

The REVIEW

ALL THE NOISE



Left: Installation view of Elias Sime: *Noiseless* at James Cohan  
Below: (Detail) *Tightrope: I BURNED IT*, 2019. Reclaimed electrical wires and components on panel. 264.2x812.8cm.



A viewing of Ethiopian artist **Elias Sime's** show at James Cohan in New York leads Paul Laster to investigate the artist's use of discarded technological waste and its resulting statements on dehumanisation

capturing the zeitgeist of the moment, Elias Sime makes art using discarded technology. Working with reclaimed materials for the past 20 years, the Ethiopian artist started employing electronic waste in his work about 10 years ago and has since built a body of work that comments on dehumanisation in the digital age and the negative impact of progress on the environment. For his third solo show at the gallery since 2015, Sime presented seven new assemblage paintings that continue his *Tightrope* series while adding the aspect of being "noiseless" to the formula. Constructed from braided electrical wires and cut up circuit boards that are nailed to small wood panels, which are then grouped together to create a large-scale work, the wall-mounted pieces look like abstract paintings, but are made bit-by-bit like sculpture.

Sime gathered materials for seven years before beginning the *Tightrope* series in 2009. Referencing both the inner power it takes for a tightrope walker to stay balanced, while always treading the line between staying afloat and falling, and the stress that results from being too tight, where you are bound to break, the series reflects the artist's philosophical view of the state of the world right now. The Addis Ababa-based artist explains his concept of "noiseless" in this way: "Noise is often associated with unpleasant sounds. Noise can also seem to create words, or words can be part of noise. Words channel our thinking along familiar paths towards realistic images. The absence of noise allows our minds to create unfamiliar and abstract images."

Utilising the technological flotsam that the West has dumped on Africa, Sime creates abstractions that build upon such modernist strategies as geometric art, colour field painting, gridded minimalism, conceptual art, and the pattern and decoration movement, while still maintaining a relationship to the use of craft in traditional African art and textiles. Discovering the reclaimed materials Merkato, the biggest open-air market in Africa, that he deems worthwhile in the Menalash Tera section, where there's nothing you can't find, he instantly buys what he wants because it could be gone tomorrow. He's drawn to materials that have been touched by

other people—tapping the energy that's still present. But he employs the obsolete materials like paint, cobbling their colours and textures together to construct powerful pictures, imbued with new meaning.

*Tightrope: Noiseless 2* (2019) features a grid of 110 panels covered in an earthy coloured plastic-coated wire that's shaded with the black and gray heads of nails to create the nuanced look of an empty plot of land. Where nothing else is growing, a pair of flowers (shaped from cut circuit boards and assembled like mosaic tiles) surprisingly sprout, which provides hope that they might eventually cover the land with aesthetic beauty. Similarly, *Tightrope: Noiseless 16* utilises a mosaic technique to cover the panels in angular shards of circuitry like a tile floor. Floating within the fragmented field are two picture-framed doors, which appear like portals to another realm. *Tightrope: Noiseless 12* uses a monochromatic palette of grey tones that's shaded to look like a birds-eye view of a river flowing through the landscape or a stream of information passing through the mind. *Tightrope: Noiseless 18* presents a topographical study of a city, but one that was digitally generated via a satellite view from Google maps. It's eerie to think that what was once visible on the screen of a computer might now be reproduced by the disemboweled innards of that same machine. Representing a technological landscape of the future, *Tightrope: Noiseless 10* uses key-boards to map a population of characters connected in the same way. Visualising the artist's voiced concern that we may all turn into robots one day, it lays the network of sameness in the middle of a red zone that's rapidly consuming an endangered environment.

But it's *Tightrope: I BURNED IT* that leaves no doubt over the artist's concerns. Measuring nearly 3x8 metres, the massive piece covers two walls with an array of brightly colored wire panels. The central panels have been burnt black to create a dark cloud floating over the technological grid. However, the burnt plastic reveals an inner truth in the form of the exposed copper wire, which sparkles when freed to return to its natural beauty. ■ *Elias Sime: Noiseless runs until 29 June at James Cohan, New York* [www.jamescohan.com](http://www.jamescohan.com)

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