

The New York Times

Elias Sime Recycles Discarded Objects Into Abstract Works

By Holland Cotter

Oct. 1, 2015



Elias Sime's "Tightrope 7," a collage of reclaimed electronic components adorned with items such as buttons and batteries.

Elias Sime and Adam Reich/James Cohan, New York / Shanghai

Elias Sime, who is based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, makes complex monumental art from tiny parts. His New York solo debut at James Cohan begins, in a side gallery, with things fairly conventional in format: paintinglike abstract pieces, stitched from yarn, of biomorphic forms in grays and browns. Work in the main gallery is, by contrast, larger, but incrementally composed, pieced together from individual blocks of dense patterning made with unusual material: braided and brightly colored electrical wiring, of a kind found in computers.

Mr. Sime (pronounced SEE-may) buys this and other electronic detritus — most of it shipped in bulk to Africa from elsewhere — in recycling markets in Addis Ababa. His use of it becomes spectacularly inventive in an enormous piece in the back gallery called “Tightrope 7.” Stretching almost floor to ceiling over two walls, it’s a collage of thousands of metal computer boards lined up edge to edge and adorned with buttons, screws, batteries, bundled wires and sections of keyboards, along with bottle caps and scraps of cigarette packs. On the one hand, it’s a chaos of castoffs; on the other, it’s a miracle of labor-intensive precision, with its countless minute elements shaped, grouped and placed just so.

Mr. Sime has said that the title refers to the precarious balance a city must maintain to survive and thrive, and “Tightrope 7” might be read as a bird’s-eye view of Addis Ababa, now in the midst of a disorienting transformation. But his work, while culturally specific, has always been universalist. And although never without critical thrust — no one knows better the horrors visited on Africa by shipments of toxic Western e-waste — it is utopian. Certainly some of what’s in this show has a kind of concentrated beauty I haven’t seen in his art before. It leads me to link him to Ethiopian modernists like Gedewon Makonnen (1939-1995), whose elaborate networks of drawn pen and graphite lines were intended as conduits of spiritual communication. Seen in this light, “Tightrope 7” could indeed be a grand and stress-ridden urban plan, but it could also be a celestial chart.

Elias Sime

James Cohan Gallery

533 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 17

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 2, 2015, on Page C26 of the New York edition with the headline: Elias Sime Recycles Discarded Objects Into Abstract Works