ICH GLEUBE, DASS NATIONALE KATEGORIEN DES DENKENS IN DER ART, WIE ICH KUNST SEHE, NICHT WIRKLICH ZUM TRAGEN KOMMEN. SIE SIND DER GEGENWÄRTIGEN KUNST FREMD. WENN SIE DENNOCH EINE ROLLE SPIELEND, IST ES SINNVOLL, SIE KRITISCH ZU ANALYSIEREN, DA MAN HIER OFT IDEOLOGISCH BELADENEN UND IRREFÜHRENDEN DISKUSSIONEN BEGEGNET. (I BELIEVE THAT, FROM MY PERSPECTIVE, THINKING IN NATIONAL CATEGORIES NO LONGER HAS AN EFFECT ON ART. IT IS ALIEN TO CONTEMPORARY ART. IF IT STILL PLAYS A ROLE, IT IS USEFUL TO CRITICALLY SCRUTINIZE THE FORMS IT TAKES, AS YOU OFTEN COME ACROSS IDEOLOGICALLY LADEN AND MISLEADING DISCUSSIONS. (Okwui Enwezor 2000; tr. mine).

ART IS NOT INDIVIDUAL. FEELING CAN BE INDIVIDUAL, STYLE MAY BE INDIVIDUAL, BUT ON THE WHOLE ART IS THE PRODUCT OF THE NATION. A NATION CANNOT BE CIVILIZED WITHOUT ART WORKS. (Feshaye Zemichael 2000)

Exhibition Sight/Site 1: Elsa Yacob's *Woman Hero* (1984)

ASMARA, JULY 2000. THE LATEST MILITARY CONFLICT WITH ETHIOPIA HAS NOT BEEN RESOLVED, BUT AT LEAST STUDENTS HAVE RETURNED FROM THE FRONTLINE AND ARE NOW SITTING FOR THEIR EXAMS WHICH HAD BEEN POSTPONED DURING THE...
general mobilization. At the Asmara School of Art, the finalists are about to complete their sculpture projects for graduation. Elsa Yacob, artist, art teacher, and veteran fighter of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Movement (EPLF), has taken me for a walk around town to locate a poster of one of her oil paintings, Woman Hero, produced in 1984 (Figure 1). The picture has acquired fame in Eritrea, and is one of the few paintings critically acknowledged internationally: it shows a fierce-looking, sweating woman fighter in khaki shorts holding an AK-47 in one hand, ready to throw a grenade with the other. The picture is composed as an almost equilateral triangle with the woman dominating the scene. Two male liberation fighters take cover in the lower background, while a slain Ethiopian soldier is lying at her feet. For a split second it reminds me of images from 1970s African–American action films known as blaxploitation movies: the undoubtedly very attractive female single-handedly destroying a power structure that has harmed her community. Yet the comparison with African–American “gangster melodramas with elements of social protest” does not ring true. At the time the picture was painted a bitter liberation war against neighbouring Ethiopia had been going on in Eritrea for twenty-two years. The fighter in the painting was no violent Hollywood sex icon; as one of the rare images showing a woman combatant in an aggressive stance, she was an embodiment of the liberation struggle and served as a symbol for the ‘new woman’ in Eritrea, freed from feudal, patriarchal and political oppression.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, the image of the ‘new woman’ has never translated well into post-independence Eritrean society, except among sections of the veteran and returnee communities, so deeply ingrained are the ancient social structures which privilege male over female. Even the female contingent of the new generation of soldiers in the last border conflict has shrunk for reasons too complex to discuss here. While the defiant image of the ‘woman hero’ has lost something of its

1 Note that it is common to address Eritreans by their first name, the second name being the father’s first name rather than a surname in the Western sense (the third being the grandfather’s, and so on). In this article I use both first name and father’s name to refer to Eritrean artists and authors. The bibliography, however, lists Eritrean authors by their father’s name (‘surname’) first in order to comply with international citation systems.


4 Rumour had it that unwanted pregnancies, sexual assaults and an increase in HIV infections were the reasons for the withdrawal of women from the frontlines and military training camps at the turn of the millennium. There was no public debate, however, and, to my knowledge, no official statement was issued.