

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 2015, I started roaming around an unfinished condominium complex on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. I was curious for perspective on how a rapid development scheme was playing out on an individual level, especially in a culture so historically resistant to outside influence.

On the edge of miles of these empty uniform buildings outside Addis, I met a boy who was – in his own ways – confronting “progress” as it steam-rolled his world. Pushed from his previous farmland home, he was now squatting in a makeshift house on the outside of one of the biggest condominium complexes in East African history. He was living between two realities (old and new) and actively trying to find his place in a world that seemed to constantly remind him that the new promises of modernity are not meant for him, or people like him.

Asalif's imagination and openness captivated me. While he and his mom had recently been displaced by the condo's construction, he is not a victim. Asalif believes he can take on the condo, and the world, when he channels the strength of his favorite animal (the lion). I discovered how crucial this symbol was for him, and this made me confront how much of the modern world rejects not only people who don't obviously fit into the capitalism tapestry, but also rejects tradition — symbols, fantasy and other age-old ways of confronting our inner selves. Asalif still embodies these things, while also adapting and trying to benefit from the new.

I began filming with Asalif and we started creating a fairytale out of his experience. Fairytales offer us ways to face the complex forces that affect us, ones too large or complicated to comprehend as they unfold.

This is what this ten-year-old protagonist does in his daily life: he spins elaborate stories in order to deal with the intense forces of change and domination that are threatening him and his mother. With time and care, he granted me intimate access to his world and that of his neighbors to really dig into how modernity conflicts human identity and coming of age.

On the surface, Ethiopia seems to benefit greatly from globalization. However, rapid “progress” is actively leaving millions like Asalif out of the picture. While **ANBESSA** is set in Addis Ababa, the ways gentrification, industrialization, and capitalism push so many out of the success story are universal.

Asalif's own struggles for “home” and a sense of self resonate with me. I have never lived in a space where I felt like an insider; I have never really understood or identified with narratives posed for me or about me. This has formed in me a strong sense of independence but also a sense of rudderlessness. I covet dreams, and glean inspiration and self-actualization through fantasy, and I have always respected symbols and the ways they can inform our lives. But Asalif has deepened this respect, informed and challenged my own views of how good intentions and sleek narratives of modernity and “progress” are vastly more complicated than they seem. There is a quiet violence which modernization is impressing on all of us. I made this film because I myself needed a dose of his version of reality, I needed to inhabit the realms he does in order to survive. I see his perspective as not an escape mechanism but rather a unique and essential way of coping with the annals of modernization, with forces beyond our control which threaten our existence.