Empowering images abound in the studio of multidisciplinary artist Helina Metaferia—photographs of protest sewed into textile works, thick stacks of black-and-white archival images labeled by subject matter, and sprawled across the floor, life-size headshots and full-body portraits of activists arranged into in-progress collages.
I visited the artist while she was in the midst of working on a new project for the Center for Book Arts, and her studio was plentiful in the reference materials that feature so largely throughout her work.

The Work, 2021. Acrylic on paper and wood; participatory installation, 16 x 3 x 4 ft. This variation of the installation was on view at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston as part of Metaferia's 2021–22 solo show, Generations. Courtesy the artist

Across her research-based practice, spanning collage, performance, and video, Metaferia’s artwork acknowledges the underrecognized labor of women in BIPOC communities. In her most well-known series, “By Way of Revolution,” Metaferia collages celebratory portraits of women and nonbinary femme activists using archival images and regalia motifs, noting that “When I have a platform, I usually open it up to other people, their faces, their bodies, and their stories.”

Her upcoming summer exhibitions at Center for Book Arts and Recess (both in New York City, opening May 23 and May 1, respectively) expand upon this style. They also signal a new source of inspiration for the series—the artist has been researching Ethiopian healing scrolls, creating a book inspired by the textual and visual elements of the healing talismans used for centuries in the country. These scrolls took the form of long, vertical sheets of parchment that combined divine imagery and texts, often used to protect against physical and spiritual ailments. Metaferia’s book will be presented as a risograph print resembling a long, continuous healing scroll at Center for Book Arts, while Recess will display original collages that comprise her scroll.

The book project continues the artist’s engagement with ritual and healing modalities; however, this marks a turn in visual motifs, prompting a new series the artist calls “We Must Be Magic.” The resulting collages appear comparatively pared down from the artist’s
earlier work, emphasizing the drawings that surround the sitters. Patterns, protective creatures, and circular shapes, meant to reference the eyes and role of the gaze in healing scrolls, enshrine her subjects. Ethiopian religious artifacts are usually presented in museums in terms of their long-standing history with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; through her project, Metaferia draws attention to the lesser-known mystical and syncretic elements of spiritual practices carried through multiple empires in the land now formally recognized as Ethiopia. Of her many books, she pulls out three key texts for me: two worn publications on Ethiopian magic scrolls and the forthcoming catalogue for Ethiopia at the Crossroads, a traveling exhibition featuring Metaferia's work that originated at the Walters Museum in Baltimore that merges ancient and contemporary art.

As an Ethiopian American, Metaferia often draws influences from her culture. She was born and raised in the United States, growing up in the Washington DC metropolitan region, an area known for having a large population of Ethiopians. Her father, Getachew Metaferia, is a professor of political science, and her mother, Maigenet Shifferraw, was an organizer in Ethiopia and in the US, advocating for women’s rights and political prisoners. Her parents encouraged conversation in the home about politics and Pan-Africanism, so Metaferia naturally integrated political and social issues into her artwork as a budding artist. As a high schooler, she received mentorship from her art teacher Deborah Ambush, who encouraged her to continue her practice. “I came from an educator family, and I also happened to have Black women pave the way for me to be here,” she says. She cites her former graduate professor María Magdalena Campos-Pons—a multidisciplinary artist whose work also explores migration and memory through healing and ritual—as another crucial mentor.
These traces of matrilineage and mentorship suffuse her work. “By Way of Revolution” developed after her mother’s passing in 2016, as the artist worked through her grief, honoring the underrecognized yet revolutionary labor of women through performances, video, and collage. Her collages are informed by private, intimate workshops she facilitates for women-identifying people, leading participants through conversations, exercises, and gestures to release trauma. From there, a few participants agree to be photographed for future collages. Metaferia then visits archives situated in public universities and libraries that hold images related to the site or topic of her photographic subjects. Her resulting portrait collages burst with activity, paralleling the generations of protest imagery featured within them. She creates with humble materials, such as paper and adhesives, to form compositions around the body, pairing photographs and jewel-like shapes to adorn her sitters with headdresses and crowns. Creating these collage portraits is just one way Metaferia engages with archives, as she also provides bibliographies to cite her sources and increase knowledge around the archives and their holdings.

As an artist and educator, Metaferia’s work heavily engages with social practice—a term used to broadly define artists whose work is socially engaged. In spring 2024, she coorganized a symposium on social practice at Brown University, where she teaches. Metaferia sees beauty in synthesis and thinks of collaboration as a way to maintain the sustainability of her practice, remarking that “the scarcity mentality and the idea that there can only be one is exactly the antithesis to how I approach making.”

To illustrate this point, a key component of her upcoming book project and related exhibitions include responses from her participatory artwork The Work (2019–). The Work has been installed in different institutions and prompts anonymous responses to the questions “What is your everyday revolution?” and “How can you contribute to change on a micro and macro scale?” Selected responses will appear in the book through text made to resemble Amharic script and, at Recess, a table installation will feature engraved text responses. Following these lines of inquiry brings Metaferia’s awareness to many voices, resulting in work that celebrates and looks to the power of multiple revolutionary histories.
Practical Magic 1, 2024. Archival inkjet print, acrylic, and pencil on paper collage, 11 x 15 in. on view at Metaferia's Session the Meeting Place at Recess Art in Brooklyn, NY; appears in Been Magic * Been Real scroll book at Center for Book Arts in New York City. Courtesy the artist.
Practical Magic 3, 2024. Archival inkjet print, acrylic, and pencil on paper collage, 11 x 15 in. on view at Metaferia's Session the Meeting Place at Recess Art in Brooklyn, NY; appears in Been Magic * Been Real scroll book at Center for Book Arts in New York City.
Practical Magic 5, 2024. Archival inkjet print, acrylic, and pencil on paper collage, 11 x 15 in. on view at Metaferia's Session the Meeting Place at Recess Art in Brooklyn, NY; appears in Been Magic * Been Real scroll book at Center for Book Arts in New York City.