Moving Pictures

A first-generation video artist mixes ways of seeing

BY ANNELIESE COOPER

"IT'S A KIND of creative spirit it has, no?" Theo Eshetu offers genially, indicating the impressively close quarters of his Berlin apartment turned makeshift studio, as he slides into the kitchen to brew some coffee. It's little more than a hallway—a wide-screen desktop computer for editing videos at its center, an assistant camped out on the floor. But he's right—the space hums with energy, a sort of scrappy vibrancy one might not expect from an artist more than 30 years into his career. Plus, at the moment, he's between workplaces, having recently shucked a sizable space in Rome—beautiful, central, but ultimately just "an excuse not to move."

Of course, change of place is nothing new for Eshetu: Born in London to an Ethiopian father and a Dutch mother, he spent his childhood bopping from country to country, Senegal to Serbia, incurring a particular sense of estrangement (and a particularly mellifluous accent). In 1982 he settled in Rome and began his career as a video artist, using the then untested medium to explore issues of intersectional identity across cultures. His work has since been featured at the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art and the 2011 Venice Biennale, and as part of a Tate Britain film series in 2014.

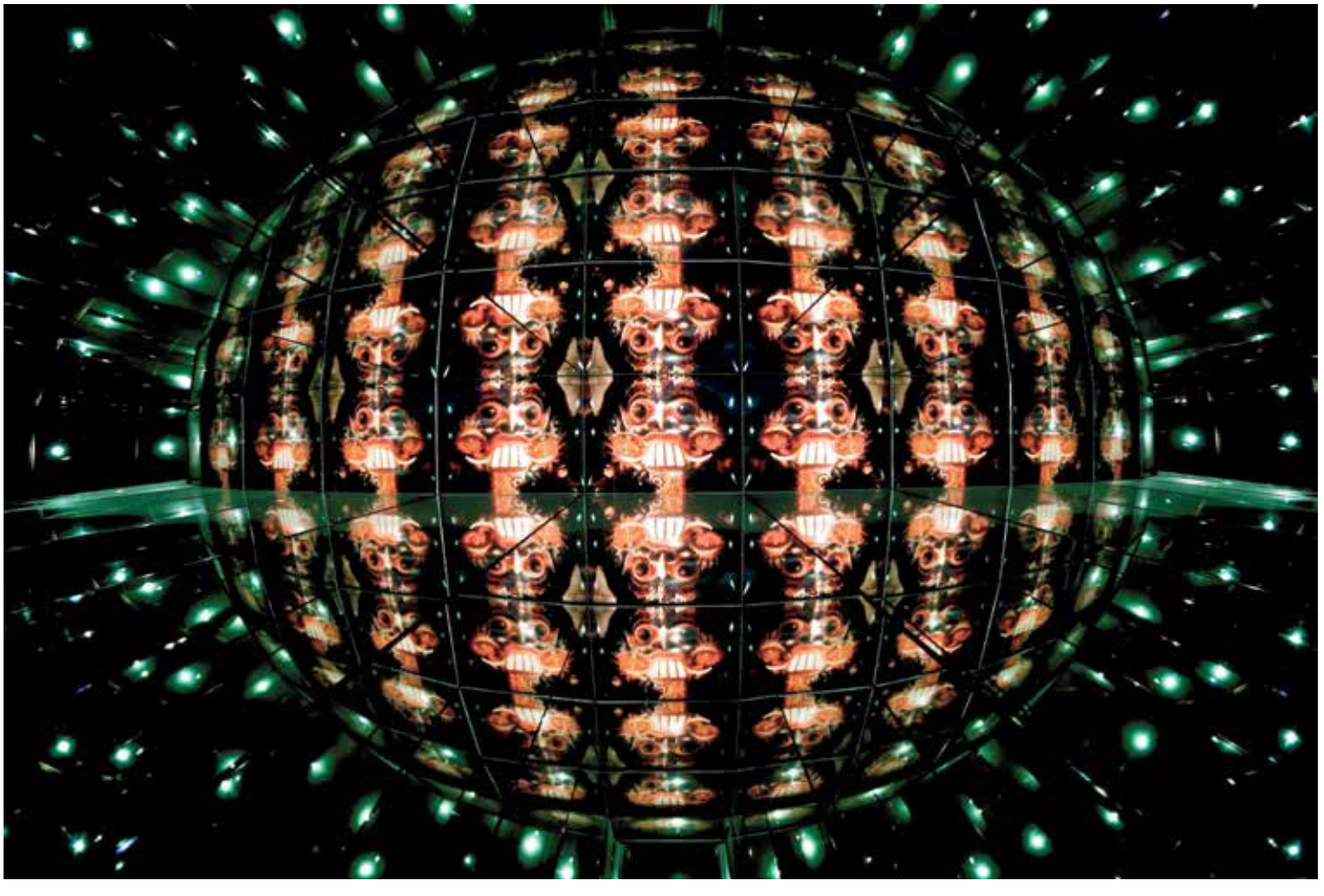
Today, far from slowing, Eshetu has joined up with London's Tiwani Contemporary, a space that specializes in African artists. This month, the gallery is presenting Eshetu's first solo show in the United Kingdom.

You're in Berlin now, but have Rome and London also been major ports for you?

Yes, but I'm also very much associated

Theo Eshetu in Basel, 2013.

RIGHT: Still from *Anima Mundi*, 2014. Multimedia and video installation, 24 min. 5 sec.



FROM TOP: PHILIPPE MALL; THEO ESHETU AND TIWANI CONTEMPORARY, LONDON

with Ethiopia, because I'm of Ethiopian origin. And you know, I have the reputation of being a traveler. The truth is, I'm not. I like staying home and just not moving—maybe because I grew up moving all the time. But every time I travel, I make a video, so that whenever I show videos, it's like "a travel to the Himalayas," "a travel to Africa"—"oh, he's the one who travels." I guess other people have stayed more settled than me.

I think three hubs is more than a lot of people have.

My father worked at the U.N., so every couple of years, I was in a new country, and I spoke, like, four languages before I was 3 or 4. I think that gives you a mind-set, a way of perceiving. And maybe a problem as well, like where do I belong? I think I make videos to address that.

When I made *Questa é vita* in '86, it was kind of a shocker because it had African rituals, fragments of pornography, and animals—an image-scape that was not what people thought video was about. People thought video was about technology, modern man, "we are the robots"—you know, Kraftwerk was very "video." And so, to make that thing, which was more "say it loud, I'm black, I'm proud"—it was hard-hitting. Actually, I was even embarrassed when I made it. I made it because I needed to make it, but when I showed it, it got a good reaction, but it was out of place.

Because there was also this whole thing when I studied Marshall McLuhan saying that video was a cold medium and everything about video was cold. So I thought, well, why does video have to be cold? Why don't I make a hot video? That's what *Questa é vita* is: In a celebratory or anthem-like way, it shows some of the anxieties of being half-black and half-white. It has that mixed intercultural union and clash.

Which ties back into that idea of not having a fixed nationality or home.

Wanting that home and not knowing where it is—literally. And people say, "Oh, you're so lucky," but as a kid, you don't want to lose friends every couple of years by moving. And you say, "Is this a *glass*, is this a *verre*, is it a *bicchiere*?—what the hell is this object?" I grew up without my own language. For example, I don't speak my parents' first languages. I don't speak Amharic or Dutch very well, so we always spoke in a foreign language to each other—in English, French, or Italian.

So of course I always gravitated to those outsider artists. That's how I got interested in video—because it was outside the art world, at least in the beginning. And it was also outside the photography and film world. When I started, people would say, "Ugh, it's so ugly, videos are so ugly."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Mirror Ball Constellation,* 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.

The Mirror Ball Constellation (No.1), 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.

The Mirror Ball Constellation (No.4), 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.

For lacking image clarity?

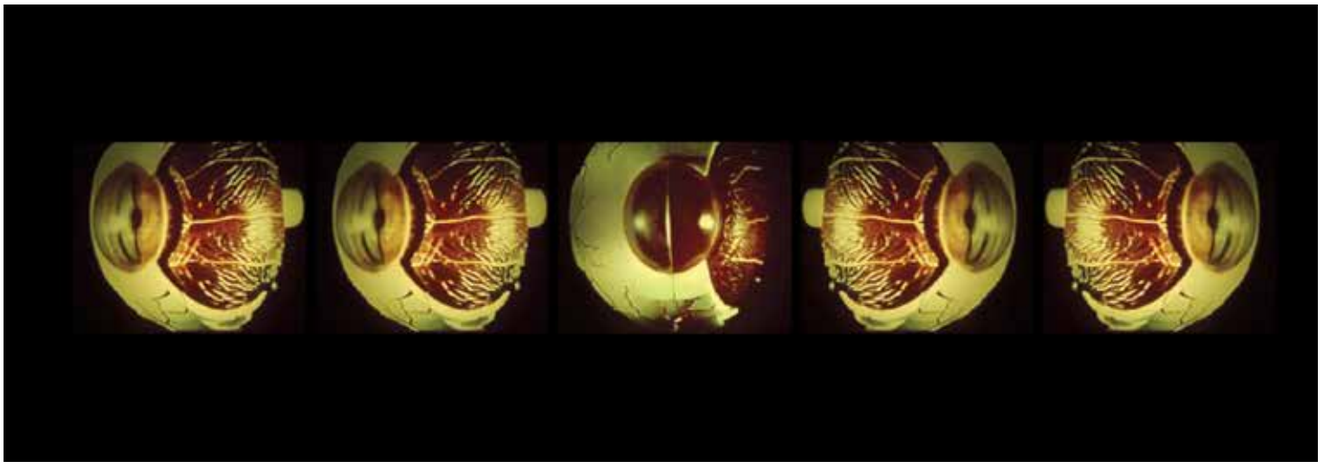
Video was invented to show porno at home, and then it became an art medium. That's why there are porn fragments in *Questa é vita*, because it's also about, not just life—"That is life," which is a translation of the title. It's also "What is video"—*questa é video, questa é vita.* It's about defining what I could have as a video poetic, if such a thing exists.

Do you draw a distinction between video and film?

Film is about what happens in front of the camera, and then video is how you put images together, is how I see it. With film, you pay the actor, you pay the directors, you paint the scenery, you get everything that's happening in front of the camera worked out—and that's why there's a cult of the actor, because he's in front of the camera. Whereas video is about using images as images, and it gives you infinite possibilities of how to put those images together. I think video really has its soul still in that, in using images as a kind of experiment for expressing something.

To add complication to that, now film has become video. So now, a lot of feature films are made using video technology. I always thought that was going to happen. Technology's just gotten better and better and better—and it's cheaper, video.

ALL IMAGES: THEO ESHETU AND TIWANI CONTEMPORARY



Meditation Light, 2006. Still from five-channel video installation, 15 min. 23 sec.

And digital images are easier to manipulate.
Because that's what video does well; it manipulates images.

In any photographic medium, there's a tension between representing and manipulating. Do you see yourself tending more toward one?
I always imagined video as a work of the imagination, of the soul, of the subconscious. It's like dream imagery. But is that fantasy? I'm not sure it's fantasy. For me it's something that is very real, but it's about inner images, not the outward appearance of things.

At a certain point, though, I started using very realistic images while still addressing the subconscious. What I was showing was always alluding to what's behind the image. And then I started doing video installations where I would still use real images, but then these kaleidoscopic collages again sort of transcend the reality—so you could see both the reality and the symbol or the metaphor it might represent.

Fundamentally, I don't believe that video or film can show any kind of reality. Because reality is one thing, and its representation is another. So no matter how real you think it is, it's always a representation—and, therefore, you might as well enter that world of representations. I mean, the kind of reality you're trying to bring out is how you really think, maybe, or how you feel, or how you would like the world to be, not necessarily about how the world *is*.

Cinematographically, I'm a great fan of Fellini, who uses cinema to represent his subconscious or something like the spirit of a nation. He's great, because it looks like it's real people doing real things, but really they are all sort of symbols—the symbol of the woman, the symbol of the director, the symbols of the country, the madman, the memory of childhood.

Speaking of Fellini—and of childhood—was there a particular piece of film or video work that you saw early on that made you key into that idea of the video world versus the actual world?
No. When I was a kid, I was an extra in movies. You think, oh, I'm going to be in a *movie*, but you spend the whole day just sitting around doing nothing, and then they say, "Okay, it's your turn now," and you clap for about 10 minutes, and then that's it. And I thought, that's just so boring. I kept doing it because they paid me—or they paid my parents, who then gave me pocket money. But that made me aware that the reality of being on the set and the fantasy that you see in the film at the end, there is just no relationship between the two. So I had that in my subconscious before I started studying art.

Have you ever seen your kid self on film?
I have, yeah. I was in the spaghetti westerns—they didn't have many Mexican kids, so I was always the Mexican kid. There was one called *My Name Is Sacramento*, and I was in this Isaac Hayes blaxploitation film, *Three Tough Guys,* which was shot in Italy. I was a church boy holding a candle or something. That was a film pretending to be shot in New York, but they shot in Italy because it was cheap, so they had to get as many dark kids as possible, and they didn't have very many in Italy in those days. A friend of my father's was a casting agent, so he would always use me.

I got kudos among the school kids. They're saying, "Oh, wow, he's going to be in a *movie*." For some strange reason, it also somehow put me off. I just got more interested in being on the making side of the camera. People kept saying, "Oh, you should be an actor, you can do it." But I've always felt uncomfortable being observed by a camera, because I'm aware that it manipulates.

Have you been in your own work?
Sometimes, yeah—just a little cameo, a Hitchcock quote maybe. But apart from that, not seriously. I've really shied away from cameras. Again, very early on, I got this idea that I didn't want pictures of myself, I didn't want other people or even me to take them. Somehow conscious of mortality, you know—I didn't want records of what I looked like. I want to go forward and live. It's almost as if my mind was on my deathbed or something. It's strange, I'm saying it for the first time actually, but I was very conscious of not wanting to leave an image for posterity.

Early film theorists, too, were concerned with that uncanny immortalizing of bodies in motion.
Oh, yes, the great dancers—I've also made a video about dance—refused to be filmed, because dancing made them look ridiculous. The Charleston in the '20s was born because it was, like, "You know how silly we look on film? Let's be really silly"—because this is for the camera, this kind of movement. It wouldn't be the kind of movement to invent on the dance floor. I'm interested in how the presence of the camera changes people's behavior. I film a lot of people looking into the camera or just waving at the camera, which filmmakers are not supposed to do—but it acknowledges this relationship that's created when you film someone, and you want the viewer to be a participant in this relationship you've established.

ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: THEO ESHETU AND TIWANI CONTEMPORARY

For me, what the images represent are my eyes, as it were. My eye, my way of looking—whether it's what the eye sees, or whether it's a more cosmic eye—so the viewer is taken into a thing that has been seen. For example, you go on a journey, and you film a lot of stuff, and then you re-create the sensations you had on that trip—and you do that because you want the viewer to have that same experience and the same emotions. So that's why they can be travelogues, but they're really something else as well.

I'm very conscious that it's the point of view of someone who is of mixed culture. Each culture has its own thought patterns that go with it, so it doesn't really operate in the thought patterns of a given culture, but it tries to define how to see the world when you break down nationalisms. And how does that resonate with whoever's watching? Then, of course, I try to be seductive to get people into the video, as a kind of charm to invite people into this world.

Images seem useful in conveying experience across languages and cultures.
That's important as well, I think—again, maybe a facile distinction between film and video is that, at least when I began, video was all sound and music and didn't have much language, whereas of course cinema is very language based. And the idea that you could put video on TV or send it by satellite—it needs to communicate to a universal audience. That is its natural path, as it were.

What about *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*? That was a very specific cultural moment for Ethiopia, but it also carries some broader themes.
One idea that I often explore is, how can paintings become video? How do you transform something that is a pictorial art into an art that's about movement and time and light? So *Axum Obelisk* is based on a traditional Ethiopian painting that has these tableaux that narrate a story, and I transformed that into a video installation. The element of narrative—which is told in still images—is transformed into time-based art. There is also another element of time within that narrative, which is: Are we talking about legendary time? Are we talking about historic time? Are we talking about now? You see them dismantling, transporting, and re-erecting the obelisk, so that's now-time, but it represents historic time, because it was an object taken during the colonial era, and the reason that's important is because of an Ethiopian legend of the Queen of Sheba, so that's legendary time. Also, I joke about it, but if something is supposed to stay still, like an obelisk, and it moves, then you've got to make a movie about it. Because it's moving, right? Something's happening.

Like now, I'm doing a video about a museum that's moving. Museums are not supposed to move, are they? They're supposed to stay in their own space. There's this ethnographic museum outside of Berlin in Dahlem [the Ethnologisches Museum Dahlem], and it's moving to the center of town. It's one of the biggest ethnographic museums in the world, and it's going to Museum Island. So I thought, "We have to make a film about that." And you discover there's a lot of stories that get told. An ethnographic museum also contains objects that have moved from their place of origin, and they're moving to another space—and what does that movement imply for the identity of Germany, or the identity of those objects themselves?

Which pieces will you be showing at Tiwani this fall?
There will be two installations. One is called *Meditation Light* and the other is *Anima Mundi (The World Soul)*. They're both videos that I really like because they show something that's impossible to say in words. It works when you experience it. Therefore, what can you say about it? You could say it's a relationship between body and soul, and it tries to represent the soul. But *soul* is an old-fashioned word, so what does it actually mean? Does it work, and does it say something to you?

It seems unfair of me to ask you to translate those images into words.
It's easy to argue that all artworks should work at that level. But this one does so well—it's really about the act of seeing, it's about the immaterial, it's about surprise, it's about communication. It sounds like I'm trying to find a justification for it, but it is about all of those things: trying to understand what the world's like. MP

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The Mirror Ball Constellation (No. 5), 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.

The Mirror Ball Constellation (No.2), 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.

The Mirror Ball Constellation (No.7), 2013–15. Digital C-print, 47¼ x 39¼ in.