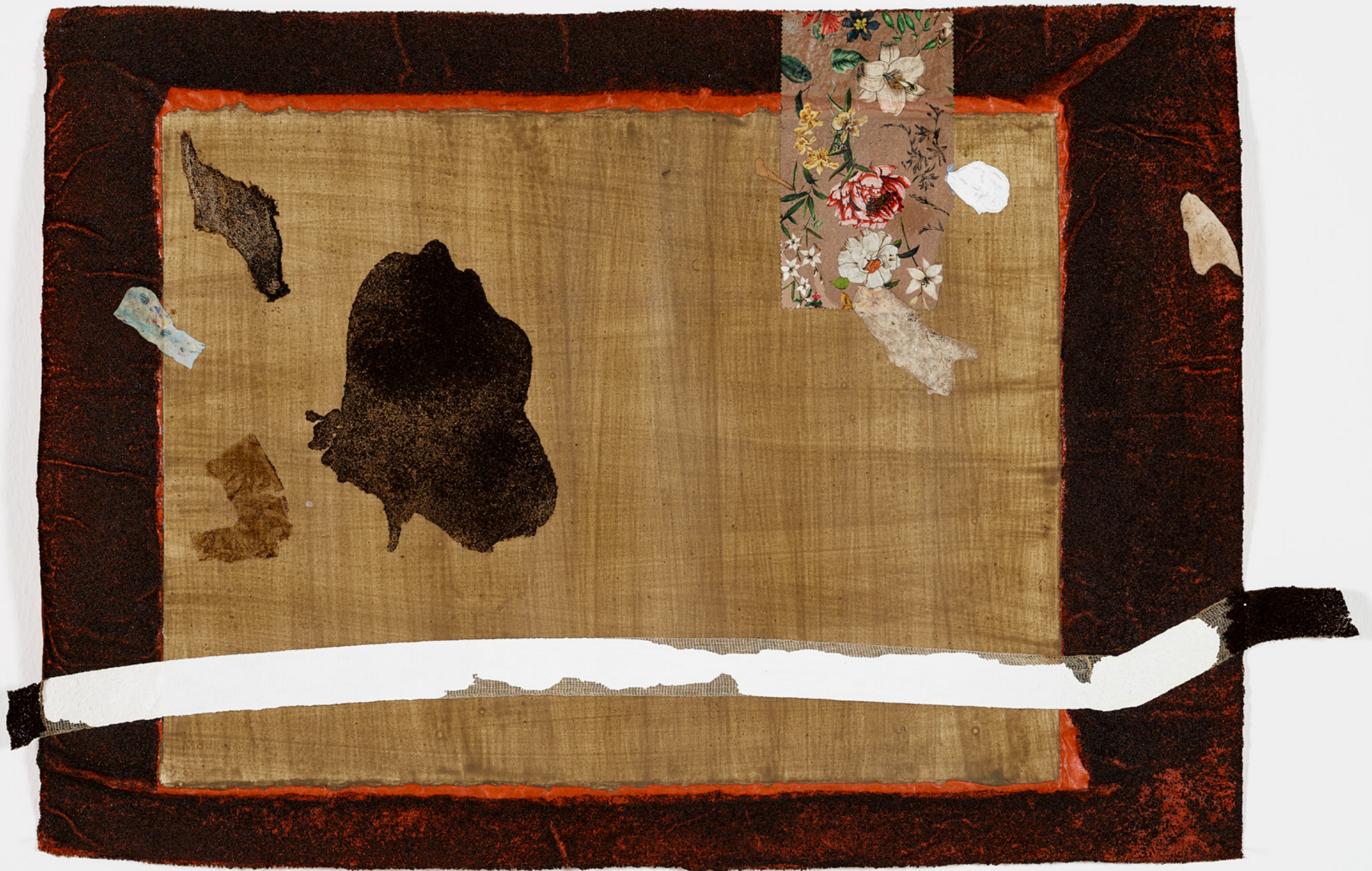


Interview by Lydia Earthy

Francis Offman

Born *1987*



Untitled, 2020-2022, acrylic, paper, 100% cotton, coffee grounds, clay on 100% cotton paper, 74x116 cm. Courtesy of the artist and P420. Photo by Carlo Favero

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. To start, you recently completed a Residency at Gasworks in South London. How was it?

It's been really interesting. When me and my friends finished the residency at Gasworks, we said we came to London with only ignorance. We discovered many things, some good, and some bad. It's changed us a lot: the competition, a lot of galleries. Everything seems to move very fast. The city requires a lot of energy, but at the same time, you receive a lot of input.

I'm busy in Bologna, but this is a small city - in 30 minutes, I'm able to move from one side to another side of the city. It was interesting to navigate. My friends were coming from different parts of the continent. One came from Costa Rica, another from Kenya, and me from Italy. Every evening we would share our feelings, and we noticed we changed and allowed ourselves to change. It was really challenging. It's a different kind of public: people are more engaged and they understand more, which is different from here in Italy, where they have stereotypes. If you're black they expect certain things. Most of the time the conversation is just about to disagree or to tell them things are different.

I'm glad to hear that you found it to be a liberating experience, your time at Gasworks. I'd like to start with some quite broad questions about your process. How do you go about starting a composition? On a practical level, what does this look like?

Most of my compositions are created through time and through the stories of the materials that I receive. The people who bring me material are friends or students who study in art school here in Bologna. Now, people know that if they don't need the material, they bring them to me, colours that they don't use any more. I collect all of those materials.

On the other side, there are the coffee grounds. Some of my collectors bring me coffee grounds. I explain to them how to

do so: every time they drink coffee, they put these aside and dry them. When they have enough, it is an excuse for me and them to talk together. For me it's very good. Most of the time I'm in the studio so having these people with coffee is really interesting. In one case, I have a neighbour who has a bar, so he has a lot of coffee. By giving me coffee, we start to have a conversation, and he's now starting to have more interest in contemporary art, he's talking with his regular clients about what I'm doing. It is a very easy way to involve people to come to art without forcing them.

All the materials I collect have stories, and in my mind somehow everything starts to grow. For example, someone brings me expensive paper from France. From there, I start to collect an audience. Something starts to connect together. And when I'm ready I start to work.

Could you tell me a little bit about how the properties of the materials inform your work?

The property of the material tells me how to behave with things. Lately, I've been focused on how the materials are created, and the product development behind them. Studying the material I'm using allows me to educate myself. I also ask myself a lot of philosophical questions, and particularly about art history in Italy. Here, there is a lot of knowledge about pigments and Arte Povera. Having access to this knowledge helps. When I started working this way, I asked myself how would an Old Master behave if they could be here in our time? If we go to footlocker, for example, and we receive a package, it has gone through a lot of stages. First there was a concept, then a colour proof, then reproduction. The package goes from the shop to a house, and then in the dustbin, you know. But if you know how the package is created and the colours you can use, you can use it in your composition. They can be beautiful packages, but their lifetime is really small.



Untitled (detail), 2022-2023, ink, acrylic, paper, 100% cotton, coffee grounds, Bolognese plaster on linen, 200x230 cm. Courtesy of the artist and P420. Photo by Carlo Favero

Untitled, 2019, acrylic, ink, coffee ground, collage and Bolognese plaster on 100% cotton paper, 58x70 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and P420. Photo by Carlo Favero



Untitled, 2018, acrylic, ink, coffee ground, collage on 100% cotton paper, 56x88 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and P420. Photo by Carlo Favero





Untitled, 2020-2022. Acrylic, ink and Bolognese plaster on cotton 227 x 262.4 cm / 89.4 x 103.3 in. © Francis Offman. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London. Photo by Andy Keate.



Untitled, 2018, acrylic, ink, coffee ground, cotton fabric, collage on 100% cotton paper, 56x76 cm.
 Courtesy of the artist and P420. Photo by Carlo Favero.



By doing this, I question myself about the environment, about plastic. I get lost in many things. In this way, the composition starts by understanding the stories outside. Coffee, for example, is connected to climate change: now in Latin America, because the climate is changing the coffee plant is very sensitive to temperature. If the temperature increases, people aren't able to plant any more coffee. So they have to emigrate to the North of America. By reading an article, I discovered the journey from South America to North America is very heavy. They have to go through the jungle, and have to meet a lot of cartellos. When I see coffee, it connects all these things in my mind.

You touched briefly on Arte Povera - I wanted to ask you about your work and its relation to this movement; their attentiveness to material, form, and value, the idea of reuse. I notice your work subverts the Arte Povera palette. How do you see your practice working within this lineage?

For me, history is something I can't escape. Italy is an open museum - even the roads are a thousand years old. Every building is more than four hundred years old, the walls are irregular. History is everywhere, you breathe it. So I decided to use history as raw material. What I understood is how the materials behave in time. For [the Arte Povera movement], it was a way to go against their situation, and the atmosphere which was happening at that moment - poor material. For me, studying Art Povera and seeing the energy in their materials gave me courage and allowed me to understand how I could go using expensive colours. Art materials are normally very expensive.

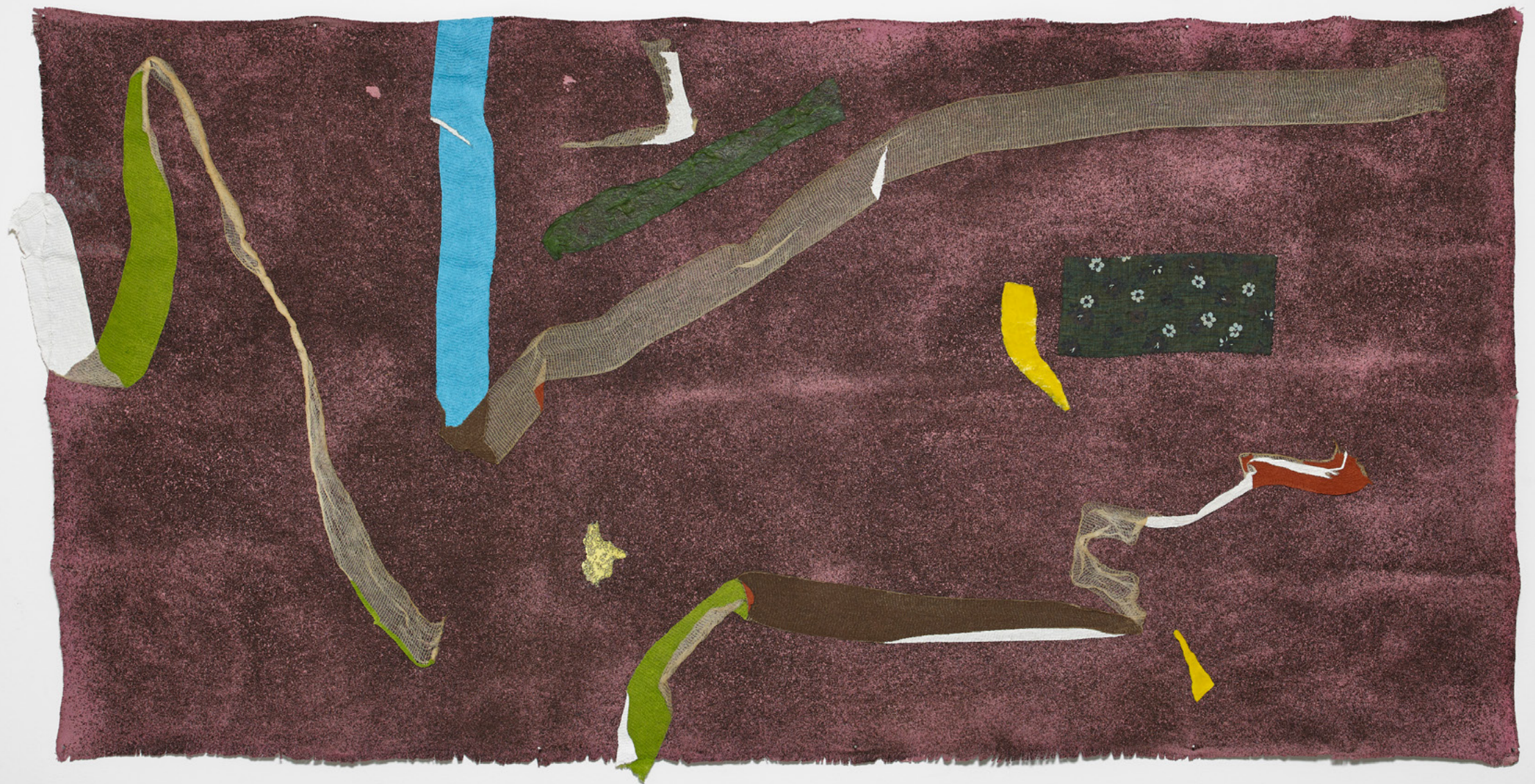
In terms of colour, this is dictated by the colours people give me. For a while I have been reusing Indian yellow. My brother did erasmus in Germany and he brought me 25 kilograms of acrylic. He just wanted to paint a small wall. So I used all the yellow, and thought about how to combine it with coffee grounds and other primary colours.



Photo by Reuben Beren James

The colours which I usually create come mostly from my memories when I was in Rwanda. I saw that here in Europe, sometimes there's a fear of using colour. Colour doesn't have a universal meaning. For example, in India, white is seen as the dress for when someone has died. And here, it's black. In Africa, it's purple, I think. What I try to see is when you create a balance, they can communicate a universal language that everyone is able to understand. You can feel calm, or be very stimulated. I try to work with this kind of formula.

I also wanted to ask you about your other mediums. Specifically, I know you are in an upcoming show at the Mead Gallery at Warwick Arts Centre, The Reason for Painting, and I understand at Gasworks you've been looking at painting more. At the Museum of Rome last year, you exhibited sculptural works. Given your interest in materiality, what does it mean to move between these mediums?



Untitled, 2020–2022. Acrylic, ink, paper, coffee grounds, cotton, Bolognese plaster on linen, 69.2 x 138 cm / 27.2 x 54.3 in. © Francis Offman. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London. Photo by Andy Keate.

The space I've been working with up until now only allowed me to work with painting - at the beginning I was working in my dining room, then a very small studio. Now I've got a studio which will allow me to work with sculpture.

The sculpture which I presented at Rome I was able to develop because I was thinking about the genocide in Rwanda. I was between my dining room and this small studio, and was thinking of what I could use. I had my mother's Bible, and was going through the history of Rwanda, and discovered a scientist called Carlo Lombroso who came from Turin. He created a science of measuring the face and determining if someone is a criminal, he's the father of criminology. Some of his knowledge was used by the Nazi party, and then by the Belgians. I was able to create this sculpture because it didn't require a lot of space.

To speak more about your sculptures at the Museum of Rome, I'm interested in the tension between the callipers and the books, and how that speaks to the known and the unknowable, the empirical and oral histories, and also narratives of loss. Could you speak more about this work and what it meant to you?

When I was working on this sculpture, I allowed myself to reflect a lot. I realised that here in Europe there is a lot of possibility. In our case, we just try to adapt to the things we have. Here in Italy, you can find roads which have been there for more than one thousand years, whereas in Rwanda it is really difficult to even find a book which is more than eighty years old because of the genocide.

At the same time, I was thinking about how the history here is recorded. In Europe they write notebooks. In our case, we use storytelling. In my work I like to tell stories because it is one of the oldest ways used to share knowledge, and in Rwanda it is still the main thing. Books are used to keep knowledge for generations to come, but on the other hand, you can use it to manipulate people, which

happened with the scientist Cesare Lombroso and the Nazis to justify what they did. It had a kind of scientific knowledge, which was written in his writings and research. I think even he didn't really realise that this science could be used to do what they did. First, the Germans did this in Namibia, with the Bushman people. And then it happened with the German people in the first and second world wars. And then in another strange way, it happened in Rwanda.

So for me the books, enclosed with callipers, was an attempt to measure the meaning of the book. The calliper is used to precisely and mechanically measure - I decided to measure a book, like a bible, which for my mother has been really important. For many people, the Bible, the Quran. For me, it was this attempt to measure something which goes beyond what is written inside. At the same time, it is a very stupid way of trying to measure a very important thing - I'm not religious, but I understand its importance. For my mother, she said that it saved her. She was able to survive and keep us alive during the genocide.

At the same time, this method was used to discriminate: to measure your nose and your head and to say you are Tutsi, because it meets a certain measurement and so on. For me, it was really stupid using this line of thinking. I wanted to translate this thinking and at the same time give it many meanings. For me, it was like shouting but without shouting: I want people to think, my interest is making people reflect when they see my work. I wanted people to have these thoughts rather than seeing dead bodies.

I have one last question for you, which is about your show at Herald Street. I wanted to ask you about this body of work, and what it means for you in particular. How does it work differently to previous incarnations of your work?

This exhibition was really intense. I did half of the paintings in my previous studio, and the other half in the temporary one.

It's very important for me because at the moment I'm having some personal difficulties. For me, it was about finding a balance, to find a place or a moment in time where I'm happy or I think that I would be happy sometime. These paintings give you joy, which was missing. Sometimes upon reflection, there are no easy solutions, you can get lost somehow. But then, the answer is not everything has to unfold sometimes, life just goes on, and you have to leave things going. The temptation to use logic to understand these feelings is very powerful.

I really liked working on them coming from Gasworks, so I had lots of excitement. I introduced new approaches. You can't really understand the differences between my previous works and these ones. I've been introduced to a type of paper by a friend at Gasworks, called Michelle [Williams Gamaker], who now has a show at South London Gallery. She knew that I was collecting material from people with meaning. The first thing I did when I came back to Italy was to study this paper and think about how I could use it.

The other thing was the biennial. When I was at Gasworks, there were some people who died in the Mediterranean Sea. In the show there's this huge blue painting which recalls the skin of fish when you see it, or the water when the light hits it. The UK is an island, water is everywhere, even in the weather. So I was thinking about the water, the ocean, and all the problems this entails. When I was in London I saw what the Prime Minister did: when immigrants arrive in London they have to be sent right back. The element of water recalls this. My paintings are abstract, I don't like to impose these things. This is the reason none of them have titles, even the exhibition doesn't have a title.



Installation view, , Herald St, London, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London.
Photo by Andy Keate.



Installation view, , Herald St, London, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London.
Photo by Andy Keate.