Helena Cantone

Desta, Gebre Kristos (**1932-1981)**

Gebre Kristos Desta was one of the most influential artists to have emerged from the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School in Ethiopia in the 1960s. Best known for his pioneering abstract impressionist style paintings, his social and political content and Pan-African perspectives, Gebre Kristos Desta was attacked by critics who accused him of being too westernised and removed from his traditions and culture. Although he exhibited widely at home and abroad, in the US, USSR, India, and Czechoslovakia, Desta was mainly known in Ethiopia and West Germany during his short life, and only received international recognition after his death.

Gebre Kristos Desta studied art at the Werschule für Bildende Kunste und Gestaltung in Cologne (1957-1961). After graduation Desta held a solo exhibition at the Gallery Kuppers, an event that launched his career as an artist. In Ethiopia, Desta flourished under the patronage of Haile Selassie I, receiving the honorary National Prize for Fine Arts in 1965, and awards for his teaching services at Addis Ababa Fine Arts School between 1962 and 1975. Desta was responsible for introducing new concepts of art to his students which included non-figurative abstract art and experimentation with social-political themes.

During the years of the Ethiopian revolution, under the Derg regime, Gebre Kristos Desta worked as an art expert for the National Campaign for Education through Cooperation, which involved propagating socialist teachings in rural Ethiopia. In 1976 he was invited by the Municipality of Addis Ababa to start the first National Gallery of Ethiopia. Desta became the founder and artistic director of what became known as the City Hall Gallery, providing young artists (including Eshetu Truneh and Tadesse Mesfin among many others) opportunities to exhibit publicly.

Disillusioned with the military regime’s ideological rhetoric, Gebre Kristos Desta went into exile in 1978, first in West Germany and then in the US, where he passed away at the age of 51. Desta is not only remembered as a talented artist and poet, but also as a highly respected teacher who influenced a new generation of Ethiopian artists during the 1960s and ‘70s.

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**Gebre Kristos Desta**



http://www.ethiopianart.org/contents.html

Protect the Flag (Bandirawone), 1976

Oil on board, 150x80cm

Addis Ababa University