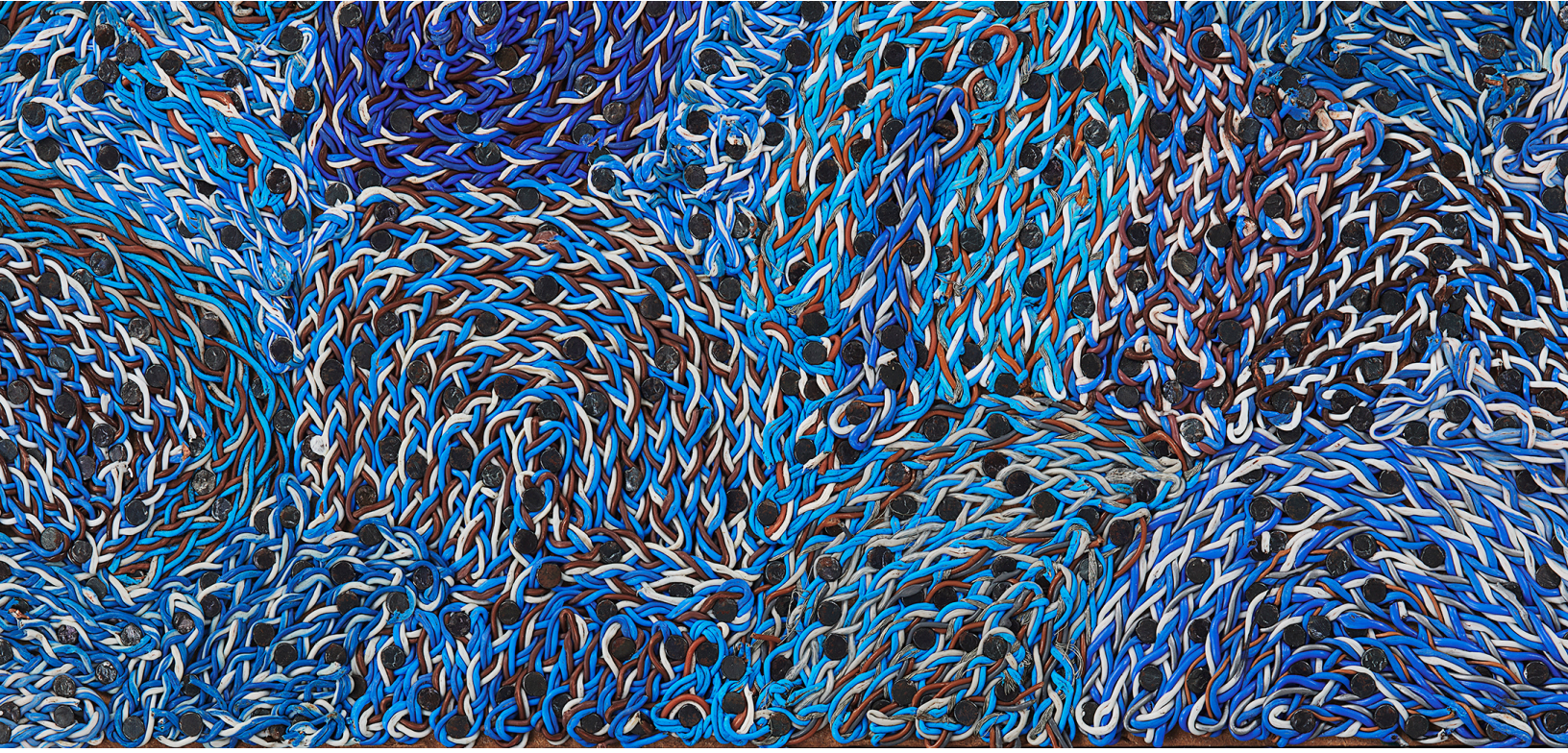




Tightrope: ECHO!? *Elias Sime*

By Meskerem Assegued



One of the joys of working with Elias Sime is going through his endless collections of things. When I say things, I mean anything and everything. He has piles of old silver keychains, coins, untouched banknotes from different eras, buttons, musical instruments, toys, books, medals and of course mountains of electronic components. Among the collections, his studio corner is piled with different megaphones. He said, “This is what I am working on now. It is time to pull them out.” I was not sure what he was going to do with them until he showed me colorful and uneven panels of wood assembled like puzzles with megaphones in the center. Both the panels and the megaphones were covered with electric wires. What struck me was not just the intensity of the wires but the placement of the megaphones. The protruding megaphones on the assembled colorful panels of wood gives them a surrealistic appearance, where sound can be visually imagined. The power of art is its ability to take the mind into a new unimaginable realm.

Megaphones are made to be held by one person and amplify ideas or announcements to a captive audience. Often, the ideas are echoed without questioning their motive. This is a worldwide phenomenon. Megaphones have evolved over time from simple cone shaped amplifiers to a more sophisticated waterproof electronic device. As he has often done with his Tightrope series, Elias, has dissected a few of the megaphone interiors and exposed them on the surface. The title for this body of work is *Tightrope: ECHO!?*

Elias’ art has always been about the moment, and today the greatest challenge for humanity is Coronavirus. Invisible to human eyes yet powerful, this virus has exposed our strength and weakness. It continues to attack with new strains. Unlike its divided host, it seems to be focused, organized, and united. A hundred years ago, when the Spanish Flu infected 500 million, one third of the world population, there was an active and anti-mask movement. Just like today, they used freedom to justify their cause. On the flip side, there were those who wore masks and washed their hands.



Elias Sime, *TIGHTROPE: ECHO!?*, 2020, Reclaimed electrical wires and components on panel,
45 x 48 x 12 1/4 in (114.3 x 121.9 x 31.1 cm)

Elias' *Tightrope: ECHO!?* works are about this dichotomy, hope and fear of repeating history. He expressed these feelings in *Tightrope: ECHO!?* *YELLOW*, the megaphone is amplifying in the center and Elias colorfully constructed the sound with a yellow and brown form. Elias has said "The form is a speech bubble. Some speakers amplify hope. During stressful times, hope can capture the majority. Because we are overwhelmed with lies and innuendos, we tend to doubt the hopeful truth. I added the brown to show a diluted hope. What keeps us moving forward is hope even when we question it." The red portrait-like figures on each side of the megaphone seem to eagerly pay attention to what is being said. Elias said, "Depending on the messenger and the message, mega-phones can be useful tools. They are simple and mobile often used during political rallies, religious events, and the likes. They are meant to amplify individual ideas and influence thoughts. The loudness of the sound and the frequency of the speaker's chosen words, can be influential thus expanding the echo."



Installation view, Elias Sime, *Currents 118: Elias Sime*, Saint Louis Art Museum, July 31, 2020 – January 31, 2021

Elias' recent solo exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum includes two large, inverted half globes, covered with woven electrical wires. One of these half globes is entitled *Tightrope: EYES and EARS of a Bat* (2020). He said, "Bats hang upside down. To a casual observer, this unusual standing position is discomfoting. To the bats, it is their natural position. I often wonder if the hollow shape of the caves' interior is what gives the bats a sense of comfort. Similarly, the ideas amplified through megaphones can be comfortable to some and disturbing to others." These half globe pieces, influenced by the Native American Cahokia Mounds and the St. Louis Gateway Arch, are about humanity's urge to let the future generations know that they were there. Just like these monuments, ideas amplified through the megaphone can impact many generations into the future.

Elias has never used computers or email or social media. He uses his smartphone only to take photos, receive, and make calls. Yet, during the last ten years, he has been dissecting electronic devices, carefully and methodically transforming them into astounding works of art. The time and cost spent to collect his art material then construct and finish his artwork cannot be easily quantified. For Elias, time and space are irrelevant. Boundless ideas stretch through his brain because he is a keen and analytical observer of everything he sees and touches with sensitivity. The subject of his compositions varies from personal stories to self-analysis or reactions to specific events and places. Over the years, he has been making art about insects, plants, sounds, astronomy, socio-politics, and love. His art rarely expresses anger. *Tightrope: ECHO!?* is his observation of the current worldwide tension, our reaction and how we can move into the future.



Elias Sime, *TIGHTROPE: ECHO!?*, 2020, Reclaimed electrical wires and components on panel,
55 7/8 x 80 1/4 x 10 1/2 in (141.9 x 203.8 x 26.7 cm)

Elias' art has been analyzed and its meaning quickly assumed by many writers. He is often bewildered by narratives about his art, particularly when the focus is on his race and place of birth. He said, "When I think about how my art is often interpreted, I think about the megaphone. Just like the person repeatedly amplifying a certain set of ideas until it is believed, my art needs to keep on evolving to change perspectives. What fascinates me about the human mind is its stubbornness to embrace beliefs regardless of the truth. It is my great hope that the audience will see and analyze *Tightrope: ECHO!?* not through my body but connect with the art through their unbiased pre-conceived notions." The power of art is its capacity to go beyond time and space. I once asked Elias how long he will continue working with electronic components and he replied, "The best part of technology is its ability to stretch and adapt to new situations. I am not sure, but for now, I am addicted to all the latest versions of electronics. I am also curious how far it will evolve or if humanity will ever get tired of it."

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