

Food For Thought: A Toast to Blondell w/ Nesanet Teshager Abegaze

Joshua Oduga: Hello, thank you for joining us for this virtual program, 'Food for Thought: A Toast to Blondell' with Nesanet Abegaze. I'm Joshua Oduga, Public Programs and Exhibitions Manager at Art + Practice, and we are very excited to share this virtual program with you. This program is organized in association with Art + Practice's current exhibition, 'Blondell Cummings' [inaudible] moving pictures, a co-presentation with the Getty Research Institute. The exhibition is on view in Lamer park until February 2022. For this program, we welcome entrepreneur, educator and experimental filmmaker; Nesanet Abegaze. Nes works as the co-owner of Azla, a plant-based Ethiopian restaurant in Leimert Park, which allows her to combine her passion for food, community and storytelling into her daily practice. In addition to being a restaurant owner, Nez is a filmmaker. Her first short film, 'Bereka' premiered and won the best experimental film award at the Black Star Film Festival in 2019. Hi, Nes.

Nesanet Teshager Abegaze: Hi Joshua.

Joshua: How you doing today?

Nes: I'm good. I'm good. How are you?

Joshua: Doing really well, really glad to be doing this with you. I feel like we met each other during all the craziness that has been happening and it's really interesting to finally be doing this with you. I wanted to give a little bit of context for this program before we jump into it. During Blondell's career, she created a series of dance, works titled, 'Food for Thought', these works included a suite of performances collected on a single tape that represented Cummings kinetic meditation on the importance and specificity of food. In many of Cummings' works, she often used meals in food as the basis for her dances and the themes that they explored. For Blondell, food was an entry point by which she explored not only her own work, but those of her collaborators and people that she observed. So, for this program series 'Food for Thought', we wanted to invite three women who also use food as ways to share stories, cultures, and understanding to share a story with all of us.

So Nes, I think when we met each other, I very much met you because of Azla and our connection being in the community of Lamer Park. But in that first meeting, I became aware of you being a filmmaker and I quickly went off and tried to search for as much of your work as I could and one of the things that really struck me is the connection between your work as a filmmaker and the restaurant. So, I really wanted to invite you to come into this storytelling program, because it just made so much sense. I see food and filmmaking as to essential tools of storytelling. So why don't you tell us a little bit about what the film that we're going to view is, and then we'll kind of get into it.

Nes: Sure. So yeah, first of all, thank you so much for inviting me. It's been really great getting to know you and the team in Art + Practice and really excited for this exhibit you guys have going on right now, honoring the life of Blondell Cummings and just so honored to be here

doing a toast to and her life's work. But yeah, in terms of this piece specifically, this one kind of came out really organically. I was participating in a sound design workshop, actually run by Garrett Bradley that was put on by the Studio Museum of Harlem and MoMA. And you know, we were kind of tasked to kind of think about sound in new ways. And so, I was working with a good friend of mine, actually who's also a resident here in Lamer Park. His name is Samir Tore and we started collaborating just thinking about kind of both of our interests in Pan Africanism and, and kind of some of the stories that you don't always hear.

And so, I was looking at some Super Eight footage that I had collected from Ethiopia. Maybe I think I was there, this was from early 2019 when I was an artist in residence at the Echo Park Film Center and kind of just said, 'Hey Samir, what would you do with this?' I want to, I'll start by saying in the beginning of the film, there's a short snippet of a traditional singer from Ethiopia, which often referred to as Asmati, kind of doing a tribute to my father. And so, you'll hear her say [foreign language]. And so, I had just sent him some field recordings of traditional music and just wanted Samir to play with it and so he ended up incorporating this speech by Marcus Garvey and we just started collaborating in this really organic way as part of this workshop. And then it kind of turned into this other piece and I ended up submitting it to Black Star Film Festival, and so it screened as part of the festival this year as well.

Joshua: That's amazing. I have so many questions about what you just said already, but we'll get into it really quickly. So, give me one second.

Nes: Sure. [foreign language]

Joshua: I love it. I've watched it a few different times since you've sent it to me. And I think every time I pick out a different thing. One of the things I wanted to ask you is I'm really interested in the multi-layered way in which you build stories. And I think I'm asking this question about your film work and about the restaurant as well.

Joshua: For me, it's really interesting and I think working with Blondell and working on this exhibition really made me start thinking about this, the way that different people's experiences and different personalities can come into one person who's telling a story and embody, what you're trying to do, and then come across, whether it's using people's voices in your films, like using family members' voices or exploring family archives, or even your personal archive, which you mentioned that, you had all this footage that you were using and you were going through it. I'm wondering what, what motivates you to create in such an open manner to create in a way where it's not just so much based on your own perspective and things like that, there's so many other factors. So that's the first part of the question.

Nes: Yeah. I mean, I guess, it's interesting the way that I came to filmmaking and even the time in my life when I really started exploring it as actually making films, I mean, I've always been a huge lover of films and films have been instrumental in my life. I always cite first documentary 'In Perfect Journey' as being a turning point in my life, watching that as a high school student and kind of without getting too far into that story, but just really understanding at that point, the power of the moving image. And so it was always kind of involved, I was around filmmakers

and kind of supporting, and maybe helping to organize screens or maybe more in a producer type role, more with logistics and things like that.

But, as a good immigrant child, I studied science, I studied human biology as the undergraduate and thought I'd do something with medicine or something in the sciences. And so I never really saw that as a viable thing that I could do as part of my life path, but was actually through the process of AZLA and, being in the kitchen with my mom, and being with her for, sometimes up to 14, 16 hours a day and just, hearing stories. My mother's, both my parents, are amazing storytellers, and so I just naturally, I'm also, I think I've always, even since I was a little kid, I would write down notes when my parents were telling me stories. So I always, I think subconsciously just really knew the power of archiving stories.

And so I would just start on my iPhone, just recording my mom as she's telling me stories. And so it, how I started making films was I, my brother had actually introduced me to the folks at the Echo Park Film Center. He organized a screening there and then eventually I took a six-week course on documentary filmmaking using super 8, all analog, literally cutting and splicing and taping film together and kind of really fell love with; they fell in love with the tactile nature and just the physicality of working with film and the preciousness of not wanting to waste, because it's really expensive. So in many ways I think there is a parallel between that process of how I learn, how to make film and also working in the kitchen.

Right? You don't want to burn something that you just spent two hours sauteing some onions you got to be careful and, and be mindful of all the ingredients. And so, then from that six-week course I was actually invited to become an artist in residence. And that's really when I really started to say, 'Oh, I can actually make films'. And so I think the fact that I wasn't formally trained in a film school in many ways for me is a real blessing because I think I'm able to really just make one, I'm making films primarily for myself and for me to think through questions and really, like I said, archive stories that are really important to me, primarily about my family, but other folks that I really care for and histories that I really care about.

So it, my filmmaking is this very organic process. It's not like I ever seek, 'I'm going to make a film about this subject.' It's just, there's a question I'm thinking about and oftentimes I'll start looking at images, looking at footage that I've shot. And then maybe later down the road I'll hear some audio piece that I've recorded on my phone or something that I did years ago and I'll be like, huh, those two things look like they could be in conversation with one another. So it's a very, like I said, it's almost like a recipe. It's like, you got to, my mom taught me, I guess I'll tell on myself. One of my, when I first started cooking, when I moved to LA, my brother, he said something to me, he said your food is, it has a lot of spices, but no flavor.

And I was just devastated. I was like, what? Yeah. But what I understood he was saying was that it's not just about throwing things in a pot, there's timing, right. So there's, when do you add that spice? How long do you caramelize the onion? So all these layers that go into cooking and I really feel like that's the same for film, that it's all about it. It's a really spiritual experience for me. It's really the story coming forth, stories that, that I feel want to be told and that for

whatever reason I have access to that information. And so, yeah, it's been a really interesting experience. I'm not sure if I answered your question, I might be rambling, but, but in many ways I think the way that I came to filmmaking,

Joshua: You totally did answer my question. And it's really interesting because the next part of my -

Nes: Yeah.

Joshua: - is your experience with storytelling grounded in any specific experiences? And I think you just talked about a bunch of those, like the Echo Park Film Center, cooking with your mother, your brother being an artist. And you have a really amazing, creative family and, and him having an experience and inviting that, inviting you into that and that being the catalyst for what you're doing. I think all of these things are really interesting. And another thing I've been thinking about that this exhibition in Blondell's work has really made me think about is the way that storytelling and creating things is much so much of a collaborative process. You're collaborating with people around you and you're thinking about their stories and you're trying to figure out even the space where you're going to show your work.

And it's really interesting that you started off just learning at the Echo Park Film Center, and then you became a resident there. One of the things I wanted to talk to you about and ask you about is collaboration. Working collectively, even as a filmmaker, the film that we just worked, it really sounded like it was shaped in the collaboration with your collaborator, the musician who helped you with the soundtrack. So I wanted to ask when you're creating collectively with collaborators, are there any things that you think of specifically, is there a specific way that you go about collaborating and then just to kind of follow up on that, when you are doing a collaboration, are you thinking of so much of it as your final work that's your own thing? Or are you thinking about it kind of like a restaurant, when you create the recipes and you're not there 24/7, there's other people that are there cooking it and you kind of have to give up a little bit of ownership. So I wanted to talk about that. I wanted to talk about collaboration and what you think about that.

Nes: Yeah, no, I love collaborating and I think it's, even if it's not an overt collaboration, I think about my first film, Bereka, and all of the music is my father playing traditional Ethiopian instruments. I think about even though that was a very internal process where I was really learning how to edit, how to use Adobe Premier as I was making the film. But I think about my good friend, Russ Hamilton, who lives in the neighborhood, who I'd be like, Russ, how do you, what, what I need to move this clip over here? What do I, and he would just stop by like, 'okay Nes, this is how you do it, show me a shortcut', or my friend Sandy, when I wanted to do the titles, I was, I really want them to, I want to do them handwritten.

I want them to be my handwriting. And so Sandy, okay, well I'm going to, so from the graphics and then, ultimately I really think about my it's my mother and my niece who are really telling

that story of Bereka, really their voices. So to me, they're my ultimate collaborators. It's really their story that I'm just helping to shape. And, and really, so I think for me, I really think about, again, going back to the first storytellers that I fell in love with, which were my parents, my parents just were so great, as a young child always instilling whether it was stories of my ancestors, whether it was my grandparents or things about Ethiopia. Obviously living in the diaspora, growing up here, them always really wanting to connect us to our culture, to our history, to the sense of dignity as Ethiopians.

So I think, I think about that a lot. And I really feel like, I'm just part of this lineage of people who, whether for them, it was sitting with their kids at a dinner table telling stories. For me, my medium might be, super eight films, but I really, yeah. In terms of this piece, [inaudible] that we just watched, that was again, just really working with Samir and being like, 'Hey, here are some different recordings that I have. What do you think?' And him really kind of taking kind of these foundational pieces being like, 'oh, we're going to talk about Pan Africanism and Marcus Garvey'. And then me being like, 'oh, wow, that would work really well with this footage of this Ethiopian church'. It really is, and then the name of, of Phyllis Wheatley, really wanting to honor this idea of Ethiopianism and, and kind of this resistance that black folks had in this country.

Even during slavery, that was kind of a predecessor to Pan Africanism to say no, we see ourselves as divine beings. We see, not even so much the idea of the country Ethiopia, but just as a black people that we are in the Bible, we are here, you know what I mean?

Joshua: Yeah.

Nes: And we are going to command that respect. And so, always wanting to just shine light. So to me, she's a collaborator, right? These, all these people that kind of laid the groundwork and the foundation for me to be able to do what I'm doing and, and play and experiment to me, they're all my best collaborators.

Joshua: Yeah. That's such an amazing way to think about making work. And I think, a lot of that, from my opinion, and from my perspective, and talking to a lot of different people might have to come from the way that you entered into it. Right. Like thinking about your parents as storytellers and thinking about the Echo Park Film Center and all of those things, I think that's really amazing. And in viewing the Phyllis Wheatley work, one of the things that really struck me when you first sent it to me was the layered aspect of it. There's so much going on. Even the title, the first thing I thought about before I even watched it, I was like, 'what is this going to be about?' -

Nes: - right.

Joshua: Having my experience thinking about who she is and her legacy and, and all of that.

Joshua: And so I wanted to, I, you also just told the story about what your brother was saying to you about the flavor of that.

Nes: Yeah.

Joshua: And in cooking and how that is such a layered process. And you got to think about when you're going to do something and how you're going to do it in such a way. So this is more of a technical question really. And I wanted to ask you when you're working, how does that layered aspect of your work come across in the filmmaking? Is that something you are thinking of when you're collecting footage or is that something you're thinking of within the editing process a lot? I'd love to hear more about that.

Nes: Yeah. I mean, and first, I just want to say before I move on to this part, and I have to also just when we were talking about collaboration, I have to give a shout out to my mentor, Lisa Mar from the Echo Park Film Center, who was really instrumental in teaching me how to hand process my film. So all of that footage was hand processed, some of it, even with eco materials. So they're very, yeah. So I have to give it up to Lisa. I just wanted to say that real quick. Cause I was thinking about it because she was in there with me and when my film was getting stuck and I'm like, 'oh, I accidentally put too much developer,' Lisa was guiding me throughout that whole process.

So shout out to Lisa, but in terms of the layered aspect, it, I think it really, for me comes in the edit. When I'm collecting again, I'm, I'm not, I'll say I guess I shouldn't say I'll never do a traditional narrative from where I write a script, but for me so far, my filmmaking process has really just been observing, just observing, kind of documenting things as I'm watching them happen.

And then those pieces just end up becoming these ingredients that later get mixed together to make the film. And oftentimes, like I said, the film really reveals itself to me. It's not even something I'm thinking about it's, 'oh, I'm looking up footage and oh, here's some sound elements, what would these things look like together?' And sometimes I'll even, even with, I had initially done, it was just my mother, but something just kept nagging where I was like, this isn't done. This is not the full story. And then later, some months later, I was going through my voice memo on my phone. And I heard I had recorded my niece talking about her first trip back to Ethiopia and what that was like. And as I listened to it, I was like, oh wow, that paired with my mom's story. That's the story.

It's this full circle, story of a family leaving Ethiopia and then this third generation returning and this idea of finding home again. And so oftentimes, like I said, it's a very non-linear process. I may think I'm done with the film and then later find something that's like, oh no, that needs to be added. And with [inaudible] in particular, the initial footage, like I said, I had shot, I think it was either in 28, I want to say end of 2018, early 2019. And a lot of times people will think because of just the nature of super eight film, but also just Ethiopia is just such an ancient place

that people be like, 'where did you find this archival footage'? And I'm like, in my parent's neighborhood last week, so I feel like there's those layers.

And I remember even I screamed this [inaudible] when I was first working on it for my nieces and nephew in Ethiopia, actually this last summer when we were together. And my niece was like, 'there's almost a paranormal element. I'm seeing other things happening in the film'. And so I feel like just the nature of film too, there's that later, especially with the pan process, it's like, there's quote unquote mistakes where there might be some chemistry or the film might have gotten stuck together. But to me that's part of it, you know what I mean? That's part of the story. And it's very, again, when I talk about, there's a spiritual element to the process. It was interesting for her to pick up on that. And now as I look at it, I'm like, 'oh yeah, I am seeing like some energy' -

Joshua: - that's what I thought [inaudible]. And I don't know if that's because of some things that's been happening with me. I watched some sci-fi movies over the weekend and stuff like that. But it, I think that's really interesting because I assumed that the footage was something that you shot recently, just because I've talked to you about your work and your travels and that stuff, stuff like that.

But I could very much see someone viewing it and saying 'Hey, this is some archival footage'. And then this is, I think my third or fourth viewing of the work, I did sense a little bit of a paranormal element. And then with the narration, I was like, there's something else going on here. And one of those things, I think that's really amazing and something I'm learning about film and just take it back to Blondell, like the videos that are in the exhibition as well, the environment in which you view a film in, it changes everything as well. So I think with the work that you're making and the layer nature of it is really interesting to have these repeat screenings of it. And even if it's a private thing, you showing it for your family, that has to change, I would assume, the way you think about film as a filmmaker. So I'm interested to see things that you make in the future, because I think that that mode of filmmaking is something that really interests me. Thank

Nes: Thank you. Thank you.

Joshua: Yeah. Is there anything that you want to add to the end, in terms of the film or in terms of your work in general before we close?

Nes: No, again, I think it's for me, like I said, I guess I'll just say that I feel really blessed to be able to have the time and space to be able to experiment and tell these stories and be able to do so much that I love. And recently I discovered, I mean, I had heard of her and, but really kind of during the pandemic really started studying miss Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor. And I don't know if you know her, but amazing chef, writer, costume design, she's designed costumes for [inaudible] at one point, but just this amazing person and it's been such a blessing to be able to

encounter women like Ms. Vertamae because in many ways I think it gives me permission to explore all my passions.

Sometimes you feel like you have to choose but I think with dynamic women even someone like my mother who came out of retirement to start her restaurant something that she'd always dreamt of. It's a real blessing to be able to have permission to really think about nourishment, what nourishes me in this very multidimensional multi-layered way and to not feel like film is separate from food, is separate from, but it's really, like I said, I think the way that my parents raised it, it's all storytelling. My father's really into fashion. He's like the sharpest dress man I've ever met. And for him, he was like 'the way you show up and the way you step out into the world is telling a story', you know what I'm saying?

And whether it's 'I just woke up and I'm disheveled', that's one story. But I really appreciate as I get older, just my dad who just really, just imparted on me the importance of storytelling and that you can tell stories in the way that you plate something, and then the colors that you're using in your food presentation to filmmaking to music. My father, like I said, self-taught musician. And it's funny because in many ways my parents are like, 'I don't understand, you went to Stanford and UCLA, why are you, using these weird old cameras and in the kitchen massaging kale?' But when I really look back, my parents have always been artists and they've always, really shown us the beauty of art and really living in an artful way. So just grateful to be able to do that.

Joshua: Yeah. That's such an amazing way. I think to end this specific program series, the Food for Thought, it's just one of those things it's like, sometimes people do need that feeling of permission, especially in the world that we live in nowadays where it's like, people might tell you, you need to put your head down and focus on one thing. But I love that you, that you said that, and I really appreciate you for doing that. And for all the work that you do in terms of storytelling and things like that. Thank you.

Nes: Thank you. Thank you so much for inviting me be a part of this, Josh. I really appreciate it.

Joshua: Yeah, no problem.

Nes: Yeah, take care.