

*IN THE FOREGROUND:  
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*  
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“ON LIVING ARCHIVES”  
TSEDAYE MAKONNEN  
ON COLLABORATION AND  
BLACK PERFORMANCE PRACTICES**

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**Transcript**

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In this episode, you'll hear from me, Caitlin Woolsey, Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program. I speak with artist and curator Tsedaye Makonnen about her multidisciplinary studio, curatorial, and research-based practice. We discuss how Tsedaye's sculptural installations and performances thread together her identity as a daughter of Ethiopian immigrants and a Black American woman to explore the transhistorical forced migration of Black communities across the globe.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

*Anyone who is doing performance art, if they're not feeling like they've been taken over by something, I don't think they're doing it right. Because it's not only you, but your audience also experiences that shift that happens during a performance. And you as the performer, if you're doing it right, you will feel it as well. You'll be like, oh yeah, the audience is feeling it too.*

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you so much for joining me today. It's so wonderful to have you on the podcast to talk more about your work.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

Thank you, Caitlin.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I would be curious to hear you speak a bit more about how you came to making in the arts. How would you trace some of the influences or experiences that shaped where you've come?

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

Growing up I guess had an artistic bone, but I think all children do, to be honest, just some, as they grow older, continue to develop it and others take that creativity into other subjects and industries. But I've always sketched.

That's definitely something. I remember creating my own still lifes in the house, but not knowing that's what that was. Just so that I could practice sketching.

I can think of influences coming from aunties around me. I was thinking about my one aunt, her partner, Harry, was a framer, an art framer. So I have a small collection of prints and paintings that they would gift me, like for birthdays and big transitions, like I graduated middle school, and he would frame them. They would have these like really super special frames. And then going to their house I really enjoyed because they were such avid collectors of Black diasporic art, from Egypt to Ethiopia, to West Africa, to the Caribbean, and Black American art. So their house is a collage of just so many different pieces. Every corner, every piece of the wall was covered. I feel like that's definitely influenced me.

I had one aunt, she's a math professor, she still is [teaching] in Florida at an HBCU. She had a really strong art practice, but she just did it for herself. So that was interesting to see. She was a serious figurative painter. I remember once when we went to visit her, she stretched her own—it's not canvas, it was like velvet, a black velvet material with a circular wooden frame—and she painted I think it was a yellow boat. But I remember seeing that and being like, this is so cool.

I think also that growing up in an Ethiopian household and community, art is everywhere. But it's viewed as a way of life. It's not how it is in the western world: something that's put in museums and galleries, and treated differently. Whereas the culture I grew up in, it just is everywhere and is not distinguished in that way. So to see that she had this art practice that was closer to what I would see in museums was really intriguing to me.

My mom encouraged [me]. She would buy me really cool watercolor paint sets and nice markers and sketchbooks and things like that. But then it was also something that was looked at more as like a hobby rather than something that you could pursue as a career. But I do think that much of the mundaneness in the reality that I grew up in is what fed and feeds my art practice.

If you have grown up in an Ethiopia or Eritrean household, your walls are covered in Coptic crosses and diptych and triptych Biblical scenes, and it could be wood carvings of them, or gold leaf, intricate paintings. And usually these figures are Black too. So, it wasn't until I became an adult that I understood that the ornamentation—even going to the orthodox churches, where the priests are carrying these umbrellas that have embroidered gold on top of really beautifully rich, royal color textiles. And the clothing is mostly white, but then it's layered with all of these different colors and patterns and trimmings. And I think about that a lot. There's so much going on from even the light fixtures, to the paintings on the walls, to the Coptic crosses, to the incense that's being burnt, to all the rituals...

I realized it was such a privilege to have grown up around that because it really informed my practice as to what you see now. And maybe it's not a traditional western art upbringing, but to me it's just as rich and informed, in a different type of way. And really creative and artistic and effortlessly so. And that's the part that I really intoxicated by as a child, you know? I used to make my own Christmas cards or birthday cards, but I would paint or draw different Coptic crosses on them. I was always obsessed with them because they're essentially fractal patterns and designs. From a young age I obsessed over them.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

The way you describe it, it's both quotidian, part of your everyday surroundings and environment, but also there's the ritual aspect. These special rhythms of when things happen and I imagine during the week or during the year, like in a church setting. So there's this kind of synthetic experience that's so different from the white cube [of the museum].

### **Tsedaye Makonnen**

I had an Ethiopian American friend who I grew up with. We would go to each other's houses a lot. And she had pointed out the intention of my parents; so most Ethiopian art, a lot of it is influenced by Christianity, so you'll have Mary, Jesus, and I don't know the Bible well, so I can't name all the characters, but everyone [in the Ethiopian artwork] is Black or look like they're of East African descent. Even also the Indigenous Ethiopian paintings that my parents would bring from back home, that artwork was all dark-skinned people, which I had never noticed until my friend pointed it out. But it was intentional because of colorism. A lot of the artworks are of light-skinned Ethiopians usually, whether

it's at the church or Indigenous paintings, so even that intentional choice [on my parent's part] of the art that they chose that came into their household, even if it wasn't something that was reflected elsewhere. I didn't realize how special and privileged I was that these figures that are God or that carry a lot of power were all Black figures that looked like us. It didn't even click to me that there was a white Jesus until I was a lot older. Even though I saw those figures or that imagery around. But because it wasn't in the house and it wasn't in the churches or spaces that I had moved through, and since I grew up in Little Ethiopia [an area of Washington, DC], everywhere I looked I was reflected back.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

This perhaps builds more on what you were saying earlier about the kind of broader visual and artistic environment that you grew up in. But I'd love to talk a little bit about the materiality of your practice, because you work across a range of media. You work with textile and other kinds of objects and of course performance. I'm curious about different moments in your work, or how you came into performance and time-based work? Or perhaps you'd like to speak more about how you approach the materiality of your practice and how your ideas are played out in different forms?

### **Tsedaye Makonnen**

I use a lot of textile in my work as its own object. And the textiles I use, I describe them as sculptural textiles. Because I do see them as sculpture *and* textile. But I know that's directly comes from rouching, wearing, feeling so many different types of fabrics as a child. And there's a way that Ethiopians will adorn themselves. Like on Sunday, a lot of Ethiopians are heading to church, like they're in what we call *netelas*. For the women, [it's] a white dress that has patterns on the ends, these embroidered patterns of different colors at the end. So it's mostly this white outfit and then you have the white scarves that have the same pattern on the edges, and you wear that and you cover your head with it, or you cover your shoulders with it.

I've realized, having watched my mom, my dad, aunties, uncles, myself, that this is a type of adornment that is so important in our culture. How you step out the house, how you protect yourself, how you adorn yourself with the gold jewelry, the Coptic crosses—I'm wearing one now. That have so many meanings. Yes, it's adornment, but then at the same time it's used as the evil eye or something that's meant to protect or to heal you.

And so all of [this context] has informed the textiles that I create and use in performance. Or use as sculptural forms that exist as objects. If I'm thinking about where I'm at now, I'm making these blue textiles that have these mirrored pieces on them that I call the *Astral Sea* series.

Before I even got there: I was taking actual *netelas*, and I still do, which are these white scarves. And I was carving lino[cut] blocks and hand printing onto the [scarves]. And then using those in performance to adorn other Black audience members or myself, but I would also hang them on the walls in specific ways and that led me to where I'm at now, where I'm using these blue satin fabrics that I'm adorning with mirror pieces that come from my light sculptures. I know I'm kind of jumping ahead, there's a lot to say about that work, but this I guess is where the influence of the activism comes in.

I started using the *netelas*—the Ethiopian scarves—because, and this is even before 2020 and the BLM [Black Lives Matter] process, it was a time where there were all of these back-to-back police shootings. I was also at the time working as a doula serving mostly Black families in Wards Seven and Eight in DC, and seeing how Black women were being treated in the medical industrial complex. There was a lot of anger that I was experiencing, and trauma, as someone viewing these Black women being violently handled by hospitals. And then thinking about these babies in utero who are experiencing this level of stress coming out into the world, already experiencing this violence.

But between that and all of these police shootings, I was really following a lot of what Kimberly Crenshaw was working on with the SayHerName movement, which she's been doing for many years. I thought about these *netelas*, like, okay, these are textiles we use in Ethiopia or in our culture to cover yourself. And part of it is it's creating this layer of protection from the outside world. And so I was thinking about it in performance, like, what if I made these, if I printed these poems or prayers that I created, based off of things that people say to you when you're leaving the house.

Basically it was like these protection spells. I printed them on these scarves and I started adorning other Black performers and people in the audience with them, as this metaphor of protection, like if you're crossing a border or crossing the street.

And then from there, slowly, it took different forms. And then I landed on this *Astral Sea* series, where I have these large blue textiles. One of them is black but they're mostly in blue and they have these abstracted Ethiopian Coptic cross designs that come from my mirrored light sculptures.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Can you speak a little bit about choice of the color blue and then also use of the mirrors?

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

The blue, it's evoking water, the night sky, cosmologies—or the cosmos, I should say specifically. And the reason why that work is speaking about water is because it comes from not only the research [I've been doing], but this body of work that I've been building around Black migration. And thinking about the Mediterranean and drawing connections between what's happening across the Mediterranean right now and the Transatlantic slave trade. But also for a while I've been really interested in looking at the thread between all forms of Black migration. So, the Great Migration; my parents, their exodus from Ethiopia, leaving Ethiopia and all of their peers at that time in the seventies; East African Sub-Saharan Africans going to Libya, going across the Mediterranean, going across Europe, that journey. And then even thinking about Black migrants who are trying to get across the US-Mexico border, who are flying into Brazil to then walk across South and Central America; and whoever makes it past, all of these jungles and even racist encounters within South America, whoever makes it to the border, and who's stuck in Tijuana, or who actually gets across the border? So it's thinking about all of these. And Haitians coming across the Caribbean Sea. This work encompasses all of that, right?

I use a satin material because it's shiny and heavy. And when I move with it in performance, it actually looks like water at times. I'm not married to that texture or fabric. It's just what I've landed on now. And I'm shifting gears, bringing in other materials and stuff which I'm excited about. That's something coming in the new year [in 2023]. But to speak about the mirror pieces that are on the [textile]. These [mirror pieces] come from my light sculpture series, which are light boxes stacked on top of each other that can also be shown individually. I like to stack them in varying heights because it forces the viewer to look up. And it gives them these totemic feeling. It's supposed to feel like a sanctuary, right? It's supposed to feel almost like a holy site. I'm referencing Indigenous

architecture from Ethiopia. And on each face, it's mirror acrylic. Although I'm excitedly moving into using mirrored metal or mirrored stainless steel. But Ethiopian Coptic crosses are basically laser-cut out of each face. So the pieces that come out of Coptic crosses, I save them. So it's the negative space of these light sculptures. And then I repurpose them by placing them on these textiles.

And the way I landed on that was: like most artists, I'm a hoarder. I just don't like to throw away material. These materials are really expensive to work with. Also I'm thinking about the environment. I'm like, ugh, I am putting more plastic out in the world. how do I use this without throwing it away? It's hundreds to thousands of these tiny mirrored pieces. But then also I was noticing these shapes are so fascinating and interesting. And then to think about the negative space of these Coptic designs that I've grown up with. So I started abstracting them on these textiles.

I was doing research at the Smithsonian [National Museum of] African Art, which was really cool because again that was the backdrop of my childhood, so then getting a fellowship there and it being at the museum that meant the most to me at the time. And then the NMAAHC [National Museum of African American History and Culture] came, the Blacksonian, and that now is like the most important [to me]. The African Art Museum is still really important, but the Blacksonian really filled a void for so many people, including myself. But yeah, when I was doing research there I was looking at other spiritual patterns across the diaspora that meant the same things—like healing, protection, rebirth. It also had feminine roots. And with these Coptic crosses, I always knew that there were pre-Christian roots to them because these look very different from your regular crosses. Why are our crosses different? They make them regionally specific, specific to churches, and then specific to individuals. That's something too that throughout childhood I was like, what is this? Why is this different? And I was doing that research while I was at the African Museum, seeing the pre-Christian path to them and understanding this was adopted by the Christian Church and that this exists.

It made me realize okay, so these are universal patterns, right? And how are they connected to other Black spiritual patterns? I've mentioned this before, but Congolese cosmograms, Euro cosmology. There's a direct connection to Egypt, but then looking at Dagon, and then Haitian *vèvè*, Afro-Brazilian spirituality: the same types of patterns in different forms keep coming up.



I started basically creating my own visual language based off of these vast Black designs, and abstracting them on these textiles. I was thinking about them as—bringing back to the *netelas*, the Ethiopian scarf, this big textile, when worn, when activated, when performed with, is another form of protection and healing that is also projecting out into the space that it's in.

If you've seen any videos of mine, especially what I was able to do at [Simone Leigh's] Loophole [of Retreat in Venice in October 2022], when light hits the surface of this textile, those patterns then reflect out onto anyone who's there any surface. And it does this thing on the ceiling that I'm so happy with. It creates its own cosmology. To me, those are the cells of the women that the light sculptures are dedicated to. When I say women, I'm including those who self-identify as women, girls, gender non-binary individuals. And that work is dedicated to those who are no longer here, right? Those that have died from state-sanctioned violence, that have died whilst migrating, in really violent ways. So this work is honoring them but also bringing them into these spaces and asking them as well to come in and do the cleansing work that needs to be done. To be a part of this kind of healing, protective work. That is underneath a lot of what I do.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

It demands I think a level of attention and care from the audience as well as the performers, creating this really special, embodied quality. I love earlier how you said that you think of your textiles not just as textiles but as sculptural, that they're always already in some way embodied. Or there's a substance to them that I think is expressed in different ways across your body of work, but it's really beautiful.

### **Tsedaye Makonnen**

I am not fully aware always of what's coming through me while I'm making the work, while I'm performing the work, but also even when I'm in collaboration with the people that I'm working with, whether it's through performance or the making of work. Or even, I think about how collaborative it is when you're putting on a show as well, like with the curator, with the production team; there is a lot of collaboration happening.

In those moments I'm like, okay, the community I grew up in definitely comes through me, because I've watched my parents and their generation of Ethiopians and Eritreans that they formed families with. Because most of them came here in the seventies, having to leave a lot of their family behind. So they made their own siblings out of friends. I was raised by a ton of aunts and uncles who I'm not even blood related to, but I've grown up counting on them as actual family and watching them look out for each other. It's partially why I love working with other people because being an artist can be so solitary. I'm always trying to figure out a way to involve someone else or several people. Because I think there's just so much more richness that happens when there's different types of people in the room.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In your process, do you tend to conceptualize an idea for a work—whether it's a performance or a sculptural piece—do you tend to conceptualize that idea and then you with collaborators to realize it? Or do you also work in a way that's more co-creating from the inception point?

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

That's a great question. My practice is really research heavy, so usually there's either something that I'm experiencing personally or something's happening within my community, or friends, or people I work with that feels very important to address. So I'll usually go in and research before I figure out how that's going to turn into an art piece, whether it's a performance or an object.

I think about *Black Women and/as the Living Archive*: that came about because Alisha B Wormsley, who's a really dear friend of mine. We collaborate often with each other. And I am really intrigued by how she works and how she collaborates with a lot of black femmes. It basically came out of a conversation with her that turned into me wanting to research her practice more. So then I approached WPA [Washington Project for the Arts], an organization in DC also run by a dear friend of mine who I collaborate with often, Jordan Martin. And I asked [Jordan], can I curate a show around Alisha's work? Because I'm fascinated by all of these black femmes that she works with. I've overlapped with them on the art scene, or someone like Autumn Knight I've performed adjacent to, or Jasmine Hearn, who's a dancer, who I've now collaborated with; they've activated my textiles through dance.

Taking that idea to Jordan, she was like, how can we do more with this than just curating a show? And I was like, what if we pull in all of the different artists that Alisha has worked with in, within this film, *Children of NAN*, screen the film, but also ask all these artists to create something new for this show. Whether it's performance, whether it's objects, text, whatever. But then the pandemic happened, so then it turned into a virtual show, but then it lent itself to being turned into this book. Because we thought, since we weren't able to have an actual physical show, how can the show live on?

So this book was created, which I look at as an art object rather than a book because it is an archive of what happened, but also we were able to pull in all of these Black women writers to contribute. So then it grew, which expanded Alisha's idea about this living archive, and how it keeps going, and it lives within all of us. Which I carry with me and I love as a performer—that just as a person, we all are these living archives

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

It resonates so beautifully or powerfully with how you described the way that you envision—like in the performance at Loophole—invoking and memorializing, extending healing. That there's all these layers that are at play simultaneously, while also acknowledging the violence that is that same history.

### **Tsedaye Makonnen**

Ayanna Evans, who also performed for Loophole, that's another longtime collaborator. It's funny because her and I collaborate totally differently than me and Alisha do. Her and I know each other from the underground performance art scene in Brooklyn from years ago. We spent years watching each other and workshopping all of these crappy performances in front of each other. And then from there, because that was such a collaborative space, it was a bunch of performers who no one was paying attention to at the time. None of us were making any money from the work we were making. So we really were each other's support system, like running to the bodega and buying—I would use rice and Aunt Jemima pancake flour and tequila, and they would run and go get that from me before I arrived, because I was driving from DC, and I'd be like, I need you to hold this prop while I do this thing.

So we were naturally collaborating with each other for years, and then formally did it at a residency on Martha's Vineyard, Art on the Vine. And that's where we

realized oh, we approach our practices differently. Like, Ayana's someone who she performs her idea and then figures out what it's about. And then I'm the opposite. I have to research, usually make an object, and then perform with it

We're at this stage now where we like telepathically communicate with each other. That's what happened at Loophole. Our performances were vastly different, but they complemented each other so well. And she was saying, Tsedaye's gonna give you something spiritual and Tsedaye's gonna give you something deep, and then Ayana's gonna give you like all this joy and fun and play. I also have those elements in my performances. But for that one, specifically for Loophole, because it was in Venice, where I did my unsanctioned performance in 2019, then coming back in 2022, and being invited by Simone and the US Pavilion, I [knew I ] had to do a performance around migration, specifically about African migrants in Italy.

So my performance was heavy, but then we transitioned it so well into [Ayana'] that turned the space into a party. This all was within the span of an hour, between the two of us. I also think what's key to collaborations going well is having a history with someone and knowing each other. That really helps. I've tried to collaborate oftentimes with other people where it doesn't work so well because we don't really know each other. But if there's a kinship there, it helps.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

I want to pick up you referencing your intervention in 2019 in Venice, *When Drowning is the Best Option*. And then folding in what you were saying at the very beginning of our conversation about church services and the multisensory experience, the sound and the smell. I'm asking partly because I work on sound, and I was struck in the documentation of *When Drowning is the Best Option*, the 2019 intervention, the role that sound plays, not just movement. And it's not only the physical bodily performance and the textile covering your body, but also the sounds that it makes, that's striking.

### **Tsedaye Makonnen**

Sound is definitely a big element in my work. Multisensory, the way you described—it's perfect. I mean, I used to sprinkle cinnamon card and clove during my performances, which I should bring back, because that's what I would often smell growing up at home because we always had a pot that was boiling of cinnamon card and clove. So to set that tone and smell brings up so many

memories for people, just as much as sound does. All of that matters. And sound is huge in the *Astral Sea* pieces because those mirror pieces, when they hit the ground, I intentionally want them to sound like crashing waves.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

In 2019, when I did the two unsanctioned performances [in Venice], the first one, I had my other performance art materials with me because I decided to do it at the very last minute. So it was a little less intentional. But I had found there I was playing a song that pissed a lot of people off, Italians off, because it was, it's a song, and I've spoken about this before, but it's called "Facetta Nera," which means "Little Blackface." And this person who's a Somali-Italian scholar describes it as—and I just love using her description because she has a whole piece written about it—but it's the carnal union between Italian soldiers and little Ethiopian girls. So it was a song created during Mussolini's era to essentially convince the Italian population that invading Ethiopia: yes, we should do this. But the interesting thing about that is that Mussolini banned the song because he was a purist. So he was all like, no, we are not intermixing with these Black folk. But it's a song that still to this day is really popular. And because of the neofascist wave, it's come back. I've even done performances where I created a video montage of YouTube videos. If you put that song in YouTube there's videos of adult Italians, right now, teaching their little kids the song. That can get really dark. And a famous techno DJ also played it at some huge European festival, where there's tens of thousands of people partying to the song. I was playing that song through a speaker while I was performing.

But then fast forward, so that was in April, it was for the opening week of the [Venice] Biennale in 2019. So then I went back for the closing weekend and that's when I took, for the first time, the *Astral Sea*. I wore the very first one I made. Now I have four with the mirror pieces. The sounds of that one [from Venice] are louder because the grounds were wet. It was right after Venice was flooded. Everything was wet, so it was getting heavy and picking up all of this sediment and water while I was performing. So it sounds really loud when it's slapping the floor. I do these gestures where I'm hitting the floor constantly. There's pieces breaking off. But then I'm also doing like a cleansing or sweeping of the grounds with it. All of those are making different sounds. It's like crashing

waves. Or when I'm dragging it, it'll sound like almost like a really like a rainstorm. And when I'm doing that shaking, I feel like it sounds like water hitting up against like rocks or something. So I'm trying to evoke water, but also bodies of water that have actual bodies in them. And bodies of water are—water is violent, right?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Yes. For me, the sonic dimension conveys the potential terror and duress of the water, but it also specifically relates to contemporary migration, and also, as you alluded, to the histories of the Transatlantic slave trade; it also sounds like chains. It has this violent quality, which is both of the water and manmade.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

Yeah. And then thinking about, okay, if these mirror pieces represent the cells of these women, I feel like they're making that sound, right? Their anger is coming through their powers which, you know, I feel while I'm performing. Anyone who's doing performance art, if they're not feeling like they've been taken over by something, I don't think they're doing it right. Cause it's not only you, but your audience also experiences that shift that happens during a performance. And you as the performer, if you're doing it right, you will feel it as well. You'll be like, oh yeah, the audience is feeling it too.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

You mentioned before that you think about the archive as the individual archive and as an open archive. I would be curious to hear you speak about the research that you've specifically been engaged in this past fall [2022] at the Clark [Art Institute], looking at histories of performance and performance art. And maybe how your current focus is feeding into upcoming projects or things that you have underway?

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

I'm interested in looking at radical forms of performance art forms of activism that shift, whether it's the art world or the world outside of that, which is much larger. Like building off of what I did at the Biennale, right? Inserting yourself and using your practice as an intervention. As a political intervention.

And then tying that to the intergenerational conversations that are happening, among performers, even if they're not happening actually, like in person, or

directly. But they're happening across generations, just through influence. Going back, like Lorraine [O'Grady] did performances that now we're looking at, and it's totally clear that we're able to do the things we're doing as performers and specifically as Black performers because of what she did.

I've been really interested in having dancers activate several *Astral Seas* at the same time. I want to have an orchestra of them. And I'm talking to Sandra Burton [head of the Dance Department] at Williams College about pulling her into that, and possibly her students.

And then I've been researching public art because I have the Providence [Rhode Island] public art commission coming up, which will be like huge, building-size versions of my light sculptures.

I'm also in three shows in the fall of 2023 that are related to Ethiopian art. One is in September, and it's African metalworks from the 12th Century at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, which will have a lights sculptures and textiles.

And then in November, I'm a part of at the Met [ropolitan Museum of Art], so Andrea Achi, who's a curator at the Met, is doing a show called, *Africa & Byzantium*, and most of the works are from the first through the fourth century. She's doing the important work of shifting the narrative and our idea of what the medieval era looked like, and basically saying it wasn't just Europe doing things at this time. Her focus is between Ethiopia, Egypt, and across East and North Africa, into the Middle East. And she's doing a show that is a survey of all of that, all the artifacts and artworks. It's going to be really expansive. They're commissioning me to do my light sculptures, which for this show I'm trying to do them in metal.

I'll be making new textiles similar to the *Astral Sea* ones, but also the *netelas* I was talking about, the Ethiopian scarves, where I print text. I'm making new ones for that [exhibition]. My writing is in an American accent, so when I spell it out, I don't spell it correctly, because of the character, and I like that because it just speaks to what gets lost in translation, right? When people migrate. But for this one, I'm going to have my mom correct my translations and have those printed on top, in her hand. And then I was thinking, I'd love my son, my 12-year-old, to then write the English translations of them on top of that. So I'm going have that

in the show and that'll be in conversation with all of these ancient Ethiopian manuscripts, which I'm really excited about.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

The shift from [mirror] acrylic to metal, was that an intentional shift in your materials in relation to the historical modes of making that are in the show?

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

Yeah. Metalworking in Ethiopia has been really important part of making, and also the making of Ethiopian crosses specifically; this is something that's been around for centuries. This is me trying to access that and also create them in a more intentional way.

My dream, and this is something that I'm working towards in my like two- to five-year goals, when I buy my warehouse studio, is to turn it a metal workshop. It's me basically learning something that is already, I'd like to think, in my DNA, right? Because that's how things have been made there [in Ethiopia] traditionally. And the weight of that. I've also been thinking about how will I be attaching these [forms] to the textiles? And if I do [attach them], I'm going to have to imagine that differently because it's going to be heavier, also dangerous.

Mirror acrylic is wonderful, but it's not forever. I've been thinking about that too. It's plastic, it's sensitive, it gets scratches. I mean, it's a wonderful material but I'm kind of ready to move away from it. And then there are also collectors of mine who are really excited because they're like, yay, we've been waiting for this [move to a more stable, permanent material].

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's interesting too how the shift in materials, as you said, will necessarily change the *Astral Sea* pieces, and perhaps even the material possibilities and constraints may shape the performances in ways that open up new directions or different directions of meaning.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

I've just thought how cool would it be if I plan on going to Ethiopia soon and if I could find a way to build my own residency where I learned directly from the metalsmiths that make these crosses?



Oh, and there is one more show, at the Walters Art Museum [in Baltimore, Maryland]; that's in December. The Met show there's only two living artists, and everything else will be from the first to fourth century. The Walters Museum will have a lot more contemporary artists involved and in conversations with the [museum's] historical collection. And they have, I think, one of the largest collections; the people who opened the Walters, they were collectors of Ethiopian artifacts.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

You have so many exciting projects on the horizon and already underway. I really appreciate you being willing to speak with me and share more about your work. It's been a pleasure.

**Tsedaye Makonnen**

Thank you so much, Caitlin.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to resources referenced in the conversation, please visit [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with Caroline Fowler; music by lightchaser; sound editing by CJ DeGennaro; and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Maggie O'Connor.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.