

# Looking back at myself

*Citizens of the East African state of Eritrea need a pass and a fixed reason to travel within their own country. Eritrean expatriate Dawit L. Petros tells Nadine Rubin how his 'otherness' allowed him mobility to create his new work*



*Dawit L. Petros is Art South Africa's fourth Bright Young Thing for 2008*

One Saturday morning last November a small crowd had gathered on the tenth floor of a building in Chelsea, New York, to hear Dawit L. Petros talk about *A Total Instance of Reflexivity*, his first New York solo outing. At Alexander Gray and Associates, Petros had installed a set of six shiny black boxes arranged in grids of multiple sizes. Behind the darkened Plexiglas were photographs of two distinct but unidentifiable landscapes and a double self-portrait taken from behind. Gray called them "darkboxes" and, noting their architectural presence, described them as a reversal of Jeff Wall's lightboxes.

To make the work, Petros researched how black mirrors have historically been used in art. One mirror used by artists in the 19th century caught his attention. "People would go into a vast vista with a small, hand-held, convex mirror. When they stood with their back to the landscape and held up the black glass, the landscape was reflected in it. I was intrigued by the idea that this seeming vastness was considered on this tiny surface," says Petros, who sports a goatee and is noted for his impeccable dress sense. The idea that one didn't face what one looked at, but rather that one faced the landscape through this tool became the metaphor for Petros to think about the relationship of those living in the diaspora to one's own history.

Born in Asmara in 1972, he spent just eight months the Eritrean capital. At that time the tiny East African country was still embroiled in the decades-long war with its neighbour, Ethiopia, and there was an exodus of Eritreans streaming over the border into Sudan or, like the Petros family, making their way through Ethiopia and down to Kenya in the south. Petros spent most of the first decade of his life as a refugee in Nairobi. Eventually, his family, sponsored by a group of Menonite doctors, moved to Saskatchewan, Canada. As an adult he has lived in Montreal, Boston, California and now multi-cultural Brooklyn. Inspired by the strict parameters set by artists like Adrian Piper, Vito Acconci, and Sol LeWitt, Petros uses photography,



video and installation to construct and deconstruct his peripatetic existence and the experience of living in various diaspora. Petros' scholarly rigor resonates in his work but "it's his use of personal history within a theoretical framework that pushes it past being purely academic or impressionistic," says Gray. "There is such heartfelt, raw emotion there."

To try to establish his relationship to Nairobi, Petros returned for the first time in February 2007 and drove about 45-50 minutes south to Naivasha. "I stood at a point where I could see over the Rift valley, looking north towards Eritrea and made a photograph," he says of the landscape that is framed inside one of the black boxes. As you approach it, Petros' photograph appears, apparition-like through the smoky Plexiglas. The landscape could be anywhere and because of the shiny surface, you come face to face with your own reflection too – a meditation on the universal relationship between people and the places that hold meaning for them. You, as the subject, are literally

forced to navigate the space. But as you begin to move around, the image falls into a sea of black and you learn that, like the fragment of a memory, the information that brought you in is unstable. "Memory functions very specifically to the diasporic subject," explains Petros. "It's contingent, it's flexible and it's always in the process of being renegotiated relative to experiences in a new location." Petros' parents made sure that he and his three brothers retained a strong rootedness in their own culture and taught them to speak Tigrinya. "They believed that if you forget your connection to what makes you who you are you are completely displaced," he says. As an adult, Petros realised his indebted to these Tigrinya lessons. The first time he returned to Eritrea in 1998, they enabled him to converse with his aging grandmother. When he returned last February, determined to "seal the gesture" that he had begun in Nairobi in 2007 and take a second photograph looking south from Eritrea towards Kenya, they saved his life.

"I thought it would be a simple thing to find a point on the western face of the Rift Valley and take a photograph," he says. "But I arrived to find a different country to the one I had visited a decade earlier." Eritrean nationals need to have a pass and a fixed reason to travel within their own country. Failing to do so could mean detention. And within this tense, environment, the simple act of taking a photograph became political. Every time he took out his medium format camera he and his cousins were arrested and his film confiscated. Soon after, he was let go, but his cousins weren't so lucky. "A part of what ensured my safety there was that it was obvious that I grew up overseas. Being 'other' in that regard is what allowed me to move around," says Petros, still visibly disturbed by the experience. He finally captured the image digitally

because the digital cards, he learned, meant nothing to most of the soldiers. "Non-familiarity became the very thing that made it possible for me to make the work." There is no clue in Petros' beautiful landscapes to suggest the tension in which they were made. He shakes his head. "Part of my fear as an artist is that I am making something way too aesthetically pleasing when it contains such a difficult group of issues."

**Nadine Rubin** is a New York-based writer currently completing her Masters degree in arts and culture journalism at Columbia University

**About Dawit L. Petros:** Born in Asmara, Eritrea (1972), New York-based Petros completed his undergraduate studies in Montreal then relocated to Boston where he earned a MFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. His photographic practice has evolved from straight documentary portraiture, notably a series of portraits of North American-Eritreans, to encompass aspects of conceptual photography and performance art. Widely exhibited internationally, he has presented three solo exhibitions, most recently a self-titled one-person show at Alexander Gray Associates, New York. The recipient of numerous awards and grants, he was a 2008 artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

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Dawit L. Petros,  
*Untitled (Confluence II)*,  
Dekemhare, Eritrea, 2008,  
C-Print, 50.8 x 61cm

[facing page](#)  
Dawit L. Petros,  
*Matthios*, 2005, C-Print,  
76.2 x 101.6cm