

**ARTIST**

Eric Gottesman

**TITLE**

Beletu and Beletu Text

**DATE**

early 2000s - early 2010s

**DIMENSIONS**

8 in H x 10 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print, Inkjet Prints, Vellum Paper

**IMAGE NOTES**

Toned Gelatin Silver Print with Inkjet Print of Text on Vellum

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2014.131 and 2014.130

**CURRENT LOCATION**

Eric Gottesman Portfolio Box1

**DESCRIPTION**

Beletu

My husband knew. But, he didn't tell me. I asked him why we were receiving assistance. He said to me, "It is because we are 'displaced.'" I would have left him if I had known at that time, or killed myself maybe.

When the doctor told me my results. I was very angry. I never knew a man except my husband. I fought with him and left home. After a while, I reconsidered and came back to my family. Then he passed away: that was a year and a half ago.

People think life is easy, you know? I think now about my husband. If he had told me earlier, he wouldn't have died as soon as he did. We could have shared the burden together. I didn't have any idea at that time. This thing is so bad. I would love to teach others now but I prefer to teach in some remote area, away from those who might recognize me.

See, society is narrow-minded. Even those who are so-called "educated" are narrow-minded on this matter. For example, I told my husband's friend. He is educated. He had been to England and Germany. I was hoping he might help my children when I die. However I haven't seen him since: he doesn't even want to talk to me. This is the situation. My second child saw something on TV about AIDS and started laughing and joking. Sometimes, I think about my children: who could teach them about this problem?

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**ERIC GOTTESMAN****BORN**

1976

**BIRTHPLACE**

Nashua, NH

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Lebanese/ Eastern European Jewish

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2013  
Light Work Hallway Gallery, 2017  
If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food (Ka Fitfitu Feetu)

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 177

## BIOGRAPHY

Eric Gottesman is a photographic artist, teacher, and activist. Since 1999 he has been working in and around the Middle East and Africa collaborating with communities to produce photographs and videos that often challenge preexisting images and perceptions of a culture and/or place as well as the concept of singular artistic authorship. Over 10 years ago, Gottesman worked with a group of Ethiopian children whose parents died of AIDS to found Sudden Flowers, an art collective that produces photographs, videos, installations, and performances in their own community. Interested in how photography functions within the social sphere as the repository for individual and collective memory and as factual and fictional documents, many of Gottesman's projects examine the quiet, long-term, psychological impact of mass trauma.

Gottesman has been the recipient of a number of important awards, fellowships, and grants including a Fulbright Fellowship in Art, an Artadia award, an Aaron Siskind Fellowship, the apexart Franchise award, as well as grants from the Magnum Foundation, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Most recently his work has been exhibited at the Addison Gallery of American Art and the deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park. His first monograph *Sudden Flowers* will soon be published by Fishbar. Gottesman participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence Program in September 2013.

## ESSAYS

In the world we live, with all the violence we inherit and the violence we ourselves trigger, we desperately need art to hold us accountable, to show us our underside selves and not the innocence we prop up and cling to. The (self)revelation that art affords — be it in the form of an image, a word, a gesture, a cry — can have a radical power to yank us off of our mooring of indifference, fear, and cruelty. It can force us to question the norms that curtail human freedom and complexity, transgress the limits of power and propriety, and reclaim what is deemed aberrant and shameful. It is armed with these elements that a powerful body of art has reckoned with the AIDS catastrophe — powerful not only as a work of art with aesthetic merits, but also a work of politics with explicit aims of combatting the spread and stigma of the disease. Aesthetics and politics fold into a singular undertaking, one feeding the other in the same act of commitment. That act is in clear display in Eric Gottesman's series of photographs, *If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food*, the first of its kind to portray Ethiopians living with HIV / AIDS. These portraits capture the specter of AIDS when it first became a crisis in Ethiopia in the mid-to-late 1990s: a time of compounding loss, mounting deaths exacerbated by deep fear, deafening silence, and widespread malfeasance; when people living with HIV / AIDS were harmed with impunity, subject to arbitrary evictions, firings, beatings, imprisonment, and disownment. Amid this climate, people rarely disclosed their illness privately or publicly, since the consequences of disclosure were immediate and severe. Even for the AIDS dead, disclosure could exact a price and exclude them from burial rites, leaving the dead and the surviving kin in disgrace. *If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food* conjures up this period not by trumpeting AIDS in Africa (or the Western idea of Africa, for that matter) as an object of sensationalism and charity; but instead by evoking the interior lives of those living with the disease, and the agency to be had in facing the camera's gaze. The one feature that distinguishes these photos as a group is the anonymity that the subjects chose to maintain. The portraits bear a face that is partially or fully disguised by hands, a shawl, a painting, or some artifact; or the person is altogether turned away from the camera, or the image overexposed to make the face indiscernible. The fear encapsulated in these gestures of anonymity hails the people photographed inasmuch as it betrays the society that forced them to face the public eye half-veiled. Still, fear is not the only feeling featured in these pictures. However covert or tacit, by virtue of being photographed, the men and women in these portraits also dare to embody AIDS publicly, imbuing these images with a heightened sense of agency and self-representation. Gottesman's photographs opened new ways of seeing HIV / AIDS in Ethiopia. They signaled that people living with the disease could use portraiture as a forum for confronting fear, stigma, and loss, as well as a medium for self-expression and corroboration, and that photography can play a critical role in exposing what power and taboo render invisible. The key to these portraits is their ethics of collaboration whereby photographer and photographed together create the image. The shared enterprise becomes an act of mutual commitment and transformation, not only thwarting the tropes of spectacle and pity that often figure in (AIDS in) Africa, but also breaking down the barrier between the observer and the observed, the invisibility of HIV-positive people and the visible forces of social stigma, art and politics, and other binary oppositions that presuppose a fixed hierarchy. That shared gaze also has a reflexive effect on viewers, demanding us to dare face our fears and strive to see ourselves in these portraits. Gottesman's work is a powerful reminder that, ultimately, the image of "the other" is a reflection of the self that must be embraced and not estranged. Only then will we achieve a more just world. Dagmawi Woubshet Dagmawi Woubshet is associate professor of English at Cornell University. He is the author most recently of *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, fall 2014). — Eric Gottesman lives in Washington, DC, and completed his residency at Light Work in September 2013. [www.ericgottesman.net](http://www.ericgottesman.net) Eric Gottesman: *If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food* (Ka Fitfitu Feetu) March 20 – July 27, 2017 Light Work Hallway Gallery Reception: Friday, April 14, 5-7pm Light Work is pleased to present Eric Gottesman: *If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food* (Ka Fitfitu Feetu), on view in the Light Work Hallway Gallery from March 20 through July 27, 2017. A reception in conjunction with George Awde: *Scale Without Measure* will take place on Friday, April 14 from 5-7pm. Refreshments will be served; the event is free and open to the public. In 1999, artist Eric Gottesman began making portraits in Ethiopia of people with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Because great stigma surrounds this disease, subjects did not allow him to photograph their faces. Over the next five years, Gottesman made these portraits of people with HIV anonymous by hiding and obscuring their faces and changing each sitter's name to protect their identity. A transcribed text from each sitter describing life with HIV in Ethiopia accompanies each image. In 2004, a woman with HIV allowed him to photograph her face for the first time and he knew the project was completed.