ARTAFRICA

Tracing the Invisible Threads Between Venice and Ethiopia

INTERVIEW

As the 13th artist-in-residence at AKKA Project during the 2026 Venice Biennale Arte, Dawit Abebe reflects on travel, cultural exchange, and the unexpected historical connections that have transformed Venice into both a subject and a collaborator in his evolving practice.

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For Ethiopian artist Dawit Abebe, travel is more than merely reaching a destination—it is a way of thinking, observing, and creating. Serving as the 13th artist-in-residence at AKKA Project during the 2026 Venice Biennale Arte, he dove into the complexities of a city shaped by centuries of exchange, migration, and myth. As he moved through Venice's maze of streets, canals, and islands, Abebe connected Venetian and Ethiopian histories, drawing unexpected links that reverberate across geography and time.

He found inspiration everywhere: from maps and masks to Murano glass and the symbolic play between the Lion of Saint Mark and the Lion of Judah. Venice did not remain a mere backdrop; rather, it became an active presence within his work. In this conversation, Abebe discusses the residency as a journey-walking, research, and embodied experience transformed the city into both subject and collaborator.

Dawit Adebe. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

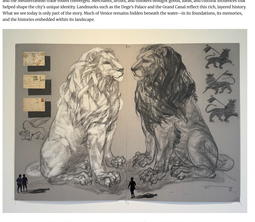
Suzette Bell-Roberts: How did your experience in Venice specifically challenge or expand your artistic approach?

Dawit Abebe: Travel is central to my artistic practice. In Venice, the city's layered histories, material textures, and cultural memory become sites of inquiry and exploration. Through walking, observation, and immersion, I develop an embodied understanding of place that expands my visual and material vocabulary. This experience shapes the way I engage with form, materiality, memory, and lived experience in my work.

Dawit Adebe, Untitled, Mixed media on Cardboard. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

Which aspects of Venice's history or atmosphere most directly influenced the development of AKAKAN?

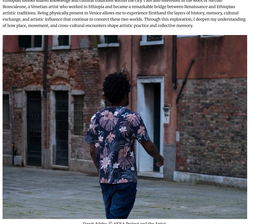
Venice feels like a city born from both water and imagination. It stands on thousands of wooden piles driven deep into the lagoon, creating an unseen forest beneath the surface. Upon this hidden foundation, stone palaces and churches rise like flowers blooming from a submerged garden. For centuries, Venice served as a meeting point between worlds, where Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean trade routes converged. Merchants, artists, and thinkers brought goods, ideas, and cultural influences that helped shape the city's unique identity. Landmarks such as the Doge's Palace and the Grand Canal reflect this rich, layered history. What we see today is only part of the story. Much of Venice remains hidden beneath the water—in its foundations, its memories, and the histories embedded within its landscape.



Dawit Adebe, Untitled, Mixed media on Cardboard. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

How did particular historical links between Ethiopia and Venice shape your residency work?

During my stay in Venice, I am exploring the historical connections between Venice and Ethiopia, particularly the period when Ethiopian monks shared knowledge and cultural traditions within the city. I am also interested in the work of Niccolò Brancaleone, a Venetian artist who worked in Ethiopia and became a remarkable bridge between Renaissance and Ethiopian artistic traditions. Being physically present in Venice allows me to experience firsthand the layers of history, memory, cultural exchange, and artistic influence that continue to connect these two worlds. Through this exploration, I deepen my understanding of how place, movement, and cross-cultural encounters shape artistic practice and collective memory.



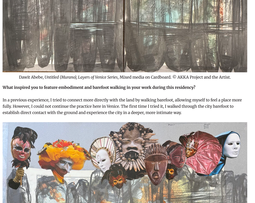
Dawit Adebe. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

How does comparing the Lions of Saint Mark and Judah facilitate cross-cultural exchange in your work?

For me, symbols reflect history, culture, religion, and knowledge. In this sense, I see both the Ethiopian symbol of the Lion of Judah—which represents the Solomonic dynasty and Ethiopian monarchy—and the Venetian symbol of Saint Mark as reflections of their historical and cultural backgrounds. What is most important to me is the connection between these traditions and the way different people have shared knowledge, cultural experiences, and ideas over a long period of history. These symbols remind us of the exchanges and relationships that have linked different civilisations for centuries.

Maps, postcards, collages, and found objects play an important role in your practice. What attracts you to materials that already carry their own histories and journeys?

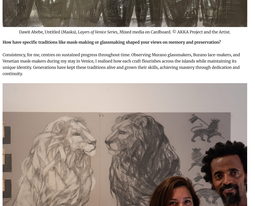
Archival documents, maps, objects, and postcards were made for specific tasks. Yet over time, they accumulate historical and cultural weight. They cross periods, acting as carriers of memory and preserving subtle traces of people, places, events, and experiences. Their meanings change; every era brings new interpretations as people interact with them differently. Not just records of the past, these materials also actively shape history and collective memory.



Dawit Abebe, Untitled (Murano), Layers of Venice Series, Mixed media on Cardboard. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

What inspired you to feature embodiment and barefoot walking in your work during this residency?

In a previous experience, I tried to connect more directly with the land by walking barefoot, allowing myself to feel a place more fully. However, I could not continue the practice here in Venice. The first time I tried it, I walked through the city barefoot to establish direct contact with the ground and experience the city in a deeper, more intimate way.



Dawit Abebe, Untitled (Masks), Layers of Venice Series, Mixed media on Cardboard. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

How have specific traditions like mask-making or glassmaking shaped your views on memory and preservation?

Consistency, for me, centres on sustained progress throughout time. Observing Murano glassmakers, Burano lace makers, and Venetian mask-makers during my stay in Venice, I realised how each craft flourishes across the islands while maintaining its unique identity. Generations have kept these traditions alive and grown their skills, achieving mastery through dedication and continuity.

Dawit Adebe and Lidija Kostic Khachaturian. © AKKA Project and the Artist.

Which aspects of Venice's fragility or resilience most impacted your artistic direction during the residency?

My time in Venice led me to view fragility as a relative concept. I was deeply moved by the resilience of a city built atop wooden foundations, forever exposed to shifting conditions. This resonates with my artistic practice—archival materials are considered fragile, yet they endure. The comparison between Venice and the archive offers new directions for research that will continue to influence my work.

The exhibition is on view at AKKA Projects in Venice until 31 July 2026.

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