

# Esther Schipper

**Merikokeb Berhanu**

May 2 – May 31, 2025

Esther Schipper, Berlin



Merikokeb Berhanu, **Untitled XCIX**, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 182,9 x 243,8 cm (72 x 96 in) (MEB 004) © the artist

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce Merikokeb Berhanu's first exhibition with the gallery. On view will be three new paintings.

Merikokeb Berhanu's work combines abstract and representational elements, forging a distinct formal vocabulary. Her biomorphic imagery evokes associations with life: Rounded shapes invoke cells, buds, seed pods, or embryonic life, suggesting processes of conception, gestation, reproduction, or birth – underlying themes that are more intuited than stated. A circular form recalls celestial bodies such as sun or moon, but can also be positioned as a figure's head, organ or, in a formal vocabulary that powerfully destabilizes our sense of scale, even as a cellular structure. References to animal life bespeak an understanding of the connectedness of all life-forms.

Equally fluid in their meaning are Merikokeb's representations of the human body: individual feet or hands become visible but embody a more generalized human presence; elongated shapes with rounded heads could represent a group of flowers just as much as a community of men and women. **Untitled XCX** features fragments of the human body and beautifully demonstrates this conflation of vegetal, organic, and perhaps even mineral form. Multiple elongated shapes can be seen as abstract, organic, and human at the same time. Solid colors alternate with intricately patterned sections where lines can become cell membranes, currents of an orange-colored stream, or a field of schematic technical detritus.

Merikokeb's paintings wed an earth- and life-bound timelessness with references to technology that equally register as both precise and far-reaching. Sometimes surfaces are covered in pattern recalling the angular threads of microchips or schematic motherboards, as if they had proliferated autonomously. This fantasy circuitry, sometimes rendered in a matrix-green reminiscent of representations of cyberspace in early sci-fi, signals a modern, industrial and digital realm. In **Untitled XCIX**, a cluster of nestled oval shapes at the center is surrounded by an array of red circles dotted over a broad green band – ambiguous hybrids between wildflower, blood cell and micro-circuit. **Untitled XCXII**, also features these red shapes, which here are encroached upon by various tech-like sections and which surround a dark geometric void at the center.

While Merikokeb's work has long had a focus on lifeforms and biomorphic imagery, her inclusion of technological elements, and the imagery of distressed animals, such as the pile of fish bones at the bottom of **Untitled XCIX**, have been attributed to the artist's move to the US in 2017, where she grappled with the implications of mass consumption, environmental pollution and climate change. Paradoxically, after her move, her palette also brightened. The tension inherent in Merikokeb's approach to the meaning of color and shape, abstract and representational form, bespeaks a deeply felt spirituality—pained by a perceived estrangement between humans and nature, yet fueled by a belief in the long history of humanity's resilience. Her paintings have a topical and contemporary mood, not because of their references to a vaguely technological formal vocabulary but because of the mix of melancholy and strength. There is sadness but also a will to find beauty and hope in life and in form.

Born in 1977 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Merikokeb Berhanu graduated in 2002 from Addis Ababa University, All School of Fine Arts and Design, with a focus on mural design.

Since her inclusion in the 2022 Venice Biennale, **The Milk of Dreams**, the artist has exhibited widely in Europe and the US. Among recent exhibitions are: **Making Their Mark** curated by Cecilia Alemani, Shah Garg Foundation, New York (2023) and **Ethiopia at the Crossroads**, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (2023).

Her paintings are part of several prestigious institutional collections, including: Tate, London; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Denver Art Museum, Denver; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (promised gift); Inhotim Museum, Brumadinho; and Fondation H, Antananarivo, Madagascar.