



Merikokeb Berhanu, *Untitled XCXIII*, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 in (182.9 x 243.8 cm).

52 WALKER ST | OCT 10 – NOV 1, 2025

Merikokeb Berhanu

James Cohan is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Merikokeb Berhanu, on view from October 10 through November 1, 2025, at the gallery's 52 Walker Street location. This marks both the artist's debut with the gallery and her first solo exhibition in New York. The gallery will host an opening reception with the artist on Friday, October 10, from 6-8 PM.

Merikokeb Berhanu (b. 1977, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) explores spiritual transcendence and environmental consciousness through the synthesis of bold abstract gestures and biomorphic forms. The artist creates paintings that blend influences ranging from pan-African pictorial traditions to global modernist movements within dense geometric patterns of resonant symbolism. This distinctive language speaks to Berhanu's lived experience within the African diaspora following a relocation to the United States in 2017. Her work draws on centuries of image-making to probe the tensions between the natural world and the manmade, commenting on the complexities of contemporary urbanization and the profound interconnectedness of all living things.

The paintings in this exhibition intermingle cosmologies and topographies upon a singular plane, an expansion of Berhanu's earlier *Cellular Universe* series, which were featured in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022). Recurring organic elements such as cellular structures, budding

plant life, and anthropomorphic shapes extend across Berhanu's compositions, where a single circular form might simultaneously suggest celestial bodies or microscopic cells, playfully destabilizing our sense of scale. Silhouettes of human figures and animals are set within richly textured, vibrantly colored landscapes. Berhanu's use of blues and greens draws on resonant art historical associations within Ethiopian culture. Blue, long linked to spirituality and the divine in both early Byzantine and Ethiopian Christian iconography beginning around 400 CE, conveys reflection and transcendence. Green is tied to the land and fertility, evoking growth, renewal, and resilience.

Two monumental canvases anchor the exhibition. In *Untitled XCXIII*, Berhanu orchestrates a densely layered composition that vibrates with movement and multiplicity of form. Curving bands of radiant orange carve through muted blues and greys, evoking both the solidity of trees and the tempo of urban architecture. Within this scaffold of color and line, organic forms unfold—seed-like clusters, blooming structures, and ambiguous humanlike shapes that hover between the microscopic and the cosmic. In *Untitled XCIX, 2025*, Berhanu offers a meditative scene that stands in contrast to the exuberance of *Untitled XCXIII*. The composition is bisected by two interconnected groups of figures whose faces are indistinct, emphasizing their archetypal presence as guardians, witnesses, or ancestral spirits. Their interaction can be read symbolically, referencing ritual and rupture or growth and rebirth.

Merikokeb Berhanu graduated in 2002 from Addis Ababa University, Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, with a focus on mural design. Following her graduation, Berhanu and her contemporaries founded an artist-run studio and exhibition space called the Nubia Studio in 2004 with the goal of increasing their visibility and long-term career opportunities in a region where the arts have historically been under-supported. Berhanu's work has been showcased in solo and group exhibitions worldwide, including the traveling exhibition, *Making Their Mark: Art by Women in the Shah Garg Collection*, curated by Cecilia Alemani, at the Shah Garg Foundation, New York (2023), Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley (2024), and the Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis (2025); the landmark travelling exhibition *Ethiopia at the Crossroads* at Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (2023), Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (2024), and Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo (2024); and the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022).

Berhanu's paintings are included in major institutional collections, including Tate, London, UK; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA; Inhotim Museum, Brumadinho, Brazil; and Fondation H, Antananarivo, Madagascar.

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