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# Meeting point



The Dubai-based English artist Simon Coates at the Dubai Community Theatre and Art Centre, where he and the Ethiopian artist Ephrem Solomon have been artists-in-residence for the past month. Satish Kumar / The National

[Part 2]

Ductac's residency scheme kicked off by pairing a British and an Ethiopian artist. They tell Christopher Lord how the exercise has helped them both to develop creatively

Simon Coates and Ephrem Solomon have spent a quiet but rewarding month working alongside one another. The language barrier hasn't held them back. In fact, both artists, from the UK and Ethiopia respectively, reckon they've developed something of a "telepathic" relationship over the course of their residency in Ductac's Gallery of Light.

The 37 pieces of work they've produced during their month-long stay – 19 by Solomon and 18 by Coates – are on exhibition and on

sale at Ductac, Mall of the Emirates, until Wednesday. This is the first in a planned series of such residencies, that began on September 6 and that the arts and community centre has begun offering to artists based both in the UAE and abroad. Once Solomon and Coates's show is over, two more artists will come to work in the space on Saturday for a month.

**Ductac, continued on 4 →**

# 'It is like a dictator on the throne; this paunchy, lazy overlord that's braying'



The Dubai-based Englishman Simon Coates and the Addis Ababa printmaker Ephrem Solomon have been working together at the Dubai Community Theatre and Art Centre.



Examples of work produced by Ductac's September artists-in-residence Ephrem Solomon (left picture) and Simon Coates. Photos by Satish Kumar / The National, images courtesy Ductac and the artists

## → Ductac, continued from 1

The organisers are keen to emphasise the open-studio element of the programme and to encourage the public to come see them at work.

"Something just clicked between us when we met," says Coates, who is originally from London but has recently moved to Dubai.

Solomon nods in agreement, and explains that they'd never seen each other's work before sitting down to paint together, as he'd applied for the residency from Addis Ababa.

"When we first started, Ephrem started work on a small image on cardboard of two chairs, black and white, next to each other," says Coates. "I asked him what was happening in this piece, and he said 'That's you and me, black and white, working together in this environment'. It was a good icebreaker."

The artists are remarkably different in style, which is part of what makes a shared residency interesting. Solomon places Ethiopian politics and print at the centre of his efforts in art and life. Though trained as a printmaker, which comes

through in his exquisite etchings in cardboard, the artist has also chopped up old Amharic-language newspapers – some from the Haile Selassie era – before pasting sections on to cardboard to form a rough base on which to paint.

Tall, thin bodies with gangly legs seem to shuffle across these works. Amharic is daubed across it in bold red, juxtaposing the elements one might find on an Ethiopian identity card – name, age, tribe – on each of the images.

"These figures are me and my generation," says the artist. "They have distorted bodies because they're not strong, not able. It's not comfortable to be a young person in Ethiopia."

He explains that the legacy of the brutal communist regime of the Derg underpins his work. The Derg was headed up by Mengistu Haile Mariam, responsible for a genocide in the 1970s known as the Red Terror, the effect of which is still felt, according to the artist. "We need peace and good government to get to the future I see for Ethiopia," he says.

Coates, on the other hand, offers a far more introspective presence. His works are darker, more elemental and symbolic in imagery.

He says his studio time in Ductac has stripped down his style to just two or three colours: white, black and red, the same that Solomon has used in his cardboard-based pieces.

It has also reined in Coates's enthusiastic paint-flicking as well. Earlier pieces show a tendency for Coates not to know when to finish, bathing his work in dots of paint. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not, but the pieces produced for the Ductac residency suggest a desire for a cleaner and more exacting style.

"I find painting enormously difficult, but it's like a form of self-flagellation for me," he says. "Here, I wanted a challenge so as to up my game."

For the stygian blackness that typifies Coates's latest paintings, he went back to the true master of black – Caravaggio – in a bid to understand how such a dominant colour can be shaped with a bit of coaxing. In these scenes, we see working animals that writhe under their burdens, and the

head of an enraged horse rising from a broken body in a wheelchair.

"I'd never heard of Mengistu before talking to Ephrem," he says. "As he explained the Red Terror – the sheer number of people that were killed, including one of his cousins – I sat there with my jaw on the floor."

With ideas from Solomon, Coates has set about creating a finely wrought pencil portrait of Mengistu, and then allowed red paint to trickle in ugly lines down the length of the canvas. But there's also something of the Ethiopian dictator about this horse's head, he explains.

"It's like a dictator on the throne; this paunchy, lazy overlord that's braying."

It's clear both artists have fed off and into each other's practices. What emerges is an extremely diverse collection of work.

A residency should not iron out differences between the participants; rather, it should let them spark. That's why this unlikely pairing has worked: a dreadlocked British artist painting scenes of internal carnage, and a deeply political Ethi-

opian artist keen to find warmth and texture in the very material he paints on.

Their only brief, the artists explain, was reflections on Dubai. But they say they've both gone beyond that to get at something more fundamental and universal in their work. The residency, Coates reckons, has that effect: "It's like taking a big pot of water, boiling it for three weeks and seeing what you have left."

The artists note that visitor numbers definitely picked up as the residency progressed and word of their work spread. Ductac attracts a lot of students to its daily workshops and classes, and these became regulars hanging around in the artists studio.

"The most important element of these residencies is that we have artists working in a gallery that the public and other artists in the city can interact with," says Colette Mol, Arts Manager for Ductac who has spearheaded the residency series. "We ran several workshops with students over the last month, and they were extremely successful."

"This is about trying to create dialogue around artwork and showing

what young artists are preoccupied by. It also creates opportunities for underrepresented artists to get their work seen," Mol continues.

"While Simon and Ephram are more mature artists and their work places emphasis on skill and traditional methods of artistic production. Mona and Khawla, on the other hand, are younger and they will possibly focus more on installation pieces. Rather than workshops, we'll be inviting curators and artists into the studio to critique their work produced over the month and give them guidance on how to move forward."

Next up in the Gallery of Light are the Egyptian-German artist Mona Fares and the emerging Emirati talent Khawla Darwish; Fares will be working from 10am to 5pm six days a week and Darwish will take the 3pm to 10pm shift. Finding common ground between these two very different artists promises an interesting month ahead. Fares creates neon-colour fields that dissolve into an abyss of blue and black. Darwish opts for cartoon-like observations on life in the UAE and expressions of Emirati pride.