

INTERVIEWS

Yatreda

An interview with Ethiopian artist Kiya Tadele, member and leader of the Yatreda art collective

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Named after a childhood nickname, Yatrede is the family art collective celebrating Ethiopian history in the [NFT world](#). Here we speak with co-founder and leader of the group Kiya Tadele.

Tell us a little about yourself.

"My name is Kiya Tadele. I was born in the Ethiopian countryside but I always saw a different life for myself. I moved to our capital city, Addis Ababa, to join the modeling industry for 7 years. After that, I wanted to learn behind the camera. I worked in production all over Ethiopia, in the lighting and editing department of other photographers and documentarians. All of those things taught me a lot, but [Yatrede](#) is the first project that I have ever taken full leadership of. I modeled in some of the NFTs myself, casted others, organized the productions, and photographed them. It is scary but exciting at the same time.

The word Yatrede (ያጥሬዳ) comes from a source of two Amharic words: fence (አጥር) and debt (ዕዳ). When I was little, my mom took me to a vision-impaired woman. She felt my face with her hands to see how I looked like. She said my face was beautiful and when I grow up boys will climb and break our fence to look at me. Therefore, our house fence will have a struggle, break, and be in debt. So that was my nickname as a little girl. We decided this name was also perfect for our art project because we photograph and film everything in our front yard. Neighbors and the construction workers building houses around us wanted to know what we were doing, wanting to know who these people in historical costumes were walking around our house. As they were curious looking at us from over our fence, Yatrede became the name for our group."



How did the project Yatreda come to life? How does the relationship between members and the creative process work?

Yatreda describes our family of artists, our collective group: My sisters Roman and Suzy Tadele, my fiancé Joey Lawrence, my friends Tigist and Abiy. Roman does a lot of historical research- how were the weapons, what did people wear and look like at that time. And my other sister Suzy can modify clothing or make anything from scratch with her sewing machine. So what prop we can't find in a museum or antique shop, we can just make ourselves. Joey is the lighting master and can do any technical detail. I operate the camera, direct the cast, and choose the final footage selection for the NFT in my editing software. In the end we all give our input like individual bones in a skeleton. Each person has their unique and important role.



Our first series began at an antique shop where the owner is our friend. We helped him with his photo album to promote his shop, so we can borrow what we like. We made one big pile of jewelry, antiques and even historical clothing for each character.



When we shoot in slow motion, the camera is on a tripod so it stays still. The person has a little bit of movement, so it should be like a photo coming to life. Some elements can move like incense, glass, wind, the other things can be very still. We are recording what we can't capture in a still photo, what we can't print into a book. We want to make the art perfectly fit within the innovations of the NFT world. There would never be a place for this kind of work before NFTs.

After that, I make selections of the footage in Adobe Premiere Pro. I put that clip on a timeline and watch everything, waiting for a genuine moment that will work as a never ending loop. That selected clip is played forwards and backwards so it will link up, and play looping forever while on a display. It's a simple trick. We minted our first series of 6 NFTs and then [listed them on Foundation](#). After that, we got a lot of attention.



How did you conceive the project *Kingdoms of Ethiopia*? Why did you choose to mint it as an NFT?

So much of Ethiopian history is not known in the outside world, so Kingdoms of Ethiopia is a big way to teach everyone, even Ethiopians themselves.

I remember when I was a child, schools would be closed for the anniversary of Adwa Victory Day, the annual celebration of stopping colonial invaders in 1896. As kids, we gathered wearing warriors clothes and boasting fukara (ፉክራ) and doing our battle cry (ቀረርቶ). But even though we are a patriotic country, there is a lot missing. We look at all those great famous films, paintings and artwork made by other countries about their legends. There is a feeling “why doesn’t someone do something like this about Ethiopia?” Well, who is someone? We decided that someone could be us... Or at least, we can start small with a series of historical motion portraits.

We consider our country to have a living history, as we are one of the oldest living nations. In that way our NFTs are also moving, and alive. We can preserve our history in this miniature form, but also share it to the world.

What are the underlying influences in your work?

The work is influenced by a little bit of everything combined from my past experience in the art and photography world: modeling, working in the editing department, and traveling around Ethiopia for 2 years with Joey working on his fine art book project. All of those things have inspired me, but I try to make Yatreda look as unique as I can. It is my own vision told through the history I grew up with, the treasures I can still find today in Ethiopia, and the interesting faces I have met over the years.

What is art for you?

Art is seeing the world with open eyes. The artist is responsible for opening your eyes.



What kind of legacy would you like your work to have? And what kind of impact do you hope it will have on the viewers?

I want my work to be timeless and classic. I hope it will help give Ethiopia recognition and inspire a new generation of powerful artists here that we don’t even know exist yet. Imagine what creative potential we might lose if they didn’t know what is possible? We want to inspire those people.

I’m sure there are many people out there who think like I did before—they tell themselves they are not good enough, nobody will listen, or they are too afraid to share their vision. I was like that too once. But now, I want to represent the fair chance this new digital art space can offer anyone. Me, as an Ethiopian woman, I started from nothing, I just had to be committed and believe in what I’m working on. If I can do it, anybody can do it. Believe me on that. The time is now.

Do you think stories shape the world we inhabit?

Yes, and we need to be a part of those stories. As I grew up in the countryside, we didn't know much about the modern lifestyle. Of course we had foreign drama programs on TV and commercials, but not much exposure to art or the value art can have. There were magazines in my dad's veterinarian office and one funny photo of a woman with sunglasses made me want to be a model. Those foreign things began this journey for me, but now I am using what I learned to share and preserve our own story. So that the creative world around Ethiopian kids growing up reflects our own history, our own stories of kings and queens.

In these polarized times what are the responsibilities and roles of the artists?

In polarized times, we actually want to come from a place of strength and power. Now we know many eyes are on our work. Those eyes are not just coming from online, but we feel some eyes come from the future generation of Ethiopia. We should use that platform to create inspiring art, and influence them. We have to show the new generation the power we have, not focus on what was lost. We have a good word in Amharic for how I feel. It is *adera* (አደራ). It means something like the English word entrusted. As an Ethiopian artist, I am entrusted with telling our story in the way it needs to be told.

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Do you think art can have an impact, change things?

Art is like a universal language. I speak Amharic, you speak Italian. We are doing the interview together in English. But with art we don't have to speak any language to feel it, to know what was trying to be said. That is the power of art!

Did the impact of social media affect your work? If so, how?

Social media spread our crypto art to every corner of the world. I am amazed by how many people started paying attention to @Yatreda on Twitter. It came organically at first through the hashtags we used, and then more and more people started following. Now honestly I'm nervous!

What are you currently working on?

Now we are excited to do our next NFT series. We have a big list of ideas. We are casting photogenic friends or trying to convince some more photogenic family members we know to be part of it. We will be diving deeper into Ethiopian and the ancient history of this region. I'm addicted to this now. Imagine how far back Ethiopian history goes, and how many different unique things we can capture and preserve? Which heroes will we decide to mint and spread all over the world, decentralized and almost impossible to destroy? Books can disappear forever. NFT not so easy. That's the work I'm trying to do.