

Museums

# Two visual artists, worlds — and centuries — apart

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By **Mark Jenkins** February 22

In a sense, Erik Thor Sandberg and Abel Tilahun live several centuries apart. Sandberg is an oil painter who has mastered techniques that most contemporary artists discount and who takes cues from the likes of Goya and Bruegel. Tilahun is a futurist who works in sculpture, photography and video, inspired by architecture and outer space.

Yet the two share more than the coincidences of being Washingtonians and having simultaneous shows at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center. Both are visual storytellers, and each depicts the human body as voluptuous flesh as well as metaphor.

Sandberg's self-titled show includes a recent series, "Blossom," in which women's heads and torsos open like petals, revealing diverse inner identities — masculine, vulpine or even vegetal. The most immediate piece in Tilahun's "Vital Signs" is "Heart of Gold," an oversize working model of a human heart. It's a visceral art object that pulses inside a golden frame on a fabric-draped wall.

Tilahun, who teaches at AU, was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and splits his time between there and the District. The motifs of his art are both visual and thematic. Among the former are circles, arches and holes — and the views through them — as well as sweeping vistas in which humanity is represented by dozens of swarming black silhouettes.

The artist's photos and videos juxtapose real and contrived, mechanical and organic. Sometimes they suggest video games and sci-fi movies. (Like another

local video artist, Jonathan Monaghan, Tilahun seems to have studied “2001: A Space Odyssey.”) Vast expanses contrast vulnerable bodies, as in a video sequence where a naked baby crawls across a chalky landscape.

“In Progress” consists of seven pairs of human feet that protrude from wrapped fabric inside wooden scaffolding. These partly constructed people might be the work of genetic engineers, or some mad scientist from gothic fiction. Or they could represent the artist’s ongoing quest to craft the ideal figure, perfect in import if not form.

Such works propose an equivalence between artistic creation and biological conception. The rounded forms in Tilahun’s art can be seen as either portals or uteruses, and sometimes both. “Womb” places a fiberglass fetus inside a metal oval that turns out to be a satellite dish. The unborn child is already surrounded by mass-media transmissions.

Sandberg’s portrayal of gestation is less literal — and, characteristically, more disturbing. In “Exorcism,” a wolf’s snout protrudes from a woman’s belly, and an untitled painting depicts a skeleton that’s either departing or entering a blank-faced woman’s birth canal. Even further from conventional human biology, two of the four people in “Course” have trees growing from their stomachs.

Although such images are eerie, they’re hardly the stuff of slasher movies. During a recent talk, Sandberg explained that he’s “not interested in splitting skin.” His pictures aren’t bloody or meaty, and the one in this grouping that most explicitly addresses mortality, the exquisitely rendered “Transition,” is also one of the show’s most traditional paintings.

Inspired by his father’s passing, “Transition” simply shows a man’s nude body, apparently at the moment of fatality. There’s nothing else in the overwhelmingly black composition except a bat that flies away from the body, representing death or departing life.

There are almost as many animals as nude women in Sandberg’s painting. The artist says the creatures express the contrast of “human nature versus animal nature.” The most vivid of these pictures display a remarkable

emotional range. In “Hope Courage Fortitude (Persevere),” potentially threatening beasts surround a kneeling woman, licking her benignly. Much more ominous is “Trapping,” in which hunters pursue a woman through a forest whose trees are festooned with animal-head trophies.

Sandberg’s paintings depict little that’s modern, although some of his partly dressed women wear (or pose near) contemporary bras and underpants. But the use of animals does highlight a significant difference between the artist and his Old Master precursors. They used symbols of generally understood (and generally religious) meaning. Sandberg can make it up as he goes along.

Most of the artist’s other innovations involve form. He paints on wooden panels, a venerable technique, but sometimes curves them to create the sense of a panorama. Most of the “Blossoms” are hexagonal, and this show includes a sort of hive in which six-sided pictures are set off by empty frames of the same shape and size.

Such gambits are intriguing, but what draws the eye are the artist’s idiosyncratic scenarios — he calls his style “magic realism” — and extraordinary skill. Such paintings as “Transition” and “Blinded,” which are among the simplest in composition, demonstrate a superb ability to render light, shadow and the delicacy of human skin. Sandberg’s work is rich in metaphor, but also in sheer physicality.

## **IF YOU GO**

### **Erik Thor Sandberg**

#### **Vital Signs: Abel Tilahun**

American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW, 202-885-1300, [american.edu/museum](http://american.edu/museum).

**Dates:** Both through March 11.

**Admission:** Free.

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