

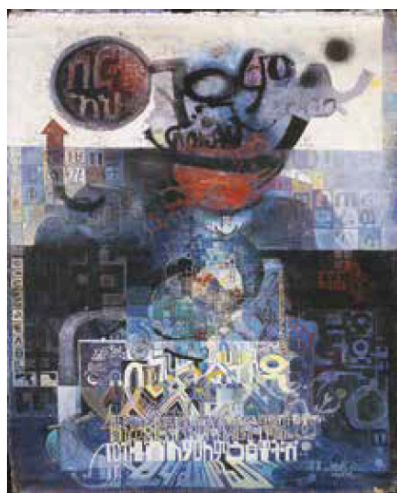
# Beyond Words

A NEW BOOK has just been published on the art and life of artist Wosene Worke Kosrof called *WOSENE: Beyond Words*.

The handsome hardbound volume attempts to sum up a career begun fifty years ago when the artist graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa – the capital city of Ethiopia – where he then joined the faculty. Following the overthrow of the government in 1974, the art scene in the city dried up. In 1978, Wosene immigrated to the United States with hope, but very little money.

Fortunately, he was accepted into the MFA program at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he studied with the eminent AfriCOBRA, Jeff Donaldson. With Donaldson’s encouragement, Wosene began to paint the letter forms of Ethiopia’s Amharic alphabet into abstract compositions. European and American ideas of pictorial space, spontaneous gesture, and “all-over” painting were infused with the

ancient written language of the artist’s home country to create a new style that the artist today calls his *wordplay*. The Amharic letter shapes combine with the artist’s distinctive sense of color and free-

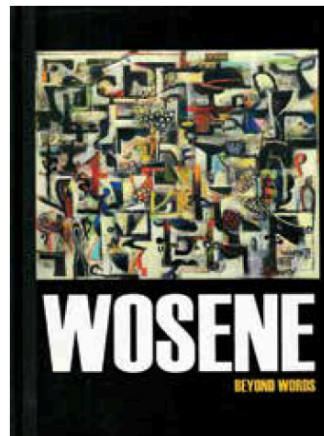


wheeling approach to laying up paint to produce abstract paintings that feel both fresh and grounded in shared history.

Wosene’s trajectory is easy to follow in the lucid opening essay by Richard Woodward, the founding curator (emeritus)

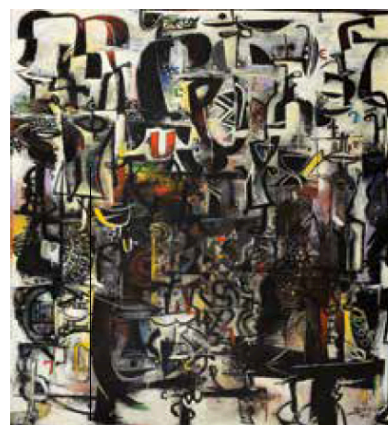
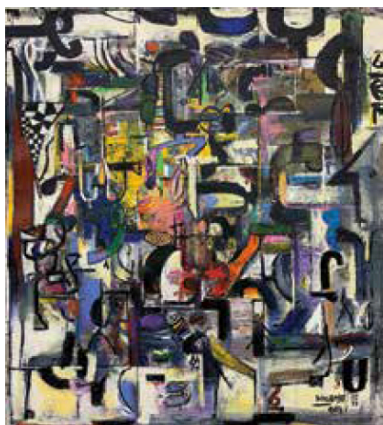
of the African art collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. Woodward discusses the history of Ethiopia’s Coptic Christian iconography and its impact on Wosene’s earliest efforts as well as the social, political, and artistic context of his early years in Ethiopia, Washington, D.C. and New York City. Follow-up essays by Charles Donelan and his Santa Barbara gallery, Nathan Vonk, expand the world in which Wosene has made his life and career.

Finally, the artist himself writes poignantly about his own approach to art making and the myriad influences that feed his studio practice. Among these, the jazz music of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker inspires the artist to improvise, to play, and to aim



for excellence. A poet’s inventory of other influences follows: Ethiopian spices, architecture from Spain to Japan, plants, animals, and even the “strange sounds” of German as it’s spoken in Berlin.

The volume is also richly illustrated with works dating from the artist’s student days to pieces done as recently as last year. Most of these works were purchased years ago, but a number of those illustrated come from public collections at places like the Smithsonian, Keith Haring Museum in Japan, National Museum of African Art, Crocker Museum in Sacramento, California, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, among many others.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN GOSS