

Comment Piece

**“We All Share the Same Language” Elias Sime: Eregata, Arnolfini, Bristol,  
October 21, 2023 – February 18, 2024, Exhibition**

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**ABSTRACT**

A review of the exhibition Elias Sime: Eregata at the Arnolfini gallery, Bristol. The Exhibition is the first solo exhibition in Europe of Sime’s work. The review explores the Zoma project, a network of arts centres in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, created in collaboration between Sime and the curator and cultural anthropologist, Meskerem Asseged. The Arnolfini exhibition is discussed in relation to its central theme of networks, both local and global; networks that consist of stories and knowledge, commerce and waste.

**Keywords:** global communication, networks, art, Elias Sime, exhibition

**“WE ALL SHARE THE SAME LANGUAGE” ELIAS SIME: EREGATA, ARNOLFINI, BRISTOL, OCTOBER 21, 2023 – FEBRUARY 18, 2024, EXHIBITION<sup>1</sup>**

Sitting in the valley of the Entoto Mountains above Addis Ababa, and on the verge of completion, is the third iteration of an extraordinary project, the Zoma Museum and, now, Zoma Village. This is the result of a long-running collaboration between the artist Matias Sime, and curator and anthropologist Meskerem Asseged.

The initial Zoma (known locally as ‘Little Zoma’), in the Mekanisa area of Addis Ababa, was purchased by Sime and Asseged as a home for Sime, an artist residence and gallery. The appearance of the property is of a *gestamtkunstwerk*, with each and every surface a part of the breathtaking whole; from the paving tiles leading to the building’s entrance, engraved with images of local wildlife, to the mud-built walls, and the beautifully decorated timber walls of the interior, which is inhabited by traditionally hand-carved wooden furniture. In her essay for the catalogue that accompanies the Arnolfini exhibition, Nana Biamah-Ofusu describes this building as ‘a convivial space, designed for gathering, sharing stories and the act of dreaming’.<sup>2</sup>

The second iteration of Zoma, Zoma Museum, expands the scope of the first with the addition of a school, library, restaurant, amphitheatre and herbal gardens. Here, the artist’s home-as-artwork becomes a space for community. The project, funded largely by the sale of Sime’s artwork, offers an alternative space for learning, for the children who attend school there, and for members of the wider local community. The school, and Zoma as a

<sup>1</sup> *Elias Sime: Eregata*, Arnolfini, Bristol, October 21, 2023 – February 18, 2024, Exhibition

<sup>2</sup> Brace, G. (ed). (2023). *Eregata* (Bristol: Arnolfini, October 21, 2023 – February 18, 2024, Exhibition Catalogue): 68.

project, follow a traditional approach to education, 'ye kes timirt bet', which, as Biamah-Ofusu explains, 'long before standard Westernised learning, provided literacy education to young children in this region'.<sup>3</sup> Here, children

'are exposed to nature, where general sciences are taught through planting or looking after the cows who are also residents here, where art and physical exercise are intertwined with play and gardening, And where Amharic (a semitic language descended from Ge'ez) is taught with the same significance as the English language.'<sup>4</sup>

The latest instalment of the project, Zoma Village Entoto, is an altogether (even) more ambitious centre for art, community, education and story-telling. Here are more galleries, artists' studios, living spaces for visiting artists, scholars and students. Although this latest aspect of Zoma seems more directed towards art-workers and less toward the local communities of Addis Ababa, its location above the city is as symbolic as it is practical. The knowledge developed, shared and curated at Zoma Village Entoto will, inevitably and deliberately, inform the projects and initiatives that take place in and around the other two locations ('Little Zoma' and Zoma Museum). Zoma is, unquestionably, a model for holistic arts, cultural and social education and community development that should be seen as a model for societies in which learning has become secondary to data and political point-scoring. It might also be considered a model for the reinvention of the Western arts centre, in that Zoma is inherently asset-based, accepting and celebrating what is there in the local community and building from that. In this sense, Zoma and Sime's artwork are inextricably linked, using materials, knowledges and language shared and exchanged between communities.

The current exhibition, the first in Europe of work by Elias Sime, is the result of a visit by Arnolfini staff to the Zoma projects. The gallery's director, Gary Topp, has described how the qualities of the Zoma project 'speak to the Arnolfini's own determination to be a civic space with many different values, communities and purposes at its heart'<sup>5</sup>, demonstrating a continuing commitment to developing the gallery as a hub for diverse creative communities.

The exhibition is titled Eregata, an Amharic word with a complex meaning whose nearest translation in English is 'serene'. The Amharic language significantly predates other Northern Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic, suggesting an ancient and rich history of oral and written tradition. The work exhibited here represents twenty-two years of artistic practice, but also an engagement with millennia of story-telling traditions, both local (to Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, and Amharic-speaking communities) and global. Throughout this time, Sime's materials have ranged from repurposed fabric, clothing and buttons (materials crucial to existence and survival) to recently defunct electrical and computer components (technology so crucial to the sharing of knowledge and stories over the last half century). The collection of works on display tell stories of networks, both local and global; networks that consist of stories and knowledge, commerce and waste.

Eregata begins on Arnolfini's ground floor with a series of works from Sime's *Tightrope* series (2014-present). This series is largely constructed using reclaimed electrical (and occasionally mechanical) components, either hanging on the walls of the gallery mounted on huge two-dimensional panels, or in the form of hollow curved quarter-sphere sculptures sitting on the floor of the gallery space, like modular panels from some defunct 1980s spacecraft.

The first of the wall-hung pieces, *Tightrope: 99*, is impressively large at 200 × 481.3 cm. Consisting of thousands of pieces of circuit board, dismantled, cut up and rearranged, the physicality of the work is unavoidable. Yet, from a distance, it has the appearance of mid-century Modernist painting, mainly of greys and browns composed in asymmetric geometric patterns across the surface of the panel. The dull colours are punctuated by tiny flecks of red, orange and blue. The resistors, capacitors and transformers, long since redundant as electrical components, become aesthetic components of an absorbing work of art. The focal point of this piece is a circle of green circuit board, dropping out from behind a wall of grey-brown just left of centre in the bottom third of the panel. However, this partial circle functions as more than a formal component of an abstract arrangement, but also as a literal focal-point, pulling the eye's focus from the overall composition of the panel, to the fine detail of the circuit boards themselves; from the big picture to the intimate stories of the panel's inhabitants, whose previous existence might have involved the transmission of data across the globe.

This metaphor is also present in the works that consist – sometimes in part, sometimes entirely – of electrical wire that has been braided and woven together in patterns that represent the serene rippled surface of a flowing river, or a calm but ever-shifting ocean. *Tightrope: (20) While Observing*, a similar size to *Tightrope 99*, is made up of 72 rectangular panels, all consisting of orange electrical wire apart from the top-right module, which is a combination of blues and greys, mixed like pigment on the surface of the panel. Again, from a distance the

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 7

impression is of mid-century Modernism, or perhaps the modular minimalism of LeWitt or Stella. However, once again, close-up it is difficult not to read the materials through the metaphors they offer of networks, connections and the transference of information. This interpretation is further supported by the metal nails that hold the wires in place. Sime himself has stated that he ‘prefers things to have been touched or been in contact with people’,<sup>6</sup> and these currents of communication are populated by so many ant-like travellers.

However, the materials used by Sime in these works speak also of another global network, the largely unregulated export of electronic waste from Europe to African nations (Maes and Preston-Whyte, 2022). Sime takes materials that are damaging local eco-systems and have become a health hazard for local people, and repurposed them to tell a more hopeful story.

Sime’s work is rife with contradictions; between old technology and new, hand-made and machine manufactured, local and global, nature and culture. The earlier reliefs, here exhibited in the smaller first-floor gallery, are testament to this, especially when exhibited within sight of the most recent works in the exhibition; more panels covered with braided electrical wire, but this time spread over symbols and figures from Ethiopian folklore. These earlier pieces are made from fabrics, used and discarded clothes, and buttons. Here the matrix consists of stitched and woven fabric rather than braided wires, and the buttons, which have previously held together clothing now do much of the compositional heavy-lifting. Nonetheless, just as Sime sees little difference between these materials and the technological components of the later work, they hold stories, memories and knowledge in much the same way.

Hanging in one of the smaller galleries are reliefs consisting of woven threads, found fabrics, clothing and buttons. *What is Love? 1* involves a symbol that Sime has returned to across his oeuvre, the turtle, although this is the reptile’s only appearance in the current exhibition. Here, yarn is painstakingly stitched onto canvas, representing an undulating grey landscape taking up the bottom two-thirds of the canvas. The top third, a sky, or perhaps more likely due to the subject-matter, the edge of the sea, is stitched from yarns of pale blue and white. In both the yarn and electrical wire pieces, Sime’s colours mix on the surface of the canvas or board. From a mass of red in the form of an anthill or termite mound, crawl hundreds of small, bright red-orange turtles, heading in all directions, but apparently aiming for the sea/sky. In an article for *Surface Design Journal*, A. M. Weaver has interpreted Sime’s use of the turtle symbol in relation to characteristics ascribed to the creature by various African mythologies; ‘patience and endurance’, ‘intelligence and prudence’, and the wisdom of elders (Weaver, 2010, p. 28).

On the same wall hangs another relief, whose textured surface is created from layers of clothing fragments; in the top half of the canvas, a sky of largely muddy browns on top of mid- and pale-blues, the bottom half a road of darker browns, punctuated by patches of cadmium red. Between land and sky are vertical rectangles of reds, greens and black, perhaps representing buildings that line the road on which two over-burdened donkeys trudge across the picture (one has already exited the canvas at stage right, only its rear legs and tail visible). The palimpsest of fabric suggests that this is a scene repeated over and over in the same spot over many generations, at the same time absolutely local to this place, yet a representation of universal experiences of work, drudgery and the transportation of goods (including clothes and fabrics).

This work tells stories more local to Addis Ababa. Alongside more wall-based pieces and larger sculptures, one also encounters hundreds of smaller pieces of hand-made pottery, or models made of mud and straw (the same materials made to build much of Zoma village). In one room, these are small mud and straw models of televisions, frogs and apes, punctuated by traditional Ethiopian jugs. In another room, a wave of ceramic pots, made in collaboration with a community of potters in Addis Ababa, flows below more wall-based panel works from one end of a long wall to the other. These were inspired by one of the research trips Sime made to South-Central Ethiopia with Assegued, where they met ceramicists working with traditional local techniques. This time, tacit knowledge flows from human to human, region to region, and is now spread beyond national borders through this exhibition and many others across Africa, Europe and North America.

As with any artist’s oeuvre, there is weaker work in this exhibition (IMHO, to borrow a term from today’s networks). Tucked away in a smaller gallery on the second-floor is a series of works titled *Tightrope: Echo*, made between 2021 and the present. These consist of cut-up circuit board mounted on board, each with a megaphone (also covered in circuit board) placed onto the surface. The metaphor of the megaphone feels clumsy and on-the-nose compared with the visual and metaphorical complexity of the other works, and their visual composition feels secondary to this. These works shout without saying much, where at its best, Sime’s work transforms humble materials into visual stories that cross cultural boundaries. The work embodies tensions between humans, nature, society and technology, but seems to suggest an optimistic view of technology’s ability to transmit knowledge globally. However, there is some inherent warning here that, without tacit knowledge and traditional skills, and without ways in which to share it, there is much to be lost. In Sime’s own words, ‘If you pull it too tight, it will break’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Elias Sime: Eregata*, op. cit., wall text

<sup>7</sup> *Elias Sime: Eregata*, op. cit., wall text

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