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« SEPT 2023 Issue

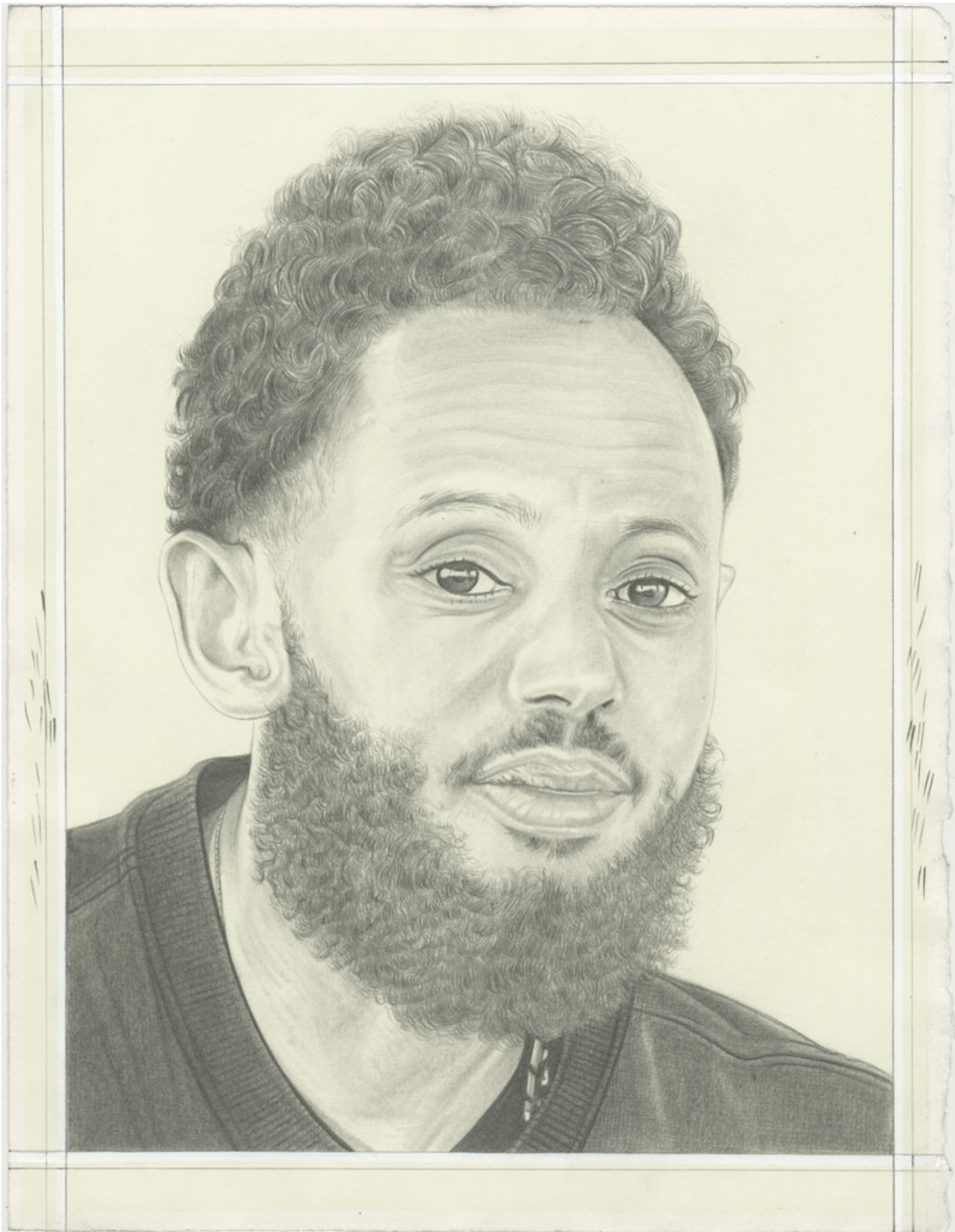


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**Art In Conversation**

## **Tariku Shiferaw with Charles M. Schultz**

*SEPT 2023*



Portrait of Tariku Shiferaw. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

**On View****Galerie Lelong & Co.***Marking Oneself in Dark Places*

September 7–October 21, 2023

New York

**Southampton African American Museum***Making Space: One of These Black Boys*

August 5–November 30, 2023

Southampton, NY

When curator Rachel Vera Steinberg approached Tariku Shiferaw about an exhibition she was organizing at Smack Mellon that would be called *You'd Think By Now*, she had a particular wall she wanted to offer. By any standards it was a large. For Shiferaw it was the largest anyone had ever proposed, and he gamely accepted what he viewed as a gargantuan challenge.

This was 2022, when Shiferaw was working out of a studio on the twenty-eighth floor of 4 World Trade Center, along with a cohort of fellow artists, supported by Silver Art Projects. Out of that arrangement came the monumental installation, *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams*, presented in Steinberg's exhibition. Upon that gigantic wall the artist mounted seven canvases—each twenty-four feet tall by eight-feet wide—edge to edge. Dark and deep blue, the wall was transformed into a night sky, beside which ceramic sculptures in the shapes of crates rested on the floor, emanating the sound of train doors, chanting, protests, and much else.

These themes continue in his current exhibition, *Marking Onself in Dark Places*. In late summer I visited the artist's studio in the Bronx as he was finishing preparations on the final canvases. We talked about the night sky as a site where different civilizations have inscribed their visions of the world, the influence of mythologies on the order of social codes, and what it means when boundaries become porous.



Installation view: *Tariku Shiferaw: Marking Oneself in Dark Places*, 2023. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Photo: Thomas Müller.

**Charles M. Schultz (Rail):** Tell me about the title of your exhibition, *Marking Oneself in Dark Places*.

**Tariku Shiferaw:** The title came out of my thought-process surrounding the night sky—how it's simultaneously an imagined and physical space. It's something real, yet unattainable. So, we have to imagine it. I was also considering how dark the Western-lead social and political spaces can appear for some of us.

That's why it's important that we are aware of the type of "imagination" we uphold through popular media such as television and books. Often, Eurocentric mythologies such as the Greeks' and Romans' dictate the values of our society today, intrinsically giving more regard to a particular group of people over others.

**Rail:** How do you think about the difference between an imagined and a physical space?

**Shiferaw:** Well, in referring to an imagined space, I'm thinking about a place we create as a result of what we see. In this case, the night sky. For instance, mythology originates out of things that are real and expands into non-factual imaginations. For ages, humanity has engaged the night sky in a similar way. Now, the content of the "imagination" that are cast into the night sky depends on the group of people, their global location, and their set of beliefs. For example, some imagine a ram's head, a shepherd, or their ancestors in the constellations. Certainly, everyone sees themselves and thinks of themselves in the creations of such imaginations. As a result, dominant cultures enforce their imaginations above others.

These mythologies inform our perspectives of the world around us—defining the standards of life for everyone who exists under similar governing systems. As a Black person living in Western-dominated culture, I think about the imagined space as an invisible zone that guides our physical reality—defining what's acceptable and what's not.

Similarly, other "imagined" spaces help us to escape set-boundaries. We delve into our Blues, our Afrobeats, and into our science-fiction to create an alternative reality we hope can influence the masses for more favorable conditions. We hope that our imagined ideas become universally accepted, like the "myths" Roland Barthes defines.

**Rail:** What about the imagery coming from space-telescopes like Hubble and now James Webb? They are delivering brand new images of stars and galaxies, but also they can't see what many scientists propose is holding it all together, dark matter.

**Shiferaw:** [Laughter] We're quickly getting into interesting territories! I love science and I love how we're constantly discovering new facts and images of the universe! Most importantly, I appreciate that you connected my ideas of "imagined" and invisible spaces with the concept of dark matter.

First of all, I find the discovery of dark matter intriguing. How is it that this invisible force holds our entire universe together? I mean, if it weren't for dark matter holding them in position, stars would be flying out of orbit from their galaxies because of their speed.

I think in a way the invisibility of dark matter parallels how mythology operates in our society. As you mentioned, dark matter does not actually appear in any images. It does not interact with electromagnetic fields nor does it emit electromagnetic radiation. For this reason, scientists don't know enough about it. Similarly, mythology can function as this clandestine force that dictates our values and perspectives. As a result of these invisible ideals influencing how we structure our systems, we think a certain way and treat one another according to those ideals.





Tariku Shiferaw, *Dogon Sun*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

**Rail:** Talking about different systems, what was it like to be working in the financial district in downtown Manhattan versus the industrial neighborhood we're in now? Do you feel either place influenced the way you work?

**Shiferaw:** Well, it starts with the banal differences, like food. The part of the Bronx my studio is located in is sort of a food desert. On the contrary, it's easy to access whatever type of food you want at the World Trade Center. That's a critical difference when working long hours in the studio. So, I have to be creative with my meals uptown.

In terms of size, neither studio is big enough for big projects! [*Laughter*] Yes, the World Trade studio was a lot bigger—but my space was about one-thousand square feet and the pieces I was making for Smack Mellon in 2022 took up my entire floor. I could only work on one canvas at a time. So, late at night I would use the hallways, which are so wide they could be turned into studios. Additionally, I asked my friends who run NYC Culture Club, a nonprofit organization downstairs, if I could use their space and they agreed. This really saved time. Being back in my Bronx studio, I had to be resourceful in finding extra space again. Luckily, I found out the tenant on the first floor—a former construction company—had just moved out. So, being able to operate there—incognito—allowed me to complete the large installation paintings titled, *A Sign in Space* (2023), in record time.

**Rail:** So, the floor is where the painting happens? Does it stay floor-based or is there a point where you move the canvas to the wall and continue working?

**Shiferaw:** I make all of my pieces on the floor due to the liquidity of the paint—giving me more control over the paint movements. Working on the floor makes it easier to use tools like paint-rollers to move paint around faster, then I come in with a brush. Speed is important in allowing me to make my reductive marks before it dries. I use acrylic paint on white pre-primed canvas—and layer different colors of paint using matte medium.

Translucency is important, so I work from light to dark to maintain an illusion of depth. I layer different colors on top of one another, and this creates moments where multiple layers of paint can be seen through each other. With this, white-gesso prime is ideal because it reflects light and creates depth. I go into the wet layers with self-made tools like flat scrapers taped to a broomstick. This allows me to reveal the layer of paint beneath and create an opening for the eyes to travel through. Honestly, I've used many tools and failed many times, but from where I've failed, I've also learned.

**Rail:** Like Dylan sings, "There's no success like failure!" [*Laughter*] But seriously, any particular moments you can point to where failure actually gets you closer to success, or maybe to a different success?

**Shiferaw:** I'm such a perfectionist. [*Laughter*] And it was crippling in the beginning. For many years, I viewed failure as something to overcome. I would paint or draw, but if it wasn't perfect, I threw it away or I started over. It was frustrating not being able to accomplish what I imagined, and when it doesn't turn out the way I expect.

It was out of frustration and playfulness that I discovered these failures were fun and worth exploring. I began noticing the lines in the landscape or figures I was painting. I became more interested in the painterly gestures and the object-ness of the sculptures, rather than the final outcome of the painting. These moments of failure created an opportunity for me to notice the happy accidents—the abstraction, the unknown.

**Rail:** Whatever perfectionism is part of your sensibility, it doesn't come through as rigid or fussy brushwork. Some passages even look improvisational. So what about spontaneity, how does that function with perfectionism?

**Shiferaw:** I learn every day that I'm a student of life, a student of art, a student of all that is around me. These paintings are the result of the many failed paintings that came before. I know it's harder to see a failed painting if you're not the artist, but I do learn from the failed paintings. So, being open to potentially messing-up in making a painting allows me to be more confident and spontaneous with some parts of the painting. In a way, spontaneity is practiced over and over again to a point where I subconsciously know where to place these marks.

**Rail:** How can you tell when a canvas is failing? Is it a feeling you get? Does it happen all at once or slowly?

**Shiferaw:** Failure happens all the time—especially when I'm exploring a new medium or technique. Also, I determine what's a failure based on my experience and my aimed goal. This could be either physical or conceptual failure. I encountered so many failures when creating both series—sometimes I don't even recognize that it's a failure for months before running aground. But every failure has been a place of growth and advancement.

In creating the series, "Mata Semay," which means "night sky" in Amharic, I failed more than I ever succeeded. I couldn't get the paintings right, the concept wasn't as air tight, and my references had so many holes in them. It took a while—it took about four years before I could present it to the public. The most annoying thing about this series is that I had made one amazing piece years earlier, well, aspects of it were successful and I saw the potential—I wanted to repeat it! I wanted to explore further. Someone once said that you can accidentally make an amazing work but learning what makes the piece great and being able to make it again is what makes you an artist.

**Rail:** That's an interesting idea. Who are some artists you admired as a young person? Have they remained important to you?

**Shiferaw:** As a teenager I was really into Salvador Dalí. I was seventeen and at a summer art program the first time I saw *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) during a presentation. I remember marveling at the technical and conceptual achievement. Because of Dalí I was introduced to Surrealism, which led me to learning about André Breton—who wrote the Surrealist manifesto. That was my developmental stage, high school, fawning over Dalí and Picasso, particularly his cubism era. This also led me to René Magritte and reading Freud's "The Interpretation of Dreams"—and eventually onto many other philosophers and theorists.

There are lot of other artists who inspired me later on. David Hammons's materiality has been a very interesting reference—he's almost like a north star for me because his practice is so complex. Other painters I really admire are Marina Adams and her husband Stanley Whitney—both incredible. I found I related to Rauschenberg's assemblages in a weird and exciting way. It's probably the reason I sometimes make paintings that are also sculpture-like, obscuring the boundaries. Jack Whitten made very interesting works that interweaved abstraction and activism through his "Black Monolith" series. He was very important to me during my artistic developmental stages—and I'm very glad to have met him while he was still alive. I also admire John Baldessari's conceptual practice. His work from the sixties has done a lot for my practice in terms of building out "One of These Black Boys." So did Laura Owens's practice—she never titles her works, and that did something for me.

**Rail:** When you mention Hammons's use of materials, I immediately think of your poly-chiffon paintings. They're astounding. How did they come into being?

**Shiferaw:** Thank you. They're an interesting story. So I've inherited a variety of materials since 2014, from silk to regular cloth, cotton, nylon—everything. As artist-friends moved out of New

York, they'd be like, "Hey, do you want this?" And I would get rolls or boxes of fabrics.





Tariku Shiferaw, *Superstar (Ms. Lauryn Hill)*, 2023. Acrylic, poly-chiffon (and other silk materials), on iridescent film and canvas. 60 x 48 inches. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Over the years I started going to the fashion district in New York to check out fabrics. I would occasionally make stuff with it in my studio. And then COVID hits and we're told to stay at home. I would hit the studio daily. That's when I started playing around with all the stuff that I had collected for years, and one of the fabrics I wanted to use was the black poly-chiffon I bought in 2019.

I made my first piece using a variety of types of silk materials, including the black poly-chiffon. It was a small piece, about 40 by 30 inches, now titled *Lady (Fela Kuti)* (2020) and currently showing at Southampton African American Museum. I included materials I had used in other works, like mylar and iridescent film. I played around with light, translucency, and layering, in the same way I would layer acrylic paint on canvas to create depth.

Although I made them as part of the series "One of these Black Boys," their aesthetics heavily relate to "Mata Semay." I mean, they're dark, but they're also revealing. There are layers in there. And they're also illuminated from inside, through the mylars and the shiny metallic cloth materials, and the iridescent film that protrudes through the silk layer and then the black poly-chiffon.

I also love that it hides and reveals itself from the viewer, depending on the viewer's position. If you are directly in front of it, you will see everything. But if you're standing from an angle, you can't see much. The effect is similar to having a phone-screen-protector that prevents people from seeing the content from an angle. I'm interested in the revealing and the hiding of content through the layering of paint and other materials.

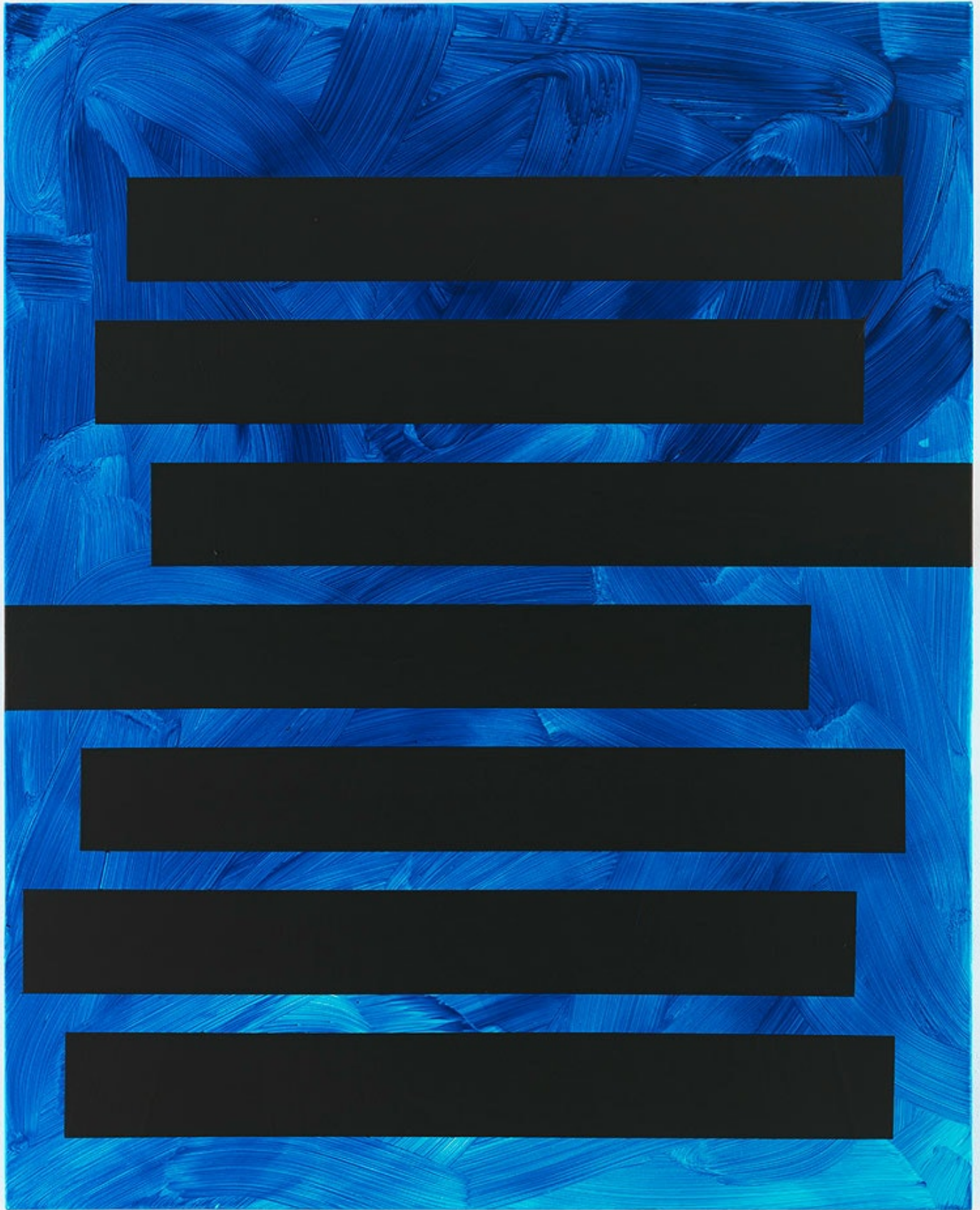
**Rail:** I understand conceptually how the work is an extension of the concepts in "One of These Black Boys." The layers create barriers, but the barriers are porous—like filters. The fact that the paintings present themselves differently depending on where the viewer stands is a big shift. The work literally responds to the viewer's movement and position in the room.

**Shiferaw:** Yeah, I love that about it.

**Rail:** I wanted to ask about music. You've titled paintings after songs, and there are sound elements in some of your newer work. Can you talk about how the music engages the paintings?

**Shiferaw:** First of all, there're two series that I'm currently working on, "One of These Black Boys" and "Mata Semay." I began "One of These Black Boys" in 2016 while I was still living in Bushwick. I started titling the works based on music from the African diaspora including genres like Hip-Hop, R&B, Jazz, Blues, Reggae, and Afrobeats.





Tariku Shiferaw, *Montero (Lil Nas)*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

**Rail:** Was 2016 the beginning? Is that when you started using musical references for titles?

**Shiferaw:** Yes, for the series, “One of These Black Boys.” But I’ve been trying to incorporate music into my practice since 2011, it just never felt right. Music has always been a part of my existence—something about the beats, the base, and the feelings I’ve always wanted to capture in my works. So, when I started thinking about the concept of mark-making within the painting context, I wanted to bring in music as a tool to make a mark in my paintings and introduce something different contextually.

Initially, I was using lyrics, but eventually I narrowed it down to song titles. I mapped out different eras of music, in which the process was just amazing! But what ignited this entire series was listening to Louis Armstrong’s “Black and Blue” repeatedly in 2014. It’s maybe two or three minutes long, and for the first minute, it’s just this music coming through the horns. It’s not until after the first minute that Louis’s raspy voice comes in, and he starts singing, and—I don’t know how to describe it—there’s this feeling. That’s how the colors black and blue were introduced into my work. Two years later, in 2016, I started using the song titles in titling the paintings as a way of making a mark that refers to context outside of the Eurocentric painting canon.

**Rail:** And of course, your exhibition title, *Marking Oneself in Dark Places*. You talked in the beginning about dark places, but how does marking oneself correspond with these other concepts of mark-making?

**Shiferaw:** Well, I wasn’t being literal. I wanted to play around with the title a bit. However, if we were to think of it more seriously, “marking oneself” could perhaps translate as something like “asserting oneself.”

**Rail:** Is there a connection between the music you reference in the titles and the actual sounds that emanate from your sculptural works?





Tariku Shiferaw, *Jeruselema (Master KG)*, 2021. Installation view: *Tariku Shiferaw: It's a Love Thang, It's a joy thang* at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, 2021. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

**Shiferaw:** Oh, it's very much related. [Laughter] I mean, there's a real physical quality to music. When I was a kid, we had a boombox and if you remember, the biggest part of the boombox is the speakers. They're huge! The music was always too loud for my mom, so instead of turning it down, I would muffle the sound using my chest against the boombox and turn it all the way up. I loved how I could feel the beat vibrate through my ribcage and throughout my whole body, really.

So in my approach to the sound works I produce, that particular physical experience is something I keep in mind. For a long time in my work, sound existed only as a reference through the song titles. Now I'm actually producing sound that emanates from inside my ceramic sculptures.

I started recording sounds in 2018 or 2019. I recorded whatever I found interesting: conversations in different languages, New York train cars squealing, phone conversations with my late father, the singing of Orthodox priests at a funeral service. In my 2021 installation piece, *Jeruselema (Master KG)*, I used recognized cultural sounds from social media, mixed tweezing sounds that sort of trigger nineties hip-hop nostalgia, and a variety of other sounds.

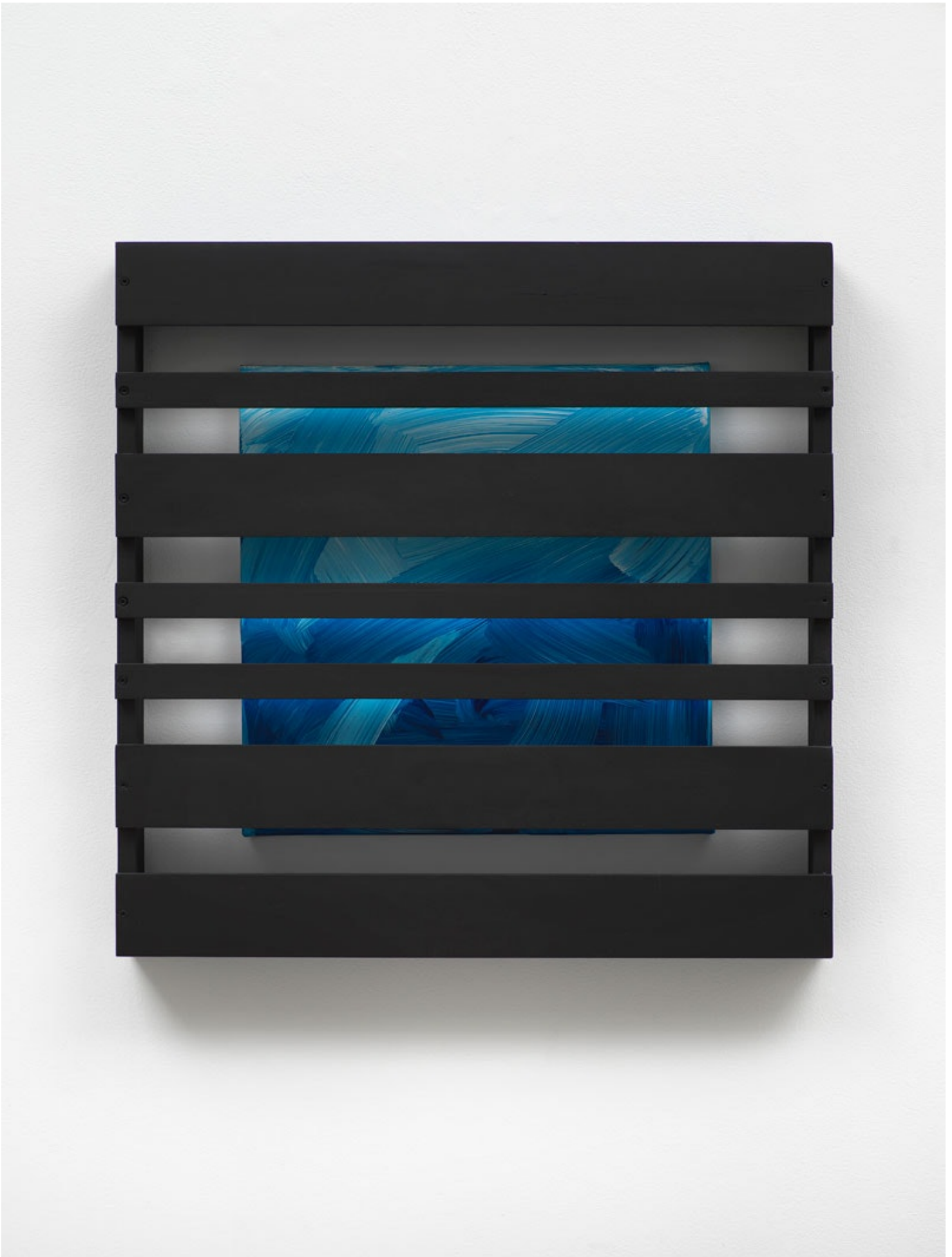
In the 2022 Smack Mellon installation, *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams*, I approached it differently. I used chants, horns, stomps, and ancestral and deity worship coming from the African diaspora. I juxtaposed the chanting of the Maasai tribe in Africa against the South Sudan

protests; the Zulu war chants against the sound of water and the humming of the universe; the ancient worship chants from Ethiopian Orthodox priests in Ge'ez (a language that has been mostly extinct for over 1,000 years) against the chanting of African American fraternities and sororities here in the US. I put together what felt right and related.

In the "Mata Semay" series, I'm interested in creating a constellation of sounds that maps out places and people along different timelines and situate them over one another. I'm interested in using the sounds as a form of constellations against the painting of the imagined night sky. So, instead of using real star-constellations to map out the night sky, I use a variety of diasporic sounds.

**Rail:** I'm curious about the presentation. Specifically, the sound works at Smack Mellon were coming from within the ceramic sculptures, which made me think of certain paintings from "One of These Black Boys," like *Waiting in Vain (Bob Marley)* from 2021, where the canvas is placed behind or within a sort of barricade, almost. In both instances there is this encasement where one thing is literally underneath another thing.





Tariku Shiferaw, *Waiting in Vain (Bob Marley)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

**Shiferaw:** I like both the conceptual layering of ideas and the physical layering of objects. In my paintings, you'll see the under-paintings through the surface layer of paint. This creates a particular aesthetics and depth. I also do the same with my sculptural works. The ceramic objects have the sound coming from inside them. And the piece you're referring to, *Waiting in Vain (Bob Marley)*, has a small square blue painting seen through the black bars of the outer object that resembles a shipping pallet. It's interesting that you perceived the bars as barricades to the small blue painting inside, considering I was thinking similarly about these objects. But I like that neither the sound in the ceramic sculptures or the small blue painting cannot be contained—they protrude through, both visually and in audio.

**Rail:** In your last show at Lelong, *It's a love thang, it's a joy thang*, you used chain link fence for one of your wall installations. That's another sort of boundary marker that's also porous. It defines an area, even if it doesn't fully contain it.

**Shiferaw:** Yeah, I'm glad you pointed that out. I also like your choice of words, "porous!" It's an important observation—it sure is a barrier that you can still see through. The first time I used the chain-link-fence was in the installation *Jeruselema (Master KG)* (2021). I later discovered a black-powdered chain-link-fence to use for the installation piece, *Casting Our Dreams in Strange Places* (2022). You'll see it again in *A Sign in Space* at Galerie Lelong. There are a lot of things I like about the chain-link fence. As you stated, it is a see-through boundary marker, it defines an area and contains it. I have nostalgic memories of having to illegally hop such types of fences to play basketball when I was a kid. All the public schools I attended in Los Angeles had similar fences—it was to keep students in and the danger out. It enforces a system—control of commerce and population—the internet and all its complexities.

What I find interesting about the chain-link-fence is that it's light and open, yet it's still serious enough to enforce a physical and legal boundary. When flattened out against a wall, the chain-link fence resembles a graph or a grid—somewhat diagonal, but similar to the grids we'd use in science to organize, isolate, and study the constellations in the night sky.

Now, we've studied the constellations for thousands of years—and by we, I mean the Dogons of West Africa. Everyone else comes after them. But I find it fascinating that many different cultures have named the same celestial bodies according to their own culture and value systems. It's like repeatedly making the same mark in the same place. If it's a graffiti tag, then it's the equivalence of crossing someone's tag out and placing yours over it.

I find our attempt to grid-out the night sky and claim it as a territory absurd! It's as humorous as planting a flag on the moon. That's another form of mark-making, a socio-cultural mark-making. It's interesting, but also kind of preposterous. Italo Calvino gets to this idea in the short story "A Sign in Space." The character makes a mark and thinks he's going to take a trip around the universe in one galactic year (which is 200 million years) and return to see his sign again. Except it takes three galactic years—600 million years—and by the time he returns he doesn't recognize his sign. He has all sorts of theories about why that is, but ultimately concludes how ridiculous it is to even make a sign in space and to expect it to remain unchanged. This story makes me think of our grids in the night sky—but I also find it intriguing because it lives between reality and the imagination.





Tariku Shiferaw, *Cosmic Egg*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

**Rail:** The Calvino story reminds me of your painting *Cosmic Egg* (2023) insofar as placing a sign in space goes. You've painted a Dogon symbol on this night sky. The sign itself is a container of knowledge, but not everyone has access to it. I don't know what it means, I don't know the story, and in making an effort to know it, I wonder if I would end up changing it. Similar to what occurs for Calvino's galactic traveler.

**Shiferaw:** Yeah, there's this thing you can't remove yourself from. My origins might be in one place, but my current existence is in another, and my ancestry is somewhere else. It's a matter of positionality in time. There's different dimensions we're dealing with—

**Rail:** Cultural time, physical terrain—

**Shiferaw:** Exactly. And here I am making a mesh of those ideas. When I was telling you about those sounds I was mixing, one-thousand-year-old chants alongside contemporary chanting of fraternities and sororities—I identify with both of them as part of my life. In the same way I relate to the Arabic chanting of South Sudanese people who were going through a lot of turmoil. And in that particular religion of the world, women have it a lot more difficult than in the West. Yet, they're out there risking their lives, chanting. If you remember the movement a few years back, that was the case. That's also in the neighborhood of where I come from, East Africa. So there's a personal relationship to some of the sounds and the others are more to show pride of the incredible African history. Like with the Dogon. I'm not from West Africa, but I take pride in their discoveries.

I may not talk about it in my work like that, but really the whole idea of mark-making for me is marking these moments, these ideas, these thoughts. And in doing that, new connections emerge. It's about engaging these connections through a new knowledge production system, something alternative to the Eurocentric perspective, like a new mythology.

## Contributor

### Charlie M. Schultz

**Charles M. Schultz** is the Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.