

**P** Hans Ulrich Obrist:  
A Conversation with Francis Offman  
**paesaggio**

16/09 – 13/11/2022  
Museo di Roma

**I would like to start this conversation by asking you how art came to you or, perhaps, how you came to art.**

I came into contact with art through my father's trips to Europe when I was a child. He had studied in France and Belgium, and every so often he would come back with videotapes of cartoons. That was my introduction to drawing. They were souvenirs he brought back from his travels and they gave me an idea of what that distant world was like. I used to wonder how those animated films were made and he would explain it to me. The process intrigued me. Reproducing a drawing many times and then animating it by running it across different sheets was intriguing. And so I developed a real interest and continued to learn more about them. I must say that my father supported me, even though he didn't believe that art would provide me with a real job. He thought it was a kind of method that could help me with my studies.

**Your father wanted you to study Administration Science. And, in fact, from 2007 to 2011, this is the university course you attended in Milan. Am I right?**

When I came to Europe, I was introduced to art history. I was greatly attracted, but I didn't know how to tell my father I wanted to be an artist. In his opinion art was a hobby, to be cultivated alongside a job that would give me some stability. He wanted me to be in administration like him, to study Political Science and then work at the UN, where money and security were guaranteed. So when I confessed to him that I wanted to enrol in an artistic high school he reacted angrily. He told me I had to learn to be pragmatic. Indeed, studying art does not help a foreigner in Italy. When you come of age you have to renew your residence permit, and you must have a job providing a steady income. So, in the end I attended Political Science. It was interesting, but it was not what I was passionate about. I studied subjects I liked, to a certain degree, such as sociology, administration, human resources management, ethnography. However, I continued to be attracted to art. So I studied with the hope that one day it would be able to make it my job.

**"Art is the highest form of hope," Gerhard Richter once told me. And so, after Administration Science, you started to study painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna. This is where you officially began to pursue art. However, I would like you to tell me about these years of limbo, of transition. I wonder, in fact, were you already painting then? And do you believe that the works of that period are part of an initial body of work that might end up, one day, in your 'catalogue raisonné'?**

That's an interesting question. Because many people think I started painting at the Academy. Actually, I had been producing artwork throughout my previous studies. I worked on small formats, at home, at night. Also because, when I started studying, I had to support myself by working for an advertising company. I didn't have much space, so I worked on A4 formats. And I must say I learned a lot by having to try and keep all the tension in such a small space. However, those were the years when I started to understand what art meant for me. It was a form of hope, as you say, that's true. But it was also a form of therapy. During this particular period, I created works that I still like very much. They allowed me to use my imagination. And, sometimes, I realised that with certain works it was enough to have them in my mind. It was not necessary to actually create them. Another thing I realised at that time was how much processing goes into the production of all the things surrounding us, starting with the boxes things are sold in. They are containers made to be thrown out once we get home with our nice new pair of shoes. A lot of research goes into making these boxes, you have a designer, tests are done to find the right material and colour. This fascinated me, so I started to pay attention to everything I saw and every material I came into contact with, these materials became much more stimulating for me than the so-called 'noble' materials of painting.

**This is when you started to give great importance to the different materials you use in your work. I once heard you say that your source of inspiration is the whole of Africa, the genocide that took place in Rwanda. At the same time, you try to convey and represent our time through**

**the materials you use. All the materials in your works, in fact, are donated to you or come from recycling and therefore take on a special meaning for you. You know where each material comes from. Among your materials there is also coffee from your country. And this creates a bridge, with Africa, which is a territory of inspiration.**

For me coffee, as a working material, has a precise origin. My mother brought it back from a trip she made to Rwanda a few years after our escape. I belong to a family of political refugees. My mother was able to return to the country because, as a woman, she was not seen as a threat. When she reached us again, in Italy, she brought the coffee we produced, telling us how it was no longer only an export product, that people had started to drink it in our cities. This surprised us. And so we began drinking these packets of coffee that she had brought back with her. I haven't been back to Rwanda for twenty-two years. Because of my surname, my father's surname. I have lived most of my life outside the country. And coffee was something that connected me to the place I am from. That's why I didn't want to throw it away once I drank it. So I started collecting the grounds and learning more about their properties. I started with simple notions, such as the fact that coffee absorbs a lot of water and is a good fertiliser. Then I studied how here in Italy the moka was invented, which made it possible to brew coffee in just a few minutes. Later I realised that coffee brought order to western society, because before that people used to drink various things, such as grappa, before going to work in the morning. Coffee, with its properties, contributed to the development of the West and its industrial civilisation. I understood its importance. And since materials for art cost so much, I thought I could also use it for my own purposes. That was also the case with shoe boxes. I'll tell you another story connected to this, it's something that happened when I arrived in Italy. One day some friends suggested going to the park. I thought they were speaking of a playground. So we walked for about fifteen minutes until we came to a green area, it was simply a lawn, with plants, a meadow. I realised I had walked for fifteen minutes on the soles of my shoes, a layer of material separating me from the planet earth. This was the West, a place where you could walk for a long time without ever even getting the edges of your shoes dirty. It was a sudden intuition, it surprised me and also made me a little sad. So I became interested in this element, shoes, and their packaging, designed to be thrown away.

**There is always a meaning attached to materials. Also a memory, I would say. Yet we live in an age in which the greater availability of information does not necessarily coincide with a stronger memory. I think, in fact, that a characteristic element at the heart of our time is amnesia. And, thus, the function of art, as Eric Hobsbawm said, is to protest, as it were, against forgetfulness. I say this because when you started at the Art Academy in Bologna, you began to draw on sheets of paper that had been thrown away by your fellow students. And I find that very interesting. But first of all, how did you end up in the city of Morandi?**

My younger brother brought me to Bologna, he'd come here to study in 2016. In December, he asked me to join him and gave me a tour of the Academy. The city surprised me, I was captivated. At the time I lived in Bergamo, which is a very different place. Bologna looked like a campus city, full of students. The atmosphere was joyful. I had decided that I would continue creating small works, but I would stay out of the art world for several reasons. One of them was that here, in the West, there is an important history that I was not sure I could handle. I was afraid I'd be overwhelmed. But my brother insisted that I enrol at the Academy so the following year I officially began my journey in the world of art. I must say it was not easy, because at that time I had already started researching on my own and having younger classmates was a challenge. But since I am willing to do anything for art, I decided to leave aside what I had already studied, the ideas that had become consolidated, and start over again. For example, I slowly realised that I could form a knowledge of materials from the great history of Italian art that would give me absolute freedom. In this respect, I was always very surprised to see how other students would draw on sheets of paper and then throw them away and take a new one. I used to tell them that if it's only an exercise, one can also use the other side, the point is to train one's hand and muscle memory. But they wanted new sheets, immaculate sheets of paper. So since I had struggled in previous years to find these materials, which were expensive, I started to take their sheets and use the other side. I have always considered it a challenge to use the materials

that are available: it's as if my actions were able to connect with a previous history. It's also a way to trick the *horror vacui* of an empty canvas, because the history of a specific medium already more or less tells me what to do.

**The future is often written with fragments of the past. Every creator works with other artists when writing or painting. It's a collaboration that involves not only the living, but also one's predecessors. We can paint with Goya, for example. So I would like to ask you which artists you work with. Which have been important to you. I am thinking of Luca Bertolo who was your professor in Bologna.**

Luca Bertolo understood from the start what I was doing and encouraged me. Although our work is very different, he was the first artist I came into contact with who had a family, and was a professor. He was living proof that my father was wrong. Another important figure, when I started working, was David Hammons. I must say that all the artists who inspired me did not do so through their works, but rather because of where they stood in society. My main concern back then was still the fact that I was a foreigner in Italy who had to renew his residence permit by proving a steady income. So I was interested in the behaviour of artists, not so much in the objects they produced. I have a very African way of approaching this issue. In Rwanda we make objects that must not be a burden on future generations, they are supposed to die with us, with our generation, so that the next generation is free to create something new. We don't have this desire for things to be eternal. What inspired me about Hammons was how strict he was, his determination in pursuing his own vision, which is also typical of other African-American artists. Obviously the historical period also influences this rigour. But it was very interesting for me to observe this. To think about a kind of art that does not seek the market's approval, that aspires to a dignity of its own. I've always been fascinated by the behaviour of artists. And the way I behave also makes me think. For example, many people bring me coffee and I – who generally never open my studio to critics, curators or people from the art world – let them in very happily. We talk, I show them how I use their coffee. It's a very simple way of sharing, I like to bring people closer to art like this. At present, for example, I'm using cement in my work. I met a site manager who had no interest in art. We met in a bar and he explained to me how cement behaves in certain conditions. Then I showed him I use it and he was surprised. He became very interested in what I do, now he talks to his friends about contemporary art, he calls me often. That's the kind of sharing that interests me. They may seem small things, but for me they are very valuable.

**This makes me think of other dialogues you have established, for example with Arte Povera artists. I remember that years ago, speaking of materials, Kounellis told me that if you take the dramatic element out of art you are left with formalism. So he used recycled objects, objects that sometimes came from landfills, which had this dramatic element. I don't know if it's the same for you.**

The work of Arte Povera artists went against a certain climate that was rather dominant at the time. They chose to counter it by using waste materials in their works, but they treated them exactly for what they are. I am more interested in the cyclical nature of these materials. When one drinks coffee, coffee grounds are produced that can be reused in painting. It's a cycle, the end point is the beginning. They are two different approaches. My approach is not one of protest. Although I must admit that having studied their work has given me a profound awareness of materials in art. I am also thinking about another very important artist for me, Mimmo Rotella. When he tore down his posters, he did not ask himself how they were made, what story was behind them. His interest was purely aesthetic. When I use paper, on the other hand, I consider it essential to know where it comes from and to know about everything involved in the production of that particular sheet of paper.

**It's interesting that you mention Rotella. He started working with posters after a phase in which he came to believe that painting was finished and that something more alive had to be invented. His encounter with the posters was epiphanic and so he started to tear them off the walls and bring them into the studio, reassembling them or sometimes leaving them as he had found them. It is a ready-made or *objet trouvé* approach that is not alien to your work. You also paint using other means.**

Yes, but I have never thought of reinventing anything. My ambition is only to learn techniques that allow me to go one step further. It's not an ideological but a very practical approach, a rational approach to painting. Also, Rotella created in a very different period. Talking about finished painting perhaps made sense in an art world that at the time excluded an immense continent such as Africa and also the whole of the East. But that is not the case today. I have studied his period, I have also tried to form an awareness of the present, the period in which I am pursuing my artistic research. However, I must say that I do not experience all this as a form of otherness. On the contrary, I approach these artists because I believe they are my predecessors. I don't think it makes sense to build separations. Rather, I seek evolutionary continuity. It may be because I don't believe in this grand theory of black and white. I am certain that it serves no purpose. My colleagues often talk about white power, but I work with colours, for example, and it's a nightmare to have to talk about white or black people. When we speak of men and women there is an infinite variety of colour gradations, which also depend on emotions. After all, we are one family, science tells us. So I refuse to see things in a divisive way. I often think about this when I work. For example, when I started doing my paintings, I asked myself how a boy in Africa might behave if he took inspiration from me. What would he do if I used very expensive colours, like the Mussini colours that are not available in Rwanda or Tanzania? How would he follow my example? I try to think in a way that would work for him. I'll give you another example. For many years huge containers full of used clothes arrived in Rwanda. So I thought they could be used to make paintings. We don't necessarily have to use pigments. This approach is one possible way of sharing my painting.

**It's a very political approach. In some of your interviews, among other things, you have said that the concrete you use in your work has to do with what happened in the United States with the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed.**

**You say you were impressed by the reports of African-Americans being picked up, beaten and thrown to the ground, their faces against the asphalt. You said that as an African you posed questions and as an artist you tried to say something, but without shouting. So you created works using black cement, juxtaposed with rice paper resembling the skin you saw drying on the faces of the dead in Rwanda.**

**Is Stefano Boeri right when he says that art and architecture are a way to talk about the present?**

I must say that during the Covid pandemic I was surprised to see, for the first time, people all over the planet sharing the same emotions. In this situation, the death of George Floyd was like a tear. Also, you know, we Africans have this very friendly and unintentional relationship with concrete whenever we are arrested. The first thing police do, when they stop us, is to press our face against it. It's not only the police. Recently, thirty-nine-year-old Nigerian-born Alike Ogorchukwu was killed because he was trying to sell handkerchiefs to a couple and the man, after a while, went back to look for the seller and strangled him, pushing him to the ground, on the street. No Italian intervened. Many times I have asked myself how can one speak of this with art and I have realised that concrete is an element capable of conveying this tension. It is also the membrane that separates us from planet earth, as I told you before. So this material is deeply connected to many of our problems. I thought that if used in the right quantity, a bit like with Bologna chalk, it could be very effective in artworks. And so I decided to use it. However, as you see, the way of asking questions becomes intimate, these questions are not shouted. Also the work we're exhibiting in Rome – which talks about a genocide – proves there are different ways of addressing problems. It is also possible to deliver a punch in the stomach without necessarily trying to create spectacular effects, but by constructing more complex visions that lend themselves to different interpretations. When I began my work with the callipers and the Bible, I had to solve the problem of how to obtain the book, because it was my mother's Bible, who is very Catholic. I had to insist a lot. In the end, she gave it to me, making me promise that I wouldn't do anything blasphemous with it. My goal was to try to measure the value of a book. That book is important to many people. It is to my mother, but also to me, on a philosophical rather than religious level. For each of us, the relationship with sacred books is different. And certainly this book has played a crucial role in the history of humanity. To measure it, therefore, is simply impossible. All the more if you try to do so using a calliper, no matter how precise the instrument is. That Bible is also linked to the genocide that took place in my country. There were many causes that led up to it, and I was trying to under-

stand why things went that way. This attitude once made me uncomfortable. When I saw colleagues in the United States working on Rwanda and the genocide, I felt a sense of hatred for their operation. But over time I started to understand the role of the artist and I gradually realised that if artists did not talk about it, no one else would. So I decided to focus on this project, and it took me a long time. I had to go deep into my questions, consider what my family felt, what I felt. My father is a political refugee and it's still hard for him to accept what happened, even though twenty years have passed. He continues to write against the government. The questions I had to ask myself while working on this project were many.

**I was a very good friend of Édouard Glissant. In some of his works, he clearly talks about the concept of the archipelago, the importance of opacity, worldliness, of the need to find tools to understand the twenty-first century, but he also says that art should invent other circuits to travel outside galleries, away from museums, towards people, to create more public circumstances that leave no one out. Have you ever thought about this perspective, or have you imagined projects for public spaces that were not realised or that were censored?**

There are many unrealised or censored projects. Sometimes it's a form of self-censorship, it stems from the fact that I still feel awkward with my family and my father. What I would really like to do is a sculpture park in Rwanda. A park with sculptures capable of talking about the country's history. What happened before the genocide has fallen into oblivion. The history departments at university only teach what happened after 1994. I must say that I would like to try and create monuments that would be witnesses to our history, they would stand there and not risk disappearing and being forgotten. Another project I have been thinking about a lot is a music club where the energy of the feet of people dancing would activate visual effects. I would also like the sound to come from all around, without the presence of a DJ. This is because one thing that has always bothered me is that, at festivals, everyone looks in the same direction, to where the DJ is standing, so people don't take notice of the people around them. Eliminating the DJ would radically change the relational experience of the space.

**Another project you hadn't realised yet is the one installed in Rome at the invitation of Gian Maria Tosatti and the Quadriennale. As you said before, the presence of books in this work is very important. I think literature is important in your work. You once stated that "the written word can be an endless nightmare, but also an excellent way, in wise hands, to leave something to those who come after us, something we may call future." I would like to understand more about your relationship with words, with books, with libraries.**

Rwanda chose not to have a past. This has taught me that without archives, one goes into the future blindly. It's like drawing in the dark. Books, libraries, here in the West, have changed my life. In Bologna there are two large libraries, one in the Sala Borsa and another in the Archiginnasio. The latter has particularly old books that are bound in a really fascinating way. I spent a lot of time there. I believe that literature and history are important, sometimes regardless of the stories they tell. What really matters is words, written words, available words, also to be refuted, or to be used to enter into a dialogue with those who are no longer present. I myself sometimes write. I write down thoughts of joy or despair. I leave them on paper. When I go back to them I often destroy them. Because that's the right thing to do. I think my very existence is a form of protest. However, the books you wrote were very important for my brother. They are tools that can be used to gather important information. Coming from Rwanda, where history covers a period of twenty-eight years, we understand how valuable this is. The same way I realise what it means to deny words, what it means when countries like mine or North Korea use words to distort our conscience. Books always have two sides. They can deliver a blow or provide knowledge. I accept both, as long as we have books. The project I'm working on for the Quadriennale also stems from these reflections. It is built around the Bible that my mother read during the genocide. The idea is that she, like so many others of her generation, left behind all the knowledge that belonged to the people, which had been handed down for millennia before something else took over. It's also absurd that it was words that led to the killings. The order to

kill was often broadcast on the radio, as the majority of the population was illiterate. Language is also the tool that led to the translation of the Bible into Kinyarwanda by a philosopher. Seeing my mother clutching this Bible in those years made me want to measure it with a calliper, to measure its value. But then again, even a calliper is unreliable, not only because it is unable to measure what I'm looking for, but also because it is the instrument that was used to determine the ethnic difference between Tutsi and Hutu in my country; it was the same instrument used by Cesare Lombroso.

**This inability to obtain data that is certain makes me think of the right to opacity that Edouard Glissant talks about.**

I must confess that the work you did with Glissant influenced me greatly. His idea that clarity is impossible, that there is always something standing between it and us is pivotal. I'll give you a rather banal example. Think of the plastic we use to protect documents. We use it precisely so that those documents may last for many years. But then we often throw plastic away, the wrappings of what we consume, into the environment, as if that plastic were not as durable as the other. We are actually aware of this, but we decide to admit one thing and not the other, we favour one thing over the other. This renders us opaque. This idea – it's something Glissant speaks of – left a strong impression on me. And I think that in the work for the Quadriennale I wanted to maintain this sense of openness. It interests me, for example, to see that for some people this work reminds them of *Star Wars*, because the callipers resemble certain spaceships in the saga, while for others the association with violence is immediate. Seeing that several visions coexist and that there is no single key to arrive at meaning for me is essential. I don't believe in black and white polarisation. I myself feel that I am a child of the great Western masters and I belong to my city, to Italy, with all that this entails, also for the future, as we prepare for a right-wing government that risks doing major damage. I accept this. Opacity for me is not a house, it is the awareness of the everyday dimension, it is my ability to accept the reality I live in, it is a way of resisting this society. I accept the coexistence of everything, without seeking a clear definition. I accept the existence of racism, the fact that people don't know my story, they don't know what's behind it and they think coffee is produced in Italy. I accept the coexistence of all this and I let it inhabit me. It helps me move forward.

**Besides the Bible, what other books are part of this work?**

The two books I would like to draw the audience's attention to are a version of the Bible translated into Kinyarwanda and a French grammar text from 1900. The Rwandan Bible has a red cover, while the other book is blue. They are books I have chosen and have kept with me for a long time. The French grammar is a reference to what happened in Rwanda, to its political history. The Bible, on the other hand, is a reference to the religious sphere, which has also played a certain political role, because Christian institutions have played a great role behind the scenes in several episodes of the history of my country, as in many others. The other books are collections of short stories from all over the world, but on their covers there is a layer of coffee, so it is impossible to determine their content.

**Earlier you spoke of Bologna, of your sense of belonging to the city.**

**You once recommended a book by Emilio Clementi called *La notte del Pratello*.**

**What is it about this book that is so interesting with reference to your city?**

To that book I owe the fact that I chose to live in the Pratello area when I decided to move to Bologna. Clementi tells the stories of this street. It is a very particular place, very bohemian and free. There is a bar on every corner. Sometimes, coming home in the evening, these bars are a temptation. There are bars that open at midnight or at four in the morning. Places that are accessed through a secret code. All this has always fascinated me. But I really understood the soul of Pratello on April 25th, the day of the Liberation from the Nazi-Fascists. All of Bologna, on that day, pours into this street, which is not very wide. Also, the street is inhabited by some truly incredible characters. There is a saying in town: when you arrive here you either leave immediately or you stay forever. I stayed. Bologna is built on a human scale. It is welcoming, but one also risks losing oneself, because it has everything you could possibly need.

**Let us return for a moment to the materials of your research, which are important and fascinating. I am reminded of a project of yours entitled *You Might Know*, which is inspired by a song dedicated to the figure of Brian Winford aka Spaceman. It is the story of this African-American, in Memphis, who invented a self-driving car back in 1988, made entirely out of landfill materials. There is an idea not so much of recycling, but of upcycling, which can also be found in your practice. The idea that with recycled materials one can shape the future. And it is also interesting that for this project you sought the collaboration of Jessica Sartiani who is an expert on the history of coffee.**

I worked with Jessica Sartiani thanks to the Black History Month Florence programme, directed by Justin Randolph Thompson, an African-American who has lived in Florence for a very long time and who decided to bring together all the African artists in Italy. There are not many. But I don't think this has made things easier. On the contrary, I think it presented an even greater challenge for him. When I started talking to Justin about coffee, the dialogue led us towards the possibility of me working with someone who was an expert on all those aspects that do not come up in my research. At first I thought I was not interested. However, soon after, I realised it could learn a lot. And so I met Jessica. I learnt about many things related to the consumption and production of coffee blends. I realised that Italy is famous because its coffees are the result of blends of so many raw materials from different places. This is evident in the packaging that is sold here and which does not indicate the origin of the coffees used. In other countries this is not the case. In other countries you know that the coffee you consume comes from a specific country. I also realised that many other socio-economic factors have a role in the production and consumption of coffee. For example, when coffee cultivation arrived in Rwanda, it supplanted and wiped out other peasant cultures. In South America there are huge problems at the moment, because due to climate change the coffee plant, which is very delicate, has stopped growing in several areas. No longer having the knowledge to grow other plants, many farmers are forced to move from parts of Colombia or Brazil to the United States in an attempt to survive. And many men die while attempting to migrate. Recently, a CNN documentary showed how several farmers ended up becoming prey to drug traffickers because they could no longer grow coffee due to global warming and had lost their jobs. Jessica Sartiani shared many of these stories with me, which made me understand more about the identity of the material I use in my works.

**Sartiani's research also touches on the myth of purity related to this colonial product, there is a real cartography related to coffee that tells of expropriation and of 'culture levelling'. I think the term cartography is interesting in this context also because your works are often viewed as landscapes.**

As I told you before, the exchange with Jessica led me to better understand that Italian coffee has the peculiarity of passing through many hands and crossing many geographical borders. The coffee we find in the supermarket, distributed by big brands such as Lavazza or Kimbo, comes partly from the Philippines, partly from Brazil, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and on a conceptual level, it draws a map without borders. Many of the monochromes I create, like the one exhibited at Palazzo Braschi for the project *Quotidiana*, curated by the Quadriennale, are like planispheres in which it is impossible to make out borders. This is, after all, the world I believe in, in spite of the fact that I still have great difficulty travelling, due to the renewal of my residence permit and passport. And, perhaps, that is why these works have a certain gravity, they are capable of drawing viewers in.

**This large painting, it's over two metres large, is connected to the book installation. In fact, your canvases are also layered, they resemble palimpsests. How do you construct a work such as this one?**

There is something very natural behind this layering. Painting with coffee taught me how to work with the seasons, as traditional craftsmen did. Bologna, in fact, is very humid. I start preparing these works in the summer, so that they can dry quickly. In the hot season, I prepare the canvases and let them dry. I do the imprimatura, I bind the material with Vinavil. I have to do it at this time of year, otherwise mould might form. So in summer I don't paint. It is in winter that the coffee preparations come into contact with the more artistic colours and materials, the acrylics, the inks. In the mean-



time, I start collecting coffee, I put it on the radiator to dry. Then once it's summer again, I put it in the sun, and so on. I like this routine because it has a human rhythm. In fact, I don't produce much. I let some works that I prepare in the summer sit for two years before deciding to go back to them.

**And when do you consider a work to be finished?**

When I can't stand it any more. Until recently, my studio was the living room of my house. So my relationship with my works was one of continuous exposure. But also today I know that a work is finished when I realise that any other mark I make will turn out to be crap in the end. I know that a single drop of colour will ruin everything. And I know that at that point I would no longer recognise the work. Sometimes I want to add something, I have an idea, but I have to desist, because I know I will lose everything. At that point I stop, immediately.

**If I look at the work you recently exhibited at the Macro, also in Rome, I can see a lot of what you have said and it still seems to me that what emerges visually is a kind of landscape interrupted by holes. This makes me think of Michael Armitage. Also in his works the material often produces gaps.**

Yes, that work is the result of the kind of layering we talked about. Part of it was made with Chinese paper that I glued together at the beginning of the process. There were parts of that paper that did not stick well. So I decided to cut it off, removing what I didn't need. Then holes started to form, which, over time, I filled with coffee or with a mixture of coffee and acrylic. The exhibition was called *Retrofuturo* (retrofuture). I thought it was a perfect title. It makes me think of myself: every time I take two steps forward, I also seem to take one step back. It also made me think of this country, of its politics. Nothing is perfect. There are holes in everything.

**You say that *Retrofuturo* is a perfect title for the exhibition and for the relationship with your work, but you don't give titles to your works. Why is that?**

It has to do with something I understood before I went to the Academy. I had tried to exhibit. And I learnt that by using my real name, people connected it to a stereotype. They expected something African, with masks and the whole corollary of clichés. I realised that also titles were a distraction. So I eliminated everything. I chose a name that didn't make people think of anything specific and I got rid of the titles, because I wanted my works to be learning devices. My works are abstract and there is no order in which one has to view them. Instead, the titles provide indications of something one must look for. The same goes for my name, Francis Offman, which I use so that people don't associate me with Rwanda and, as a result, convince themselves that my works necessarily speak of the genocide or that when I use red it is to represent blood or wounds. The fact is that I have been here for twenty years. I feel fully European even though according to the government I am not. I am Italian. And the choice of a stage name and the elimination of titles is a way to make people focus on the substance of my work.

**To end this interview, I would like to ask you who are the artists you dialogue with the most.**

It's not easy to build real dialogues here in Italy. I think that what interests me does not usually interest colleagues of my generation. They don't seem to want to address issues that are at the centre of international concerns. There is a very particular concept of art here, and I think it is largely due to such an important cultural history. Which sometimes also risks being an overwhelming burden. I also realise that other artists often say that my work is heavy or that I talk about colonialism because I am African. But Italy too has had a colonial history, so whoever believes that there are elements in it that need to be investigated is free to do so. Africa does not have the exclusivity of pain. On the contrary, we too like to be joyful. Perhaps the person with whom I have the most interesting exchange is Guglielmo Castellani, maybe because of an international outlook we both have. But the people I feel closest to me are those who teach me how to use materials, like the site manager who explained the secrets of cement or the neighbour who brings me coffee grounds. I like talking to my neighbours. About art, of course, perhaps using mediating elements, like coffee, cement. These are little tricks in fact.