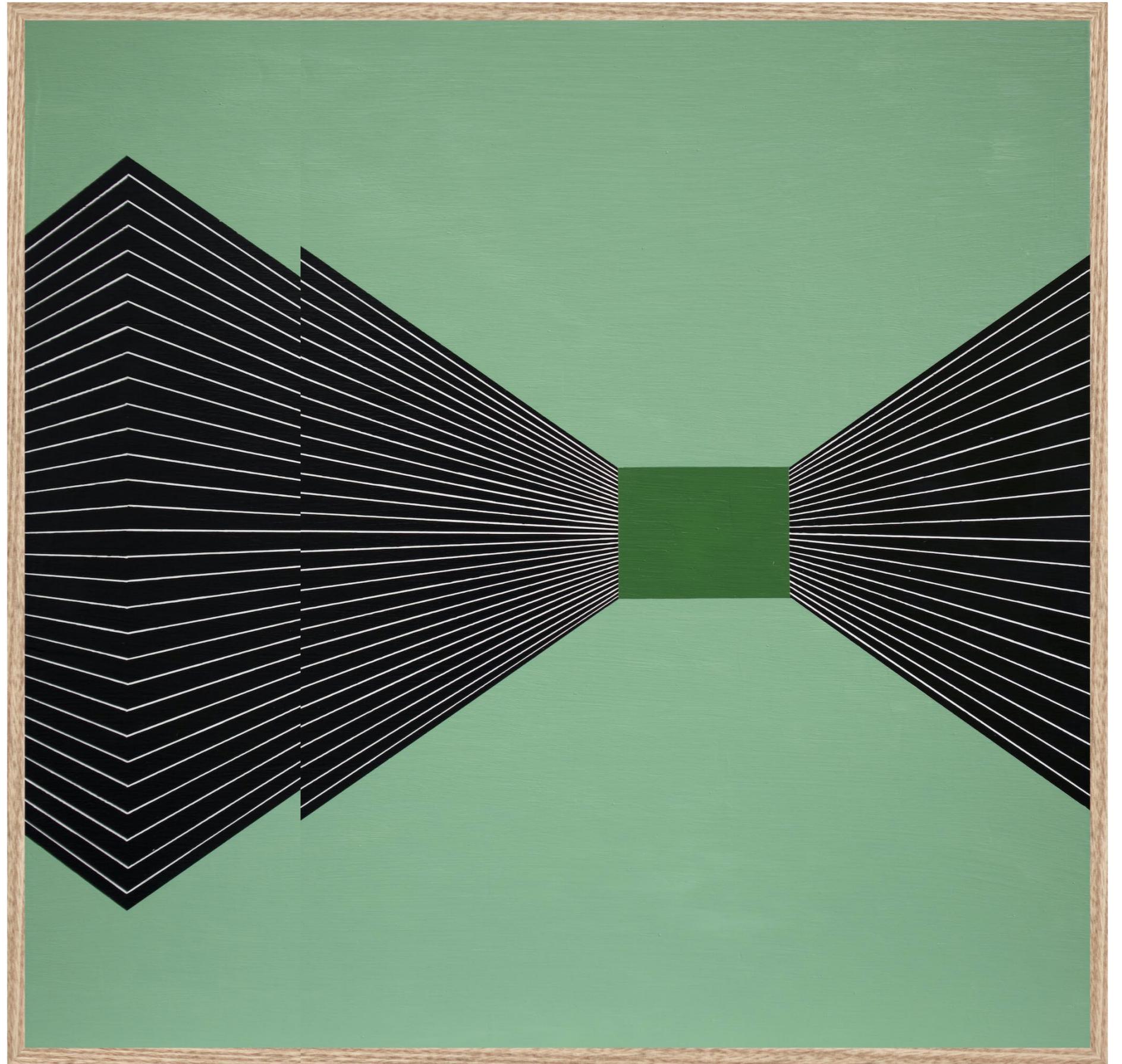


VERNISSAGE / ONLINE GALLERY

# Virtual Connections



Text

Emma-Kate Wilson

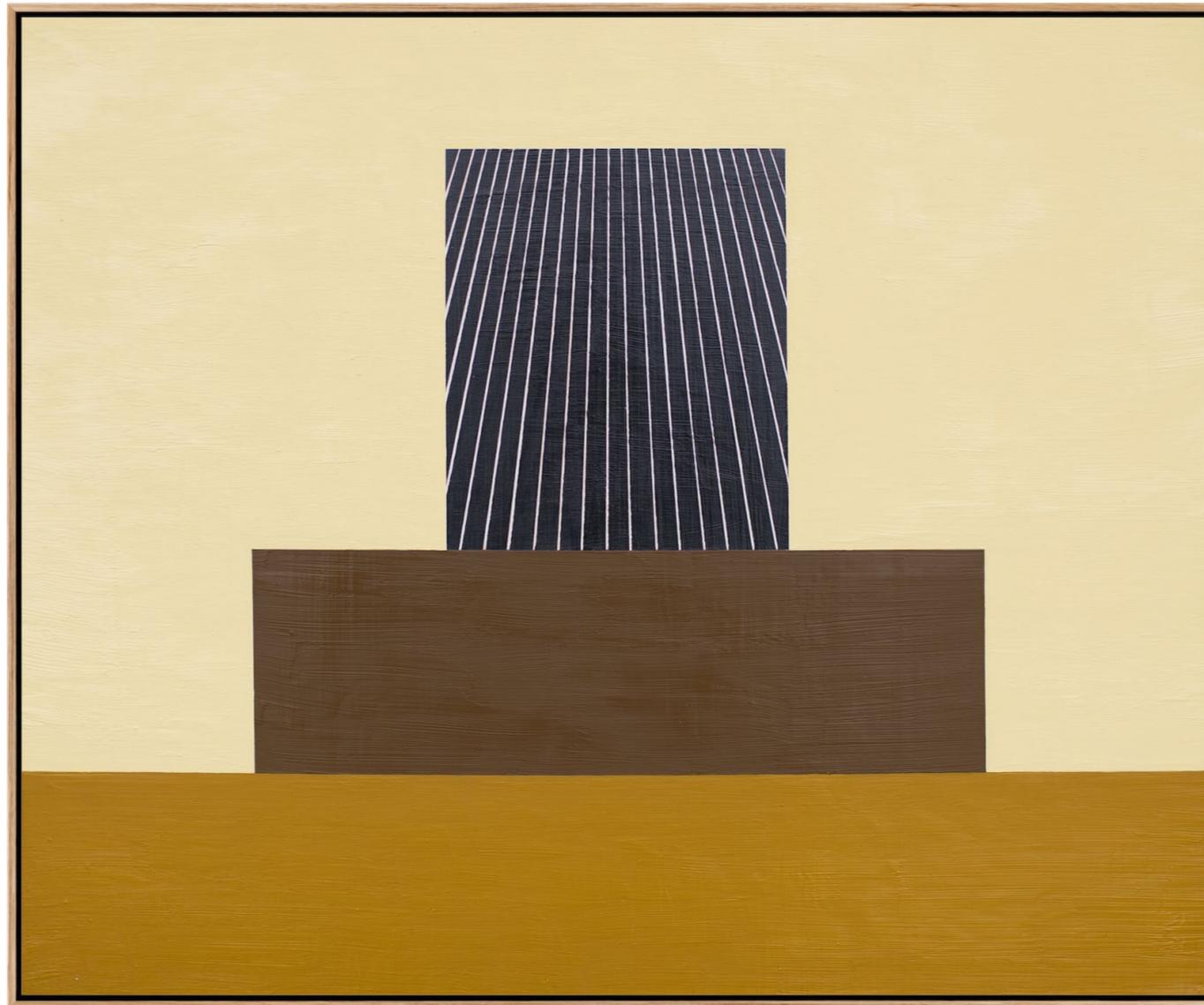
As lockdowns continue in most major cities in Australia, the long-term effects are increasingly prevalent in individual practices and businesses throughout the art industry. Online galleries have continued to spring up in a new world of social distancing and uncertain plans. For Brisbane-based curator Bayoush Demissie, the concept for Aster + Asha Gallery unfolded during the 2020 lockdowns, as galleries sought novel ways to interact with collectors. 'There's a desire in collector bases to consume and engage with art in a digital way,' says Demissie, whose previous posts include management roles at Jan Murphy Gallery and the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Existing as a permanent exhibition platform presented with clear imagery of shoppable artwork, the gallery connects with its digital audience through email, social media and direct messages. 'It's about having much more of a reliance on imagery and making sure that the artists are documenting their work with really great visuals and high-quality images, and having the information about the work accessible and easy to digest,' Demissie says of the model. Although there has been the occasional pop-up, the gallery is designed to occupy an online space, meaning these assets are essential.

The venture has already connected artists with clients across the world as the digital brings audiences together. 'For Australian artists, it has often been a real difficulty to get into a broader international market,' Demissie says. 'I think the digital world that we're in right now allows for that global interaction.' She cites the importance of Instagram as a way for artists to communicate with both collectors and their peers. 'It has connected the art world in a new way,' she says.

Selecting artists for the gallery was an intensive process, with Demissie looking to artist-run galleries and art school exhibitions across the country, and, of course, Instagram. The curator sought out artists who bring their own viewpoint and unique technical skills, along with engaging concepts and refreshing takes on unusual mediums. Nathan Beard, for example, uses mediums including photography and sculpture to explore culture, memory and identity in relation to his Australian and Thai heritage, while Senegal-born Kevin Diallo uses mixed media to create intricately patterned works that reference traditional African design and interrogate complex cultural history.

Artworks already available on Aster + Asha Gallery include Kasper Raglus's *Lets* (2021) (previous page) and *Up And Up* (2021) (top), and Jack MacRae's *Sunshine Beach* (2021) (bottom). All images courtesy of the artist and Aster + Asha Gallery.



Brisbane-based curator Bayoush Demissie established Aster + Asha Gallery as an online contemporary art platform to connect international audiences with emerging artists working across Australia. Image by Kate Alida Mullen.



For Demissie, it was crucial that the artists sit well alongside one another. 'Part of what we're concerned with is presenting a platform with a diverse range of artists who examine how we navigate the world,' she explains. 'Our world is very complicated right now, so issues about the environment, spirituality and cultural identity are coming out more and more in art.'

Demissie's own heritage and the gallery's name both reflect ideas of unity — Aster is an Ethiopian name meaning 'star', while Asha is an Indian name that means 'hope' and 'life'. As the artists' works and the online gallery inspire a brighter future for the arts, so too does the underlying concept — connecting audiences and artists through these uncertain times.