



Threads of Resilience

Maheder Haileselassie,
Olivia Howland,
Women working in the Ethiopian Garment Industry

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Stories from Ethiopia's garment manufacturing industry

30th July - 22nd August 2026

Opening reception & talk
Wednesday 29th July, 5 - 9 pm

The Holmes à Court Gallery
Afrika House
Nairobi

Threads of Resilience

Threads of Resilience chronicles the daily lives of women working in the export garment industry in Ethiopia. Grounded in questions of workplace health and safety, this group exhibition features works by Ethiopian artist Maheder Haileselassie, British-Kenyan artist Olivia Howland, and eight women who work in the garment factories in Addis Ababa. These works encompass the lived experiences and embodied realities of factory work, which is dominated by women's labour, and reliant upon the exploitation of their time and bodies, to the detriment of their health and safety.

The global garment industry is dominated by women's labour: traditional ideas around gender characteristics such as docility, dexterity and endurance have led to more than 80% of garment workers globally being women. Yet alongside these assumptions comes a burden on physical and mental health: injury, stress, exhaustion, exposure to heat and chemicals, and precarious employment terms, as well as the double burden of domestic duties, contribute to a sick and fatigued workforce.

The pressure from global consumers for cheap fast fashion has led Ethiopia to rapidly construct several industrial parks, housing enormous "sheds" where factories, often run by foreigners, have set up shop. Whilst these have provided jobs for around 40,000 women, there are daily and ongoing violations of worker rights which remain unaddressed. These 'invisible' and expendable

workers speak through these artworks, and the true human cost of fast fashion must not be ignored.

Many women garment workers in Addis Ababa come from war-torn regions of Ethiopia, seeking a better life, yet the city welcomes them with different challenges. They work as machine operators, supervisors or quality controllers, either standing or sitting all day – never both – which takes a heavy toll on their bodies.

Some live in company dormitories with 16 beds to a room. Dorm living makes 13 hour working days mandatory: 6:30am to 8:30pm. Others rent a single room unit, sharing with workmates, despite the rising cost and inflation.

Women are typically responsible for supporting a parent or child while they struggle to make ends meet each month. Whatever money remains after their essential expenses is expected to be sent home to help parents or siblings.

The three year-long study in Ethiopia, led by Dr Olivia Howland, was part of the larger Invisible Women, Invisible Workers study which took place in Ethiopia, Jordan, Cambodia and the UK – key production sites for the export garment industry and fast fashion. Threads of Resilience is curated by Kenyan visual and conceptual artist and MOMA international curatorial fellow, James Muriuki.

www.invisibleworkers.org.uk

Holmes à Court Gallery

When Afrika House humbly took the name The Holmes à Court Gallery it was because I have long been inspired by the work of an Australian gallerist, Janet Holmes à Court. She has been an incredible force in the Australian art world for as long as I can remember. Also, she's my mum.

She has been a fearless supporter of new artists, one of the earliest and most significant collectors of Australian Aboriginal art. Perhaps most relevant to this exhibition, Mrs. Holmes à Court is a committed humanitarian who has never been afraid to exhibit work that addresses the most challenging social issues of our time.

Just this year, her Galleries have shown both captivating art but also exhibitions relating to the nuclear bombings of Japan at the end of WWII, right to die legislation for the terminally ill, and the conflict in Gaza.

It is in that spirit that The Holmes à Court Gallery humbly presents *Threads of Resilience*.

We hope it opens conversations about the nature of work, about our East African neighbors, about womens' issues, about development, and then our job as the Gallery is to stand back and let the conversations roll.

In our supporting art and ideas, we never separate the innate beauty from the inherent challenges that art provokes. We embrace the

visually spectacular, the emotionally moving, the intellectually fascinating, and the discomfort that art (in all its forms) can deliver.

As such, *Threads of Resilience* ticks every box. It is an exhibition of beauty and issues, of creativity and substance. It reminds us that art at its best does not ask us to choose between aesthetic pleasure and difficult conversations. It delivers both.

We are proud to open our doors to Olivia, Maheder, and, most importantly, to all the women who so bravely shared the stories captured in this exhibition.

We hope you enjoy *Threads of Resilience* as much as we enjoyed the process of welcoming the artists to the Holmes à Court Gallery at Afrika House here in Nairobi.

Peter Holmes à Court

Founder and Chief Convener, Afrika House

Maheder Haileselassie

Maheder Haileselassie's work, independently titled *Baaytewar* – that she loosely translates to mean Lone Bird – can be considered a sneak peek into the place Ethiopia has for its youth and specifically its women: poor support, inadequate education, and a true resilience portrayed.

Maheder photographed these women, whose names have been altered to protect their identities, inside their living spaces or on the paths they walk to work. In some of her works, her actions of needling and threading are reflections of their daily lives inside the factories. The needling represents the many blows endured from childhood, but simultaneously the fierceness they carry within themselves in order to face life's difficulties. Threading, despite the women's willingness to show their faces for her camera, is used as a gesture of care and protection.

Maheder Haileselassie is a contemporary visual artist and photographer based in Addis Ababa, whose practice engages with history, memory, and the city through an experimental approach.

She is the recipient of the **Seydou Keïta Grand Prize** at the Rencontres de Bamako and the 2023 **CAP Prize** (Contemporary African Photography Prize) for her project *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, a series that examines history, personal and collective memories.

In 2024, she was named among the BBC 100 Women for her work addressing child marriage and climate change in Ethiopia's Somali region.

Maheder is a 2025 Magnum Foundation Fellow and has exhibited internationally. She is also the founder of the Center for Photography in Ethiopia (CPE), an independent learning platform that supports emerging photographers through mentorship, exhibitions, and critical discussions.



Hayat
135cm x 90cm
Photo print on board

Hayat, 30, has worked for different garment factories inside the industrial park for six years. She has finished her 12th grade education and currently lives by herself in a single room rental house made from corrugated iron sheets. She says she doesn't have a saving and life is certainly not easy so in search of a better pay, she is considering going to Arab countries to work as a house help. Hayat is a kind and humble person by nature and believes that her character made her susceptible to mistreatment by her supervisors.



Mieraf
135cm x 90cm
Photo print on board

Mieraf, 24, has worked at the industrial park for more than five years. She came to the city from Arsi zone, Oromia region and currently lives with her husband and two year old daughter in a one room house they rented on the outskirts of the city. Everyday, Mieraf has to wake up very early and walk across a farm field to catch the bus that takes her to work.



Tinasae
135cm x 90cm
Photo print on board

Tinasae, 30, is seen here with her two year old son. She worked in different garment factories inside the industry park for six years as a quality controller. She has graduated from a technical college in garment production in 2011 and initially refused to apply for a job at the garment factories because the salary was too low. For her, the hardest part of working as a quality controller is that she has to stand all day and that comes with its own health complications.



Olivia Howland

Olivia Howland's works on paper comprise three main elements of storytelling from the project.

Olivia Howland (b.1987, UK) is an anthropologist, ethnographer and artist working at the intersection of visual art and science in East Africa. She wrote her PhD in Applied Anthropology and Public Health, an ethnography of informal alcohol brewing and selling in rural Kenya.

She has spent two decades living and working primarily in Kenya, and her work has touched upon varied topics from One Health (the intersection of human, animal and environmental health), urban riparian spaces, indigenous medicine, livelihoods, syndemics, liminality and gendered aspects of health and wellbeing.

Olivia's visual art uses painting, linocut printing and installation-based media. Her works have been exhibited in Kenya and the UK. Olivia spends her time between Nairobi and Nanyuki.



Sew and Tell
 70cm x 40cm
 21cm x 63 cm
 72cm x 25cm
 pencil on paper cutting patterns



Sew and Tell are three works of handwritten garment worker narratives on delicate cutting patterns, smuggled out of the factories by study participants. The fine, small handwriting reflects the level of detail they are required to produce in their work, yet however small, their words are powerful in communicating the stress and anxiety of their lived experiences. The works use cutting patterns smuggled out of the factories by women working in the cutting room as a physical tether to their daily reality. The ephemeral nature of the paper, its delicacy and its likely rapid fragmentation

forces us to reflect on the similarly disposable nature of these workers, treated as “easily replaceable” machine-like beings, rather than the humans they are.

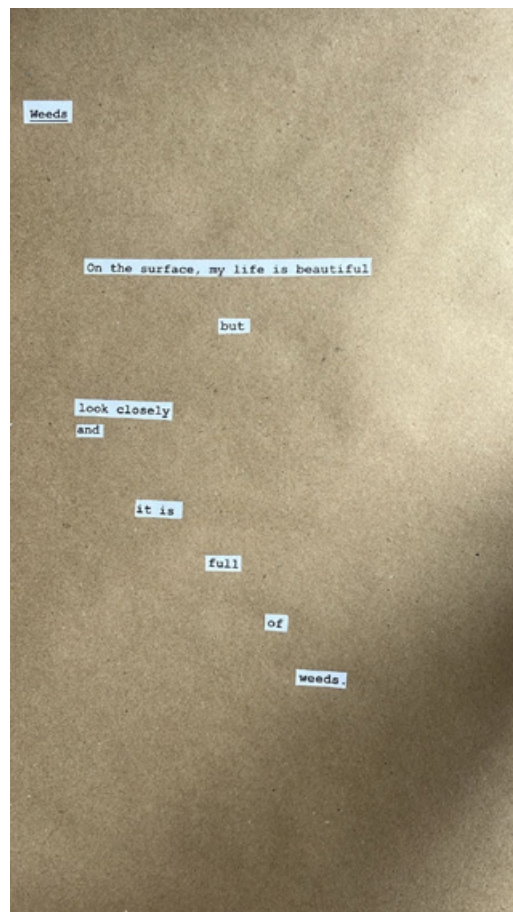
Paper Promises
3 pcs each 450cm x 90cm
Acrylic on paper.

Paper Promises, three large works of acrylic on paper, uses jargon "sustainability" statements drawn directly from the websites of companies known to produce clothing in Ethiopia. While the implication of these statements is that of "fair" trade and humane treatment of workers, we know these to be false, merely paying lip service to globally ratified agreements on worker rights and wellbeing. The statements are deliberately made huge, emphasising their ridiculous and absurd nature, especially when presented alongside the truths of the women who work in this industry.



Unwritten Sunichal
10 pcs each 75cm x 50cm
Collage on paper.

Unwritten Sunichal are ten poems created using a technique called "found poetry" - snippets from interview narratives are used to create a new type of folklore, reminiscent of sunichal - traditional Ethiopian folkloric poems. They are short, profoundly beautiful and deeply meaningful in conveying the eloquent voices of women and their labour. Juxtaposed with the large, bold, shouting nature of Paper Promises, *Unwritten Sunichal* is purposefully small, quiet and easily ignored. Yet the beauty and truth in the women's words cannot, and indeed must not, be disregarded.



Photovoice participants

Photovoice is a methodology whereby research participants are given a digital camera and, after a short training on the basics of photography, they were asked each week for four weeks to take a photo to answer various questions or prompts.

The photographic works produced by the eight women workers through the Photovoice methodology are powerful intimate visual narratives. They provide deeply personal insights into their daily lives, and the effect of factory work beyond the confines of the industrial parks.

This body of evidence compels us to engage with their experiences as mothers, daughters, wives and workers, re-framing their own bodies as agents beyond merely expendable victims of capitalism: rather their persistence, power and resilience speaks louder than their daily struggles. Their works humanise the global fast fashion industry, reframing them as agents of critique and solidarity in contrast to the

typically accepted narrative where workers appear as objects of documentation and adversity, or a monolithic proletariat.

Mihret is a 24-year-old married mother of one. She has worked in several garment factories on and off, and has, since our fieldwork, travelled to Jordan to work as a bonded domestic labourer.

Worknesh is a 24-year-old single woman working in a factory in Addis Ababa, where she has worked for 5 years. She began as a machine operator but has since been promoted to supervisor.

Kalkidan is 28 years old, single, and working for a factory in Addis Ababa. She works as a quality control officer.

Maryam is 21 years old, single, and works as a machine operator in a factory in Addis Ababa. She has worked there for two years.

Tizita is a 25-year-old married mother of one. She works as a technician in a factory in Addis Ababa.

Anyalem is 26 years old, married, with one child. She has worked in the garment factory for 9 years now and is a technician.

Fikir is a mother of two, married, and works as a machine operator in a factory in Addis Ababa where she has worked for a year. She is 25 years old.

Etenesh is 29 years old, and a single mother to one child. She has worked in the garment factory in Addis Ababa for 10 years, and is now a team leader, meaning she manages a large number of more junior workers.



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