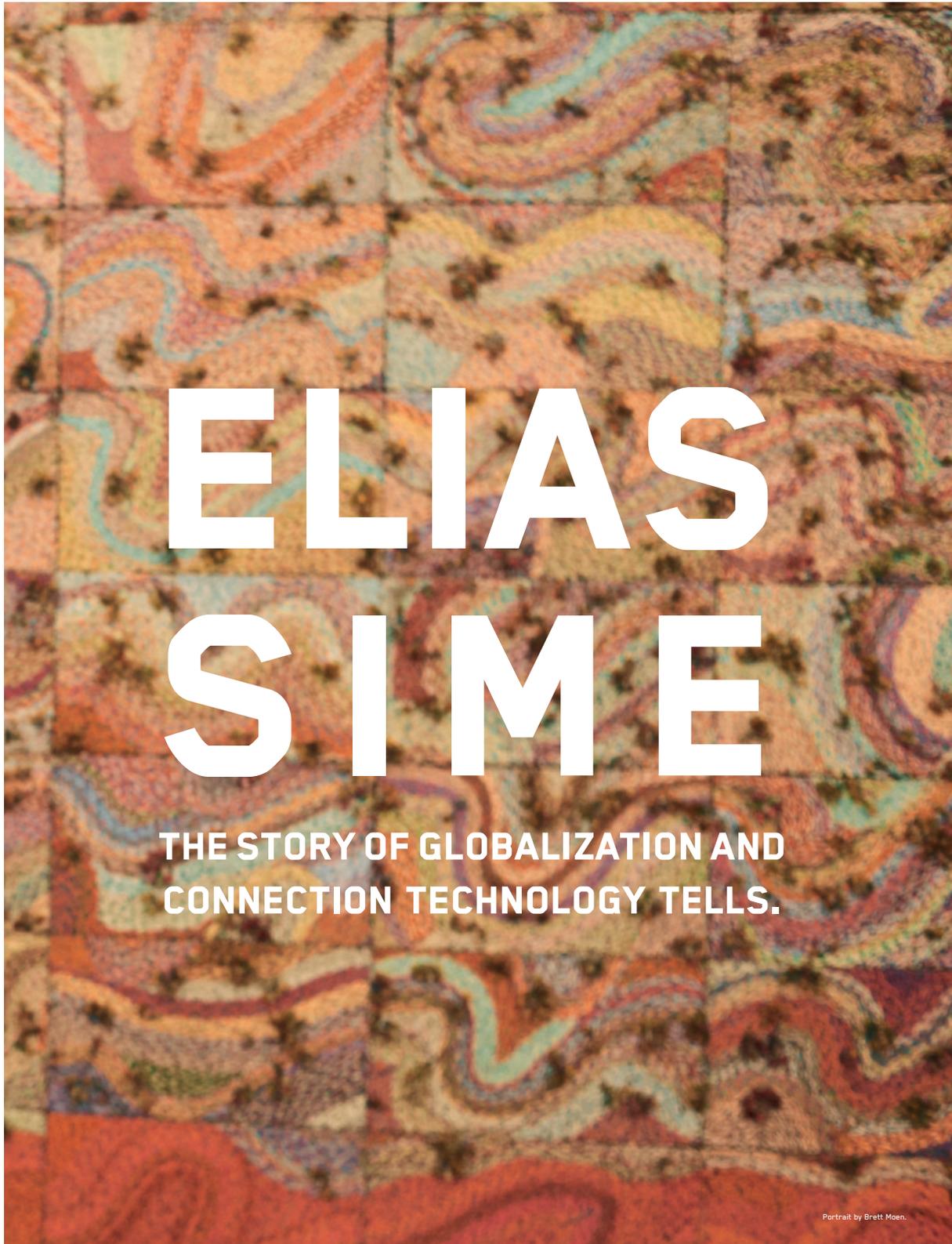




**whitewall**



# ELIAS SIME

THE STORY OF GLOBALIZATION AND  
CONNECTION TECHNOLOGY TELLS.

Portrait by Brett Moen.

## By Katy Donoghue

Elias Sime creates sculptural reliefs and collages from discarded technological material like wires and circuit boards. After they are collected, pieces are woven together and arranged into colorful patterns and tiles. For the Ethiopian artist, they tell the story of globalization and maintain the history of all the hands through which the material has passed.

*Whitewall* sat down with Sime in New York at James Cohan gallery, where his show “NOISELESS” opens this April. We spoke through the help of the co-founder and curator of Zoma Museum, Meskerem Assegued, who translated.

They were in town after a trip to Facebook headquarters outside of San Francisco, where Sime had been working on installing a major commission. The piece is inspired by San Francisco’s surroundings and history—the redwoods, and the story of the Gold Rush, more specifically, relating that fervor to what’s happening in Silicon Valley today. The large piece expresses our relationship to technology, how it has changed society, and what it has taken away.

His work, as he told us, is not about Ethiopia, not about Africa. It’s the story of globalization, and every bit of discarded technology he weaves into his work has a tale to tell—who invented it, who constructed it, who ordered it, who opened it, who loved it, who touched it. It’s the story of human touch.

It’s also a marker of time. Inevitably, what he collects becomes extinct, no longer made. As technology has gotten smaller and more refined, Sime worries that the story he is telling will shrink. Still, there’s a voice inside him saying, “You haven’t said enough.” So he continues.

Sime has also been heavily focused on building the Zoma Museum in Addis Ababa. The structure uses a modern vernacular while being made from mud and straw. When it is finished, there will be a space for residencies and a large garden. The museum will show temporary exhibitions and offer educational programming and workshops. It’s meant to serve the public—a gift back, if you will. Ultimately, it will be a space where art and architecture can be experimental.

**WHITEWALL:** *How was the Facebook commission inspired by your first trip to the redwoods?*

**ELIAS SIME:** I wanted to see the space and the area. I wanted to have a clear mind. I didn’t want to have any preconceived notions before I went there. I wanted to understand the environment, the air, the smell, the visuals, and the sounds—to use all of my senses to understand.

The redwoods was an amazing trip. Everything was green on both sides of the road. I did not expect that at all. The drive itself was incredible. As soon as I started walking into the redwoods, I was ready for it. I already felt it. A lot of things came to my mind then.

Before that, I saw Peter Sellars and he was doing this opera on the redwood forest and the San Francisco story, the Gold Rush story. We went to see that opera [*Girls of the Golden West*, 2017].

**WW:** *And you’ve previously worked with Peter Sellars.*

**ES:** Yes, many times. Peter invited us to come, and the story was about the redwood forest. So, there was also that story that was connected. I thought it was going to be a story from some time ago. I did not expect to be confronted with the real stuff. I could not believe my eyes. There was so much I wanted to take in, I couldn’t get enough of it. I decided I had to do something. I didn’t know how I was going to express it.

The first thing I did was I just started looking. I was asking to take that photo, asking, “Tell me about that one.” Really, I wanted everything. It’s like being hungry for a long time and suddenly seeing something that you have never tasted before.

As much as we have developed technologically, it was interesting to witness how much we have destroyed. The designs on the trees were like weaving. I started to imagine that maybe this weaving is what kept us together and what kept us going. There’s something that they’re saying. When I saw the younger ones, they don’t create the weave, but the older trees have the weave. This weaving happened over time as they experience and go through life.

So I was thinking, “Why not replicate this?” It’s history. It says a lot. I was very ambitious about it in the beginning.

**WW:** *It’s interesting, the parallel between the Gold Rush story and what’s happening now in Silicon Valley. Was that in the back of your mind?*

**ES:** I was talking about that a lot, looking at what Silicon Valley has created in San Francisco, the life, and the rush. And the great things that it has created. It’s very contemporary, the Gold Rush story. What happened then is what’s happening today.

**WW:** *What did the project become?*

**ES:** When something excites you, you start thinking of all kinds of possibilities. Imagining things is the most satisfying thing in the world, because it’s free to imagine. Because I’m already working with electronic material, I started thinking that this could actually tell a story.

I felt that the electronics, the computer, the designs, the material—all of those things—could express what I wanted to say. I wanted to show the tree using this material and correlating that story. The way life is moving—the speed, the complications, the woven world we’re living in. It gives that immediate feeling about the current condition we’re living in. I felt I could tell the background of the trees’ stories, the current and the future of the story.

You can say that it’s a sculpture because it has that feel. You can also look at it as a painting, but that’s not enough. What I really want the viewers to see is that it’s tactile. It’s about touch. It’s about people to people touching, that connection, that tactile behavior.

**WW:** *Why is touch important for you?*

**ES:** The materials I select, by the time they get into my hands, they’ve been touched by so many people, and now they’re in my hands. Even though it may not be visible, when you’re working on your personal computer, you leave a part of you on that. Then, when it breaks, there is somebody else who goes inside it and touches it; there’s that fingerprint. That’s why I connected the tree to that fingerprint, that connection that you can even have with the machine.

Technology is very tactile. It’s connected to us. That doesn’t mean it’s going to be beneficial for us, 100 percent. It actually made us lose a lot of things, too. It gave us speed. But we have also lost that calmness, tranquility, and quiet. We have lost sitting down and spending time, touching one another and feeling one another . . . the patience we need.

If you want to know about me, technology gives it to you. So our conversation doesn’t start from zero. You already have information on me.

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Detail of Elias Simic's installation at Facebook, photo by Mariah Tiffany, courtesy of Facebook Artist in Residence Program.

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IT'S NOT ABOUT  
ETHIOPIA. IT'S NOT  
ABOUT AFRICA.  
GLOBALIZATION IS  
EVERYWHERE



You don't see through my eyes to understand me, because you already have knowledge about me. You don't even feel, when I shake your hand, the form that's already brought here. Technology has contributed to that. That's the hard part.

**WW:** *You don't see through my eyes to understand me, because you already have knowledge about me. You don't even feel, when I shake your hand, the form that's already brought here. Technology has contributed to that. That's the hard part.*

**ES:** You're absolutely right. When you start from scratch, you get to see what it is. Now, because of technology, you have to work at it to open the heart and look at what's there. Otherwise, you will stay on the surface. It takes so much to get to this point of trying to understand what it is. It was not about collecting thrown away material. It's not about that. It's talking about contemporary context, contemporary history. I'm looking for the full history.

When you look at my work, people see the computer part of it. But really, that's not it. If you really take a closer look at what I'm working on, I collect my work like a small calculating machine and then I dissect it. It's like a collage of all of this different material. But they tell the history; each one of those pieces has its own history.

**WW:** *And yet we think of technology as devoid of humanity, right?*

**ES:** It's actually a very human history. It changes information; it changes the way you think. That's the amazing part. This is why we need to touch, why we need to look at one another in the eyes and feel.

When I say, "I love you," there is a feeling. But if I give you "I love you" on a piece of paper, or I text you, you have a different feeling. Of course, you'll smile, but you won't get that first feeling. That's what I want to talk about.

When you talk to experts about the pieces I collect, they can say this is from that year, it came from this part of the world. Every piece has a story that's connected to some country and to the people who made it, to the person who thought of it.

And as I'm working, the material that I'm using becomes extinct. I can only use it for a certain amount of time, because they do become extinct. The new computer or the new electronic device that I'm collecting now are very different from what I used before. They're very light, they're fine, the material is very different. I'm seeing this evolution in the materials.



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Elias Sime  
Untitled  
2018  
Reclaimed electrical wires and components  
on panel  
55 x 47 3/8 inches  
Photo by Christopher Burke Studios  
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan  
Gallery, New York



**WW:** *So your work ends up being a marker of time just in material.*

**ES:** Time is passing, time is going, time is changing. Without us knowing as we are aging, this technology is changing, and I'm noticing that. We don't even know how it's working anymore or what's inside it. We just know the surface. It has a whole new life inside it.

I am not one of those people who says technology is not good, but I am one of those who says, "Let's talk about it. Let's stop and think about it."

**WW:** *What attracts you to taking things apart?*

**ES:** That's what makes me happy. I think about the first person who touched this computer. The very first person who bought it; the very first person who opened the box and touched it. That first person always comes to my mind, and the excitement when they bought it. I try to stay with that feeling. It's about the excitement you get when you first see or touch something.

I think of an envelope that's been sealed. Your first love letter. Without even knowing the fact that it came from somebody, you already feel good, you already feel happy. After you open it, you're happy. When you get it, you're happy. Those feelings are what goes on in my mind.

**WW:** *Because technology is becoming smaller and lighter, is it more difficult to work with?*

**ES:** No, not difficult. But I feel like the next thing I collect is going to be just a flat thing; I won't have anything to pull out. The tactile is going to be gone. So, I'm talking about what is even going to happen.

The bigger material has more to tell. As they get smaller, I worry that my story is going to shrink. There's less material to work with. Making the art is not the hardest part; collecting the material is the hardest part. I'm happy that I'm able to collect material that goes back many years and I have been collecting them over many years. I'm not 100 percent sure when technology first came into Ethiopia, but I have material from many, many years ago. So, that process of how it got there, and where it came from and how it landed there—that history in itself I find very interesting. It has changed society. That's very playful, very fun to understand.

There are times when I think I might stop working on this material, but there are other times where it just wakes me up. It's a voice that comes and says, "You haven't said enough."

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The garden of Zoma Contemporary Art Center in Addis Ababa, photo by Michel Temteme.

WHITEWALL 94



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Sometimes you tell a story and the story stops. I'm waiting for the story to end. It is a world history. It's not about Ethiopia. It's not about Africa. Globalization is everywhere. Whether we like it or not, it's in every one of our lives. If you didn't know my name, if you didn't know who I was, if you looked at the art, you will know where it came from. It's about human life. Just as is.

**WW:** *Absolutely. When you look at your work, there is nothing that says, this was made by an African artist.*

**ES:** It feels like the art is just mine, but it's not just mine. Just imagine how many I've collected. The people behind the art—from the people who made it to the point it came to me, so many hands have gone through it. The material itself was made by other artists. I feel very humbled when I talk about my art, because it's actually a combination of other people's art. I feel like it has a lot of people's hands in it. The people around me, the forces who help me make this art, come through. The final product of the work is not just me. It's a lot of people's work.

I'm very lucky I'm sitting here talking to you, but I do want to recognize everybody.

Meskerem Assegued and I have worked together for many, many years. It's been many years of building step by step. And when you look at the work, I never sign my name. I want to say that. Nobody has ever asked me that question, but that's why I don't sign.

**WW:** *Because there are so many people behind it?*

**ES:** There are so many people who are unnamed here. Their product is what I created into this art, so I don't like to take the claim for myself. They influenced me, because their work is what I transformed.