

Esther Schipper

Merikokeb Berhanu

Cellular Memory

June 9 – August 14, 2026

Esther Schipper Seoul



Image: Merikokeb Berhanu,
Untitled CXIV, 2026,
acrylic on canvas,
182,9 x 152,4 cm (72 x 60 in) (MEB 026)
Photo: Dawn Whitmore

Esther Schipper Seoul is pleased to announce Merikokeb Berhanu's exhibition **Cellular Memory**. This is the artist's first solo presentation in Asia and her second with the gallery. On view will be six new paintings.

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Merikokeb Berhanu's formal language, color palette, and recurring motifs fuse elements from the history of Ethiopian art and its absorption and transformation of modernist influences, while also reflecting her experience in the United States, where she has been based for nearly a decade. Merikokeb received her Diploma of Fine Arts from Addis Ababa University in 2002, studying painting under Getahun Assefa at the Allè School of Fine Arts and Design. Getahun belonged to a generation of Ethiopian artists who expanded upon the work of modernist pioneers such as Skunder Boghossian* through greater abstraction and engagement with social realities, and whose influence on Merikokeb's practice remains palpable. Merikokeb's development of a distinct hybrid visual vocabulary reflects broader themes of diasporic experience.

Merikokeb's new paintings, produced in 2026 for this exhibition, represent a significant development in her practice. Working across a range of scales, from the large format **Untitled CXIV** to smaller, more concentrated compositions like **Untitled CXX**, Merikokeb continues to explore the semi-abstracted figurative language she has developed over the past decade, while pushing it into new chromatic and compositional territory. The works share a recurring visual vocabulary: interlocking organic forms that suggest bodies, landscapes, and cellular structures simultaneously, without resolving into any one of them. 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. Fragments of the human body are woven into a conflation of vegetal, organic, and perhaps even mineral form.

Running through this new group is an evident tension between the natural and the technological. The inclusion of technological elements has been linked to the artist's move to the United States in 2017, where

she confronted the realities of mass consumption, environmental pollution, and climate change. In **Untitled CXX**, budding red forms on the left find their mirror in what read as crimson circuit-board orbs on the right, root-like structures branching down below as if to anchor both worlds in the same soil. **Untitled CXVIII** operates like a geological cross-section, its layered strata teeming with organic life, while a circuit-board tracery sits just beneath the surface, close enough to feel like a second nervous system growing through the earth. The fantasy circuitry, sometimes rendered in a matrix-green and reminiscent of representations of cyberspace in early sci-fi, signals a modern, industrial and digital realm.

This is fertile ground, literally and conceptually. Merikokeb has long engaged with the friction between nature and technology, but in these paintings that relationship feels less like conflict and more like coexistence, two systems finding their way toward something shared.

* The work of Alexander “Skunder” Boghossian (1937–2003) is currently included in the exhibition **New Humans: Memories of the Future** at the New Museum, New York; see the exhibition catalogue (Phaidon, 2026), pp. 234, 396.

Merikokeb Berhanu’s work is included in our exhibition in Paris, **Pays rêvé, pays réel: A proposal** by Lucien Terras — In dialogue with works from the Seroussi Collection, on view at Esther Schipper Paris and Galerie Natalie Serroussi from June 4 — August 1, 2026.

Merikokeb Berhanu was born in 1977 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She graduated in 2002 from Addis Ababa University, Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, with a focus on mural design. The artist lives and works in the US.

Merikokeb’s works have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions worldwide, including: **Merikokeb Berhanu**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2025); **Twilight is a Place of Promise**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2024); **Ethiopia at the Crossroads**, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (2024); **A World Grows Within**, Addis Fine Art, London (2023); **Making Their Mark: Art by Women in the Shah Garg Collection**, curated by Cecilia Alemani, Shah Garg Collection, New York (2023); and **The Milk of Dreams**, 59th Venice Biennale (2022).

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