

— THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

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ARTIST: DAWIT L. PETROS

WRITER: SIMONE WHITE

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YOHANES IN THE GARDEN \ 2004



In his photographs, installations and video works, Dawit L. Petros stages encounters between objects that do not (naturally) occupy the same place and time. The horizon lines of Churchill, Canada; Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania; and Death Valley, California, become one. The perpetually twilit wilderness swinging into view through the window of a train is timeless and enchanted, not in-itself, but because the artist's gaze makes it so. In his work, "gestures that mirror, mix and conflate" alter the relation between a location and its meaning.¹ For Petros, location is not place, but proposition. He envisions an "elsewhere" that defies perspective, interruption and capture.

A Geography of the Immanence

Born in Eritrea during its decades-long struggle with Ethiopia, a two-year-old Petros and his family embarked on a journey to Saskatchewan, Canada, by way of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and England. They arrived in Canada nearly seven years later. Petros acknowledges that his family's struggle to reach Canada and begin again in that unknown place informs the powerful impulse, evident in his work, to range—to move across the earth toward a frontier. "In Canada," he reminds us, "the frontier is North." And so the work moves, sometimes easterly, in the direction of the artist's memory, sometimes into the American West (sorrowfully diminished in Proposition 2: Mountain [2007]), and always toward the "Mythic North" alive in the imaginations of artist and viewer.

Reinscriptions

In a series of portraits titled "Reinscriptions," Petros photographed Eritreans living in Canada and the United States. In Yohanes in the Garden (2004), a cheerful gentleman tends a plot of vegetables enclosed by a low wooden fence. The Hadenbes (2005) thrive in a most orderly manner. These photographs are almost too natural—somehow the viewer is alarmed by the good and neighborly fence or the peaceable family group in a familiar-looking suburban backyard. In diaspora, longing to be enfolded in a domestic locale (or being there) is peculiarly problematic.

Petros, it turns out, is a master reinscriber. In every journey there lives a trace of another journey. Every gesture is an echo of another. The series "Some Go Weeping and Some Rejoicing" borrows its title from Robert Hayden's "Runagate, Runagate," a poem evoking the manifold terrors of the flight north and out of slavery ("Many thousands rise and go/many thousands crossing over/O Mythic North/O star-shaped yonder Bible city").² The Idea of North (2007) is a visual meditation on Glenn Gould's radio broadcast of the same title, which itself meditates on the meaning of the Canadian interior (perhaps both consider the meaning of blinding, unitary whiteness).³ Proposition 1: Sign (2007) reproduces a sign announcing arrival at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, devoid of geographical "data" and deposited in a sub-Arctic landscape. In a reflecting pool, Petros builds out his own gaze, but the viewer sees only herself and the exhibition space. Does this prove the proposition that by repeating a journey incessantly, one eventually arrives in a different place?

Ultima Thule

A white expanse proposes unity, perpetuity, synthesis. The operations of black climbers and a detached black hand (its own symbol of subjectivity) remake the expanse, embodying a counterforce that dwells at earth's high places, hot places, poles and valleys. Globalization does not foreclose the quest for a magical edge-of-the-world—never mind that when we get there, it has already moved.

NOTES

1 DAWIT L. PETROS, ARTIST'S STATEMENT, 2007.

2 ROBERT HAYDEN, "RUNAGATE, RUNAGATE," *COLLECTED POEMS*, ED. FREDERICK CLAYBER (NEW YORK: LIVERIGHT, 1985), 59.

3 "SOLITUDS TRILOGY PART 2: THE IDEA OF NORTH," *IDEAS*, PROD. GLENN GOULD, CBC RADIO, DECEMBER 27, 1967.

