

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Measured and Visually Musical, Two Artists Harmonize

In this two-person exhibition, Shiferaw and Melake meet one another in a space of genuine conversation.

Seph Rodney July 13, 2018

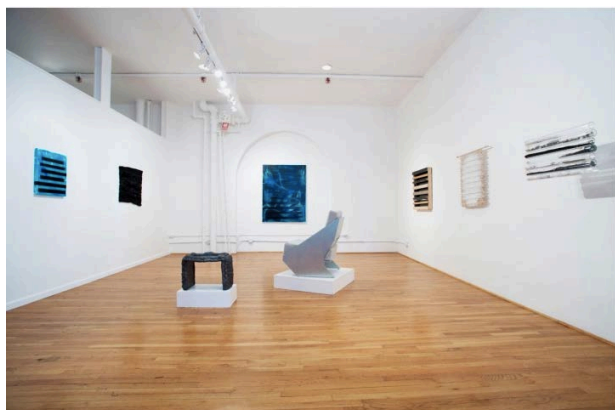


Tariku Shiferaw, "Rewind (Kelela)" (2018)
acrylic on canvas, 58h x 44w in, 147.32h
x 111.76w cm (all photos courtesy of
Private View Soho)

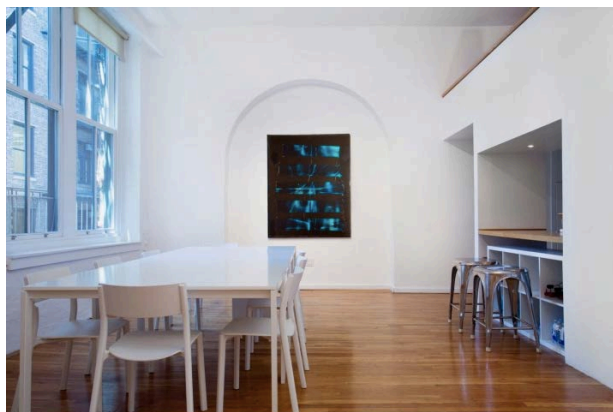
The combination of the two artists [Tariku Shiferaw](#) and [Luam Melake](#) at the Private View Soho gallery makes me think of bars and measures. For Shiferaw's work, I can't avoid thinking of bars because they are the centerpieces to his visual compositions: utterly black, horizontal redactions deployed across his substrates. The bars are as rigorous and resolute a visual gesture as I have seen from the old New York School or [Color Field](#) painters. But Shiferaw makes that arch, insular language generated from the choir of Abstract Expressionism into a pidgin that also references hip hop, contemporary politics, and the precariousness of black life. Shiferaw frequently uses titles that shout out the names of black musicians, and in previous work has

referred to specific songs. I've [written about his paintings before](#), intrigued by his turning rigidly austere visual motifs into evocations of the lived experience of black life by way of Biggie Smalls, or Rakim.

For his paintings in this exhibition, he’s changed the game a bit. He’s layered textured surfaces underneath the bars so as to create a kind of pictorial field on which the bars now float unmoored — though not adrift. In his “Janet (Berhana)” (2018) the bars cohere as a frame that keeps me from the shadowed blue iridescence beneath. And in his “Rewind (Kelala),” the folds of material, like accorded paper, overwhelm the bars. They become oceanic and I wade into the waves.



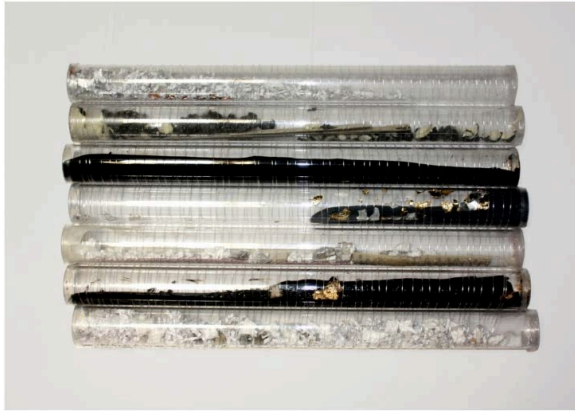
Installation view of *Without Qualities* at Private View Soho gallery



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Melake’s work on the other hand makes me think of measure, as in the verb form which means to gauge or consider the extent, quality, value, or effect of a thing. I can see her mind at work in assessment in the piece “Black” (2017), which is *almost* ornamental, almost a benignly lovely woven tapestry of cord with pockets of hair here and there — maybe. On closer inspection I find it is composed of lamb’s wool woven, glossy, and lustrous, enticing me to touch. With her piece “Sandcastles” (2017), which looks like an ornamental wood screen washed in white paint, it’s as if she took the measure of the white wash, understanding it would make the wood into something that reads as ceremonial, even consecrated. The eponymous work “Without Qualities” (2018) is even more visually captivating with its clear, plastic tubes affixed together with strange objects captured inside: tar, gold leaf, small rocks, shredded paper, pennies, and foam insulation. It’s like a sorcerer’s abacus that might solve a problem that has bedeviled us for centuries.

Without Qualities is a canny pairing, because each artist meets the other in the space in genuine conversation. They begin in concert, with Melake’s sculpture pieces (the ones that are hung) having a similar horizontal orientation to



Luam Melake, "Without Qualities" (2018) mixed
media 14.25x 25w in, 36.20 x 63.50 w cm

Shiferaw's bars. But then like siblings with rival talents, they also take turns showing off their skills to the viewer — thus making the show feel familial. Shiferaw demonstrates his painterly faculties to create surface and complex pictorial space, and Melake uses her understanding of material to create objects, that though small, have an unavoidable gravitational pull.

Without Qualities is on view at Private View Soho gallery (66 Crosby Street, #5F, Soho, Manhattan) through July 14.