I just did it. I had never felt a stronger urge [...] Painting was the miracle, the final act of defiance through which I exorcised the pain and reclaimed my sense of place, my moral compass, and my love for life.

— Ficare Ghebreyesus, 2000

The pieces that flowed out of me were very painful and direct. They had to do with the suffering, persecution, and subsequent psychological dilemmas I endured before and after becoming a young refugee from the Independence War (1961-1991) in my natal home of Eritrea, East Africa [...] When I paint in my studio in New Haven, some five thousand miles away from home, I still find myself reacting to this reality. My normative experience is inescapably Eritrean [...] I am continually recontextualizing my normative experiences in early Eritrea [...] I have become a conscious syncretizer.

— Ficare Ghebreyesus, 2000