

Conversation with Dr. Tajedin N. Yousif



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***“I Think it’s Important, when we think of Art, to
Realize how Connected it is to Everything.”***

By: Sona Berhane

Were you artistic from a young age?

I believe so. I went to a good school as a child. The curriculum included a 90-minute per week art period. The school was well equipped with all kinds of art supplies. That gave me a chance to experiment with painting and be active.

After that I continued my learning at the Institute of Education for four years. That’s when I developed an interest in children’s art and children’s psychology – the two are deeply interlinked. Later on, I joined the College of Fine and Applied Art.

Upon completing my education at the institute, I started working at a primary school as a teacher. The five years I spent there teaching 7 to 9-year-old kids was very enjoyable. I did not engage with the children as a grown up that was there to discipline them and tell them what to do and what no to do, but worked with them in a way that encouraged them to be curious and express freely. I remember at the end of the day, the other teachers would look at me and ask me what happened because when I came in the morning, I would be neatly dressed but after two

periods of interacting with my students, I would be quite dishevelled. My shirt would be covered in paint and tiny handprints. *[Laughs]*

The experience was invaluable and to this day, I still use what I learned from them in my art.



Give me an example of the things you use in your art that you learned from children?

I don't like to mix my colors too much. When I do, I try to keep it to a minimum. I want to use them in their original hues. This is how children use colors. And when I get an idea of something I'd like to paint, I don't deliberate too much on it. As much as possible, I will try to paint it in its original form, before I start to change it with my thoughts. This is very interesting because we often dismiss children's drawings as simplistic or not artistic, but this is how they create. And there must be something that is captured in my paintings because they resonate so deeply with my audiences who are exclusively adults.

Why do you think children's art is important?

The expressions of a child is pure, not self-conscious, and, free from social or disciplinary influence. It is human expression in its most primitive form. I think studying these expressions is the best way to learn about what it means to be human. Even on a personal level, our childhood years are, for each of us,

extremely formative experiences to how we turn out as adults. But we don't pay it too much attention.



There is also the dominant belief that beauty has measurements and that what doesn't line up with these measurements is ugly. I disagree with this theory as well. Beauty is highly subjective and, consequently, so must be ugliness. In fact, I think the word "ugly" is what we use to describe something we don't understand or like. It has everything to do with our state of mind and inclination, and almost nothing to do with the thing we're describing.

I conducted a workshop once for children. It was years ago. I asked them to draw their families, to draw certain concepts that they didn't yet know fully, and the results were so interesting and insightful. I'd never seen art work like that. I wrote an article about it. This was many years ago in Sudan.

Do you have a favorite color?

Blue. It's what we see when we look up to the sky, and it's also the color we see when we look at the sea. Why blue? All the colors are there in the light, but we only see blue. I call it the infinity color.

It's very apparent from your paintings that you love Massawa.

Yes, I love Massawa. I was born and raised in Sudan. After I joined the EPLF, Massawa was the very first city I saw in Eritrea. I think that's why it is a special

place for me. Besides that, it is a quaint, charming, historically and culturally rich place.



Tell me about your time as the first director of the National Museum of Eritrea?

It was a tremendous responsibility and I felt very honored to hold the position. The museum housed a lot of invaluable historical artifacts. Some of these artifacts were the Dahlak tombstones. It's what led me to study them tombstones further and write my doctoral dissertation. I eventually wrote a book on the subject of the Dahlak tombstones many of which, sadly, are scattered around the world in different museums. I still continue to research – most of my work is field research. I'm passionate about preserving the history and culture of the region. What I have found is that cultural and historical appropriation is a very serious and pressing issue for us.

You're a painter, you study children's art and psychology, you're a teacher and you also study the history of art in the region. Is it difficult to balance all your interests?

I don't think they're that different. I think of them as feeding into and supporting one another – one leads to the other. I think it's important, when we think of art, to realize how connected it is to



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