

## Graves that Shake, Wombs that Remember, Horns that Call: Three Ethiopian Artists Against Forgetfulness

By: Asayehegn Ibsa

This piece treats Adam Reta, Worqu Inkubahri, and Meskot Gersu as three independent artists and theorists whose artistic positions can be read side by side, even though Worqu and Meskot are fictional painters created by Adam Reta in *Yesinibit Qelemat* and *Etemete Lomi Shita*. The analytical wager of the piece is deliberate: it temporarily suspends the author-character hierarchy and approaches the three figures as if they all existed in the same artistic field, producing parallel but distinct bodies of theory. What follows is therefore not an attempt to collapse the characters into Adam's doctrine, but to compare three artistic worldviews as autonomous intellectual positions. This comparative reading is intentionally limited to the theoretical articulations found in the provided summaries of Adam Reta's *Hitsinawinet* (አፅናዊነት), Worqu Inkubahri's *Misle Noht* (ምስለ ኖህት), and Meskot Gersu's *Tenekanaky* (ተካናኪ).



### Art as a technology of memory, presence, and closeness

Adam Reta's artistic philosophy, formulated as *Hitsinawinet*, defines art primarily as a connective and mnemonic technology. Art, for him, is not a vehicle of linear narration but a structural device for retrieving what has been stored, erased, or fragmented. He describes art as a system of connectivity in which "the meaning lies in the connectivity rather than in isolated units," and frames it as a response to the collapse of linear historical experience following social rupture, particularly the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. His conceptual metaphors are precise: art is "an edible book" or "a survivor document," an injera-like structure that preserves memory through circulation rather than monumentality.

Worqu Inkubahri, a painter character from *Yesinibit Qelemat*, articulates his conception of art through *Misle Noht* (ምስለ ኖሳት) or *Hateta Noht* (አተታ ኖሳት), which similarly begins with a rejection of emptiness. It is worth noting here that Adam himself maintains that the artist must recognize “the womb (Mahesten), or the feminine, creative spaces within structures (alphabets),” and actively fill them. Yet Worqu’s point of departure is not narrative form but ontological presence. For him, what appears void is in fact saturated. He insists that Noht, the so-called empty space, is never empty, because it is filled with soul, wind, and relation. Art, in his formulation, becomes “the interaction between the visible (massive) and the invisible (Noht/Air).” His aesthetic position reframes representation itself as an act of giving mass to what has been socially and historically thinned out. As he states directly, the task of art is to reveal and materialize the invisible: the artist is a “revealer of the invisible” whose duty is to “fill the Noht (the invisible spaces) to give them mass or existence.”

Our third artist’s philosophy of art, Meskot Gersu’s *Tenekanaky*, shifts the axis of art from visibility and memory toward proximity and embodied knowing. While Adam destabilizes linearity and Worqu destabilizes emptiness, Meskot, the renowned dwarf painter from *Etemete Lomi Shita*, destabilizes distance itself. He defines art through what he calls proximity, a concept that closely resonates with Nebyu Gobena’s “science of gursha” (የጉርሻ ሳይንስ), articulated elsewhere in the novel. According to Nebyu, gursha constitutes a spiritual bond that employs tactile connection and emotional transfer to destroy interpersonal distance and merge individuals into collective unity. In line with this, Meskot argues that artistic knowledge must not privilege the eye, as in traditional Ethiopian painting, and its distancing logic alone, but must also engage touch, smell, and taste. His definition of art as *Tenekanaky*, meaning interactivity and closeness, is anchored in the idea that art is a synthesis between distance and intimacy, subject and object, a “synthesis (ጭምቀት) between distance and closeness.”

Across the three positions, art is not conceived as representation in the conventional sense. Adam approaches it as a connective archive, Worqu as a materialization of hidden relations, and Meskot as an embodied bridge that collapses experiential distance. Yet all three define art as a structural operation on reality rather than as a decorative or expressive act.

### **The artist as retriever, bridge-builder, and researcher**

Adam Reta’s figure of the artist is expansive and almost cosmological. The artist is not merely a producer of works but a mediator of dormant relations. He explicitly frames the artist as “a retriever of authentic memories belonging to the writer, the characters, and the nation,” and further elevates the artist to the position of “a co-creator” linked to a “creative spark of divine consciousness.” The artist thus functions as a kind of “scientist of connectivity,” assembling previously unrelated elements into new experiential and conceptual constellations.

Worqu’s artist is less metaphysical but no less connective. Known for inscribing his own couplets onto his paintings, Worqu defines the artist as a “researcher of threads (ዘሃ),” someone with an instinctive awareness of the overlapping lines of influence, memory, and

coexistence that bind people and cultures together. The Worqu-artist is above all a bridge-builder, linking past and present and different modes of expression, particularly painting and poetry, which he insists must exist as mutual continuations rather than separate genres. His formulation is famously reciprocal: “My existence is supported by the existence of others I know and do not know. If I am massive, you are Noht; if I am Noht, you are massive” (“እኔ ግዙፍ ብሆን አንተ ፍኅት ነህ። እኔ ፍኅት ብሆን አንተ ግዙፍ ነህ። ማምለጥ አይቻልም”).

Meskot’s artist is defined through discipline and epistemic responsibility. He insists that the artist must, first and foremost, be a researcher. The role of the artist is “the collection of knowledge (ዕውቀት) through study (ጥናት) before engaging in performance.” Unlike Adam’s cosmic co-creator and Worqu’s thread-researcher, Meskot’s artist is anchored in social inquiry and intellectual preparation. Even his description of painting as “brush throwing” emphasizes that meaningful artistic results often emerge from magical, unplanned, or seemingly divine occurrences, but only after prolonged and serious study. “Brush throwing” (ብሩሽ መጣል), as Meskot describes it, likens the painting process to a fortune teller casting pebbles, underscoring the role of chance and mystery in outcomes that are not fully intentional.

What unites the three is a shared rejection of the artist as a spontaneous genius detached from society. The artist is instead a retriever, a researcher, and a constructor of bridges. The differences lie in the scale of responsibility: Adam reaches toward historical and metaphysical memory, Worqu toward relational invisibility and interdependence, and Meskot toward knowledge-based social accountability.

### **Wombs, horns, and the work of remembering**

Worqu’s visual language introduces two crucial symbolic forms: the womb and the horn. In his renowned work *Birds of Nefas Silk* (“የንፋስ ስልክ አዕዋፍ”), as well as in other major works, Worqu incorporates images of the womb and the horn not as decorative motifs but as archetypal tools through which he attempts to reconnect society with what it has forgotten. His works focus on the retrieval of archetypes, such as the womb and the horns of Amun, as a means of healing what he understands as national forgetfulness. As Yohannes Wola, the cultural critic character in *Yesinibit Qelemat*, observes, these symbols appear designed to tether viewers to ancient history and release them from collective amnesia (“...አሙን የተባለው የጥንት የኢትዮጵያውያን አምላክ ባለ ሙከት ቀንድ ነው። [...] ወርቁ ኤር ብሎ በሥዕሉ ያስቀመጣቸው ማሕፀንና የቀንድ ምስሎች ከጥንት ታሪካችን ሊያያይዘንና ከዝንጉነታችን እንድንላቀቅ ሲከፈለው ይመስለኛል”).

In Worqu’s paintings, the womb becomes a spatial metaphor for origin and continuity, while the horn invokes ancestral power, memory, and cultural resonance. Together, these symbols function as visual bridges between suppressed histories and contemporary perception.

This symbolic project resonates strongly with Adam Reta’s emphasis on Mahesten, the womb-like creative spaces embedded within language and structure. Although Adam’s primary root metaphor is injera, he similarly describes the artist as a witness to the womb hidden inside form, arguing that artists must remain attentive to voids and actively work to fill them. In both positions, the womb is not merely biological or maternal; it becomes an epistemic space in which memory, creativity, and suppressed narratives are gestated. By focusing on “eyes” and on “filling the holes,” Adam aims to retrieve authentic memories and connections that have been arbitrarily lost or deliberately subdued by history and society.

The shared concern here is not nostalgia but retrieval. Adam explicitly frames injera as an “edible parchment” or “a three-dimensional sculpture of memory,” arguing that while visible records such as stone inscriptions or thick parchments were often destroyed by violence or prejudice, the subtle and modest injera was carried into the present on the backs of farmers, potters, and women. Worqu’s horns and wombs perform a parallel function, visually and symbolically reconstructing what has been culturally thinned out. Both artists thus transform symbolic archetypes into mechanisms of historical and social reactivation.

### **Art and society: self-awareness as collective survival**

At the level of social philosophy, Adam, Worqu, and Meskot converge most clearly around the necessity of collective self-awareness.

Adam Reta insists that art must mirror social complexity and disharmony, arguing that *Hitsinawinet* emerges from a society in which traditional linear representations no longer suffice. His artistic ethics emphasize retrieval rather than instruction. *Hitsinawinet*, he states, “shows rather than preaches (ያሳያል እንጂ አይሰብክም),” and seeks to generate empathy and what he calls “positive liaison” by exposing the connective tissue of lived reality. His deeper ethical ambition, evident in *Yesinibit Qelemat*, is the recovery of suppressed national self-understanding.

Worqu articulates the same concern through interdependence and cultural specificity. He explicitly rejects the uncritical adoption of imported ideologies, insisting that artists must first understand the internal dynamics of their own society. Art must expose hidden inter-ethnic and historical influences and dismantle illusions of cultural purity. His assertion that art should expose the Noht in social relations directly frames artistic practice as a tool of social self-examination.

Meskot is even more explicit in transforming artistic practice into a project of collective self-knowledge. One of the central ethical claims of *Tenekanaky* is that self-knowledge functions as defense. He insists that artists must help society know itself in order to delay what he describes as cultural enslavement. His formulation is uncompromising: the artist’s duty is to reveal “total information” and resist narratives constructed from selective data. This commitment aligns directly with Adam’s broader cultural project, famously summarized as the aim of *Tenekanaky* itself: at least to know ourselves, and go to our graves shaking our heads in awareness (“ቢያንስ ስለ ራሳችን እያወቅን ራሳችንን በቁጭት እየነቀነቅን መቃብር እንድንወርድ ነው”).

Although articulated through different metaphors, all three positions defend art as an instrument of collective self-recognition. Adam grounds this in connectivity and memory retrieval, Worqu in interdependence and archetypal reactivation, and Meskot in epistemic responsibility and proximity.

### **Form, structure, and the refusal of partial narratives**

Form occupies a central theoretical place for all three artists.

Adam's formal thinking is built on connectivity. He rejects the monad and argues that "a single story is merely a monad; therefore, the minimum number of stories must be two." His injera metaphor becomes a structural model in which roundness, holes, and internal tunnels form a maze of relations. He explicitly draws on chaos theory, using fractals and bifurcation to construct narratives that emerge rather than being designed in advance.

Yohannes Wola similarly adopts fractal logic in his interpretation of Worqu's work, comparing it to the relationship between mass and space. He argues that the empty spaces of a metal cross are as constitutive as the metal itself, and frames Worqu's practice around the coexistence of the massive and the Noht. Worqu's concept of *Erbrab* (እርብራብ), "a pile of overlapping threads of connection (ዘሃ)," defines content as the study of layered relations rather than linear thematic development. Even the relationship between painting and poetry is restructured through the tail principle, where "the poem is the tail of the painting, and the painting is the tail of the poem."

Meskot's formal theory is shaped by resistance to minimalism and selective narration. He names such practices "to be *Ashurawi*" (አሹራዊነት) and refers to their practitioners as "*Ashrawiyan*" (አሹራዊያን). He opposes them through a demand for total information. For Meskot, *Ashrawiyan* deliberately extract a single piece of data from a complex field in order to construct narrow thought systems that serve economic, political, or professional interests. His own creative process relies on breaking down fragments of reality and reassembling them through analysis and synthesis. His recurring image of the mouth is theoretical rather than merely figurative: it is vital because it is where food, language, and connection intersect. Form thus becomes the site where social, biological, and cultural flows converge.

All three therefore reject reduction. Adam rejects the monad, Worqu rejects the void, and Meskot rejects partial information. Their formal systems are built to resist the oversimplification of experience.

### **Ethical horizons: showing, repairing, and knowing**

Ethically, Adam, Worqu, and Meskot articulate closely aligned but differently inflected responsibilities.

Adam’s ethical core is empathy and retrieval. Art must recover forgotten histories and fill what he describes as the spaces of ignored memory in order to provide “a deep and necessary understanding of the self and the nation.” The artist is not a moral instructor but a revealer.

Worqu’s ethics are corrective and civic. In a declamatory exchange with Jimmaworq in *Yesinibit Qelemat*, he openly admits that art cannot directly solve material deprivation, but insists that it must show that something is missing and fill the holes in information and wisdom. Because the artist is a citizen, he or she must toil to correct what is not right in society.

Meskot places ethical emphasis on intellectual integrity. He insists that knowledge must precede performance and warns against artistic boldness that lacks research and social understanding. His ethical stance ultimately returns to self-awareness, arguing that only through deep knowledge of one’s society can cultural subordination be delayed. As he states, the aim of *Tenekanaky* is to delay our inevitable subordination, even if it cannot ultimately prevent it (“ተነካናኪ የሥዕል አጣጣል ንቅናቄ ዓላማው ባያያዛችን ባሮች መሆን ባይቀርልንም የመሆኛ ጊዜውን የማዘግየት ነው”).

In all three, ethics are inseparable from epistemology. To show is to know; to connect is to repair; to retrieve is to resist erasure. To extend this further, borrowing the language of *Etemete Lomi Shita*, one might say: “to live is to remember. Art is the highest form of remembrance. Through play and wit.