

# PIN-UP

Obrist, Hans-Ulrich, "Feature: Elias Sime" *Pin-Up*, Spring  
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## FEATURE

***When he's not turning trash to treasure through his hauntingly beautiful collages, the Ethiopian artist nurtures Addis Ababa's blossoming local art scene and cultivates his ever-changing garden.***

# ELIAS

**Interview**

**Hans-Ulrich Obrist**

**Photography**

**Mekbib Tadesse**

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Zoma Contemporary Art Center (ZCAC), a house, gallery, and artist residency program. Elias Sime co-founded with Meskerem Asseged. It began as a pre-existing house the artist purchased in 2002. Using traditional techniques and local materials, the design developed organically in much the same way as Sime's collage practice: found objects transmuted into meticulous works of art. Sime embraced the local *tukul* form of circular housing for ZCAC, and let indigenous plant varieties grow into a lush garden surrounding the building.



From an early age, Ethiopian artist Elias Sime showed a keen interest in what most people, especially in the so-called first world, consider waste. Born in 1968 in Addis Ababa, the young Sime would rummage his local neighborhood, collecting cast-off bits and pieces that included everything from tin cans and bottle caps to mud, straw, wood, and other found objects. After obtaining a degree in graphic design at Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Art and Design, Sime channeled his early passion for collecting the things that other people discard into an extraordinary art practice. His work consists of sculptures and large-scale tableaux that are meticulously collaged and hand-crafted from detritus that includes mud and straw, but also consumer trash like plastic bags, bottles, tin cans, and, in recent years, ubiquitous e-junk such as computer parts, cables, and batteries. The results are semi-abstract landscapes of confusing beauty, imbued with a critical post-consumerist optimism and containing myriad references to Ethiopia's millennia of cultural heritage. Over the past 25 years, Sime has exhibited all over the world, from Dakar to Vienna to New York, but remains deeply beholden to his native country and the city where he grew up. That is why, together with the curator and anthropologist Meskerem Asseged, he founded Zoma Contemporary Art Center (ZCAC) in 2002, a gallery and artist-residency project dedicated to international exchange and to exposing contemporary Ethiopian visual artists to a global audience. ZCAC's Addis Ababa home (it also has a center in Harla) is an old mud house that Sime spent almost eight years converting: the result, which includes a vast and luxuriant garden, is a testament to his and Asseged's obsessive collector's zeal, and was described by The New York Times as "a voluptuous dream, a swirl of ancient techniques and ecstatic imagination." During a recent trip to Ethiopia, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, co-director of London's Serpentine Gallery, sat down with the two collaborators for a cup of tea in their delightful house and garden.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: I'd like to begin by talking about the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art. I've been obsessed by examples of Gesamtkunstwerke for a long time, probably ever since I first saw Rudolf Steiner's Goetheanum when I was a kid in Switzerland. Your house and garden here at ZCAC could also be called a Gesamtkunstwerk. How did it all begin? What was the epiphany for this building?

Elias Sime: At the beginning, I didn't know the house was going to become like this. The first thing I wanted to do was build a studio. It started happening organically — the



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house began to change from a studio to what it is now. But it was a slow process. When we first got the house, in 2002, it was very old and falling apart. We couldn't change the shape because we had to deal with government regulations. So we had to figure out how to play with the existing design. If we hadn't had any restrictions, maybe the design would have been very different. But that's what led it to where it is.

**HUO:** To me there are some direct connections to the work of Antoni Gaudí in your design process. But what about local inspirations, in an African, and specifically Ethiopian context?

**Meskerem Asseged:** With both Elias and Gaudí, the inspiration comes from natural forms. Elias and I have been working together for the past 14 or 15 years — I don't know exactly, I don't count anymore! [Laughs.] I've always been working on contemporary art and anthropology, and how I can connect the two. When Elias joined me on one of our first trips together, we researched types of buildings and the materials used here in Ethiopia, such as mud walls. It's something that's profoundly interesting. You have women working with mud and designing their homes as they build them. I've been taking photographs of this for the last 17 or 18 years. They make art without being artists, yet art has taken off in their homes, with all the drawings they do and the paintings they make in their rooms and on the doors. It's very impressive how people express themselves. Just like a traditional mud building, this house was a metamorphosis. It was continuously changing and evolving, and new ideas were always coming.

**ES:** In the beginning I wanted to build a two-story house here, with stone or something like that. Not with mud. More of a studio and living space. But because of the bureaucratic process, it was difficult to make a new design. They told us we could renovate an existing house and we wouldn't have to do the whole permit process. That was a bingo for me. The existing house was made with mud. The whole thing was, "Whoops, I guess it's mud!" [Laughs.]

**HUO:** You've done many other works besides the ZCAC house. Where did the inspiration for them come from?

**ES:** I was born in Kirkos, which is considered a rough neighborhood in Addis Ababa. I don't personally see it as a rough neighborhood, because for me it's a neighborhood

of love. But for the rest of the country, when they hear Kirkos, they always go, "Oh my god!"

**MA:** People there have to survive to make it through. It's coming apart, but it's still there. Before we went on television and actually said, "We're from Kirkos," nobody wanted to admit they were from there.

**ES:** In my opinion, everything is complete there. We have all kinds of people. We have people who are very poor, people who are middle class, and also wealthier people; people who have an education and people who don't have an education. They all live there. I think if you grow up in that kind of neighborhood, especially if you have an artistic inclination, it completes you. There's a lot to see — different things at once. I think a lot of my inspiration comes from having grown up in that neighborhood, especially with my collages.

**HUO:** The house here is so multi-layered — I wonder if one could describe it as a collage as well?

**MA:** Yes, I like that. I've never heard it described like that, but yeah.

**HUO:** The architect Lina Bo Bardi is someone I greatly admire, and one of the most important things for her was that the interior of a house was also the exterior, and vice versa. As we're sitting here in this house, we're obviously on the inside, but we're also outside, in the garden. I was wondering at what moment the garden became important for you?

**ES:** The whole idea was to connect it all. As one thing is being built — for instance, when you do the garden — you have to harmonize it with the building or with the wall. Or if you see one area, the next has to communicate with it and create some kind of liaison. When one is being built, the other has to be done in order to not make it boring. Also, there's a lot of loving and connecting there. It's for every age group to enjoy.

**HUO:** Do the many carved figures we can see in the steps come from your imagination, or are they mythological?

**MA:** They come from folk tales. Sea creatures, microscopic creatures, land animals. Different things. They're all carved out of stone.

**ES:** I wanted to do something that actually touches everyone. When kids come, they have things that are familiar to them. They recognize the turtles, the frogs, the little creatures, and they immediately connect

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with them. The idea is that when kids come they won't be bored. They won't have to follow their parents. When older people come, there's something else for them.

**HUO:** In a way this reminds me of what the Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti said of his embroideries: he called them “*tutto*” because he wanted to pack everything, every reference, into them. So someone who is Buddhist could discover Buddha, or someone who's not religious could dis-

**HUO:** Your work as an artist, as well as the building of this house, started from existing elements and developed organically, over time. Was it the same process for the garden, where it started from pre-existing plants? And was the house built around the garden? Or did the garden follow the house?

**MA:** The plants and the foundation happened at the same time. It was all growing together. When the house was being built, the plants

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cover something important to them. So it's a cosmology. It leads us back to this question of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

**ES:** The feeling that I have inside may reflect that, but it's hard for me to think about those things as I'm working. I feel that if I had to think about how I do things, the work would become boring. It's more a reflection of how I'm feeling at that moment. It's like falling in love, and the feeling moves you inside. There's no limit to how you feel. You don't plan it, it just comes out, it just happens. If you have to think about these things then you start limiting yourself. For how I feel, there's no limitation.

**HUO:** So there was no master plan for the house and the garden, it all developed organically. But did the history of Ethiopian garden design have an influence on your work?

**ES:** The type of formal gardening you are familiar with does have an influence. That's human nature. But that's not how I think about the garden. I have doubts about this sometimes. I understand that plans are necessary, organization is necessary — to know that when you start from here, you have to end there. I know that these are all very important because you have to get from A to B. But sometimes there is a conflict between where I want to go and the plans.

were also growing. The landscape was already in place. There are photographs where you see the completely unfinished house and the plants blooming beautifully. One of the things we learned when we were planting — and I give credit to Elias for this because he noticed it immediately — is that when there were two different plants in the pot, they seemed to bloom as one. They could be completely different — a vine and a cactus, something soft and something hard — but the moment you put a second plant inside your pot, something happens. We used to argue. He'd say, “Are they competing?” And I'd say, “No! They're compensating for one another. They're actually responding to one another.”

**HUO:** I'm very interested in what kind of plants you use.

**MA:** At ZCAC's other location in Harla, near Dire Dawa [Ethiopia's second-largest city], we grow a variety of plants: indigenous, medicinal, and everything else you can think of. That's actually a garden that has everything. It's blossoming. But in this garden here in Addis Ababa, while we have indigenous and endemic plants all over the yard, there are also plants that Elias brings from different countries. When he sees a beautiful cactus, he puts it in his bag. We're always shopping. When he sees



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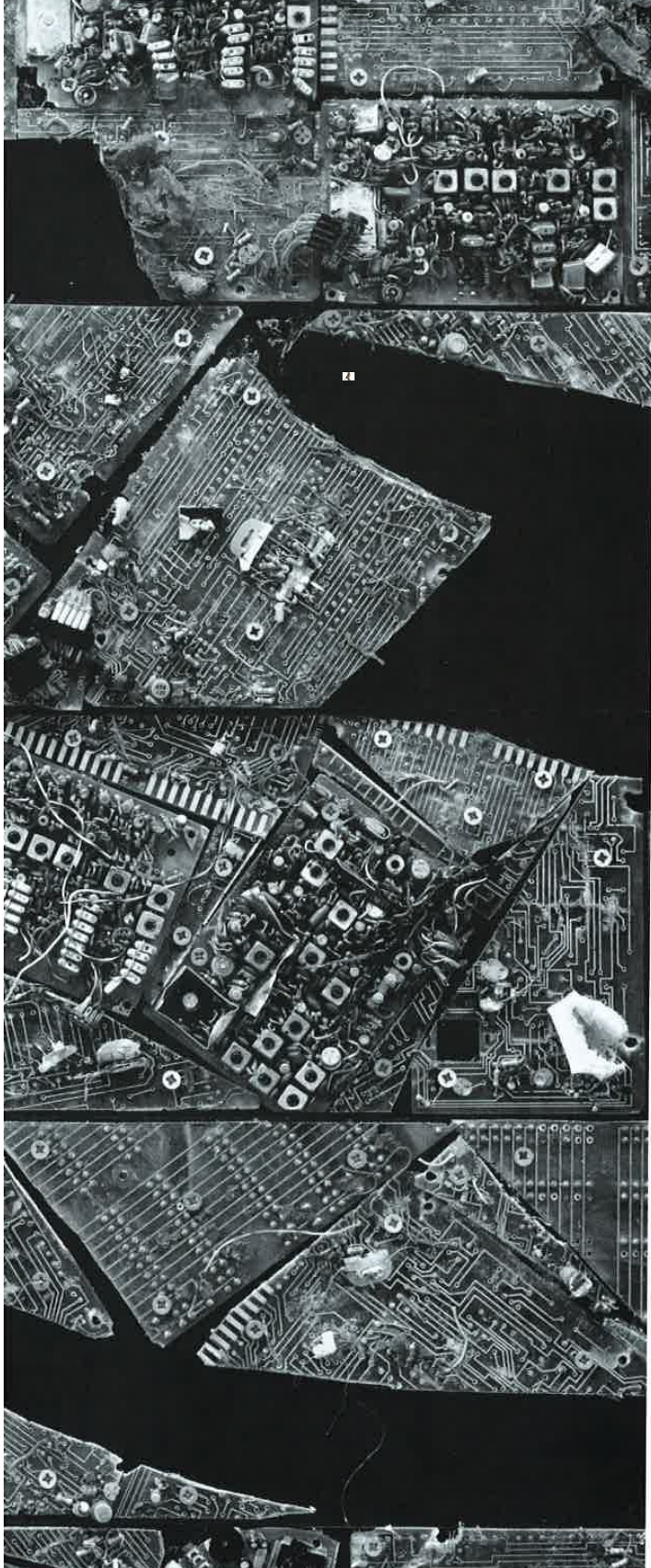


What appears as the bird's eye view of a cityscape in Elias Sime's *Tightrope 3* (2009) is actually a collage of dismantled motherboards. Finding cause for renewal among discarded detritus, Sime weaves a stockpile of reclaimed computer components and fiberglass found in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the artist's hometown and the location of Addis Merkato, Africa's largest open-air market. The pictured panel from his monumental *Tightrope* series

debuted in Sime's solo show at New York's James Cohen Gallery in 2015.



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something he likes, it's "Oh my god, I have to take this one!" When we bring them here, we always plant them in pots, because we don't know what they will do to the other plants. But then it's easier to experiment, because you can plant something else next to it and see what happens. We have a lot of medicinal plants and they're very local medicines — *tena adam* [*Ruta chalepensis*, or fringed rue] or *demakese* [*Ocimum lamiifolium*] for example.

HUO: What are your favorite plants?

ES: I have a hard time thinking about this. In general, I love anything green. I don't know how to answer, I love them all. [Laughs.]

MA: If you go to Kirkos and walk through this little alley — luckily I took a lot of photographs, because they're going to knock it down — you can see plants everywhere, most of them medicinal plants, like *feto* [*Lepidium sativum*]. People just go out and pick them for whatever reason. When I was growing up, if you had a wound, it was easy to heal with *teff* [*Eragrostis tef*], used to make *injera* flatbread, and *gomenzer* [highland kale]. It heals it right away. Immediately.

HUO: The top of the house looks almost like a tree. Did you deliberately conceive it as a treehouse?

MA: That part is a loft. You can go up there, it's beautiful. We had some workshops there where people just slept on the floor. Again, it was organic. In Elias's neighborhood there was a fire, and a bunch of houses were falling apart. After the fire, Elias collected the wood from the ceilings and the floors. He was collecting all these burned things in piles and piles. He had a huge collection of different kinds of wood that he salvaged, which then became the mosaic you see here. There is even packaging wood, and some wood that termites destroyed. You can also see some water-damaged pieces. But it's not a random mosaic. He had a drawing. He talks about not planning, but he does plan. [Laughs.] I don't think he's done anything without at least having a sketch.

HUO: But I see more than just different types of wood. Often there's wood mixed with other materials. It's a little bit like what you said earlier, about mixing plants that don't necessarily belong together. Even the doors are very often wood with metal and textile. It seems like the same logic as the garden.

ES: That's it. I do what I feel today. This is what you see here. I feel that's what probably moves me to make the next piece of art. One thing



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leads to another. Because I do what I feel, it's truly contemporary. If I have stitches that I'm making, if I'm working on metal, then I include them in there. It becomes a mélange of all these things. If you have to think "I'm going to do a wooden door," that stops you right there. I know what's going to be next, but I like to play with it. Maybe that's why it's still harmonized, because I'm following whatever I feel inside.

**HUO:** Eight years to build this house is actually not that long — if you compare it with Gaudi's still unfinished *ŕagrada Familia* [which he began working on in 1883] or Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* [c. 1923–37] eight years is actually quite quick.

**MA:** Yes, especially if you consider that Gaudi had private donors. We don't. We don't have anybody to commission us or fund us.

**HUO:** So it's entirely self-organized?

**MA:** Yes. It's 100-percent self-organized and self-funded. But the new building we're designing in Bale Mountains National Park in central Ethiopia is going much faster because it's funded in part by the European Union. We can hire a lot of people to help us.

**HUO:** Perhaps it was actually because of the economic constraints that the first building grew in this organic way. Will the Bale building also have a garden?

**MA:** Yes, there's always a garden. Gardens are a must. [Laughs.]

**HUO:** If you compare ZCAC Addis Ababa to the new building in Bale, to what extent do the two velocities of construction and planning differ?

**MA:** Thadaigh Baggallay, a researcher from the Frankfurt Zoological Society who works at the national park, saw ZCAC Addis Ababa and asked, "Could you build us a visitor center? We want it to be very artistic." So we had to negotiate. We told him, "Yes, if you give us the freedom to buy whatever we want. We don't want to buy the material. If you can buy the material but respond to everything we ask, and pay us for doing the work, that would be much easier for us. Then we don't have to deal with contractors and getting material." We also negotiated for more time to do it because it's a work of art, not a planned construction. So it's also evolving very organically. It's incredible. Of course we walk into the forest and Elias points out all these incredible roots, and wood that has fallen that nobody wants. We have to get a permit to take anything, because it's a protected forest, but the visitor center is quickly





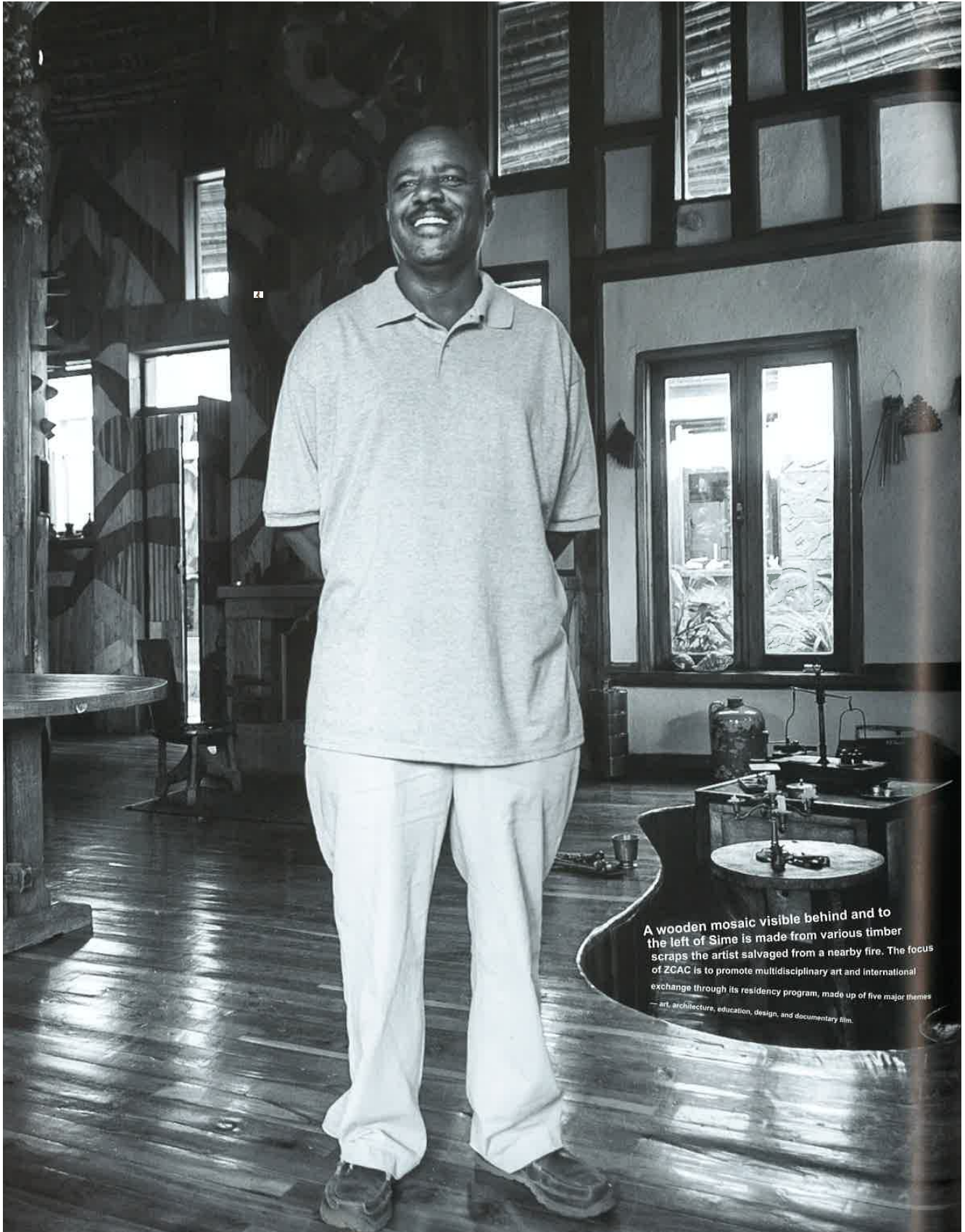
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Sime spent nearly eight years sculpting the ZCAC building with vernacular materials, combining hand-sculpted mud and straw with stone, wood, and reclaimed materials. A close-up of the façade reveals traditional Ethiopian braiding techniques. Sea creatures and land animals borrowed from local folk tales are carved in stone and incorporated into the completed space, now a global platform for Ethiopian and international artists. ZCAC took its name after Zoma Shiferaw, a young local artist who tragically died of cancer in 1979.





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A wooden mosaic visible behind and to the left of Sime is made from various timber scraps the artist salvaged from a nearby fire. The focus of ZCAC is to promote multidisciplinary art and international exchange through its residency program, made up of five major themes — art, architecture, education, design, and documentary film.

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becoming a wood marvel. Though it's also partially made from cob and mud. Elias can't stop recreating things, like the windows. It keeps expanding. But we're going to have to finish soon — the E.U. wants it done by next year.

HUO: But this building here never has to be finished.

MA: The other one has a restriction, this one doesn't. That one has a deadline. This one has no money. That one has money to build it. We don't have to worry about workers.

I took some photos! I asked Elias why he did it, and he said, "Oh Meske, I was sitting here and thinking about it — it was so horrible. I feel much better that I knocked it down." There are a lot of these stories. It's part of our collaboration.

HUO: Are there unrealized projects among your drawings? Do you have dreams, utopias, maybe gigantic houses? Or cities? Would you want to build a city?

ES: I have dreams of large things.

## *I do what I feel today. That's what probably moves me to make the next piece of art.*

We can hire anybody. We don't have to worry about materials. The combination of that makes it a lot faster to move forward. Here we had to stop because there was no money. Then we have to wait until some person comes and wants to buy some of Elias's art. Or I do some kind of curatorial work and get some money, and that money goes straight into this. And we're not even husband and wife! [Laughs.]

HUO: I wanted to ask you about that. Your collaboration is very unique. It seems very special because it's been so intense over 16 years or so.

MA: It's more about respecting and understanding one another. It's also respecting each other's distance.

HUO: How do you figure out who does what in your collaborations?

MA: We each do everything. Sometimes Elias is my driver. Sometimes I'm his driver. Sometimes I feed him. Sometimes he feeds me. This house for instance: there are times when I walk inside, as it's being built, and something is driving me nuts. It could be a shape or something, and I say, "Are you crazy? That's not going to work. There's no life in there. How are you going to do that?" He'll say, "Come on Meske, I put so much into it. I've been working on this for two, three weeks." Of course, before I go he has already knocked it down. He's starting over. But then, there was this beautiful wall here and I loved it to death. It was beautifully made. Even the chimney was nice, a conic kind of chimney. The next time I came back it was gone. I'm glad

MA: He wants to build this incredible library.

ES: It's something no one would really expect of me. I have a huge amount of building material for this library that I've been collecting for about 15 years.

MA: You can't imagine it. You have to see it. He has an idea for the building. I want the library.

HUO: We all want the library.

MA: It's an art library. We have to build it. I know someone who wants to help us a little bit. She's from the Smithsonian Institution. She's been following the project and has been donating books for years. You know what we're going to do, though? I have a house, and he has a studio next door. Our dream is to knock out this house for the library, because we don't need that much space to live.

HUO: I can't wait! One last question: what would your advice be to a young artist or architect?

ES: My advice is they should have love. They should love what they do. There's a lot of power when you love. There's patience when you love. That's how it should be. They have to love everything they touch, everything they do. That's what helps them move from one project to the next.

*The Swiss-born curator, critic, and art historian Hans-Ulrich Obrist is the Co-Director of the Serpentine Gallery in London, but is equally well-known for his online project to make freely available the 2,500 or so hours of interviews he has recorded over the course of his 30-year career. Special thanks to Missla Libsekal and Simon Castets.*