

SAINSBURY CENTRE

Living Art Sharing Stories

Press Release

The Sainsbury Centre presents ***Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa*** featuring a powerful new series of paintings reflecting on conflict and the refugee crisis



Tesfaye Urgessa, *First Flame*, 2025, oil on canvas. Copyright of the artist

20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
Sainsbury Centre, Norwich

The Sainsbury Centre presents *Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa*, a new exhibition by Tesfaye Urgessa (b.1983, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) featuring a powerful new series of paintings reflecting on cultural conflict and the refugee crisis, and the fragility of the human mind, which have been created in dialogue with the museum's collection.

The exhibition is a moving and urgent response to war and displacement - in 2024, the number of people forcibly displaced rose to 122.6 million globally, an increase of 11.5% compared to the previous year - and the enduring trauma carried in the human body, and features as part of the Sainsbury Centre's *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?* season.

Influenced by neo-expressionism and the London school, Tesfaye Urgessa's figurative paintings explore the politics of race and identity. For Urgessa, painting is more than a visual language – it is a critical act of witnessing and capturing the scars of conflict, the realities of displacement and the environmental crises reshaping our world. His work moves fluidly between figuration and abstraction, drawing on the emotional depth of Lucian Freud (1922–2011) and the visceral intensity of Francis Bacon (1909–1992), while interrogating themes of identity, war, diaspora and belonging.

Roots of Resilience follows a residency undertaken by Urgessa at the Sainsbury Centre in March 2025, where he was inspired by works from the museum's global collection, such as Pablo Picasso's *Woman combing her Hair* (1906), Henry Moore's *Mother and Child* (1949), and a wooden female figure with child from the Baule people of Côte d'Ivoire, among others.

The paintings featured in *Roots of Resilience* refigure the human body not as broken, but as bearing dignity, defiance, and the enduring capacity to heal – reflecting not only personal and collective trauma, but also our potential for empathy, endurance, and transformation. His figures bear witness to violence – scarred yet never defined by their wounds. Rooted in his own diasporic experience, these paintings confront the brutal realities of war, forced migration, and exile, while also reflecting the psychological toll of environmental collapse. In a world shaped by conflict and climate crisis, *Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa* becomes both elegy and act of resistance.

Tesfaye Urgessa, said: "I want to paint the human figure in its totality - scars and resilience, fear and strength."

The exhibition forms part of the Sainsbury Centre's latest exhibition season, *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?*, which asks how artists can help us confront violence and imagine pathways to healing and repair. Urgessa's contribution is raw, striking, and profoundly necessary – reminding us that resilience does not lie in returning to the past, but in the radical act of reimagining the future.

"*Tesfaye's paintings don't simply respond to the Sainsbury Centre collection – they challenge it,*" says John Kenneth Paranada, Curator of Art and Climate Change at the Sainsbury Centre. "*They reach across continents and centuries to ask: how do we carry pain in the body? How do we survive it? And can art help us begin to heal?*"

In *Roots of Resilience* the human figure becomes both mirror and vessel, reflecting not only personal and collective suffering, but also our potential for empathy, endurance, and transformation. Here, the body becomes a quiet site of introspection; a space where survival becomes testimony, and where art asks us to see each other again as human beings with families, friendships, and the need to be treated with dignity, love and care. This, perhaps, is how we begin to build lasting peace so that, one day, we may truly stop killing each other.

Can We Stop Killing Each Other? is the latest in an innovative series of investigative exhibitions by the Sainsbury Centre following its radical relaunch in 2023, when it became the first museum in the world to formally recognise the lifeforce of art, enabling people to build relationships with living art across its dynamic museum landscape.

The exhibition is supported by Cheng-Lan Foundation and Saatchi Yates.

NOTES TO EDITORS

For more information, interviews and images:

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Exhibition details

Tesfaye Urgessa: Roots of Resilience

20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026

Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia,

Norfolk Road,

Norwich NR4 7TJ

The Sainsbury Centre continues its innovative series of investigative exhibitions in 2025 with a new programme that examines the fundamental question of why humans are led to kill, and how art, film, TV and culture have grappled with, or even aggravated, our proximity to violence.

Five concurrent exhibitions ask *Can We Stop Killing Each Other?*: if creative thinkers, and the art they produce, can use empathy to create change, and if humanity can choose hope over violence.

Featured exhibitions:

- *Tiaki Ora ∞ Protecting Life: Anton Forde*, 2 August 2025 – 19 April 2026
- *Eyewitness*, 20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
- *Roots of Resilience: Tesfaye Urgessa*, 20 September 2025 – 15 February 2026
- *The National Gallery Masterpiece Tour: Reflections on Peace*, 20 September 2025 – 11 January 2026
- *Seeds of Hate and Hope*, 28 November 2025 – 17 May 2026

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Opening times

Tuesday – Friday 9am-6pm (exhibitions open 9.30am)

Saturday – Sunday 10am-5pm

Closed Mondays, including bank holidays

Entry

Tickets operate on a 'Pay Only If and What You Want' basis, so you can choose the price from free through to full membership. A Universal Ticket grants access to the permanent collection, Lower and Mezzanine Galleries, and Sculpture Park.

The Sainsbury Centre is a world-class art museum with a unique perspective on how art can foster cultural dialogue and exchange. Following a radical relaunch in 2023 the Sainsbury Centre is the first museum in the world to formally recognise the living lifeforce of art, enabling people to build relationships across an arts landscape.

The art of the Sainsbury Centre can help reframe and answer the most important questions people have in their lives. It is not a museum to only learn more about artists, cultures or movements like Francis Bacon, the Tang Dynasty or Modernism, it is a place of experience, where collections are animate, and visitors are emotionally connected.

One of the first museums in the world to display art from all around the globe and from all time periods equally and collectively, Sir Robert and Lady Lisa Sainsbury created one of the most sought after yet non-conformist art collections. In 1973 they donated their collection, which transcended traditional barriers between art, architecture, archaeology and anthropology, to the University of East Anglia, and created an entirely new type of museum. Housed in Sir Norman Foster's revolutionary first ever public building, the space aimed for an interactive relationship between people, object and landscape, where art was placed within an open yet intimate 'living area'.

Visit www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk and follow @sainsburycentre on Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn, as well as @TheSainsburyCentre on YouTube.

Tesfaye Urgessa was born in 1983 and lives and works between Europe and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He studied under Mezgebu Tessema, Bisrat Shibabaw and Cordula Güdermann and later graduated from the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart. Through these experiences, Urgessa connected Ethiopian iconography with his deep fascination for traditional figurative painting, developing a unique and striking visual language. His classical figurations, featuring writhing bodies, create a sense of distorted psychological tension within domestic settings.

The artist's subject matter often explores intertwined representations of race and the politics of identity. Urgessa's work is held in the permanent collections of Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; Kunstmuseum, Germany; Art Al Maaden, Marrakech, Morocco; and several institutions in, Europe, Asia and the United States. He represented Ethiopia at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia in 2024.