

Water life: Aïda Muluneh



Aïda Muluneh, *Knowing the Way to Tomorrow*, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh

Exhibition Guide

April 27th - September 25th, 2022

Curated by: Sarah Quinton

Presented by the Textile Museum of Canada in **partnership** with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, with additional **support** from Partners in Art, and the Aga Khan Museum.

General Information

Artist **Aïda Muluneh** was born in Ethiopia and moved to Calgary at the age of 11, where she began to explore photography in her high school dark-room. Since, she has had an extensive career in photography and photo-journalism, taking her all over the world.

The series that this exhibition is titled after, **Water Life**, was commissioned by WaterAid, a charity advocating for clean water globally. Therefore, the artist's vibrant photographs address the impact of living without access to clean water on women and girls in Ethiopia, while drawing attention to other communities around the world suffering from water scarcity, including indigenous communities here in Canada.



Aïda Muluneh. The Sorrows We Bear, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh

The series was shot in the dry salt flats of Dallol, one of the hottest places on earth. Her staged images depict parched landscapes, the female body, and graphic elements that relate to women's health. Her colourful images of women wearing magnificent garments of flowing reds, yellows, and blues is inspired by traditional, regional Ethiopian dress, and their adorned bodies and faces, adapt traditional Ethiopian body-paint ornamentation. Making references to traditional crafts, while speaking to the present of these issues, and the future of Black life, she models her photographs in **Afrofuturist** fashion.

In her artist statement, Muluneh writes: "My main goal is to address the plight of water access and its impact not only on a society but also on women in rural regions. For those of us who live in cities, we often take for granted the privilege that we have in relation to water access, while those living beyond the city grid encounter challenges that not only impact their health but also their capability to contribute to the development of their communities. With this in mind, each piece is a reflection in addressing the impact of water access as it relates to women's liberation, health, sanitation, and education."

Find out more about Aïda, her photographs, and references in the pages to follow.

About the Artist



Audio excerpts are from the Aga Khan Museum's This Being Human: Photographer Aïda Muluneh podcast, produced by Antica Productions.



Photo credit: Moustafa Cheaiteli

Born in Ethiopia in 1974, Aïda Muluneh spent her childhood between Yemen and England. In an interview she states, "coming from a family of farmers, I've experienced first-hand the angst caused by waiting for the rain to fall," making the concern for water access a personal one. She settled in Calgary, Alberta in 1985, where she attended high school before studying at Howard University in Washington D.C, where she graduated with a major in Film and became a photojournalist for the Washington Post. She is the 2007 recipient of the European Union Prize in the Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie in Mali; the 2010 winner of the CRAF International Award of Photography in Italy; and a 2018 CatchLight Fellow in San Francisco, USA. Her photography is found in several publications as well as in permanent collections of MoMa, Smithsonian Museum of African Art, RISD Museum of Art. In 2019, Muluneh became the first black woman to co-curate the Nobel Peace Prize exhibition and returned in 2020 as a commissioned artist. As an educator and cultural entrepreneur, she develops local and international projects in Ethiopia and Côte d'Ivoire.

The Water Crisis

Ethiopia a country with a great water reserve underground, but water access is a major issue. In Ethiopia, as in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, household water access is between 40-80%. The access disparity is even more pronounced between cities and rural areas. This issue is particularly difficult for many women and girls who are forced to travel hours out of their communities to gather safe drinking water from wells or pipes, having an effect on their education and wellbeing. In addition, around a quarter of these improved drinking sources, are still infected with fecal matter, which leads to deadly diseases and widespread health issues because of the water contamination.



Aïda Muluneh, *Star Shine Moon Glow*, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh

In, **Star Shine, Moon Glow (2018)**, Muluneh shows a seated woman framed by enormous, bright red, billowing fabric "wings," with a full moon hovering behind her as a reminder that most girls in Ethiopia do not attend school during menstruation due to the chronic lack of water and resulting unsanitary conditions. Each girl is "like a caged bird that cannot fly but is grounded," says the artist.

Globally, around 1.8 billion people lack access to clean drinking water, that is roughly a quarter of the world's population, or roughly 1 in 3 individuals, with the vast majority in the Majority World, or Global South, including most of the African continent.

Dallol, Ethiopia



Aïda Muluneh, *The Shackles of Limitations*, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh

“Photographed on the salt lakes of Dallol, this image addresses the fact—for the case of Ethiopia—we are a country with a great water reserve underground, but still the access to water is a major issue. In a sense, I wanted to express that we are walking on lands with water but due to the limited irrigation of the water, we are living in a paradox.”

– Aïda Muluneh

In ***The Shackles of Limitations* (2018)**, Muluneh depicts a woman dressed in red holds a blue umbrella against a cloudless, pristine blue sky as she wades through the lake’s salty shallows, trailing a string of yellow **jerry cans** that float along the water’s surface. Simultaneously skeptical and optimistic, she appears steadfast in her forward journey toward improved irrigation for the region. The image speaks to the paradox of the unpotable water that resides mirage-like in and beneath Dallol’s salt lakes.

Water Access in Our Own Backyards



Christi Belcourt, Water is Life, 2016. Digital image, dimensions variable. <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/publications/sduk/take-care/water-is-life>.

In Canada, there are **33 long-term boil-water drinking advisories** in 28 communities, some of which have been in place since the 90s, and some as close as 2 hours driving distance from Toronto, even though **Canada has 18% of the world's fresh water sources**. This is a United Nations human rights violation, as sanitation and safe drinking water are essential human rights. A majority of Indigenous water systems in the country are at mid-to-high risk of contamination (including e-coli, heavy metals and other parasites or bacteria), therefore, waterborne illnesses are also a major issue in these communities. Due to colonial governing systems, many of these communities are not legally entitled to making their own decisions on how to handle water treatment systems, or have access to safe drinking water regulations.

References

The Museum has always approached our exhibitions and programs with an interdisciplinary lens, finding connections to other disciplines and media, celebrating the universality of textiles. Muluneh uses garments as ways to set the scene, they play an important role in creating the images. Other exhibitions previously featuring photography at the Museum include: [Loop: Peter Wilkins CONTACT Photography Festival 2011 Feature Exhibition](#), [Balancing Acts: Nadia Myre](#), [Fictions and Legends: Heather Goodchild and Jérôme Havre](#) and [Frida Kahlo: Through the Lens of Nickolas Muray](#), with traditional Mexican costume from the Textile Museum of Canada.

Muluneh's work references the primary colours seen in Ethiopian Orthodox wall paintings, and traditional Ethiopian body paint, through the models' painted faces and dresses depicted in her photographs. She also references **jerry cans** and **insera pots**, both used as tools to carry water by women in Ethiopia. See the images below for examples of these references:



Aïda Muluneh, *Mirage of Privilege*, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh.

Audio excerpts are from the Aga Khan Museum's *This Being Human*: Photographer Aïda Muluneh podcast, produced by Antica Productions.



Primary Colours



Ethiopian Orthodox Icon triptych (early 16th century); Ethiopian Orthodox, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons; <https://artincontext.org/ethiopian-art/>



Ethiopian body paint



Traditional Body Painting, Karo Tribe, Southern Ethiopia; <https://www.documentarytube.com/articles/the-karo-tribe-maintaining-a-500-year-old-body-paint-tradition>

References Continued



Aïda Muluneh, *Knowing the Way to Tomorrow*, 2018. Photograph.
© Aïda Muluneh

Jerry Cans



<https://blog.charitywater.org/post/143491921667/the-story-behind-the-jerry-can>

Jerry cans, typically used for gasoline, are used to carry water by women in Ethiopia. We see these used as props, tied together as shackles, in Muluneh's work.

Insera Pots

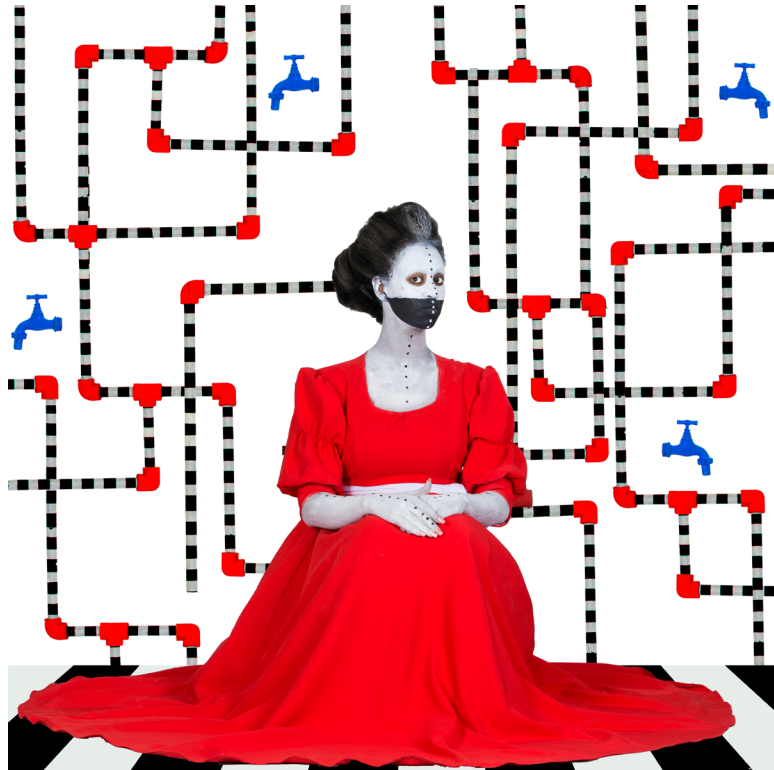


<https://easterntourandtravel.com/component/content/article/93-tourist-destinations/80-enkutatash-ethiopian-new-year?Itemid=437>

Insera pots, made of clay, are also used to carry water. We see Muluneh's models struggle to carry these pots.

Definitions/Important Terms

Afrofuturism – is a cultural philosophy and aesthetic developed in the 1990s that is applied by artists of the African diaspora to create speculative futures based on the black experience



Aïda Muluneh, Access, 2018. Photograph. © Aïda Muluneh

City Grid – in urban planning, this refers to a grid which divides the city by its streets in the form of a gridded pattern

Climate Change – the change in temperatures and weather patterns which have long-term effects on our planet

Dallol – is a town in northern Ethiopia known as the hottest and one of the most remote places on earth

Insera – a type of ceramic pot traditionally used to carry water in Ethiopia

Liberation – the act of setting someone free from oppression, slavery or imprisonment

Ornamentation – adding decorative elements to an object

Sanitation – the act of making something sanitary (clean, health-safe, hygienic)

Social Justice – justice for all members of society through the even distribution of wealth and opportunities for all

Discussion Questions

1. How does the artist use the elements and principles of design in her work? Think about the types of shapes and colours she utilizes.
2. How does the artist's lived experience, being from Ethiopia, influence her work? Why do you think discussing the water crisis important for her?
3. Brainstorm ways of being conscious about your water consumption. How can you use less water to shower, cook, clean, etc?

What are the elements and principles of design? (Page 18, [Ontario Curriculum](#))

- Elements: line, shape and form, space, colour, texture, and value.
- Principles: contrast, repetition and rhythm, variety, emphasis, proportion, balance, unity and harmony, and movement.

What is the critical analysis process? (Pages 23-28, [Ontario Curriculum](#))

The critical analysis process includes the following aspects:

- initial reaction
- description
- analysis and interpretation
- expression of an informed point of view
- consideration of cultural context

For further exploration of the elements and principles of design and the critical analysis process, apply these to the related activities below.

Related Activities

1. Draw a map of your community. Include a symbol at every location where water is accessible (water fountains, city parks, bathrooms, etc). Write a reflection on the vast water access we have in urban centres in Canada, versus in the global and local communities you've learned about on page 5.
2. Visit Aïda Muluneh's [Instagram page](#), how does the artist use social media to promote her work and create awareness about the water crisis? Create a mock-up social media post on [Canva.com](#) to create awareness about the water crisis. Include facts and information that you learned on pages 4 and 5. Apply key elements and principles of design in your composition.
3. Research the work of other visual artists using art to convey issues of **social justice**. Inspired by their artistic practice and the critical analysis process, stage a photoshoot with your classmates or family that addresses a social justice concern that is personally important to you. What props or elements would you include to convey your message?

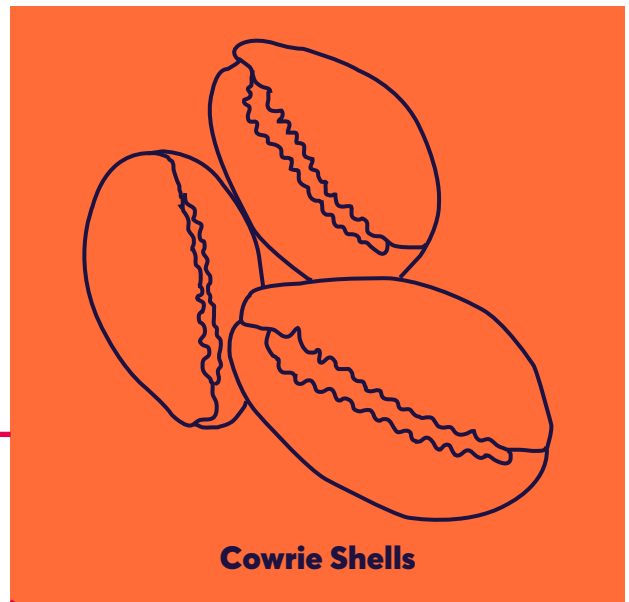
Items from the Textile Museum Collection

These objects from our Collection, include **cowrie shells**, which were transported to widely across Africa, Europe and Asia, and were historically used as currency. They also represent a symbolic connection to **water**, and in many cultures are associated with women, fertility and birth, and valued for their protective and spiritual properties.

Ethiopia



Milk Container; Africa: East Africa, Ethiopia; Oromo (sub-group: Booran or Borana); 1980's; L 24 cm x W 52 cm; skin, Plant, cowrie shell. From the Opekar / Webster Collection. Textile Museum of Canada Collection. T94.2171a.



Cowrie Shells

India



Head Ring; Asia: South Asia, India, Northern India, Rajasthan; 1940 - 1960; L 13.5 cm x W 13.5 cm; cotton, cowrie shell; Gift of Michael Bazinet. Textile Museum of Canada Collection. T83.0270



Head Ring Flap; Asia: South Asia, India, Southern India, Karnataka, Shimoga; Banjara; 1930-1970; L 34 cm x W 30 cm; cotton; glass mirror; cowrie shell; Gift of Richard H. Meadow metal. Textile Museum of Canada Collection. T2007.9.2

Like most rural peoples in India, the **Banjara** must carry water daily from a communal well or river to their dwelling. This headpiece consists of three parts: the indhoni (a bast-fibre ring covered with white cotton thread) protects the woman's head while providing a base for stabilizing the water jar; the rectangular gala protects her back from splashing water, and; the small square fits under the pot on top of the ring to add further support and protection.

Resources



Listen

This Being Human, Agha Khan Museum Podcast, Season 2, Episode 3 – Aïda Muluneh



Read

[Aida Muluneh: From Ethiopia to Canada and Back Again](#)

[The Artistic Paradox of Ethiopia's Water Woes](#)

[Exploring Ethiopia's Past and Future Through Body Painting](#)

[Raising awareness through art: Aïda Muluneh's WaterAid project](#)

[Water Life: The making of Aida Muluneh's striking photo series](#)



Water

[Dozens of Canada's First Nations lack drinking water: 'Unacceptable in a country so rich](#)

[Safe Water for First Nations](#)

[There's Something in the Water](#)



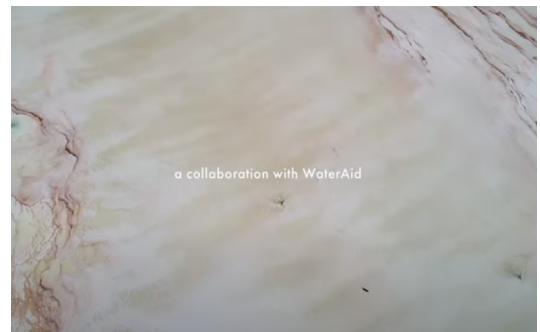
Watch



Between nostalgia and future dreaming | Aida Muluneh | TEDxJohannesburgSalon



Aida Muluneh - Water Life and Somerset House| WaterAid



Visit the hottest place on Earth with photographer Aïda Muluneh for WaterAid