



**'great rift'**  
**ROBERT SLINGSBY**

# 'great rift'

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ROBERT SLINGSBY

Charcoal and chalk pastel drawings  
Woodblock mono-prints

EVERARD READ

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FRANSCHHOEK

in partnership with  
THE LEEU COLLECTION

‘great rift’

“My mark making has been captivated by Africa’s artists, both ancient and contemporary. I am constantly drawn to experience first hand Africa’s wealth of creativity.

The animist tribes compel me to repeatedly return to the Omo Valley located in that part of the Great Rift Valley lying in the Southern reaches of Ethiopia.

It is the intoxicating visual overload that is the imagery of authentic Africa; people adorned with designs so ancient and mysterious, a living art form, having inspired and informed fashion and the visual arts globally.

What I search for is the most authentic blue print of contemporary tribal Africa; material reflecting traditions maintained over thousands of years. The material is pure, not contrived in a studio setting, but embracing all the rawness of the moment, regardless of what has defined the interaction.

But by visiting the Omo Valley tribes repeatedly, I am bearing witness to a freeze-frame on cultural obsolescence as a result of Anthropocene man, as he invades their lives both literally and metaphorically. In so doing, the bravery of the tribes of the Great Rift Valley who have to make painful transformations through loss of tribal land and cultural traditions split the fault line. ‘great rift’”

Robert Slingsby



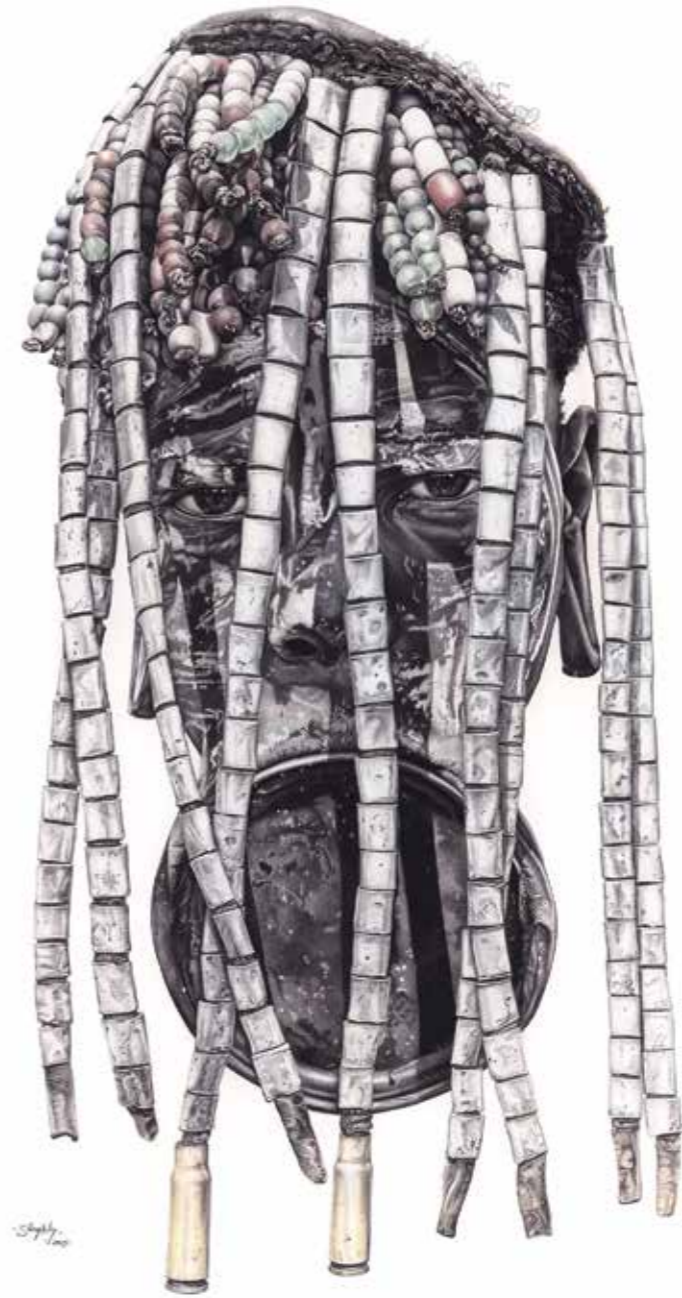
*'I am Olu' Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 116 X H 192 cm's*



AM OLU, I AM MURSI, FROM MAGO PARK, OMO VALLEY, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA 5°31' 54.79"N 36°15' 31.01"E ELEV 4,40M



*'I am Nga Jareholi'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 205 X H 132 cm's



*'I am Atari'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 127 X H 188 cm's

## HAZEL FRIEDMAN FRACTURING THE FREEZE-FRAME

As one exits the rambling metropolis of Addis Ababa, the 21st century begins to morph into a pre-industrial era with roadways dominated by donkeys and cattle herds. It takes at least three days to reach the Omo Valley, in the most remote south western region of the country. Access is via a road that, during the dry season, can be downright harrowing. It snakes through a breathtakingly beautiful, undulating topography of contrasts, arid plateaus flanked by gloriously green mountains; a landscape seemingly frozen in time.

Among the most unique ecological areas in the world, the Omo Valley has been a crossroads for people traversing the region for thousands of years. It is also the locus of Robert Slingsby's 'great rift'. Since 2013, Slingsby has travelled along this very road to where the Sudanese and Kenyan borders are literally in sight, immersing himself in the ethnically diverse region that is home to 8 distinct cultural groups. In 'great gift' it is the Kara and the Mursi tribes who are the focus of his lens and canvases.

Both tribes use their bodies as aesthetic temples, performing scarification and piercings in various patterns and painted designs using yellow sulphur, white kaolin, white limestone and grey ash. Their use of pigment permeates the layers of both their material and spiritual worlds, as it does for many traditional cultures dispersed throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. These practices signify rites of passage, and are frequently objectified through the Western tourist gaze, exoticised in their 'otherness'. However, this gaze does little to unbundle the profound semiotic layers in which the material culture of these tribes is embedded.

Globalisation has inevitably amalgamated previous boundaries and obstacles of language, culture and geography into quasi-hybridized trans-frontiers of human interaction and exchange. The multicultural worldview argues that we are all now part of a global super-identity and discourse. But condescending ethnography continues to render tribes like the Mursi, either as primitive or as curiosities. Their visual representations remain distorted by the socio-cultural impacts of colonialism, reflected through the lenses and brushstrokes of racial, patriarchal hegemony.

Slingsby acknowledges the inevitably race and gender-skewed, ethnocentric prism through which 'otherness' is viewed. But while he acknowledges the imperatives of decolonising this paternalistic worldview, he believes this should not be attained at the expense of acknowledging and celebrating cultural tradition and identity.



*'Stone platform of Dirikoro' Oil ink woodblock monoprint with new ostrich eggshell beads and silver leaf W 133 X H 140 cm's*

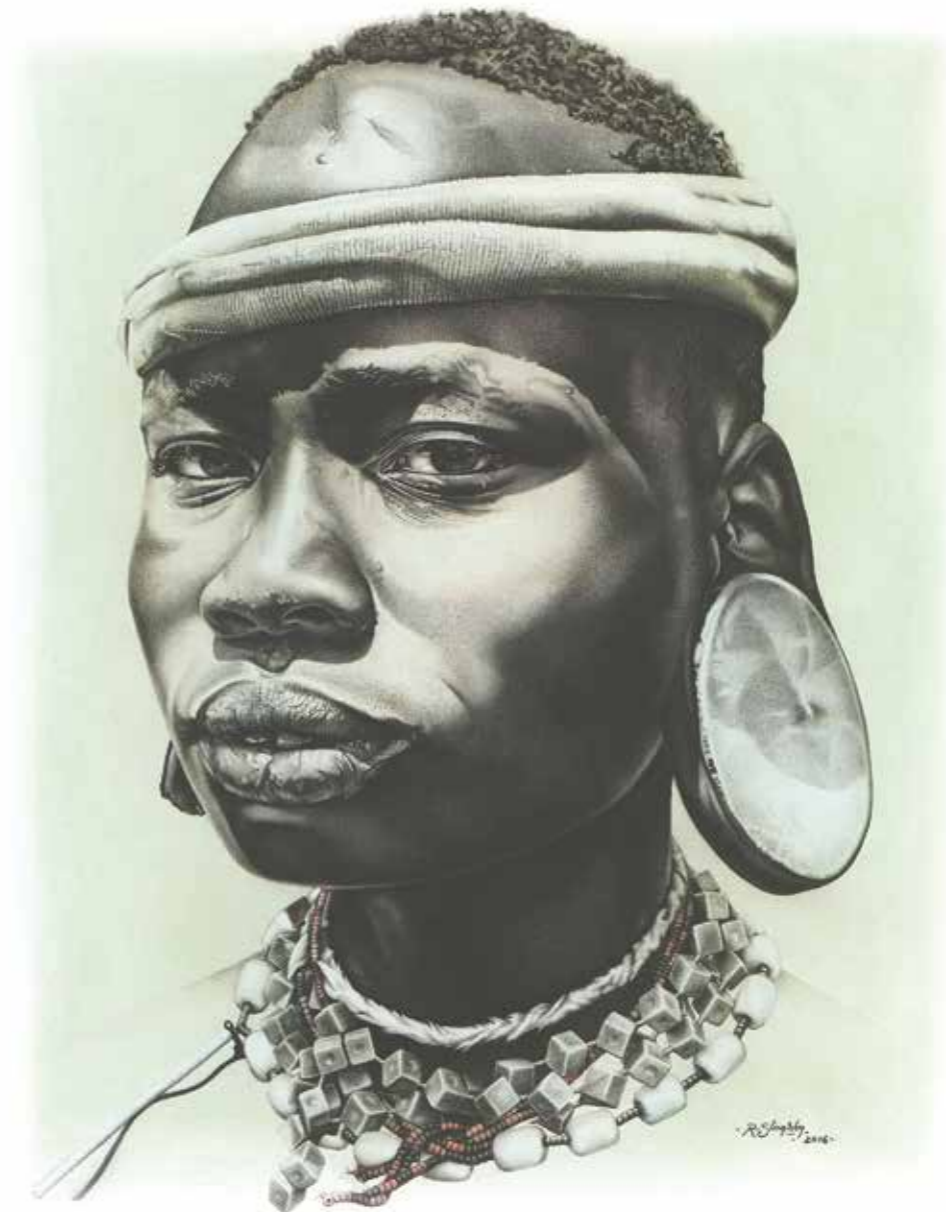
The 'great rift' comprises monumental charcoal and chalk portraits and drawings. Each work is reconfigured from photographs Slingsby shot in the field, communicating a sense of a shared experience in real time, an intimate connection between Slingsby and his subject. The drawings are rendered as an augmentation and unearthing of humanistic elements, so that even the 'in-situ' photograph sometimes "filters" out. Slingsby explains: 'It's about embracing the moment, without the comfort of a controlled studio-environment, and of photographing with as little augmentation as possible, to respectfully depict the symbolism of the markings and the significance of the ancient hallowed rituals and rites of passage.'

In these works it is evident that a direct relationship between Slingsby and the individuals he portrays has been of immense value in facilitating the fashioning of these portraits. Apart from the astonishing technical acumen with which he's depicted them and their distinctive anatomical markings, what strikes the viewer most are their eyes – luminescent pools of memory and aspiration.

Each work is titled with the name of the individual photographed and drawn, preceded by the phrase 'I am': an expression of self-assertion- an individual affirmation of uniqueness and identity within the collective. The titles therefore subvert the ethnocentric tendency to render tribal communities as anonymous exhibits that tacitly collude in the broader erasure of the individual voices that inform and augment collective identity. Slingsby asserts that his subjects are neither voiceless nor submissive. They proudly meet the viewer's gaze, disobeying the conventional powerful versus passive role.

The 'great rift' drawings pay homage to a culture on the cusp of inevitable, irrevocable change. Although there is always the nostalgic temptation to impose a cultural freeze-frame on a transforming world, 'great rift' acknowledges the desire and right, on the part of the Omo Valley tribes to embrace change – and the consequences thereof.

In many respects, this exhibition represents a revisitation of a recurring theme that has been seen throughout Slingsby's career, spanning more than 40 years. Since 1972, his perennial search for historical archetypes, artefacts, fictions and the ancient residue of altered states of consciousness, led him to record Southern Africa's ancient rock engravings along the banks of the Orange River, Namibia, Egypt, Malta, England, Scotland and beyond.



*'Cutting the cut' Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 117 X H 130 cm's*



It was during the 1980s that his search to unearth the meaning behind rock art assumed a creative odyssey and quest that transcended the academic confines of ethnography, archaeology or anthropology. Call it field or feel work, Slingsby's meticulous documentation and depiction of the petroglyphs produced by the Nama of the Richtersveld, represent the origin and stimulus of his mission to record the remaining material culture – the memento mori- of marginalised ancient communities. The discarded scraps of once thriving material cultures have become metaphors for disempowered communities, dispossessed by colonialism.

Ultimately, Slingsby's role has been that of humanist, artist, historian and activist: intricately mapping the visual markings of personal and social histories furrowed onto faces, objects and habitats, outlining their relationship to each other and their environment. His quest has been defined by a profound belief in social justice, the need to interrogate the contexts of production, the problems of representation, the pathways of circulation and the consequences of consumption. Through his art, Slingsby has waged an unrelenting protest against the rupturing of ancient rites and the scarring of spiritual spaces by the bulldozer's claw, while acknowledging the polarities of wounding and healing, desecration and restoration, loss and reclamation.

What differentiates 'great rift' from previous creative trajectories is that in this location the dissipation is happening in real time. Indeed, for centuries the survival of the indigenous communities of the Lower Omo Valley, has been predicated on the natural ebb and flow of its delicate ecosystem. Inextricably linked to the river running through the region, is the population directly dependent on the Omo River for survival. In this arid climate they have developed an agrarian system for either flood recession agriculture or the replenishment of grazing lands. They practice husbandry, hunting fishing and crop farming. After the annual flood, the tribes living along the Omo River plant crops in the riverside soils nurtured by its mineral-rich sediment deposits.

Cattle are central to the material culture in the region, and the link between social and universal order. Cattle constitute the tribes' most valued possession; with cultural, ritual, religious, ancestral, wealth and nutritional significance entwined. Most enthralling, perhaps, are the elaborate physical and aesthetic modifications performed on their herds, ranging from horn sculpting, adornments and decorative branding.



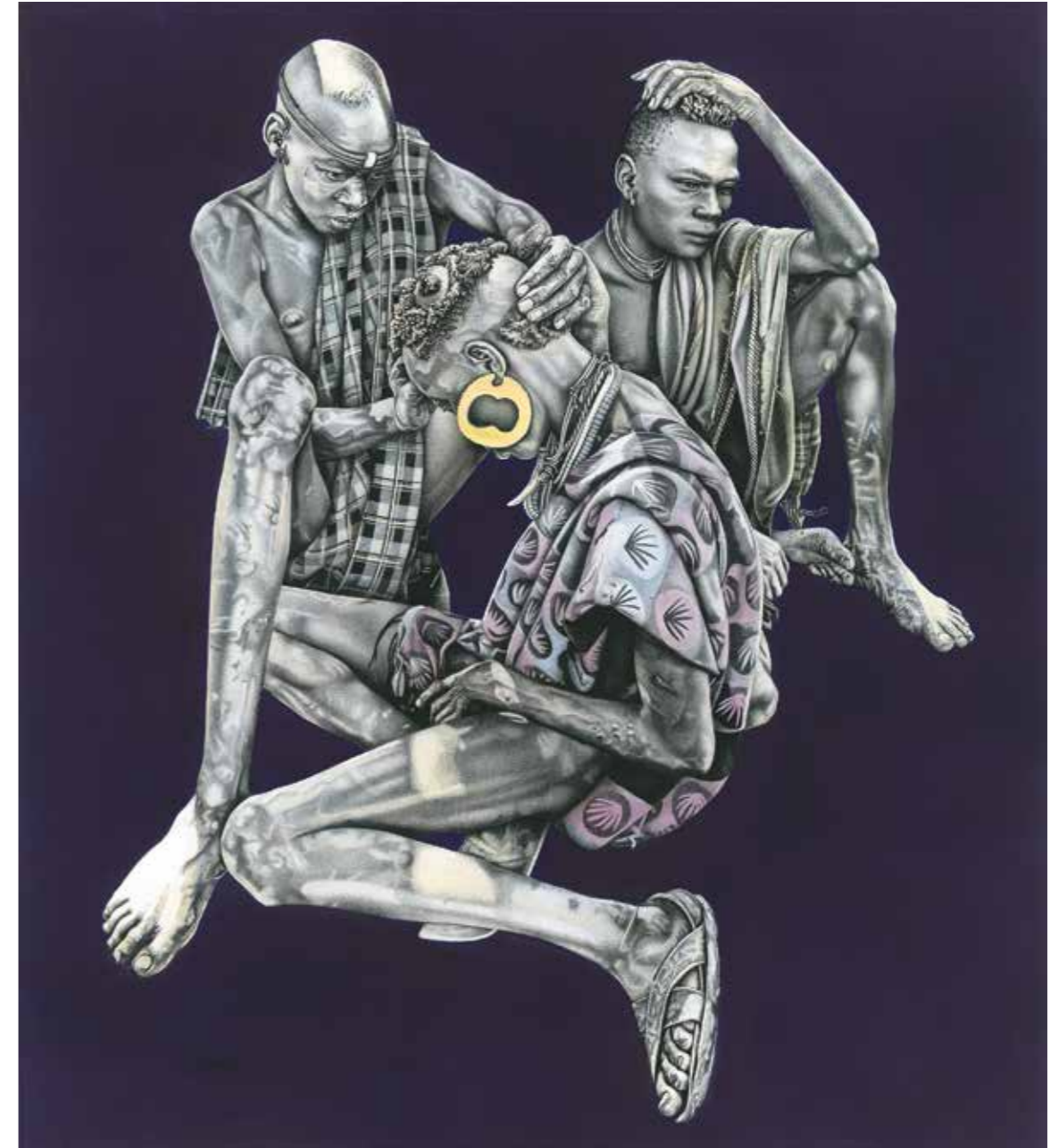
*'Lost without a whimper'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 119 X H 160 cm's

As has been increasingly documented by human rights groups, the tribes subsisting along the banks of the Omo River are now under threat by the lures of progress, power and profit. In 2013, the construction of Gilgel Gibe III- a massive hydroelectric dam – was completed upriver. While the dam will generate much-needed power for Ethiopia’s vast population, environmentalists warn it will have a devastating impact on water levels downstream. For the indigenous residents of the Lower Omo, and those who live around Kenya’s Lake Turkana, which receives 90% of its water from the Omo River, development comes at a cost.

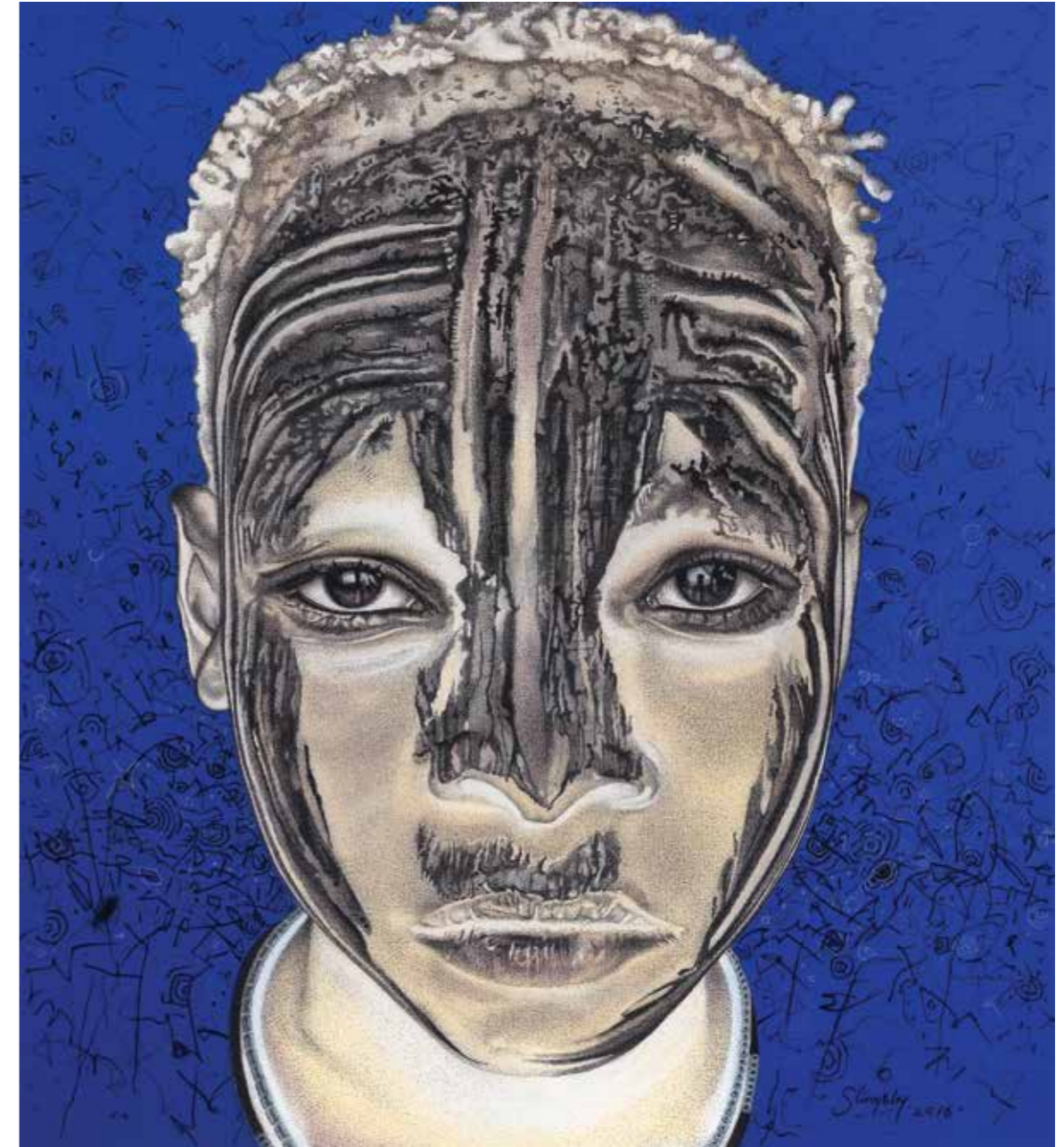
The Ethiopian government has leased out vast blocks of fertile land in the Lower Omo to foreign investors; without satisfactory environmental and social impact assessments or prior consultation with the traditional communities inhabiting the region. Countless indigenous communities have been evicted from their land to make way for these large-scale land grabs. While the plantations will potentially create more than 150,000 full and part-time jobs, affected tribes will be displaced, requiring associated life-style adjustments. Although some welcome the change, there exists the risk that over half a million traditional livelihoods will be endangered.

The Omo Valley tribes are caught between these conflicting perspectives, precariously straddling the schism between old and new. Hence the aptness of Slingsby’s exhibition title: ‘great rift’. Beyond the obvious reference to the Rift Valley, ‘great rift’ also speaks, more ominously, of broken promises, fractured realities and looming conflict. It is a neo-colonial trade-off, Slingsby argues, that will ravage the country’s natural resources and reduce its indigenous inhabitants, particularly Ethiopia’s traditional communities, to reservoirs of cheap labour, exchanging centuries of self-sustainability for serfdom. In the process, we will all lose intricate knowledge of life systems that have evolved over centuries of habitation, that reinforce the interconnectedness of nature and humanity.

But the moment of transition has already begun. Slingsby recalls when there were forests as far as the eye could see. Then huge trees were felled and uprooted to make way for a foreign cotton plantation. The bulldozer’s claw has already left an indelible scar on the land and its people. The line had been crossed, leaving behind a great rift and the freeze-frame irrevocably fractured.



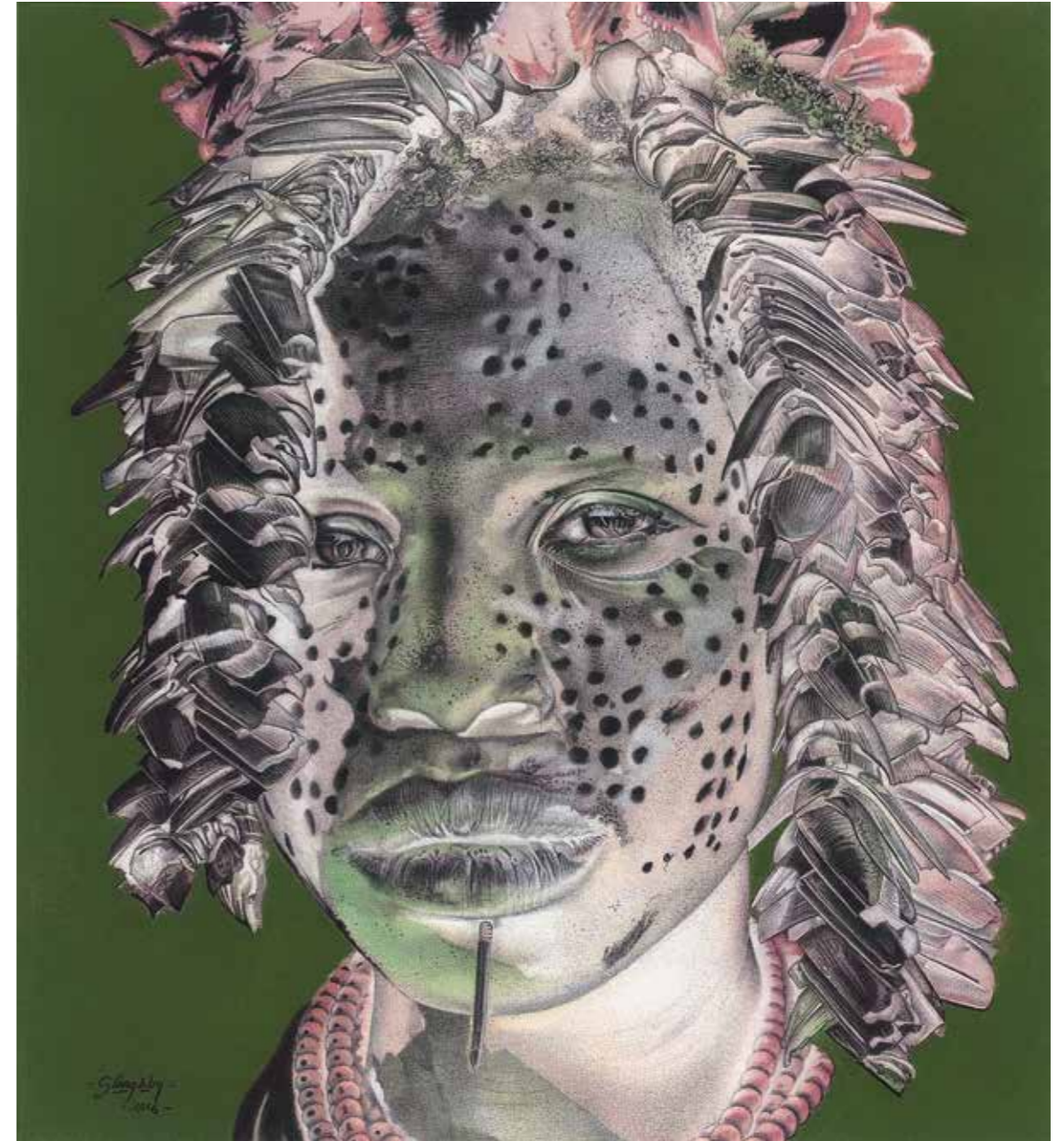
*‘On razor edge’ Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 117.5 X H 129cm’s*

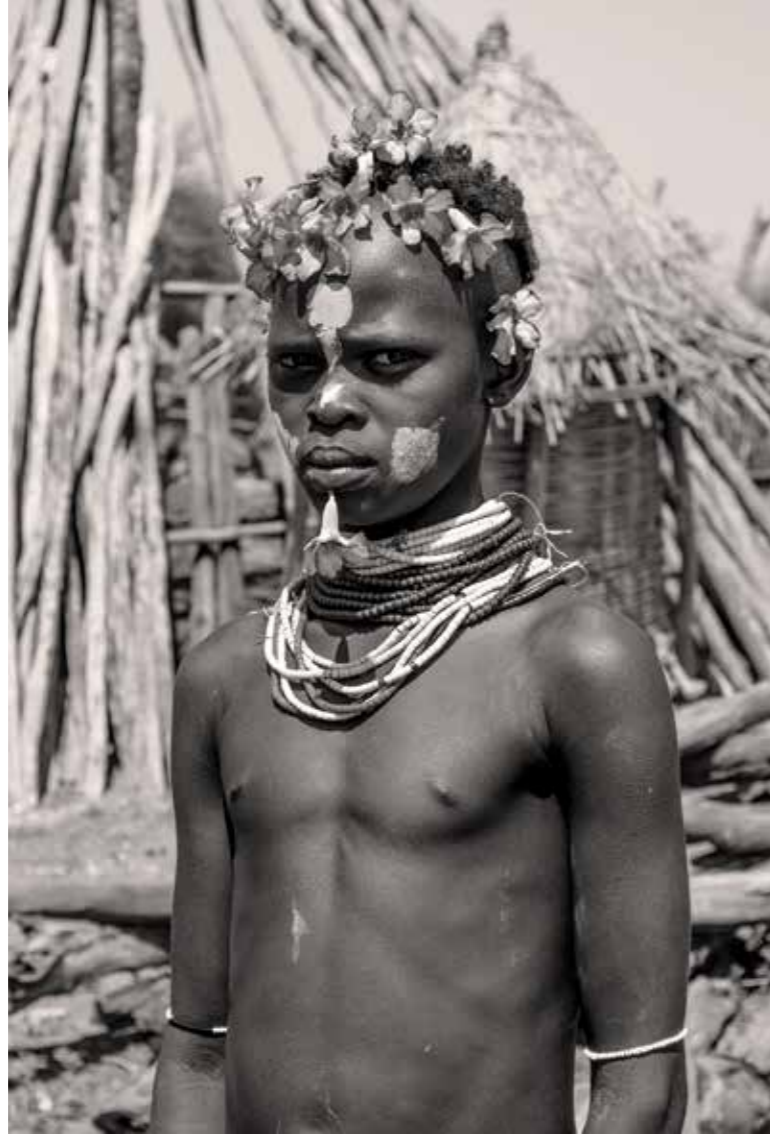


*'I am Akriyo'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 72.5 X H 77.5 cm's

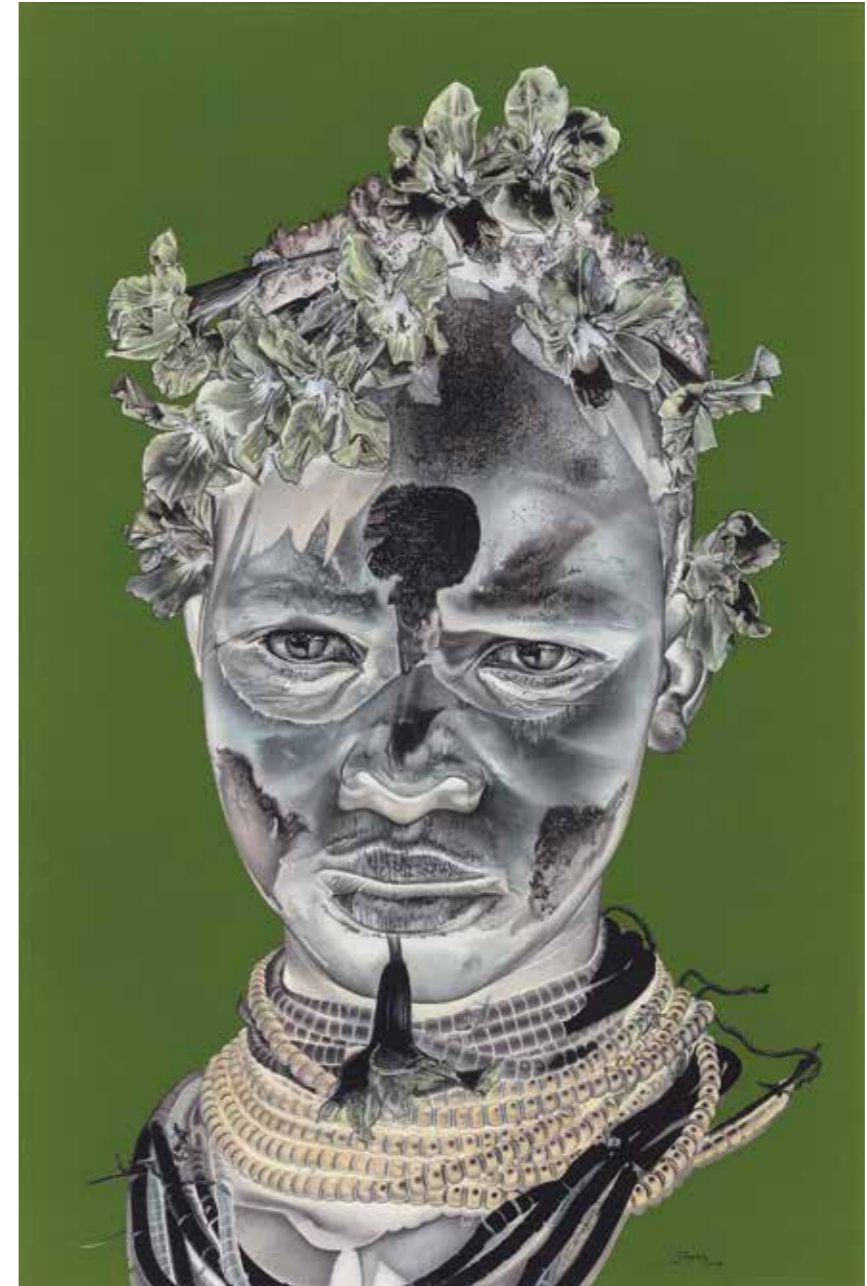


*'I am Wahla'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 72.5 X H 77.5 cm's



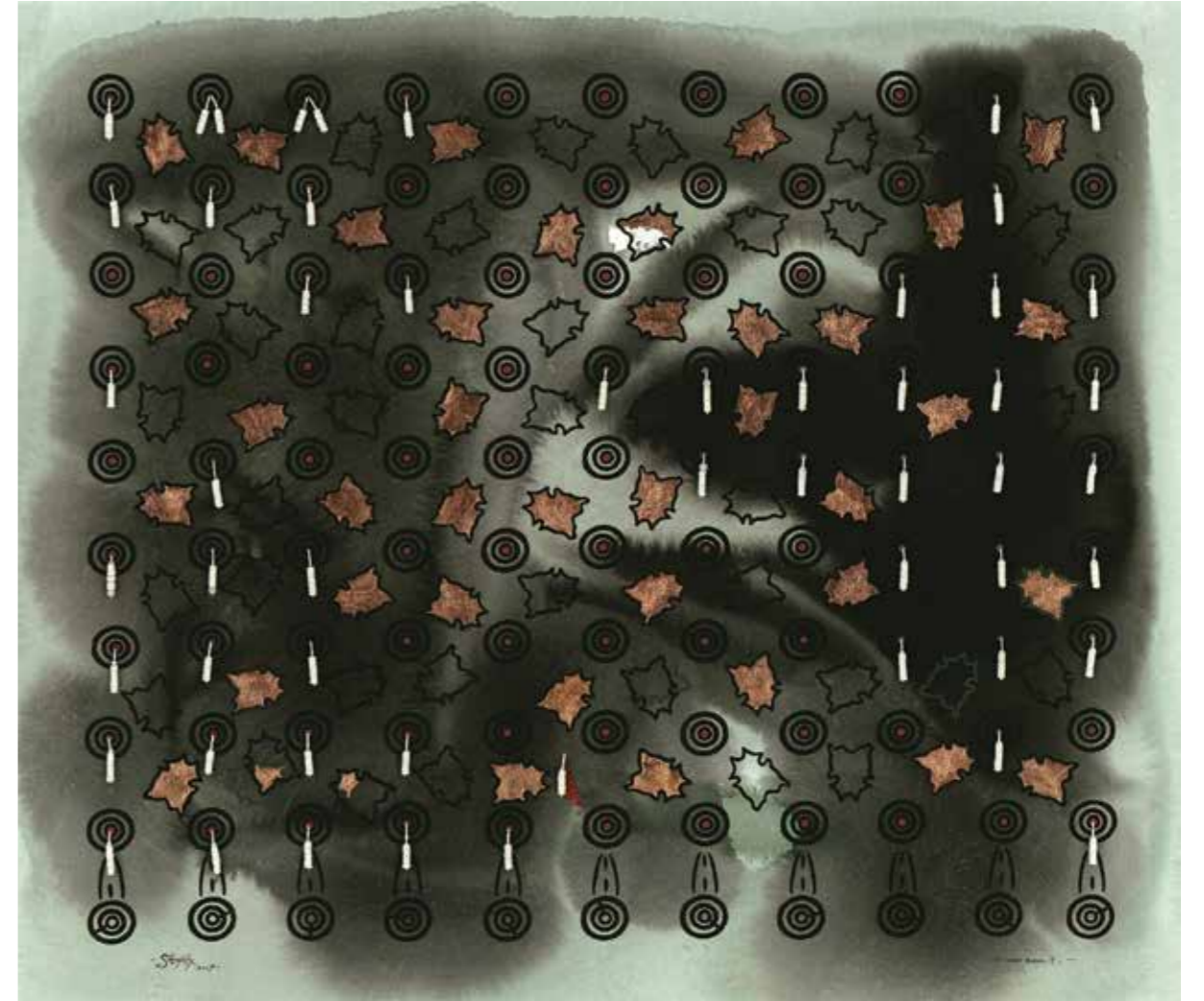


*'I am Berigy Bore Lomulem'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 121 X H 168.5 cm's





*Above: Wooden parliament building, Dus, Omo Valley, Southern Ethiopia*



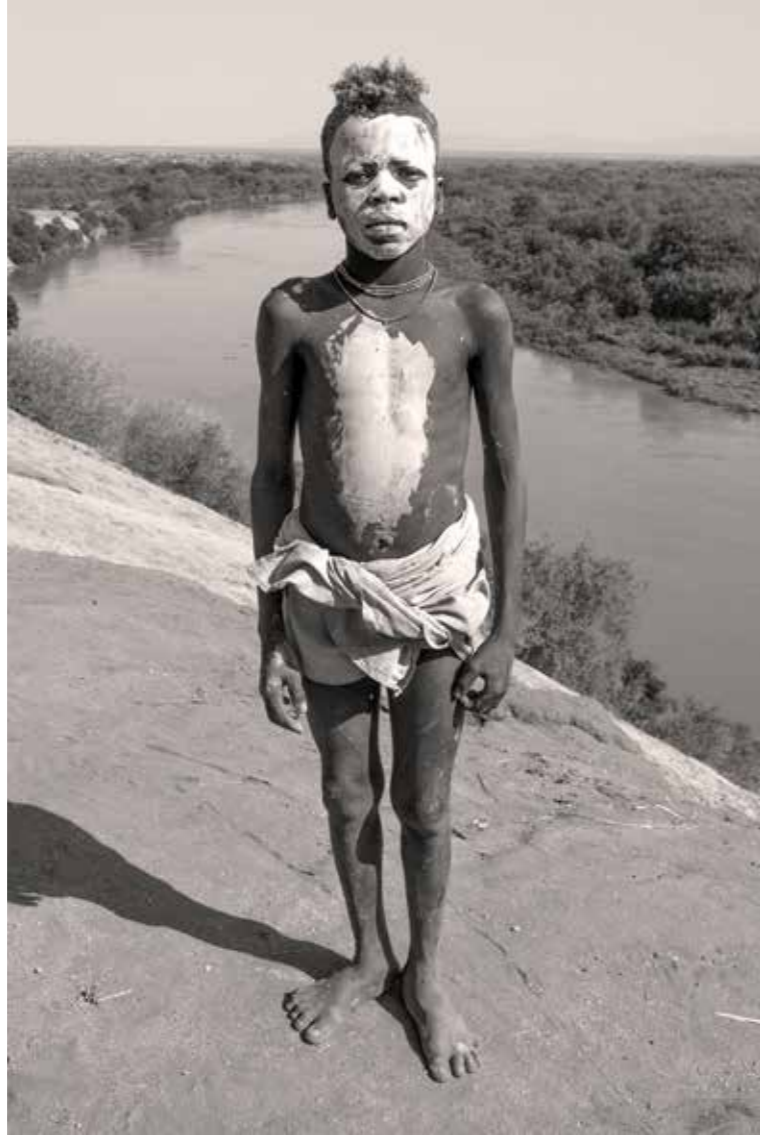
*Right 'Parliament' Oil ink woodblock monoprint with new ostrich eggshell beads and copper leaf W 133 X H 140.5cm's*



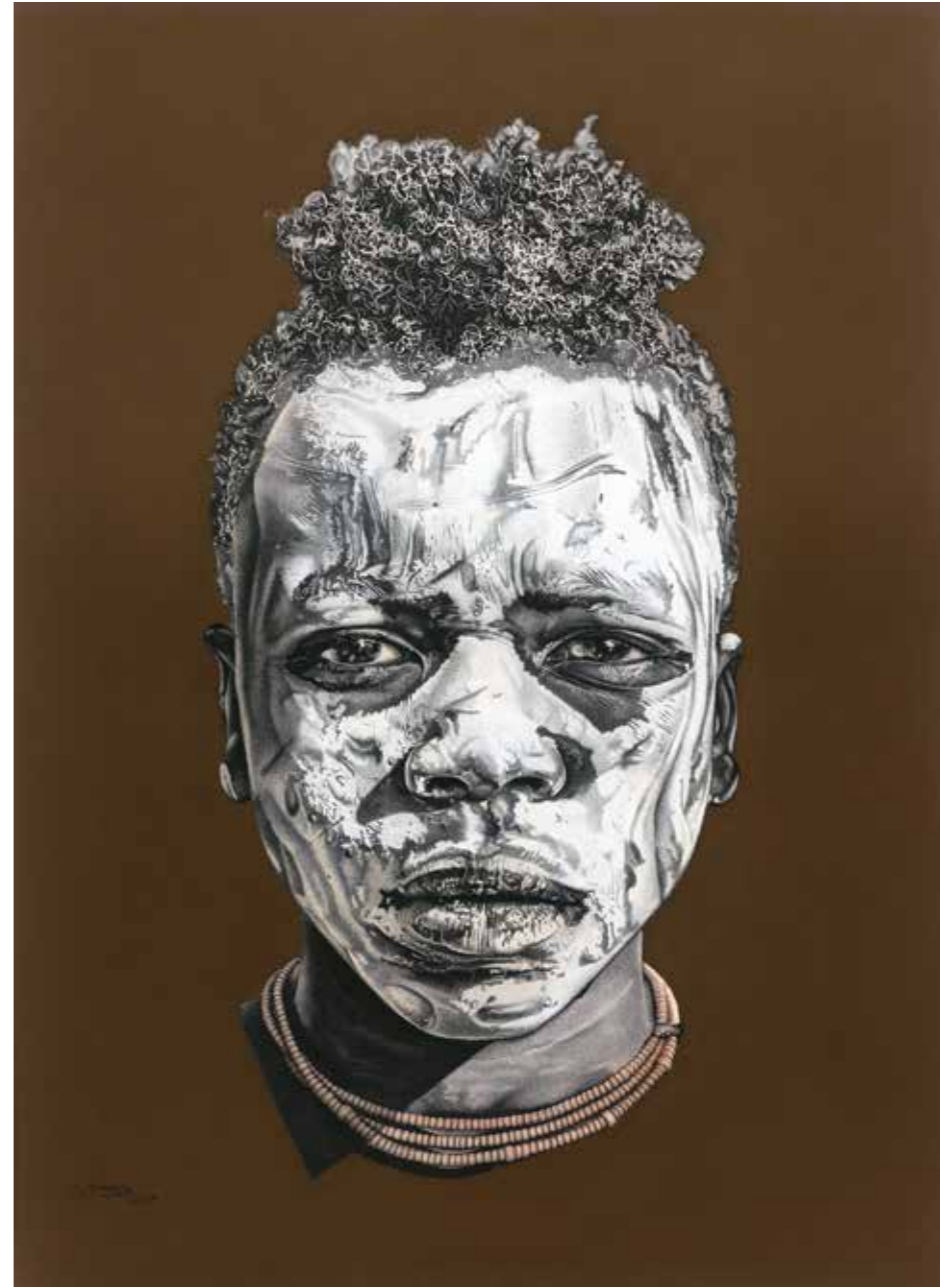
Above: Stone platform of Dirikoro, Mago Park, Omo Valley, Southern Ethiopia



Right 'Navel' Oil ink woodblock monoprint with new ostrich eggshell beads W 118 X H 126 cm's



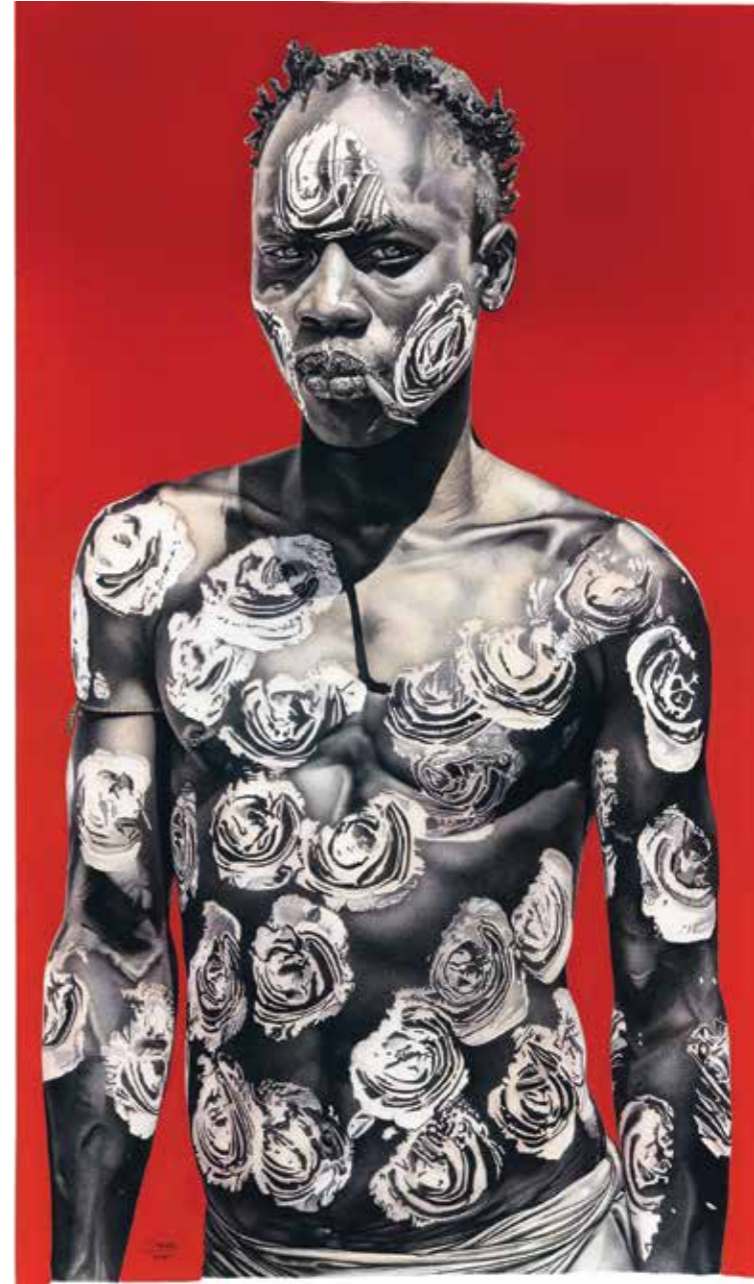
*'I am Amer'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 109 X H 141 cm's







*'I am Mero Dakalt'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 126 X H 192 cm's

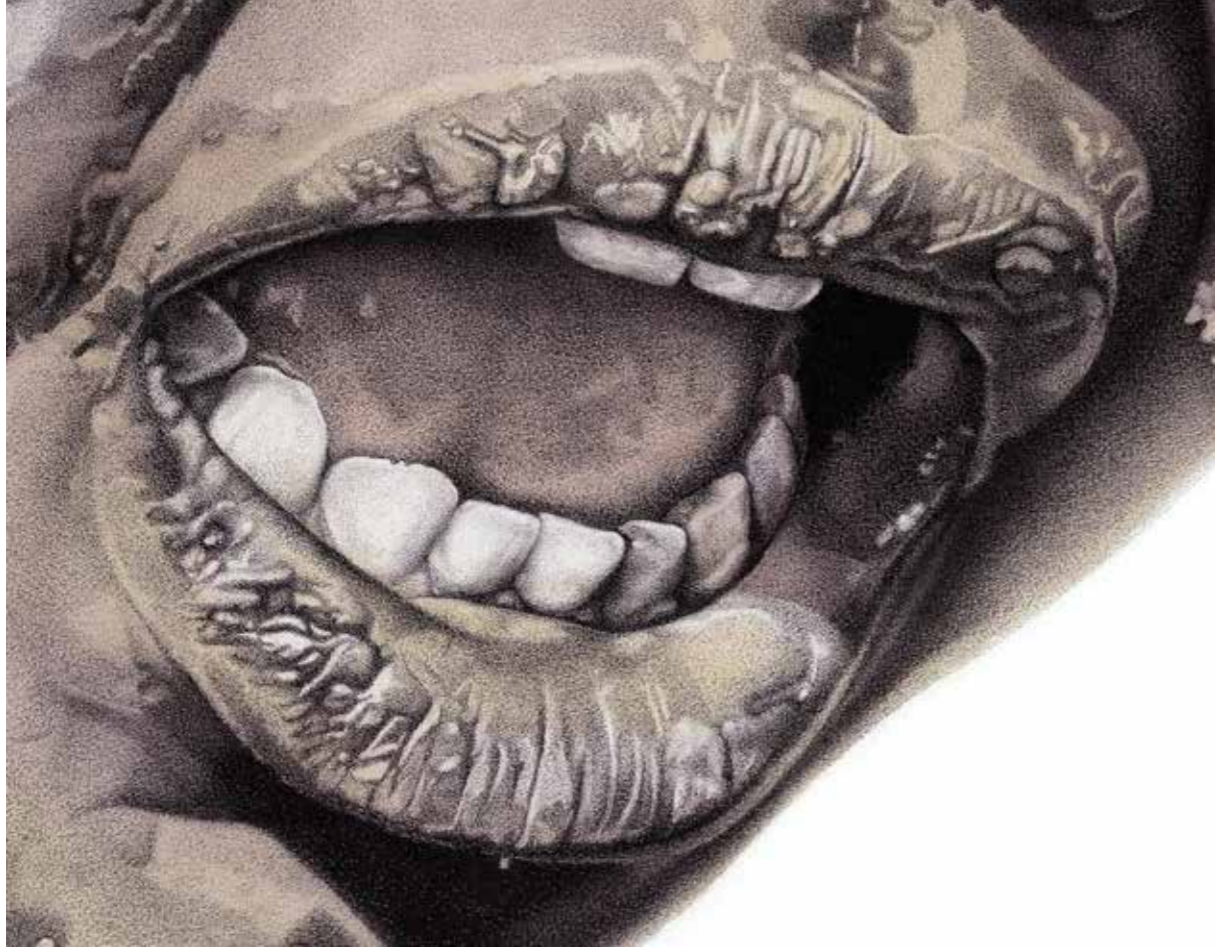




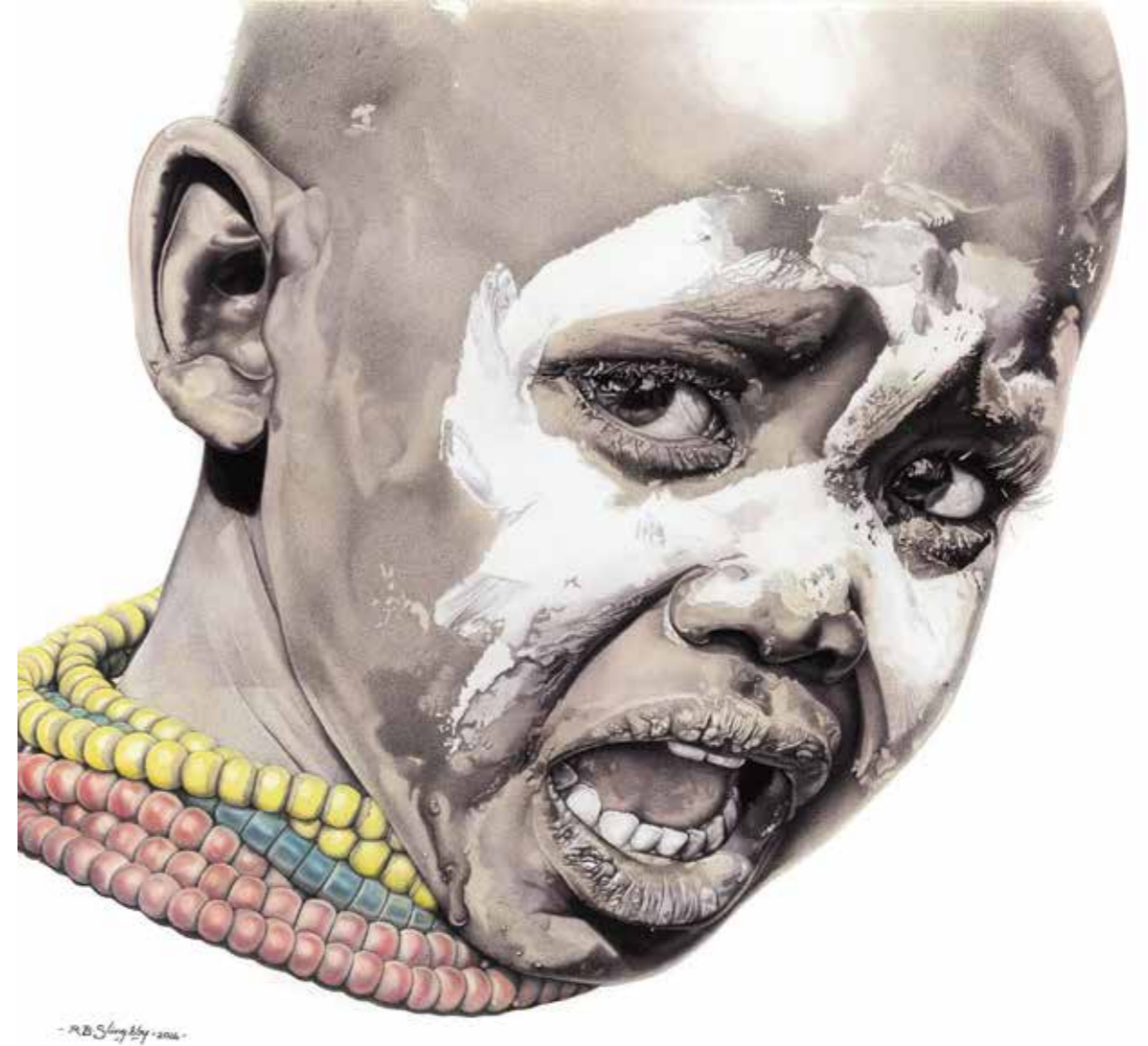
*'I am Kare Dubale'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 116 X H 204 cm's



I AM KARE DUBALE. I AM KARA, FROM KOLCHO, OMO VALLEY, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA 5°11'30.25" N 36°12'26.81" E ELEV 431M



*'I am Bordi Keke'* Charcoal and chalk pastel drawing W 132 X H 119 cm's



## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2017 'great rift' Everard Read, Franschhoek  
2015 'I am' Royal College of Art, London  
2014 'Crossing the line' Barnard Gallery, Cape Town  
2012 'Money and God in his pocket' Barnard Gallery, Cape Town  
2010 'CC- Unlimited power', Barnard Gallery, Cape Town  
2010 'CC- Unlimited power', UCT Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town  
2007 Square 1 Gallery, London  
2006 'Bones of the rusting carpet' Square 1 Gallery, London  
2005 'Power house' Bell-Roberts Contemporary Art Gallery, Cape Town  
2001 Air Gallery, London  
2000 Dundas Art Gallery, Edinburgh  
1999 Osborne Gallery, London  
1999 Bourne Fine Art, Edinburgh  
1999 Edinburgh Festival  
1997 Code Red, Perth, Australia  
1994 Primart, Cape Town  
1993 Visual Arts Foundation, Johannesburg  
1992 Primart, Cape Town  
1991 Gallery International, Cape Town  
1991 William Humphries Art Museum, Kimberly  
1990 Gallery International, Cape Town  
1989 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg  
1983 Gowlett Gallery, Cape Town  
1982 Gowlett Gallery, Cape Town  
1982 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg  
1981 Toys, The Hague, Holland  
1981 La Tertulia, Amsterdam, Holland  
1980 Sheraton Hotel, Amsterdam, Holland  
1979 Posthoorn, Den Haag, Holland  
1978 Galery Galjoen, S'Hertogenboch, Holland  
1978 Gallery '77, Ijsselstein, Holland  
1978 Gallery Ploemp, Delft, Holland  
1976 Gallery International, Cape Town  
1972 First exhibition in Diocesan College- Bishops Art Loft

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014 Works on screen- Saatchi Gallery, London  
2014 'Play' NIROX sculpture park, Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site  
2011 Sandie Lowry, Kensington Park Rd pop-up, London  
2010 Joint exhibit with Suw Williams, Gallery Genesis, Athens, Greece  
2010 Painting Midas touch selected as part of FIFA Official Poster edition  
2007 Joint exhibit with Cuban artist, Ernesto Rancaño, Square One Gallery, London  
2007 Art Expo, New York with Park Bench Gallery  
2006 Art International, Nassau, Bahamas  
2006 Cannazaro House, Wimbledon  
2006 YPO auction, Slingsby painting raised over \$69,900.00 CTICC  
2005 Art International, Nassau, Bahamas  
2001 'On the Road to Meikle Seggie', Richard De Marco, Venice Biennale  
2000 Hanover EXPO 2000: GERMANY  
2000 Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University, U.K.  
1998 Lisbon Expo, Portugal  
1998 'Art Beyond Borders', Augsburg, Germany  
1998 'EKHAYA', Traveling Exhibition to Tsoga-Langa, Uluntu, Guguletu.  
1998 IDASA Gallery, Cape Town  
1997 Kunsamer, Cape Town  
1997 Code Red, Perth, Australia  
1996 Sisonke Association of Arts, Mitchells Plain  
1996 Installation on Robben Island- Memorial Sculpture  
1994 SA Cultural History Museum, Cape Town  
1994 Quid Novi Gallery, Germany  
1994 World Convention Centre, Singapore  
1994 World Trade Centre, Hong Kong  
1994 Very Special Arts Gallery, Washington D.C.  
1993 'Made in Wood: Works from the western Cape', SANG  
1991 SANLAM Collection, Baxter Gallery, Cape Town  
1989 Natalie Knight Gallery, Johannesburg  
1988 The Sasol Art Collection, Rand Afrikaans University  
1985 'Tributaries- a View of Contemporary SA Art' BMW RSA, Touring Germany  
1984 'Masterworks on Paper' SANG, Cape Town  
1983 SA Contemporary Realism, Pretoria Art Museum  
1978 Nederlandse Fijnschilders, t'Kunsthuis, V H Ooste, Holland

## COLLECTIONS

ABSA  
Artoteek, Dutch Municipal Collection Coronation  
Berman Bros Group  
Bunders Bank, Germany  
Cape of Good Hope Bank  
Department of Foreign Affairs  
Deutsche Bank, Johannesburg  
Investec Bank  
Leeu Collection  
Pepsico  
Pietersburg Art Museum  
Sanlam Public Collection  
SANTAM  
SASOL Public Collection  
SEEFF Holdings  
South African Reserve Bank  
South African Embassy, Brussels  
Telkom  
Rand Merchant Bank  
Witwatersrand University Collection  
William Humphries Museum

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Dedicated to Janis Slingsby

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