

IN

THE

STUDIO

WITH

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FRANCIS



Words:
Tarisai Ngangura

Photos:
Camilla Ferrari

BOLOGNA, ITALY

By using coffee grounds in his abstract art, Rwandan artist Francis Offman
reconnected with his history and found balance in his practice.



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OFFMAN

"BY STARTERS TO USE



COFFEE!

Rwandan artist Francis Offman uses his art as a tool to probe the edges of his past. His childhood, spent in the lush farming town of Nyanza, is split between the bucolic peace he recalls prior to the 1990 civil war and the trauma after it ended, four years later. "I remember all of this green, a lot of flowers, and a few houses," he says. "Then [after] I wasn't allowed to go outside because a lot of people from my generation lost legs, and so on. They fell on bombs that hadn't exploded during the war."

As a preteen, Francis moved to Italy with his family in 1999, and after expressing an early interest in art — drawing cartoons led him to painting — he sought a thread that could bridge his formative years in Rwanda to his new context in Europe. He found one such connective material: coffee.

"It was really strange for me to see how much coffee people drink in Italy, and it's not even grown here," says Francis, who's lived in the country for nearly two decades and is now based in Bologna. "People in Rwanda didn't drink coffee at all, and so I wanted to understand that."

German and Belgian colonists brought the coffee plant to Rwanda to grow it as an export crop, and until recently, very few people who did the labor of growing and harvesting it ever tasted the end product. Meanwhile, colonizing countries exploited Rwandans' labor and land for their economic gain. Francis carries this history into the large-scale, abstract canvases he creates.

Rather than purchasing materials, he uses a variety of discarded and donated ephemera to make his art — including dried coffee grounds (left over from his own cup) and fabrics like cotton — and creates works that are textured with the very history of their materials. But you wouldn't know all of this by just looking at his art; he refracts his influences and leaves his works untitled. This draws further attention to his materials, inviting questions about where they come from and how they got there.

We spoke with Francis by phone about exploring colonialism and coffee, listening to the seasons, and connecting with the past through his materials.

HEY BARISTA: When would you say you realized that art was something you were interested in and that you could make a career of it?

FRANCIS OFFMAN: My father used to go to Europe and come back with gifts. Once he came back with cartoons, and I was really surprised that it was possible to draw and make an image move. He explained to me that the drawings were on a lot of pages, and if you make the pages move, you can see the image move. From that moment I was very interested in drawing and how all of this was created. From there, I ended up in manga, and then I discovered painting.

My father didn't see art as a job. I think now he has changed his mind. I really wanted to do it, but it was difficult. For example, I don't use my real name in my work here [in Bologna]. If I do an exhibition with that name, the people who come will see I'm African, and they'll expect to see some mask or this kind of stereotype that belongs in the '50s. This is how Italy is when it comes to these issues. If you are an immigrant, you are going to face a lot of stuff. In my case, I just find ways to bypass the whole thing by using the name Francis Offman, so when you come, you don't open the stereotype box. You just enjoy the paintings. It's a way of trying to survive here. It takes your time, and you have to have the will to do the whole thing.

HEY BARISTA: Tell me what first got you thinking about and working with coffee grounds?

FRANCIS: When my mother went back to Rwanda from Italy [in 2013], she returned with bags of coffee. I wanted to have a connection with Rwanda; I was so desperate to. I knew that coffee was grown there, and I just thought of all the hands it passed through. I wanted to be able to catch that energy from the journeys it took. I started to use coffee and really studied it.

From there, I was really happy. It was a new way of doing my painting practice, because before

RIGHT: FRANCIS IN HIS BOLOGNA STUDIO. IN MARGIN: FRANCIS WORKING WITH COFFEE GROUNDS.



Hey Barista,



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I used to draw with oil, but it wasn't really good. It could be anyone who had painted those paintings, because I was just following the classic way of doing things. By starting to use coffee, I understood that I could use history as raw material. I could even engage with people here in Italy by using coffee, and talk about where it comes from and the countries that produce it.

For example, when I say *coffee* and *colonialism*, most of the people in Italy just close themselves off. You just have to go really easy and in a soft way, because the goal is to have a discussion about colonialism and the environment.

HEY BARISTA: You talk about how you wanted to use and feel all the energies involved in the coffee process. Has that been a heavy thing for you, because there's so much energy and history attached to coffee?

FRANCIS: Working with it is like having friends with me. It keeps me company. It's kind of a shield. It protects me somehow, just by respecting how I work with it. The work is a map because the coffee is from everywhere, and I really enjoy painting with coffee, because for me, the works are kind of breathing. I feel all the energy, from the person who grows the coffee to the expert who was able to blend the whole thing.

HEY BARISTA: What do you mean coffee protects you? Like, from yourself, or it protects you from the outside when you're working?

FRANCIS: Mostly it protects me from myself, from some thoughts that I may have. Being a young artist here in Italy, being Black, it's very tough. So you have to resist; you have to be focused on what you are doing, and it's not always easy. Even the racism here in Italy is very present. I can wake up and go from my home to the studio, and your day can change with someone saying, "Hey, Negro." Here it's very common to say this kind of stuff and put you down. But when I'm working with the coffee, it's very therapeutic - using my hands, making me move. It allows me to face the problems outside. When I'm working with it, I switch off my brain. Like, I am there but I'm not there.

HEY BARISTA: What I find very interesting is that for the rest of the world, coffee is what wakes them up, gives them energy. For you, it seems like coffee is what helps you slow down.

FRANCIS: Yeah. One thing, which I've discovered while working with coffee, is it allows me to work with seasons. Here in Bologna there's a lot of humidity, even in winter. So for coffee to dry, it really takes a lot of time. [I have] to find the right moment to work with it. In summer I know what I have to do. In winter I know what I have to do, and this has really given me a kind of balance with even identifying trends in the art market. It really keeps you on the right road somehow.

HEY BARISTA: When you combine all of the work you put into your art, the coffee process, and



ABOVE: FRANCIS STANDS ON TOP OF ONE OF HIS WORKS IN PROGRESS. IN MARGIN: FRANCIS IN HIS STUDIO.

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BELOW: A DETAIL OF FRANCIS'S ARTWORK.



the mental strain of being an artist and believing in yourself, do you think that the value placed on your art is fair?

FRANCIS: The art world is really complicated, but you are able to navigate it if you are inside it. The way that I work, the feelings that I've got, the things I've been through ... when I'm painting all these things come out, so I tend to produce a lot. But at the same time, my gallery [P420] can't ask me for a lot of paintings because they know that I have to go through a long process when working with coffee.

I am aware of how young Black artists are used in the market. This is why sometimes I question

myself, that as an adult, I'm still doing this, putting color on the fabric. But this is work I want to do for the rest of my life.●



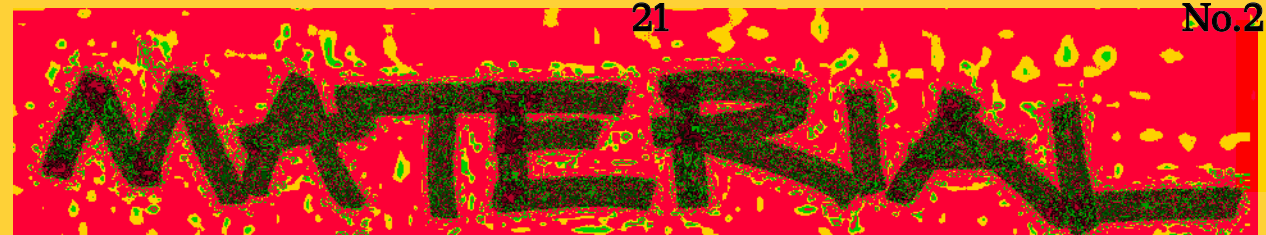
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