

## **ART REVIEW : Other Sides of Empty - Now in the Contemporary Arts Forum's 'Bloom Projects' corner space, empty boxes and photographs thereof make up the main materials of African-born and not Brooklyn-based artist Dawit L. Petros**

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### **ART REVIEW**

**DAWIT L. PETROS, 'MAHBER SHAW'ATE (ASSOCIATION OF 7)'**

**When:** through Oct. 9

**Where:** Contemporary Arts Forum, 653 Paseo Nuevo

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

**Information:** 966-5373, sbcaf.org

Now in the "Bloom Gallery" nook of Contemporary Arts Forum, literal empty boxes — and photographs thereof — make up the primary material list for Dawit L. Petros, "Mahber Shaw'ate (Association of 7)." Suffice to say, this is one of the more severely, semi-ironically minimal shows yet in this often provocative space and series, and once you pay proper contemplative respects and spend some time with the show, its deeper power and magnetism emerge. The underlying message might be that a void is not always a void.

Born in the East African locale of Asmara, Eritrea, raised in Kenya and now based in Brooklyn, Petros allegedly makes references to an African alphabet while feeding into the long, evolving Western minimalist tradition in his CAF show — really a unified, thematically-driven installation. There is more to it than meets the first impression-seizing eye.

For one thing, as part of the now long continuum of often site-specific projects in this special corner space of CAF (with the outdoor "glass box" space added to the available spatial

resource," this is a dryly engaging and also funnily absurd variation on the "Bloom Projects" conceptual gist. Into this corner "box" of a gallery, seven large square cardboard boxes become empty vessels within the host space (which gallery attendants are invited ♡ empowered - by the artist to move about, randomly).

In effect, the more dominant artworks in the contextual whole are deadpan color photographs on the walls, showing said boxes placed in key spots around Santa Barbara ♡ at the beach, in the foothills, on the red-tiled State Street sidewalks. These go by the formalizing series title "Cube Formation" (e.g. "Triple Cube Formation," etc.), and establish a sense of systematized site-specificity between Santa Barbara as site and this CAF nook as homebase.

Thus, humble boxes assume a character of "found sculpture" nobility, and they appear as totems or monoliths. Linked back to the gallery space, they also serve as connective signifiers. Yet, still and all, we're aware of the tactic of an elevation of the commonplace at work here. We know that the artist knows we know that these boxes are commercially available objects made of cardboard and air, lavished with artistic purpose.

As an extra optical wink of a gesture in the installation, feeing into the idea of emptiness ennobled, a simple black square has been placed low on one wall. The implication is of another empty void in the whole of the piece, another faux hollow enclosure and a hint of a hole contributing to the aesthetic whole.

Through it all, the spare elements in Petro's unexpectedly intriguing installation all fit together to make for a surprisingly meditative and witty piece. All it takes, on the part of the art beholder, is a bit of time in contemplation, appreciation of the underlying scheme and humor, and suspension of skepticism.