

In Conversation

Alejandro Cartagena, co-founder of Fellowship, discusses Yatrede's unique videophotographic project, "Adam and Hewan" as well as past projects.



Rain Dance I from "Movement of the Ancestors," 2021

Alejandro speaks to Yatreda

Alejandro Cartagena: Tell us about how you developed your interest in visual art and storytelling?

Yatreda: When you grow up and live your whole life in Africa, storytelling is the root where everything comes from, especially from our elders.

I learned from my mother to do artistic things with no measuring, like home cooking... This is where you become comfortable with the recipe and no longer count any ingredients. It can be acting, being behind the camera, it can be traditional dance or costume design. You just follow it by instinct and feeling. Someone once said Yatreda's work is like "...translating a grandmother's recipe into digital art..." This captures us so well. It's about following a feeling and using good materials, putting trust in family and friends who are gifted in their work.

My mother, she was in a music band, and she loved to get us new comedy tapes from the local shop. My sister Roman and I would act out the scenes for her. It was very theatrical. Later on in life, I cast my sister as Andromeda of Aethiopia, and I put a heavy chain on her neck, ready to be sacrificed to the sea monster. It reminded me of those playful days making family art.

My father loved art books and listening to an Ethiopian radio drama on Sundays. Episodes of stories would play and he would encourage us to listen and imagine the visual story in our minds. Since there was only audio, we would dream very big things that were probably not able to be easily produced on film.

I moved from my small town to the big city, Addis Ababa, to be in art. At first, I modeled for others. But I always had opinions about the other photographers work, and kept them to myself to be professional. It did frustrate me. So I quit modeling for others and began to assist other photographers to learn lighting and the basics. When I started my own visual art, I became free to create anything my mind thinks of.



Ethiopian Warrior Prince from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021



Queen of Sheba from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021



Yatredda: Adwa Fighter from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021

This isn't to say we haven't suffered big in our lives. Every Ethiopian knows the taste of real pain. But knowing this, we choose to turn that pain into strength in what we create.

Yatredda

Cartagena: Through your different projects, such as 'Movement of the Ancestors,' 'Kingdoms of Ethiopia,' 'Strong Hair,' and 'Andromeda,' there seems to be a deep connection with the past—a search to visually represent tales of the past. What inspired you to bring these beautiful and profound cultural stories to life?

Yatredda: So many visuals exist inside the collective imagination of Ethiopians because they were not written down, but spread by oral history. There are cultural stories we all share and know about, but don't know exactly who or where they came from. That's how the folk story telling spreads and despite using modern technology for my art, I do see myself as a folk artist.

Those projects you mentioned have something in common. We start our projects standing tall, coming from a place of power, not from a place of being victims. When we have this in mind during creation, the work always comes out from a strong place too.

This isn't to say we haven't suffered big in our lives. Every Ethiopian knows the taste of real pain. But knowing this, we choose to turn that pain into strength in what we create. The stories of victorious kings, queens, family life, cultural celebrations, dance, our community. This is what life means to us. Someone might have a whole world inside but chooses to show something else to the world. Going through the tough times means nothing to us if what we make doesn't aim to free our kids and the generations to come from it.



Royal Guard from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021



Seba Segel - The New Star from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021

Growing up, for many of us, our first school was inside the church. We learned the ancient Ge'ez alphabet under the guidance of the Yeneta [priest teacher]. It's a part of who we are.

Yatredda

Cartagena: Is there an Ethiopian storytelling tradition to which you feel connected to?

Yatredda: Yatredda follows the Ethiopian artistic style of tizita, which can mean something like "nostalgia." As Ethiopians, we remember our past as something proud because we have always been independent. I think that honestly, sometimes we invoke our past to compensate for the present moment and problems in our country. I imagine it is a romantic escape and therapy for us.

Nostalgia is a big part of my personal life as well. Right now you are living with your family, your mother or your siblings. Which is lucky. But you aren't guaranteed that for tomorrow. They might not be there with you. After one person is missing in your family, that person will become nostalgia. That is the only thing going to be left. For example, my mother is not here. All I have is the nostalgia. When you expand that to make it a bigger version of the country itself, it is even wider and deeper. All the Ethiopian combined creates nostalgia for the country. It is no wonder that diaspora people feel homesick. The African continent is calling them home with the scale of tizita.

In Ethiopia, there exists established musical frameworks. One of these four qenet is also known as tizita. When you open Ethiopian jazz music, it can immediately set the mood and invoke nostalgia. For Ethiopians, their heart starts crumbling. They just know it by the scale. But for non-Ethiopians, the feeling is also automatic, even if words can't describe it. That is because these are universal languages and you feel it just by listening and seeing. I want my visual artwork to be like that.



Mosaic II from "Strong Hair," 2021-2023

Cartagena: In your work, the body is central. It is from the body that these stories come to life. How do you find your subjects and determine that they are the ones who can give life to your ideas? Could you tell us about how you develop a director-actor relationship with them?

Yatrede: When I was growing up, the society around me taught me to be conservative, to be shy is better. They said to hide when guests were around. So, when I began casting people for Yatrede projects, I gravitated towards people in my family, my friends, my neighbors. Sometimes, I just look at someone and their face says to me, “Ah, this one's an old soul.”

The beauty of the new generation and the old one, it's not the same, right? I find myself pulled to the ways people saw beauty in the old times, that deep, soulful look.



Royal Armada of Aethiopia from “Andromeda from Aethiopia,” 2022

Now, about casting Hewan, or as many know her, “Eve”. I always saw Hewan as a purely natural beauty. So, I chose Sylvia. She has a very timeless, soulful look, someone who makes the world remember their mother or maybe even their soulmate lover. She is someone with no need for makeup. The fact that she would be implied as nude made me choose a friend, someone I was comfortable directing, someone who understands art well. Sylvia had been part of the production team for “Andromeda of Aethiopia,” and her husband Kevo is the one behind the costumes. So when Kevo worked with her closely, for example gluing leaves on her body, there was nothing uncomfortable. The work was very hard but we grew closer as friends during the production.

As for Gabu, that beautiful man who plays Adam, he is our friend from a long time ago and I have even modelled beside him in the past. Gabu is a creative person willing to do anything, even covering himself in clay. He is physically handsome but also sweet and innocent looking, like he never did a sin in his life. That is how I see Adam.

Cartagena: Ethiopian culture has one of the oldest relationships with Christianity. King Ezana of the 4th century is said to be one of the first Christian rulers in history. How does this history manifest in Ethiopian culture today, and how did you experience it in your upbringing?

Yatrede: Let me start by saying Adam and Hewan is not just a Christian story; it's rooted in all the major religions in Ethiopia – it's shared among Christians, Muslims, and the House of Israel. Even some of our Animist brothers and sisters in the south have a similar creation story about the first man coming from a hole in the ground. Scientific people know Lucy (Dinkenesh, as we call her), our earliest known ancestor, was discovered right here in Ethiopia. This makes our region a kind of Garden of Eden. If Lucy is our physical ancestor, then Adam and Hewan are like spiritual ancestors for so many of us.

It became a lot of pressure for me to make artwork about so many people's origin story, but it's an exciting challenge to give it a new breath of life, to make it in a way no one's seen before. Looking at this should feel familiar, like "I recognize this from somewhere," as the legend belongs to humanity, but also be a fresh and inspiring interpretation.

In Ethiopia, the cultural and the religious are intertwined; they are not separate. The impressions of the Ethiopian Kingdom are still visible today; you witness it in our holidays, in our traditions, it's embedded in the fabric of our culture.

Growing up, for many of us, our first school was inside the church. We learned the ancient Ge'ez alphabet under the guidance of the Yeneta [priest teacher]. It's a part of who we are.



The Sacrifice of Andromeda from "Andromeda from Aethiopia," 2022

In Africa, storytelling is the root where everything comes from, especially from our elders.

Yatrede

Cartagena: How do you feel about the distinctive way in which Christianity was introduced and has evolved in Ethiopia, notably as one of the few Christian nations that was not colonized by European powers? How has this unique history influenced your artistic and cultural perspective?

Yatrede: Even though Italy tried to conquer our country, we won the war in 1896. Because of that we kept so much of the culture. That could be the way we dance, the way we tell stories, even to the way we eat. This is one of the main things that motivated me to start Yatrede. The unbroken chain. I'm proud of my history because all I know in my life is from the winners' side. So that makes me want to tell the story from the perspective of a winner. As you know, winners do write history.



Adam Names the Animals from "Adam and Hewan," 2023

Cartagena: As you've developed your various projects, you've become increasingly ambitious in the stories you want to tell. With 'Adam and Hewan,' you've gone to the beginning of human time, to a place we've pictured through tales and myths. What drew you to tell this particular story?

Yatredda: In ancient cave churches in Ethiopia, you can find Adam and Hewan paintings.

Many parts of the creation story are bouncing around in my head. Everyone questions "where do we come from?" The beginning of all stories is Adam and Hewan.

But the creation itself is just a small part of this story. For me, the most interesting part that connects with humans today is the story of sin. Imagine that even when humans were given everything, they still messed up and were tempted to choose the wrong thing. (I think the crypto world knows the feeling of having everything, and then suddenly have nothing!) There was just one rule given not to break, and that was the rule they were tempted with. That feels familiar. A lot of this series is about being kicked out of paradise, and living the rest of your life "by the sweat of your brow."

Cartagena: Tell us about the process of creating this body of work. Is your creative process more intuitive, or do you first plan out all the stories and storyboards before creating the images, or do you intuitively build the story?

Yatredda: Since motion portraits are similar to film production, many things have to be planned to exact details.

My research begins at the museum, books, online, all building my idea. I will have a mood board. I will start talking to the actors, actresses, and costume designers. I will say, "You can use your creativity on top of my creativity, in the area you are doing." I will brainstorm with my family or anyone I believe whose idea matters. I will start to make a shot list which includes the shooting time and location.

Sometimes, we sketch. My sister Roman can make a digital painting of the composition.

When it comes to the action days, when we actually film the motion portraits, I will give some time to be creative and make mistakes. Maybe we have to return the next day if something didn't go as good as I believe it could be. For Adam and Hewan we reshot many days the same thing.

The desert location we filmed in Kenya was literally nicknamed "Hell's Kitchen." It was very hot and unforgiving. We had to be conscious with what we are doing.



Medusa - Andromeda of Aethiopia from "Gorgon Sisters," 2023

Cartagena: In this project, the body and nature unite to tell a story. Nature becomes a character. How do you scout and decide which places will be the best for each story?

Yatrede: You are right that nature is a central character. You can say God is like Mother Nature. When I envisioned the Birth of Adam, I didn't see it as a giant human hand creating him. I saw him as Adam as a newborn baby in the desert landscape, nature itself constructing him in the womb.

When I was in Kenya for another project, I began to make a list of locations and ideas. I sent a treatment of my ideas to our costume designer and production manager Kevo to go scout around. It was amazing to see that he came back with many of the same ideas I had. In one case, we had found the exact same tree! (The oldest living tree in Karura Forest, which we used for “The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) So we were very aligned.

Cartagena: With so many possible moments to represent in the story of Adam and Hewan, how did you decide which parts to include in this project?

Yatreda: There are specific moments represented as the story progresses, but also two pieces which use multiple stages of the human Genesis story to demonstrate specific themes.